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THE QUEST FOR RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE RISE OF MORMONISM

by Mario S. De Pillis

The editors believe this essay will help bridge the unfortunate gulf between Mormon and non-Mormon writers of Mormon history, which has allowed Mormons to be cut off from many useful insights and allowed non-Mormons to be blind to important elements such as the role of doctrine. Mario De Pillis teaches American social history and the American West at the University of Massachusetts. He has been trustee and historical consultant for the restoration of the Shaker community of Hancock, Massachusetts, and is presently the Roman Catholic member of a four-college ecumenical seminar of Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy and laity. Both Mormon and non-Mormon responses have been arranged for the next issue.

IF THERE IS TO BE ANY HONEST DIALOGUE WHATSOEVER BETWEEN educated members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and outsiders, the question of the historical origins of Mormonism must ever remain central. And in a way it has remained central.

Nevertheless, no serious student of writings on the origins of this central issue can deny that the controversial "dialogue" of the past hundred and thirty-five years has been less than candid. It has long been true, however unfortunate loyal Mormons may find it, that the historians who write our generally accepted social and intellectual history have rarely consulted such standard Mormon historians as B. H. Roberts, Orson F. Whitney, or Joseph Fielding

Smith. This was true even before the writings of these historians had become dated.

Until very recently, professional historians and serious writers outside of academia have been non-Mormons and often implicitly anti-Mormon. This non-Mormon historiography, as "official" in its attitude as that of the approved Church historians, has been a failure in three basic ways.

First, it has been dominated by the later period of Mormon history: by Brigham Young and Utah, by the great "practical" leader and the first "successful" Mormon settlement. Secondly, and related to this, is the role of Joseph Smith the Prophet. Among the Mormons, of course, he has never really lost ground to Young. But in accepted American history he was the impractical visionary who belongs to the Jacksonian reform era. Serious treatments of his career have emphasized to this day the golden plates of the Book of Mormon and the revelations — an implicit concern with the decades-old question, important enough, of whether Mormon scriptures are authentic or not. Thirdly, the serious writings have rarely dealt with early Mormonism as a religion whose study was governed by the same canons of modern scientific methodology as, say, Congregationalism. There is nothing in the official historiography of Mormonism to compare with the intense studies of Puritanism: in the editing of documents, the relationship with other groups, the personnel, the earliest environment and background, and above all in the religious ideas. Even Mormon historians have neglected to work on critical editions of such crucial documents as Joseph Smith's *History of the Church*.¹

¹ The "practical" Young who saved Mormonism appears everywhere, and it would be pedantic to document this view of him. Almost any college textbook embalms in language and illustration the contrast between the visionary, hounded Smith and the "brilliant," "commanding" Young.

Standard Mormon historians like Roberts, Whitney, and J. F. Smith have, of course, done much writing on the early period, but they are not consulted by persons who write American history. When the *Harvard Guide to American History* was published (Cambridge, 1954), it listed as standard (p. 215) W. A. Linn's *Story of the Mormons* (New York, 1902), which puts extreme emphasis on the later period. Other references are to the well-known works of I. W. Riley (1902), W. E. La Rue (1919), M. R. Werner (1925), B. H. Roberts (1930), and F. M. Brodie (1945). Linn, Riley, and La Rue do deal with the early period but are clearly polemical and concerned mainly with authenticity.

Except to Mormons, Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (New York, 1945) is not clearly polemical. Intellectual honesty requires this opinion to be stated at the outset at the risk of offending some Mormon readers. Though hardly pro-Mormon, Brodie's book does not clearly fit either of my two categories of Mormon and non-Mormon. Leaders of Mormon thought have yet to come to grips with the influence of her book.

The sole Mormon authority is B. H. Roberts, but his six-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1930) is too

These failures are understandable. Among the many possible explanations of this regrettable state of affairs, the most profoundly plausible, aside from an unexpressed anti-Mormonism, is the modern regional interpretation of the American West. Writers have emphasized the later period of Mormon history because they have worked under the influence of what may be called the myth of the Trans-Mississippi West, that is, the well-known folk-image that associates the Mormons with cowboys and Indians, the gold miners, the mountain men, and other heroic figures of the great, open, arid spaces of the West. As residents of the trans-Mississippi region, most Mormons have tended in their historical publications to live up to the role expected of them: inflating the importance of Brigham Young in their history and diminishing the significance of Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Martin Harris, and other leading figures in the early Church (1827-1844). They celebrate Pioneer Day, not Hill Cumorah Day.

The third failure in the serious academic study of the origins and theology of Mormonism may not seem apparent at first glance. Some will be quick to assert that Mormonism has not been neglected in thoroughness and wideness of research or in relation to environment; that, in fact, one may easily find many works and sections of works that reasonably and correctly relate the new religion to a wide variety of historical elements: frontier conditions, reform movements, anti-Masonry, Jacksonian equalitarianism, theories concerning the Hebraic origin of the American Indians, the widespread evangelical rebellion against conservative Calvinist orthodoxy, and so on.

But while all trained historians may agree that these and other factors are necessary in any explanation of Mormonism, historians have not formed any pattern of agreement or disagreement, as they have on Puritanism or the Reformation or perhaps even Christian Science. Not even within the Mormon camp has there been any attempt to explain what made Mormonism unique in its appeal and in its surprising and even shocking heterodoxy.² One well-

sprawling and undigested to be of much use, and though it is listed by the *Guide*, one very rarely finds it cited by non-Mormon historians.

In alluding to the very recent change in the acceptability of works by loyal Mormons, I have in mind such works as Leonard J. Arrington's excellent and definitive *Great Basin Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1958). Significantly, perhaps, this does not deal with early Mormonism or its theological milieu.

