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Rational Supernaturalism: Early Mormonism and Enlightened-Romantic Rhetoric

In December 1840, William Clayton recorded in his private book that Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet and Seer, had delivered a “key” to unlock the mysteries of angelic beings. “If an Angel or spirit appears offer him your hand,” Smith explained to his close confidants, “if he is a spirit from God he will stand still and not offer you his hand. If from the Devil he will either shrink back from you or offer his hand, which if he does you will feel nothing, but be deceived.”¹ In other accounts of Smith giving similar advice in following years, the instructions included the addition that if the angel were a resurrected personage, he would grasp the individual’s hand—literally interlocking mortal flesh and blood with what Smith described as immortal flesh and bone—and the physicality of the angel would thus prove his pure intentions and divine authority.²

This empirical experiment (shaking hands) to determine a traditionally miraculous phenomenon (angelic ministration) provides one of the most lucid examples of early Mormonism using rational methods to prove supernatural beliefs. The first clause of the title for this presentation, “rational supernaturalism,” is meant to represent this rich and complex cohesion. The second clause of the title, “Early Mormonism and Enlightened-Romantic Rhetoric” is meant to engage the two intellectual schools this type of thought appears to straddle. The American Enlightenment period, according to Henry May, consisted of people who believed in two important propositions: “first, that the present age is more enlightened than the past; and second, that we understand nature and man

¹ Joseph Smith, December 1840, recorded in William Clayton’s Private Book, in *Words of Joseph Smith*, 44.

² See Smith, ed., *Intimate Chronicle*, 520.

best through the use of our natural faculties.” Those excluded from this category, according to May, are those “who think that the surest guide for human beings is revelation, tradition, or illumination.”³

However, while the Enlightenment era was in decline by the beginning of the nineteenth century, it had already made a deep impact upon the intellectual climate. It made believers who emphasized spiritual impulses not only have to defend “what is true?” but also “what is rational?” What had been fundamental beliefs like God’s intervention in human lives, direct communication from heaven, and Angelic visitations were now contested as being unreasonable and improbable. But, instead of silencing antebellum religionists and their supernatural beliefs, it became, as Eric Leigh Schmidt noted, “as much one of God’s loquacity as God’s hush.”⁴ Indeed, the nineteenth century saw many religious figures and movements incorporate elements of Enlightenment thought in an attempt to prove their theology as rational and place their beliefs on scientific footing. E. Brooks Holifield wrote that “never had the issue of rationality assumed as much importance as it did in the early decades of the nineteenth century,” which saw rise to what he titled “evidential Christianity.”⁵ Calvinist minister Samuel Tyler, in an 1850 pamphlet on Baconian philosophy, quoted approvingly Francis Bacon’s famous statement that had by then become the mantra for American religious discourse:

³ Henry May, *Enlightenment in America*, xiv.

⁴ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11.

⁵ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 175.

“It ought to be eternally resolved and settled, that the understanding cannot be decide[d] otherwise, than by Induction, and by a legitimate form of it.”⁶

This era also saw rise to what has been termed as the Romantic period. This intellectual shift placed more emphasis on the individual, allowed more room for the sublime and supernatural, and yearned to know the unknowable. Those considered Romantics rebelled against the neo-classical structure of the previous age that they found both stifling and limiting to human potential, and they argued for an ideology that placed no limits on the soul. They left open the possibility for divine intervention and argued for a more spiritual outlook on the world. Connections between this intellectual movement and the early Mormons have been noted of late,⁷ yet much more work is still to be done.⁸

But, while Romanticism influenced many religious groups of the day—including the Mormons—the requirement for a rational presentation and defense still remained. What they needed was an intellectual approach that could be seen as respectable while at the same time still proving the reasonableness of religion, revelation, and

⁶ Samuel Tyler, *A Discourse of the Baconian Philosophy* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), 5. Tyler went on to claim that Baconian logic was “the most wonderful philosophical revolution...of any within the whole history of the world” (46).

