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Multiple Discourses in Early Mormon Religion

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1835, in Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph Smith's brother, William, established a debate school. The Prophet knew nothing of the school when it first opened; but on November 18, after returning home from funeral services for Nathan Harris, he along with members of the Newell Whitney family, went for a visit to William's home.

When the company arrived, they "found that some of the young Elders, were about engaging in a debate, upon the subject of miracles, the q[u]estion was this; was or was it not the design of Christ to Establish his gospel by miracles." Apparently, the evening's entertainment was to be provided by some of William's students, and as Joseph later remembered, the contest continued for another three hours until "it was decided by the presidents of the debate in the negative; which was a righteous decision."[1]

The outcome obviously pleased Smith--but despite the positive note on which the debate ended, the whole affair left Joseph feeling some concern. Unable to remain silent, he felt the need to counsel the participants. According to his own account,

> I discovered in this debate, much warmth displayed, to much zeal for mastery, to much of that enthusiasm that characterizes a lawyer at the bar, who is determined

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[1]Joseph Smith, "Ohio Journal, 1835-1836," entry dated 18 November 1835, in Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, vol 2. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 86. See also Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1980), 2: 317-8. Spelling and punctuation has been preserved as in the original.

to defend his cause right or wrong. I therefore availed myself of this favorable opportunity, to drop a few words upon this subject by way of advise, that they might improve their minds and cultivate their powers of intellect in a proper manner, that they might not incur the displeasure of heaven, that they should handle sacred things very sacredly, and with due deference to the opinions of others and with an eye single to the glory of God.[2]

Joseph found the debate entertaining, but when it was finished he also felt it necessary to admonish the brethren because in his mind, he had a responsibility to aid their minds and to keep them in the straight and narrow way that they might not incur the displeasure of God.

Nothing more appears in the Prophet's own writings about the incident, but apparently his counsel was not heeded. Almost one month later, on December 12, Joseph again attended the school not as an observer but as an active participant. The question raised was again provocative: The two parties were to determine whether or not "it [was] necessary for God to reveal himself to man, in order for their happiness," and perhaps in deference to Smith's prophetic authority, he was to give the last word "on the affirmative" side of the issue.[3]

Unfortunately, no decision was reached that evening. Joseph was called away to administer to an ailing Church member, and the debate was then rescheduled for December 16 to allow him a chance to speak. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at the time, but when the school reconvened four days later, hostility quickly erupted. According to him,

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[2]Ibid.

[3]Smith, "Ohio Journal," entry dated 12 December 1835, 102. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:330.

> This evening according to adjournment I went to Br. Wm. Smiths, to take part in the debate that was commenced on Saturday evening last.--after the debate was concluded, and a desision given in favour of the affirmative of the question, some altercation took place, upon the improprety of continueing the school fearing that it would not result in good.
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> Br. Wm. oposed these measures and insisted on having another question proposed, and at length become much enraged particularly at me and used violence upon my person, and also upo[n] Elder J. Carter and some others, for which I am grieved beyond expression. . . .[4]

For some reason or another, Joseph now wanted the school closed. William, on the other hand, was determined to keep it open and the result was an angry scuffle between brothers.

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The brief encounter between the prophet Joseph Smith and his brother William is an intriguing one. William's temper was already famous. In fact, this particular incident was not the first time that Joseph and his younger brother had butted heads. A few months earlier, in October, the two had argued rather vehemently over the validity of their mother's testimony given before the High Council in Kirtland.[5] This dispute, like the second, ended in violence. But angry words and fisticuffs exchanged between two brothers are not the issue here. It should surprise no one that siblings sometimes quarrel, even in later years--but in the exchange between William and Joseph we can learn

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[4]Smith, "Ohio Journal," entry dated December 16 December 1835, 106-7. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:334-5.

[5]Smith, "Ohio Journal," entry dated 29 October 1835, 59. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 2: 295.

something about the early Mormon world view and about the different types of discourses which existed simultaneously within that world view.

Though admittedly one-sided, a letter written by the Prophet Joseph Smith to his brother William two days after the altercation had taken place provides us with at least a partial understanding of the incident. Apparently, William had sent a letter of apology requesting that Joseph forgive him, and in response the Prophet explained his actions at the debate school:

> Br. William having received your letter I now proceed to answer it, and shall first procede, to give a brief naration of my feelings and motives, since the night I first came to the knowledge, of your having a debating School, which was at the time I happened in with, Bishop Whitney his Father and Mother &c--which was the first that I knew any thing about it, and from that time I took an interest in them, and was delighted with it, and formed a determination, to attend the School for the purpose of obtaining information, and with the idea of imparting the same, through the assistance of the spirit of the Lord, if by any means I should have faith to do so; and with this intent, I went to the school on last Wednesday night, not with the idea of braking up the school, neither did it enter into my heart , that there was any wrangling or jealousy's in your heart, against me;
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> Notwithstanding previous to my leaving home there were feelings of solemnity, rolling across my breast, which were unaccountable to me, and also these feelings continued by spells to depress my spirit and seemed to manifest that all was not right, even after the school commenced, and during the debate, yet I strove to believe that all would work together for good; I was pleased with the power of the arguments, that were aduced, and did not feel to cast any reflections, upon any one that had spoken; but I felt that it was the duty of old men that set as presidents to be as grave, at least as young men, and that it was our duty to smile at solid arguments and sound reasoning, and be impresed with solemnity , which should be manifest in our countanance, when folly and that which militates against truth and righteousness, rears its head
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> Therefore in the spirit of my calling and in view of the authority of the priesthood that has been conferred upon me, it would be my duty to reprove whatever I esteemed to be wrong fondly hoping in my heart that all parties,

> would concider it right , and therefore humble themselves, that satan might not take the advantage of us, and hinder the progress of our School. . . .[6]

The letter continued on. Joseph next recounted the debate school incident in great detail.

In conclusion he then offered words of encouragement and forgiveness--but in this one passage where Joseph explained his motives we can begin understand something of the nature of early Mormon religion. Joseph Smith had a calling to fulfill. He believed himself a prophet. It was therefore his duty to preach the word of God to his people. Unfortunately, in his eyes, in both sessions of the debate school, the parties involved were less interested in discovering God's word than they were in ultimate victory of one side over the other. Put simply, in his view, in the debate school in Kirtland rhetoric mattered more than truth. Such sophism bothered Joseph. What mattered to him was his responsibility to ensure that the Saints understood the principles and truths of the gospel of Christ. Thus, when it seemed apparent that William's debate school would not accomplish his purposes, he moved to close the school. True, Joseph had come to the school willing to listen "with deference" to the opinions of others--but when push came to shove, he could not abandon his prophetic mantle. Although he apparently accepted the notion that debate could be a useful tool to discover and explore God's word, he could not escape the pressing responsibility to reveal truth using his prophetic authority. In other words, in Mormon religion, at least, the pursuit of rhetoric paled in comparison to revelation by prophecy.

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[6]Smith, "Ohio Journal," entry dated 18 December 1835, 113-4. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 2: 340.

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The conflict between Joseph and William Smith highlights the difference in importance between rhetoric and prophetic authority in early LDS religion. But it also points us to another important aspect of early Mormonism. Put simply, this incident reminds us of the fact that early Mormon religion was at is very center a clash of discourses. Debate societies and lyceums were a common feature in Antebellum America, and in this sense, the Smiths and those who joined with them acted in much the same manner as other contemporary Americans.[7] But Mormons were not exactly like other Americans. Yes, they were Christian, republican, and democratic in their views. But they also believed in prophets of God, and over time, as prophetic symbols became more important in Mormon theology, they came into conflict with other symbols contained within early Mormon theology.

Exploring this clash of symbols can better help us to understand many of the ironies inherent in Mormon religion; but to fully comprehend the implications of this type of analysis, it is first necessary to define our use of the term 'discourse.' According to republican historian J. G. A. Pocock, a discourse is a set of values, symbols, ideals, and institutions--a language, if you will, but one not always spoken. It involves speech acts, definitions, re-definitions, experience, perception, texts and contexts. As Pocock himself

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[7]See Nan Johnson, "The Popularization of Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric: Elocution and the Private Learner," in *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric*, eds. Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 139-143; and Bower Aly and Grafton P. Tanquary, "The Early National Period: 1788-1860," in *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, ed. William Norwood Brigance (New York and London: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1943), 1:70-89. For a more general history of the lyceum movement and its influence in Antebellum America, see Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1-26.

explains, it is a series of "idioms, rhetorics, ways of talking about politics, distinguishable language games of which each may have its own vocabulary, rules, preconditions and implications, tone and style." In other words, a discourse exists as a complex series of language tools, a set of "paradigms" if you will, which structure our minds to think in certain ways and to interpret the world in which we live.[8]

Recognizing this fact, we can better come to terms with the various social ideas and movements in the past. If we know, for instance, which symbols and values influenced the thinking of a particular group, we can better understand that group's behavior. We may then be able to define more clearly the nature of various social movements in American society. But having said this, we must remember that there is yet another important implication of this type of literary approach. If it is true that a discourse represents a complex set of symbols and values which allow a person to construct and reconstruct their surroundings in some meaningful fashion, it is also true that within any particular community, several discourses exist at once. Put simply, world-views are not one-dimensional. Instead they composed of many different and sometimes conflicting symbols. As noted by Pocock, "an indefinite number of these [sub-languages] may be found within a given language, and may consequently be found within a single monoglot text; for these ways of talking while often profoundly at variance, do not typically succeed in excluding one another."[9] In other words, within any one discourse

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[8]J. G. A. Pocock, "The concept of a language and the *métier d'historien*: some considerations on practice," in *The Language of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 20-21.

[9]Ibid.

there exist many alternate discourses, some conflicting and others not. Of course, some of these languages take precedence. Certain discourses dominate others--but none exclude the rest.[10]

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When we apply the various implications of this type of literary theory to the Mormon experience, we will gain a better understanding of the nature of early Mormon religion. Essentially, we will come to realize this new world religion, like many other cultural and social movements of the nineteenth-century, was composed of multiple discourses which often times led to increased tension within the Mormon community. This realization is an important one, but it does not depend on discourse theory alone for verification. There is other evidence in favor of such of a position. Modern historiography, too, provides us with some important insights regarding the existence of multiple discourses in early Mormon religion.

One of the most pressing problems Mormon historians face today, in fact, regards the fundamental definition of early Mormonism. In order to define this complex and multifaceted religious tradition, historians must first identity its social, political, economic, and cultural strands. The task is not an easy one, however, and most scholars who have been involved in early Mormon studies have been led to the conclusion that

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[10]For an excellent review of Pocock's views in comparison to other linguistic historians such as Michel Foucault and Keith Baker, see John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review* 92 (October 1989): 889-893.

early Mormonism exhibited many competing tendencies simultaneously. Gordon Wood, for example, in an attempt to describe LDS religion in relation to its cultural and social context, has noted that "Mormonism was both mystical and secular; restorationist and progressive; communitarian and individualistic; hierarchical and congregational; authoritarian and democratic; antinomian and arminian; anti-clerical and priestly; revelatory and empirical; utopian and practical; ecumenical and nationalist."[11]

Wood offers a rather daunting list of contrasts within early Mormon theology and perhaps he exaggerates. But many other historians of religion have echoed almost the same conclusion.[12] At the same time, however, their willingness to accept a certain degree of ambiguity within Mormon theology has not ended the quest to understand the exact nature of this new world religion. One example of this tendency has been the persistent attempt to describe early Mormonism within its American context. The question usually posed is an important one: Where do Mormons fit in? Were they similar to other Christian Americans or do they represent a new religious tradition unlike the rest? Unfortunately, the answer is never certain. Different scholars have come to different conclusions. Focusing on one or more aspects of contemporary society as the primary keys to unlocking this complex and multifaceted social movement, each attempts

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[11]Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 41 (October 1980): 380.

[12]See for example, Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 503-4; and Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), viii-ix

to define the nature of early Mormon religion. But because they cannot agree which aspects of American culture are most important, their interpretations often vary widely.

Despite this variance, however, it is possible to group these multiple interpretations into general schools of thought. The first would include those who see early Mormon religion as a response or reaction to certain conditions in American society. Alexander Campbell, for example, in a fiery blast directed principally at the Book of Mormon, has said a great deal more about Mormonism in general. According to him,

> This prophet Smith, through his stone spectacles, wrote on the plates of Nephi, in his book of Mormon, every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years. He decides all the great controversies;--infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation, fasting, pentance, church government, religious experience, the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the question of free masonry, republican government, and the rights of man. All these topics are repeatedly alluded to. How much more benevolent and intelligent this American apostle than were the holy Twelve and Paul to assist them!!! He prophesied of all these topics, and of the apostasy and infallibility decides by his authority every question.[13]

Admittedly, Campbell's intent was critical rather than analytical. But in using such harsh words he still managed to capture something of the breadth and depth of early nineteenth-century Mormon religion. Mormonism was in its very essence an attempt to answer all of these questions. Why? Because in his mind at least Mormon religion was a reaction to many different issues within American society.

