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Gustav H. Blanke

Karen Lynn

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"God's Base of Operations": Mormon Variations on the American Sense of Mission

Gustav H. Blanke with Karen Lynn

Whatever his nationality, a student of Mormonism soon becomes aware of the significant and central position of America in both the history and the theology of the Mormon church. The importance of America goes far beyond what might naturally arise from the simple historical fact that the Church's founder and first members were Americans. Mormons everywhere look to America, and particularly to the United States, as "God's base of operations," a "great and glorious nation with a divine mission and a prophetic history and future."¹

As a non-Mormon European observer who has been studying the American sense of mission for some time, I am interested in the way in which this Mormon sense of America's symbolic and religious importance is intimately tied, in some very specific ways, to the spiritual and moral ideas which have been prominent in American history from the days of the Puritan settlements. The nationalistic philosophy and rhetoric that manifested themselves in Mormonism almost from the time of its inception are part of a cohesive and iden-

This article originated as a lecture which Dr. Blanke delivered at BYU in January 1977.

Gustav H. Blanke is professor of English at the University of Mainz, Germany. A founder of the German Association of American Studies and author of numerous works about America, he is presently writing a book on the rhetoric of the American sense of mission, with particular attention to election sermons, Fourth of July orations, theological tracts, and political pamphlets.

¹Ezra Taft Benson, address to the One Hundred Thirty-Second Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in Conference Report, 8 April 1962 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press), p. 103. In this address the speaker explicitly states that non-American Mormons as well as those living in the Mormon homeland should realize the sacred nature of America and her destiny: "Every true Latter-day Saint throughout the world loves the USA. The Constitution of this land is part of every Latter-day Saint's religious faith" (p. 103).

tifiable stream leading from the earliest days of American history.² A non-Mormon historian views these facts simply as the coming together of philosophical and historical elements that help to explain the sources and the timely appeal of some of the doctrines of Joseph Smith and his successors. A Mormon historian, on the other hand, is more likely to see the hand of God at work laying the foundations for the Restoration. From either viewpoint, I feel the question is of tremendous interest. One cannot understand the Mormon church without understanding its own version of the American sense of mission, and this aspect of Mormon beliefs ties the Church rather closely to an important American tradition that was essential in prefiguring and preparing for the founding and subsequent flourishing of the Mormon church.

I

From the days of the very first settlers, inhabitants of the North American continent have seen themselves as players in a fore-ordained, divine drama. Since God in his wisdom wished to bring about certain ends, both religious and political, among his children on this earth, he needed agents who would accept their role as instruments of his will. America was to be the stage for pivotal, far-reaching events that would exemplify man's divine potential for all the world to see, eventually bringing about the moral resurgence that would prepare the world for the Second Coming. Clinton Rossiter described the "American Mission" as

a simple belief—comprehensible, viable, and endlessly serviceable. It assumes that God, at the proper stage in the march of history, called forth certain hardy souls from the old and privilege-ridden nations; that He carried those precious few to a new world and presented them and their descendants with an environment ideally suited to the development of a free society; and that in bestowing His grace He also bestowed a peculiar responsibility for the success of proper institutions. Were the Americans to fail in their experiment in self-government,

²Among the most important works dealing with the American sense of mission are Loren Baritz, ed., *City on the Hill: A History of Ideas and Myths in America* (New York: Wiley, 1974); Edward M. Burns, *The American Idea of Mission: Concepts of National Purpose and Destiny* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1957); Norman A. Graebner, ed., *Manifest Destiny* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968); Ernest R. May, "America's Destiny in the Twentieth Century," in Daniel J. Boorstin, ed., *American Civilization: A Portrait from the Twentieth Century* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 321–32; Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963); Russel B. Nye, *This Almost Chosen People: Essays in the History of American Ideas* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966); Clinton Rossiter, *The American Quest 1790–1860: An Emerging Nation in Search of Identity, Unity, and Modernity* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971); Cushing Strout, *The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Ernest L. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1935).

they would fail not only themselves, but all men wanting or deserving to be free.³

