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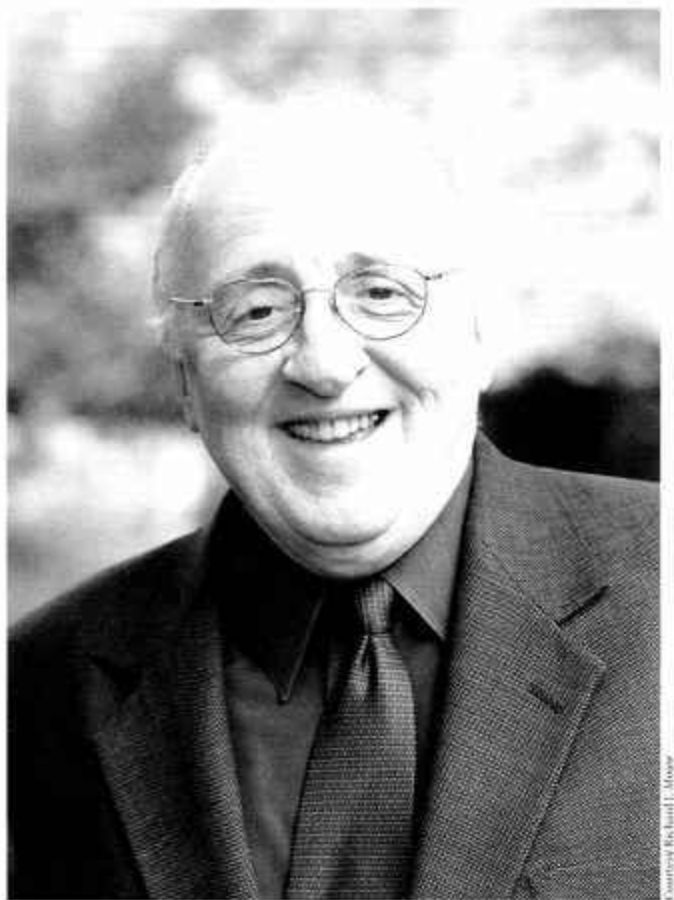
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What Does God Think about America?

Some Challenges for Evangelicals and Mormons

Richard J. Mouw

I visited an Evangelical church once in my younger years where the sermon of the day featured a straightforward exposition of the teachings associated with dispensationalist premillennialism. The signs of the time are clear, the preacher said. Wars and rumors of wars. Earthquakes and famine. Widespread lawlessness. The prophetic clock is ticking. God's plan for the future of the earth centers on the Jewish people, who will eventually recognize the true Messiah and inherit all the earthly promises given to them of old. All other nations are doomed to pass away. The destiny of Gentile Christians is a spiritual and heavenly one, and soon all faithful Christians will be raptured, to meet their Lord in the air and be taken to their heavenly home. Then comes the tribulation, after which the Lord Jesus will return to establish his millennial Kingdom with its center in Jerusalem.

At the close of the service, the pastor noted that the Fourth of July would be falling within the next week. As we prepare to celebrate our freedoms as Americans, he said, it is fitting that we should praise Almighty God for the unique blessings he has bestowed upon this great nation of ours. He then led us in the singing of "America the Beautiful." The congregation sang lustily, and my guess is that I was the only one who noticed the stark contrast between the content of the sermon we had just heard and the theology of the eschatological verse of that patriotic song:

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years,
Thine alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears.
America! America! God shed his grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.

Here was an expression of great optimism about the future of the American nation. Indeed, the envisioned future for the United States was so glorious that the images used were the very ones that the Scriptures employ to describe the New Jerusalem: urban dwelling places adorned with precious stones; tears being wiped away; a holy harmony that reaches from sea to sea and shore to shore.

When Katharine Lee Bates penned the words to this verse in 1893, she was picking up on themes that had long been around in American culture. The Puritan settlers in New England were motivated by what they saw as a God-given mandate to establish a city upon a hill that would be a light to the nations of the earth. And in the eighteenth century the idea of America as the seat of the millennial Kingdom, the place where the New Jerusalem would be established, often found expression.¹ In the nineteenth century, this notion was often merged with a postmillennial theology, which posited a coming era of widespread peace and righteousness—in this case, flowing in a special way from the blessings that God was bestowing upon the United States—which would precede the coming of Christ.