Many modern scholars echo this contemporary view of LDS religion. According to David Brion Davis, for instance, "the influences which shaped Mormonism came

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[13] *Millennial Harbinger* (Bethany, VA), February 7, 1831.

largely from New England." Having inherited from its Puritanical forebears a strong distaste for pluralism, Mormonism was, in Davis' mind, a reaction against the "rising tide of liberalism and individualism" so prevalent in nineteenth-century America. In other words, according to Davis, "Mormonism was a crude attempt on the part of untrained but sincere men to establish a simple and authoritative church, the church that they had lost and now yearned for"--a unified body of faith.[14]

Mario De Pillis has agreed in part. In his view Mormonism was first and foremost a reaction against growing sectarianism in America. Of course, other religious movements of the period exhibited the same antipathy, but according to DePillis, the Mormon quest for religious authority was in certain respects unique. Similar to other grass-roots religious movements such as the Church of Christ and the Shakers because of its determination to end rampant sectarianism, Mormonism was also dissimilar because its claim to authority rested not in the Bible or the Book of Mormon *per se* but in the concept of a holy Priesthood that was created "in the mind of Joseph Smith."[15]

A fourth interpretation comes from Marvin Hill. Though his thesis is not completely new, in *The Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism*, Hill argues, as the title implies, that Mormonism at its heart was a quest for order. Surrounding by growing disorder, chaos, and disintegration, Joseph Smith and many of his followers sought for some type of unity. According to him, these early Mormons

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[14]David Brion Davis, "The New England Origins of Mormonism," *The New England Quarterly* 26 (1953): 153-6.

[15]Mario De Pillis, "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 1 (1966): 74-77, 78.

balked at the plural elements within Jacksonian America, and instead desired for themselves "a society in which the godly ruled over a unified religious people." In other words, Mormonism was at its heart a reaction to certain elements within American society.[16]

Each of these scholars interprets Mormon religion as a response to some aspect of its contemporary social world. A second school employs a more organic approach. According to them, Mormon religion is not so much a reactionary movement as it is an integral part of contemporary social transformations. In *The Democratization of American Christianity*, for instance, Nathan Hatch has argued that early Mormon religion developed out of the same democratic trends that informed other Christian movements of the Second Great Awakening period. In his view, Joseph Smith, like other contemporary religious figures, appealed to disparate needs within American society. His oratory and his populist zeal captured the minds and hearts of many dislocated or fringe elements in society and thus he was able to build a large following of committed believers.[17]

Hatch is not the only scholar to draw such parallels. Jon Butler, too, finds room to fit early Mormonism into the larger American context. In *Awash in a Sea of Faith: The Christianization of America*, he argues that the spread of Christianity in America was due not to the democratization of Christianity but to a deliberate imposition of various

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[16]Marvin Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), xiv. See also Marvin Hill, "Quest for Refuge: An Hypothesis as to the Origins and Nature of the Mormon Political Kingdom," *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975):4-5, 14.

[17]Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 113-122, 212-213.

structures of authority beginning in the eighteenth century. The establishment of churches and councils, and the marginalization of other forms of religious expression such as folk magic and black African spiritualism allowed ministers to shape and control American religious expression. Perhaps he is right, but whether he is matters not so much as his interpretation of early Mormon religion with regards to his wider thesis. According to him, early LDS religion exhibited this same trend. Following the footsteps of other religious reformers, Joseph Smith established various structures of authority which mediated and controlled the beliefs and practices of his followers.[18]

Both Hatch and Butler underlined important similarities between Mormon religion and American Christianity. Others scholars have also linked the rise of Mormonism to occult spiritualism or folk magic in early America. D. Michael Quinn, for example, has noted the similarities between early nineteenth-century American magical practices and the Restoration in his book *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. According to him, early Mormon religion was imbued with various occult symbols and rites; and this being the case, we must interpret it through magical eyes.[19] A similar interpretation is offered by John L. Brooke. According to him, early Mormon theology is rooted in the Christian hermetic tradition which had its beginnings in Europe. In his view, although there is no clear link between Christian hermeticism and early Mormon religion, hermetic philosophy did find its way to America. Existing in fragmented form,

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[18]Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 269-70.

[19]D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), ix-x, 1-27.

it informed several strands of early American religious thought and these strands together provided the necessary symbols and ideas for the rise of early Mormon cosmology.[20]

Hatch and Butler link Mormon religion to early American Christianity. Quinn and Brooke link it to alternative forms of religious worship. Another book, written by Harold Bloom, goes much further. In *The American Religion: The Emergence of a Post-Christian* Nation, Bloom attempts to define the essence of American religion. It is an interesting project. But what is even more intriguing is the fact that after describing certain elements within American culture which seem to permeate both religion and politics, Bloom then argues that Joseph Smith's religious views are the ultimate expression of this Orphic, Enthusiastic, and Gnostic American religion. It is a surprising argument because Bloom somehow manages to link Mormon religion to other American religious traditions such as Southern Baptism and Christian Science even though these different movements appear to be worlds apart in terms of theology and practice. But if Bloom is correct, it would appear that Joseph Smith's religion was at its heart an integral part of the American religious experience.[21]

Or maybe it wasn't. Not all scholars have been so willing to focus on America and its political, economic, social, or cultural circumstances in order to explain the rise of Mormonism. Instead of focusing so clearly on the similarities between Mormon religion and other religious movements in America, they focus on the differences. According to

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[20]John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xiii-xiv, 27-9.

[21]Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of a Post-Christian Nation* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 45-58, 79-128 *passim*.

them, a fundamental radicalism was built into early Mormon religion, and if it is true that the Latter-day Saints accepted some of the basic tenets of Christianity in America, it is also true that they were willing to alter these beliefs in order to create for themselves a New World theology all their own. Thus Philip Barlow has pointed out quite correctly that Mormons were "Bible-believing" Christians "with a difference." Mormons did believe the Bible to be the word of God, but as early as June 1830, Joseph Smith began a process of re-translation in order to bring the Bible up to Mormon standards of truth. Similarly, Thomas Alexander has argued that early Mormon theology was originally quite close to that of other Protestants but that over time it developed into something uniquely Mormon.[22]

Other scholars have pushed such an interpretation even farther. Jan Shipps, for example, in her book, *Mormonism: the Story of a New Religious Tradition,* has argued that Mormonism represents a new religious tradition in America. Just as Christianity in the first century AD was a reordering of certain Judaic values into a new religious tradition, Mormon religion was a reordering of certain Christian-American values into a new American religious tradition with world wide implications. A similar argument has been made by Richard Bushman in his book, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism.* In his view, "Joseph Smith is best understood as a person who outgrew his culture." In other words, as the Restoration continued, Smith abandoned much of his

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[22]Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991): 12; Thomas Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone* 5 (July-August 1980): 24, 27.

American cultural heritage. In other words, in becoming a prophet, he became less and less American.[23]

Essentially, both Shipps and Bushman argue that Mormonism is, in its truest form, an exceptional religion. This new world religion, though it exhibits certain elements of past religious and cultural values, is better interpreted as a new and unique religious movement in American society. It is a controversial argument, but many scholars of American religion have shown a great willingness to accept it. Mark Noll, for example, in his survey of American and Canadian religious history wrote,

> Smith's Religion drew on themes prominent in the early national period, including a republican conception of world order and a democratic belief in the ability of common people to grasp religious truth. Even more than this, Mormonism represented a new religious movement, dependent upon the traditions of Jews and Christians but also (in the view of its adherents) transcending these traditions.

Echoing Noll, Irving Hexham has argued that while Mormonism was "an indigenous religious movement that incorporates American values of self-reliance, pragmatism, progress and democracy. . . .The differences between the teachings of Utah Mormons and traditional Christianity are so great that it would more accurately be called a new religion."[24]

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[23]Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: the Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 46; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 7.

[24]Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992): 196; Irving Hexham, "Mormonism," In *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1990): 776-7.

Scholars clearly disagree about the fundamental nature of early Mormon religion. To some it is a product of its social and cultural milieu. To others, it represents an entirely new religion of sorts. Yet despite this impasse, it seems that all would agree that early nineteenth-century Mormonism was in some ways similar and in some way different in relation to other American religions of the period.

But why? Why would Mormonism incorporate so many aspects of belief from so many different religious movements? What was it that made early Mormonism so fundamentally different yet so remarkably similar? There are no definitive answers to such perplexing questions as these. Many historians have tried and failed to come to terms with the complexity of this religion. That should surprise no one, however. Social and cultural movements are typically complex and multifaceted, and the development and evolution of early Mormon religion is no exception. Thus we are left with the broad range of plausible interpretations.

Having said this, however, I still believe there is opportunity to solve this long-lasting riddle. In much the same way as the conflict between William and Joseph Smith serves to illustrate the existence of multiple discourses in early Mormon religion, the wide range of opinions regarding the nature of early Mormon religion reminds us again that various conflicting symbols existed simultaneously in this new world religion. Put simply, scholars struggle to agree as to the fundamental nature of this new world religion because Mormons were many things at once. They were American and un-American. They embraced republican and prophetic symbols simultaneously despite the fact that the two categories conflicted.

This inner tension is not necessarily a problem, however. In fact, a number of historians have pointed to the existence of this same type of phenomenon in other historical groups. Employing various types of literary theory, they have focused on multiple discourses within communities as a means of explaining the apparent ironies and incongruities which often do exist within these groups. Drawing upon their work, then, we now have a new set of tools with which to interpret the Mormon past. Using discourse theory as our starting point, we learn that the early Mormon world-view which developed after 1830 consisted of several disparate strands of thought and language. One symbol of early Mormon religion was the voice of God as represented by the prophet Joseph Smith. This Mormon prophet became to the Latter-day Saints a modern Moses or Abraham, and as a result the *Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenants* became sacred Mormon symbols of God's word.[25] But alongside this evolving discourse of prophecy, remnants of other discourses remained intact. As historians have pointed out, for instance, early Latter-day Saints often sounded much the same as other Christian primitivists.[26] They were also intensely millenarian and republican in their views.[27] In fact, early Mormonism contained within it various symbols and values drawn from several pre-existing discourses; and as exceptional as these Saints were in their religious

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[25]Jan Shipps has also discussed the importance of such symbols in early Mormon religion. See Shipps, *Mormonism*, xiii.

[26]Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 25-41; Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 135-6.

[27]Grant Underwood, "Millenarianism and the Early Mormon Mind," *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 41-2; and Kenneth H. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America*, 1830-1846 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 40-62.

beliefs and behaviors, their language was derivative of other discourses in America, each one possessing a unique series of values and language constructions.

This type of literary approach to Mormon history which emphasizes the multiple discourses within early LDS religion would be useful for at least two reasons. First, an examination of the multiple discourses in early Mormonism will help us to unravel many of the ironies inherent in LDS theology. Using such an approach, for instance, we will be better able to come to terms with such complex events as the establishment of the Council of Fifty, Joseph Smith's Presidential campaign, and even the destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor. But even more importantly, such an approach which allows us to focus on the multiple discourses within early Mormon religion will provide us with a simple solution to our previously-mentioned historiographical problem. When we realize that early Mormonism developed in an already existing sea of alternate discourses, it should be no surprise that Mormonism developed in response to certain trends within American society. We also should not balk at the notion that Mormon religion was in certain respects a product of its American heritage and that it shares with various social groups in America a common history. Nor should we reject outright the theses of Bushman or Shipps. Indeed, Mormonism could be all such things. Situated in a vast sea of competing discourses, these early Saints could draw upon many different symbols to express their fears and ambitions. They could sound like republicans and primitive Christians. They could be democrats and liberal Americans, enamored with their revolutionary heritage. All these different discourses existed within American society and it was quite possible for Mormons to draw upon such symbols in constructing their own world-view. In this

sense, then, Mormons were products of their contemporary culture. But they could also take existing discourses and rearrange or redefine the terms in such a way that they become something new and in certain ways exceptional. In other words, early Mormons were many things at once. In some ways they were products of their political, social, and economic circumstances; but in other ways they represented a new departure from the past.

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The dual nature of early Mormonism again points us to a clash of discourses in LDS theology, and it this clash which provides the interpretive framework for my thesis. The first chapter, for instance, explores the implications of an emerging prophetic discourse in LDS theology. The second then traces the persistence of American symbols and their effect on early Mormon behavior. Admittedly, there is no clear connection between these two sections; each takes a different tack--but in focusing our attention on two separate discourses in early Mormon religion, they both illustrate the way in which competing symbols acted together to shape the minds and actions of those who embraced the Mormon gospel. By so doing, they also help us answer some important historiographical questions regarding the nature of early Mormonism. More importantly, however, they will again remind us of the inherent complexity of this new world religion. The question we ask is a simple one: Were Mormons something new or something old disguised as something new? No one can say for certain, but perhaps the best answer is

also the most ambiguous. In the early period of LDS Church history, at least, they were something of both.

CHAPTER TWO

THUS SAITH THE LORD

Non-Mormon scholars have often had a difficult time coming to terms with what they see as a pervasive "blind obedience" or "blind faith" built into Mormon religion. They cannot understand why so many Latter-day Saints are eager to listen to the prophet and to follow his counsels without question. To them it is a puzzle. Accustomed to the liberal rhetoric of modern America, the idea of a prophet-leader like Moses seems to them antithetical if not strange.

Indeed, to most Americans, religion is a profoundly individual experience. Their relationship with God is intensely personal and spiritual. Seeing this tendency, some scholars of American religion have gone so far as to argue that the essence of modern American religion is its appeal to the popular and to the individual. Nathan Hatch, for example, has argued that the fundamental characteristic of nineteenth--century American religion was its democratic and populist nature. In his view, people did not come to church in America; churches came to the people.[1]

I would agree, at least in part. One of the major reasons for the Christianization of America during the early decades of the nineteenth-century was the ability of various denominations to respond to the needs of its members. Early LDS religion too would fit

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[1]Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 210-219.

into this type of democratic framework, and Hatch himself presents ample evidence in defense of such an argument.[2] But we must not push this type of analysis too far. There is another dimension to this new world religion which is far less democratic in flavor. Although Hatch may be right to link Joseph Smith and Mormonism with a growing democratic spirit in nineteenth-century America, this populism has oftentimes been overshadowed by another important element of early Mormon theology, one which emphasizes instead the role of prophets and prophetic authority.

