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“GO YE OUT FROM BABYLON”:
MORMON GATHERING AS A REACTION TO AMERICAN CULTURE, 1831-1846

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Many have claimed that Mormonism is the American religion. But perhaps they have mistaken American geography for American culture. While early Mormonism took place in America, it can be interpreted as a reaction to American culture, and this is perhaps best seen in the Mormon doctrine of gathering.

One Historian observed that gathering “was Mormonism’s oldest and most influential doctrine.”¹ Joseph Smith introduced that concept only months after he organized the church in a late December 1830 revelation that commanded Smith and his followers to “assemble together at the Ohio.”² Mormon convert John Whitmer explained that the Mormons were “[slow] to be made to believe the commandments that came forth in these last days for the upbuilding of the kingdom of God.”³ In consequence, at a church conference held in Fayette, New York, on January 2, 1831, Joseph Smith presented another revelation concerning the gathering to Ohio. The revelation stated that enemies of the Mormons created a secret plan “to bring to pass even your destruction” but it provided a way to “escape the power of the enemy” by gathering in Ohio. The revelation promised the Mormons “a land of promise; a land flowing with milk & Honey, . . . the land of your inheritance” upon the condition that they “seek it with all [their] hearts.”⁴

In regard to the revelation and the conference, church member Newel Knight remarked that “it was at this conference that we were instructed as a people, to begin the gathering of

¹ William Mulder, “Mormonism’s ‘Gathering’: An American Doctrine With a Difference,” *Church History* 23, no. 3, (September 1954): 249.

² Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, Steven C. Harper, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations, Manuscript Revelation Books* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 1:69; *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1986), 37:3. *The Doctrine and Covenants* is a collection of revelations received by Joseph Smith and some of his successors which the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints canonized. It will hereafter be cited as D&C with chapter number, then verse, separated by a colon; D&C 1:16.

³ John Whitmer, “Book of John Whitmer,” 2, Community of Christ Archives, Independence, MO.

⁴ Jensen, Woodford, Harper, eds., *Joseph Smith Papers*, 71, 73, 75; D&C 38:13, 18-19. It is interesting to note that John Whitmer explained that even after Smith provided the members with this revelation, “there were some divisions among the congregations, some would not receive the [revelation] as the word of the Lord: but that Joseph had invented it himself to deceive the people that in the end he might get gain.” Whitmer, “Book of John Whitmer,” 3.

Israel.”⁵ He associated the Mormon gathering with the prophesied gathering of Israel and remembered that upon returning home from the conference, “in obedience to the commandment which had been given, I together with the Colesville Branch, began to make preparations to go to Ohio” and that “as might be expected, we were obliged to make great sacrifices of our property.”⁶

The gathering commenced. Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph’s mother, led a band of about eighty Mormons from New York to Ohio in early 1831. In Lucy’s story of the journey, the group chose her to lead them. In later years when she recorded this narrative, Lucy explained that their journey was similar to the migration of the first family chronicled in the *Book of Mormon*. The book begins by narrating the tale of how a pre-exilic Israelite patriarch named Lehi led his family into the wilderness from Jerusalem and helped them cross the ocean to the American continent. Lucy associated her family’s move to Ohio with the migration of Lehi and his family. She wrote: “we have set out just as father Lehi did to travel, by the commandment of the Lord, to a land that he will show us if we are faithful. I want you all to be solemn and lift your hearts to God in prayer continually, that we may be prospered.”⁷

When faced with a setback on the journey (the canal bank they traveled on collapsed), Lucy remembered that there was “much murmuring and discontentment,” as occurred in the narrative of Lehi and his family, but she told the others to stop complaining and be patient. Among a debate with “others murmuring and grumbling,” Lucy “stepped in their midst” and said “we call ourselves Saints and profess to have come out from the world for the purpose of serving

⁵ Newel Knight, *Autobiography and journal*, 1846, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

⁶ Knight, *Autobiography and journal*, 1846, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. Those with farms that could not be sold were to either leave them or rent them. Jensen, Woodford, Harper, eds., *Joseph Smith Papers*, 75; D&C 38:37, 39.

⁷ Lucy Mack Smith, *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith By His Mother*, ed. Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 261.