² A very recent Mormon attempt to do this was not yet available to me as this article went to press: Milton Backman, *American Religions and the Rise of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City, 1965). It remains to be seen whether this work, published by the Deseret Press, will gain an acceptance outside the Church comparable with Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom*. For the haphazard nature of non-Mormon interpretations, see below, note 31.

known historian has even asserted that theology made no difference to the pragmatically minded Americans of the nineteenth century, anyhow. Mormons and similar believers were incapable of distinguishing even between the relatively simple teachings of the Methodists and the Presbyterians.⁹

This failure in approach or methodology is deficient chiefly in that it merely provides a traditional analysis of the traditional factors without taking into account the traditional element of dogmatic theology. How different from the standard treatment of the most minuscule of orthodox denominations! The Pilgrims of Plymouth, for example, could never be treated acceptably without adverting to the whole theology and doctrine of the English Reformation. In other words, non-Mormon historians have not taken Mormonism seriously *as a religion*. They have thought it sufficient to take a position on the golden plates and to relate the "movement" to the general history of the time. Mormonism ends up as a kind of religious Grahamism.

Mormon historians have, of course, taken the religious part of their history seriously. But motivated for the most part by the demands of apologetics and catechesis, they are more likely to view their religious history through the new revelations rather than through the theological issues that gave birth to the new revelations. They have not related the doctrines of this new body of revelation to the historical and *theological* time and place of the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. They seem to reason that if these works are divine, true, and authentic, it is more important to expound and believe. Non-Mormons (and, of course, anti-Mormons) seem to reason that since the new revelations were human, false, and inauthentic, it is more important to expose, to *disbelieve* such shocking heterodoxies.

It is the aim of this essay to assess the rise and historical significance of Mormonism from the neglected point of view of historical theology and to show the crucial importance of the doctrine of authority.

* * *

If historians were to take Mormonism as seriously as, say, the Separatism of Plymouth, what could they discern as the chief religious appeal of the new revelation? For an answer they must look not merely to the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, but also to the sincere concerns of the intensely religious

⁹ Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880's* (New Haven, 1950), p. 9.

people of western New York in the 1820's and 1830's. A good place to start is the explanation, never closely read by non-Mormons, of Joseph Smith himself.

The Prophet's neglected explanation of the events leading to his first vision are among the most significant and revealing in all of early Mormon history. It occurs in essentially the same form in two different places: at the beginning of his own *History of the Church* (1838)⁴ and in his letter to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat* (1842). In both places his explanation, following the bare facts of birth, family, and education, comes first as the very source of his whole life and career:

When about fourteen years of age, I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon inquiring [about] the plan of salvation, I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed Considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion, I determined to investigate the subject more fully

Retiring to a grove, he began to call upon the Lord for wisdom and while so engaged was suddenly enwrapped in a heavenly vision, brighter than the noonday sun, in which two persons appeared:

They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as His Church and kingdom: and I was expressly commanded "to go not after them," at the same time receiving a promise that the fullness of the Gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.⁵

There was no room for much detail in his letter to Wentworth, but in his more discursive *History* the Prophet related his search to the particular religious conditions in the vicinity of Manchester:

[About 1820-21] there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects of that region. In-

⁴ See the *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Period I. History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet by Himself*, edited by Brigham H. Roberts (7 vols.; various editions; Salt Lake City, 1902-).

Knowledgeable Mormons will point out that this work, though it goes back to as early as 1838, cannot be so precisely dated. But in so doing they underline the fact that Brigham H. Roberts, the editor, was not following the rules of modern critical editing, rules which were in full flower when he published the work. No modern historian can use the work as he would the modern editions of the presidential papers — or even, e.g., the University of Utah's scholarly edition of Hosea Stout's journal, *On the Mormon Frontier* (1965). This, in part, explains why official Mormon publications have until recently not found acceptance among non-Mormon scholars.

⁵ *History of the Church*, I, 3-4.

deed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people, some crying, "Lo here!" and others, "Lo there!" Some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist.

The Prophet's family succumbed to Presbyterianism, which the early Mormons often equated with Congregationalism. Joseph, then fifteen years old, remained uneasy and undecided:

So great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.⁸

Who was right and who was wrong — that was the issue at the very root of Mormon beginnings. By what *authority* did the contending preachers lay claim to the one true road to salvation?

The issue of authority will not seem unusual to faithful, informed, educated members of the Church. But in the writing of history this criterion of salvation is rarely cited as an important explanation of the origins and immediate success of the early Church. Non-Mormon historians and, indeed, most Mormons, habitually attribute the rise and progress of the Church to personalities: Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery, Brigham Young, or others; to the appeal of the Book of Mormon; to the "age of reform"; to the environment of the Burned-over District of Western New York, with all its revivalism and religious emotionalism, its "far-out" reform movements; to the frontier environment.

These traditional explanations are relevant and necessary. But they do not make complete sense of the revivalism, the visions, the handful of Mormon baptisms that took place before the organization of the Church in April, 1830, nor of the Mormon insistence on the necessity of a High Priesthood (the Melchizedek Priesthood); of the new revelations (collected in the Doctrine and Covenants); of the social and economic instrument of restorationism represented by Mormon communitarianism (chiefly expressed in the United Order of Enoch); of the new historical framework (the Book of Mormon). All these may be explained by the thirst of Joseph Smith and his contemporaries for the religious authority of one true church, *i.e.*, for divine authority.

When this thirst has been recognized by leading historians, most of whom have belonged to the liberal tradition, it has been dis-

⁸ *Ibid.*, IV (2d ed. rev., 1956), 536.

missed as "authoritarian." The use of this pejorative denies to Mormonism any sincere concern with divine authority — and thus abjures any need to analyze Mormonism as seriously as one would analyze a more orthodox denomination. Thus, a standard work in American intellectual history deals with Mormonism in this way:

The weakness of Protestantism in the Middle Period was its sectarianism Inevitably some anxious souls sought the reassurance of an authoritarian Church. Two such organizations played minor roles in the United States during the Middle Period. One, the Catholic Church, was old; the other, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, was new. The latter was indigenous.⁷

The "anxious souls" were many, not "some." They all refused to accept the three evangelical orthodoxies of Baptism, Methodism, and Presbyterianism. Some rebelled against any kind of formal doctrine of salvation and became Universalists, Unitarians, and "infidels." These sought authority and truth by relying in varying degrees on some concept of reason; others joined splinter groups like the Reformed Baptists, Reformed Methodists, Free Will Baptists, and others; some followed minor prophets like Joseph Dylks or Isaac Bullard; many joined various "Christian" groups and communitarian societies.