This second element of early Mormon theology represents a prophetic discourse in LDS religion. It did not exist from the beginning. In the first years of the Restoration, no prophet-figure existed. Joseph Smith was to early members of the Church a translator or first elder. True, the early Saints did use the term "prophet" to refer to Joseph Smith but its definition in 1830 was far more ambiguous than it became by 1844.[3] But over time, a more concrete meaning began to take shape, and as this process occurred, a new discourse emerged in Mormon theology which would fundamentally alter the ideological foundations of Mormon religion.

This emerging discourse had one major symbol. Limited to the thoughts and ideas and values of one man, at its very center was the Prophet Joseph Smith. Latter-day Saints believed his voice to be the voice of God speaking to His people, and because they believed this, Smith's values and beliefs became an important force shaping the minds

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[2]*Ibid.*, 113-122.

[3]D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, In association with Smith Research Associates, 1994), 8-9.

and thoughts of those who believed. Put simply, Joseph Smith and Joseph Smith's persona in large part determined the values and ideals after which others patterned their own ways of thinking. At stake was the salvation of their souls, and in the minds of many early Latter-day Saints, his teachings became the means to that end.

For this reason, they listened and obeyed the prophet's voice; and because of their willingness to obey, the voice of Joseph Smith would eventually become one of the most potent discourses in early Mormonism. In fact, some might argue that this prophetic discourse became the essence of Mormon faith and Mormon theology. Of course, it has continued to develop over the years. Brigham Young, Lorenzo Snow, Heber J. Grant, Joseph Fielding Smith and several other Mormon prophet-leaders have added their own views and preaching to this prophetic discourse within Mormon religion, and because of this multiplication of authorities this particular discourse is far more complex in our modern world. But regardless of its complexity, we must try to come to terms with this discourse which emphasizes prophetic authority. In order to fully understand the nature of modern LDS religion, we must first understand the role prophets play in the minds of those who believe.

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One possible means of dealing with this prophetic discourse in early Mormon religion is through examining the lives of those who struggled with it. To many modern Latter-day Saints, especially those who remain active in their faith, it goes almost unnoticed. Modern-day prophecy has become a built-in facet of the Mormon world-view.

But there have always been those who cannot deal with the implications of this unique discourse within Mormon theology. Some of them refuse to bend to the demands of this emerging force within Mormon religion and others offer up alternative definitions of its expanding role. In either case, however, their concerns reveal much about the scope and power of this emerging discourse within early Mormon religion.

In this chapter we examine the lives of three such men. David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery were honest believers in the restored gospel of Christ. For several years they remained true to the faith, yet they could never quite bring themselves to accept fully this new Mormon discourse and in time they rejected it outright. Sidney Rigdon also believed, but as the Church of Jesus Christ grew more and more radical in its beliefs and practices, he too found himself wavering. His fall was not like Cowdery's or Whitmer's however. Rigdon did not reject this prophetic discourse in Mormon religion. Instead, he attempted to redirect it. After Joseph Smith's death, he offered the Saints an alternative future. In his mind, the voice of Joseph Smith would continue through the voice of Sidney Rigdon. Others disagreed, however, and because only one future course could prevail, Rigdon too found himself an outcast.

David and Oliver dissented, Sidney offered instead an alternative future, but in each case the outcome was the same. All three fell away. Each struggled in one way or another to come to terms with an emerging discourse within Mormon theology, and each proposed his own solution to the problem. Unfortunately, their various remedies proved incompatible with the symbols of an emerging prophetic discourse in early Mormon

religion, and though all three believed the divinity of the Restoration, they found themselves out of favor with others who believed the prophet.

In their life stories and in their attempts to vocalize these concerns, then, we can gain some sense of the nature, the origins, and the extent of this emerging prophetic voice. More importantly, we also gain an important insight about the development of early Mormon religion. In the early history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a clash of discourses occurred. Competing symbols and definitions struggled for preeminence as this new religion took shape, and out of this firestorm, a new discourse emerged which would fundamentally shape and define Mormon religion and theology.

The Restoration of a "Primitive" Church

In 1887, David Whitmer wrote and published his *Address to All Believers*. The pamphlet was divided into two sections. The first was addressed to non-believers in the Restored gospel. The second was directed to those who believed the Book of Mormon to be true, but more specifically, to those who still accepted the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith. It is this second section which concerns us here. David had left the Church of Jesus Christ fifty year earlier. To those who never knew him, perhaps he was all but forgotten, but in these last years of his life this Witness to the Book of Mormon was determined not to go unheard. David wanted to set the record straight, but more importantly, he hoped to explain to those who still believed in the teachings of Joseph Smith his self-imposed exile from the Church of Christ.

To fully understand his explanation, however, it is necessary to first recount his early experience as a member of the Restored Church. David had been involved with Smith from almost the beginning of the Restoration. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery finished the translation of the Book of Mormon in the Whitmer home, and in June 1829, David became one of its Three Witnesses. That same month, he was baptized and ordained to the office of elder; and one year later, on April 6, 1830, he became one of six founders of the Church of Christ.[4] Like Joseph, he too was ordained to the priesthood of God. He too witnessed firsthand the work of translation; and he too saw the gold plates, the interpreters, the breastplate, and the compass.[5] In the first years of the Restoration, then, David had shared many of the same experiences and blessings given to Joseph Smith. In other words, he had become something of an equal to the Prophet, a partner if you will in the work.

Later years would alter this relationship somewhat. In the spring of 1832, the Whitmer family moved from Ohio to Missouri, and there, David witnessed firsthand the trials and suffering of persecution. Upon his shoulders fell the responsibility to lead Mormon resistance against their Missourian foes. In 1834, he was appointed as President of the Church in Missouri--but despite his continued leadership, he began to struggle. When it was discovered that he, along with his brother John Whitmer and Oliver

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[4]David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers by a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Richmond, Missouri: n.p, 1887), 32.

[5]Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981), 67-92. See also Preston Nibley, *The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, 1946), 61-104.

Cowdery, had sold land in Jackson County, the Missouri Saints voted David out of office. A short time later, a second list of charges was presented to the Far West High Council against the former President. According to the charges, David had violated the Word of Wisdom and even worse, he had corresponded with the dissenters in Kirtland. Citing lack of jurisdiction on the part of the High Council, Whitmer refused to appear before its judicial proceeding, but regardless of his protests, on April 13, 1838, the High Council excommunicated him for apostasy.[6]

The accusations made against David Whitmer in Far West do tell us something about his falling away. If they are true, we know that by 1838, David no longer supported the Church and its teachings. In the first years of the Restoration, he had been closely associated with the prophet Joseph Smith. He had participated in many of the most important events leading to the establishment of the restored Church, but over time, a geographical and spiritual distance developed between the two. But the growing distance between David Whitmer and Joseph Smith does not explain fully David's falling away. Also important for us to consider is David's own explanation offered in his *Address to All Believers*. In his mind, his leaving was due to the fact that the Church he left was no longer true. Early on, it had drifted into error. What was once the Church of Jesus Christ had now become the Church of Joseph Smith.

Such an accusation is full of bitterness and indignation, especially towards the Prophet, yet if one looks beyond the emotion-filled rhetoric, David Whitmer's *Address*

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[6]Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 3:18-9. See also Brigham H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century I* (Salt Lake City: Desert News Press, 1930), 1: 430-1, 434-6.

reveals something very important about the Church he had abandoned in the early spring of 1838. When we read his text carefully, we begin to see that it was not Joseph Smith the man who bothered David--it was Joseph Smith the prophet.

To say this, however, is not to say that David rejected outright the early works of Joseph Smith. David still believed honestly that Joseph had translated the Book of Mormon. How could he dispute what he had seen with his own eyes?[7] But regardless of his continued confidence in the authenticity of this Mormon scripture, something had gone terribly wrong with the Church. Explaining "how the church was established in the beginning, and how they drifted into error," David wrote:

> In June 1829, the translation of the Book of Mormon was finished. God gave it to us as his Holy Word, and left us as men to work out our own salvation and set in order the Church of Christ according to the written word. He left us as men to receive of His Spirit as we walked worthy to receive it; and His Spirit guides men into all truth; but the Spirit of man guides man into error. When God had given us the Book of Mormon, and a few revelations in 1829 by the same means that the Book was translated, commanding us to rely upon the written word in establishing the church, He did His part; and left us to do our part and to be guided by the Holy Ghost as we walked worthy to receive.[8]

According to David, then, the work of translation had been the work of God, but when the Book of Mormon was completed, God had left Joseph Smith and others "as men" only. Men, not prophets, were now given a commission to continue the work of building up the church as they were led by the Holy Spirit. They were now to establish the Church not by prophecy, but according to the "written word." According to David, then, with the

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[7]Several historians have dealt with the subject of David's continued belief in the Book of Mormon despite his disaffection from the Church. See for example Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 74-90; and Nibley, *The Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 65-104.

[8]Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers*, 30.

Book of Mormon completed and with a few revelations in hand, revelations received through the same interpreters used to translate the gold plates, the Church of Christ had been established.

In David's eyes, the word of God in its fulness had been revealed, and with it the work of building the Church could commence. But this building up of the kingdom was to be the work of men. In other words, in David's eyes, Joseph Smith was a man--led by the Spirit of course, but no different from any other.

Unfortunately for Whitmer, Joseph would not accept the limits of this new role. In David's view, this young Mormon leader aspired to become something more than a translator. He desired to be "prophet" too, and when other members of the Church foolishly accepted this new office, errors began to creep into the Church. This declension was easily explained, however. According to Whitmer, "In the beginning we walked humble and worthy to receive the great portion of the Spirit of God. We were guided rightly at first in establishing the Church, but then we began to drift into errors, because we heeded our own desires too much, . . ." Unwilling to follow God's Spirit, and relying on their own desires, the Saints began to drift away from the word of God. Instead, they chose to follow the voice of one man who claimed to be the Lord's mouthpiece, and the result was heresy:

> After the translation of the Book of Mormon was finished, early in the spring of 1830, before April 6th, Joseph gave the stone to Oliver Cowdery and told me as well as the rest that he was through with it, and he did not use the stone any more. He said he was through with the work that God had given him the gift to perform, except to preach the gospel. . . . The revelations after this came through Joseph Smith as "mouth piece;" that is, he would enquire of the Lord, pray and ask concerning matter, and speak out the revelation, which he thought to be a

> revelation from the Lord; . . .In this manner, through Brother Joseph as "mouth piece" came every revelation to establish new doctrines and offices which disagree with the New Covenant in the Book of Mormon and New Testament![9]

From the Lord's "mouthpiece," then, came error, not truth. In other words, according to David, the Church of Christ fell because its leader claimed to be something more than he was. After the translation of the Book of Mormon was completed, Joseph became a prophet of God, a man like unto Moses or Abraham. To the Saints he now revealed line upon line, precept upon precept--but by so doing, according to David at least, the Church of Christ became something less than true.

This falling away from truth occurred when the Saints first sustained Joseph Smith as a prophet, seer, and revelator, on April 30, 1830, but it was not altogether Joseph's doing. According to David, the early members of the Church "were like the children of Israel, wanting a king," so Joseph became their leader. Blinded by their own spiritual weakness, the Saints looked to Joseph Smith, the prophet, to be their guide, and as a result they accepted an array of strange doctrines and practices that eventually "proved their destruction and final landing of the majority of them in the Salt Lake Valley in polygamy, believing that their leader had received a revelation from God to practice this abomination."[10]

To Whitmer, then, Joseph Smith, the Prophet Joseph Smith, was a charlatan. Yes, he had been a translator. He was also the first Elder of the Church of Christ--but he was not appointed to be a Moses or an Abraham. Put simply, the idea of a latter-day prophet-

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[9]Ibid., 32.

[10]Ibid., 34.

figure who ruled over the Saints of God rankled David. It was too much to bear. In his eyes, the Church of Christ was a Church of God's elect and in that Church all men were equal. The Book of Mormon and the Bible together contained the word of God, along with a few revelations given through the same interpreters used to translate the gold plates, and according to the written word, the Church of Christ had been restored in its fullness. Everything else was man-made. Those later revelations which came through the Lord's mouthpiece were dissimulations of the truth and symbols of error. Revelations were altered, the office of high priest was instituted, and the name of the Church was changed, all because the Saints sustained Joseph as a prophet, seer, and revelator to the Church.[11]

According to the *Address*, then, David left the Church because he could not bring himself to accept the notion that Joseph Smith was a living prophet. He could not believe that Joseph's voice was God's voice. Put simply, he rejected outright this emerging prophetic discourse. Yes, he remained a faithful member of the Church nine years, from 1829 to 1838, but during this period he was never able to accept this second calling given to Joseph Smith to be the Lord's "mouthpiece." For Whitmer, then, it was only a matter of time. When revelations were altered, when the office of high priest was instituted, and when the gathering of Israel was introduced and the law of consecration established, these additions to the word of God, these adulteration of the true Church became a greater and

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[11]Ibid., 37, 45-75 *passim.*

greater burden on his soul.[12] Thus, when he was faced with dissension and persecution in Missouri, he left.

