



The Foundations of Mormon Thought:
Church and Praxis

Feeding
the Flock

Terryl L. Givens

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To Philip and Deborah

*How good and glorious it has seemed unto me, to find pure and holy friends, who are faithful, just,
and true.*

— JOSEPH SMITH



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Preface



IN VOLUME I of my history of Mormon thought I chose “Wrestling the Angel” to designate the metaphorical struggle to articulate in human terms the key ideas pertaining to the nature of God, the human, and their relationship. (I use “Mormon” as a simpler and interchangeable term for “the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” the formal designation for the faith tradition.) In this, the second volume, I chose “Feeding the Flock,” as it is the metaphorical expression the resurrected Savior used to refer to the work of the ministry, executed in and through his church by his delegated servants.¹ I intend those words to convey the general scheme of organization, offices, authority, and practices that God designed to bring to fruition his ultimate intentions for the human family discussed in that first volume. This is a book, simply put, about the church, or what religious scholars call ecclesiology. In referring to a history of Mormon practice, I do not mean to present a sociology of Mormonism, or a history of Mormon culture. I mean only to contrast the study of Mormon theology, or Mormon thought as a system of ideas and doctrines, with Mormon ecclesiology, that is, the study of how those ideas and doctrines have been formally implemented through an ecclesiastical structure and modes of worship. In one volume, I cannot hope to cover the entire range of the institutional church, historically or organizationally. So while important, many aspects of the institutional church (like auxiliary organizations and educational systems) I have had to neglect

or pass over lightly as being less central to the study of ecclesiology as historically understood.

The same caveats apply to this volume as they did with the first. I make no claims to either a comprehensive or authoritative presentation and have selected for treatment those aspects of Mormon ecclesiology that strike me as most useful in answering the fundamental question of ecclesiology: what did Joseph Smith and his successors understand the purpose of the church to be, and how did the resultant structure and forms of practice evolve over time?

Mormon ecclesiology in my experience has proven more complicated to arrange topically than theology, because of the complex interconnectedness of all the parts: sacraments are inseparable from questions of authority; authority has both institutional and soteriological roles; in addition, authority is both evidenced in and a precondition for certain spiritual gifts; some spiritual gifts are hard to distinguish from sacraments (healing, for example); some sacraments are central to temple theology but some are part of the order of worship (the Lord's Supper), and some are performed independently. A patriarch holds a priesthood office, but his work is to pronounce blessings, which are a form of sacrament. Seventies formed part of the church hierarchy, became a ward-level priesthood office, then reverted to part of the leadership structure, and so forth. Therefore, liberal use of the index may be the best way to ensure that one has access to all the angles from which a given topic may be discussed in this volume. For readability, most spelling from original sources has been modernized.

Acknowledgments



MANY OF THE questions this volume tackles were raised in the Mormon Scholars Foundation Summer Seminar of 2015, “Organizing the Kingdom: Priesthood, Church Government, and the Forms of LDS Worship.” I thank the donors of the MSF for their support and the participants for their contributions. Several scholars have reviewed various drafts of this work and made helpful criticisms, especially Matthew Bowman, Benjamin Huff, Michael MacKay, Gerald Smith, and Joseph Spencer. Jed Woodworth’s critiques have been crucial, and Jonathan Stapley’s work on priesthood has been invaluable. A work of this nature would be much more difficult if not for the world-class editing of the Joseph Smith Papers editors, making available to this generation an unprecedented bonanza of readily accessible source materials, and I am grateful to the entire team of editors for their contributions to the field of Mormon Studies. I also express appreciation to the University of Richmond Faculty Research Committee and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship for generous support in bringing this project to fruition. Finally, a thank you to my colleagues at Harris Manchester College, Oxford University, where I completed the manuscript as a Visiting Fellow in 2016.

FEEDING THE FLOCK

1

What Is the Church, and Why Is One Necessary?



IN MORMON THEOLOGY, human anthropology is traceable to a premortal sphere in which God the Eternal Father invited into eternal relationship with himself and a Heavenly Mother an innumerable host of those immortal human spirits by which they found themselves surrounded.¹ Rather than forming humans for their own glory, the Divine Parents choose to nurture these souls toward godliness so that these their children, women and men, “might have joy.”² It is at this moment, before the earth is created or the first person formed, that grace—God’s freely given offering of love—irrupts into the universe. In a seventeenth-century sermon, the English Puritan Thomas Watson asks, “What is the chief end of man,” and replies, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God.”³ A historian of theology writes that according to the great American divine Jonathan Edwards, God “always acts for his own glory and honor. Why did God create anything outside himself? . . . God’s only motive was self-glory.”⁴ The first lesson of the Catholic Baltimore Catechism asked, “Why did God make you?” The answer: “God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him.”⁵ One of the most popular preachers of the twenty-first century writes, “You were made for God’s glory.”⁶ Mormon scripture challenges such orthodoxy, asserting, on the contrary, that humans were not created to serve as instruments of God’s glory but that he has made it *his* project and purpose to create the conditions for *our* happiness, by bringing “to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”⁷

God, being perfectly and supremely joyful, wished the same condition to be shared by the human race and made provision—at his unfathomable personal cost—for this to be so. Embodiment for billions of spirits, the travails of mortality, and the educative experiences of pain and pleasure, dissolution, and death—all are orchestrated to effect the eventual incorporation of these numberless multitudes into a celestial family. Full communion with God, partaking of the divine nature by immersion in an eternal web of loving relationships, is the purpose and project of human existence. A mortal sphere exposing humans to the formative crucible of experiences and choices defines as much as refines our nature and propels the process onward. The crowning culmination is achieved when sanctified individuals are assimilated into eternal union with each other and with heavenly parents, in a divine family. Such ends are achieved through belief in God and his providence, and faith in an atoning sacrifice of God the Son that makes repentance, sanctification, and resurrection possible. This is the fundamental framework of Mormon thought.

The contrast with orthodox conceptions of human existence and redemption is profound. “God’s purpose and goal in redemption,” writes one religious historian, “is to reverse the sin, corruption and death introduced into humanity by Adam.”⁸ Mormons, on the other hand, do not see God’s primary work as recuperative or restorative but as progressive and additive. They see the Fall as part of God’s plan from the beginning, a prelude to a mortal experience that is educative, formative, and ennobling, linking an eternal, premortal past with post-resurrection future. As Smith would say in one of his last sermons, at some moment in a distant, primeval past, “God Himself found Himself in the midst of spirits and glory. Because He was greater He saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest, who were less in intelligence, could have a privilege to advance like Himself *and be exalted with Him*.”⁹ This conception of a covenant that precedes the world’s existence, wherein a divine being (and a feminine divine companion) invites humans to participate in the divine nature and enter into eternal relation with them, with that human family reciprocally committing to the terms and conditions of such an outcome, is the governing paradigm of Mormon soteriology. This is the covenantal relationship that underlies and encompasses all other covenants. Smith is a long time unfolding the full cosmic narrative, but he finds the principal impetus with his translation of the Book of Mormon and its radical reworking of covenant theology, aided by revelations in the months following that detail premortal councils and human participation in the grand design. Mormon ecclesiology is best understood—indeed, it can only be understood—insofar as it is situated within this underlying covenantal framework.

Why, we might ask to begin with, is a church even necessary in such a bold scheme? A world of independent agents, exercising faith and living virtuous lives as

motivated or drawn by the clarion call of a heavenly love is a powerful point of departure. The comforting, fortifying, and instructing divine Spirit guides in the journey. Is an actual church necessary in the process? Certain functions of the church are neatly laid out in the letter to the Ephesians: ministering, edifying, and teaching until the imitation of Christ is fully achieved.¹⁰ But is the church thus alluded to essential and indispensable or merely helpful? “Without religion,” one literary character claims, “you *cannot* make the will equal to its tasks.”¹¹ As fallen, self-interested creatures with “willing spirits but weak flesh,” outside aid is critical.¹² A church, from this perspective, serves as spiritual reinforcement, a catalyst or facilitator of moral betterment. In a related way, the collectivist model of public worship and religious affiliation can provide a kind of spiritual as well as material synergy, transforming the good intentions of solitary efforts into both personal transformation and public impact. Not only are “two or three . . . gathered in [his] name” the guarantee of God’s presence,¹³ but large-scale dilemmas require concerted action that charities and orders and congregations moving in concert are better prepared to address than individuals. But are such rationales sufficient explanation?