⁷ Terryl L. Givens, “Prophecy, Process, and Plentitude,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith*, 55-56; Richard T. Hughes, “Two Restoration Traditions: Mormons and the Churches of Christ in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Mormon History Association’s Tanner Lectures: The First Twenty Years*, ed. Dean L. May and Reid L. Nelson (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 30-45; Jared Hickman, “No Creed to Circumscribe My Mind”: Joseph Smith, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Romantic Theology,” in *Archive of Restoration Culture: Summer Fellows’ Papers 200-2002*, ed. Richard Lyman Bushman (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History at Brigham Young University, 2005), 65-85.

⁸ See Benjamin E. Park, “‘Build, Therefore, Your Own World’: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Joseph Smith, and American Antebellum Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History* vol. 36 no. 1 (Winter 2010, forthcoming).

supernaturalism—Baconian logic and Scottish Common Sense philosophy served this purpose. William Goetzmann’s recent history of American nineteenth century thought argued that Scottish philosophy served as “the broadest philosophical foundation for the new nation,” most importantly because it “took full advantage of the new sciences of the day, yet without abandoning a number of traditional values they greatly esteemed”⁹—most notably, conservative theological understandings. Indeed, it placed importance on empirical proof and inductive logic while still granting the possibility for inspiration and the supernatural.

The Scots mirrored the larger European enlightenment, yet were conservative enough to see pitfalls in that intellectual shift and feared the deistic and atheistic conclusions they felt it led to. Scottish philosophers and theologians thought that Christianity—and more importantly, revelation—could still go hand in hand with new scientific and theological advances. As Goetzmann put it, starting in the 1730s, “Common Sense Realism...became the ‘official’ American philosophy and the fountain head of theology for nearly 150 years.”¹⁰ While this philosophy was officially introduced into America by elites—most notably the Scottish Reverend John Witherspoon who was appointed president of Princeton in 1768—the idea of “rational theology” had already been influencing preachers like Jonathan Edwards during the Great Awakening and became a common feature for the “populist” ministers in the first few decades of the nineteenth

⁹ William H. Goetzmann, *Beyond the Revolution: A History of American Thought from Paine to Pragmatism* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 53.

¹⁰ Goetzmann, *Beyond the Revolution*, 57.

century.¹¹ While there were vast disagreements on theological interpretations within those who were influenced by this school of thought, the primary mode of infiltration was in the tone and presentation of their messages—in essence, the appeal to prove by common sense the ideas of revelatory supernaturalism.

Especially during the Nauvoo period, Joseph Smith and other early Mormons fully employed this common sensical approach that colored their theological discourse. When Joseph Smith preached on the possibility of salvific certainty, he prefaced his remarks by claiming “it is so plain & so simple & easy to be understood that when I have shown you the interpretation thereof you will think you have always Known it yourselves.”¹² When he attacked the idea of creation *ex nihilo*, he explained that it was not only on the basis of revelation but also because “it is contrary to a Rasha[n] all [rational] mind & Reason. that something could be brought from a Nothing.”¹³ It was this combination of reason and revelation that Parley Pratt felt was the key to unlocking theological truths:

Revelation and reason, like the sun of the morning rising in its strength, dispel the mists of darkness which surround him; till at length heaven’s broad, eternal day expands before him, and eternity opens to his vision. He

¹¹ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1990), 182-183.

¹² Joseph Smith Sermon, Howard and Martha Coray Notebook, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, Religious Studies Monograph Series, no. 6 (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 206.

¹³ Joseph Smith Sermon, Frank McIntire Minute Book, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 61.

may then gaze with rapture of delight, and feast on knowledge which is boundless as the ocean from which it emanates.¹⁴

According to Holifield, one of the major lessons from Common Sense philosophy was that “theology should avoid the metaphysical, or speculative, or theoretical.”¹⁵ While early Mormon theology was anything but conservative—and in many cases pushed the limits of what might be described as “speculative”—it was always presented as the result of rational and logical reasoning; that while the truths came through revelation, they were still supported by common sense. This is exhibited beautifully through the calm reasoning of David C. Kimball in his British pamphlet, *The Fireside Visitor, or, Plain Reasoner*, where he confidently encourages “calm and considerate perusal” of what he considered “sober facts.”¹⁶ Attacking the very notions of speculative and mysterious theologies, Parley Pratt wrote a satirical piece in England where he pretended to be a “sectarian minister” writing to fellow religionists:

[The Mormons] know no better than to tell the people to believe the Bible as it reads, and to no longer give heed to the spiritualizings of our learned priests. Even setting aside and despising that glorious name on the forehead of our goddess,—that word “MYSTERY” which stands most conspicuous among the great and venerable names which encircle her on every hand. Thus having burst the veil of mystery, [they take] the scriptures as if common sense was to be exercised...¹⁷

¹⁴ Parley P. Pratt, “Immortality and Eternal Life of the Material Body,” in *An Appeal to the Inhabitants of the State of New York, Letter to Queen Victoria (Reprinted from the Tenth European Edition,)* *The Fountain of Knowledge; Immortality of the Body, and Intelligence and Affection* (Nauvoo: John Taylor, Printer, 1840), 23.

¹⁵ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 175.

¹⁶ David C. Kimball, *The Fireside Visitor, or, Plain Reasoner* (Liverpool: Printed for the Author by R. James, 39, South Castle Street, n.d.), 2, 15.

¹⁷ Parley P. Pratt, *An Epistle of Demetrius, Junior, the Silversmith, To the workman of like occupation, and all others whom it may concern,—Greeting: Showing the*

Nowhere is this school of thought more evident than the Saints approach to scripture, where they often evoked what Goetzmann described as not only “practical and universal but ‘Common Sensical’ principles.”¹⁸ While Philip Barlow may be correct in noting the early Mormons were mostly “selective literalists,”¹⁹ they often saw themselves—or at least presented themselves—as sticking with the most literal interpretations of the Bible for their theological authority. “The Scriptures should be taught, understood, and practiced in their most plain, simple, easy, and literal sense,” wrote Pratt in 1840, “according to the common laws and usage of the language in which they stand—according to the legitimate meaning of the words and sentences precisely the same as if found in any other book.”²⁰ George Adams echoed this thought four years later: “We believe that the inspired men who wrote those pages, meant truly and literally what they said,” Adams taught, explaining that “God would not direct his prophets and apostles to write one thing when he meant another,” and that God would never “hide in mysticism and uncertainty the word of life.”²¹

Best Way to Preserve Our Craft, and to Put Down the Latter Day Saints (Manchester: Wm. Shackleton and Sons, Printers [1841])

¹⁸ Goetzmann, *Beyond the Revolution*, 54.

¹⁹ Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 32-36, 65.

²⁰ Parley P. Pratt and Elias Higbee, “An Address by Judge Higbee and Parley P. Pratt, Ministers of the Gospel, of the Church of Jesus Christ of ‘Latter-Day Saints,’ to the Citizens of Washington and to the Public in General,” *Times and Seasons* 1 (March 1840): 6870.

²¹ G. J. Adams, *A Lecture on the Authenticity & Scriptural Character of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: J. E. Farwell, 1844), 3.

In his discourse on the beasts in John’s Book of Revelation, Joseph Smith stated, “Everything that we have not a key word to, we will take it as it reads. The beasts which John saw and speaks of as being in heaven were actually living in heaven, and were actually to have power given to them over the inhabitants of the earth precisely according to the plain reading of the revelations. I give this as a key to the Elders of Israel.”²² A year earlier, he also taught, “—what is the rule of interpretation? Just no interpretation at all. [but to] understand precisely as it read[s].”²³ To the early Saints, Mormon theology was supported by any logical reading of the Bible, and thus any objective appeal to the ancient scriptures would prove the validity of their message. Reflecting on the recent success of his missionary efforts in 1840, Lorenzo Barnes boasted, “the dust was brushed from many a bible which I presume had lain useless for years, and a general search of the scriptures was made, so that it was said, and I think in truth, the bible was read more by the people in a few weeks after we arrived in the place, than it had been before for many years.”²⁴ Similarly, when the Reverend Orson Spencer publically explained his conversion to Mormonism, he explained, “What could I do? Truth had taken possession of my mind—plain, simple Bible truth.”²⁵

²² Joseph Smith Sermon, William Clayton Report, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 187.

²³ Joseph Smith Sermon, Joseph Smith Diary, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 161, underlining in original.