One "Christian" group, the Campbellites, and one communitarian movement, Shakerism, were very strong advocates of religious authority as the foundation of salvation. And it is significant that these were the two groups whose history impinged most closely on Mormonism.

Alexander Campbell's quest for primitive Christianity and divine authority led him, between 1808 and 1812, from Secession Presbyterianism to a kind of Baptist congregationalism. Authority was to be found in the ability of a congregation to find truth in scriptures. Campbell called the first such congregation assembled by him the "Christian Association." He found authority to ordain in the consent of his congregation — unlike the Mormons, who found this crucial exercise of authority in new revelations, especially the revelation on the High Priesthood.⁸ For the Campbellites,

⁷Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* [1940] (2d ed.; New York, 1956), p. 57. Another leading historian in this tradition hardly admits the existence of sectarianism, noting, quite erroneously, that the word *sect* was only "occasionally used" in nineteenth-century America! Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Great Century, A.D. 1800—A.D. 1914*; Vol. IV of *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York, 1941), p. 429.

⁸Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* (2 vols.; Philadelphia, 1868—1870), I, 387—391. Campbell's doctrine of adult baptism for the remission of sins has often and erroneously been stated to be the model for the similar Mormon doctrine. But the doctrine was a kind of afterthought for Campbell. *Ibid.*, pp. 391—400. For both

sectarianism was the chief evil⁹—one reason why they called themselves “The Church of Christ” and “The Disciples of Christ”; for the names implied nonsectarianism or “unity.”

A second group that competed with the Mormons in the Western Reserve of Ohio and elsewhere was the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, commonly called Shakers. The Shakers were also ardent antisectarians. Richard McNemar, who before his conversion to Shakerism had been one of the leading figures of the Kentucky Revival, wrote a poem in about 1807 ridiculing the sectarians of the age; one stanza runs:

Ten thousand Reformers like so many moles
Have plowed all the Bible and cut it [in] holes
And each has his church at the end of his trace
Built up as he thinks of the subjects of grace.¹⁰

Thirty years later he was preaching the same message. He made it clear that antisectarianism was a general feeling among the non-orthodox seekers of the early nineteenth century.¹¹ He and others like him sought one true church with the mark of divine approbation. It had become meaningless to pick one of the major contending denominations as an instrument of salvation.

Antisectarianism could, of course, lead to infidelity or to rationalist simplifications of doctrine, but it usually meant, as it did with Joseph Smith, a fundamental rejection of the three dominant denominations of the frontier and rural areas of the time: Baptism, Methodism, and Presbyterianism. A seeker hardly wasted time with those denominations, and perhaps the spiritual history of the many anxious souls of the day may be symbolized by the brief story of the religious experience of young Michael Hull Barton of western Massachusetts, an area that gave so much to the religious life of western New York.

After traveling extensively throughout New England seeking the one true church, Barton found himself torn between the Mormons and the Shakers. Finally, in 1831 he started from Western Massachusetts for Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to be baptized by a Mormon elder. On the way back to his home his “conscience

Campbell and Smith (and many others) it was simply the way of the apostolic church, to which almost all sectarians appealed for the authority of their doctrine.

⁹ See Campbell's prospectus for his projected newspaper (*The Millennial Harbinger*) in the *Western Reserve Chronicle*, Dec. 3, 1829; also, the earlier Campbellite announcements of Feb. 28 and Mar. 18, 1828.

¹⁰ “The Mole's little pathways” (1807?), ms. copy, Shaker Papers, Library of Congress.

¹¹ Richard McNemar, *A Friendly letter to Alexander Mitchell* (Union Village, Ohio, 1837), reprinted by the Shakers from the *Western Review*.

seized him and his sins stared him in the face." Retiring to the woods to pray, he received the spiritual light which turned him toward the nearest Shaker community in the town of Harvard, Massachusetts.¹² If he had lived in western Pennsylvania, he might have joined the Campbellites.

Fully to understand the importance of authority in early Mormonism, one must do more than take into account the religious milieu of the 1820's and the extraordinarily direct testimony of Joseph Smith. One must examine in detail, painful detail for the nontheologically inclined, the subsequent development of Mormon polity and doctrine. Does it prove the sincerity of Joseph's quest for authority? Did his followers also seek it? Does the extraordinary elaboration of Mormon doctrine after 1830, and especially between 1839 and 1844, cast doubt upon his original quest?

Aside from the Book of Mormon (1830), the Mormon conception of authority rests chiefly on a special Priesthood and on the revelations received by Joseph Smith. Most of the development of the Priesthood and most of the revelations came after 1830.

For Mormons authority means the right of those holding the Priesthood to act for God. This right and the Priesthood that exercises it are given a historical rationale in the Book of Mormon and acquired specific forms and goals through subsequent revelations and practices. Mormon religion was authoritative (a slightly different concept from that of authority) because God attested to its truth by direct revelation. To demonstrate that Mormonism was a continuing quest for authoritative religion, it is not necessary for the historian to enter into the question of whether these revelations were authentic or to show how the Mormons proved their doctrines to be true in contrast to those of all their competitors.

