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Exiles in a Land of Liberty

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Exiles in a Land of Liberty
Mormons in America, 1830-1846

by Kenneth H. Winn

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*for Karen,
mi corazón*

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Introduction

When the Book of Mormon first appeared on March 26, 1830, it verified what most Americans already knew. It was God who had delivered the United States from British monarchy and endowed it with republican liberties. Speaking in the Lord's name, the pre-Columbian Mormon prophet Jacob proclaimed that America would "be a land of liberty unto the Gentiles" and promised that there would "be no kings upon the land."¹ Jacksonian Mormons gloried in these sentiments. Over the next few years, they indulged in all the conventional slogans of American self-praise, waxing fervent over the illustrious signers of the sacred compact of 1776 who, guided by God, had created an asylum for the oppressed where all could enjoy the rights of freemen under our happy form of government.²

Fifteen years after the publication of the Book of Mormon, however, Mormon expressions of hatred and contempt for the United States were commonplace. On September 26, 1845, Brigham Young announced that he did not "intend to winter again in the United States." Denouncing Americans as "corrupt as hell from the president down clean through the priests and the people," he concluded that Mormons did "not owe this country a single sermon."³ Accordingly, on February 5, 1846, the "Camp of Israel" began their fabled exodus from the Mormon settlement at Nauvoo, Illinois, for an unknown destination outside the territorial limits of the United States. There, they believed, they would build the kingdom of God and await the collapse of "Babylon" under the weight of its own iniquity.

The trek west notwithstanding, the Mormons felt not so much that they had left the United States as that it had left them. They still celebrated God's gift of liberty; it was the majority of Americans who did not. This conviction came as a result of sixteen years of bitter conflict with their neighbors. Between 1830 and 1846 persecution has-

tened or forced the church's departure from six separate gathering places within the states of New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Clashes between the church and its enemies took perhaps hundreds of lives, cost millions of dollars in property losses, and inflicted untold psychological damage. The Mormons reaped the overwhelming majority of these losses. As the years of unrelieved hostility progressed, the Mormons grew increasingly weary of their country. On June 27, 1844, an angry anti-Mormon mob stormed the jail in Carthage, Illinois, and murdered the Mormon founder and prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum. The assassination of the hated Smith did not dampen anti-Mormon hostility. After a brief respite, armed bands of the original inhabitants (called "old citizens" or "old settlers") initiated guerrilla-style warfare against isolated church settlements. By the fall of 1845, the Mormons had had enough. There were no gentile neighbors to shoot them in the Great Salt Basin, and this alone was enough to make it a promised land.

The oldest and most interesting debate about early Mormon history attempts to determine the church's relationship to American culture. This study reexamines this debate and endeavors to bring fresh answers to it by employing what other historians have called "republican ideology." 4 In recent years, historians have seen Aristotle as the "unmoved mover" of republican thought. From him, the meandering descent of republican tradition winds its way through Western Civilization transformed and refined in the works of the Renaissance philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli, James Harrington and the thinkers of the English Revolution, the writers of the English "Country" opposition to Prime Minister Robert Walpole, and finally taken over by the American revolutionaries. Republican ideology, as conceived by these men, dichotomized political life into a struggle between the forces of virtue and corruption. A strong republic rested upon the foundation of a virtuous citizenry composed of independent property-owning men whose self-reliance, civic spirit, and hardy disdain for enfeebling luxury separated them from the very wealthy and the very poor. Property ownership, because it was generally understood as farm ownership, meant self-sufficiency, so the property owner, beholden to none, could exercise his free and independent judgment about what was good for his community. Yet while possession of the basic necessities of life engendered good citizenship, opulence did not. The republican citizen scorned luxury because it fostered a lust for fine things and

encouraged the citizen to put his private advantage ahead of his public duty. Threats were, in fact, omnipresent. Republican government balanced precariously between anarchy and tyranny. Good citizens were expected to arm themselves, form militias, and exercise constant vigilance in putting down challenges that threatened to upset this fragile equilibrium.