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Perhaps one reason for David's refusal to accept Joseph's prophetic calling was his Christian primitivism. Like many early Latter-day Saints he hoped for a restoration of the primitive Church and for that reason the Restoration captured his imagination. He like others took seriously the promise from God, that "he would establish his church 'LIKE UNTO THE CHURCH WHICH WAS TAUGHT BY MY DISCIPLES IN THE DAYS OF OLD.'"[13] But as David soon discovered, the Restoration was not simply primitive in its design. Yes, the Saints did believe that their church was designed with the same "organization which existed in the primitive Church,"[14] but over time, changes were made which had little apparent sanction in Biblical or Mormon verse. As a primitivist, expecting a restoration of the New Testament church only, these later changes probably seemed quite drastic to David.

Christian primitivism became an obstacle in David's path--but before we push this idea to far, we must note that Christian primitivism and prophets are not mutually exclusive concepts. As a primitivist, David believed in prophets. He too used the term to refer to Joseph Smith. But Whitmer's definition was dissimilar to the definition

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[12]Ibid., 35-6, 56, 62, 71.

[13]Ibid., 60

[14]Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:541

employed by Joseph Smith. David Whitmer, like many others believed in all the gifts of the Spirit, and to him a prophet was a man who spoke by prophecy, a gift given to all those who believed. As he himself pointed out,

> Brother Joseph gave many true prophesies when he was humble before God: but this is no more than many of the other brethren did. . . .I could give you the names of many who gave great prophesies which came to pass. I will name a few: Brothers Ziba Peterson, Hiram Page, Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, Peter Whitmer, Christian Whitmer, John Whitmer, myself and many others had the gift of prophesy. Hiram Page prophesied a few days before the states fell in November, 1833, that the stars would fall from heaven and frighten many people. This prophesy was given in my presence.[15]

To David, then, the gift of prophesy was a gift spoken of in the New Testament. It was a gift of God given to all Saints, not a calling reserved to Joseph alone. In other words, David Whitmer's conception of Joseph Smith's role as prophet was based on his Christian primitivist understanding of the Restoration.

In this conflict of definitions, then, we find a clash of symbols. A certain degree of Christian primitivism existed in early Mormon religion.[16] It can even be detected in Joseph Smith's own writings. In one of the Prophet's early journals, in an entry dated November 29, 1832, he wrote: "this evening Brother Frederic Prophecyed that next spring I should go to the city of PittsBurg to establish a Bishopwrick and within one year I

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[15]Whitmer, *Address*, 32.

[16]Many scholars have examined this primitivist discourse in early LDS theology. See for example Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 25-41; Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 133-52; Marvin S. Hill, "The Shaping of the Mormon Mind in New England and New York," *BYU Studies* 9 (Spring 1969): 351-8; and Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 28-30.

should go to the City of New York."[17] Two years after being ordained by Oliver Cowdery as a prophet, seer, and revelator unto the church, Joseph still recognized in others the right to prophecy. Put simply, he still allowed for the existence of prophets as defined by David Whitmer. But within early Mormon religion, the word "prophet" had a dual meaning. In one sense of the word, a prophet was one who prophecied by the Spirit of God. But as the Church developed further, a prophet also became the Lord's chosen servant to His people. In other words, in early LDS theology a division emerged between the concepts of prophecy and prophetic authority. The right to prophesy remained the domain of all members equally, but at the same time, the role of prophet-leader was reserved for one man alone. Though all Saints could prophesy, in the restored Church of Christ, there was to be only one prophet of the Lord and from him alone came divine revelation to the whole Church.

It was this second meaning of the word "prophet" that David struggled over. It implied a new prophetic discourse in many ways dissimilar to the primitivist discourse David recognized. Concerning Joseph's calling as a prophet, seer, and revelator, one early revelation read:

> Behold there shall be a record kept among you, and in it, thou shalt be called a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church through the will of God the Father, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; being inspired of the Holy Ghost to lay the foundations thereof, and to build it up unto the most holy faith; . . . Wherefore, meaning the church, thou shalt give heed unto all his words, and commandments, which he shall give unto you, as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me: for his word ye shall receive, as if from

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[17]Joseph Smith, "Diary, 1832-1834," in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), 16. Frederick G. Williams was at the time serving as Joseph Smith's scribe.

> mine own mouth, in all patience and faith; For by doing these things, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you.[18]

"For his word shall ye receive, as if from mine own mouth." Dated April 6, 1830, this revelation marked the beginnings of a prophetic discourse in Mormon religion. Before this time Joseph had been a translator only. He had been visited by angels and he had been given the priesthood authority to act in God's name. But after April 6, 1830 he was also accepted by many of his followers as a seer, a revelator, and the Lord's anointed--a prophet like Moses. Joseph's voice was now the voice of God, and David, accustomed instead to a more primitivist definition of the word prophet, simply could not reconcile himself to this new dimension of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

The "Second" Elder

David Whitmer was not the only person to struggle with this emerging prophetic discourse. Oliver Cowdery too found it difficult to adjust to this new element within Mormon religion. Like David, he too had been privy to many of the most important events in early Church history. He served as Joseph's scribe through much of the Book of Mormon translation process. On May 15, 1829, he received, with Joseph Smith, the Aaronic priesthood under the hands of John the Baptist and later that same day he was baptized by Joseph Smith in the Susquehanna river. Eleven months later, on April 6, 1830, he was sustained by the Saints as second Elder of the Restored Church of Christ.

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[18] *A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ, Organized According to Law, on the 6th of April, 1830* (Independence, Missouri: W. W. Phelps & Company, 1833), XXII:1-6. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 1: 78-9; and *Doctrine and Covenants* 21:1-6

Each of these early incidents highlight Oliver's close association with the Prophet Joseph Smith. But later years would see him gain increased responsibility and influence. In 1834, Cowdery was ordained by Joseph Smith to be an assistant president of the Church of Christ, and on April 3, 1836, he received with Joseph the keys of the kingdom of God.[19]

Despite his vast experience, however, Oliver struggled to accept Joseph Smith's prophetic role. At the heart of the problem was the ambiguity of Cowdery's position in the early Church. On April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith became the first elder; Oliver became the second--but when we examine Oliver Cowdery's experience in the Church, one has to wonder if he truly understood what had taken place. The term "second" may mean many things to many people, but as this prophetic discourse emerged and took shape, the distance between first and second became almost infinite, and Oliver Cowdery found the division impossible to accept. Yes, he too held keys, but he could not speak for God as Joseph did. He was a spokesman, a missionary, and a preacher, but he was not the prophet--and that one word made all the difference in the world.

It was the meaning of the word "second," then, that contributed most to the conflict between Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and eventually to Oliver's expulsion from the Church. Unlike David, Oliver appeared at first willing to embrace Joseph

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[19]Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 51-63; Nibley, *The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon*, 33-41. See also Phillip R. Legg, *Oliver Cowdery: The Elusive Second Elder of the Restoration* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1989), 35-44, 47-48, 86, 102-3; Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery: Second Elder and Scribe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 41-65, 69-72, 124, 133-5; and Mary Bryant Alverson Mehling, "Cowdrey-Cowdery-Cowdray Genealogy" (n.p., 1905), 174, 177-8.

Smith's prophetic calling–but he could never quite come to terms with the implications of this emerging discourse in Mormon religion.

This inability may have been a product of his earlier experience. Before the Church was organized, long before the Saints had accepted Oliver as the second Elder and Joseph the first, he too had prophesied. On May 15, 1829, after receiving the Aaronic priesthood from John the Baptist, Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith were commanded by the angel to be baptized. This they did, and according to Joseph,

> No sooner had I baptized Oliver Cowdery than the Holy Ghost fell upon him and he stood up and prophesied many things which would shortly come to pass: And again so soon as I had been baptized by him, I also had the Spirit of Prophesy, when standing up I prophecied concerning the rise of this Church, and many other things connected with the Church and this generation.[20]

On this one occasion, both men prophesied in the name of the Lord. In other words, in the days before the Church was established, Oliver and Joseph shared almost the same roles. Joseph was the first elder and Oliver the second, but the distance between these two men was a minor detail only.

Then came the establishment of Church of Christ. On April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith received a revelation from God declaring Smith to be a prophet, seer, and revelator to the Church. Oliver had no such calling given him, however. Instead, the distance between these two men increased rather dramatically. The true meaning of "second", though still ambiguous was beginning to take shape, and the result was increasing tension between the two men.

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[20]Joseph Smith, "History, 1839," in Dean Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 291. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:42.

The first sign of conflict came after July 1830. Apparently Joseph Smith had taken it upon himself to change to some of the earlier revelations and the. Perhaps Oliver expected as much, but even so one alteration in particular bothered him immensely. In 1829, Cowdery had been commanded to establish a set of "Articles and Covenants" for the Church of Christ He obeyed and in this first draft of what would later be known as *Doctrine and Covenants* 20, the verse regarding the qualifications necessary for those desiring baptism into the Church of Christ read as follows: "Now therefore whosoever repenteth & humbleth himself before me & desireth to be baptized in my name shall ye baptize them."[21] Something about this particular reading did not sit well with Joseph Smith, however, and the Prophet took the liberty to add a few lines. Admittedly, it is not clear exactly what changes Smith made, but when the Articles were finally published in 1833 the same verse now read,

> Behold whosever humbleth himself before God and desireth to be baptized, and comes forth with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, and witnesseth unto the church, that they have truly repented of all their sins and are willing to take upon them the name of Christ, having a determination to serve him unto the end, and truly manifest by their works that they have received the Spirit of christ unto the remission of their sins, then shall they be received unto baptism into the church of Christ.[22]

Clearly, Smith's version differs from the original as authored by Oliver Cowdery. In particular, the phrase, "and truly manifest by their works that they have received the Spirit of Christ unto the remission of their sins," Oliver found to be out of harmony with his

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[21]The original revelation is reprinted in Robert J. Woodford "The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants," vol. 1 (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 287-9

[22]*Book of Commandments* XXVI: 30. See also *Doctrine and Covenants* 20: 37

understanding of the restored gospel; and in response the second Elder wrote a letter to Joseph commanding him "in the name of God to erase those words that no priestcraft be amongst us."[23] According to Oliver, Joseph had erred. In his eyes, Joseph's words were no more sacred than Oliver's. Both could speak in the name of the Lord, both could prophesy, and for one to make a change to the revelations without the other's consent, seemed to him to be a violation of God's will.

Joseph responded quickly to this challenge. In reply, Smith wrote back, demanding "by what authority [Oliver] took upon him[self] to command me to alter, erase, to add or diminish to or from a revelation or commandment from Almighty God." In asking Oliver what authority the second Elder had to command the first, Joseph had now staked his own claim to exclusive prophetic authority. In his mind, he alone had the right to "alter, erase, to add or diminish to or from a revelation." No other Latter-day Saint had such authority from God.

Unfortunately, this scolding did not put an end to the conflict. Oliver was not yet willing to acquiesce in the Prophet's authority, and only a few days later, when Joseph Smith paid a visit to his wayward friend, he discovered a minor mutiny in the works. Not only was Oliver offended, but now the Whitmer family, as well, was up in arms over the matter:

> In a few days afterwards I visited [Oliver] and Mr Whitmer's family, when I found the family in general of his opinion concerning the words above quoted [ie. the changes made by Joseph to the revelations]; and it was not without both labor and perseverance that I could prevail with any of them to reason calmly on the subject; however Christian Whitmer, at length got convinced that it was reasonable and

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[23]Smith, "History, 1839," 320. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 1: 104-5.

> according to scripture, and finally, with his assistance I succeeded in bringing not only the Whitmer family, but also Oliver Cowdery to acknowledge that they had been in error, and that the sentence in dispute was in accordance with the rest of the commandment.[24]

The conflict between Oliver and Joseph over the nature of this emerging prophetic discourse had boiled over. On one side was Oliver with his party of supporters, on the other was Joseph. But after what must have been a lengthy and heated discussion on the matter, Smith convinced the offended party that Oliver was in fact wrong, and that Joseph's conception of the revelation was the correct one.

Fortunately, the dispute was settled amicably, but the clash of wills between the first and second Elders of the Church remained close to the surface. Only a short time later, in fact, a close friend of Oliver's and an early convert to the Church by the name of Hiram Page obtained for himself a seer stone and from it he was receiving various revelations regarding the "upbuilding of Zion, the order of the Church &c &c, all of which were entirely at variance with the order of Gods house, as laid down in the new testament, as well as in our late revelations."[25] Here again was a challenge to Joseph's authority. In this antinomian controversy, Hiram Page, a follower, became also a prophet, seer, and revelator. But to make matters even worse, the Whitmer family and Oliver Cowdery believed these new revelations.

Clearly the second Elder did not yet understand the meaning of the term "prophet" as Joseph Smith intended it to be used. Instead, Cowdery's definition seemed more in

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[24]Smith, "History, 1839," 320. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:105.

[25]Smith, "History, 1839," 322-3. See also Smith, *History of the Church* 1:108-9.

keeping with David Whitmer's more primitivist version. What was needed was a more clear definition of the line between prophet and Saint and it should be no surprise, therefore, that this second crisis of authority set the stage for a new revelation defining with clarity the calling of Joseph Smith and the meaning of this prophetic discourse in Mormonism. Addressed to Oliver directly and dated September, 1830, the revelation read,

> Behold I say unto you Oliver, . . . no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church, excepting my servant Joseph, for he receiveth them even as Moses: And thou shalt be obedient unto the things which I shall give unto him, even as Aaron, to declare faithfully the commandments and the revelations, with power and authority unto the church. . . .And thou shalt not command him who is at thy head, and at the head of the church, for I have given him the keys of the mysteries and the revelations which are sealed, until I shall appoint unto them another in his stead.[26]

According to revelation, only one man was appointed by God receive commandments and revelation for the Church. Put simply, only Joseph was to lead. He alone held the keys of the mysteries of God and he alone could speak for God. Oliver Cowdery, Hiram Page, and others members of the Church of Christ could not.