God at the expense of all earthly things; and will you, at the very onset, subject the cause of Christ to ridicule by your own unwise and improper conduct? You profess to put your trust in God, then how can you feel to murmur and complain as you do? You are even more unreasonable than the children of Israel were.” She asked: “How can you expect the Lord to prosper you when you are continually murmuring against him?” Lucy declared that God “set his hand to gather his people together upon a goodly land” and that “if they will fear him and walk uprightly before him, it shall be unto them for an inheritance; but if they rebel against his law, his hand will be against them to scatter them abroad and cut them off from the face of the earth.”⁸ Lucy and the others eventually arrived safely in Kirtland, Ohio.

The migration from New York to Ohio was only the beginning of Mormon gathering. They continued to gather from 1831 through 1846 and it was Smith’s revelations that governed their movement. The willingness to gather “came to be regarded the sign of one’s faithfulness, and the convert who did not feel the pull was considered a queer fish in the gospel net.”⁹ Joseph’s revelations established the doctrine of Mormon gathering that created a Mormon cultural identity by rejecting American culture and the Jacksonian American ideal of the common man and replaced it with voluntary suppression of individualism for the sake of Zion.

Jacksonian Democracy vs. Mormon Theocracy

Nineteenth-century Mormon culture was different from that of Jacksonian Americans. The Jacksonians “valued the wealth embedded in western land, were of the attitude that it belonged to them by manifest destiny,” wanted to remove the Native Americans, and assumed

⁸ Smith, *History of Joseph Smith By His Mother*, 262-63, 268-69.

⁹ Mulder, “Gathering,” 250.

popular sovereignty.¹⁰ They viewed Joseph Smith’s revelations as undemocratic because they “implicitly rejected popular sovereignty,” “assumed authority,” and “presented a potent alternative to the assumed self-evident wisdom of Jacksonian democracy’s manifest destiny.”¹¹ Mormons, as well as Native Americans and blacks, “posed perceived threats to peculiarly Jacksonian democracy.”¹² In contrast to Jacksonian democracy, Joseph Smith’s revelations commanded the Mormons to “gather ye together,” to “Go ye out from Babylon,” or from the world, and to “be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord.”¹³ The revelations established themselves as a higher law than the law of the land. One revelation indicated that the Mormons would “be a free People, & ye shall have no laws but my laws, for I am your Law giver” and “that in time ye shall have no King nor Ruler, for I will be your King & watch over you.”¹⁴

The naming of places by Jacksonians as well as the Mormons demonstrate the disparity between the values of these two groups. “Settlers of Jackson County, Missouri, imposed their will on the contiguous landscape with arbitrary survey lines.” They used descriptive place names like Independence, Jackson, and Liberty to stake claims and declare values. “The lines, the names, and the particular political and economic values they represented constituted the raw materials out of which the county’s settlers established a Jacksonian identity.”¹⁵ In contrast, the Mormons used figurative names like Zion, New Jerusalem, and Babylon. Zion was “the ideal society that Joseph Smith sought to establish” which would be a “righteous, unified, poverty-free

¹⁰ Steven C. Harper, “‘Overwhelmingly Democratic,’ Cultural Identity in Jackson County, Missouri, 1827-1833,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 4.

¹¹ Harper, “‘Overwhelmingly Democratic,’” 1, 8-9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ Jensen, Woodford, Harper, eds., *Joseph Smith Papers*, 205, 207; D&C 133:4-5, 7-8, 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 73; D&C 38:21-22.

¹⁵ Harper, “‘Overwhelmingly Democratic,’” 1.

community,” and “a holy city.”¹⁶ Babylon, as referred to by one of the revelations, was the world.¹⁷

Joseph Smith’s revelations persuaded the Mormons to reject Jacksonian individualism for the cause of Zion. One revelation promised that the law of God would be revealed to them if they obeyed the commandment to gather in Ohio and that they would receive an endowment with “power from on high.”¹⁸ Ultimately, the Mormons “gathered for the same reason Israel gathered anciently—to build a temple where God could reveal knowledge and ordinances.”¹⁹

