

PERSONAL VOICES

Journey to My Westward Self

ADELE BRANNON MCCOLLUM

FOR SOME YEARS I have been working on Jungian interpretations of history, not in order to lay claim to any special insight into historical events, but as a way of enriching our experience of the historical events so interpreted. I must admit also some interest in wresting psychological interpretations of history from the Freudians. My work has dealt with a methodology I call myth-history. It is similar to "sacred history" with at least one major difference. In sacred history the assumption is transcendence is up. This myth-historical method bears the sense that transcendence is down, or, if you will, inward. And so in Mormon Studies, for example, the trek westward becomes the trek inward as well.

Like Judaism, Mormonism puts intense emphasis on the idea of the journey. In the Church, Pioneer Day is more celebrated than Easter, and Lent and Advent are barely mentioned.

Pioneer Day activities (July 24) include dressing children as pioneers, building covered wagons or handcarts, cooking foods cooked during the westward trek, presenting plays or skits replicating the move into the Salt Lake Valley. It is a general coming together to celebrate an event as momentous for Mormons as the Exodus is for Jews. The stories of bloodied feet and buried children, pregnant women crossing the plains in winter still bring a tear to the eye of even the most jaded Mormon. This identification with the pioneer spirit serves as a focal point for Mormon history and thus, is sometimes used in place of theology.

Except for a brief introduction, the Book of Mormon opens with Lehi setting out from Jerusalem on a journey with his family into an unknown territory simply called "the wilderness." During this setting out and during

ADELE BRANNON MCCOLLUM is assistant professor of the philosophy of religion at Montclair State College, New Jersey. This article is based on a speech delivered at the American Academy of Religion in New York City November, 1979.

the course of the journey, some of his sons rise against him. Others remain loyal and continue their quest for the promised land . . . the land "choice above all others."

Jan Shipps has made the point that the evangelical way of conversion was through personal realization of the saving effect of Jesus Christ, while, the way of salvation in Mormonism lay in joining with the Saints in the gathering of the Ten Tribes. I take it that she is making some distinction between personal experiential religion in which one *feels* saved through the power of the spirit and the conversion process in Mormonism in which one becomes, as it were, converted to the idea of the truth of the Book of Mormon—a more rational commitment.

It is not my intention to argue this point (although I disagree with it), but to direct attention to the experiential dimension of religious belief in Mormonism which, if Shipps is correct, is believed by some to be exceptional rather than primary or necessary in Mormonism.

While there is, indeed, a problem in discussing this experience among Mormons, I suspect there are more experiential aspects to Mormon activity and belief than one might at first suppose. This experiential dimension is obscured by the sometimes fanatical insistence of many Mormons on the literal, linear, historical "truth" of the facts of the Book of Mormon and upon the First Version and the early and continuing revelations of Joseph Smith and others.

Within the Church itself there seems to be to be a dichotomy of thought. The aforementioned propensity for the literal and an anti-intellectualism both amazing, given certain dogmatic quotations such as "the glory of God is intelligence," and worrisome. I say worrisome because it sometimes comes out in rather peculiar statements such as one made to me by a bishop. He said, with a straight face, "No intellectual can have a testimony of the Book of Mormon." (My inclination was to retort that that must mean that only dull normals such as the speaker could find Mormonism of any value.)

What I hope to do with both Mormon doctrine and Mormon history is to illuminate them and make them available to experience so that the experiential and the historical unite. In doing this I want to assure people that I am not negating the historical dimension but am instead asking that both dimensions be considered; that the Mormon past be read both (and perhaps even first) as history, but that we not stop there but go on to read *out of* that history the personal experience of conversion testimony, empathy and so on. It is this combined understanding that I have called mytho-history. There was a time when I might have said that the historical dates and events were not important as long as the experience was there. I no longer can say that, and I believe the change comes from the sizeable amount of Eastern religious studies I have engaged in during the past seven years. Clearly, there is a difference between the personal salvation of the East and the more linear expectation of the fulfillment of history in the West, although that dichotomy is not so sure as some would have us believe.

The Book of Mormon opens at 600 B.C.E. Lehi, the father/patriarch, has a vision of the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Babylonian Captivity. He moves with his family into the wilderness. Some forty pages and ten to eleven years later, they arrive in the promised land, the American continent, having been guided there by the Lord.

In the second chapter of Nephi, son of Lehi and one of those who remained faithful to his father's vision, has to depart and journey further into the wilderness of the promised land because some of his brothers are contending against him. Lehi dies and Nephi goes on with the record of the book of Mormon. But at all times he remains on a journey or a search. Further on, in the Book of Omni, we find Mosiah discovering another important group of people who had also gone out from Jerusalem at the destruction of that city and had journeyed across the waters to the Promised Land. These people had become warlike and had brought no records with them; however, Zarahemla learns the language of Mosiah and reports his genealogy and his story to him.

This should be enough to show those not acquainted with the Book of Mormon that the motif of journey is a predominant one. The pilgrimage is always to the promised land.

The next major scripture of the Saints is the Doctrine and Covenants. Here we have a modern version of the growth of that church which bases itself in the Book of Mormon from ancient times. In this scripture there is recorded the beginning of a persecution which to some degree is still going on. The history of the Saints is movement, movement from New York to Ohio to Missouri and Illinois and finally the long Westward Trek into the Salt Lake Valley.

