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A Local Faith

Nathan B. Oman

On October 22, 1844, men and women across America were disappointed when the world did not come to an end. They were the followers of a lay Baptist preacher named William Miller. Beginning in 1833, Miller, a native of New York's Burned-over District, began producing elaborate biblical commentaries indicating that Christ's Second Coming was imminent. Working with these writings, his followers converged on October 22 as the day of the Savior's coming, much to their ultimate disappointment.

Mormonism might easily have suffered a similar fate. Indeed, in 1843, as excitement over Miller's predictions was reaching its height, Joseph Smith told of a revelation informing him that he would see the Lord face to face if he lived to be eighty-five years old. "I was left thus," he said, "without being able to decide whether this coming referred to the beginning of the millennium or to some previous appearing, or whether I should die and thus see his face" (D&C 130:16). This coy prophecy, however, was an outlier. In contrast to the Millerites, the promised Millennium of Mormonism was less a moment than a place—Zion, the New Jerusalem—to be built up to the Lord by the gathering of the faithful. Mormonism thus made connection to a particular location a central element of religious experience. Zion, however, consisted of more than merely the transposition of apocalyptic expectations from time to space. It was a concrete community with neighbors, social halls, neatly laid-out lots, and due allowance for grazing livestock. At its worst, this concept of Zion reduced religion to the mere hum of work and business. At its best, Zion sanctified the ordinary, turning one's home and town into the beachhead of eternity.

The Mormons had their own disappointed expectations. Those disappointments, however, were geographic rather than chronological. The

constant need to alter and reinterpret the geography of Zion—as the Saints lost in succession promised lands in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois—left its mark on Mormon doctrine. Even the ultimate resting place in Deseret proved chancy. In 1857, as Johnston’s Army marched west to crush the Mormon rebellion, Brigham Young made contingency plans to abandon Utah and move the Saints en masse to the north. The move proved unnecessary, but it took a while for Salt Lake City to become Zion. In the end, however, the force of time and population gave Deseret a theological heft in its own right, and Isaiah’s prophecy of the mountain of the Lord’s house in the tops of the mountains (Isa. 2:2) was appropriated for the spires of the Salt Lake Temple.

I grew up in the place created by this transposition of the Millennium from time to space. My earliest memories are of the house where I lived as a small child. It was a modest home, built around 1900 in what was then a residential suburb of Salt Lake City. The house stands on Sixth East, between Eighth and Ninth South, the streets measuring themselves from the Salt Lake Temple. During the nineteenth century, this bit of the valley was known as Mill Farm and belonged to Brigham Young. Today, Brigham’s farm is a park, and my sister and I played on a swing set in what had been the prophet’s backyard. As a child, however, I measured the



The house on Sixth East in Salt Lake City where I lived as a child. All photographs courtesy Pam Oman.

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The Chase Mansion in Liberty Park, which was once Brigham Young's home.



The Sixth East entrance to Liberty Park, which was formerly Brigham Young's farm.



This small gazebo marks the location of the only tree growing on the plain when the Pioneers entered the Salt Lake Valley in 1847.

religious content of my place not from the temple or Brigham's farm, but from a small gazebo set in the middle of the road several blocks north of our house. The Mormons designed their Zion with wide streets, wide enough to completely turn a wagon and team without unhitching them. It made for roads rather too large for modern residential neighborhoods, with the result that down the middle of the streets ran broad, grassy medians. The gazebo sat on one of these medians surrounded by a modest garden. A small bronze plaque declared that when the Mormon pioneers entered the valley in July 1847, the only tree growing on the plain before them stood on this spot.

My earliest sense of the sacred emanated from that gazebo. Riding my bike down the tree-lined streets of Salt Lake City, I knew that this wooded world of roads and houses had once been a barren expanse of sagebrush. Driving through the desolate valleys north of Salt Lake City each summer on the way to my grandpar-

ents' home in southern Idaho, I could imagine the landscape before the Mormons arrived. It had been transformed, I was taught, by pioneer-dug irrigation ditches. (My cousins in Utah Valley, fifty miles to the south, still had an irrigation ditch running in front of their house; I was deeply envious.) The green around me had been the pioneers' dream, a desert blossoming as a rose, according to prophecy (Isa. 35:1).

In the chapel where we attended church each Sunday was a vast stained-glass window portraying Joseph Smith's First Vision. My father still has the drawing of it that I produced during one of the long, boring meetings filled with unremembered sermons. At the window's center, Joseph kneels before two hovering figures in white. One gestures toward the other. Green glass depicting the leaves of the Sacred Grove surrounds them. In my mind, the glowing leaves in the window merged with the sacred greenery of Salt Lake City. Just as the presence of God sanctified the leaves surrounding Joseph, stories of barren valleys, pioneers, and the arboreal redemption they wrought sanctified the trees of my childhood.

