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Mormonism and Islam through the Eyes of a “Universal Historian”

James K. Lyon

In 1912 the internationally known German historian Eduard Meyer published a book that ranked as a curiosity among his writings to that point. In it this remarkably prolific scholar, who in the previous thirty years had published a monumental five-volume history of the ancient world and 274 other books, treatises, and articles,¹ explored two topics that were so alien to the mainstream of his previous work that it baffled his learned peers. Those topics were Mormonism and Islam. Entitled *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen, mit Exkursen über die Anfänge des Islâms und des Christentums* (The origin and history of the Mormons, with excurses on the beginnings of Islam and Christianity),² it remains a curiosity even today. Besides being generally inaccessible (it is available only in a single, limited-edition English translation produced in 1961³), almost nothing is known by most people today about its author and contents. Who was Eduard Meyer, and what prompted him to examine a nineteenth-century American religion and a seventh-century Mideastern one, both of which were chronologically far removed from his historical writings about the ancient world?

Eduard Meyer—the Man and His Work

Born in 1855 in Hamburg, Germany, Meyer was a prodigy.⁴ At five he was composing poetry in German; at six he could write Latin; at twelve he authored a five-act tragedy entitled *Brutus, oder die Ermordung Cäsars*. By age seventeen, he had completed the elite Johanneum preparatory school, where his father was a professor, and had begun studying at the University of Bonn. Disappointed with his professors there, he abandoned classical philology and went to the University of Leipzig, where he turned his attention to the field of *Orientalistik* (the rough equivalent of what we today call Near Eastern Studies), which included Egyptology, Sanskrit, Hebrew, and the ancient language and history of Egypt, Palestine, and surrounding cultures.

A polyglot, Meyer displayed a remarkable gift for learning language. As a boy, he had acquired a solid grounding in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew at the Johanneum, where he also began studying English and Arabic. At the University of Leipzig, he devoted his energies almost exclusively to further language learning—of the forty courses he took in five semesters, thirty-five

dealt with philology or direct work in a foreign tongue. Besides continuing his studies of Arabic, he immersed himself in learning Sanskrit, Egyptian, Syrian, Persian, and Turkish. Following the custom of the day, Meyer learned these languages by studying original documents. It was probably here that he first read the Qur'an in Arabic. His ability to read languages established the basis for his career as a historian and later earned him the reputation of a *Universalhistoriker*, the German term for a historian who studies a multiplicity of cultures. His prodigious intellect allowed him to finish a doctorate degree in 1875 at age twenty with the grade of *summa cum laude*—a distinction rare in German universities—with a dissertation on the Egyptian god Set-Typhon.

For the following two years, Meyer worked as a private tutor for the children of Sir Francis Philip, the British ambassador to Constantinople, where he experienced Muslim culture firsthand, observed history in the making in these crucial years during the disintegration of the Osmanic Empire, and learned to read, write, and speak English fluently. After Sir Philip's unexpected death in 1876, Meyer moved with the family to England. His yearning to return to "uncivilized Constantinople" is an early mirror of the ambiguity he felt toward Islamic culture. While in England, he paid special attention to English religious and political life before finally going back to Germany for the so-called voluntary (actually obligatory) year of military service, which he completed in September 1878. During that year and the months immediately following, he wrote and submitted to the University of Leipzig his "habilitation," the *magnum opus* that was expected to surpass the doctoral dissertation in scope and quality and was required of all scholars planning to enter the academic world. In 1879 at the remarkably young age of twenty-four this "Habilitationsschrift" was accepted, and he began a career as a historian. Teaching first at the universities of Breslau and Halle, he soon established himself as the ranking historian of antiquity in Germany, based in part on his five-volume *History of Antiquity*, written between 1884 and 1902. In 1902 he received a call to teach at the most prestigious center of historical studies in Germany and, arguably, in all the world at the time—the Friedrich Wilhelm University of Berlin.

Trips to America and Expanded Awareness of the "Mormon" Religion

In an 1877 letter to his mother, the twenty-two-year-old Meyer observed that for one who is interested in ancient history, as he was, America must not be dismissed: "Just think of the great, remarkable religious movements, e.g. the Mormons."⁵ In subsequent years there is, as far as we know, never a hint that he knew or thought about them again. But in March 1904, at the invitation of the University of Chicago, he made his first trip to America, where he lectured at Cornell, the University of Chicago,

Berkeley, Princeton, Harvard, Yale, and Columbia (in that order). During this time, the University of Chicago awarded him an honorary doctorate of law, and when Harvard duplicated the honor in 1909, their laudatio noted that, as a classical historian, Meyer was "unsurpassed by any living man."⁶ In brief, he was an international star when he first came to the United States.