At the same time, institutional religion comes at a cost. Once a formal institution enters the religious picture, a critical Rubicon in the call of faith has been crossed, and a whole series of dichotomies complicate the life of discipleship. Belief and practice, orthodoxy and orthopraxis, inward faith and outward performance, private conscience and organizational affiliation—such distinctions are useful labels, organizing categories we have come to employ in the study of religion. These dichotomies, however, can also suggest a rupture that portends a crisis, if not a catastrophic failure, of the animating imperative at the core of Christianity: pure and uncalculating love, leading to the holiness that fits one for full communion with God. The moral philosopher and theologian Kenneth Kirk considers that the institutionalization of the Christian church itself threatens to undermine its own avowed purpose, as faith, yearning, love, and loyalty become overwhelmed by forms, rules, and procedures.

Such a dilemma manifested itself almost immediately in the Christian church, he believes: “with the Apostolic Fathers . . . the actions and dispositions are [already] wholly confused,—actions right and wrong pushing their way more and more into the foreground of the code, and obedience and conformity taking the place of enthusiastic loyalty as the basis of Christian life.”¹⁴ The problem, in other words, is that moving from spontaneous love of God as a natural response, to creeds and practices as prescribed belief and performance, would seem to turn religion into the self-conscious pursuit of a goal. Selfless response becomes self-interested quest. “If my aim in life is to attain a specified standard,” notes Kirk, “or to live according to a defined code, I am bound continually to be considering myself, and measuring the distance between my actual attainment and the ideal. It is impossible by such

a road to attain the self-forgetfulness which we believe to be the essence of sanctity.”¹⁵ One remedy suggests itself: “How is disinterestedness, unselfishness, to be attained? Once grant that moralism, or formalism, cannot bring the soul nearer to it, and there remains only one way—the way of worship. Worship lifts the soul out of its preoccupation with itself and its activities, and centers its aspirations entirely on God.”¹⁶

Worship is, as James White notes, “an exasperatingly difficult word to pin down.”¹⁷ Luther saw worship in terms of communion through “prayer and the song of praise,” Calvin saw its end as union with God, while Archbishop Thomas Cranmer said worship was “directed to God’s glory and human rectitude.”¹⁸ In Kirk’s view, worship in its pure form is what saves us from preoccupation with self and turns our hearts and minds upward—enhancing a “stream of new life” that characterizes “this primary bond set up between God and the soul.”¹⁹ Most conceptions of worship, then, emphasize interaction, reciprocity, praise given, and God’s spirit felt, “the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity” in the Catholic view.²⁰ In what follows, I will treat the broad theme of Mormon worship in a similar way but extending Kirk’s emphasis on how believers develop to fruition “this primary bond set up between God and the soul.” Geoffrey Wainwright is correct that “the proper relationship between creature and Creator is . . . the relationship of worship,”²¹ but Mormons construe this “proper relationship” rather differently from other Christians. As I have suggested above and explicated at length elsewhere, Latter-day Saints interpret that bond “between God and the soul” as a literal kinship, a version of theosis more robust and more literal than other Christian versions of the doctrine. Given Mormonism’s reading of that bond as one that is unimpeded by an “infinite qualitative divide,”²² worship entails adoration and praise but also the forging of an eternal, familial relationality.

In addition, worship is not a solitary act—it is communal, an activity expressed in solidarity with others. “To S. Paul and S. John,” notes Kirk, “it could have no other context than that of the Church.”²³ As White quotes the Russian Orthodox theologian George Florovsky, “Christian existence is essentially corporate; to be a Christian means to be in the community.”²⁴ Theologians like Wainwright have also emphasized worship’s community-building and unifying function.²⁵ Latter-day Saints in particular emphasize the communal nature of religion but as much more than an assist to compensate for the human frailty of solitary devotion, or for purposes of establishing communities of merely provisional duration. Mormons construe salvation as eternal relationality with other human beings as well as with God, or what Joseph Smith called a “sociality” with friends and family “coupled with glory.”²⁶ (In this volume, I am using salvation to refer to the Mormon conception of the highest degree of glory, the celestial kingdom or “exaltation.” Mormons—confusingly—also

use the term to refer to the state that virtually the entirety of the human race will inherit, excepting only the “sons of perdition.”)

The philosopher Charles Taylor sees secularism as following upon a great cosmic reorientation in the Western world—an “anthropocentric shift,” or a substitution of man for God at the center of ultimate concern. This anthropocentrism, he writes, replaces theocentrism as a consequence of Enlightenment thought.²⁷ Mormonism refuses this either/or split and reconstitutes heaven as a matrix of eternal relationships that are horizontal as well as vertical. Rather than transcending human relationships in a beatific vision, Mormonism sacralizes them and incorporates them into a divine family of which God (as Eternal Father united with an Eternal Mother) is the head. In both these ways, as celebration of God’s invitation to participate in his heavenly family and as the work of forging a heavenly community here and now, Mormon worship seeks to reverse the direction of religious concern from self to other. More than this, however, the church exists as an indispensable means for developing communities of sanctified individuals that can endure eternally. This requires particularly robust means of shaping character and solidifying durable relationships, means that require covenants and sacraments.

THE PROTESTANT RUPTURE

Jesus launched true Christianity, the saying goes; humans invented churches. Such a wry remark only has resonance among Christians in a modern age, where the value of a formal institution through which to worship God has been called into question. In earlier Christian eras, the indispensability of the church was too obvious to doubt. Before the era of organized, institutional churches, religion was inseparable from culture. The Old Testament uses the Hebrew term *qahal* (ἐκκλησία or *ekklesia* in the Septuagint) to signify a convocation for civil or religious purposes. By the New Testament era, writers employ the term *ekklesia* to refer most commonly to organized congregations of Christian disciples in specific locales (“the church at Antioch”; “the churches of Asia”), though it can also indicate a more universal body of believers (“I will build my church”; “as Christ loved the church”).²⁸

The basis of Israel’s religion was covenant; Jon Levenson wrote that Israel “was called into existence at a moment in ordinary time and at a specifiable place,”²⁹ but in other Jewish thought, God’s covenant with humankind dates to the very creation of the heavens and the earth; “All the souls which existed from Adam onward,” wrote Menasseh ben Israel, citing the Tanhuma, “and which will exist until the end of the world, all these were created in the six days of creation, and they were all in the garden of Eden.” And, he added, they were all present at Sinai

and participated in the reaffirmation of the covenant. This last assertion he found attested by the verse in Deuteronomy 29:14, “I make this covenant to those who are standing here, and with those who are not here with us today.”³⁰ Its earliest biblical expression was in Abraham, where God defines his relationship with his covenant or “chosen” people as one that is passed on hereditarily, an “unconditional” gift, “valid forever.”³¹

As Christianity grew out of Jewish roots, the principal mode of affiliation—of belonging—continued to be covenantal. However, in the new trans-ethnic community and amid Christianity’s universal claims, the covenant was construed in terms of adoption rather than inheritance, and new institutional forms with affiliation open to all became fundamental to religious identity. This was because the church that Jesus was seen to have inaugurated, as locus of the new covenant, became an inescapable conduit to the salvation believers sought, effecting the purposes enumerated in the letter to the Ephesians: ministering, edifying, and teaching until the imitation of Christ was fully achieved. For centuries, the most emphatic rationale the church provided for its existence was simple and convincing; the principle “*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” (“outside the Church there is no salvation”) was unquestioned at least from the third century, when it was first expressed by Bishop Cyprian of Carthage. Or, “whoever wishes to be saved, needs above all to hold the Catholic faith,” as the Athanasian Creed put forth.³² This was thought to be the case because the Fall of Adam immersed his posterity in a blanket condemnation from which none could escape through their own merits.