²⁴ T&S, 2 December 1839, pg. 27.

²⁵ Orson Spencer, *Letters Exhibiting the Most Prominent Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Liverpool, England, 1848), 9.

William Appleby's 1844 pamphlet, *A Dissertation on Nebuchadnezzar's Dream*, offers another crucial example for this approach. The goal of this pamphlet was to prove by scripture and reason that the kingdom spoken of in the Book of Daniel was the Mormon religious organization. To do this, Appleby used a highly rich and literalistic exegesis. "It is by taking the scriptures in their most literal sense, and making a right application of them, assisted by the spirit of truth," he reasoned, "that we shall ever be able to understand their literal meaning." Doing otherwise, Appleby concluded, is what led to the "discords of the present religious world." He approvingly quoted from the 2nd Epistle of Peter—that "No Prophecy is of any private interpretation"—and then equated it with the most damnable offence coming from Common Sense logic: "i.e. no spiritualizing." With this groundwork in place, the Mormon writer went on to prove that Daniel's Kingdom referred to the Mormon Church by emphasizing the difference in the Biblical record between the phrases "*these* last days" as opposed to "*the* last days."²⁶

Beyond the scriptures, early Mormons employed Baconian logic to many topics. For instance, when it came to priesthood authority, Smith again hearkened to supernatural mediums for exclusive authoritative claims, and proving it through a common sensical method. While the common Protestant belief in the "priesthood of all believers" was popular among the majority of contemporary evangelical-minded denominations—especially those who emphasized a populous clergy—the Mormon Prophet reached for

²⁶ W. I. Appleby, *A Dissertation on Nebuchadnezzar's Dream: Showing that the Kingdom Spoken of by Daniel the Prophet was not Set Up in the Days of the Apostles; and the Order of the Kingdom Set up then Explained. Also: The Rise and Faith of the Most Notable Orthodox Societies of the Present Day, Together with a Synopsis of the Origin and Faith of the Church of "Latter-Day Saints," Comparing Their Faith with the Faith of Other Societies* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking & Guilbert, 1844), 1-3.

something even more tangible. Shortly after settling in what was then still called Commerce, Smith delivered a rich and detailed discourse laying out his stance on the necessity and nature of religious authority. “The Priesthood is an everlasting principle & Existed with God from Eternity & will to Eternity,” he explained, and “the Keys have to be brought from heaven whenever the Gospel is sent.” In order to bypass the decidedly apostate Churches between antebellum America and the meridian of times, he resurrected dead apostles-cum-angels to link the new dispensation with the past. “How have we come at the priesthood in the last days?” he asked the congregation in 1839; “It came down, down in regular succession. Peter James & John had it gen to them & they gave it up.”²⁷

The appeal of spiritual gifts was another crucial topic for the Mormon message, being a focus in Restoration scripture as a sign of religious authority. However, resulting from competing spiritual claims from both within and without the movement, it was also one that required a rational defense to differentiate between legit and fraudulent spirits. This was common in this environment, for as Anne Taves has shown, many Protestants found themselves using rationalistic methods to discredit what they felt were superstitious and outright ridiculous theological dogmas.²⁸ In a Nauvoo editorial titled “Try the Spirits,” signed by Joseph Smith but probably penned by William Phelps or John Taylor, the Saints were told, “it is evident from the apostle’s writings that many

²⁷ Joseph Smith Sermon, Willard Richards Pocket Companion, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 8-9. Similarly, John W. Welch has pointed out: “[Smith] relied not only upon biblical *authority to recover the past*, but upon *the past to recover authority*.” John W. Welch, “Joseph Smith and the Past,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith*, 112, emphasis in original.