America fascinated Meyer. He took every opportunity during this and his subsequent trip in 1909–10 to explore its far reaches. While traveling from Illinois to California for his lecture at Berkeley, he stopped in Salt Lake City—probably March 28, 1904—for a one-day visit, where, he claims, "I received a number of, though not entirely adequate direct impressions" of Mormonism.⁷ When he returned in September 1909 for a semester as a visiting professor at Harvard, he immediately started collecting books, articles, and bibliographical references and read extensively about the Mormons. The topic quickly moved onto his research agenda, and it seems probable that among his many public lectures and paper presentations during this semester (at Harvard, the American Historical Association, Yale, Bryn Mawr, and the University of Pennsylvania) he began to lecture on the Mormons. On January 12, 1910, David G. Lyon of the Harvard Semitic Museum wrote a letter that suggests Meyer had already spoken on the Mormons in some public forum, for the writer obviously considers him to be very knowledgeable: "This is to introduce you to Dr. H. H. Haynes, who wishes to ask you some questions about Mormonism. I hope you can give him an interview."⁸

Meyer, who had not written on Islam at any length in his earlier works (it did not fit into his field of ancient history) and would not write a book on Islam until some years later, nevertheless knew enough about it that his readings on Mormonism led him to discover what he thought were "analogies" (his term) between this American religion and Islam. Soon he began to go public with them. His first documented lecture on this topic, delivered at Cornell University sometime between February 8 and 10, 1910, had an English title—"Origin and Development of Mormonism Compared with the Beginning of Islam"—that foreshadows his 1912 book. His ten-page, English-language text, with two additional pages of citations has been preserved among his papers, as have extensive other notes and bibliographic references on the topic—all in Meyer's almost microscopic handwriting.⁹ Scholars often use lectures to launch a trial balloon for new ideas, which is what Meyer seemed to be doing, so he possibly repeated this lecture, or a variation of it, elsewhere in the United States. He gave well over two dozen more lectures at eleven more American universities before returning to Germany in late April.¹⁰ But two more years elapsed before he turned again to the topic and finally completed his manuscript, which appeared in print before the end of 1912.¹¹

Meyer's Approach to Mormonism and Islam: Qualifications and Limitations

Despite his brilliant mind, encyclopedic knowledge, and undisputed contributions to the field of ancient history, Meyer, like every historian, had his limitations. A 1966 volume issued by the University of Berlin to commemorate its past rectors (a position Meyer held from 1919 to 1920) lauds his “universal breadth of knowledge” but tactfully observes that his “extreme conservatism and his unscientific theories (cyclical theories, theories of race) have diminished the value of his extensive historical writings. More recent research has justifiably criticized many specific conclusions of his history of antiquity *and other works*.”¹² In perhaps none of his writings did his limitations become as problematic as in his 1912 study of Mormonism and Islam, which one scholar rightfully calls a “foreign body” (*Fremdkörper*) in his overall scholarly production.¹³

A marked product of his times, Meyer's Eurocentric thought reflects a cultural arrogance typical of scholarship in imperial Germany at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Educated in an intellectual tradition that saw the Germans as the only legitimate cultural heirs of the Greeks,¹⁴ he continually returned in his writings to Greek civilization as the apex of human achievement in the ancient world. Whether in religion, art, philosophy, or architecture, Greece was superior to any ancient culture. Logically, then, non-Greek cultures, though still of considerable interest for him, were repeatedly measured against Greece and found to be inferior. In none of his writings did this cultural superiority complex cause more problems of methodology and ideology than in his writings about Mormonism and Islam.

Methodological Problem. At least one methodological problem arises from Meyer's common practice of using analogy or parallel features to describe and compare societies.¹⁵ Historians and thinkers today realize that it is possible to prove almost anything by analogy, for an analogy can be used as a blunt instrument if one is determined to make objects similar. But what seem to be analogies or parallels are usually far too complex to endure more than superficial scrutiny. As one observer has noted, “Few *different* objects or ideas are essentially the *same* to more than a superficial observer or thinker.”¹⁶ Indeed, Meyer's treatise on Mormonism and Islam has been criticized precisely for its superficiality.¹⁷

Ideological Problems. Meyer's approach to Mormonism and Islam poses another problem. He subscribed to the neo-Kantian notion that “history deals with the particular rather than the universal.”¹⁸ But in using Mormonism as a comparative basis for an examination of Islam, which was his announced goal, he contradicted that premise. In effect, he tried to

argue that Joseph Smith and Mormonism had common traits and in many ways duplicated some features of Islam, or vice versa. Here it seems he was asserting at least implicitly that some universals connected these two religions and their leaders.