With this said, the exact meaning of this prophetic role was now settled. To those who accepted the revelations of Joseph Smith, it represented the voice of God, spoken by his chosen servant. Only the Prophet could speak for God. In other words, the distance between the first and second Elders of the Church now became infinite.

Cowdery appeared to accept this second-place standing, however. He soon repented of his earlier rebellions, and persuaded Hiram Page and others that the

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[26] *Book of Commandments* XXX: 1-6. See also *Doctrine and Covenants* 28: 1-7.

revelations from the stone were false. But even after this act of submission, his place in the Church was not secure. As a prophetic discourse in Mormon religion emerged and took shape, Oliver's voice became less and less important. Even after he was appointed Assistant President of the church, holding with Joseph the keys of the kingdom, he could not speak with the same authority as Joseph. Only one man in the Church of Christ could rightly say "thus saith the Lord," and it was this unique status afforded the Prophet Joseph Smith which again led to tension between these two men. Amidst the persecutions and dissensions that racked the Church in Missouri, two competing visions of the kingdom of God again clashed; and in the end, Oliver, like David, found himself in exile.

Oliver remained relatively quiet until the early spring of 1838, when things again came to a head. Rumors of Joseph Smith's alleged infidelity bothered the Second Elder immensely and added to this burden was a growing list of radical doctrines which were now being introduced.[27] But rumors and doctrinal innovations were not the only problems facing Oliver. In Missouri, he created his own troubles. Together with David Whitmer and other leading men, Cowdery sold most of his land in Jackson County. This act angered many of the Saints but when later questioned regarding this apparent transgression, Oliver refused to respond. In response, on April 7, 1838, Seymour Brunson presented to High Council at Far West a series of nine charges against Cowdery including "seeking to destroy the character of President Joseph Smith, jun., by falsely insinuating that he was guilty of adultery," "denying the faith by declaring that he would

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[27]For a more detailed account of the causes leading to Oliver Cowdery's dissension, see Legg, *Oliver Cowdery: The Elusive Second Elder*, 109, 120-3.

not be governed by any ecclesiastical authority or revelation whatever," and "selling his lands in Jackson county, contrary to the revelation."[28]

These charges, if true, reveal the chasm which now separated Oliver and the Prophet Joseph Smith. Oliver was disaffected and rebellious, and it is this spirit which pervades his letter written in response to the charges. Dated April 12, 1838, Oliver wrote,

> I could have wished that those charges might have been deferred until after my interview with President Smith; but as they are not, I must waive the anticipated pleasure, with which I flattered myself, of an understanding on those points, which are grounds of different opinions on some Church regulations, and others which personally interest myself. . . .
>
> The fifth charge reads as follows: "For selling his land in Jackson county" contrary to the revelations. So much of this charge, "for selling his lands in Jackson County" I acknowledge to be true, and believe that a large majority of this Church have already spent their judgement on that act, and pronounced it sufficient to warrant disfellowship; and also that you have concurred in its correctness, consequently, [I] have no good reason for supposing you would give any decision contrary.
>
> Now sir, the lands in our country are allodial in the strictest construction of feudal tenures attached to them, consequently, they may be disposed of by deeds of conveyance without the consent or even approbation of a superior.[29]

Unconcerned with his future status in the Church, Cowdery readily admitted to the charge. In his defense, however, he argued that neither the prophet nor anyone else for that matter could command him in such matters. He had his own mind concerning such matters and it was his right to sell his land when and where he pleased, "without the consent or even approbation of a superior."

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[28]Minutes of the trial, including the list of charges filed against Cowdery, were originally recorded in the Far West Record. See Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1983), 162-9. See also Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:16.

[29]Ibid., 3:17.

With this said, Oliver next responded to the fourth charge that he had denied the faith "by declaring that he would not be governed by any ecclesiastical authority or pretended revelation whatever, contrary, to my own judgement." Again, Cowdery admitted to the charge, and again he asserted his rights:

> such being still my opinion, [I] shall only remark that the three great principles of English liberty, as laid down in the books, are "the right to personal security, the right of personal liberty, and the right of private property." My venerable ancestor was among the little band who landed on the rocks of Plymouth in 1620--with him he brought those maxims, and a body of those laws which were the result and experience of many centuries, on the basis of which now stands our great and happy government; and they are so interwoven in my nature, have so long been inculcated into my mind by a liberal and intelligent ancestry that I am wholly unwilling to exchange them for anything less liberal, less benevolent, or less free.[30]

In his response to both the fourth and fifth charges, then, Oliver presented himself as both a republican and an American, incensed at the constraints this prophetic discourse asserted on his individual rights. To him, the dictates of Joseph Smith had violated his rights of life, liberty, and property. Already on his way out, Oliver now lashed out, accusing the prophet of abrogating the rights of the Saints to do what they pleased with their properties and with their sacred liberties.[31]

Oliver's argument, couched in republican rhetoric, makes for an interesting contrast between two different discourses which shaped the early Mormon world-view. Though he had many grievances with which to air his growing opposition to the leadership of Joseph Smith, on this particular occasion he said nothing regarding such

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[30]Ibid., 3: 18.

[31]See also Kenneth H. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830-1846* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 121-122.

things. He remained quiet, for example, regarding the charge that he had preached that Joseph Smith had committed adultery. Instead, he focused his letter on what to him was an absurd notion that he must submit to prophetic counsel regarding his right to own and sell land. Put simply, he pitted a discourse of republicanism against a discourse of prophecy in a last-ditch attempt to limit the influence of this emerging prophetic discourse within the ideological framework of Mormonism. Unfortunately, there was no contest. By 1838, the values of American republicanism paled in comparison to the symbols of prophetic authority.

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The experiences of David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery are quite revealing in one sense. Both of these men left the Church at about the same time and both put to paper their grievances. Essentially, neither man could accept Joseph Smith's prophetic role, and though David chose to explain his opposition using symbols of democracy or Christian primitivism in contrast to Oliver's use of a more republican-type rhetoric, the essence of their argument was the same. They both rejected an emerging prophetic discourse in Mormon religion.

David Whitmer used primitivist and democratic rhetoric; Oliver Cowdery was more republican sounding in his critique of Mormon religion, but what matters here is not their particular grievances *per se*, but rather what their grievances tell us about the nature of early Mormonism. In order to explain their concerns these men employed certain symbols and values that seemed to them to contrast with those ideas and symbols which

they rejected. In other words, their critique of Mormon religion offers to us, at least in part, a definition of this emerging prophetic discourse.

Realizing this, we could probably say simply that this prophetic discourse was undemocratic, that it was anti-republican, and something less than primitive in the Christian sense. To do so, however, would mean we must accept Whitmer and Cowdery's arguments at face value. Perhaps they were right, perhaps they were wrong, but it is probably more accurate to argue instead, that the prophetic discourse was sometimes undemocratic, sometimes anti-republican, and sometimes radical because at its heart was the Prophet Joseph Smith. Speaking for God, the Mormon prophet could be anti-democratic or anti-republican. He could appear to be authoritarian and exclusive--and for this reason Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were able to express their grievances using such republican or democratic rhetoric.

But Joseph Smith, too, could speak with a republican tongue. He, too, could act in democratic fashion. Throughout his lifetime, in fact, the Prophet praised the American Constitution. He pleaded continually for the protection of the Saints' republican rights and he oftentimes presented himself to others as a son of liberty. If this is true, we cannot simply label this prophetic discourse as anti-democratic or anti-republican. Rather, we should define it as the voice of God speaking to those who believed. Put simply, whether we believe the message of the restored Church or not, whether we believe Joseph Smith to be a charlatan or divine prophet, doesn't matter. What matters is that we as historians understand that within Mormon religion a particular discourse existed which many early Saints believed to be the voice of God, speaking through the Lord's prophet--and because

they believed this voice to be God's, this discourse became a potent force shaping their minds to believe in certain ways. In other words, if we as historians want to understand these early Saints, we must understand that they believed God was speaking to them through a prophet's voice and because of their desire to obey, they accepted those words as eternal, saving truth and shaped their lives and minds accordingly. It is this point which our analysis of David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery serves to illustrate in the negative. Neither of these men could believe that Joseph Smith was everything he claimed to be. They could not accept that he alone spoke the word of God so they juxtaposed their own democratic or republican rhetoric against Smiths' godly pronouncements. That their words failed to persuade most and failed to arrest the developments of a new prophetic discourse says a great deal about the strength of their own discourse in comparison to the growing potency of the word of prophecy as spoken by the prophet, Joseph Smith.

The "guardian"-Prophet

Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer found it difficult to accept Joseph Smith's new role as a prophet, seer, and revelator; and for this reason they eventually abandoned the church of the Restoration. Sidney Rigdon suffered a different fate. Unlike Oliver and David, he had accepted the divinely appointed role of Joseph Smith, but over time he found himself less and less able to support the Prophet's heavenly counsels. In his eyes, Smith had radically altered the future course of the Church of Christ. But instead of following the example of earlier apostates, Rigdon chose a more subtle form of protest.

Though he struggled with some of the prophet's later teachings, he would not leave the Church nor would he criticize it openly. Nor do I think he intended such a course. The principles and values of Mormonism had become so engrained into his psyche that dissent was not an option. But a second solution was available. If he could not leave the Church, he could instead propose an alternative future. In other words, he could redirect the course of the LDS Restoration, thus returning the Church to its former state. To accomplish this task, however, he, too, would need to play the role of prophet-leader.

Rigdon had joined the Church in November 1830. He was not privy to those earlier experiences shared by both Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, but his own experience would make up the difference. In fact, after only one month as a member of the Church, Rigdon became one of its most influential members. In December, Rigdon, with a close friend of his by the name of Edward Partridge, visited with Joseph Smith in Fayette New York, and while there Joseph Smith received a revelation outlining the calling of this new convert to Mormonism. Addressed directly to Sidney, the revelation counseled,

> And a commandment I give unto thee, that thou shalt write for him: And the scriptures shall be given even as they are in mine own bosom, to the salvation of mine own elect: For they will hear my voice, and shall see me, and shall not be asleep, and shall abide the day of my coming, for they shall be purified even as I am pure. And now I say unto you, tarry with [Joseph Smith] and he shall journey with you; forsake him not and surely these things shall be fulfilled. And inasmuch as ye do not write , behold it shall be given unto him to prophesy. And thou shalt preach my gospel, and call on the holy prophets to prove his words, as they shall be given him.[32]

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[32] *Book of Commandments* XXXVII:21-25; See also *Doctrine and Covenants* 35:20-23.

Only one month after embracing the restored gospel, Rigdon was called to serve as a scribe and a spokesman for the Prophet Joseph Smith. He was not to be a Second Elder, as was Oliver Cowdery, but his calling was an important one nonetheless, and for several years, Rigdon was a close associate of Smith. Wherever Joseph went, Sidney went also.[33]

Perhaps his most endearing quality was his ability to preach. He had served both as a Baptist and a Campbellite preacher before his conversion, and after his conversion, Sidney was known among the Saints as an orator and scriptural genius. Joseph Smith once described him as "a very great and good man a man of great power of words and can gain the friendship of his hearers very quick he is a man whom god will uphold if he will continue faithful to his calling."[34] Yet this oratorical power had little merit when compared with Joseph's prophetic calling. Rigdon could speak well and for this reason he had been commanded to act as a spokesman and defender of the prophet, but never was he allowed to act as prophet. That role was reserved for one man only.

Rigdon accepted this, however, and during his years of service, he erred only once. In 1832, in a small gathering of Saints, he proclaimed that the "keys of the kingdom are rent from the Church." The statement caused no small panic among those attending, for he seemed to be suggesting that the kingdom of God was again lost on the earth. But Joseph Smith settled the matter quickly. In response, the Prophet stripped Rigdon of his license until he repented of his error and from that point forward Rigdon

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[33]Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 62, 71-72; F. Mark McKiernan, *The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness: Sidney Rigdon, Religious Reformer, 1793-1876* (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1971), 29-36, 41-44.

[34]Joseph Smith, "Diary, 1832-1834," 21.

made no other attempt to direct the Church. In sum, he believed what Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer could not--that only one man could speak with the voice of God to the whole Church.[35]

In later years Sidney would continue to follow this precedent. He willingly acquiesced, even when he disagreed. In Kirtland and in Missouri, he was content simply to act as a scribe and a preacher. He worked with the Prophet on the inspired translation of the Bible. He taught the gospel and ministered to the Saints; and in what was perhaps his greatest moment in the Church, he saw with Joseph Smith a vision of the Savior and of the three kingdoms of God.[36]

But then came Nauvoo. New doctrines, new practices, and new ideas were revealed that Sidney could not espouse. Even worse, because of continual illness, he found himself somewhat marginalized, replaced in the First Presidency by the affable and designing John C. Bennett. The cards now seemed stacked against him. He was sick, he suffered from various psychoses--and over time he became an outcast among those who were once his closest friends. But despite his sufferings and the never-ending humiliation, he refused to leave the fold. When his daughter Nancy accused Joseph of attempting to seduce and marry her, when Joseph Smith removed him as postmaster because of an alleged conspiracy with John C. Bennett, and even when the prophet

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[35]Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1995), 194-6. See also Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 126-8.