Push and Pull of Gathering

The revelations rejected democratic choice, which created endless choices and elevated people above God, and replaced it with an apocalyptic culture of choosing Zion or Babylon. Those who knew Joseph Smith best “accepted the voice in the revelation as coming directly from God, investing the highest authority in the revelations, even above Joseph Smith’s counsel. In the revelations, they believed, God himself spoke, not a man. . . . The believers heard that voice and believed it; in times of stress they wanted to hear it again.”²⁰

Edward and Lydia Partridge exemplify conversion by and devotion to Joseph Smith’s revelations. Edward and Lydia, who were fairly wealthy, sold most of their property at a great loss to obey the revelations.²¹ Partridge, called to be the first bishop of the church, traveled on an

¹⁶ Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, 1832-1839* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 1:473.

¹⁷ Jensen, Woodford, Harper, eds., *Joseph Smith Papers*, 225; D&C 1:16.

¹⁸ Jensen, Woodford, Harper, eds., *Joseph Smith Papers*, 71, 73, 75; D&C 38:13, 18-19, 28, 31-33.

¹⁹ Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, Jensen, eds., *Joseph Smith Papers*, 467.

²⁰ Richard Lyman Bushman, “The Little, Narrow Prison of Language: The Rhetoric of Revelation,” *Religious Educator* 1, no. 1 (2000): 102.

²¹ Emily Dow Partridge Young, one of Edward and Lydia’s daughters, explained in her autobiography that “father’s business was left in the hands of his agent, and his property, what was sold at all, was sold at a very great sacrifice.” Emily also quoted a letter from one of her uncles to her father in which her uncle mocked her father for getting very little in return for his farm: “You say the world with all its pomp and show looks very small in your eyes; I have

assignment from Ohio to Missouri thinking that he would only be there for a short time. After he arrived a revelation explained that Partridge and others were to “be planted in the land of Zion as speedily as can be with their families.”²² The revelation commanded Partridge, his councilors, and their families to move to Missouri. Another revelation, received about two weeks later, explained the apocalyptic culture created by these revelations: “It is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward. Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.”²³ Edward and Lydia chose to obey the revelation. He stayed in Missouri and Lydia packed their things and she and the children joined him.

In a revelation concerning gathering, Partridge was chastised for “unbelief and blindness of heart” and commanded to repent.²⁴ After receiving the chastisement, Edward wrote to Lydia: “You know I stand in an important station, and as I am occasionally chastened I sometimes feel as though I must fall, not to give up the cause, but I fear my station is above what I can perform to the acceptance of my Heavenly Father.” Feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities of being bishop, he asked Lydia to “Pray for me that I may not fall.”²⁵

Amidst persecution from dissidents and some outside the Church in Kirtland, a revelation, dated January 12, 1838, commanded Joseph Smith and the presidency of the Church to leave Kirtland, Ohio, and move to Far West, Missouri: “Thus saith the Lord, let the Presidency

every reason to believe it, from the manner of disposing of your property, particularly your farm, which I learn you have received a fifteen-year-old horse for.” “Autobiography of Emily D. P. Young,” *Woman’s Exponent*, December 1, 1884, 102.

²² Jensen, Woodford, Harper, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, 161; D&C 57:14.

²³ Jensen, Woodford, Harper, *Joseph Smith Papers*, 165; D&C 58:26-28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 163; D&C 58: 15.

²⁵ Edward Partridge to Lydia Partridge, August 5-6, 1831, “Genealogical Record,” 8, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. Misspelling in original.

of my Church, take their families as soon as it is practicable, and a door is open for them, and moove to the west, as fast as the way is made plain before their faces, and let their hearts be comforted for I will be with them, Verrily I say unto you, the time has come, that your labors are finished in this place for a season.”²⁶ The revelation even commanded that they “let all your faithful friends arise with their families also, and get out of this place, and gather themselves together unto Zion and be at peace among yourselves, O ye inhabitants of Zion, or their shall be no saf[e]ty for you.”²⁷ Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon responded quickly to this revelation and left for Missouri the same night.²⁸