Another ideological impediment to a balanced assessment of Joseph Smith and Muhammad has to do with Meyer's rejection of Hegel's notion of "world historical individuals" as the moving force in history. Though he recognized that such great men had existed, he felt that—taken together—the free will of individuals in a society and the battle of ideas this inevitably caused; the force of any society's public and private institutions; and the role of chance were far more significant in determining the course of history than any individual's thoughts, experiences, or actions. In his introduction to *Origin and History of the Mormons*, he repeats this well-known position as it relates to Joseph Smith:

In all ages there have been inspired persons of the type of Joseph Smith—thousands of them, among all peoples and religions. . . . Occasionally they generate extensive, lasting results, which, in a few cases, can be world-historical and last for millennia . . . but as in all historical life, this [position] is based only in part on their unique traits. They might surpass all others in individual worth . . . but more decisive are the historical impulses at work in an epoch, how they [these men] seize or resist these, and how they, caught up in this conflict . . . are able to achieve their own goals and channel these currents in a certain direction.¹⁹

Not only did Meyer not want to see Joseph Smith or Muhammad as "world-historical individuals," but he consciously attempted to denigrate them. As a twenty-one-year-old, he labeled Muhammad a "fanatic and swindler"²⁰ (*ein Schwärmer und Schwindler*), and in 1912 he applied similar labels to Joseph Smith, whom he categorized among mentally ill "enthusiastic mystics," "visionaries and dreamers," and "seers and miracle workers."²¹ He belittles both men: "Neither Joseph Smith nor Muhammad were towering personalities. One would hardly place them in the line of the great figures among the Old Testament prophets, or with Zoroaster, or with countless similar Christian or Buddhist saints."²² In a footnote, he nevertheless asserts that "Muhammad stands much higher" than Joseph Smith, "as we shall see, to say nothing of Zoroaster or perhaps Mani or Bab,"²³ but this note does not mitigate his unrelenting derision of both men and of their religious experiences. Although he ranks these men as less significant than the Old Testament prophets, he does not have much regard for those earlier prophets either. For most of the Old Testament prophets, he has the same outlook as he has for Joseph Smith—whom he sees as a man of honest conviction, mingled with self-delusion and outspoken deceit; he dismisses them, too, as delusionists. Jeremiah's prophetic

utterances are “simply a pretext,” and “Ezekiel is in reality no prophet at all, but one who assumes this mask for his theological speculations.”²⁴

Part of this dismissive pattern probably arose from Meyer’s own negative view of religion generally (except for Greek religions). Though raised a Lutheran, his antitheological, “enlightened” stance left him little sympathy for Christianity or Islam. In the 1912 treatise, Jesus is not only *not* the son of God, but, according to Meyer, he was also not a prophet and certainly not the founder of a church.²⁵ Meyer further speaks of modern Judaism and the Parsi religion (and of course Mormonism) as “sects.”²⁶ As seen above, he demeans Old Testament prophets by classifying them generally as persons lacking any sense of the boundary between the physical and spiritual world and “consequently of truth and reality in the sense that it is present in normal humans”; for some, he believes, this lack “can develop into conscious fraud.”²⁷ In short, his approach to Mormonism and Islam was void of the detached, unbiased stance that one might hope for in a world-class historian.

Problematic Research Practices. A final limitation that makes Meyer’s treatise problematic is his lack of access to reliable primary and secondary source material on the Mormons and his failure to gain access to materials that were readily available. Acknowledging that he relied primarily on the holdings of the Harvard library and the collection of anti-Mormon literature at the University of Wisconsin by A. T. Schroeder, “an opponent of the Mormons,”²⁸ Meyer regretted being unable to look at New York Public Library’s collection of Mormon historical documents, the largest of its kind in the United States at that time. He also admitted that he was unable to make firsthand acquaintance with a number of important primary documents, such as Brigham Young’s sermons, Lucy Mack Smith’s book on her son, and Church newspapers—all of which he knew only through “excerpts [found] in other works.” Though he studied the Doctrine and Covenants thoroughly, he confessed he had “not been able to read the complete *Book of Mormon*.” Nevertheless, he comes to the surprising conclusion that “I believe to be sufficiently well-informed about the most important facts to be allowed to risk an independent treatment of the subject.”²⁹

To some extent, Meyer might be excused for this breathtakingly desultory approach to primary and secondary sources. B. H. Roberts’s documentary history of the Church, for example, would not appear until nearly five decades later. On the other hand, Roberts’s series of essays, later published as *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, had already begun to appear in 1909 in monthly installments in the American Historical Society’s periodical *Americana*, and any serious scholar of Mormonism could have consulted this respected journal.

It seems that Meyer’s own biases intruded so conspicuously in his choice of material that he was uninterested in presenting a balanced picture.