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The Salt Lake Second Ward Chapel where I attended church as a small child.



My drawing of the stained-glass window in the Second Ward Chapel.

I lived in God's city, not a place as sacred as that where Joseph had his theophany but a place nevertheless touched by God's cosmic plan. When I received my first Bible, I turned to the passages in Isaiah on the mountain of the Lord's house and the blossoming rose of the desert and marked them with a red pencil.

At eight years old, I was baptized. Our chapel did not have a baptismal font. Rather, we made our way six blocks west and eight blocks north to Temple Square. I recall standing before a bronze statue of handcart pioneers. To me, their struggle across the continent seemed the epitome of righteous heroism. My father informed me that my own ancestors had pulled just such handcarts to Zion in the mid-nineteenth century. Next to the statue stood Brigham Young's great Tabernacle. My father pointed to its domed roof and explained how the lattice of rafters was held together by rawhide lashings and what a marvel the building had been when it first rose in the 1860s. Had the pioneers who lashed together the Tabernacle pulled handcarts as well? They must have, I thought. The building took on their heroism, the heroism of God's chosen Saints doing his will amid a persecuting world. In the basement of the building was a font, and it was there that I went into the waters of baptism and became a Latter-day Saint.

By then Mormonism had long since given up on the geographic gathering to an Intermountain Zion. Indeed, in my childhood during



Bronze statue of handcart pioneers on Temple Square.

the 1980s, the excitement that my father carried home from Church headquarters, where he worked, was the excitement of a globalizing religion. The glory of Zion was no longer in wagon trains heading west for Utah but in Mormon congregations growing in Latin America, West Africa, and the Philippines. Yet for me, even this global story was tied to the older theology of place. The prophets went forth from Salt Lake City, where the streets were still measured from the temple. Satellites beamed their teachings every six months from the conferences held in the Tabernacle where I was baptized. Even in a global church, my faith was local, tied to the place where I was born.



The west end of Brigham Young's great Tabernacle. In the basement at this end was the baptismal font where I was baptized.

Eventually I discovered that the town I grew up in is not the center of the world. When I got older, I left Salt Lake City. I lived in other cities that aspired to be the *axis mundi*: Boston, which Oliver Wendell Holmes declared in his famous "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table" essays to be the hub of the solar system, and Washington, D.C., which in the age of the *Pax Americana* is a city with an honest claim to be the capital of the world. The Salt Lake City of my childhood shrank in size, and as I turned down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the White House or up Massachusetts Avenue toward Harvard Square, I recognized that my hometown could look provincial and unschooled.

With a growing awareness of the vastness of the world beyond Salt Lake City, I realized that my local faith created three temptations. First was the temptation of embracing the cosmic story of my hometown too tightly. The vices of giving in to such a temptation are easy to see and imagine. If Salt Lake City is the *axis mundi*, the point at which God speaks to prophets for mankind, then perhaps Salt Lake City is the destiny of the world. Much as I love the city, it is not an entirely inspiring vision. For example, if I were to embrace such a view, the two years I spent teaching the message of the Restoration in the cities and towns of Kyoung Sang Do province would become a quixotic attempt to transform Koreans into

suburban Utah Mormons. My mission would be reduced to a project partaking of both a hubristic imperialism and a comic parochialism. Likewise, my local faith could easily become smug, ignorantly content in its own self-importance. My locality would be the hub of the solar system without Holmes's redeeming irony. The result would be a narrow and sterile life that suffers all the more from not knowing that it is narrow and sterile.

The second temptation was to embrace the cosmopolitan world of Boston and Washington, D.C. From this perch, Utah could be dismissed as a colorful backwater, perhaps an interesting place to be from but one that needn't make strong spiritual claims. My local faith could be transformed into a kind of nostalgia. The vocabulary for such a self-understanding lay ready-made. Mormonism could become my "heritage" or my "tradition," a marker of identity in a modern world that understands such markers to be secondary to the more universal claims of democracy, meritocracy, and pop culture. I could transform Mormonism into a repository from which to selectively take materials for my self-authored identity. It would no longer claim me. Rather, I would appropriate the colorful or fashionable bits of it to create a persona, one tied to the Mormon stories of place but only as a literary conceit. I could become like the law school classmate who waxed eloquent on the virtues of his picturesque Mormon childhood while sipping coffee and other forbidden gentile beverages with aspiring citizens of the cosmopolis. For all its occasional hypocrisy, the cosmopolitan world is a tolerant place and likes nothing better than a bit of local color, provided that the local remains firmly subjugated to the cosmopolitan. The leaves of my childhood, however, were not simply colorful. They were sacred.