Looking for the New Israel

This pattern of applying the symbolism associated with Old Testament Israel to a present-day people or nation is a part of a larger exercise that we might think of as *looking for the New Israel*. This exercise has resulted in many different proposed identifications. Often, as we will see, people join together two different identifications—they find the New Israel in two different nations or peoples. In their purest forms, though, the “findings” fall into three categories.

The first is the identification of the New Israel with the contemporary manifestation of the Old Israel. This is obviously a favorite option for many Jewish folks, but it is also common among that subgroup of Evangelicals who see themselves as experts in the present-day fulfillment of “Bible prophecy.” Where do we find the New Israel today? The answer: in the present-day life of the physical descendants of the Old Israel. The Lord said to Abram (whose name would soon be changed to Abraham):

I will make of you a great nation,
and I will bless you,
and make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and the one who curses you I will curse;
and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.
(Gen. 12:1–3, New Revised Standard Version)

These promises were given more specific content as things proceeded in the Old Testament. The descendents of Abraham settled into a promised land and established their capital in Jerusalem. Eventually, though, they were exiled from their homeland, but they were assured that the Lord had not forgotten his promises to them. Through the prophets, God spelled out even greater blessings that were to come: they would return to their land, and they would flourish there. A glorious New Jerusalem would be established, from which righteousness would flow and a marvelous *shalom* would cover the earth.

The first option for finding the New Israel, then, takes all of this in a fairly straightforward sense. God has not forgotten the glorious future promised to the ethnic descendents of Abraham. The establishment of the modern state of Israel is seen as the beginning of a prophetic scenario that is now unfolding. This line of argument says that if you want to observe the first fruits of the New Israel and the New Jerusalem, do the obvious thing: keep your eye on the collective life of the present-day Jewish people.

The second option sees the promises given to Abraham as having been transferred to the New Testament church. The theological basis for this view has been very clearly articulated by some Reformed theologians. They argue that when the Jewish people of Christ's day rejected him as the promised Messiah they forfeited their right to inherit the promises to ethnic Israel. The Gentile church as the New Israel is now the proper recipient of these promises. The only way, for example, that a Jew can claim the benefits of the old covenant is by joining the New Israel, the community of the adopted spiritual heirs of Father Abraham.

Yet a third option is to see some present-day ethnic or national community as the unique object of God's special favors. America as the Chosen Nation, as the place where the New Jerusalem will be established, is an obvious example of this identification.

I have described these options here in their starkest forms. In actual practice, though, we can often observe a "mix and match" phenomenon. People hold these views in various combinations. Especially in the case of the third option, most American Christians are reluctant simply to assert that the United States is *the* New Israel. Rather, their official theology assigns that role primarily to ethnic Israel or the church, but in a secondary sense they also use New Israel images to apply to the American nation. And in reality, the elevation of America to Chosen Nation status is often done instinctively, without a theological rationale that is capable of clear articulation.

Mormonism's Two Israels

Mormonism, however, provides us with an important alternative to the typical “mix and match” pattern. Joseph Smith set forth a perspective in which two of these options played a role, and he did so in a way that the interrelationships between the “Israels” were explicitly articulated. In August of 1832, Joseph Smith wrote an open letter, published in Mormonism's first newspaper, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, addressed “To the Honorable Men of the World.” He encouraged all people who were genuinely open to the truth to study the Scriptures carefully in order to “search the revelations of God; study the prophecies, and rejoice that God grants unto the world Seers and Prophets.” He encouraged all genuine truth-seekers to pay special attention to the ancient prophets when

they saw truth spring out of the earth, and righteousness look down from heaven in the last days; before the Lord came the second time, to gather His elect; they saw the end of wickedness on earth, and the Sabbath of creation crowned with peace; they saw the end of the glorious thousand years, when Satan was loosed for a little season; they saw the day of judgment when all men received according to their works, and they saw the heaven and earth flee away to make room for the city of God, when the righteous receive an inheritance in eternity.³