By his own admission, he granted that the Mormons had produced a considerable amount of literature about themselves. But his unabashed prejudice against all material written by them or writers friendly to the Mormons is evident when he admits to only superficial familiarity with Edward W. Tullidge's *History of Salt Lake City* (1886) and Orson F. Whitney's three-volume *History of Utah* (1892–1904). After praising the rich collection of materials he found in Bancroft's *History of Utah*, he discounts it, too, and warns that it should be used with caution. In a statement reflective of his general bias against any favorable portrayal of the Mormons, he dismisses Bancroft's opus by noting that "under the guise of impartiality, [it] gives a slanted, thoroughly one-sided portrayal [of Mormon history] in their favor."³⁰ He goes on to lament his lack of access to E. D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled* (1834) but stresses the importance of the apostate John Hyde's *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs* (1857) and John D. Lee's *The Mormon Menace* (1905) for his own work.

As his most important sources, Meyer lists W. A. Linn, *The Story of the Mormons* (1902), and I. W. Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith* (1903). Though Meyer asserts that Linn attempts to take an impartial historical stance, in his view Linn fails to represent the Mormon position from the Mormon perspective and therefore judges them as any patriotic American would, that is, negatively—a curious judgment, given Meyer's own less-than-positive approach. Riley's work, he asserts, makes no claims to be a history but instead "treats the prophet Joseph Smith as an example of abnormal psychology."³¹ In his earlier writings, Meyer had repeatedly eschewed psychological analysis of history, but for his 1912 treatise, he accepted and employed it. The psychology of religion enjoyed great popularity on the continent and in America at this time, and Meyer found it fascinating as a possible means of reading history.³²

With all these limitations in mind, let us turn to a brief examination of some of Meyer's essential arguments and comparisons in his attempt to link Mormonism with Islam.

Comparisons and Analogies between Mormonism and Islam

Meyer's account of the origins of Mormonism echoes almost all the well-worn clichés from the anti-Mormon literature of his day. Subscribing to Riley's diagnosis of Joseph Smith as an epileptic and psychopath, Meyer sees Joseph's visions and revelations as examples of a self-deluded deceiver who lies and falsifies in order to manipulate others. Meyer denies categorically that the gold plates ever existed, insists the Three Witnesses were duped, and maintains that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon himself. Repeatedly he emphasizes Joseph Smith's low educational level, what he views as Joseph's general ignorance, and the setting of religious

fanaticism and mysticism as well as the “semi-barbaric” circumstances in which the Prophet grew up. In brief, Meyer’s historical account reports nothing new or original about Joseph Smith or the origins of Mormonism. What Meyer apparently considered to be unique is his comparison between Mormonism and Islam. What follows is a synopsis of five of the major points of analogy he makes between the two religions and their founders.

At the outset, Meyer announces his project to be a study of the origins of Mormonism as a new, unique “religion of revelation,” which, he claims, did not begin as a sect. Its development, he asserts, reveals surprising analogies with Islam and generates significant information that can be useful in understanding Muhammad and his religion. He quickly, however, qualifies his apparent praise by saying that “among revealed religions it [Mormonism] is one of the crudest, indeed intellectually the lowest of them all.”³³ This, he asserts, is the basic factor underlying the Mormon attempt to rule the world (*Weltherrschaft*).

1. World Domination. Meyer asserts that *Weltherrschaft* was the intent of Mormonism as it was for Islam. He notes, “For Mormonism has in fact always sought to rule the world. Even if, unlike Islam, it has not achieved this, nevertheless it has been able to establish a theocratic empire with a unique culture in the mountain west.”³⁴ In describing the Church’s government in Missouri, he elaborates on this initial assertion:

Mormonism was to be a new religion for the entire world, which appeared at first *in* and for America. . . . A fully independent theocratic organization . . . was the goal, a church-state. . . . Other churches were to make way for him [Joseph Smith] and his group, just as other sects were set aside by Muhammad and Islam to be, at best, allowed to continue as merely tolerated subjects of the divine kingdom.³⁵

Among other things, this analogy overlooks the fact that Mormons never embarked on military campaigns to propagate the faith or attempted to establish the type of political hegemony that marked the first century of Islam’s growth. Meyer ignores or overlooks the simple distinction between building the kingdom of God through peaceful missionary efforts and resorting at times to armed confrontation to establish political rule.³⁶ Though he qualifies his analogy by noting that by 1912 Mormonism had lost the original momentum that could have made it a world religion at that time and that it had sunk to the level of a sect, his original assertion about Mormonism’s attempt to rule the world reveals the oversimplification and contradiction also inherent in some of his other analogies.

2. Joseph Smith and Muhammad as Prophets. Throughout his account of the rise of Mormonism, Meyer repeatedly interjects comparisons to Muhammad and the origins of Islam. Though he disdains that prophet, too, he views him somewhat more favorably than Joseph Smith.