²⁸ Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 17-18.

false spirits existed in their day, and had ‘gone forth into the world,’ and that it needed intelligence which God alone could impart to detect false spirits, and to prove what spirits were of God.” To detect these spirits, Smith continued, one must possess the priesthood and have “a knowledge of the laws by which spirits are governed.” This is possible because even wicked spirits are bound by limits and laws that they are forced to follow.²⁹

Similarly, another editorial that same year explained that they believed in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but only “rationally, reasonably, consistently, and scripturally, and not according to the wild vagaries, foolish notions and traditions of men.”³⁰ Spencer Fluhman has written that the early Mormons “charted something of a middle way” between enthusiastic exuberance in spiritual gifts on the one hand, and rational, formalistic interpretations on the other.³¹ During the period that Jon Butler described as the “antebellum spiritual hothouse,”³² where numerous religious movements were claiming authentic spiritual gifts, Joseph Smith and his followers argued for a more “reasonable”

²⁹ Joseph Smith, “Try the Spirits,” *Times and Seasons* 1 April 1842, pg. 743-747. The detection of false spirits was a focus for the Mormon Prophet during this period. George A. Smith, cousin of Joseph and member of the Quorum of the Twelve, remembered that “there was no point upon which the Prophet Joseph dwelt more than the discerning of Spirits.” “Minutes of Meetings Held in Provo City,” 28 November 1869, Microfilm of holograph, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

³⁰ Joseph Smith, “Gifts of the Holy Ghost,” *Times and Seasons* 15 June 1842, pg. 823.

³¹ J. Spencer Fluhman, “The Joseph Smith Revelations and the Crisis of Early American Spirituality,” in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 68.

³² Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 225.

approach that still encompassed the supernatural manifestations their restoration scripture promised them.

Two topics that begin to take prominence during the Nauvoo period are especially potent with this rhetorical tone: the argument for immediate revelation as empirical knowledge in itself, and the eternal nature of matter. The rest of this paper will focus on these two topics, relying primarily on the writings of Parley Pratt—perhaps the foremost Common Sense writer for the early Church.

In his pamphlet “Plain Facts,” Pratt took on the accusation of a minister that all doctrinal truth was to be found within the Bible, and called such a restricted position as “atheism in a new dress.”³³ Rather, Pratt argued that if reason and intellect were to seriously engage the scriptures, it would show that “the Bible holds forth the doctrine of CONTINUAL and UNIVERSAL REVELATION...Do away the principle of direct Revelation then, and we do away the religion of the Bible, and have nothing left but atheism.”³⁴ In his essay “The Fountain of Knowledge,” written the same year, Pratt claimed that “it is therefore a self-evident fact, that sacred books are the productions of revealed knowledge, and revealed knowledge is not originally produced from books.”³⁵

³³ Parley P. Pratt, *Plain Facts, Showing the Falsehood and Folly of the Rev. C. S. Bush, (a Church Minister of the Parish of Peover,) Being a Reply to His Tract Against the Latter-day Saints* (Manchester: W. R. Thomas, Printer [1840]), in *The Essential Parley P. Pratt*, 76.

³⁴ Pratt, *Plain Facts*, 75. The Pratt brothers’ accusation of “atheism” to contemporary theologians is one of the most fascinating points of their rhetoric.

³⁵ Parley P. Pratt, “The Fountain of Knowledge,” in *An Appeal to the Inhabitants of the State of New York, Letter to Queen Victoria (Reprinted from the Tenth European Edition,) The Fountain of Knowledge; Immortality of the Body, and Intelligence and Affection* (Nauvoo: John Taylor, Printer, 1840), 15.

Similarly, in the classic “Joe Smith and the Devil: A Dialogue”—perhaps the best example of Common-Sense/Baconian logic—Pratt’s fictional devil character explains that “I am decidedly in favor of all creeds, systems, and forms of Christianity...so long as they leave out that abominable doctrine which caused me so much trouble in former times...I mean the doctrine of direct communion with God, by new revelation.” But with this knowledge, the fictional Joseph Smith explained, the doctrine of direct revelation could “lift the veil from your fooleries on one side, and...present plain and reasonable truth on the other, and the eyes of the people could at once distinguish the difference so clearly that, except they chose darkness rather than light, they would leave [the devil’s] ranks and come over to the truth.”³⁶ In Pratt’s theology, continued revelation was the Common Sense conclusion from a literal reading of the Bible.

Concerning the Mormon version of “materialism,”³⁷ Pratt argued for the eternal duration of matter as the only reasonable conclusion when approached rationally.