Some of their “faithful friends,” however, did not react so quickly. Newel K. Whitney and William Marks dragged their feet. They did not want to leave Kirtland. They would suffer great financial losses if they moved. By July 1838, Whitney and Marks still remained in Kirtland and Joseph Smith received a revelation addressed to them. The revelation commanded them to “settle up their business speedily and journey from the land of Kirtland, before I, the Lord, send again the snows upon the earth. Let them awake, and arise, and come forth, and not tarry, for I, the Lord, command it.” The revelation warned that if they remained in Kirtland “it shall not be well with them.” They were to “repent of all their sins, and of all their covetous desires, before me.” The revelation told these two men that if they were faithful that Marks would “preside in the midst of my people in the city of Far West” and that Whitney would be a bishop in Adam-ondi-Ahman.²⁹ Despite his initial unwillingness to go, Whitney eventually obeyed the commandment and in doing so lost all his Kirtland property.³⁰

²⁶ Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, Jensen, eds., *Joseph Smith Papers*, 283.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 284n182.

²⁹ D&C 117:1-4, 9-11.

³⁰ Mark L. Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 551.

Elizabeth Ann Whitney, Newel's wife, remembered that her friends tried to persuade her to stay in Kirtland but she "had unbounded faith in the promises of Joseph, that I should be able to go in safety, and my trust in God was firm and unshrinking." She left the place where she "anticipated spending all my life, and where everything had been arranged according to my own ideas of taste and beauty." She rationalized her family's removal to Far West because she "was serving my Heavenly Father." Her children "were devotedly attached to Joseph, and were never weary of praying for him; and their faith seemed perfect. In their innocence and trust they believed truly the Lord would hear and answer them, and they firmly trusted in all the promises and blessings pronounced upon them."³¹ Elizabeth recollected the faith she and her children possessed in obeying a revelation even though her husband initially dragged his feet and struggled to decide whether or not to move to Far West. At the beginning of her autobiography, she asked the question: "Can any sacrifice be too great through which we are called to pass, if we would follow in our Master's footsteps?"³²

Conclusion

As the Mormons attempted to gather, flee Babylon, and create Zion, they "suffered one debilitating setback after another."³³ Repeated attempts by the Mormons to establish Zion in Missouri, led Missouri State Governor Lilburn W. Boggs, in 1838, to force them out of the state.³⁴ The Mormons temporarily fled to Quincy, Illinois, and eventually gathered in Commerce,

³¹ Elizabeth Ann Whitney, "A Leaf From an Autobiography," *Woman's Exponent* 7 (1878): 91.

³² Whitney, "A Leaf From an Autobiography," *Woman's Exponent* 7 (1878): 33.

³³ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 560.

³⁴ Governor Boggs issued an executive order on October 27, 1838, which stated that "the mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State if necessary for the public peace." Lilburn W. Boggs, Jefferson City, MO, to John B. Clark, Fayette, MO, Oct. 27, 1838, Mormon War Papers, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.

Illinois, which they renamed Nauvoo.³⁵ They established a thriving city there, complete with a temple. Persecution continued, however, and in June 1844, Joseph Smith was assassinated. In the spring of 1846, the Mormons left Nauvoo, under the leadership of Brigham Young, for Utah Territory.

The attempts of nineteenth-century Mormons to gather can be understood as a reaction to American culture. This Mormon counter-culture, created by Joseph Smith's revelations, rejected American individualism in favor of building Zion. Instead of leaving the Mormons with endless choices, as did American democracy, Smith's revelations created an apocalyptic culture of choosing Zion or Babylon. Some readily chose Zion while others hesitated.

Wilford Woodruff summed up Mormon gathering well when he said, "Notwithstanding the Saints are driven from city to city & from place to place yet they are not discouraged but are determined to build a city wherever their lot is cast showing themselves to be industrious & determined to maintain the kingdom of God."³⁶

³⁵ Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Hyrum Smith, in a *Times and Seasons* article, explained that "the name of our city (Nauvoo,) is of Hebrew origin, and signifies a beautiful situation, or place, carrying with it, also, the idea of rest; and is truly descriptive of this most delightful situation." "A Proclamation, to the Saints Scattered Abroad," *Times and Seasons*, January 15, 1841, 273-74.

³⁶ Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff Journal, 1833-1898*, ed. Scott G. Kenny, typescript (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983-84), 1:332.