One passage gives a flavor of many comparisons sprinkled through the text. After speaking of the cunning, manipulative, controlling behavior of both men, he summarizes:

We find these traits, sometimes less developed, sometimes more developed, in countless saints and miracle workers. Here, too, there is a pervasive sameness between Muhammad and Joseph Smith. But with Smith it appears in more grotesque raiment. His manner is more cynical so that here the prophet cannot be distinguished from the charlatan. That is because he belongs to a much lower [social] sphere than the Arabian prophet, and that despite the external veneer of civilization, his environment stood on a much lower level than the knightly-thinking aristocrats of Mecca who moved in loftier circumstances.³⁷

3. Sacred Books. At one point, Meyer says that, without exaggeration, one can call Mormons "the Muhammadans of America."³⁸ He again uses analogies to reinforce his assertion, the most obvious being the existence of and the two people's relationship to their sacred books. If God in his infinite mercy gave his revelations to Jews and Christians in the form of a Bible, how could he leave "the noble Arab people in ignorance and consign them to Hell?" The answer is that each prophet responded with revelations for their own people—Muhammad with the Qur'an, Joseph Smith with "A Bible for America"—the Book of Mormon.³⁹

Meyer appears fascinated by Joseph Smith's cunning in creating the "fiction" that the Book of Mormon was written on metallic plates, which Meyer knew were common in ancient Mideastern cultures, but he does not pursue the matter. Instead, he addresses the relationship between believers and their holy books by deprecating the literalness with which Muslims and Christians alike and, by implication, Mormons, take the word of God as revealed to them there.⁴⁰ He also finds an analogy in the claims by both prophets that their enemies had altered their words, in Joseph Smith's case with the missing 116 Book of Mormon manuscript pages given to Martin Harris, in Muhammad's case with "biblical" citations that were not found in the Bible.⁴¹

Meyer also finds negative stylistic similarities between the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Qur'an, each of which he finds tedious and difficult to read. Again he reveals slightly more sympathy with Muhammad because the Islamic prophet was more literate. But the Qur'an, like its Mormon counterparts, also bores him. Claiming the style of the Book of Mormon to be "clumsy, monotonous in the extreme, repetitious . . . incoherent as one would expect it from a totally uneducated man who dictated it in a state of half-sleep," he calls the book *ein Machwerk*—an untranslatable German word for a very bad book that can be a fraud, a concoction, a fiction, or a botched effort. He concludes this assessment by

saying that the Book of Mormon ranks “far below the *Koran*, which is already bad enough in terms of monotony and triviality. No human, except a believer, could find the strength to read the whole thing [the Book of Mormon].”⁴²

4. Receiving Revelation. Acknowledging that the Book of Mormon does not profess to contain revelations to Joseph Smith, Meyer later shifts his analogy to the Doctrine and Covenants, which he calls “the prophet Joseph Smith’s *Koran*.”⁴³ Its revelations serve Meyer as another major parallel between the two religions. Both prophets gave vivid accounts of the process by which they received them—Muhammad, among other means, by divine dictation from the angel Gabriel, Joseph Smith primarily by angelic instruction or personal inspiration from God. Meyer downplays Joseph Smith’s description of the type of personal revelation described in section 9 of the Doctrine and Covenants and claims it is “nothing more than that which we all experience with any effort of the mind (*geistige Arbeit*).” It is, he says, “the same processes of the soul” (*dieselben seelischen Vorgänge*) experienced by Zoroaster, Muhammad, Jeanne d’Arc, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and “countless others” who cast what arose from the depths of their souls into words that gave the appearance of coming from God.⁴⁴ Meyer finds another analogy in the fact that each of the prophets saw their revelations as a continuation of those emanating from Old Testament prophets. He notes that “both Muhammad and Joseph Smith considered their revelations to be in perfect agreement with the older ones, which they were only continuing and supplementing—all being ‘the word of God.’”⁴⁵

In his determination to compare and equate the phenomenon of divine revelation in both men, he sometimes makes startling analogies. His assertion, for example, that Joseph Smith’s first vision, in which both God the Father and His Son appeared to Joseph, “is similar to” the appearance of an angel to Muhammad as recorded in Qur’an 53 and 81.⁴⁶ Although both experiences involve the appearance of a heavenly being, Meyer’s analogy is nevertheless an example of Procrustean stretching and lopping to fit a preconceived template. Besides the obvious point that an angel is different from God the Father and the Son, Joseph Smith went to God with a specific inquiry, to which he received an answer. According to Meyer, Muhammad, who did not approach God and had no specific question in mind, was not even sure for a considerable period of time that he had seen or heard an angel. Only later, claims Meyer, through conversation with others, did he finally accept his experience as a divine manifestation.⁴⁷