[36]Joseph and Sidney shared this vision on February 16, 1832 in Hiram, Ohio. The event is recorded in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 1: 245-52.

demanded his release from the First Presidency--despite all these challenges, Rigdon refused to leave. He maintained his status, and even if Joseph Smith no longer supported him, the people did.[37]

Of all the controversies he faced, however, it was the issue of plural marriage that bothered Rigdon the most. The practice devastated him, and in later years, after 1844, Rigdon distanced himself from it. As he would later write in January 1845, its introduction was a sign that Joseph Smith had fallen from grace.[38] But this conviction was not enough to drive him from the Church. Like Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, he too became concerned about Smith's prophetic role, but Rigdon did not come out in open opposition to the practice during Joseph's lifetime. Instead he chose a different course. Marginalized during the Nauvoo period in part because of his continued ill health and in part by his unwillingness to support some of the prophet's more radical teachings, Sidney waited for the time when he could lay claim to this emerging prophetic discourse and restore the Church to its former state.

At least one scholar has argued that Rigdon made his first attempt towards this end shortly before the death of Joseph Smith. Depending on how one reads Sidney Rigdon's April 1844 Conference address, it could serve as evidence that Rigdon now

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[37]McKiernan, *The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness*, 101-125 *passim*; and Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 277-329 *passim*.

[38]*Latter Day Saint's Messenger and Advocate* (Pittsburgh), January 1, 1845. See also Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon*, 368-72; McKiernan, *The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness*, 134-136; Daryl Chase "Sidney Rigdon--Early Mormon," (Master's Thesis, University of Chicago, 1931), 145-9; and Thomas J. Gregory, "Sidney Rigdon: Post Nauvoo," *BYU Studies* 21 (Winter 1981): 51, 58-60.

desired the mantle of leadership.[39] But there is no clear evidence for this assertion, and regardless of its veracity, the fact remains that the death of Joseph Smith gave Sidney his one chance. When Joseph was murdered at Carthage Jail in June 1844, at least one issue remained unsettled in the Church. Who was the anointed successor to the prophet? That was the question posed in August 1844. The answer was crucial, for at stake was the future of the Church. On the one hand was Sidney Rigdon, on the other hand was Brigham Young and the Twelve; and each party involved had their own vision of the Church of Jesus Christ. Two men laid claim to the prophetic mantle; both claimed themselves to be the legitimate successor of the prophet, both presented themselves before the people.

At the time of the martyrdom, Sidney was away in Pittsburgh, having been called to serve a mission there by Joseph Smith. A month later, he arrived in Nauvoo, on August 3. The next day, he preached to the Saints, sharing with them, "a vision which he said the Lord had shown him concerning the situation of the church, and said there must be a guardian appointed to build the church up to Joseph, as he begun it." This was his trump card. If he could speak like the prophet he would become the heir to the throne.[40]

Admittedly, the notes of this sermon are patchy. The entire sermon is reduced to simply a paragraph but the essence of Rigdon's discourse is plain nonetheless. For an instant, Sidney became a prophet too. Recounting his vision to the Saints, Rigdon

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[39]Ronald K. Esplin, "Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve: A Succession of Continuity," *BYU Studies* 21 (Summer 1981): 322-3. Rigdon's remarks are recorded in Smith, *History of the Church*, 6: 288-96.

[40]*The Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, unpublished manuscript, LDS Church Archives, August 4, 1844.

claimed one thing only: "He said he was the identical man that the ancient prophets had sung about, wrote and rejoiced over; and that he was sent to do the identical work that had been the theme of all the prophets in every preceding generation."[41] Here Sidney Rigdon claimed his divine right as successor and leader of the Church of Christ. In his mind, at least, he was to be the next prophet of the Restoration. In other words, in offering himself as a guardian, he was not simply offering himself as a spokesman, but as "the identical man" the prophets of ages past had dreamed about and prophesied of.

Others disagreed, however. Two days later, on August 6, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Wilford Woodruff, and Orson Pratt arrived. Assessing the situation, they called a meeting of the Twelve, the High Council and the High Priests for August 8 in order to hear the case. To this body Rigdon presented his case, declaring again himself to be the guardian of the Church. Said Rigdon:

> It was shown unto me that this church must be built up to Joseph, and that all the blessings we receive must come through him. I have been ordained a spokesman to Joseph, and I must come to Nauvoo and see that the church is governed in a proper manner. Joseph sustains the same relationship to this church as he has always done; no man can be the successor of Joseph.
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> The kingdom is to built up to Jesus Christ through Joseph; there must be revelation still. The martyred Prophet is still the head of this church; every quorum should stand as you stood in your washings and consecrations. I have been consecrated a spokesman to Joseph, and I was commanded to speak for him; the church is not disorganized, though our head is gone.[42]

This time Rigdon chose his words more carefully. There was no mention of prophecy, no mention of terrible things to come, only a vision that he must continue serve as

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[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid., August 8, 1844.

spokesman. Indeed he claimed that "no man can be the successor of Joseph." But we must be careful to read between the lines here. With Joseph gone, Sidney would continue to be the spokesman of the prophet of the Restoration. According to him, "there must be revelation still." But who would give this revelation to the Church? As guardian, Sidney would. In other words, in speaking for Joseph he would become Joseph. Thus, if he couldn't act as prophet, seer, and revelator outright, he would act as the voice--and with Joseph dead, there wasn't much difference.

To this suggestion Brigham Young responded emphatically. After a brief recess, the future leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints took the stand. With all on the line-- the temple, the future course of the Church, the right to employ this prophetic discourse, and the right to speak in the name of the Lord--Brigham replied,

> I do not care who leads the church, even though it were Ann Lee; but one thing I must know, and that is what God says about it. I have the keys and the means of obtaining the mind of God o the subject. . . .
>
> Joseph conferred upon our heads all the keys and powers belonging to the apostleship which he himself held before he was taken away, and no man or set of men can get between Joseph and the Twelve in this world or in the world to come.[43]

In response to Rigdon's claims of divine authority, Brigham stated his own. He with his brethren in the Twelve held the keys of the mysteries of God. Their voice, not Sidney's, was the voice of the Lord.

It was this set of alternatives that the Saints faced on that breezy afternoon of August 8, 1844. They could choose Sidney as a their guardian/prophet, or Brigham Young and the Twelve. At stake was everything Joseph had accomplished. Of course, as

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[43]Ibid. Brigham Young was referring to Ann Lee, the leader of the Shaker movement.

some scholars have argued, many members of the Church already knew what course to follow. The close association between members of the Twelve and the Prophet Joseph Smith together with the Twelve's many years of leadership prepared them to follow Brigham Young and his associates.[44] But past experience was not sufficient to convince the Church as a whole. What was required was a confirmation of the Twelve's divine authority, and it is in this context that an event occurred which settled the issue for many Latter-day Saints. On that day, a number of those present heard in Brigham Young's voice the voice of Joseph Smith. Moreover, they saw in his face, the face of their fallen Prophet. Put simply, the voice of God, once spoken by the prophet Joseph Smith, was now uttered by Brigham Young. To some Latter-day Saints, this transfiguration experience was a major turning point. It convinced them that the Twelve were chosen of God to lead the Church. To others, it was merely a confirmation of that which they already knew to be true.[45] But regardless of these differences of perception, what matters most to us here is the impact this event had on the minds of those who listened. When this transfiguration occurred, according to many of the Saints who witnessed it, the mantle of authority fell from one prophet to another.[46] For them, the choice was now made easy. They knew with certainty that the Twelve should lead. Brigham Young had spoken with the voice of Joseph Smith; therefore Brigham Young was the Lord's

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[44]Esplin, "Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve: A Succession of Continuity," 325.

[45]For a more in-depth study of the range of perceptions regarding the transfiguration experience see Lynne Watkins Jorgensen, "The Mantle of the Prophet Joseph Smith Passes to Brother Brigham: A Collective Spiritual Witness," *BYU Studies* 34:4 (1996-7): 128-34.

[46]Ibid, 125-8. See also James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 216; and Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 166-7

anointed servant. Sidney Rigdon, on the other hand, was left to pick up the pieces of his shattered dream.

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Two men, each competing for the title of prophet, seer, and revelator, squared off to resolve a key question regarding the future course of the Church. Upon one fell the mantle of prophet. The other found himself an outcast and a wanderer. Brigham Young led the Saints west while Rigdon, on the other hand, was excommunicated for continuing to preach to the Saints that he alone held the keys.[47]

But even though Rigdon ultimately failed in his attempt, his story does tells us something about the way in which this prophetic discourse had evolved over time. Earlier opponents such as David Whitmer and Cowdery had juxtaposed a republican or democratic discourse against the symbols of Mormon prophecy. They did so because early in the Church, republican and democratic Christian values still held great sway over the minds of those who believers. But by the end of Joseph Smith's lifetime, the efficacy of these alternative discourses paled in comparison to the influence of the discourse of prophecy. Thus, while some members would continue to leave the Church in vocal opposition to the dictates of Joseph Smith, pitting alternative symbols of democracy or Christian primitivism against the symbols of prophecy, others chose instead to offer an alternative prophetic discourse. They could not reject the dictates of prophetic leadership, but they could still change the course.

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[47] *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, Illinois), 1 October 1844.

Rigdon's protest falls into the second category. He remained true to the faith during Smith's lifetime. But he also waited for the time when he could speak as Joseph once spoke, for a time when his voice would become the voice of God. Put simply, the symbols of a prophetic discourse had become so engrained into his own world-view that dissent was not an option. His only option, then, was to offer a legitimate prophetic alternative to the course Joseph Smith had set. Put simply, he needed to pit prophecy against prophecy, his own vision of the future Church against the vision of Joseph Smith, later claimed by Brigham Young. Of course, Rigdon was not the only Latter-day Saint to attempt this. Many others claimed similar authority after Joseph Smith's death.[48] Of all of them, in fact, J. J. Strang was perhaps the most successful,[49] but Rigdon's close association with the Prophet made him a serious threat to apostolic succession. Rigdon knew what the Saints wanted and needed. He understood the nature of this prophetic discourse, and he used it in offering a competing vision of the future Church.

So why did Young prevail? The answer is simple. Rigdon's alternative did not square with what the Saints believed. In short, he did not speak with the voice of Joseph. What he had overlooked was the fact that the prophetic voice of Joseph Smith did not die. Because many of the Latter-day Saints had come to accept it as the voice of God, it had become an integral part of what I have called an emerging prophetic discourse in early

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[48]For a comprehensive analysis of other possible succession options see Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 187-243; and D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *BYU Studies* 16 (Winter 1976): 187-233.

[49]Strang's prophetic claims are presented in Roger Van Noord, *King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jessee Strang* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 1-11, 33-47. See also Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 209-212.

Mormon religion. To appropriate this discourse, then, one needed not only to speak like a prophet. It was not enough to say "Thus saith the Lord." One also had to act the part of Joseph.

In sum, it was not enough for one to have visions and dreams. One also had to continue the work of the Restoration, not change it. In order to appropriate the mantle of authority, then, Sidney Rigdon had to play the part. In the words of sociologist Max Weber, he had "prove himself to be charismatically qualified."[50] This concept of charismatic leadership, in fact, provides us with a key insight regarding Rigdon's failure. Again, according to Weber,

> the holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission. His success determines whether he finds them. His charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him, he is their master–so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through 'proving' himself.[51]

If we apply this principle in the case of Sidney Rigdon, it becomes clear that in order to win the hearts of the Saints, Rigdon had to espouse the same mission Joseph Smith once taught. But Sidney could not accept this fact. He desired a return to the glory days in Kirtland. Polygamy especially bothered him and he sought to undo the damage Smith had done.[52] In contrast, Brigham Young, together with other members of the Twelve,

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[50]H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 246.

[51]Ibid.

[52]McKiernan, *The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness*, 133. See also Thomas J. Gregory, "Sidney Rigdon: Post Nauvoo," 58-60.

wanted the Church to stay on course and to continue the work of its dead leader.[53] In so doing, Young provided the Saints with a charismatic confirmation of his divine leadership. Of course, we should not believe that this charismatic element was the only factor involved in the decision process. Many issues were involved, but Young's charismatic voice did provided the Saints with another type of confirmation of his divinely appointed role. Whether they heard the voice of Joseph Smith or not, because Young played the part of prophet-leader, he was the one perceived by others as the Lord's anointed.

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After August 8, 1844, Brigham Young's voice in conjunction with other members of the Quorum of Twelve, emerged as the voice of God to his people. As President of that body, he assumed the position of leadership once held by the Prophet Joseph Smith. Of course it would take another three years to reestablish the First Presidency, but the transition of authority had begun. Brigham Young was soon to become the chosen prophet, seer, and revelator to the Church. Those who chose to follow him on August 8 would later choose to accept his words as though they were the voice of God. When he spoke, they would listen.

Over the course of two decades, the Saints had undergone an important evolution. They were no longer American, at least not completely. They were not wholly democratic and they were no longer Christian primitivists though they resembled such

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[53]Esplin, "Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve: A Succession of Continuity," 327-333.

things. Instead, they were Mormon. A new discourse, a prophetic voice had emerged in the crucible of persecution, dissent, hardship, and despair. Despite continued opposition, Joseph Smith had maintained his place as the prophet, seer, and revelator of the restoration, and as a result, over time, this prophetic discourse submerged all others.