Both Mormon apologetics and anti-Mormon propaganda have always dwelt, and understandably for their purposes, on the issue of the historical authenticity of the golden plates and on the divine authenticity of Joseph Smith's visions and revelations. This question of authenticity is basic for explaining the rise of the new religion, but is not enough. What must be shown is how much stronger the Mormon quest for authority was than that of the Campbellites, Shakers, and others who preached against sectarianism, how much more elaborate and theologically central was the Mormon concern for authoritative religion than, for example, Campbell's exaggerated reliance on the New Testament or the Shakers' faith in the postmillennial ministry of their foundress. Despite the intricate

¹² Letter from the Ministry of Harvard to the Ministry of New Lebanon, Harvard, Mass., Nov. 9, 1831, ms. Western Reserve Historical Society.

elaboration of their Priesthood, Mormons never watered down its function: the right and power to act authoritatively for God. Only the restored Priesthood could save a torn and divided Christianity.

* * *

The mitosis of churches, or what Kenneth Scott Latourette has called the "fissiparous genius of Protestantism,"¹³ has been the classic problem of Protestantism, stemming from a belief in the individual interpretation of the scriptures, bibliolatry, and a rejection of sacerdotal authority.¹⁴ And it antedates by at least two centuries the "Middle Period" of American history.

To oversimplify, it may be said that there are three modes of establishing a theological claim to being the one true teaching church: apostolic succession, miracles and "gifts" (as signs of divine approbation), and special revelations. With certain modifications the Prophet used all three methods. Since apostolic succession was Roman and alien,¹⁵ he turned to a more familiar source of Protestant tradition, the Old Testament: he claimed a prophetic succession through a dual priesthood that allegedly existed among the Hebrews.¹⁶ Miracles and gifts he used discreetly and sparingly; ambitious miracles, such as his attempt to raise a dead infant, were likely to fail.¹⁷ As for special revelations,¹⁸ they were central to the

¹³ *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. IV, *The Great Century, A.D. 1800—A.D. 1914* (New York, 1941), p. 261.

¹⁴ For an excellent short statement of the problem of authority, see Robert McAfee Brown, "A Protestant Viewpoint: Protestantism and Authority," *Commonweal*, LXXXI (Oct. 9, 1964), 69–71.

¹⁵ The Mormons became quite sensitive to the accusation that they had glossed over apostolic succession. See Henry Caswall, *City of the Mormons; or, Three Days at Nauvoo, in 1842* (2d ed., rev. & enl.; London, 1843), 17, 39, 42. Caswall, an Anglican minister, taunted them concerning this traditional touchstone, for he knew that it could not be reconciled with the story of early Christianity given in the Book of Mormon. For the Roman Catholic Church the "marks" of the one true church are traditionally four: it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

¹⁶ *The Prophet*, Jan. 4, 1845, p. 1, col. 1; *History of the Church*, I, pp. 40–41. A priesthood did, of course, exist among the Hebrews; and some orthodox Christian denominations believe in a continuation, in some manner, of this priesthood. Such Christians point, as do the Mormons, to the appropriate verses in the seventh chapter of Hebrews, where the familiar phrase occurs: "Thou are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedec." But the dual priesthood and the special elaboration of the Mormon Priesthood of Melchizedek (spelled Melchisedec in the King James version) is peculiarly Mormon.

Mormon readers will also be aware that Joseph Smith claimed apostolic succession through Peter or, more accurately, Peter, James, and John. But this is far less important to the definition of Mormonism than the belief that the Apostles were "prophets and revelators" in a prophetic succession from Moses on down through Solomon, John the Baptist, and Christ to Joseph Smith. See James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, pp. 300–301.

¹⁷ F. M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, pp. 104, 112.

¹⁸ For revelation in general as a source of authority, see Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning* (New York, 1837), p. 119.

establishment of authority and Joseph adopted them even before the Church was organized (1830); his mother, with her antinomian predilections for special inspiration, encouraged him to see visions and revelations. Joseph believed that his additions to orthodox Christian-Jewish scripture — his revelations, the Book of Mormon, "lost books" like the Book of Enoch, and his revision of the King James Bible — constituted the "fulness of the Gospel." In short, while using some of its doctrines, Joseph rejected Protestantism as well as Calvinism: he claimed to bring an entirely "new dispensation." "Truth," he later said, "is Mormonism. God is the author of it."¹⁹ This special status of Mormonism as a fourth major religion is generally accepted in American society.²⁰

The idea of a religious authority established by means of prophetic succession and direct revelation originated not in the Book of Mormon but in the mind of Joseph Smith. The historical foundation, or authority, supplied by that book was of little practical use to the Prophet in defining the polity and doctrine of the new religion. For the non-Mormon it is almost as though he had simply composed a Hebrew-and-Indian novel with no thought of making it the Bible of a new religion. Even the uneducated agrarians who had read it with relish seemed to sense this, for they usually felt compelled to visit the Prophet and hear what was concretely required of them for salvation. At first the Prophet had little to offer them beyond baptism and his own impressive personality. Many heard him preach, but by January, 1831, less than eighty persons in western New York had embraced the gospel — eleven years after Smith's first vision and six months after the publication of the Book of Mormon.²¹

Converts soon discovered that Mormon polity and doctrine would consist of what God revealed through Joseph Smith, month by month, in direct revelations. It was Smith's revulsion against the sectarianism of the Burned-over District and his consequent quest for a new source of authority that made direct revelations

¹⁹ *History of the Church*, III, 297.

²⁰ This separate, "fourth" position of Mormonism achieved a kind of quasi-official recognition in a film used in the Democratic party convention of 1956 and shown on nationwide television networks.

²¹ I mean here the conversions in the area of western New York under the direct influence of the Prophet. It is true that in the fall of 1830 about one hundred persons had been converted in the vicinity of Kirtland, Ohio, mainly from a group of former Campbellites there known as Rigdonites. In January, 1831, there were not more than a hundred converts in the area, most of whom had been baptized a few weeks before. The Ohio conversions differed from those in western New York, where the leadership, presence, and revelations of the Prophet were of primary importance. See the *History of the Church*, I, 77 note, 120, 124, and 146.

necessary. And it was in the newer Wests of Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois that most of the doctrine and much of the polity took form.