The Mormon leader was appealing here to themes that could be found by anyone who searched the Old and the New Testaments. But if his readers were also willing to look into the recently published Book of Mormon, they would have discovered a perspective in which these biblical prophecies were given a specifically American focus. There they would have read the account reportedly written many centuries before on American soil, about the vision of Ether, a prophet in the Book of Mormon, who

saw the days of Christ, and he spake concerning a New Jerusalem upon this [American] land. And he spake also concerning the house of Israel, and the Jerusalem [in ancient Palestine] from whence Lehi should come—after it should be destroyed it should be built up again, a holy city unto the Lord; wherefore, it could not be a new Jerusalem, for it had been in a time of old; but it should be built up again, and become a holy city of the Lord; and it should be built unto the house of Israel—And that a New Jerusalem should be built upon this land, unto the remnant of the seed of Joseph, for which things there has been a type. . . . Wherefore, the remnant of the house of Joseph shall be built upon this land; and it shall be a land of their inheritance; and they shall build up a holy city unto the Lord, like unto the Jerusalem of old. (Ether 13:4–8)

This text is prophesying about the emergence of two Jerusalems in the latter days. The first is the restoring of the Old Jerusalem as an important "holy city unto the Lord." This city, which is to be established as an important center for the Jewish people, cannot be, however, the glorious New Jerusalem promised of old, because, as Ether insists, that is not really a "new" Jerusalem, "for it had been in a time of old." Thus, while acknowledging God's continuing concern for the restoration of ethnic Israel as a Chosen People to whom God's promises have not been cancelled or simply transferred, Ether is envisioning a second Jerusalem, this one the New Jerusalem, that will be established by God on American soil.

It was with Book of Mormon texts of this sort in mind that Joseph Smith could confidently affirm: "We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and, that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory" (Article of Faith 10). Or, as he explained it in more detail in an 1835 statement, drawing on both the Book of Mormon and the New Testament:

Now we learn from the book of Mormon, the very identical continent and spot of land upon which the new Jerusalem is to stand, and it must be caught up according to the vision of John upon the isle of Patmos. Now many will be disposed to say, that this New Jerusalem spoken of, is the Jerusalem that was built by the Jews on the eastern continent: But you will see from Revelations, 21:2, there was a New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, adorned as a bride for her husband. . . . [T]here are two cities spoken of here. . . there is a New Jerusalem to be established on this continent.—And also the Jerusalem shall be rebuilt on the eastern continent.³

These same themes are repeated in later Mormon writings. Here, for example, is Bishop Orson F. Whitney, in a lecture delivered in 1889: "Young men and young women of this people, it was for this purpose that you were born upon this favored land, the land upon which God intends to build the city of Zion, to erect His holy Temple, upon which the glory of God will rest." And then he observes that it is in the building of this American Zion that the familiar "Arise, shine; for thy light is come" prophecy of Isaiah 60 is to be fulfilled.⁴

Mormons as Israelites

It is clear, then, that Joseph Smith held that two communities, one of them in the Middle East and the other on the North American continent, could make claim to be "Israel's": the former by virtue of its continuity

with the people whose story is told in the Old Testament, and the latter, the community established by the Latter-day Saints, because it will be the site of the New Jerusalem which will serve as the seat of Christ's millennial reign.

Jan Shipps explains Mormonism's understanding of its connection to Old Testament Israel by drawing a contrast specifically to the self-understanding of those nineteenth-century Christians who saw themselves as the spiritual heirs to the promises given to Abraham, which were now extended also to the Gentile nations through the redemptive work of Christ. Shipps specifically attributes this view to the Disciples of Christ, but it is in fact typical of much of Evangelicalism. Among themselves Evangelicals debate dispensationalism versus two-covenant perspectives, but the underlying assumption of both of those interpretive schemes is that the New Testament church has been made possible by God's decision to offer saving mercies to the Gentile nations—with the intra-Evangelical disagreement having to do with whether that offer to the Gentiles is a natural extension of the Old Testament redemptive economy or a supplementary arrangement to a redemptive plan in which ethnic Israel also still looms large in the unfolding of God's purposes for humankind.

Both of those Evangelical perspectives differ significantly from Mormonism's understanding of its relationship to the Old Testament system. As Shipps points out, early Mormonism did not rely directly on the New Testament notion of the inclusion of the Gentiles. Instead, "in the Mormon restoration, membership in the Church of Jesus Christ means that the Saints are literally adopted into Israel and are thereupon brought into the covenant by virtue of their membership in the tribes of Israel."⁵ Among the things that get restored for Mormons are many of the concrete features of ancient Israel, with the obvious ones being the re-establishing of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, along with temple-based rituals and the patriarchal (including, for a while, polygamous) family structures.