It is usual for non-Mormon people to think of the Saints automatically as Brigham Young, Westward Trek, Salt Lake Valley. It is customary in the Church to speak in terms of eternal progression and increase when thinking of doctrine. The primary plan of salvation in LDS doctrine is that of movement. Quest. Pilgrimage. The pilgrim, who has existed from the beginning, comes to earth to get a body, moves on to yet another stage and can continue so indefinitely if he or she has lived appropriately during the second estate or time on earth.

I want to argue here that the entire history and experience of the Mormon is that of one who travels, one who grows. I also want to argue for this motif's being consistent with the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon and with the movement of the contemporary, New Dispensation Church.

This movement alone might have been merely migration were it not for the fact that in each case the goal was a promised or covenanted one and the expectation one of attaining that Promised Land or Valley. It is like the movement of the Jews with the exception that in Mormon thought the idea of pilgrimage does not end with physical death. One keeps on keeping on, and the great promise is that one who lives righteously will be granted the opportunity to keep on keeping on. Punishment is seen as a dead end, a state in which one can no longer seek, quest, learn, grow or move on. *Stasis*, to the Mormon way of thinking, is the most ominous defeat.

We can understand this concept through historical accounts. That is to say, we understand it as a group event, whether of the ancient people or Lehi or Israel or of Saints moving West.

But the fact that the same historical idea becomes part of a doctrine to which the individual Mormon subscribes is sometimes more difficult to understand. My impression is that many Mormons fail to see *on a conscious level* the connection between the historical quest and the spiritual quest. This, nonetheless, does not mean that no such connection exists.

There is a sense in which the Mormon idea of journey or quest can be seen as "just one more" hero journey in the long line of Joseph Campbell's heroes, or it may be said to be another amplification of the hero archetype as Carl Jung would describe it. This in no way reduces the importance or impact of the historical Mormon journey, but it does make personal that which has been communal. There is, one might say, a Hero/Quest blank hidden in all people. At the same time there is a widespread fear of stasis as imagined in death, old age, illness, injury, depression, senility and sometimes neurotically in sleep or under anesthesia.

For one with these blanks, the Westward Trek, whether of Lehi or Brigham Young, resonates undeniably in the psyche. While it is universal, it is also peculiarly American. The collective psyche of the American continent must have trembled when the Pacific coast was finally settled. Having reached the last frontier, where did one go besides Alaska? One answer was to turn inward. When the physical journey was over and stasis was unacceptable, the journey became more a spiritual quest. And today the Church is recognizing that fact by calling people to remain in their stakes instead of gathering to the Salt Lake Valley or to Missouri. Zion is now located in a strange land.

For many Americans the spiritual quest may already have been underway along with the physical journey. Others turned outward as long as possible; only when faced with no outer space to explore did they turn inward. (This brings to mind the number of astronauts who have "found" religion.)

I want to suggest that the Mormon is through-and-through a pilgrim pioneer. The Mormon missionary makes a two-year initiatory journey. Mormons travel long distances, sometimes taking days to reach the Promised Land, of the temple.

From the beginning, the idea of moving toward the Promised Land was adopted for both the geographical and the psychical landscape. Every time one reads the journey of Lehi, of the Nephites, Jaredites, Israelites or other contemporary westward-bound pioneers, one necessarily identifies, however unconsciously, with the internal journey we all make. Don't we all set out into the wilderness not knowing what is in store? Don't we every day enter dark unknown areas in which we must learn as we go and hold before ourselves the idea of a promised valley somewhere in which peace will be sweet? At the same time, as we pursue the pearl of great price, the spiritual kingdom or the material kingdom, don't we really fear stasis, the dead end job, the inability to

learn any more because of age or illness? Don't we fear that one of the obstacles along the way may prove to be insurmountable?

Having reached what we thought was the promised valley, we once again realize that to be alive spiritually and physically is to be on the move. This is evident in Mormon hymns as well: "Come, Come Ye Saints." We'll make the journey to the Salt Lake Valley, but if we don't, there is always the promise of the journey after death. On the other hand, there is the hymn: "Think not when you gather to Zion/your troubles and trials are through . . . the prize and the victory won/Think not that the warfare is ended/the work of salvation done." The hymn goes on to speak of the Saints who continue to labor and continue to grow.

The motif of the quest or pilgrimage is, I would suggest, Mormonism's version of the hero journey, of the historical and psychical or myth-historical view of a world and people ever growing. I would be almost willing to say that this motif is an *over-riding* motif of Mormon thought—that it is not just one among many interesting motifs, but a central one.

What is to be gained from such an analysis? Apart from verifying historically the events or the concrete portion of this dual experience, one has to be aware enough to understand *consciously* that this is the fulfillment of the archetypal quest and is also Mormonism's answer to the fear of finality. "And should we die before our journey's through/Happy day all is well." Of course, we will all die before our journey's through, but then, there is the happy day in which to continue the pilgrimage on yet another plane of existence.

I believe it is this coming together of the historical and psychical in mytho-history, which accounts in part for the great appeal of Mormonism, that appeal which has made it the fastest growing church in the world.