In spite of these facts students of Mormonism have assumed for over a hundred and thirty years that the religion sprang full-blown from the brain of Joseph Smith in the form of the Book of Mormon. This myth may be traced back to a single sentence in a book published in 1832, a sentence quoted in almost every work touching upon early Mormonism. In that year the Rev. Alexander Campbell, the founder of the Campbellites, or "Reformed Baptists," published *Delusions*, the first serious, critical analysis of the *Book of Mormon*. Campbell wrote that the Mormon bible had provided final answers to every theological problem of the day:

. . . infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transsubstantiation, fasting, penance, church government, religious experience, the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the question of freemasonry [sic], republican government and the rights of man.²²

This was the bitter attack of a man who had lost his best preacher, Sidney Rigdon, to Joseph Smith's new religion and who resented being identified as a friend to Mormonism. Hardly any of these many "answers" was much more than hinted at in the Book of Mormon and certainly not in any way that was unique to what is now termed Mormonism. The Prophet gave his answers, answers which diverged from the Book of Mormon, in the form of nearly one hundred revelations issued after 1830 in accordance with what Mrs. Fawn M. Brodie calls his extraordinary "responsiveness to the provincial opinions of his time."²³ So great seemed his doctrinal departures from the Book of Mormon that one heretical offshoot of the church called the Whitmerites made opposition to such changes their chief point of doctrine.²⁴ And the justice of the Whitmerite position is well attested by the evolution of the main elements of Mormonism between 1830 and 1844: church government, the nature of God, and the nature (the Fall) of man. A brief discussion of each of these three elements shows that Mormonism was mainly a product of these later years.

²² Alexander Campbell, *Delusions. An Analysis of the Book of Mormon . . . and a Refutation of Its Pretences to Divine Authority* (Boston, 1832), p. 13. The title is an allusion to 2 Thes. 2: 11.

²³ F. M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, pp. 69, 86. This is also emphasized very strongly by Stow Persons in his *American Minds: A History of Ideas* (New York, 1958), p. 183.

²⁴ David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ. By a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Richmond, Mo., 1887), pp. 4, 50.

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Mormon church government was based on two priesthoods, the Priesthood of Aaron and the Priesthood of Melchizedek. This dual priesthood provided a sacerdotal authority for the latter-day gospel, and between 1830 and 1844 the Prophet organized and elaborated a whole hierarchy of offices founded on this dual priesthood. The dual priesthood not only developed outside of and after the Book of Mormon, it also came in answer to specific needs.

The first need arose even before the Book of Mormon was finished — from the skepticism of Oliver Cowdery, one of the Prophet's scribes in the translating of the golden plates. Cowdery pointed out that the Book of Mormon did not provide the "keys," or authority, for performing baptism.

Cowdery's skepticism²⁵ was immediately overcome by a vision in which John the Baptist, in the form of an angel, conferred upon the two chosen ones the lower Priesthood of Aaron, with authority to baptize the first converts to the new faith. Thereupon, in the spring of 1829, Smith and Cowdery baptized one another in the chilly Susquehanna River and became the first members of the Church. A year later the Book of Mormon was published and almost simultaneously, on April 6, 1830, the little church of less than thirty persons — most of them closely related — was formally organized.²⁶

This solution, the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood, did not lay the question of authority to rest. The Book of Mormon had implied that all elders could ordain priests and teachers. But the relations among the Melchizedek Priesthood, the Aaronic Priesthood, and church government were not crystal clear, and subsequent, clarifying revelations were needed to supplement the Book of Mormon. Accordingly, in April, 1830, the Prophet issued a revelation on church government which outlined the duties of elders, priests, teachers, and deacons and the manner of baptism. Over the next year and a half he issued two revelations teaching that the second or higher Priesthood of Melchizedek would be necessary for ordaining and being ordained to teacher, deacon, the new office of bishop, and "all the lesser offices."²⁷

²⁵ Smith also wondered about the need for authority to baptize, but he was not weak in faith, as was Cowdery throughout his life.

²⁶ *History of the Church*, I, 64–79, 84.

²⁷ *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 20. Hereafter cited as *D. & C.* This extremely important revelation was received in April, 1830, and Smith may already have revised it while preparing it for its first printing in the *Book of Commandments* (Independence, 1833). In August another revelation stated that the higher Priesthood of Melchizedek, then held by Smith and Cowdery, bore "the keys of ministry." See *D. & C.*, 27: 12. The predominance of the Melchizedek Priesthood in general and of its First Presidency in particular was first strongly asserted in November, 1831, in *D. & C.*, 78: 15–22. When

By June, 1831, the rapid growth of his church in Ohio persuaded the Prophet to announce at an important conference in Kirtland that the Lord had restored the special office of High Priest.²⁸ The Prophet may have been encouraged to make this announcement by an influential new Ohio convert named Sidney Rigdon.

The office of High Priest has often been confused with the Melchizedek Priesthood, even by Mormons. And well it might be, for it was not until after the death of Joseph Smith that the complex, vague, and shifting relationship between the High Priesthood and the Melchizedek Priesthood could be stabilized.²⁹ The distinctions were quite blurred in Smith's time, for between 1830 and 1844 he issued many revelations which greatly expanded the two priesthoods of Aaron and Melchizedek, not to speak of the High Priesthood. In 1832 he provided them with a genealogy or "succession" going back to Adam and Aaron, respectively.³⁰ That same year he made the dual priesthood indispensable for personal salvation and for the salvation of the world. In March, 1835, the Prophet greatly elaborated the biblical background of the higher priesthood and its manifold relations to all other offices. By 1841 the Priesthood of Melchizedek was the most important institution of church government. And toward the end of his life the Prophet seemed to be clothing it with the power of binding and loosing of sins.