Understanding the Authority Issue

It is important to underscore here the way in which the Mormon restoration of these ancient offices and practices resulted in a very significant departure from the classic Protestant understanding of religious *authority*. The subtlety of the issues at stake here is often missed by us Evangelicals, with the result that we typically get sidetracked in our efforts to understand our basic disagreements with Mormon thought. We often proceed as if the central authority issue to debate with Mormons has to do with the question of which authoritative *texts* ought to guide us in understanding

the basic issues of life. We Evangelicals accept the Bible alone as our infallible guide while, we point out, the Latter-day Saints add another set of writings, those that comprise the Book of Mormon, along with the records of additional Church teachings, to the canon—thus we classic Protestants are people of the Book while Mormons are people of the Books.

This way of getting at the nature of our differences really does not take us very far into exploring some of our basic disagreements. What we also need to see is that in restoring some of the features of Old Testament Israel, Mormonism has also restored the kinds of *authority patterns* that guided the life of Israel. The Old Testament people of God were not a people of the Book as such—mainly because for most of their history there was no completed Book. Ancient Israel was guided by an open canon and the leadership of the prophets. And it is precisely *this* pattern of communal authority that Mormonism restored. Evangelicals may insist that Mormonism has too many Books. But the proper Mormon response is that even these Books are not enough to give authoritative guidance to the present-day community of the faithful. The Books themselves are products of a prophetic office, an office that has been reinstituted in these latter days. People fail to discern the full will of God if they do not live their lives in the anticipation that they will receive new revealed teachings under the authority of living prophets.

I have heard Evangelicals comment that our disagreements with Mormonism on the question of authority are not unlike those that have been at stake in our longstanding Protestant debates about authority with Roman Catholic theologians. In an important sense, this is true. Evangelicals want to argue against both Catholics and Mormons about the way in which both of those communities rely on “new” teachings—deliverances that are viewed as infallibly authoritative and which go well beyond the contents of the Old and New Testaments. But Mormonism’s understanding of the character—to say nothing of the content—of these additional teachings also differs from the Roman Catholic view in significant ways. For Catholicism, the office that produces these new teachings is the *magisterium*, the *teaching*, and not the prophetic office. Furthermore, Catholics do not see their additional teachings as new revelations. Rather, when the bishops of the church exercise their teaching function, “they bring forth,” in the words of the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*, “from the treasury of Revelation new things and old, making it bear fruit and vigilantly warding off any errors that threaten their flock.”⁶ This “bearing fruit” metaphor is often used to explain how the Church’s magisterial deliverances are to the contents of Scripture as a piece of fruit is to the original seed. These teachings do not, for Catholics, provide us with new information; rather,

they are considered as *explications* of what the Bible teaches—the making explicit of that which is already implicit in biblical revelation.

Mormonism, on the other hand, does view its postbiblical deliverances as new revelation. In this sense, Mormonism has interesting similarities to some contemporary versions of Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity, where there is also often an emphasis (but not without much debate on how to construe the emphasis) on a continuing prophetic office that can produce new revelations. Richard Bushman articulates the Mormon perspective nicely:

The Book of Mormon did not become a handbook for doctrine and ecclesiastical practice. It was not as if a new truth had been laid out in the teachings of the ancient Nephites and the modern church was to pore over the record to extract policy and teachings. From the outset doctrine came day by day in revelations to Joseph Smith. Those revelations comprised the backbone of belief, the doctrine and covenants for the church. . . . [Indeed,] most of the applicable Book of Mormon doctrines and principles were revealed anew to Joseph Smith, and [they] derived their authority from the modern revelation as much as from the Book of Mormon.⁷

But for all of this, as Jan Shipps points out, early Mormonism still saw itself, not as a community of Israelites, but as a Christian *church*, an ecclesial community “whose blueprint was the one set out in the Book of Acts.”⁸ Thus, she argues, Mormonism has embraced a tension between “literal as opposed to figurative interpretations of the church/Israel connection.” She insists that this tension is already there in the New Testament’s own understanding of the relationship between church and Israel.⁹ I am not as convinced as she is that the tension is there in the apostolic writings in the way she suggests. But there certainly is a kind of fluidity in the New Testament’s portrayal of the relationship between Israel and the church, a fluidity that has allowed for several different understandings of the church-Israel relationship among Evangelicals—one of which has made room for Evangelicals to apply New Jerusalem motifs to the United States.