Repeatedly within his analogies, Meyer contrasts Joseph Smith’s unwavering certitude at what he experienced in seeing the Father and the Son or the Angel Moroni or other heavenly messengers with Muhammad’s uncertainty,

his self-doubt, and his periods of depression as he attempted to find expression for what he had experienced. Meyer does not like Joseph Smith's certitude, and when he weighs both prophets in the balance, it is no surprise that he finds Joseph Smith wanting, just as he does Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Muhammad is Meyer's kind of prophet because he is so human, so beset with doubt, despair, and emotional struggles. After his first vision, Muhammad told his wife that he feared he was either possessed of the devil or had become a soothsayer or jinn-inspired poet, things which he detested.⁴⁸ These struggles stand in marked contrast to the steadfast certitude Meyer sees in Joseph Smith.

At one point, Meyer cites almost the entire ninth section of Doctrine and Covenants (his own translation) to illustrate how Joseph Smith received revelation. From it Meyer concludes, "Probably never has a visionary or prophet portrayed so vividly what goes on within him as it happens in this halting but completely intelligible language."⁴⁹ This comment, however, is in no way a compliment, since Meyer rejects the divine origin of this and any other of Joseph Smith's revelations. They arose from within the soul of the writer, who in turn passed them off as having divine origin. Though he claims that Muhammad's revelations developed in the same manner, he ranks them higher than Joseph Smith's because in his view, they are of somewhat higher poetic quality, despite what Meyer sees as their repetition, monotony, and triviality.

5. Polygamy, Sensuality, Revelation. Meyer uses a simplistic form of psychoreligious analysis to deal with polygamy in Islam and Mormonism. In brief, he sees its basis in his belief that as Joseph Smith and Muhammad grew older their sexual drives became increasingly stronger. They responded to these urges by declaring the practice of plural wives to be a revelation from God: "It is well-known . . . how the sensuality of their sex lives grew increasingly stronger, and how the means of satisfying it then manifest itself as a divine commandment."⁵⁰ Calling Doctrine and Covenants 132 (the section on plural and eternal marriage) a "confused flowing together" of various biblical elements,⁵¹ Meyer analyzes it at length and then finds a curious and not totally coherent analogy between Joseph Smith's revelation and Muhammad's justification of polygamy:

Thus he activated the revelatory apparatus for his marital crises and his sexual needs in the same way as Muhammad did when justifying his favorite wife Aischa against the suspicion of adultery and put an end to the gossip by imposing a punishment of 80 stripes for the accuser if he could not produce four witnesses.⁵²

Meyer continues with a curious justification for the views of the two prophets on plural marriage. They were not conscious deceivers or swindlers, he claims, for they truly believed that their secret thoughts and

feelings were grounded in divine revelation and that the revelatory apparatus was available to them to declare their thoughts as coming from God:

As cynical as was the shamelessness with which Muhammad and Joseph Smith took care of their personal needs and their most intimate affairs of the heart, nevertheless it is not psychologically accurate in these and similar crass cases to speak simply of public deception and conscious fraud. For both it was self-understood that precisely their innermost thoughts and stirrings of the heart were based on divine inspiration. Through long familiarity with it, the apparatus of revelation stood ready for use by either of them.⁵³

Accounting for Differences in Mormonism and Islam

In his pursuit of analogies like those above, Meyer often fails to elaborate on or, in some cases, to mention differences at all. Singularly absent from his account, for example, is at least one striking dissimilarity that makes his analogy between polygamy in the seventh-century Arabian peninsula and that in nineteenth-century America problematic. Revelations to Muhammad, who was living in a polygamous society, built on an established practice of his own time and society. On the other hand, Joseph Smith's revelations on the subject not only flew in the face of the institution of marriage as understood and observed in America—they radically challenged a view that had prevailed in Christianity for nineteen hundred years. Thus Muhammad conformed to the prevailing social norms of his day, while Joseph Smith found himself in diametrical opposition to many of them. This is only one of many significant differences that Meyer either ignores or fails to recognize.