The entire government of the Church came to rest on the dual priesthood. The primitive officialdom of the Palmyra years — Priests, Teachers, Deacons — was incorporated into the lesser, or Aaronic, priesthood. The high offices of the High Council, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the Patriarch, the Seventies, and the First Presidency all arose after 1830-31.

the *Book of Commandments* (1833) was revised and reprinted with additional revelations as the *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835), Smith added verses 65, 66, and 67 to *D. & C.* 20. In these verses he defined more precisely the right of ordaining and being ordained, a right that was the very key to the complex hierarchy of offices from Apostle down to Deacons and church members. In short, the Melchizedek Priesthood and the powers associated with it were elaborated even before the first printing of the revelation on church government in *D. & C.*, 20. Elaboration continued at least up to 1841 in subsequent revelations.

²⁸ *History of the Church*, I, 176.

²⁹ Some time after 1844 the relationship between the two institutions was reduced to the seemingly simple notion that the High Priesthood is a *category* to which the eldership and High Priesthood belong as *offices*. A High Priest also always holds the Melchizedek Priesthood or is "within" it. But actually there is extensive overlapping of offices and categories even today.

³⁰ Fawn M. Brodie has suggested that the concept of the dual priesthood came directly from two books published by one Rev. James Gray in Philadelphia and Baltimore in 1810 and 1821. See *No Man Knows My History*, p. 111.

It is apparent that the dual priesthood had a genesis and history of its own. Its theological *raison d'être* was the principle of teaching authority, a central principle of Mormonism to this day. This principle was a response to the "social sources" of rural Jacksonian society in western New York, a society which burned with religious fervor but was torn by sectarianism. At the time and place there were many other responses to the religious yearnings and sectarianism, but Smith alone clearly saw the need for authority and this might have made Mormonism a unique solution even if his new, heterodox scriptures had not been published.

Of course, the Book of Mormon did provide the basic historical rationale for the prophetic succession (restored in the nineteenth century), and consequently the "Mormon bible" is strongly emphasized among Latter-day Saints as the main historical source of teaching authority of the Church. Non-Mormon historians, on the other hand, have tended to ignore the theological claims described above as rooted in a quest for authority. They have looked to "the frontier," to the New England mind, and to Jacksonian reform for explanations of Mormonism. These three nontheological explanations will always remain relevant; and so, too, will the Book of Mormon as the historical foundation for the basic doctrine that Mormonism is a new or "restored" historical religion. But the only non-theological element that seems to explain the unique content and appeal of Mormon religion is the one that most clearly shows it to have been a quest for religious authority: the element is the fluid, sectarian, torn society of rural (or "frontier") New York and northern Ohio.

It was here and in the subsequent, socially fluid, western environments of Missouri and Illinois, that the principle of authority was spun out in the revelations of Smith and in Mormon institutions, the most important of which was the dual priesthood. (As a set of Mormon institutions, the communitarian United Order of Enoch, begun in Ohio, was possibly even more important in early Mormonism than the dual priesthood, but it was an answer to social as well as theological problems.) The dual priesthood and a peculiarly Mormon obsession with authority arose outside of, and, in large part, after the Book of Mormon. And it arose in a special social environment as a result of specific needs confronting the young Prophet. In logical order, skepticism over the Book of Mormon had to be overcome, converts made and baptized, and leaders ordained — all tasks requiring authority. Particular ordinances connected with the dual priesthood, chiefly baptism and ordination, were widely enlarged as the Church moved westward, as it

grew in numbers, and as it encountered everywhere persons and printed matter which cannot be identified solely with the New England Mind, the Book of Mormon, the Turnerian "frontier," or Jacksonian reformism. In sum, Mormonism and its characteristic doctrine of authority was a growth made possible by the social conditions of Smith's time and place: the rural, northern society that was emerging between the 1820's and the martyrdom of the Prophet in 1844.

Alexander Campbell was right in an important sense: Smith supplied people in this fluid society with answers to every perplexing theological question and even some social questions of the day (a day when social questions were still approached theologically). But Campbell wrote too early: in 1831-32, just after the appearance of the Book of Mormon. To the outsider writing over a hundred and thirty years later, the Book of Mormon seems much less decisive in the rise of a full-blown Mormonism than the astonishing developments in revelation and practice between 1831 and 1844.

These conclusions can be confirmed by comparing one partly nontheological explanation of the rise of Mormonism, New England religion and culture, with the Prophet's authoritative doctrinal solutions for the contentions of his day. Two very revealing Mormon teachings are those outlining the nature of God and man. His teaching on property relations (Campbell's "communism") would be even more instructive. His complex property arrangements, under a set of communitarian institutions known as the United Order of Enoch, supplied the social fabric for the millennial kingdom of God on earth. The Order is not within the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, the revolutionary changes in the rural fringes of New England's society are almost equally well reflected in Smith's definition of God and in his conception of the behavior required of men who want to be saved.

When non-Mormon historians consider the rise of Mormonism as a religion, they tend to overlook its setting in western New York and northern Ohio. Their instinct is to see it in relation to the religious aspect of New England culture or even as a throwback to the polygamous, millennial Anabaptists of the Reformation era.⁸¹ This

⁸¹ See D. B. Davis, "The New England Origins of Mormonism," *New England Quarterly*, XXVI (June, 1953), 148-149, for the comparison of Joseph Smith with the Anabaptist, John of Leiden. None of the standard works on American intellectual history treats Mormonism in the same way; nor are there patterns or schools of disagreement. Ralph H. Gabriel stresses its authoritarianism, as pointed out in the text. See *The Course of American Democratic Thought*, p. 57. He also considers it a "product of the New England frontier" (p. 35). Stow Persons emphasizes its eschatological elements

generalized view loses sight of historical time and place and thus of the principle of authority which Smith preached to the settlers of New York and Ohio.