Although republican theorists dreaded both anarchy and tyranny, they felt that corruption of civic virtue ultimately led to the latter. The forces of anarchy just walked a more crooked path to get there. Americans constantly feared that a republic was not strong enough to defend itself. Anarchy reared its head when the rabble, generally men with no stake in society, or a set of "designing men" fractured the body politic into unrestrained factions. Republicans knew that the people would never tolerate chaos and feared they would turn to the champion on the white horse who brought the order of the sword. It was the ambitious strong man, or perhaps a "secret combination" of men, who walked the straighter road to tyranny. Through wealth or political power such men reduced other citizens to dependent status, forced them to do their will, and thereby transformed the public interest into private interest. For this reason, women, children, slaves, and propertyless men were classically considered unfit for the franchise because they were seen as dependents having no will of their own. When citizens prostrated their own independent judgment to that of others, liberty was imperiled.

Preservation of a republic necessitated a stable, even static, society. Accordingly, patriotic Americans guarded against political innovation and, through the "republican jeremiad," expressed their foreboding about change and loss of virtue.⁵ The legacy of Puritanism played a major role in reinforcing many republican values, such as thrift, self-discipline, and a regard for the commonwealth.⁶ The Puritan jeremiad had lamented the declension from righteousness and exhorted the people to reformation. Republican Americans converted this act into a ritual bemoaning of the near extinction of liberty unless a speedy return to virtue took place.

In the Jacksonian era, the scheme of republican ideology developed by the Founding Fathers remained basically intact, although it took on an increasingly libertarian cast. The rapid change and severe social dislocation of the period caused Americans to invoke their jeremianic concerns over the loss of republican liberties at an unusually high

pitch. Whigs and Democrats, Masons and anti-Masons, as well as Mormons and anti-Mormons, bewailed the country's impending ruin. The opponents of each, of course, had caused this sad decline. Emphasis on farm ownership, or even property ownership, as the sine qua non of civic virtue had declined. Merchants, manufacturers, and laborers were all now tacitly welcomed aboard the ship of republic virtue. Increasingly, republicans accepted those qualities associated with Victorian Americasobriety, thrift, punctuality, and self-disciplineas sufficient badges of civic virtue. 7

Many an antebellum forest must have fallen to supply all the paper the Mormons and their opponents used to proclaim themselves good republicans and their opponents antirepublicans. This ideological quarrel, however, remains largely uncommented on by historians. There are probably two reasons for this. First, many scholars unfamiliar with the concept of republican ideology often assume that words like "tyranny," "mobocracy," "vice," "virtue," "luxury," "corruption," as well as "republicanism," possess a timeless meaning when, as we have seen, they are code words of a specific ideology that has pervaded American history from at least as early as the American Revolution. Second, Mormon and anti-Mormon concern about republicanism seems easy to dismiss as mere rhetoric. True enough, since the days of the Founding Fathers, a wide chasm has existed between American political ideals and practice, even among more conventional patriots. Yet Mormons and anti-Mormons alike thought that they measured up to republican standards and that their opponents did not. While many felt uneasy about the actions they took, they reassured themselves in their diaries, in their letters to family and friends, and in the newspaper to the community at large, that in defense of republican liberties they stood shoulder to shoulder with Thomas Jefferson.

If historians have not seen the conflict between the Mormons and their gentile neighbors explicitly in terms of republicanism, they have extensively addressed the question of Mormon "Americanism." For various reasons, scholars, who can agree upon little else, have magnified Mormonism's exceptionalismsometimes to emphasize its specialness as a religion, at other times to characterize it as an oddity of antebellum social disorder.⁸ Many of these historians reason that Mormonism, with its novel doctrines and dissent from mainstream religions, must have represented an ideological counterculture subversive to larger society. If not, why did it attract such brutal violence?