In a sense, the scandal of my local faith, of a spirituality reared in Salt Lake City as the center of the world, is simply the hometown version of a common scandal. How can that which is local make claims that are universal? Jesus was an itinerant Jewish preacher in a provincial backwater who claimed to be the son of God, the Word made flesh in Nazareth, of all places. The paradox, it would seem, is that all life, including religious life, is local, endowed with a set of particularities arising from history, place, and tradition. It is these particularities to which we are necessarily attached. Inevitably we live in a particular place, a particular time, and a particular history. The appeal of the religious particularities of my childhood, however, lay precisely in the hope that they offered something beyond themselves. The trees and streets and tabernacles and temples formed a chain leading from my bicycle on the sidewalks of Sixth East back through time and space and myth and revelation to God.

It is here that I faced a third temptation. It was the temptation to abandon the particularities and reach only for that which is beyond them. It was the temptation to give up—out of embarrassment at its locatedness—a faith that is somewhere and reach instead for an unlocated faith that is nowhere in particular. A universal faith shorn of particularities offers the hope of being unencumbered by the local. It is an attractive vision, one in which I might enjoy the spiritual riches of the Restoration without its scandalous details. In short, perhaps I can avoid the burden of a sacred story enmeshed in the parochial streets of Salt Lake City.

My Mormonism, however, teaches me that there is a kind of nihilism in the universal. The point shows up most powerfully in the Mormon concept of God. For example, Orson Pratt, one of our great nineteenth-century thinkers and polemicists, attacked the traditional vision of a God without body, parts, or passions. He wrote: “There are two classes of Atheists in the world. One class denies the existence of God in the most positive language: the other denies his existence in duration or space. One says, ‘There is no God;’ the other says, ‘God is not *here* or *there*, any more than he exists *now* and *then*.’ . . . The infidel says, God does not exist anywhere. The Immaterialist says, ‘He exists *Nowhere*.’”¹ According to Pratt, Mormonism’s response to both forms of atheism was to assert the existence of a radically embodied and situated God. “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as a man’s” (D&C 130:22) taught Joseph Smith. It is a doctrine that is not without its own scandals, but it offers the hope of a God that can be approached without an annihilation of the defining particularities of history, space, and body. Indeed, it is striking that Pratt associates atheism with a God shorn of place—“The Immaterialist says, ‘He exists *Nowhere*.’” Even faith needs to be situated someplace.

In the end, it is very difficult to live nowhere in particular, despite the embarrassments of a local faith. Repudiating Salt Lake City would mean giving up a world of sacredness that was given by the landscape of my birth and reaching for a sacredness that was not given to me, one that would have to be self-authored. The problem of a self-authored faith, however, is that ultimately I would confront only myself. Given the human tendency toward self-deception, this would be no mean feat. There is a dignity in self-discovery through a self-created spirituality, but such is not a spirituality in which one sees the face of God amid irrigation ditches and trees planted on the floor of a dusty, sagebrush-covered valley.

I no longer live in Salt Lake City. It has been more than a decade and a half since I left. I now live in the tidewater of eastern Virginia. From time to time, I feel the stab of exile. The James River will transform itself into the waters of Babylon, and I will pledge the cunning of my right

hand (Ps. 137:5) not to forget the mountain of the Lord in the tops of the mountains and the gazebo with the plaque remembering the only tree in the valley. I find, however, that even in a landscape dominated by stories of revolution and civil war, my Mormonism can become local. I discover that during the 1840s, Tazwell County, Virginia, had a thriving cluster of Mormon branches dubbed Little Nauvoo. I ferret out stories of nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints passing through Norfolk on their way from Europe to Zion. I savor the inscription of Mormon scriptures on the stone exteriors of Virginia and Washington, D.C., chapels built in the 1930s and 1940s as part of Mormonism's permanent return to the East Coast. I learn of the great wave of Mormons brought to the tidewater by war and the U.S. Navy in the 1940s and the birth of our wards and stakes. Even in Virginia, Mormonism can leave its traces on my landscape. My hunger for these details strikes many of my fellow Latter-day Saints as odd, a strange bit of religious pedantry. With them, however, I remain within the sacred world that was given me as a little boy on Sixth East, and I can plant trees in the spot of ground where God continues to gather me.

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1. Orson Pratt, *The Essential Orson Pratt*, ed. David J. Whittaker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 77.