New England no doubt endowed the Prophet with his willful, ordering, moral, religious, theorizing, institutional cast of mind. But it was from the alchemy of his personal life, his reading, his daily experiences, from the reception accorded the Book of Mormon, and from the social opportunities of his time and place that he extracted an entirely new socio-theological system that completely repudiated the age-old system of his forefathers. The New England culture he had inherited was shaped by Puritanism, now modified to a kind of combined Congregationalism-Presbyterianism (early Mormon missionaries used the two names interchangeably). And early Mormon teachings on the nature of God and man lucidly illustrate how profoundly Smith rejected this heritage.

* * *

The God of Mormonism was not Calvinistically and unpredictably stern, as He still was in most of New England. God was, as Joseph's mother had taught him, friendly, immediately present,⁸² easily consulted, and, to one who reads the revelations, knowledgeable and down-to-earth. To the older New England the ways and "providences" of God were inscrutable. To a rebellious son of New England, living in an age of secret societies with strange signs and special ceremonies, God was quite scrutable, but only to those who were initiated. Some Mormons knew more than others and the one who knew most was the Prophet, who acted as the very medium of God's revelations.⁸³ These revelations are only the most obvious kind of evidence for the knowability of the Mormon God. The stalwart Apostle Parley P. Pratt demonstrated in his *Autobiography* how the minutest occurrence could clearly and indubitably reveal the scrutable will of God and how those closest to the Prophet enjoyed the completest understanding of the Divine Will.

(also mentioned by Gabriel, p. 35). See Persons, *American Minds: A History of Ideas* (New York, 1958), p. 182. But he is also the only non-Mormon writer who clearly asserts that Smith's neighbors were "yearning for an authoritative dispensation of the truth [and] Smith came to such people with an unqualified claim of authority" (p. 184). Merle Curti makes it one of the many new utopian experiments of the age of reform. Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (3d ed.; New York, 1964), p. 304. Henry Steele Commager describes it, together with Christian Science, as a "native American religion." Commager, *The American Mind*, p. 186.

⁸² Brodie, pp. 6-7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 141, n. 2. Mrs. Brodie makes much of this. It is doubtful that the Prophet veiled his actions in the particular incident which she cites here, but some Saints thought so. The well-known fact that the Prophet permitted only a select group of Saints to know the spiritual wife doctrine (polygamy) may also be recalled.

God was not only knowable; he was material and plural. There are three persons in the Godhead. A revelation of the Lord given in 1843 stated that of these three the Father and the Son have bodies "of flesh and bones as tangible as man's."⁸⁴ The Holy Ghost is less important than the Father and the Son; he is a spirit, but still matter — more finely divided. A few days later another revelation put it bluntly: "There is no such thing as immaterial matter."⁸⁵ But these are not the only Gods, said the Prophet in a sermon. There are others far above them,⁸⁶ and man, below them, can attain equality with the Gods⁸⁷ and rule kingdoms. God himself was a man in the beginning with Adam. He had risen to a high position in heaven, as indeed every American of that egalitarian period hoped to do on earth.

Mormonism as it evolved between Kirtland, Ohio, and Nauvoo, Illinois, also rejected the pre-eminence of faith over works, a doctrine which has always had direct implications for the behavior of men. The *Evening and Morning Star* comes, said the editor of this first Mormon newspaper, "to declare that goodness consists in doing good, not merely in preaching it . . . all men's religion is vain without charity."⁸⁸ The allusion, of course, is to what Luther called the "straw epistle," James, chapters one and two. But charity did not drive the Mormon into a philosophy of supererogation. He wholeheartedly accepted the worldly "creature" (earthly pleasure) that had plagued the old Calvinist conscience. The best-known work on early Mormonism stresses this acceptance:

The paradise of the prophet had much of the earth in it. Joseph had the poor man's awe of gold, and it crept into his concept of heaven. When God would descend to the holy city, he said paraphrasing Isaiah, "for brass he will bring gold, and for iron he will bring silver; and . . . the feast of fat things will be given to the just." And when the lost tribes of Israel streamed forth at last from the North countries to join the Saints, they too would be laden with jewels and gold.

Mormon theology was never burdened with otherworldliness. There was a fine robustness about it that smelled of the frontier and that rejected an asceticism that was never endemic to America. The

⁸⁴ *D. & C.*, 130: 22.

⁸⁵ *D. & C.*, 132: 7.

⁸⁶ George F. Partridge (ed.), "Death of a Mormon Dictator; Letters of Massachusetts Mormons, 1843-1848," *New England Quarterly*, IX (Dec., 1936), 594. The doctrine caused many to apostatize.

⁸⁷ "King Follett Discourse," a funeral sermon given in 1844 and printed in [Joseph Smith], *The Voice of Truth* (Nauvoo, Ill., 1844). See pp. 60-62 and also *D. & C.*, 132: 20, 37 (1843). Joseph had hinted at the plurality of Gods as early as 1832 (*D. & C.*, 76: 58).

⁸⁸ *Evening and Morning Star*, I, 7 (June, 1832).

poverty, sacrifice, and suffering that dogged the Saints resulted largely from clashes with their neighbors over social and economic issues. Though they may have gloried in their adversity, they certainly did not invite it. Wealth and power they considered basic among the blessings both of earth and of heaven, and if they were to be denied them in this life, then they must assuredly enjoy them in the next.³⁹

While some may cavil at the psychological interpretation of the “frontier” here, it is far more dubious to see, as anti-frontier historians often do, a kind of anti-liberal “puritanism” that “shaped” Mormonism in the East and to state that Mormonism “was nearly extinguished on the frontier.”⁴⁰ Mormonism was, if anything, a moderate liberal revolt. Like Transcendentalism on its higher plane,⁴¹ Mormonism avoided the extremes both of Unitarianism and Calvinism. The frontier produced neither Turnerian frontier liberalism nor conservatism. A fluid frontier society was simply a stimulus to change in any direction.