The underlying logic of this indispensability of the church was based on notions of divine authority, which Christ was believed to have bestowed on his apostles and their successors, and which was employed in administering the church sacraments, those “instrumental channels of God’s grace to humanity,” the indispensable conduits through which saving power was transferred to fallen humans.³³ Such sacraments were necessary to salvation, and only the Mother Church has the Christ-given authority to administer them. As the Council of Trent reaffirmed in response to challenges to this position, those (Protestants) who claimed that sacraments “have been instituted for the nourishing of faith alone” were profoundly wrong, and they were anathematized accordingly. Sacraments were not merely “outward signs of grace”; they were that, but they also “contain the grace which they signify” and “confer that grace” on the faithful.³⁴

With the sixteenth-century Reformation, a major sticking point to separation from Rome was this perceived impossibility of finding salvation outside the formal church organization—of which there was only one plausible candidate in most eyes. Thus the objection of the Catholic cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto to Reformer John Calvin was typical: Sadoletto “rejected the Protestant teaching of salvation by faith

alone and repeatedly emphasized the role of the institutional church.”³⁵ A break with the Roman Catholic Church could only be justified, in this light, by an entirely new conceptualization of the church. Most specifically, as Horton Davies writes, Protestants would have to redefine the “authority of the ministry and the nature of the sacraments.”³⁶ For the most part, Protestants redefined a church sacrament as a sign rather than a channel of grace. “Signs and seals of the covenant of grace,” according to the Westminster Confession; “signs” of “divine promises,” according to Melancthon.³⁷ In Calvin’s most authoritative work, *The Institutes*, he calls sacraments “useful helps in fostering and confirming our faith.”³⁸ They were not the means of grace; Protestants came to use “sacraments” instead to refer to “those duties we perform for the purpose of improving our minds, affecting our hearts, and of obtaining spiritual blessings,” activities like “hearing the Gospel, reading the Scriptures . . . [and] prayer.”³⁹

For Protestants, then, faith was the determinant of salvation, a faith that relied entirely upon the grace of Christ. But this proposition raised a critical problem. If, as the Reformers argued, salvation was truly by grace alone, and the word of God as a rule of faith trumped human councils or authorities, then neither the church nor its sacraments were the exclusive mediators of salvation. (As early as the fourth century an influential text had expressly called the bishop “the mediator between God and you,” and another affirmed that priests are necessary “mediators between God and humanity” in the twentieth.)⁴⁰ Once this break with clerical authority occurred, it was not unreasonable to question the need for any institutional church at all. Initially, Reformers resisted that possibility.

Although Luther protested corruptions in the church that reached to the pope, he nonetheless affirmed his belief that the visible church was the institution in which that spiritual congregation could alone flourish, just as the human body is the proper abode in which the human spirit resides.⁴¹ John Calvin at first justified his break with Rome by claiming individuals found salvation through personal encounter with the Word, not through institutional authority. However, he, like Luther, found it necessary to develop a rationale for the continued existence of a formally structured church, which he had done by the 1543 revision of his *Institutes*.⁴² As a consequence of “human ignorance, sloth, and vanity of mind,” he writes, we “stand in need of eternal helps.” In generous “accommodation to our capacity,” therefore, “God has provided a method by which, though widely separated, we might still draw near to him.” However, what sounds here like merely useful assistance, a “method,” he insists is an institution just as indispensable as ever the Catholic Church was to its adherents. Referring to the “visible church” in particular, he declares: “beyond the pale of the church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for. . . . The abandonment of the church is always fatal.”⁴³

Early Methodism shifted through various phases. Wesley came to emphasize authority and correct doctrine less and less, though he valued his connection to the established church; eventually he lamented that he had not preached from the beginning that “every one who feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted of him.”⁴⁴ The church, in this expansive vision, encompassed “all the Christians under heaven,” or “all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world.”⁴⁵ And in his generosity, Wesley “dare[d] not exclude from the church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines . . . are sometimes, yea, frequently, preached.”⁴⁶ However, participation in *some* visible church was in his view indispensable. Not for any sacraments performed or authority represented, but because Christians are called upon to constitute a community, a fellowship, and summoned as they are “to live the life that is hid with Christ in God, then [we must] take care how [we] rend the body of Christ by separating from [our] brethren.”⁴⁷

Others justified more radical responses to the collapse of sacramentalism. (Five years after launching his attack on medieval sacraments, notes Brooks Holifield, Luther was “struggling to save the sacraments themselves.”)⁴⁸ In England, for instance, Benjamin Hoadly argued that individual “conscience” and “sincerity” trumped apostolic authority and “external communion”; in so doing he ignited a debate involving fifty churchmen and seventy-four pamphlets in 1714 alone. Anxious fellow Protestants correctly perceived that his argument would effectively “dissolve the Church as a *Society*.”⁴⁹ In America a century later, the young Abraham Lincoln drew the same logical inference from Reformation thought as did numbers of Protestants: Lincoln embraced the Bible but felt no need for any formal religious affiliation whatsoever. “I am not a member of any Christian church, but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures.” In Nathan Hatch’s words, such reasoning in effect calls “for a Christianity exclusively biblical that had no place for clergy, denominations, confessions or creed. What [Lincoln and others] came to affirm was a faith drawn from the Scriptures without human mediation.”⁵⁰ The position was eminently reasonable: if essential sacraments administered by virtue of apostolic authority were not unequivocally requisite to salvation, of what necessity was any church at all?

Like other Christian thinkers, Joseph Smith did not believe the saved were limited to one institutional church. “The church of the Lamb of God” consists of “those who will have [the Lord] to be their God,” in the words of the Book of Mormon, and an 1829 revelation had God declaring “whosoever repenteth and cometh unto me, the same is my church.”⁵¹ Yet another scripture produced by Smith held that some of “his [the Lord’s] people” include many of the righteous who co-exist *alongside* the Restored church.⁵² All this only makes the question even more emphatic; *why* should Mormons believe the institutional church to have a vital—or even indispensable—role in human salvation? Why the necessity of a formal

incorporation and organization? From Smith's own reminiscences of his youth, it is clear that the first function that he sought in religion was spiritual and emotional, and it is to those motives that we may trace the origins of the system he would shape. His personal faith journey gives important historical context to Mormonism's foundations in covenant theology, even as it establishes an enduring theme in LDS ecclesiology—the quest for assurance of salvation.

ANXIETY, CERTITUDE, AND COVENANT THEOLOGY

The intense human craving for relief from the fears of death and damnation has given rise to many cataclysms and innovations in the history of Christianity. In the Catholic soteriology, assurance of salvation can only come when an imperfect faith is supplemented, as Adolf von Harnack long ago characterized the principle, “by the doctrinal authority of the Church on the one side and by the Sacramental Church institution on the other, and yet in such a way that it is obtained only approximately.”⁵³ In other words, salvation comes from belonging to the true church and receiving its sacraments by authorized administrators. Those conditions provide a degree of assurance that may fall short of absolute certitude but is as close to a guarantee as is possible in this world. Providing such assurance was a conspicuous function of the church. It may be true that Church Fathers professed a theological rationale for the indispensability of the church to human salvation; but the church had also provided a critical psychological role in assuaging a human fear of the hell that perpetually threatened in the background. That role was radically undermined with the Reformation critique of sacramental efficacy. Without those visible instruments of salvation, how does one know one is saved? Clearly, in light of the Reformation critique of Catholicism, the doctrine of the church would itself have to change if it were to maintain its relevance and value. The church would have to find an alternate means of satisfying the human craving for an antidote to the anxiety of damnation, and a firm theological basis as well.

Institutional abuses and purgatorial practices aside, Luther's unease with Catholic doctrine itself was precipitated in large measure because of the spiritual insecurity he found in his life of monastic commitment. No matter how devoutly he observed the rules and commandments of his faith and his order, he found himself incapable of confidence in his spiritual standing and future. “My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no assurance that my merit would assuage him.”⁵⁴ “Assurance” emerges here as a critical preoccupation in Luther's mind, and it will assume paramount importance in the theological systems of most Protestant forms that follow in his wake.

Luther found Catholic sacramentalism insufficient as a basis for spiritual peace. And as Protestants came to deny that salvation comes through sacraments administered by an elect class of mediators, they entirely demolished the principal hedge against the personal dread of damnation that had for so many centuries been a constant in the Christian mind. If innate guilt and depravity are our natural inheritance and eternal torment our fitting destiny, then where is the balm of Gilead to be found, if not in Mother Church and her saving sacraments and commandments, faithfully upheld? Protestants had to necessarily supply a new answer to the age-old question: what constitutes the *certitudo salutis* (personal assurance of salvation), and how is it to be secured? The fear of damnation, soon reinforced by Calvinist preaching that emphasized human depravity and a fully merited eternal punishment, drove thousands and eventually millions to seek spiritual relief. A popular eighteenth-century schoolbook, *Collection of English Prose and Verse* captured the religious terrors that had become increasingly normalized. One writer in the anthology agonized over “the vast uncertainty I am struggling with . . . the force and vivacity of my apprehensions; every doubt wears the face of horror, and would perfectly overwhelm me, but for some faint gleams of hope, which dart across the tremendous gloom. What tongue can utter the anguish of a soul suspended between the extremes of infinite joy or eternal misery. . . . I tremble and shudder.”⁵⁵

The solution to this hunger for assurance, Luther held, was to repose trust in God’s faithfulness rather than in his own. When Paul said “the just shall live by his faith,” Luther took this to mean not that we live in a constant state of hopeful uncertainty. The power of faith did not for him refer to a human capacity for or exercise of simple trust. Rather, the righteous should live by confidence in Christ’s promises. And given the fact that the *object* of that faith is certain and steadfast, being Jesus Christ himself, *his* reliability was of such perfection as to ground incontestably the confidence we repose in him. Our faith can relieve us of the purgatory of uncertainty, not because our mind is firm but because our foundation is Christ’s faithfulness, not ours. The object, not the practitioner, of faith endows faith with its saving power but also confers its fruits: confidence and spiritual tranquility. “I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn.”⁵⁶ Luther’s self-diagnosis for spiritual anxiety—and the prescribed cure—resonated through much of the continent and across the channel.