Mormonism first emerged as a protest movement decrying the religious anarchy created by the "priestcraft" of major denominations and, implicitly, the growing economic inegalitarianism of Jacksonian society. The Mormons framed their critique within the context of republican ideology. The solutions the Mormons devised for these problems, in turn, brought swift reaction from the gentile communities where they settled. Non-Mormons recoiled from the church members' slavish devotion to their prophet Joseph Smith and their economic and political unity. The attacks that came from fearful anti-Mormons, however, only increased Mormon apprehensiveness of mobocracy and their fears that America had fallen into irredeemable corruption. Both Mormons and anti-Mormons accused each other of being antirepublican and, not surprisingly, each group betrayed a keener eye for their opponent's lack of virtue than their own. Curiously, Mormons charged gentiles with inciting anarchy, while gentiles accused the church of the other antirepublican evil of tyranny. In point of fact, the Mormons did subvert and distort the political and social institutions, republican or not, where they settled. This resulted partially from beliefs inherent within Mormonism and partially from a defense against gentile attacks. Anti-Mormons, numerically superior in number, punished the church for grievances, real and imagined, and for not accepting their version of republican ideology. Those historians who believe that Mormon values were rejected by the majority of their neighbors as being antirepublican are, in effect, accepting the interpretation of the contemporary anti-Mormons themselves.

Chapter 1

The Origins of Mormonism

Mormonism represented no retreating sigh of the oppressed, but an angry indictment of early nineteenth-century America. It is a curious fact, then, that by all accounts its creator, Joseph Smith, was not a thundering, long-faced Isaiah, but a man possessed of a remarkably cheerful, optimistic disposition. However, Smith had reason for dissatisfaction. Years of injustice suffered by his family and a broad sensitivity to the advancing disintegration of the larger social structure alienated him from the mainstream of American life. Yet while thousands of people in similar circumstances simply floundered, the recognition of a gap between what was and what should be sparked in him a call to prophethood. Like the prophets of old, however, Joseph demanded not so much a new world as repentance and a return to virtues lost. When he attacked American society, he did so by measuring it against its own ideals, reworking the distinctive American language of republican ideology into an expression of his anger and aspirations. In doing so, he struck a responsive chord in others, and at the age of twenty-five, he founded America's most successful indigenous religion.

Joseph Smith, Jr., was born in Sharon, Vermont, on December 23, 1805, to Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith, both of old New England stock. Joseph's ancestors had prospered in the New World. The Smith line had accumulated a substantial amount of property, and a number of family members had achieved political distinction in state and local offices. The Macks had also obtained a measure of success, many filling Congregational pulpits. The first break with this general good fortune came during the lifetime of Joseph's two grandfathers. Asael Smith, his paternal grandfather, left his ancestral home in Topsfield, Massachusetts, to rebuild his fortune as a pioneer in the wilds of

Vermont. Solomon Mack, his maternal grandfather, led a life of wild military and economic misadventure and never achieved economic security. Still, both of these men managed to instill a keen sense of respectability into their children. 1

When Joseph and Lucy married on January 24, 1796, their prospects looked promising. They had a farm in Tunbridge, Vermont, and Lucy's brother, Stephen, had presented her with the handsome wedding gift of a thousand dollars from himself and his business partner. Unfortunately, one financial disaster followed another. The farm proved barren and rocky; an unscrupulous partner in a ginseng speculation absconded with their substantial investment. Before many years had passed, the Smiths were living an impoverished, nomadic life, endlessly searching for the fresh start that would bring them financial security.²

The Smiths were not alone in their misfortunes. Farmers throughout New England had found that extracting a living from their unproductive soil was a marginal enterprise at best. Capricious weather, erratic economic conditions, and competition from more fertile lands further west ruined thousands of farmers, and they too left New England in search of better prospects. The productive land surrounding the Genesee and Mohawk rivers in upstate New York and the prospect of thriving commerce held out by the new Erie Canal lured many of these New Englanders. In 1816, the Smiths migrated to the region and settled near the village of Palmyra. Unluckily, by the time they arrived, the best land had long since been taken; and the boom had subsided into the hard times that culminated in the Panic of 1819. Too poor and perhaps not enterprising enough to push further west, they decided to try to make the best of things farming an inferior piece of land.³