The American sense of mission had its roots in the New England Puritan conviction that God had sent a "saving remnant of the holy nation of England" across the Atlantic to become a model of piety and good government for all of Europe. John Winthrop, in his "A Modell of Christian Charity, Written on Boarde the Arrabella, On the Attlantick Ocean, Anno 1630," exemplifies the isolationism, the self-examination, and the high-minded aims of the early expression of the American sense of mission. To Winthrop, the journey of the settlers to the New World was a separation, both literal and symbolic, from the corruptions of the Old World. The establishment of a new settlement was "the cause betweene God and us. Wee are entered into Covenant with him for this worke, wee have taken out a Commission . . . then hath hee ratified this Covenant and sealed our Comission [and] will expect a strickt performance of the Articles contained in it . . . for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us."⁴ The Puritan settlers had only to carry out the mission that God had called them to, and soon, said Winthrop, men would exclaim regarding each succeeding settlement, "the Lord make it like that of New England."⁵

But the diligent, determined colonists were soon to find that their example meant little to Cromwell and the English Puritans. A slight redefinition of their mission was necessary, one that would accommodate the realities of their situation—England and the rest of the Old World were generally content to disregard their spiritual example—but one that would at the same time give them a new sense of the worth of their own struggles; the underlying metaphor was no longer "the city on the hill" or "a light unto the nations"; it became instead "the errand into the wilderness," and the colonists cherished the "wilderness-condition" of their church as a special challenge to overcome all temptations, intended primarily for their own proving and purification rather than as an example to the world. The wilderness-condition made the colonists vigorous fighters against Satan, keeping them away from the mischief and vices of the world by forcing them to struggle with dangers and uncertainties. Samuel Danforth called these hardships a prerequisite of the "hedges of grace." Within these "hedges of grace at the end of the Jewish

³Clinton Rossiter, "The American Mission," *The American Scholar* 20 (Winter 1950-1951):19-20.

⁴John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity . . ." (1630), in *Winthrop Papers* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929-1947), 2:294-95.

⁵Ibid.

world" the "vineyard of the Lord" could be safely attended to, and the world eventually must come to see that the New England Puritans alone were carrying on the difficult work of reformation without being distracted by more pleasant tasks.⁶ The wilderness-metaphor invited frequent comparison with the people of Israel on the journey from the "house of bondage" into the "land of promise." The wilderness churches were compared with the tents or tabernacles of the Sinai desert.

Inevitably, this idea of Canaan came to represent the new land of promise, and "the City on the hill" founded in the New World suggested "Zion" and gradually came to be interpreted, in such Puritan writings as those of Edward Johnson, Samuel Sewall, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards, as an anticipation of the "New Jerusalem." Edward Johnson pointed out to his Puritan brethren in England that God's heralds had promised the New England immigrants that "this is the place where the Lord will create a new heaven and a new earth."⁷ Samuel Sewall said in 1697 that "America's Name is to be seen fairly Recorded in Scripture," that the "New Jerusalem" will come down in "the Heart of America," that God prefers to "Tabernacle in our Indian Wigwam" rather than in the magnificent cathedrals of Europe, and that the spiritual body of Christ will rest his right foot in the American Zion.⁸ Cotton Mather affirmed that "AMERICA is Legible" in the promises of the Old and New Testaments regarding the end of the world, the millennium, and the New Jerusalem.⁹ Jonathan Edwards stated further that "AMERICA is that part of the world that is pointed out in the Revelation of GOD" for the latter-day events. Since the Old World saw the birth of Christ and the beginning of the Reformation, the New World will see the Second Coming. This restoration of the spiritual balance of the hemispheres, which completes Newton's physical and cosmic balance, means that the light of the world "shall rise in the west."¹⁰

⁶See Samuel Danforth, "A Briefe Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness" (Cambridge, Mass., 1671). (Sermon 11 March 1670.) Cf. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 67-68.

⁷Edward Johnson, "Wonder-working Providence of Sion's Savior..." (London, 1654), in Perry Miller, ed., *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1956), p. 30.

⁸Samuel Sewall, *Phaenomena quaedam Apolcolyptica Ad Aspectum Novi Orbis configurata. Or, some few lines toward a description of the New Heaven, As It Makes to those who stand upon the New Earth* (Boston, 1697), 1-2 (Dedicatory Letter), A 2 vs, 37, 40. *Letters of Samuel Sewall* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society Sixth Series, 1886-1888), 1:177; 2:156, 201.

⁹Cotton Mather, "Theopolis Americana, An Essay . . . of Better Things to be yet Seen in the American World" (Boston, 1710), pp. 43-44.