Jerusalem or Babylon?

In 1968, S. Franklin Logsdon, an itinerant “Bible teacher” who had once been pastor of Chicago’s Moody Memorial Church, published a little book with the title *Is the U.S.A. in Prophecy?* Logsdon gave an unambiguous affirmative answer to the question he posed in his chosen title. Indeed, he was so confident of his assessment that he wondered why Christian teachers had not given more attention to the subject of America’s role in God’s plan for the ages. “As I have spoken on the theme

in cities across the country," he reported, "there has been much interest evidenced, with the attendance swelled not infrequently to an overflow." Logsdon was discovering that "people want to know, as never before, just what God has to say about our great nation." And Logsdon was pleased to tell them "that the omniscient God, looking down the corridors of time, and concerning Himself so prominently with the Gentile nations, did not overlook the one nation He has blessed above all others."¹⁰

Unfortunately, though, Logsdon did not think that God was very happy with contemporary America. Indeed, Logsdon came to the conclusion that the present-day American nation exhibited what he saw as sixteen characteristics, derived from his reading of Jeremiah 50–53 and Revelation 18, of "prophetic Babylon," a city that falls under the judgment of God for its wicked ways. Not that Logsdon had completely given up on the United States. "It may be the eleventh hour," he observed, "but many a fight has been won in the last round."¹¹ From everything he could see, however, "our great Ship of State is currently in turbulent waters and headed for treacherous shoals."¹²

Given the way American Evangelicals of the past have been attracted to the "patriot dream" perspective on America as having clear New Jerusalem potential, Logsdon's discussion is noteworthy. While he never asserts without qualification that America is in fact "prophetic Babylon," he clearly thinks that the United States may well be moving in a direction where its wickedness is so pervasive that it will become a special object of divine wrath.

I am not particularly interested here in Logsdon's specific way of applying the "Bible prophecy" themes to the present-day United States. What is significant for our present discussion, though, is the fact of his *ambivalence*. America, as "the one nation [that God] has blessed above all others" obviously has New Jerusalem possibilities in his estimation. But it is precisely because of its prominence in God's plan for history that the United States also runs the real risk of becoming the irredeemably wicked Babylon of the end-times.

Logsdon's ambivalence points to a pattern that can be seen at work in the collective Evangelical psyche. While the conception of America as having a special divine appointment among the nations has often loomed large for American Evangelicals, there are times when a very different mood emerges, and America is seen as an ungodly place where true Christians are living as exiles. My own reading of how the shifting back and forth between optimism to pessimism—between a Jerusalem and a Babylon mood—is that the movements typically happen among Evangelicals

without a conscious acknowledgement of a corresponding shift between two very different eschatological perspectives.

Issues in Eschatology

Eschatology is the subdiscipline of theology that focuses on events of the future. Evangelicals and Mormons have both been very interested in end-times questions—the main difference being, of course, that the two groups set forth quite different end-time scenarios. Unlike the Mormons, however, we Evangelicals have also expended much energy arguing with *each other* about the details of “Bible prophecy,” with our disagreements stemming from three different views about the proper interpretation of the reference in Revelation 20:1–6 to the thousand-year reign of Christ.

Premillennialists believe that Christ will return from heaven before (“pre-”) the millennium. Often this view takes a quite pessimistic view of the last stages of human history. Things will get worse and worse, with a positive turn occurring only when Christ dramatically returns to earth to establish his thousand-year reign of peace and righteousness. The premillennialists are obviously the most literal in their interpretation of Revelation 20 and other texts that have an end-time feel to them. After the bad things prophesied in Matthew 24 occur, they say, the scenario sketched out in Revelation 20 will unfold as described there. Christ will return and “bind” Satan, putting the Evil One out of commission for a thousand years. During this time, Christ—along with those who have been martyred for the faith throughout history—will bring a worldwide millennial reign of peace and righteousness. When the millennium comes to an end, Satan will be released and will deceive a vast majority of the human race. A mighty conflict will then take place—the great battle of Armageddon (see Rev. 16:15–16). Here Satan will be decisively defeated and will be cast into “the lake of fire and sulfur,” where he will be “tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10).