As the idea would be canonized by Anglicans in the Westminster Confession, “such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be *certainly assured* that they are in a state of grace” (emphasis mine). Furthermore, “this certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, . . . but an infallible assurance of faith.”⁵⁷ And

this assurance, or “calling and election made sure,” is one that all may obtain “without extraordinary revelation.”⁵⁸ To the Protestants, writes one historian of theology, “the test of the Christian was not that he was so living as to secure the promise, but that he had experienced in himself the certain conviction that the promise was indelictably his. This conviction—the ‘assurance’ of a status that cannot be lost—. . . is the palladium of orthodox Protestantism.”⁵⁹

This assurance the church offered, made available through the grace of Christ, took the form of a highly developed theology—Protestant covenant theology. As dissenters migrated to America especially, in the words of John von Rohr, “the often anguished Puritan search for personal assurance of salvation found substantial assuagement in covenantal certainty.”⁶⁰ The general view was that God had established a covenant of works with Adam (the covenant made with Moses at Sinai, wrote Charles Buck’s editor, was “merely a republication” of the original).⁶¹ In the aftermath of Adam’s (and Israel’s) failure to fulfill his obligation of perfect obedience, God made provision for a new covenant—the covenant of grace, inaugurated by Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Covenant theology was derived from the New Testament’s express differentiation of Christ’s sacrifice and the gospel it inaugurated from the Mosaic code and sacrifices which preceded it. Jesus himself referred to the Eucharistic wine as emblem of a new covenant,⁶² and the author of Hebrews called Christ the “mediator of the new covenant,” the “law [being] only a shadow of the good things to come.”⁶³

Covenant theology continued to evolve in the eighteenth century. The most substantive reworking of the idea would be in response to the emphasis of Jacob Arminius on the role of human agency in salvation. For Arminius, “inclusion in the covenant of grace is not determined solely by God but by the free response of the human person to God’s imitative in Christ.”⁶⁴ Herein, the door is again opened to that very anxiety that covenant theology was meant to alleviate. With John Wesley, the whole program of salvational assurance is once again thrown into radical doubt. In his “Call to Backsliders,” Wesley obliterated any hope of an abiding spiritual security: even those “sanctified” in “the blood of the covenant” may indeed “fall away from sanctifying grace.”⁶⁵ Is, then, no greater assurance possible? A limited one at best, opines Wesley. Like God’s pledge to Abraham, the archetypal covenant, “though *everlasting, was conditional*.”⁶⁶ Wesley’s critique reveals how unstable the solution of the *certitudo salutis*, or assurance of salvation, had become in the years leading up to Joseph Smith. It is no overstatement to say the religious world of antebellum America continued to be the story of personal quests for salvational assurance writ large. And covenant theology was the framework in which seekers found and secured that *certitudo salutis*. Covenant theology is the framework on which Mormonism, too, erects its ecclesiology—but it is a covenant theology radically transformed.

LUTHER, WESLEY, SMITH

Mormonism's beginnings connect the movement's founder—and founding vision—to Protestant predecessors in crucial ways. For many decades, Latter-day Saints (LDS) believers have dated the origins of Mormonism to the fourteen-year old Smith's remarkable theophany in an upstate New York grove of trees. Recent historians have pointed out that the event was of an almost exclusively personal nature.⁶⁷ In actual fact, both the historical revisionists and the Mormon laity are correct; Smith's experience in the upstate New York woods in 1820 was an intensely personal experience that neither involved nor intimated any commission to inaugurate a new religious tradition. At the same time, the particular motives and outcomes behind that spring theophany situate Smith firmly within a long-standing Protestant narrative, and connect the Mormon church's founding to an ongoing history of anxiety about salvation and covenant theology—just as Lutheranism and Wesleyanism were.

The typical Protestant conversion story occurring at the intersection of salvational anxiety and covenant theology was of the form we saw above with Martin Luther—and it appears again in the conversion of John Wesley. He found his spiritual quest one of perpetual anxiety until a decisive moment when, he recorded, "I felt that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."⁶⁸ Out of Wesley's personal experience and entrepreneurial religiosity, Methodism was born. Joseph Smith's personal journey and religion-making career began in very similar circumstances (and indeed, Smith was long inclined toward Methodism and greatly influenced by it). The cause of his prayerful quest was—as the case with countless others before and since—spiritual unease. "I [had] become convicted of my sins," he recorded of his early adolescence, "therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go." (His later words, spoken out of personal experience, tie him even more closely to the pattern of Protestant terror about one's prospects of salvation: "There is no pain so awful as the pain of suspense.")⁶⁹ With telling language, Oliver Cowdery, in his account of Smith's First Vision (compiled, he said with Smith's assistance), referred specifically to the boy's yearning for "that *assurance* which the Lord Jesus has so freely offered" (emphasis in original).⁷⁰ In the ensuing 1820 theophany, Smith heard the sought-after words that firmly place him within the tradition of the Protestant conversion narrative: "Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee."⁷¹

The divine words of comfort, however, proved to be no enduring balm; forgiveness of sins gave no lasting assurance of salvation. Three years later Smith was haunted anew by the specter of damnation, and eternal torment again plagued his mind. So once more "I betook myself to prayer and supplication," seeking "a manifestation of

my state and standing before him.”⁷² Smith’s spiritual odyssey was to this point but one example of the familiar pattern: an anxious individual, conscience-plagued by introspection and chastened by hellfire sermons, seeking solace and tokens of grace.⁷³ However, Smith’s case was complicated to some extent by the fact that remedies available to the spiritual heirs of Puritanism were not available to him. By personal inclination on the one hand and Methodist influence on the other, he was averse to the two preconditions of Puritan covenantal theology: “piety and predestination.” Smith was famously disinclined to both evidence and claims of personal piety. Three years after his First Vision he lapsed into “sins and follies,” and later frankly admitted, “I am not so much of a christian as many suppose I am.”⁷⁴ Months later, he repeated the point: “I do not want you to think that I am very righteous, for I am not.”⁷⁵ At the same time, his early partiality to Methodism equally rendered any Calvinist version of covenant assurance impossible. “I abhor the doctrine of predestination,”⁷⁶ thundered Wesley, and Smith followed suit: “God did not elect or predestinate.”⁷⁷

However, on the occasion of Smith’s second spiritual quest, something more durable resulted from this heavenly encounter than a transient absolution from sin. This second vision, which Smith described as a visitation from the angel Moroni, laid the foundation for the production of the Book of Mormon, and it was to the receipt of this record that Smith dated his ministry.⁷⁸ This record—and the church that arose out of its pages—were both consequences of Smith’s personal quest for salvational assurance, and both satisfy that quest in a manner analogous to the *certitudo salutis* fashioned by the Protestant theologians. In his project of Restoration, Smith effectively reworks the Protestant model of the covenant of grace—appropriating the language, modifying the form, and accomplishing the same ends. The theology Smith developed supplied an emotional and spiritual surrogate for the consoling balm of that covenant framework—one with a language familiar to a nineteenth-century Protestant audience—and it would effect the same assurance, without relying upon either piety or predestination. The Book of Mormon, subsequent revelations, and Smith’s rhetoric of restoration were all replete with allusions to and explications of God’s covenant with Israel. The Book of Mormon in particular served to radically reconstitute covenant theology: it replaced its dichotomies of old and new, law and grace, historic and spiritual, with an unparalleled synthesis of them all, even as it exploited and literalized the earliest conceptions of covenantal history to create a people with a rare spiritual cohesion; and it provided a concrete nexus for experiential religion that was a remarkably successful surrogate for the covenant of grace, channeling as it does a comparable effect of salvational assurance. Most important, in the newly reconstituted covenant theology that emerges from the Book of Mormon we find the outlines of a comprehensive rationale for the church that Smith organized immediately thereafter.