¹⁰Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England in 1740," in *Works* (New York, 1830), 4:132; 3:316, 376; "An Humble Attempt . . . for the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth Pursuant to Scripture-Promises and Prophecies Concerning the Last Time" (Boston, 1747), pp. 5, 169.

This apocalyptic and millennial conviction that the "New Jerusalem" was to be established in America remained fully alive into the beginning of the nineteenth century. It found many adherents among the preachers of the Revolutionary Period. Such millennialists as George Duffield, Samuel Hopkins, Joseph Bellamy, David Austin, and Elias Boudnot emphasized the contrast between the depravity and corruption of the Old World and—after the conversion of the Indians—the restoration of Eden in the unspoiled regions of the western world. It became fashionable among Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and other denominations to call America the "harbinger of the millennium." The historians also contributed to the trend by linking the New World in a historic continuum with the world of both the Old and New Testaments, thus turning typology into a historical sequence.¹¹

Celebrations of America's future glory consistently emphasized that as the Old World was the scene of Christ's first appearance on the earth, so the New World, unspoiled and uncorrupted, would host the second. "Here," said George Duffield in his Thanksgiving Sermon of 1783,

far removed from the noise and tumult of contending kingdoms and empires; far from the wars of Europe and Asia, and the barbarous African coast, here . . . shall our JESUS go forth conquering and to conquer; and the heathen be given him for an inheritance; and these uttermost parts of the earth, a possession. Zion shall here lengthen her cords, and strengthen her stakes; and the mountain of the house of the Lord be gloriously exalted on high. Here shall the religion of Jesus; . . . the pure and undefiled religion of our blessed Redeemer; here shall it reign in triumph, over all opposition. . . . And here shall the various ancient promises . . . and the light of divine revelation diffuse it's [sic] beneficent rays, till the gospel of Jesus have accomplished it's day, from east to west, around the world. A *day*, whose evening shall not terminate in night; but introduce that joyful period, when the outcasts of Israel, and the dispersed of Judah, shall be restored; and with them the fulness of the gentile world shall flow to the standard of redeeming love: And the nations of the earth, become the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour.¹²

To this point we have seen articulations of the idealistic, separatist, self-denying pole of America's sense of mission. It began in an

¹¹See Glenn Miller, "'Fashionable to Prophecy': Presbyterians, the Millennium and the Revolution," *American Studies* 21 (1976):239–60.

¹²George Duffield, "Sermon on the Day [11 December 1783] appointed by the United States in Congress . . . to be observed as a day of thanksgiving, for the restoration of Peace" (Philadelphia, 1784), pp. 16–17. Mormons will recognize a more flowery version of the basic ideas of the tenth article of faith.

all-consuming conviction that America would be the triumphant proof of God's grand design for his faithful children, then became more inner-directed, focusing on God's choice of a particular group to become sanctified through a sacred struggle in a "wilderness." The rhetoric that followed was more forward-looking, stressing America's role in the fulfillment of millennial prophecy. But no matter how the expression varied, at the core of each restatement of the sense of mission was the sense of a solitary destiny that would eventually command the attention of the "wicked" nations of the world. As long as the emphasis was on God's will and on his unalterable providence, there were few direct efforts to bring others to an acknowledgment of America's superiority.

As nineteenth-century historical circumstances allowed the new nation to expand toward the Pacific Ocean, the American sense of mission took on an entirely new character. The passive, exemplary views of America's destiny gave way to an active, outward-reaching set of goals. Americans began to believe that the success of God's plan was largely up to them and that God should not have to wait any longer upon their agency. "Doing" replaced "being." It was no longer sufficient to be a light; it was necessary to enlighten. Though writers and orators retained basic religious terms as "Providence," "God," and "mission," the mission to exalt religion and religious obedience turned into the mission to exalt liberty and republicanism.¹³ The sense of apocalyptic destiny was equated not with the literal establishment of a New Jerusalem but with man's ability to effect model political institutions derived from the principles of liberalism, republicanism, and federalism. By 1840, after several uninterrupted decades of successful economic development and territorial expansion, Americans had come to believe that their principles and institutions were so superior, morally and practically, as to guarantee their expansion into the adjacent territories that were ready to receive the divine spark. It became America's destiny now to spread freedom and federalism to other lands, often through stronger means than mere example. By 1900, Albert J. Beveridge could claim on behalf of the nation that God's hand was in "the eternal movement of the American people toward the mastery of the world."¹⁴

¹³For a discussion of the development of the "civil religion" that basically substituted the nation for the church but continued to employ nondenominational religious imagery, see Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 8-21.