It was during Smith's lifetime that this discourse of prophecy became a defining characteristic of Mormon religion. When Joseph Smith spoke, he spoke not as a reformer. He was not a preacher, nor was he a democratic, republican, American. Rather, he became a prophet of God to those who believed. To the Latter-day Saints he appeared as a modern-day Moses. In other words, he became the "prophet" of the Restoration.

It is a title which means far more than the words signify. Because Joseph Smith became a prophet-figure who represented to the Saints the literal personification of God's will, his persona, his character, his values, and his beliefs became an important force shaping and defining the Mormon world-view. In other words, Joseph Smith, his life and teachings, became a discourse in Mormon religion. His voice became the voice of God speaking to God's people. Brigham Young spoke using it. John Taylor spoke using it and all those who have obtained the title of President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have spoken using this same prophetic voice.

True, over the decades and centuries the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has altered its course. Some things have changed, sometimes remarkably. Intermingled with the teachings of Joseph Smith are the teachings of other latter-day Mormon prophets. In 1890, for instance, Wilford Woodruff brought an end to the

practice of plural marriage, at least officially. Eighty-eight years later, Spencer W. Kimball revealed that males of African descent could now hold the Mormon priesthood. In other words, the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not exactly the same Church that existed in Joseph Smith's day, but despite these many changes, one thing has remained constant. At the center of this American-born religion is a prophetic discourse, the voice of a prophet figure that many believe to be the voice of God.

CHAPTER THREE

LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Parley P Pratt's *Key to the Science of Theology* was a first in Mormon literature. In it, Pratt offered what few others have accomplished even today, a comprehensive examination of early nineteenth-century LDS theology exploring Mormon perspectives on a wide range of religious subjects including the creation, the resurrection, heavenly visions, and marriage and procreation.[1] Indeed, the book is remarkably multifaceted in its scope. But for this reason it suggests to us something about early Mormon perceptions of their surrounding world. Investigating the various symbols used by Pratt to describe his Mormon faith, we can gain some sense of the way in which early Latter-day Saints ordered their world, and with this information in hand, we may better understand their behaviors and their actions.

One passage, for example, reveals something about Pratt's perspectives regarding the American nation. Discussing the circumstances surrounding the Restoration, he explained:

> The beginning of the present century gave birth to those chosen instruments who were destined to hold the keys of restoration for the renovation of the world.
>
> The United States of America was the favored nation raised up, with institutions adapted to the protection and free development of the necessary truths, and their practical results. And that Great Prophet, Apostle, and Martyr--

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[1]An excellent discussion of Pratt's literary talent and contributions is provided by Peter Crawley in his foreward to *The Essential Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), xv-xxiv.

JOSEPH SMITH,
was the Elias, the Restorer, the presiding Messenger, holding the keys of the "*Dispensation of the fulness of times*."[2]

Key to the Science of Theology was first published in England, in 1855, eleven years after the martyrdom. The Saints were now settled in the Salt Lake Valley and in a sense, their "quest for refuge" from American pluralism was over.[3] Yet even after their escape from the American mainstream, Pratt still wrote in glowing terms of his American nation. In his theological world, an important link existed between America, the nation, and Joseph Smith, the prophet of the Restoration. America and Joseph Smith were both chosen: God's favored nation and God's favored seer. The question we must ask is why?

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In joining these two concepts, a chosen nation with a chosen prophet, Pratt's *Key to the Science of Theology* highlights one of the more intriguing aspects of early Mormon religion. The rise of Mormonism, with its emphasis on prophecy and modern revelation, represented the emergence of a new discourse in America, and as a result, LDS religion differed from other Christian denominations in nineteenth-century America in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Recognizing this fact, some historians of Mormon religion

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[2]Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Liverpool, 1855), 76.

[3]The LDS response to American pluralism has been highlighted in Marvin Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), xi-xxii. See also Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 133-52.

have argued that Mormon religion was exceptional in its American context.[4] To them, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints represented a new religious tradition in America. Put simply, in their view, the Mormon Joseph Smith was not wholly American.

But neither was he wholly un-American. Within an emerging Mormon discourse, other "non-Mormon" discourses remained intact. As noted in the last chapter, from almost the beginning of the Restoration, a prophetic discourse developed in early Mormon religion--but while this new discourse evolved, many other symbols and values still rang true in the hearts of early Latter-day Saints.

Such was the case for American republicanism. To Joseph Smith, for example, the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and the United States Constitution comprised sacred symbols of a great republican experiment. In his eyes, all men were created equal. He too believed that "all men" had certain inalienable rights given to them by God. Time after time, Joseph Smith spoke with an American tongue similar to that spoken by other liberal Americans of his generation. And Smith was not alone in his convictions. As *Key to the Science of Theology* reveals, even in 1855, long after Smith's death, American symbols persisted in early Mormon religion--even though Mormonism represented in many respects a radical departure from standard American values and ideals.

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[4]See for example Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 7-8; Jan Shipps, *Mormonism the Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 67-85; Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992): 196; and Daniel G. Reid, ed., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), 776-7.

Considered as a whole, such symbols comprise an American discourse in early Mormon religion. It was not necessarily the same American discourse employed by non-Mormons, but it had important implications for early Latter-day Saints nonetheless. For one, its symbols affected the way Mormons responded to the world around them. In other words, this discourse, like the discourse of prophecy, determined early Mormon behavior.

But it did more than that. The symbols of this Mormon American discourse were oftentimes at odds with other symbols within the larger Mormon framework. For example, many Latter-day Saints revered Joseph Smith as the only man capable of speaking for God to His people. He stood supreme as their chosen leader and near the end of his life he was anointed as their king. But while these early Saints embraced an increasingly hierarchical and theocratic ecclesiastical structure, they still accepted many of the fundamental tenets of American republican democracy. The result was that early Mormons had to carry out a balancing act of sorts. They had to find a way to reconcile their belief in a prophet of God with their acceptance of America democratic values, and what is remarkable is that they succeeded. Rather than rejecting their American heritage in favor of their Mormon identity, they embraced disparate sets of social and cultural symbols that were sometimes complementary and oftentimes not, and what emerged from the resulting tension was a synthesis, a Mormon American discourse, not completely American, but not completely Mormon either. Put simply, the symbols of American democracy remained an important element of the Mormon American world view.

Canonized in Mormon scripture and reinforced by Joseph Smith's response to

persecution and opposition by other Americans, this discourse did not disappear. Instead, it survived to become an important force shaping early LDS religion.

The Synthesis of an Mormon American Discourse

To trace the existence of an American discourse in early Mormon theology we must begin with a brief examination of the *Book of Mormon*. Though many Latter-day Saints believe this book to be a translation from ancient gold plates, we cannot overlook that the fact that at least some of its passages appear to support nineteenth-century American cultural ideals.[5] In 1829, for example, while translating from the gold plates, Joseph Smith happened upon a passage of scripture authored by an ancient American prophet by the name of Nephi. Writing around 600 BC, Nephi described the future course of the New World:

> And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters; and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land [ie. the New World].
>
> And it came to pass that I beheld the Spirit of God, that it wrought upon other Gentiles; and they went forth out of captivity, upon the many waters.
>
> And it came to pass that I beheld many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise; and I beheld the wrath of God, that is was upon the seed of my brethren; and they were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten.
>
> And I beheld the Spirit of the Lord, that it was upon the Gentiles, and they did prosper and obtain the land for their inheritance; and I beheld that they were

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[5]Several scholars of Mormon religion have pointed to the existence of American symbols within the Book of Mormon. See for example, Thomas O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 22-40; and Kenneth Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830-1846* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 18-39. For a critique of this approach, see also Richard Bushman, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," *BYU Studies* 17:1 (Autumn 1976): 3-20.

white, and exceedingly fair and beautiful, like unto my people before they were slain.

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles who had gone forth out of captivity did humble themselves before the Lord; and the power of the Lord was with them.

And I beheld that their mother Gentiles were gathered together upon the waters, and upon the land also, to battle against them.

And I beheld that the power of God was with them, and also that the wrath of God was upon all those that were gathered together against them to battle.

And I, Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles that had gone out of captivity were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of all other nations.[6]

This brief passage of LDS scripture offered early Latter-day Saints with a thumbnail sketch of something very familiar to most Americans. Put simply, it provided them with an outline of the basics of American history, from Columbus to the American Revolution. By so doing, it also canonized various elements of the American experience. According to an ancient Nephite prophet, America was a promised land and the American people (referred to as "Gentiles" in this particular passage) were a promised people whom God had delivered out of the hands of their "mother Gentiles," the imperial armies of Great Britain.

According to this ancient American text, the land upon which the Church would later be restored was a chosen one. Moreover, the American Revolution was a war not unlike those fought by ancient Israel against the wicked Philistines. From a scriptural perspective, then, the American landscape and the American Revolution became sacred symbols within an emerging Mormon theology. Of course, this belief was not unique to Mormons. Many other Americans believed in this divine destiny long before Joseph

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[6]1 Nephi 13:12-19.

Smith became a prophet of God.[7] But what is important to remember here is that some aspects of the American experience received canonical status within the *Book of Mormon* itself. In other words, what existed as folk belief in the minds of other Americans became scriptural doctrine to those who embraced the tenets of early Mormon religion.

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This canonization of American symbols within the *Book of Mormon* text was an important first step. Using the *Book of Mormon* as evidence, Latter-day Saints viewed the American Revolution as a holy war pitting the forces of good against evil. They also believed the America landscape to be a promised land given by God to his chosen people. In the October 1832 issue of the LDS *Evening and Morning Star*, for example, William Phelps referred to the same passage in 1 Nephi 13 as evidence for his belief that the Lord had blessed those who fought for American independence. As Phelps noted, "we were at war for our liberty, . . . and it has been told us that our ancestors prayed to the Lord, for assistance, and he granted it, and we believe it, for it is thus recorded in the Book of Mormon: . . ."[8] In a later issue of the same paper, dated March 1833, Phelps pointed to another Book of Mormon passage, Alma 45:15-16, to augment his claim that the America

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[7]See for instance John Winthrop's sermon entitled "A Modell of Christian Charity" in Robert C. Winthrop's *Life and Letters of John Winthrop,* 2d ed., vol. 2, *From his Embarkation for New England in 1630, with the Charter and Company of the Massachusetts Bay, to his Death in 1649* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1869): 18-20. See also Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 137-153 *passim.*

[8]*Evening and Morning Star* (Independence, Missouri), October 1832.

continent was to be a chosen land to those who acted in righteousness before God.

According to him,

> The continent of America is a choice land above all others, and ever since men have dealt upon it, if they were virtuous, and walked uprightly before the Lord, they have been blessed: When they have not done so, they have been visited with calamities.
>
> Perhaps few are aware, that the situation of the country, is still the same, for God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.[9]

In each of the above cases, a passage of the Book of Mormon became a proof text for mainstream American symbols. In so doing, the Book of Mormon provided an important foundation for a Mormon American discourse. But even with the appearance of the Book of Mormon in 1829, another important element of the American experience was still missing. Not yet incorporated into LDS theology was a republican language of equality and rights.

The context for this next addition is somewhat different from that leading to the canonization of the land and the Revolution. The Book of Mormon translation process had been a difficult one to be sure. Treasure seekers wanting to see or steal the mysterious golden plates hounded Joseph Smith continually. But the persecution he faced in New York and Pennsylvania paled in comparison to what the early Saints would later face in Missouri, and it was this new level of violence that would set the stage for the inclusion of an American language of liberty into early LDS religion.

Less than a year after the Church was established at Fayette, New York, the Mormons found themselves in Kirtland, Ohio. God had commanded them to leave New

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[9]*Evening and Morning Star* (Independence, Missouri), March 1833.

York in December 1830, and in response, the Saints moved *en masse* to their new home in the backwoods of Ohio. But Kirtland was not to be their final destination; and while these Saints removed to Ohio, they also dreamed of a future Zion somewhere in the west.

The spot for this future city of God was revealed on July 20, 1831. It was on that day that the Prophet Joseph Smith designated Independence, Missouri to become the Saints' new Jerusalem. With this said, many Latter-day Saints began their preparations for another move. Not all went at once, however. They had been counseled not to immigrate to Zion until they were prepared both financially and spiritually--but enough of these Mormon Saints settled in Missouri to cause growing concern among many of the non-Mormons settlers who had lived there before it became the place which God prepared. The Latter-day Saints with their curious religious views, their millennial rhetoric, and their anti-slavery upbringing bothered the old settlers immensely [10]--but despite the tensions, an uneasy peace prevailed until charges surfaced which convinced non-Mormon settlers that the Mormons wanted to control the economy and local politics.[11]

The outcome of this growing unease between Mormon and non-Mormon settlers was increasing violence, and in November 1833, the Latter-day Saints were finally expelled from Jackson County. In response to this action, Joseph Smith received a revelation, dated December 16. It was a revelation of counsel, but more importantly, in

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[10]Terryl L Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3-9, 40-47; T. Edgar Lyon, "Independence, Missouri, and the Mormons, 1827-1833," *BYU Studies* 13 (Autumn 1972): 17-18; and Winn, 85-105

[11]Richard Bushman, "Mormon Persecutions in Missouri, 1833," *BYU Studies* 3 (Autumn 1960): 14-16.

providing counsel, it also set in stone the relationship between the American nation and the Church of Jesus Christ. The revelation read as follows:

> And again I say unto you, those who have been scattered by their enemies, it is my will that they should continue to importune for redress, and redemption, by the hands of those who are placed as rulers and are in authority over you--According to the laws and constitution of the people, which I have suffered to be established, and should be maintained for the rights and protection of all flesh, according to just and holy principles; that every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable for his own sins in the day of judgment. Therefore, it is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another. And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose, and redeemed the land by the shedding of blood.[12]

No more clear statement can be found which indicates how fully American republicanism was incorporated into Mormon religion. In this counsel, given by the prophet Joseph Smith to the struggling Saints in Missouri, Smith set the stage for later Mormon actions against the Missouri militias. According to God, the Saints were to appeal to the government. They were to work within the system not from without because the "laws and constitution" were intended to protect their rights as citizens.