2

Latter-day Saint Covenant Theology



THE BOOK OF MORMON—"THE NEW COVENANT"

One contemporary remembered Joseph Smith relating a crucial detail about his First Vision: according to Levi Richards, Smith said that on that occasion, the Lord had confirmed to him that “all the sects” were “wrong, & that the Everlasting covenant was broken.”¹ That phrase—the everlasting covenant—became central to Smith’s understanding of his prophetic calling and the massive project of “restoration” to which he devoted his life. Translating the Book of Mormon, Smith found its prophets confirming that “many covenants of the Lord” had been corrupted or removed from the biblical text.² When Smith published the Book of Mormon seven years after Moroni’s first visitation, the scripture’s title page heralded a new version of covenant theology, with an emphatic declaration of salvational assurance: the Book of Mormon’s very purpose, its final editor tells readers on the title page itself, is “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel that they are not cast off forever.” In fact, in an 1832 pronouncement Smith records the Lord’s reference to the Book of Mormon as itself “*the new covenant*.”³ So how does the Book of Mormon reconstitute Christian understanding of covenant theology?

Protestant covenant theology is predicated on the radical opposition between the old and the new. As outlined above, the premise of covenant theology is that the original covenant given the human race in the Garden of Eden was a covenant of works, of obedience. But disobedience on Adam and Eve’s part ruptured their

relationship with God and incurred divine wrath and condemnation. Incapable of rising from the ashes of the perdition they had incurred and the state of sin to which humans would naturally and inevitably revert, Adam and Eve and their posterity could only be rescued by the intervention of a Savior, and a reconstituted relationship to God predicated on Christ's righteousness, rather than their own. This new covenantal relationship was built on the foundation of grace—and being founded on Christ's faithfulness rather than human obedience, the covenant was secure and absolutely reliable. All that was necessary was for the sinner to know that he or she fell under the covenant's provisions, as one of the elect.

This binary opposition between works and grace in covenant thought is paralleled at many related levels of Christian understanding. Spiritual Israel—those who constitute the body of Christ—takes the place of historic Israel—the biblical people of the covenant. The New Testament (New Covenant) supplants the Old Testament (Old Covenant). The qualifiers “Old” and “New” seem self-evidently instituted as emphatic differentiators of covenants, dispensations, even churches in Thomas Campbell's formulation: “Although the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are inseparably connected,” he writes, “yet as to what directly and properly belongs to their immediate object, the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament Church, and the particular duties of its members.”⁴ In the new gospel dispensation, salvation is experienced as an individual relationship, in distinction from the collective redemption associated with Israel. Finally, the gospel supplants the law (“no two words are more distinct in their signification than law and gospel,” wrote Alexander Campbell).⁵

The essence of Joseph Smith's theology represents a rejection of such polarities, as portended by the Book of Mormon itself. Rather than reaffirm the supplanting of historical Israel by spiritual Israel, the Old by the New Testament, a national by a personal covenant, or the Mosaic Law by the Law of the Gospel, the Book of Mormon instead fully encompasses and unifies the diverse strands of history, scripture, and gospel dispensations into one. In so doing, the Book of Mormon prepares the ground for the church Smith was about to found, providing the rationale and theological base for its establishment. No other Christian tradition so conflates the two covenantal theologies into one covenant that precedes and encompasses both.⁶

Literal and Spiritual Israel

As early as the *Epistle of Barnabas*, written in approximately AD 100, Christians were arguing that they had replaced the Hebrews as God's covenant people and the

practice was soon entrenched of reading the historic entity as “type of the people that should come afterwards,” the true, spiritual body of believers.⁷ So in Ambrose Serle’s 1793 *Church of God*, we read how God’s choosing of the people of Israel was “prophetic and emblematic . . . of his conduct towards the true and spiritual Israel,” and “God’s true and *spiritual* people are partakers of a better covenant,” that is, the covenant of grace.⁸ Or in Matthew Henry’s *Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, we find God’s “everlasting covenant . . . of grace” pertains to “all God’s *spiritual* Israel.”⁹ Again in Isaac Pennington’s 1761 works, Moses led literal Israel by the “outward” law, as God’s spirit would later lead “*spiritual* Israel” according to his “inward law”; God’s “statutes and ordinances” conveyed on Mt. Sinai were “but a shadow of the inward and *spiritual* covenant, the new and everlasting covenant, which God makes with his inward and spiritual people in the latter days” (all above emphases mine).¹⁰ These fixed polarities between historic and spiritual Israel collapse in the Book of Mormon’s pages.

Here, historic Israel is not supplanted in God’s eyes by spiritual Israel as was the case with supercessionist thought. Rather, historic Israel is revealed to be present in the ongoing work of gathering, literally rather than figuratively—in the form of both Native Americans and converts to the gospel. Amos had referred anciently to God’s future mercy toward “the remnant of Joseph,” meaning descendants of Ephraim and/or Manasseh, and Ezekiel had similarly intimated their eventual restoration.¹¹ The principal antagonists in the Book of Mormon narrative, the “Lamanites”—or American Indians in whole or in part¹²—are from “the house of Israel,” tracing their literal descent from a Manassehite exile from sixth-century Jerusalem.¹³ These people, descendants of one Lehi, self-identify as that remnant who would be preserved and later gathered by the Lord.¹⁴ Though the narrative ends with the fratricidal elimination of the book’s protagonists, the promise is made to the recordkeepers that “a mixture of [their] seed” will survive to find redemption in a future day.¹⁵ How? The Book of Mormon prophesied its own transmission through “Gentiles,” and the work of the Gentiles in bringing “the remnant” of Joseph to a knowledge and enjoyment of the covenant made to Abraham.¹⁶

In other words, the work predicts that in the modern era, a cadre of God’s elect (whom Smith will later identify as scattered and now recovered Israelites) from a great Gentile nation will successfully evangelize New World descendants of the House of Israel (Native American descendants of historic Israel). And early Mormons thought they were living in the very moment of its prophesied fulfillment. For example, for Native Americans, the Indian Removal Act signed into law by Andrew Jackson was an unmitigated tragedy. For settlers on the frontier it was a welcome prelude to even more dramatic expansion into the frontier. But for Mormons, the (forced) relocation of scattered southern tribes to a designated

federal territory represented the latest iteration of an ongoing fulfillment of Israel's covenantal history. The church paper proclaimed in 1832 that it was "marvelous, to witness the gathering of the Indians."¹⁷ The first LDS missionaries, who were sent to the Indian Territory, saw those Delaware and Shawnee they visited as living emblems not of brutal government policies but of God's mercy and providential designs. As the *Evening and Morning Star* opined, "What a beauty it is to see the prophecies fulfilling so exactly," then quoted Nephi that the Lord "shall bring them again out of captivity, and they shall be gathered together to the lands of their inheritance, and they shall be brought out of obscurity and darkness."¹⁸

As Smith develops his understanding of covenant Israel, he will enfold the membership of the church as well in that same vision of a literal Israel restored to their birthright. For the Book of Mormon prophesied that not only Nephi's posterity but "all the house of Israel" were heirs to the promise that through Abraham's seed, "all the kindreds of the earth shall be blessed."¹⁹ By baptism into the restored church, Smith will teach, those living remnants of historic Israel scattered among the Gentiles are gathered in, or the non-Israelite converts are adopted into the fold.

Old and New Testaments

A second, more conspicuous collapse of the divide between old and new, biblical Israel and adopted Israel, was the Book of Mormon itself, constituting a scriptural synthesis of Old and New World texts. The narrative begins in the Old World, in the city of Jerusalem, "in the reign of King Zedekiah, king of Judah."²⁰ The narrator tells us Jeremiah has been cast into prison,²¹ and the prophecies of Isaiah are quoted liberally. But this seamless record chronicles an Israelite remnant's exodus under the leadership of one Lehi to the Western hemisphere, and six centuries later, describes the preaching of a New World John the Baptist (Samuel the Lamanite, a descendant of Lehi) on the eve of the Messiah's birth. Then, recapitulating the Gospels in this New World setting, the chroniclers describe the visit and ministry of a resurrected Christ, his ordination and commission to twelve disciples, and the institution of church sacraments. It is as if the Book of Mormon rewrites the Old/New Testament records into a holistic gospel narrative in which Christ is the fulcrum rather than the culmination of Christian history, with both sides of the historical divide equally Christocentric. Prophets actually date their years in anticipation of the Incarnation,²² and rather than Old Testament writings merely foreshadowing the Christ, we find this volume quoting ancient texts that detail his death and resurrection.²³ In one remarkable passage, pre-Christian prophets demand the right to celebrate his nativity years before the fact: "Is it not as easy at this time for the Lord to send his angel to declare these glad tidings unto us as unto our children, or as after

the time of his coming?" asks Alma,²⁴ while others "testified of the coming of Christ, and have looked forward, and have rejoiced in his day which is to come."²⁵