Intriguingly, Meyer acknowledges at the end of a chapter entitled "Excursus: The Origin of Islam and the First Revelations of Muhammad" that "there are nevertheless many particular differences" between the two religions.⁵⁴ He briefly lists more than a dozen of them,⁵⁵ many of which, if explored in depth, might have modified the analogies he sees. His list of practices and principles found in Mormonism but not in Islam registers, for example, the belief in continuing revelation for the Church through Joseph Smith and later prophets; the concept that personal revelation is accessible to all Mormons; the acceptance of the Book of Mormon as a piece of scripture equal in status with the Bible; his observation that commandments found in latter-day revelation are sometimes given more weight by Mormons than commandments in the Bible; the commonplace nature of visions, healings, and other miracles or spiritual manifestations, which may be experienced by any member in daily life; the distinction between Joseph Smith's seeing God the Father in a vision and Muhammad's seeing an angel; and the difference between Joseph Smith's possessing the gold plates, translating them by means of the seer stones, and

returning them to an angel, as opposed to Muhammad's never possessing the book but writing only what the angel dictated to him from it. Using this latter difference, Meyer again emphasizes that Muhammad's revelations, "despite their monotony," are on a higher level than Joseph Smith's because "at least in the older suras, we sense something of the strength of a conviction, occasionally even poetic verve, that had been sorely won by intense mental effort."⁵⁶

Meyer concludes his catalogue of dissimilarities with another analogy in which he compares the men whom Joseph Smith attracted to his new religion with those Muhammad initially won for his cause. The former, Meyer claims, "almost without exception belonged to the dregs of society. Many of these, especially the first disciples, would later abandon him and be cut off from the Church." By contrast, Muhammad won over "intellectually prominent men of high social position such as Abu Bekr and Omar, whom he was able to bind to himself in unshakable devotion." In terms of intellectual stature and strength of character, claims Meyer, Brigham Young could not hold a candle to Omar, just as Joseph Smith could not remotely measure up to Muhammad.⁵⁷

This summary of dissimilarities reveals one of the major weaknesses of Meyer's methodological approach to Mormonism as a basis for understanding Islam: increasingly his work becomes a study in differences. To the degree that the dissimilarities disallow, outweigh, or severely qualify and modify the perceived analogies, one must ask how relevant the analogies are in the first place and what, if any, valid conclusions can be drawn from them.

Conclusion

Arnold H. Green and Lawrence P. Goldrup examine two problems common among the many writers who push analogies between Joseph Smith and Muhammad or between Mormonism and Islam. They conclude that such analogies almost invariably result in either gross simplifications or outright errors. Meyer figures prominently in their analysis.⁵⁸

Though well-disposed to Meyer, the historian Albert Henrichs also points out that from a contemporary perspective, Meyer's use of historical analogy is too restrictive and that it gives an "inadequate total picture" of the subjects under consideration.⁵⁹ He believes that Meyer might have found a more meaningful analogy in the life and works of Joseph Smith and the revelatory religion of the third-century prophet and seer Mani, the founder of Manicheanism.⁶⁰ Another religious movement that offers analogies perhaps more fruitful and meaningful than those with Islam would be the sixteenth-century Anabaptists in Meyer's homeland. For whatever reasons, none of these seized his attention. As was the case for many

before and after Meyer, the lure of finding analogies between Mormonism and Islam was too seductive. As a result, he overextended himself in a book dubbed a “bibliographic curiosity” among his writings.⁶¹ It ranks as a curiosity in the study of Mormonism also because Meyer is the only world-class historian who devoted a full-length book to the study of that religion and to a comparison between Mormonism and Islam.

Lacking in originality, flawed in theory and methodology, dated, and oversimplified or simply wrong in many ways, Meyer’s *Origin and History of the Mormons* could be conveniently viewed as playing an insignificant role in historical circles. For studies of Islam, this appears to be the case. In contrast to studies by other German scholars of the period, whose works are still used and cited today, Meyer’s book made no impact on Near Eastern or Islamic studies at the time it appeared. Today it is rarely cited in Islamic studies and has been all but forgotten. Conversely—and inconsistent with their dismissal of this work for purposes of Islamic scholarship—researchers in German-speaking countries today continue to cite this work as an authoritative source on Mormonism. This derives in part from his stature as a historian, in part because of the paucity of reliable studies of Mormonism in Europe. But the disparaging tone of this work, its conclusions based on inaccuracies and oversimplifications, its failure to consult adequate or relevant secondary literature, its blatant biases, and its flawed theoretical and methodological approach have become a model for treatment of the Mormons that persists to this day in German-speaking countries.⁶² In Europe, at least, Meyer’s legacy lives on.

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1. Albert Henrichs, “Alte und neue Propheten als Stifter von Offenbarungsreligionen: Der Ursprung der Mormonen nach Eduard Meyer,” in *Eduard Meyer: Leben und Leistung eines Universalhistorikers*, ed. William M. Calder III and Alexander Demandt (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1990), 183.

2. Eduard Meyer, *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen, mit Exkursen über die Anfänge des Islâms und des Christentums* (Halle, Germany: Max Niemeyer, 1912).