In time, Mormonism as a full-blown religion developed after as well as before the publication of the Book of Mormon. In place, Mormonism flourished in the fluid, socially confused, newer settlements — and sometimes in the decayed, confused areas of older settlements. This is what makes it a “frontier religion.” Much of what is peculiar to Mormon doctrine developed west of, or better, after Palmyra and Manchester. The Book of Mormon of Palmyra days was anti-Masonic; in Far West, Missouri and Nauvoo, Illinois, Joseph became more Masonic than the Masons.⁴² The earlier, Book of Mormon doctrine of baptism for the remission of sins, little different from that of neighboring Free Will Baptists, was metamorphosed in Nauvoo by the teaching that baptism could be accepted after death. Indeed, it was not until the Far West and Nauvoo period of Mormon history (1838–1844) that Mormon theology came to its “full flowering.”⁴³ The greatest of the official Mormon Church Historians, Brigham H. Roberts, once wrote that

³⁹ F. M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, pp. 187–188. To non-Mormons the most famous of the heavenly pleasures was the retention of one’s earthly spiritual wives.

⁴⁰ D. B. Davis, “The New England Origins of Mormonism,” pp. 153–154, 162. Davis is trying to refute “frontier historians [who] say that Mormon theology is mostly absurd and meaningless, but can be explained as a Western revolt against Calvinism” (p. 153). In this anti-frontier interpretation of Mormonism, Davis follows the widely accepted but shaky interpretation of Whitney R. Cross in *The Burned-Over District: the Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, 1950). For a fairly successful attempt to refute Cross’ interpretation of Mormonism, see Alexander Evanoff, “The Turner Thesis and Mormon Beginnings in New York and Utah,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, XXX (Spring, 1965), 157–173.

⁴¹ Frederick Ives Carpenter, *Emerson Handbook* (New York, 1953), pp. 129–131.

⁴² F. M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, pp. 64–66, 380–382, 367.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

no one could understand the wondrousness of his faith without a knowledge of this "essentially . . . formative" period: "It was in Nauvoo that Joseph Smith reached the summit of his remarkable career. It was in Nauvoo he grew bolder in the proclamation of those doctrines, which stamp Mormonism as the great religion of the age."⁴⁴ It was in Nauvoo that Joseph taught the "higher and more complex doctrines of Mormonism"—baptism for the dead, the functions of the priesthood, the correct methods of spiritual exegesis, the vision of the three degrees of glory, the kingdom of God, the time of the coming of the Son of God, the resurrection of the dead, the being and nature of God (His "materiality," the "plurality of Gods"), the immortality of matter, the spirit prison, and many others.⁴⁵

Theologically, Joseph Smith's moral and physical departure from New England may be summed up in the second and tenth "articles of faith," which were not formulated until 1841.⁴⁶ Article Two explicitly rejected the old Puritan maxim that in "Adam's fall we sinned all." Not only had God become predictable, but the Calvinistic man who was a sin-laden worm was replaced by an individualistic Arminian who "will be punished for his own sins and not for Adam's transgression" (Article Two). Article Ten insured the fact that these optimistic Americans, by "gathering" in the "lands of their inheritance," were to move west.

* * *

One must conclude from this essay into Mormon doctrinal history that Alexander Campbell's description of Mormonism on the basis of the Book of Mormon, a description avidly accepted by anti-Frontier historians over a century later,⁴⁷ was grotesquely wrong in that it considered the Book of Mormon alone to be the essence of Mormonism. But he was unwittingly right in noting that Smith sought authoritative answers for every perplexing theological problem of the day.

⁴⁴ Brigham H. Roberts, *The Rise and Fall of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City, 1900), p. 17. Daryl Chase, another professing Mormon, echoes this in *Joseph the Prophet* (Salt Lake City, 1944), pp. 74-75. See also the *History of the Church*, III, 379-381, 386 ff.

⁴⁵ Roberts, *The Rise and Fall of Nauvoo*, pp. 165-215.

⁴⁶ See James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City, 1901). This (in its various editions) is the official church statement of the Articles.

⁴⁷ D. B. Davis, "The New England Origins of Mormonism," pp. 153, 155: Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1950), p. 145. The most thorough historian of early Mormonism also quotes the Campbell litany, but does not state that the doctrines listed were Mormon doctrines. They merely reflect, like the anti-Masonic elements, the fiery issues of the Burned-over District in the 1820's: F. M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 69.

Joseph Smith hoped to establish the authority of what the early Mormons called "the one true church" over against the theological potpourri of competing sects that surrounded him as a young man in the Burned-over District. Later elaborations of doctrine never obscured this goal. New revelations merely reinforced the uniqueness of the one true church.

A great deal of additional evidence for this central concern of Mormonism could be cited. Even after he had been excommunicated, Sidney Rigdon, for example, preached the Mormon doctrine of authority. In 1845 he defended the truth of Mormonism against criticisms of the Roman Catholic bishop of Pittsburgh: the Roman church lacked a true priesthood and lacked new revelations.⁴⁸ But nowhere is the concern more apparent than in the Book of Mormon itself. That work expresses only contempt for sectarianism.⁴⁹ The danger of "going astray" from doctrinal truth and the need for establishing the one true fold are major and recurrent themes of the Book of Mormon.⁵⁰ These themes are, it seems to me, the only real theological themes of the book.

The Prophet hated the contentions and contradictions of sectarianism and hoped, in a sense, to establish a sect to end all sects. Indeed, the origin and whole doctrinal development of Mormonism under the Prophet may be characterized as a pragmatically successful quest for religious authority, a quest that he shared with many other anxious rural Americans of his time, class, and place. Historians who do not take this quest seriously enough to examine it do not take Mormonism seriously enough for rigorous historical inquiry.

⁴⁸ *Latter-Day Saints Messenger and Advocate* (Pittsburgh), June 1, 1845.

⁴⁹ *Book of Mormon*, I Ne. 22: 23–25, II Ne. 3: 12.

⁵⁰ See the dream of Lehi, I Ne. 8. Also Al. 41: 1, II Ne. 12: 5 (where, astonishingly, "astray" is added to Isaiah), II Ne. 26: 21, and II Ne. 28: 3–6.