The volume further disrupts any simple scriptural dichotomies by replacing Old and New Testaments, not with Old and New World canons, but with endlessly proliferating scriptures that erase any temporal or geographical divides. The Lord insists that "Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written. For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them."²⁶

National versus Individual

A third conflation of covenantal theology blends the communal and the individual. Jon D. Levenson points out that unlike Christian conceptions of salvation, "deliverance in the Hebrew Bible is in the main collective and historical, not individual."²⁷ ("The idea of a covenant between a deity and a people is unknown from other religions and cultures," notes the *Encyclopedia Judaica*.)²⁸ By contrast, Paul admonished Christians to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."²⁹ Even granting the "New Perspective on Paul,"³⁰ with its critique of an overly individualistic soteriology, Protestants have historically conceived conversion and adoption into the new covenant in intensely individualistic terms. In the Puritan covenant theology as articulated by Peter Bulkeley, the unconditional nature of Christ's gift did not negate the crucial fact that one "must enter into a particular covenant with God."³¹ In the Book of Mormon, covenantal relationships blend the individual and the communal. "It portrays two distinct types of salvation working in harmony," Grant Hardy notes. "Nephite writers are deeply concerned with salvation history, that is, with God's intervention in the rise and fall of entire nations and peoples—Nephites and Lamanites, Jews and Gentiles—yet those same writers also repeatedly address individual sinners in need of the 'atoning blood of Christ.'"³²

Often, covenants in the Book of Mormon operate in an intermediate way, made by small communities of the faithful—like the spiritually transformed people of King Benjamin who "enter into a [collectively administered] covenant with our God to do his will" and the little band of converts baptized by the missionary Alma—all of whom signal their covenant by individual attestation.³³ The most beautiful illustration in the Book of Mormon of a covenantal understanding that blends the preoccupation with a national or tribal salvation and an individual experience of healing grace is Enos's dialogic encounter with God. Hungering for personal relief from sin and guilt, Enos cries unto the Lord "all the day long" and into the night, before

receiving a promise of his own blessedness. He is then moved by compassion to pray for the spiritual welfare of his brethren, the Nephites. He is assured by the voice of the Lord that according to the covenant made with “thy fathers,” provision would be made for their salvation. Receiving assurance of both the covenant made with the fathers and of “the covenant which [God] had made” with Enos, his “soul did rest.”³⁴ The exchange, and the thematic blending of individual and communal incorporation into covenant relationship with God, anticipates Smith’s fuller exposition of a communal salvation—one in which neither blanket blessedness nor atomistic salvation is possible.

Old and New Gospels

Fourth and more profoundly, the Book of Mormon enacted the collapse into one of old and new covenants, the laws of Moses and of Christ. It does not, in other words, recapitulate the contrast between the old covenant of works and the Protestant covenant of grace; it reconstitutes covenant theology into something rather new. It does this by refusing to recognize the gospel of Jesus Christ as entirely supplanting or displacing an earlier covenant of works. For instance, in the Book of Mormon, the New World Christians, “notwithstanding [they] believe in Christ, [they] keep the law of Moses” centuries before his birth.³⁵ A later prophet notes that “the law of Moses did strengthen their faith in Christ.”³⁶ Clearly, the law of Moses and the new covenant of the gospel co-exist harmoniously in the religious world described in the Book of Mormon. We read, for instance, that the ancient writers of the Book of Mormon “had a hope of [Christ’s] glory many hundred years before his coming,” and “keep the law of Moses” even as they “look forward with steadfastness unto Christ.”³⁷ In a telescoping of the old and the new, righteous Nephites believed “in him to come as though he already was” and were taught faith, repentance, baptism, and reception of the Holy Ghost.³⁸ At the same time, the Book of Mormon invokes a central image of Mosaic religion and covenant Israel, the temple, and describes its replication and dispersion in the New World: a pattern that foreshadows Smith’s erection of temples in the early nineteenth century, merging even Old Testament and New Testament worship forms.

The Book of Mormon, as the extra-biblical text most used by Mormons, and employed by the hundreds (and then thousands) to disseminate their message, was the principal conduit for a view of ecclesiastical and covenant history that minimized the transition from the Judaism of the prophets to the gospel of the apostles. Before Smith ever organized the first branch of the church, he was steeped in a text that depicted a pre-Christian people worshipping Christ, and a tribe of Hebrews making a covenant to be called “the children of Christ, his sons and his daughters.”³⁹

All of what we have said about Smith's conflating of old and new covenantal theology is merely prologue to his final vision of what God's covenant with his people actually entails, and where and how it originated. Months after publishing the Book of Mormon, Smith pushes the scope of the everlasting covenant even further back in time. Working on a new translation of the Bible, Smith makes critical revisions to Exodus 34. In his redacted text, Smith clarifies that what was originally given to Moses on Mt. Sinai was the fullness of the gospel; in Moses's first mountaintop encounter with Jehovah, he received the higher priesthood, Christ's "holy order" and "the ordinances thereof." Only after the apostate episode of the golden calf were those gifts withdrawn and replaced with a lesser version.⁴⁰ The preparatory law in this version, the "schoolmaster" or "disciplinarian until Christ came,"⁴¹ is a temporary intervention bridging ancient privileges and Latter-day Restoration—not a crude first stage in a linear process of developing fullness. The resultant theology is one mired in paradox: the "new and everlasting covenant" which the church was restored to reestablish is actually "that which was from the beginning."⁴²

Those readers accustomed to accepting the new covenant as a total displacement of the failed Adamic law of works would see in this revision the most radical reconstitution imaginable of the covenant of grace—one that collapses into one not just Old and New Testaments, but all of dispensational history itself. Indeed, Smith propounds not just an ancient American Christianity, nor does he stop at a Mosaic possession of gospel fulness, but reconstructs a gospel that dates back to Father Adam himself. In 1833 Smith published in the church newspaper the shocking claim that "Adam was the first member of the church of Christ on earth." "The plan of salvation was revealed to Adam," noted a subsequent treatment of his biblical revisions.⁴³ Indeed, Smith's interpolations in the Genesis account (as part of his Bible retranslation project) even has Adam learning about the atonement, experiencing baptism for the remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Ghost.⁴⁴ As Smith's popularizer Parley Pratt put it with his typical self-assurance, "We have only the old thing. It was old in Adams day it was old in Mormons day & hid up in the earth & it was old in 1830 when we first began to preach it."⁴⁵ This perspective of a Christ-centered gospel dating in its fullness to Eden contrasts vividly with a Protestant theologian's casual comment that thinking to find a correct understanding of the Trinity in the *Shepherd of Hermas* is "expecting far too much from a second-century church father."⁴⁶

Reassurance

Even as it reconstituted covenant theology, the Book of Mormon effectively promised the same salvational assurance that the Puritan covenant theology had so

successfully grounded. This was in the direct access the Book of Mormon gave and modeled of a personal, dialogic encounter with Deity, situating the reader firmly in a covenant relationship with God; and through the artifactual concreteness of the gold plates at the story's core, which possessed an iconic status that pointedly heralded an open heaven. Thematically, a most consistent focus in the Book of Mormon is the means by which individuals engage in a direct, literal, dialogic encounter with God. The first Book of Mormon chronicler introduces this motif, pursuing his own visionary experience of Christ full of confidence that "I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him, as well in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself unto the children of men."⁴⁷ As the narrative virtually opens with this theme, so does it conclude. The final editor, Moroni, offers a concluding promise of spiritual certainty so unequivocal and literal that it elicited cries of blasphemy in 1831 to the present day.⁴⁸ After reading the Book of Mormon, he directs, "If ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things."⁴⁹

This theme of spiritual certitude is apparent in the reconstituted language of Mormon conversion, and in its pervasive rhetoric of certainty. The salvific, transformative encounter with the God of Protestantism results in an affective experience of grace. For Protestants, *personal* "assurance must come through personal awareness of the inner presence of that saving faith which is election's sign."⁵⁰ In Mormon culture, the private, experiential aspect of conversion becomes radically transposed into an affirmation of historical truths rooted in tangible artifacts, generally centering on the Book of Mormon. Still, the new scripture approaches through artifactual concreteness and the allure of individualized revelation what covenant theology achieved through contractual obligation, that is, confidence in one's hope of salvation. The Book of Mormon at one and the same time is a catalyst to personal adoption into a covenantal relationship with Christ, even as it serves as the instrument to redirect and repair the covenantal history of a wayward Israel and provide assurance that "I the Lord have not forgotten my people."⁵¹

As Smith organizes and develops the church, the New and Everlasting Covenant will find full exposition as a covenant made in premortal worlds, before the earth was created. In its final form, the church will provide the structures, principles, and practices that provide concrete preparation for, and assurance of, integration into an eternal heavenly family according to God's primordial designs. But the beginnings of that church are present in the Book of Mormon, and from its pages a reconceived church quickly emerges.