Postmillennialists believe that Christ will return after (“post-”) the millennium. They take less of a “blow-by-blow” approach in their interpretation of Revelation 20. The actual one thousand year number, they say, does not need to be understood literally; it may be only a symbol. But it does point, they insist, to an extended reign of peace and righteousness that will occur in the last stages of human history, prior to Christ’s triumphant return. During this period the Christian church will make great gains in its influence: Many will be brought into the church, and the influence of Christian teaching will have a positive influence throughout the world, even where people do not convert to the Christian faith. Peace and

righteousness will prevail, with a significant alleviation of the problems that have long plagued humankind.

Amillennialists ("a-" = "no") differ from the other two positions in their denial that the passage in Revelation 20 refers to an actual period of time that will occur in connection with—either immediately before or after—the return of Christ. Rather they see the one-thousand-year reign mentioned in Revelation 20 as a symbol of the situation that took effect with the establishing of the Christian church at the time of Pentecost and that will endure until the end of time. The church is the primary embodiment of the perfection of the Kingdom of God on earth, for which the number one thousand is a symbol—a Kingdom that will be experienced in its fullness only in the eternal realm.

Dueling Eschatologies

My sense is that American Evangelicals shift back and forth between two moods about America: a postmillennial optimistic mood and a premillennial pessimistic one. Puritan postmillennial optimism went underground when Darwinism emerged as a dominant cultural force in the nineteenth century. As the historian George Marsden once put it, the transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth was for American Evangelicalism something very much like an immigrant experience. Although the migration was not a geographic one, there was a widespread sense that Evangelicals had somehow been transported into a strange new land. They had moved from the New Israel to the New Babylon. "America the Beautiful" was replaced by "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through."

Now there has been another shift in the past few decades, when Evangelicals, long accustomed to thinking of themselves as a moral and spiritual minority in American culture, suddenly proclaimed themselves in the late 1970s to be the vanguard of a "Moral Majority." And while that particular movement has faded from the scene, we still tend toward postmillennial optimism: "This world is not my home" has given way in our hymnody to "Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father's glory."

This latest shift seems to have something to do with the significant upward mobility Evangelicalism has experienced in recent decades. Pentecostal and holiness congregations, which once stood on the wrong side of the tracks, are now often flourishing "mega-churches" occupying the best real estate in town. As a result, our theological self-understanding, which for a long time had featured a sense of cultural marginalization, has had to be altered. The problem is, though, that much of this theological shift has

happened instinctively. It is as if there are two different political theologies that lie deep in the American Evangelical collective unconscious, one a remnant apocalypticism and another a Chosen Nation triumphalism, and Evangelicals allow one or the other to emerge, and to dominate their collective patterns for a while, as befits their cultural mood.

The problem, of course, is that when this kind of thing happens instinctively, there is little attention paid to the theological basis for our self-understanding as Americans. This results, for example, in some interesting inconsistencies. Why, for example, the popularity of an apocalyptic "Left Behind" popular literature with the same folks who sing "Shine, Jesus, Shine"? And it also leads to continuing embarrassments, as when visible Evangelical leaders make pronouncements about world events and world religions that lack theological clarity.

Locating Mormonism's "Zion"

Now I am going to meddle in another group's theological business, by suggesting that Mormonism has similar issues to deal with in its theological understanding of the role of America in God's plan for history.

In the 1835 statement that I cited earlier, Joseph Smith makes the straightforward claim that the Book of Mormon tells us "the very identical continent and spot of land upon which the new Jerusalem is to stand." This strict identification of the Missouri location as Zion, however, begins to broaden out when the Saints settle into Utah. Thus, in 1893 in Salt Lake City President Joseph F. Smith delivers a discourse in which he observes that the prophecies that in 1831 were meant to apply to the Missouri settlement can now be applied to Utah also:

For, mark you, the land of Missouri is not alone the land of Zion; but wherever the people of God are gathered together and they sanctify the land through obedience to the commandments of God, that land will become a land of Zion unto them. This, therefore, is the land of Zion unto us.¹³

Here we have a view not unlike Christian amillennialism, where "Zion" ceases to be primarily geographical and comes to be associated with the spiritual influence of the people of God. If you want to find Zion, in this view, look to those places where people are living in obedience to the will of the Lord—it is precisely that way of life, that pattern of obedience, by which the place in which the Saints are living "will become a land of Zion unto them."