As class lines sharpened in the 1820s, the Smiths' consciousness of their lowly status deepened. After seven moves in twenty years, they were poorer than the day they married, richer only by nine children. Life under these circumstances became an unceasing struggle to shore up family finances. The Smith children, consequently, received scant schooling, as everyone old enough to work quickly joined the struggle to stave off poverty.⁴ Many of the Smiths' more well-to-do neighbors looked down on them as mere riffraff. Years later, a hostile anti-Mormon investigator had no trouble eliciting affidavits testifying to, among other things, their indigent condition. One neighbor, Roswell Nichols, charged that "for breach of contracts, the non-

payment of

debts and borrowed money, and for duplicity with their neighbors, the [Smith] family was notorious." In his financial desperation, Joseph Smith, Sr., allegedly once "confessed that it was sometimes necessary for him to tell an honest lie, in order to live." 5 Typically, the Smiths' detractors charged the family's poverty to a want of industry. Joseph Capron, for instance, noted with scorn that "the whole family of Smiths, were notorious for indolence, foolery, and falsehood. Their great object appeared to be, to live without work."6

These and other similar remarks were made after the founding of the Mormon church, and they betray hostility to what the Smiths became. Yet there can be no doubt that these sentiments antedated the advent of Mormonism.

Irrespective of the fairness of these assessments of the Smith family, the smug social superiority shown by some of their neighbors rubbed salt in the economic wounds they suffered long before the publication of the Book of Mormon. This humiliation probably took its greatest toll on the fiercely proud and socially ambitious Lucy, but undoubtedly the whole family felt it keenly. It certainly affected Lucy's son, Joseph, who was bitter over what he described as "being persecuted by those who ought to have been my friends, and to have treated me kindly."7 The Smiths had once held a respected place among their neighbors; now they received snubs from people they considered their social equals. But the residents of Palmyra cared little about successful ancestors or former social status; they simply saw the Smiths' present poverty Mormonism, with its economic egalitarianism and its denunciation of the haughty rich, distinctly reflects Joseph's indignation at his family's treatment at the hands of their neighbors.8

The Smiths were, on the whole, good, decent, hard-working people who should have fared better, but did not. They had lost the social status of their forebears through misfortune and poor judgment; in their poverty-induced rootlessness, they felt a painful separation from their larger community. They knew they deserved a respectable place in society, but found themselves instead neglected and scorned by their economic "betters," even while they struggled to maintain the middle-class virtues that separated them from the idle poor. As Mormonism grew, the charges leveled at the Smiths in New York would be systematized into a general accusation that they had violated the republican moral code. Yet the Smiths did not reject republican principles. They exemplified the virtues of hard work, thrift, independence, and a con-

cern for the community as much as their more prosperous neighbors did. They, likewise, shunned the vices of idleness and selfishness, and abhorred the condition of dependence. The social and religious rebellion Joseph Smith, Jr., eventually led burst forth not as a rejection of republican values, but as an attempt to restore them. What began as anger toward his family's exclusion from their proper place as worthy upholders of these standards became transformed into a counteraccusation: it was not the Smith family and their friends who had rejected the principles of republican virtue, but their opponents.

Obviously, Mormonism was a religious revolt, not simply a social protest movement. Yet it is nearly impossible to extricate the secular from the religious elements in early Mormonism. To the modern mind, bad economic conditions and social fragmentation are secular problems, but such a perception had only just gained ascendancy in the antebellum period. Joseph Smith and his followers rejected the tendency toward secularization, refusing to bifurcate their lives into separate spheres of the sacred and the profane.

Smith had a religious tradition of family heterodoxy to draw upon in his eventual dissent from the existing churches. Both his grandfathers had broken away from the traditional churches of New England. Although Asael Smith had his children baptized in the Congregational church, he eventually decided that its doctrines, and those of the other long-standing churches, coincided with neither Scripture nor reason. His religious views, however, were quite pronounced. His reading of the millennial prophecies in the Book of Daniel convinced him that the American Revolution signified the beginning of God's destruction of all ecclesiastical and monarchical tyranny, and the advent of His kingdom. On the other hand, Solomon Mack, by his own account, abandoned not only the Congregationalism of his minister father, but all other thoughts of religion as well. Then, during an illness at the age of seventy-seven, he had an intense mystical experience. As a result, he spent the remaining years of his life warning his fellow countrymen against lusting after worldly goods or ignoring their God. 9

Like their parents, Joseph, Sr., and Lucy Smith held fervent religious beliefs yet could find no home among the organized churches. Instead, like many other unchurched people, they embraced the doctrines of "Christian primitivism," the belief that the innovations of the churches down through the ages had corrupted the original religion of Jesus. Accordingly, they demanded