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST—"THE NEW AND
EVERLASTING COVENANT"

The Book of Mormon came off the press and began circulation in March 1830. Its purpose in laying out the fundamental framework of a new covenant theology that would justify a formal reestablishment of the church is evident in one simple fact—Smith organized a church mere days after its publication. It is not known when Joseph first conceived the project of a formal church organization. No such plan was indicated in his boyhood visions of the Father and Son, or the subsequent visitations of Moroni.⁵² For some years, Smith clearly believed he had been called to translate and disseminate the Book of Mormon, not found a new religious tradition. Only in March 1829 was Smith given to know that God planned to again "establish [his] church."⁵³ Weeks later, as the translation raced to completion with Oliver Cowdery's help, the word came again that the Lord would "establish my church among [this generation]."⁵⁴ Then, as Smith finished laboring on the translation in June 1829 he received a specific command to "build up [the Lord's] church."⁵⁵ He was destitute, pilloried in the press, had suffered assault, and was alienated from his in-laws as his long and fraught project came to a conclusion. It is unlikely he anticipated this new commission to found a formal church under his leadership with eagerness.

Some followers, like David Whitmer, insisted that believers in the Book of Mormon and Smith's prophetic authority were already "fully organized—spiritually—before" any formal process took place. And indeed, Oliver Cowdery, in June 1829, prepared under Smith's direction an "Articles of the Church of Christ,"⁵⁶ which included instructions for baptism, ordaining teachers and priests, and administering the sacrament. (Those articles, however, were never ratified by the membership.) After formal organization of the church took place, Whitmer insisted it only occurred in response to criticisms that they had no clerical rights without legal standing.⁵⁷ And indeed, missionaries had been going abroad to share the news of the Book of Mormon before its pages were even bound into final form, but not to baptize. Unwilling to wait for the finished volumes, Christian Whitmer, David's brother, "copied from the manuscript the teachings and the doctrine of Christ, being the things which we were commanded to preach." Others took printed portions fresh from the press to do the same.⁵⁸ Once the manuscript was delivered to the printer in summer 1829, Smith recorded in his history, "We still continued to bear testimony and give information."⁵⁹ Smith, however, understood the formal incorporation as divinely mandated, whether those promptings constituted his interpretation of prior revelation or an unrecorded new one. He wrote simply that in this period, they "had received commandment to organize the church."⁶⁰ Accordingly

Smith and five others, to comply with state law, met in the home of Peter Whitmer and incorporated as the Church of Christ on April 6, 1830.

The most direct evidence that Smith connected church organization directly to a new covenant theology was the explicit rationale published in the first collection of the revelations given to him (*The Book of Commandments*, 1833). As his First Vision had revealed “that the Everlasting covenant was broken,”⁶¹ so do the introductory verses given in the voice of God proclaim that Smith has been commanded to (re)institute the church so “that mine everlasting covenant might be established.”⁶² Some time earlier a slightly different designation had been assigned the restoration, in the form of a paradox: the Lord explained “all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this thing; and this is a *new* and an everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning.”⁶³ What was new, in other words, was the understanding that the new covenant *was* the original covenant (or, “we have only the old thing,” in Pratt’s words). But how far back did this “beginning” reach?

The New and Everlasting Covenant, Smith came to understand, encompassed more, far more, than a conflation of Old and New Testament conceptions and histories, more even than promises made to New World Israelites, the prophet Moses, or Adam himself. In an 1835 text that Smith produced, known as the Book of Abraham, he depicted the inauguration of the everlasting covenant in premortal councils, where Abraham and many of God’s “noble and great ones” were promised “an earth whereon [to] dwell,” a probationary “first estate,” and the promise of further “glory added upon their heads forever and ever.”⁶⁴ As Smith gradually unfolded the portent of those words, a new conception of the nature of the divine and of the human, of their relationship before the Fall, and the possibilities of that relationship in the hereafter took shape in a way that utterly broke with contemporary Christian paradigms. The *Hymn of the Pearl*, a Gnostic text from the early Christian era that allegorizes the human descent into the world, describes heavenly parents who

sent me on a mission
from our home in the east. . . .
They took off my bright robe of glory,
which they had made for me out of love,
and took away my purple toga,
which was woven to fit my stature.
They made a covenant with me
and wrote it in my heart so I would not forget.⁶⁵

So, too, in Smith’s thought does a salvational scheme develop that was rooted in heavenly councils before the earth’s creation and had as its design the incorporation

of an innumerable host of premortal souls into an eternal family presided over by heavenly parents. This is the foundation for Mormonism's view of salvation history as a narrative of ascent from primeval intelligence through mortal embodiment toward eventual theosis, rather than as a story that is primarily about recuperation, repair, and rehabilitation.

Meanwhile, Smith was coming to develop his understanding of what constitutes that heavenly family. Smith noted of Moroni's 1823 appearance that the angel related to him "many" passages of scripture, from both the Old and New Testaments.⁶⁶ In one of his earlier recitations, however, it was only one biblical text he recalled being quoted, one of such importance it would appear in all four of Mormonism's standard works,⁶⁷ and which would become a point of orientation for Smith's entire ministry and life: Malachi 4. These last passages from the Old Testament, slightly modified from its King James rendering, Smith recorded as follows: "I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. . . . And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming."⁶⁸

Smith would be decades fathoming the implications of Moroni's slight modification. In its eventual form, the most robust version of theosis in the Christian tradition, that covenant portends the linking of the human family into an eternal chain of belonging that culminates with a Heavenly Father and Mother themselves. In its most essential form, *that* invitation, with *that* destiny, was the essence of the New and Everlasting Covenant. And that perspective and setting and compass changed everything for Smith. First, because it collapsed the radical ontological divide between the divine and the human, it intimated that in some way, more than metaphorical, "God, angels, and humans" are all of one species.⁶⁹ It made the human soul eternal rather than created and contingent. It transposed mortality from an experiment gone horribly awry to an educative process that from the inception anticipated sin, pain, and the resultant growth. It made the human family co-participants in a long-conceived plan rather than hapless victims of primeval wrongdoing. And it meant that God's intentions and human striving were to be directed not at recuperation of a lost paradise but at the ongoing emulation of divine parents, the development and sanctifying of relationships constitutive of eternal bonds extending both horizontally as well as vertically.

If this context, this premortal, cosmic narrative, constituted the "old thing" that was lost, then Smith had come at last to understand the burden of the Lord's words to him in his 1820 theophany that other religious traditions were "all wrong." This was why he could write a friend in 1833 that there was no question that what he called "an apostacy . . . from the Apostolic platform" had occurred.⁷⁰ A church newspaper

article employed the term “Great Apostasy” shortly thereafter, though with reference to Jews, not Christians.⁷¹ Smith’s radical take on apostasy was the inference that given the covenant’s antiquity, a longer gospel prehistory must have been lost than New Testament church forms and gifts alone, as other Restorationists claimed. The absence of spiritual gifts was evidence of a diminished church, but the most important loss, he wrote, involved much more ancient “Laws,” “ordinances,” and “covenants” of the gospel.⁷² The word “ordinances,” which figures so prominently in Mormon thought, has been variously understood as a religious term. Consistent with period usage, Smith originally used it in a generic way to denote God’s laws and statutes as well as divinely prescribed rites and ceremonies. Low-church Protestants had long ago begun to employ the term in place of the Catholic terminology. “Instead of ‘sacraments,’ we prefer *ordinances*,” noted Alexander Campbell.⁷³ Charles Buck defined ordinance more broadly as “an institution of divine authority relating to the worship of God; such as baptism, . . . [or] the Lord’s supper” but also including “preaching and reading the word” and “singing of psalms.”⁷⁴ Sidney Rigdon had been a disciple of Campbell, and Smith read Buck. Mormons initially used the term in the same way, but soon, as Ryan Tobler has detailed, they came to use “ordinance” with the primarily Catholic sense of “sacrament,” that is, a saving ritual.⁷⁵ I will be using the terms “ordinance” and “sacrament” as equivalent expressions, though, as we will see, not all sacraments in Mormonism are essential or saving ordinances. Sacrament, in my usage, refers primarily to the rituals by which covenantal relationships are established, developed, and secured through the medium of authoritative representatives of God.