Consider this passage from his text, “The Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter”:

It is impossible for a mechanic to make any thing whatever without materials. So it is equally impossible for God to bring forth matter from nonentity, or to originate element from nothing, because this would contradict the law of truth, and destroy himself...these are principles of eternal truth, they are laws which cannot be broken...In all these, the product is determined by unchangeable laws, whether the reckoning be calculated by the Almighty, or by man, the result is precisely the same.³⁸

³⁶ Parley P. Pratt, “Joe Smith and the Devil: A Dialogue,” *New York Herald* (25 August 1844): 1.

³⁷ It is clear that when the Saint’s labeled themselves as “materialists,” they did not take into consideration many of the accompanying beliefs of materialism; therefore, just like most other borrowed doctrines or ideas, they picked ideas that meshed with their ideology while disregarding the others.

³⁸ Parley P. Pratt, “The Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter,” 111.

This echoed Joseph Smith’s recorded statement, already quoted above, that the idea of God creating the world out of nothing was “contrary” to the rational mind.³⁹ Both Parley Pratt and Joseph Smith relied on what they felt was the irrationality of annihilated matter in defense of its eternal duration—Smith’s most lucid example was his analogy to a ring, and Pratt’s was his claim that “Matter and spirit are of equal duration: both are self-existent,—they never begin to exist, and they never can be annihilated.” This is similar to the reasoning of Thomas Dick, a contemporary Scottish minister and famous for using Common Sense methods to prove the inter-reliability of science and religion: “In so far as our knowledge of the universe extends, there does not appear a single instance of annihilation throughout the material system. There is no reason to believe, that, throughout all the worlds which are dispersed through the immensity of space, a single atom has ever yet been, or ever will be annihilated.”⁴⁰ That this very passage was quoted in an 1835 *Messenger and Advocate* editorial—five years before either Pratt or Smith spoke out on the nature of matter—reveals that even if they did not borrow the idea of materialism from him, they were at least aware of and possibly based their defense from his rationale.

Pratt later explained that the theologies that revolved around dualism, on the other hand, “are errors of the grosest kind—mere relics of mysticism and superstition, rivited upon the mind by ignorance and tradition.” To him, “all persons except materialists must

³⁹ Joseph Smith Sermon, Frank McIntire Minute Book, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 61.

⁴⁰ Thomas Dick, *The Philosophy of a Future State*, 1829 (also in M&A 3.3, pg. 423).

be infidels, so far at least as belief in the scriptures is concerned.” The eternal duration of matter, he reasoned, is “not only proven from scripture, reason and philosophy, but [is] also demonstrated or confirmed by daily experience”—again demonstrating the balance of reason and experience purported by Baconian logic.⁴¹ The reason the world doesn’t accepted it, he concluded, is that they “suppose that such a system is too good to be true.”⁴² When he writes about the “two important facts connected with material existence”—that is, matter cannot be created out of nothing or ben annihilated—he describes them as “self evident to every reflecting mind.” The idea that “God made all things out of ‘*nothing*’” is not only unscriptural, he argued, but it “originated in the mysticisms of modern times, and been kept alive by ignorance and folly.” Further, to say that “the earth was without form and void” is “a contradicion to itself, as well as to common sence.” To make something out of nothing, he concluded, “is the climax of absurdity.”⁴³

In conclusion, while the Latter-day Saint movement relied primarily on supernatural and Romantic impulses, they took part in a larger context of rationalizing Christianity and Christianizing reason.⁴⁴ Invoking the tools that Baconian logic and Scottish Common-Sense philosophy offered, they, according to Brooks Holifield,

⁴¹ Pratt, “Immortality and Eternal Life of the Material Body,” 21.

⁴² Pratt, “Immortality and Eternal Life of the Material Body,” 22.

⁴³ Pratt, “Immortality and Eternal Life of the Material Body,” 23-25.

⁴⁴ This phrase comes from a journal entry of Theodore Parker, a contemporary Transcendentalist minister. Theodore Parker, *Journal I*, (1841-44), Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass., 51 (March 1841).

“exhibited the reach of the evidential spirit.”⁴⁵ It was through this method that Joseph Smith, Parley Pratt, and others treaded mental waters during an important intellectual shift, and truly rationalized their supernaturalism.

⁴⁵ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 333.