Alongside this "spiritualizing" of the Zion motif—so that, for example, we can find the Zion of this definition wherever in the world the Saints are

sanctifying their geographic location by living in obedience to the divine commandments—there is another Mormon view, one that keeps the geographic understanding of Zion as an American phenomenon, but which distinguishes between the fortunes of the American nation and those of the Mormon community within that nation. As Richard Bushman has observed, Joseph Smith's vision of the unfolding of prophetic events was both premillennial and postmillennial. "The early Mormon view of the millennium cut across this division" in Protestant thought, Bushman explains. Bushman notes that Joseph Smith did not see things going well for the American nation as such. The Mormon leader prophesied that many calamities, especially plagues and other natural catastrophes, would visit the earth just before the Second Coming, when Christ would return to establish his millennial reign.¹⁴ In this sense, early Mormonism had some affinities with Evangelical premillennialism.

But at the same time, the Mormon Zion would prosper, and in all of this it would be protected from the calamities experienced by the larger American society. The Mormon community would function, then, as a place of refuge for those who live in obedience to the divine ordinances. In this respect, argues Bushman, for Mormons there is—as it were—a kind of postmillennial development within a larger premillennial context.¹⁵

Theological Narratives about America

So I ask directly now the question posed in my title: What does God think about America, according to Mormon and Evangelical perspectives? More specifically, what *ought* these two groups to say about the role of America in God's plan for human history?

I have said enough already to support the observation that both Mormons and Evangelicals have operated with somewhat fluid applications of biblical imagery about the New Jerusalem, the New Israel, and Zion. When, for example, Joseph Smith wrote in that 1835 statement that "we learn from the book of Mormon, the very identical continent and spot of land upon which the new Jerusalem is to stand," he clearly had the Missouri settlement in mind. Later, after the trek to Utah, the Salt Lake City region became the potential glorified Zion for many Mormons. But then, as we saw in the teaching of President Joseph F. Smith, Zion came also to take on a broader and spiritualized identity: Zion is present wherever people live in obedience to the divine ordinances.

Evangelicals, on the other hand, have not had a specific *region* of the American nation in mind when they have thought of America as the locus of the New Jerusalem. In early New England Puritanism, the reference to

a biblical city set upon a hill was actually applied to a more general region than a particular city. Rather than thinking of a specific part of the country as the site of a glorious Zion, Evangelicals have been more inclined to think generally in Chosen Nation terms about America as such.

For Mormons, by way of contrast, the Chosen Nation theme has never been very important to their understanding of America. Indeed, the question of whether the Mormon community would actually be a part of the United States was up in the air for a good part of their early history. Whatever the Mormon understanding of the location of the New Jerusalem, the Mormon community's being a part of the American nation as such was never a requirement.

As I see things, a key difference between Mormon and Evangelical understandings of the status of the American nation in the divine economy has to do with where our respective stories about America begin. Evangelical conceptions of America have been shaped significantly by a story—one that draws heavily on biblical motifs—of an “errand into the wilderness,” where a godly people took over a land from its previous occupants, thereby bringing godliness to the North American continent. The Mormon narrative about America, on the other hand, begins much earlier. In this story those previous occupants play the most interesting role. For Mormons, the “chosenness” of America as a key location for the unfolding of God’s plan has much to do with the pre-Puritan past—a period to which almost no attention is given in the narratives of mainstream American Christianity. Thus, for Mormonism, America is blessed by God, not because of any special favor he shows to the United States as a nation, but rather because it is the geographic location to which certain branches of the ancient tribes of Israel migrated.

Clarifying the Issues

What does all of this mean for our present situation as religious communities in the United States? I want to suggest that this is an important time for both Mormons and Evangelicals to clarify their understanding of the role of the American nation in the divine economy, for at least two reasons.

First, both of our movements have been experiencing significant numerical growth outside of the United States in recent years, which means that we are each facing increasing challenges to “de-Americanize” our theologies. The crucial challenge in this regard for American Evangelicals is to make our national identity subordinate to our primary identity as people who have been incorporated into a community drawn from every

tribe and tongue and nation, and given a new kind of unity through the shed blood of Calvary. I don't know what the challenges are specifically for Mormonism, but I do suspect that some creative thinking is required about how American Mormons view their relationship to Mormons who make their homes in other lands, with no plans to gather in an American Zion.