¹⁴Albert J. Beveridge, "The Star of Empire," in *The Meaning of the Times and Other Speeches* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1908), p. 142.

II

Now that our discussion will allow us to put Mormon beliefs in the perspective of more general American thought, it might be well to begin our consideration of the Mormon sense of the American mission by abstracting some of its most important elements.¹⁵ Readers acquainted with Mormon culture will already have noted many familiar aspects not only of the beliefs but also of the rhetoric and imagery we have alluded to so far. To my way of thinking, the most important components of the Mormon sense of the American mission are these:

1. God is the master of history and he has a design for the course of human events.
2. He may choose an agent or instrument to help him in the work.
3. He has chosen a particular group of people—in this case, the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—as his principal agents.
4. The members of God's American Israel have covenanted with one another to act as a peculiar people, a people apart and different from but eager to be reunited with the rest of mankind, if the nations of the world accept the pure, true, and restored message.
5. Before this holy cause can become the cause of all mankind, his people must fulfill an errand into the wilderness, and, in this case, convert the Indians and make the wilderness blossom as a rose.
6. The establishment of Zion in the wilderness is the first step toward the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth.
7. America is a sanctuary, a refuge, and an asylum.
8. America is destined to be the moral example of the world if it will only heed its responsibility to its moral traditions.

The eight characteristics of the Mormon sense of mission typify many of the most important aspects of the idealistic pole: isolation, a "wilderness-condition," pride in struggle, a conviction of being the vanguard of a moral superiority whose triumph is certain because it represents God's will. Mormons see themselves as a chosen people in the sense of a people singled out for a difficult task, not a people chosen to rule and prosper simply because they are the fortunate beneficiaries of arbitrary, divine favoritism. Initially it may seem surprising that we would align the Mormon philosophy with the idealistic,

¹⁵Among the works I have consulted are Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen, eds., *Mormonism and American Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); W. J. Whalen, *The Latter-day Saints in the Modern World: An Account of Contemporary Mormonism* (New York: John Day, 1964).

self-denying, exemplary pole of the American sense of mission rather than with the later, empire-building pole. The Church has, after all, established an extensive proselyting network in an effort to spread itself to all parts of the globe, and certainly Mormons accept the notion that the "chosen people" must bring to pass the designs of God through their own efforts rather than just waiting in passive anticipation for the fulfillment of prophecy. But even though the Mormon church shows some kinships with the active pole, important distinctions remain. Its hoped-for worldwide growth rests finally on the assumption that, with sufficient information and spiritual enlightenment, new members will be drawn into the Church through example. The spiritual awakening will happen because it is part of God's design and because the example of Mormonism will be irresistible. Unlike the "active" sense of mission that underlay nineteenth-century expansionism, Mormon attitudes do not countenance force, financial pressure, or hard diplomacy as appropriate means for spreading Mormonism.

The entire "wilderness-experience" component has a unique coloring in Mormon tradition. John Cotton, Thomas Shepard, Peter Bulkeley, Increase and Cotton Mather, and other Puritan divines gave great importance to the notion of the wilderness, derived from the early days of Protestantism. The Lollards of the thirteenth century, the friends of Wyclif, the Waldensians, the Hutterites, and many other reform groups were fond of the idea that truth could be restored only by following God's call into the wilderness. However, with civilization evident on every hand, the wilderness concept in these earlier contexts obviously had to take on a meaning that was mainly figurative: the wilderness was mental or spiritual, a symbolic separation from established corruption, a new beginning as if on untried, still-sanctified soil. But the Americans, and particularly the Mormons, were under no such pressure to turn the wilderness into a merely metaphorical one; the wilderness was as literally true for them as it had been for the people of Israel on their way through the deserts toward the land of promise. Metaphor became a historical and geographical reality that perfectly supported the Mormons' view of themselves as a people especially chosen to be tried, a people set apart for a holy struggle that would establish their divine merit in the eyes of the world.¹⁶

¹⁶In the Book of Mormon the Mormon people already have an archetype of America as a haven of safety for chosen wanderers. The Book of Mormon "wilderness struggle" of the people of Jared and Lehi are not struggles against great physical odds, however. They are meant to stress the moral responsibility of the inhabitants of the "chosen land." The repeated message is that a people chosen by God for his errands will be safe and happy if they remain obedient.