A crucial aspect of this new (restored) covenantal understanding was its universal scope. Understanding the work of evangelizing to be tantamount to gathering scattered Israel was a Christian commonplace. Jesus had reinterpreted the “seed of Abraham” in an expansive way when he denied that being descended of Abraham made one his seed.⁷⁶ For that matter, God was able “from these stones to raise up children to Abraham,” the Baptist had said.⁷⁷ Abraham’s seed were in fact “the dispersed children of God,” according to the gospel of John, and the task of evangelizing was to gather them to the church.⁷⁸ Since the Abrahamic text Smith translated averred that the gospel commission would devolve upon Abraham’s “literal seed,”⁷⁹ Smith drew the conclusion that Latter-day Saints missionaries and converts were, by and large, Israelite by blood, even if the Book of Mormon referred to the generality of European Americans as Gentiles. (Richard Brothers had similarly taught that the Jews were scattered among the population of Great Britain in the 1790s, and British Israelism later developed out of ideas like those of Brothers.)⁸⁰

In one typical sermon of 1834, Rigdon discoursed on “the former covenants to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob & others of the ancients, which were to be realized in the last

days.”⁸¹ Several revelations seemed to confirm that this “realization” entailed gathering in real descendants of scattered Israel. Smith and his fellow Saints were “to recover my people, who are of the house of Israel.”⁸² As Brigham Young explained the principle, “God has had regard to the blood of the covenant for his oath’s sake. That promised blood has trickled down through our parents until now we are here. . . . Those who have the right will redeem the nations of the Earth.”⁸³

Mormons were here moving well beyond the language of New England Puritans, who taught that God sent his elect into the world “through the loyns of godly parents,” and referred to America as the “New Israel.”⁸⁴ Aboard the New World-bound *Arabella*, for instance, John Cotton took as his sermon text the words from Samuel: “I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own.”⁸⁵ But the Latter-day Saints went further, believing that the blood of Israel literally flowed in their missionaries—and in their converts as well. In an 1841 sermon, Smith taught that in the last days, “the Lord will begin by revealing the House of Israel among the gentiles.”⁸⁶ This “revealing” was largely effected by their receptivity to the gospel—those who accepted the message of the restoration thereby identified themselves as true Israelites. And as for converts who were not literally of Israel, Smith taught, “the effect of the Holy Ghost upon a Gentile is to purge out the old blood & make him actually of the seed of Abraham. That man that has none of the blood of Abraham [naturally] must have a new creation by the Holy Ghost.”⁸⁷ In other words, the Abrahamic covenant is limited to Abraham’s seed, but the Holy Ghost can make anyone literally an Israelite. The covenant is therefore effectually universal.

God’s invitation was extended to the entire human family but required for its fruition the resources and power of correct understanding, mutual reinforcement, and specific, essential salvific ordinances available only through an established body of disciples organized into communities. And taken as a whole, there are far more dead than living. Far more who died unbaptized than baptized. Far more who will necessarily be catechized in the world of spirits than here, if they are to be made participants in this scheme whose original conception, Smith would later teach, they witnessed and assented to. Therefore, the New and Everlasting Covenant, to be genuinely efficacious, must take within its purview the entire span of the human soul, from premortal beginnings to future participation in the divine nature and family; and it must encompass within its saving terms the entire range of humanity, living and dead, including those who lived and passed before, outside, and unknowing of the Savior’s mission.

With these considerations in mind, Smith’s conceptions of apostasy and restoration find very particular shades of meaning. In premortal councils, God recognized that a binding together of the human family had to occur, and he established laws

and instituted ordinances, along with a mortal educative process, for the purpose of concretizing, formalizing, and metaphysically or morally grounding an endless web of eternal relationships. Mormons, in fact, believe the earth was created for this very purpose: to place the human family into eternal order. Marriage was ordained and families established “that the earth might answer the end of its creation; and that it might be filled with the measure of man, according to his creation before the world was made.”⁸⁸ But through historical processes and corruptions willful and inadvertent, the larger cosmic context for this project was lost (after Christ’s death, but recurrently in prior ages as well), the consummation toward which all was tending was diminished, and hence fallible humans and their institutions reconfigured the covenant in a tragically attenuated form, of limited prehistory, extent, and impact. Whereas Jon Levenson insists that Israel’s “identity is not cosmic and primordial,”⁸⁹ Mormonism asserts it is both.

So in Mormon conception, the apostasy does not represent some minor corruptions of sacramental words or ritual forms. It is *not* about supposedly wicked priests whom God punished by removing their priesthood. (Mormons are not Donatists; unworthy administrators do not invalidate the ordinance.)⁹⁰ It *is* about a fundamental misapprehension of the background and purpose and extent of the covenant (premortal origins, mortal incarnation, and eventual theosis and sealing into eternal families) and the mode by which it is executed (temple covenants that effect the constituting of those chains of belonging, completing our journey from intelligence to deity). The apostasy did not consist of overly pessimistic accounts of human depravity and a universal fall but of losing sight of the Fall itself as a necessary and pre-meditated immersion of humankind into the crucible of experience, suffering, and schooling in the practice of love. Apostasy was not about baptizing at the wrong age or in the wrong medium. It was about not knowing that baptism makes us—all of us eventually—literally of Christ’s family and his co-heirs. It was not about simple difference in standards of sexual practice or marriage’s purpose per se. It is about failing to see marriage as a key mode of eternal association, associations that are at the very heart of what heaven is. In sum, Smith’s “Restoration” is not about correcting particular doctrines or practices as much as it is about restoring their cosmic context. Consequently, Mormon emphasis on proper priestly administrators is not about authority for authority’s sake. It is about officiators who understand the origins of that authority and the purposes for which priestly authority is to be exercised, and who can perform those sacred sacraments under God’s immediate direction, according to his original intentions and designs.

It would appear that in Smith’s understanding, the apostasy resulted from a critically impoverished account of God’s everlasting covenant, one that rendered all sacraments and ordinances ineffectual not through wickedness but through loss of

understanding of their scope and purpose—to constitute the human family into a durable, eternal, heavenly association. It is possible, on the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the rule of prayer determines the rule of belief) that the direction of influence was the reverse: if it is liturgy that fosters theology, then changes in the original sacraments would have produced the altered and diminished theological framework.⁹¹ Whether the theological underpinnings were lost, and ordinances altered and given new meaning as a consequence, or the changes in sacraments and liturgy provoked new theological formulations, the result was the same from the LDS perspective—a critically impoverished understanding of God’s everlasting covenant.

One historical narrative especially amenable to this reading of apostasy is summarized by Peter Leithard, who writes that in the century before Constantine, “persecutors targeted bishops and priests, and bishops who capitulated survived to rule the church once the persecution ended. It is hardly surprising that, with a few exceptions like Athanasius, the church leaders of the early fourth century were not men of the strongest character.”⁹² Mormons generally point to this period of creedal formation as decisive in Christian history—to the detriment of a theological grasp of human origins and of God’s design for their future. This was the era, held Joseph F. Smith, in which the “true order of God was lost.” By “about six hundred years after Christ,” opined B. H. Roberts, “the gospel laws and ordinances had become so completely warped that it was as if the Church had departed from the earth.”⁹³ So not a malicious desire to pervert as much as a culling of the most committed leaders may have led to the loss of sound understanding and spiritual discernment necessary to keep the larger gospel vision intact. Clearly, Smith envisioned his mission as that of reconstituting the full meaning of the original covenant with its accompanying panoply of uncorrupted gospel ordinances.

The language of religious exceptionalism is rarely heard today even among those traditions theologically committed to the principle. (Catholicism is one exception; as recently as 2007, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reaffirmed that the Church of Christ “subsists” in “only one Church . . . as a visible and spiritual community, viz, the Catholic Church.”)⁹⁴ Mormonism, too, is scripturally bound to its claim to be “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth.”⁹⁵ A seeming exclusivist, elitist, chauvinistic claim actually acquires, within the framework of Mormonism’s program of universal vicarious outreach, precisely the opposite signification. The claim is best understood in light of what Mormons consider to be their unique grasp of the human soul’s origins and destiny, and their sacred stewardship over the earthly ordinances that effect the necessary bridge between the two. Obviously, salvation is not confined to members of the institutional church, or the entire mammoth program of vicarious ordinance work for the dead performed