Second, in our American context, Evangelicals and Mormons increasingly find themselves working together on issues relating to the common good; as Mormons and Evangelicals engage in these cooperative efforts it would be helpful to clarify our respective understandings of what God's will *is* for the American nation. Very often the assumption of a Chosen Nation status for one's country reinforces an attitude of uncritical patriotism, with a presumption that national goals, especially as they have a bearing on international relations, have a divine endorsement. For reasons I have touched upon briefly here, it is my contention that such a perspective is not theologically appropriate for either Mormonism or Evangelicalism, as viewed from the "inside" of each of our theological systems.

From the Mormon perspective, it should be clear from the foregoing that the prospect of a future glorious Zion on the North American continent has nothing to do with the national fortunes of the United States. Indeed, that Zion might actually develop as a refuge region during a time when the American nation at large is experiencing a variety of visitations of God's wrath.

For American Evangelicals to de-Americanize our theology of nationhood requires a critical examination of a rather long tradition of applying Chosen Nation imagery to the American experience. This can be carried out successfully if at least two strategies are followed. One is to acknowledge that what we have applied to the American experience is in fact *imagery*, and that we are hard put to demonstrate biblically that this imagery is *rightfully* applied to our own nation. Here it is very helpful to compare our use of this imagery to the parallel situation of South Africa under *apartheid*, where the Afrikaners saw themselves as the New Israelites, called by God to go into a wilderness and find a promised land which they could conquer by subjugating its inhabitants.¹⁶ It should be obvious by now that this was a perverse theology, and it would be a good exercise for American Evangelicals to be clear about its defects as a means of examining our own assumptions about the American experience.

The second strategy is to recognize that even if the United States were to be assigned an especially "chosen" role in God's end-time plan, this role does not justify a Christian posture of uncritical support for the nation's goals. This should be clear from a consideration of the history of the

"older" Israel. The Old Testament prophets made it clear that God would never bless Israel if she was not promoting righteousness among the other nations. If we, then, want to encourage any contemporary nation—including the United States or the present-day nation of Israel—to claim special divine blessings, we do well to urge that nation "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly" before the face of God (Micah 6:8).

The bottom line for both Evangelicals and Mormons, then, is that our respective theologies of America require each of our communities to serve as responsible citizens who are committed to a way of life that is not to be identified with "the American way" as such. We each acknowledge ultimate loyalty to the laws of God's Zion. We have much to discuss together about how we can best cooperate for the common good, even as we follow quite different understandings of what it means to conform to the will of God. Indeed, it may be that in exploring ways to pursue our common tasks as citizens, we can find opportunities to talk frankly together—in a more productive manner than we have been able to find in the past—about our serious disagreements about matters that are of eternal importance.

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1. The view that America had been chosen as the seat of the millennial Kingdom is often attributed to Jonathan Edwards, but Gerald McDermott has convincingly argued that Edwards did not hold to such a view. In making his case, however, McDermott does provide examples of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century people who did hold to this view—for example, the military leader Edward Johns, who confidently asserted "that New England was 'the place where the Lord will create a new Heaven, and a new Earth in, new Churches, and a new Common-wealth together,'" and Chief Justice Samuel Sewall, who predicted "that the 'Divine Metropolis' would be seated on the American continent." Compare Gerald R. McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 61.

2. Joseph Smith, "To the Honorable Men of the World," *The Evening and the Morning Star*, August 1832, 22, in Joseph Smith Jr., *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:283–84.

3. Joseph Smith, "To the Elders of the Church of the Latter Day Saints," *Messenger and Advocate*, November 1835, 210, in *History of the Church*, 2:261–62.

4. Orson F. Whitney, in *Collected Discourses: Delivered by President Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others*, ed. Brian H. Stuy, 5 vols. (Burbank, Calif.: B. H. S. Publishing, 1987), 1:355.

5. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 75.

6. "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, Solemnly Promulgated by Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964," Chapter III, Section 25, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

7. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 142.

8. Shipps, *Mormonism*, 76.

9. Shipps, *Mormonism*, 77.

10. S. Franklin Logsdon, *Is the U.S.A. in Prophecy?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968), 3.

11. Logsdon, *Is the U.S.A. in Prophecy?* 63.

12. Logsdon, *Is the U.S.A. in Prophecy?* 64.

13. Joseph F. Smith, in *Collected Discourses*, ed. Stuy, 3:212.

14. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 170.

15. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 170.

16. The development of this theological rationale for *apartheid* is spelled out in great detail by T. Dunbar Moodie in his *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).