3. Eduard Meyer, *The Origin and History of the Mormons: With Reflections on the Beginnings of Islam and Christianity*, trans. Heinz F. Rahde and Eugene Seach (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1961). While this is the only English translation available, it is so faulty and incomplete as to make it virtually useless. Beginning with the title, for example, the word “Exkursen” is rendered as “Reflections,” which is not the meaning of that word. I have used the legitimate English term “excurses.” In all English citations from Meyer in the body of my article, I cite page numbers from this translation

so that readers might refer to it if they wish, but I have reworked the translations to correspond more closely to the original German.

4. Much of the biographical information presented here is drawn from Christhard Hoffmann, "Die Selbsterziehung des Historikers. Zur intellektuellen Entwicklung des jungen Eduard Meyer (1855–1879)," in *Eduard Meyer*, 208–54.

5. Cited from a letter republished by Christhard Hoffmann as a supplement to his article "Die Selbsterziehung des Historikers," 252.

6. Cited in Mortimer Chambers, "The 'Most Eminent Living Historian, the One Final Authority': Meyer in America," in *Eduard Meyer*, 110. I have drawn much of the biographical information on Meyer's trips to America from this source.

7. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, iii.

8. David Lyon to Eduard Meyer, January 12, 1919, Das Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften (listed in earlier sources as the Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR), Signature 128, under "Manuskripte."

9. Lyon to Meyer.

10. Chambers, "Most Eminent Living Historian," 128–31.

11. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, foreword.

12. *Die Rektoren der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*, ed. Universitäts Bibliothek (Halle [Saale]: Max Niemeyer, 1966), 184; italics added. The historians who wrote the essays in *Eduard Meyer. Leben und Leistung eines Universalhistorikers* cited above tend to take a somewhat less critical, almost adulatory stance in regard to Meyer's contributions.

13. Henrichs, "Alte und neue Propheten," 183.

14. For an excellent account of this view, see E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany: A Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Centuries* (Boston: Beacon Hill, 1958).

15. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, viii.

16. William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, *A Handbook to Literature: With an Outline of Literary History English and American* (New York: Odyssey, 1936), 18; italics in original.

17. Arnold H. Green and Lawrence P. Goldrup, "Joseph Smith, an American Muhammad? An Essay on the Perils of Historical Analogy," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6 (spring 1971): 46–58.

18. J. Mansfeld, "Greek Philosophy in the *Geschichte des Altertums*," in *Eduard Meyer*, 255–56.

19. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, ii.

20. Eduard Meyer to Richard Pietschmann, November 8, 1876, cited by Hoffmann, "Selbsterziehung des Historikers," 236 n. 73.

21. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, ii.

22. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, ii–iii.

23. This footnote, which should be found on page ii of Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, was not translated in that edition.

24. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 37, 38, 52.

25. Stated in a footnote missing from the *Origin and History of the Mormons* translation. The note should appear on page iii. See also Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 37 n. 1.

26. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, i.

27. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, ii.

28. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, iii.

29. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, iii.

30. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, iv.
31. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, v.
32. William James classified Joseph Smith and Muhammad as examples of an “exalted sensibility” in whom inspiration had become second nature. While there is no evidence that Meyer knew or read James, he clearly did not treat his subjects with the detachment or sympathy James showed. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longman, Greens, 1952), 467–72.
33. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 1.
34. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, i.
35. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 64; italics in original.
36. Islam’s growth in its first two centuries can be attributed only in part to military conquest. More peaceful, gradual means of propagation and expansion also played a very significant role. The issue involves a complex interplay of historical, political, social, and theological factors. See James A. Toronto, “Many Voices, *One Umma*,” in this issue of *BYU Studies*.
37. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 37.
38. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 44.
39. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 52.
40. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 13–14.
41. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 33.
42. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 24.
43. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 51.
44. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 32.
45. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 54.
46. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 48.
47. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 49–50.
48. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 45. According to Islamic tradition, the jinn are invisible beings created from fire who sometimes assist and sometimes cause trouble for human beings. The English word *genie* is a derivative of *jinn*.
49. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 32.
50. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 37.
51. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 116.
52. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 119.
53. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 120.
54. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 54.
55. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 54–56.
56. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 56.
57. Meyer, *Origin and History of the Mormons*, 56.
58. Green and Goldrup, “Joseph Smith, an American Muhammad?” 53–56. See also Arnold H. Green’s discussion of Meyer in “Mormonism and Islam,” in this issue of *BYU Studies*.
59. Henrichs, “Alte und neue Propheten,” 206–7.
60. Henrichs, “Alte und neue Propheten,” 203.
61. Henrichs, “Alte und neue Propheten,” 191.
62. For a notable recent exception, see Christian Gellinek, *Christus in Amerika? Mormonentum als christliche Religion in vergleichender Kirchengeschichte* (Münster: Agenda, 1999). Gellinek consults and lists a far larger numbers of reliable Mormon and non-Mormon sources than any of his predecessors.