The Mormon church stands today as a preserver of many original aspects of the American sense of mission which have now been transformed or dropped by most other Americans, claiming as their own certain convictions that were once widespread among all Americans. In many respects, the American sense of mission has become the Mormon sense of mission. For example, though nineteenth-century spokesmen began to dilute the Christian sense of expectancy and to make the coming of Christ synonymous with (or just symbolic of) a gradual achievement of political perfection, the Mormon church has continued to put forth the idea that, under the custodianship of the Mormon priesthood, America will be the literal site of Christ's second coming. And present-day Mormons are comfortable with explicit claims, reminiscent of Puritan statements,¹⁷ that the American continent is consecrated especially for them, that the entire momentum of the discovery, settlement, and prosperity of the United States was set in motion to enable the founding of the Mormon church.¹⁸ Mormons are likely to accept in a way that other Americans have not since the eighteenth century the notion that America is a "nation under God," a special place, providentially chosen as a refuge for the faithful who have been called to advance His work and bring closer the latter-day events that will inaugurate Christ's reign on earth, a literal reign that is more than just the culmination of the progressive movement toward perfection and the peaceful unification of mankind.

Public declarations of the American sense of mission, perhaps under the impact of Viet Nam, Watergate, and vocal foreign criticism, have today dropped much of their religious rhetoric and prideful allusion. There is less talk of America's role as the "conscience" or "light" or "hope" of the world, or of its call to be a "redeemer nation." There is even less reference to America's "high destiny" when that supposed destiny might disguise a wish to control another area or people. Instead, there is more talk of international partnership, cooperation, and world federalism based on a common recognition of human needs and human rights. The national holidays still call forth a display of much of the traditional rhetoric, but the "language of Canaan," so dominant in colonial election sermons, or even

¹⁷Edwards, "Some Thoughts . . .," in *Works*, 4:128-33: "This new world is probably now discovered, that the new and most glorious state of God's church on earth might commence there."

¹⁸See, for example, Ezra Taft Benson's statement in the address previously cited: "Yes, the Lord planned it all. Why? So America could serve as a beacon of liberty and in preparation for the opening of a new gospel dispensation—the last and greatest of all dispensations in preparation for the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ" (pp. 103-104). The Book of Mormon, in addition, refers to the discovery and eventual prosperity of the New World in the context of divine, long-term intention (see 1 Nephi 13:12-20).

as recently as in John F. Kennedy's inaugural references to "trumpet summons" and "the burden of a long twilight struggle . . . knowing that here on earth God's work must be truly our own"¹⁹ has given way to a language that has altered the religious imagery in such a way that it can accommodate all religious beliefs, reducing the stream of American exceptionalism to a mere trickle.

What is to happen? Has the sense of mission dissipated itself into ineffective platitude? Has the call to the chosen few now become so inclusive as to be meaningless? After all, much of the momentum and compelling force of the American sense of mission grew from the fact that those who preached and espoused it felt themselves singled out as privileged participants in a divinely ordained drama; clearly, now that the rhetoric has expanded to encompass the pluralism of American society, the distinctive honor of participation is gone, and with it much of the evangelical vitality of the cause.

One scholar, however, has suggested that a new and more positive self-image is about to emerge for America, that "by the decade of the 1980's there will have developed a definition of America's mission more limited than that of the nineteenth century but less limited and less negative than that of the Cold War era."²⁰ If this is correct—if America is about to waken from a slumber of overcaution and self-doubt—then perhaps Mormons, as determined preservers of the sense of mission and its accompanying rhetoric, can be one source of America's new confidence and self-respect. Along with many other friends of America, I offer the hope that Americans, whatever their religious beliefs, may indeed feel this rise in confidence and idealism. The New World, after all, is a setting that has allowed for a totally different course of events, rooted often in revolution and self-sacrifice, than has been seen anywhere else in the world. People of good will everywhere hope that the evolving American sense of mission will reflect a desire to build upon a remarkable past in order to serve as a model to the people of the world.

¹⁹John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, 20 January 1961, in *The Kennedy Reader*, ed. Jay Daniel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967).

²⁰Ernest R. May, "America's Destiny in the Twentieth Century," *American Civilization: A Portrait from the Twentieth Century*, ed. Daniel Boorstin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 332.