But this was not all that the revelation implied. In effect, it canonized two of America's central texts, the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. As the wording of the revelation made clear, the Constitution of the United States had been "established" by God "by the hands of wise men." Its principles allowed all men to act freely "according to [the] moral agency" which God had bestowed upon them. Furthermore, according to Smith at least, no "man should be in bondage" to

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[12]Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. Brigham H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 1:463. See also *Doctrine and Covenants* 101:76-80.

any other. In other words, according to the Lord's chosen prophet, all men were equal; and with this said, a language of equality and rights became a central theme within the Mormon American discourse.

Amidst persecution and violence perpetrated by both sides, Joseph Smith completed the link between Mormon theology and an American ideology. Pushed to the limits by angry mobocrats, the Saints were directed to defend themselves in part by reaffirming their republican identity. Under such pressures, they could have easily repudiated their American heritage. After all, their enemies operated under the guise of American republicanism too.[13] But the Saints refused to abandon their heritage. Their prophet counseled them differently. Rather than abandon all ties to American ideals and values, in response to this first wave of violence came a revelation embracing various symbols of American republicanism. Added to the many sacred stories of Mormonism--Bible stories, Book of Mormon stories, the Restoration story, and so on--Smith added another, more modern, story. According to him, God had established the Constitution to protect the rights of the people, rights alluded to in the Declaration of Independence as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. American liberty was an eternal truth and as such it now became Mormon truth.

The Survival

By 1833, an American discourse had become fully incorporated into early Mormon religion. The Prophet Joseph Smith had provided early Latter-day Saints with

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[13]Winn, 4.

an important example. Following his prophetic counsels as contained in the December 16 revelation, they could now believe themselves to be both Mormon and American. As American patriots, they too could embrace the symbols of a Mormon American discourse. Thus Oliver Cowdery could remind the Saints in the February 1834 issue of the *Evening and Morning Star* that "Our constitution, we know, guarantees to all the liberty of speech, the liberty of the Press, and the liberty of conscience: . . ."[14] He could also write in the October 1834 issue of the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, that the Mormons like other Americans accepted the principles of liberty and equality. According to him,

> We believe that all men are born free and equal; that no man, combination of men, or government of men, have power or authority to compel or force others to embrace any system of religion, or religious creed, or to use force or violence to prevent others from enjoying their own opinions, or practicing the same, so long as they do not molest or disturb others in theirs, in a manner to deprive them of their privileges as free citizens–or of worshiping God as they choose, and that any attempt to the contrary is an assumption unwarrantable in the revelations of heaven, and strikes at the root of civil liberty, and is a subversion of all equitable principles between man and man.[15]

In each case, Oliver echoed the same sentiments as Joseph Smith had articulated in previous revelations. Like Smith, Cowdery believed that Saints were both Mormon and American; and it was this synthesis of values, canonized in Mormon scripture and reinforced in the press, that would determine in part later Mormon responses to violence and persecution.

But the acceptance of various American symbols is only one chapter in a more complex story. In 1833, this synthesis went unchallenged. The revelation which tied

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[14] *Evening and Morning Star* (Kirtland, Ohio), February 1834.

[15] *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio), October 1834.

American and Mormon symbols so closely together came after the expulsion from Jackson County had taken place and the Saints believed rather optimistically that things would change for the better. After all, as the December 16 revelation had stated, the Constitution was established by God for the benefit of all men. Thus, they still believed rather naively that it would serve them as it had other Americans of the same generation.

Subsequent events would challenge this assertion, however, and by so doing, would put the synthesis of prophetic and democratic discourses to the test. In 1838, just five years after their expulsion from Zion, the Saints found themselves embroiled in a second round of hostilities against their enemies in Missouri. Rumors of Mormon aggression, increasingly harsh LDS rhetoric, and Mormon paramilitary activities aroused fear among non-believers and convinced many that the possibility of civil conflict between the Mormons and non-Mormons was real. The result was renewed violence, and believing the Mormons to be in "open rebellion to the state," governor Lilburn Boggs then signed an executive order calling upon the state militia to expel the Latter-day Saints from the entire state of Missouri.[16] Making matters even worse, in 1839, just one year after the Saints had abandoned their homes in Missouri, the United States Congress and the President of the United States refused Joseph Smith's attempts to seek redress for their losses.

This treatment by other Americans seriously weakened the Saints' national affinities. But such factors did not act alone. Other forces, too, threatened the existence

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[16]Alexander L. Baugh, "A Call to Arms: The Mormon Defense of Northern Missouri" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1996), 68-101.

of an American discourse in Mormon religion. Adding to the pressure was the development within the Church of a new type of political kingdom. Best illustrated by the creation of the Council of Fifty in 1844, this kingdom became an alternate political form which was in many respects antithetical to the fundamental tenets of Jacksonian America.

Each of these separate incidents challenged the synthesis of Mormon and American values which had come together in 1833. As a result of such circumstances, the Latter-day Saints could easily have rejected the values of America–but again they did not. Rather, the period after 1833 was a time of survival. Despite the many challenges the Saints faced from within and without, they refused to abandon the synthesis of two competing discourses. Though severely weakened, the Mormon American discourse remained.

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This story of survival can best be illustrated in the writings of Joseph Smith. Examples of this same phenomenon can be detected in the writings of other early Saints. Eliza R Snow's poetry remained remarkably patriotic until the end of her life. Parley P. Pratt could still write of the United States as God's favored nation long after the Saints had been driven from their homes in Nauvoo. Oliver Cowdery and Sidney Rigdon too presented themselves as sons of liberty and republican Americans despite the

persecutions and violence they witnessed around them.[17] But as the first prophet of the Restoration, Smith was perhaps the most important theologian of the nineteenth-century Mormonism. His words shaped the thinking of the Saints more than any other. In their eyes, he was "a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, and elder of the church through the will of God the Father, and the grace of your Lord Jesus Christ."[18] Smith was to be God's chosen servant. Through him, the ordinances and principles of the gospel of Christ would be revealed. In other words, the Mormon prophet was the man responsible for the work of the Restoration. For this reason, his views served as a beacon guiding and influencing the ideas of other early Latter-day Saints. Thus, it is to his writings that we must turn if we want to trace the persistence of American symbols in early LDS theology.

Joseph Smith had been absent during the Jackson County incident and it would be fair to argue that his idealism about America as expressed in the December 1833 revelation was relatively uncolored by the harsh violence and persecution experienced by the Saints in Jackson County, Missouri. But five years later, Smith was an active participant. In the second wave of hostilities between Mormon and non-Mormons in

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[17]See for example Eliza R. Snow, *Poems, Religious, Historical, and Political*, vol 1 (Liverpool, 1856), 59-60, 77-81265-266; Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985), 149, 152, 155; Parley P. Pratt, *An Appeal to the Inhabitants of the State of New York* (Nauvoo, Illinois: John Taylor, 1840), 1-6; Parley P. Pratt, "Declaration of Independence--Constitution of the United States--Discovery, Colonization, and Progress of America--Despotic Nations--Influence of American for the Universal Prevalence of Liberty," *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 1 (Liverpool, 1854), 139-43 *passim*. An example of Oliver Cowdery's republican discourse can be found in his letter to the High Council at Far West as printed in Smith, *History*, 3:17-18. Sidney Rigdon's most powerful republican oration was his 4th of July sermon, *Oration delivered by Mr. S. Rigdon, on the 4th of July, 1838* (Far West, Missouri: Journal Office, 1838), 3-4. See also Winn, *Exiles*, 121-2, 132-3.

[18]Smith, *History of the Church*, 1: 78. See also *Doctrine and Covenants* 21:1, 4-5.

Missouri, he too played a role in the sufferings, the atrocities, and the mutual animosities expressed by opposing parties. Making matters worse, after the conflict ended and the Saints surrendered to the Missouri militia, he and a number of important Church leaders were rounded up and imprisoned.

Separated from his people, except for those few men who languished with him in Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith had ample opportunity to change his mind about the relationship between Mormon religion and America. His experience in Missouri could easily have persuaded him that Missouri conflict was, at its very heart, a clash of ideals--the values of other Americans living in Missouri pitted against his own. But Joseph was not ready to abandon his national identity. While in Liberty Jail, he chose instead to reaffirm the position he had taken five years previously. In fact, in a letter dated March 20, 1839, parts of which were later added to the *Doctrine and Covenants*, we find a clear attempt by Joseph Smith to maintain the synthesis of two alternate discourses.[19] The letter read:

> Our religeon is betwean us and our God their religeon is betwean them and their God there is a tie from God that should be exercised to wards those of our faith who walk uprightly which is peculiar to itself but it is without prejudice but gives scope to the mind which inables us to conduct ourselves with grater liberality to word all others that are not of our faith than what they exercise to wards one another these principal[s] approximate nearer to the mind of God because it is like God or God like There is principal also which we are bound to be exercised with that is in common with all men such as government and laws and regulations in

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[19]In 1876 various sections of this letter were added to the *Doctrine and Covenants* by Orson Pratt. See Robert J. Woodford, "The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants," vol. 3 (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 1566-1568.

> the civil conserns of life this principal garentees to all parties sects and demominations and clases of religeon equal coherent indefeasible rights . . .[20]

A language of liberty had remained intact. According to this Mormon prophet, religion was between man and God alone. Furthermore, Smith taught that all men whether Mormon or non-Mormon had the right to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences. To him, this right was a fundamental liberty of all Americans. More importantly, however, the Prophet pointed out that this principle of liberty was "God Like," in effect reminding the Saints that it was integral part of the Mormon gospel.

The letter did not stop with a reaffirmation of Mormon views regarding liberty, however. Next followed an encomium to the Constitution. Again echoing the sentiments of the 1833 revelation, Joseph Smith noted that

> the constitution of the Unit[ed] States is a glorious standard it is founded [in] the wisdom of God it is a heavenly banner it is to all those who are privilaged with the sweats of its liberty like the cooling shades and refreshing watters of a greate rock in thirsty and a weary land it is like a greate tree under whose branches men from evry clime can be shielded from the burning raies of an inclemant sun. . .[21]

According to the prophet, then, the Constitution was a "heavenly banner" shielding all Americans and protecting their liberties and rights. To it the Saints could still turn for comfort from "the burnings raies of an inclemant sun," because they too were American. Adhering to the same stand he had taken in 1833, Smith was certain that the Constitution and the American government would favor his people. He still believed that the

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[20]Joseph Smith, "To the Church of Latterday Saints at Quincy, Illinois, and Scattered Abroad, and to Bishop Partridge in Particular, March 20, 1839," in *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), 406. The spelling has been preserved as in the original. See also Smith, *History*, 3: 304.

[21]Smith, "To the Church of Latterday Saints at Quincy, Illinois, and Scattered Abroad, and to Bishop Partridge in Particular, March 20, 1839," 406-7. See also Smith, *History*, 3:304.

Constitution was established by God and that by appealing to it the Saints would find peace.

By so presenting the Constitution, Joseph Smith reassured the Saints of their own sense of American-ness. In his eyes, the Mormon American synthesis could still hold. The Mormon experience in Missouri had not dampened his love for the symbols of American liberty. Instead, in his view,

> Notwithstanding we see what we see and we feel what [we] feel and know what we know yet that fruit [of the Constitution] is no les presious and delisious to our taist we cannot be waened from the milk nether can we be drawn from the breast neither will we deny our relegeon because of the hand of oppression but we will hold on untill death we say that God is true that the constitution of the united States is [true] that the Bible is true that the book of m[ormon] is true that the book of covenants [is] tru that Christ is true...[22]

In an early version of what would later become the Mormon articles of faith, Joseph Smith included the United States Constitution as a principle of the Mormon gospel. In this dark hour, then, the synthesis of Mormon and American symbols held firm. Joseph Smith had spoken as a prophet of God to his people--but he also acted as an American patriot.

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Later events would weaken Joseph Smith's more positive tones, however. When he first wrote the March 20 letter, Joseph Smith was confident the United States operating under the banner of its glorious Constitution, would defend the Mormon cause. For this

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[22]Smith, "To the Church of Latterday Saints at Quincy, Illinois, and Scattered Abroad, and to Bishop Partridge in Particular, March 20, 1839," 407. See also Smith, *History*, 3: 304.

reason, in the winter of 1839, after his escape from Liberty, Smith followed the same advice and counsel he had given to the beleaguered Saints in Jackson County six years earlier. With a small party of fellow believers, the Prophet traveled to Washington, D.C. to seek federal support against Missouri. Unfortunately, the journey was overly optimistic. The powers of the federal government were considered by many to be quite limited. Most politicians still favored the view that such matters were best left to the states, and when Smith arrived in the capital, his pleas appeared to him to fall on deaf ears.[23]

As a result of this treatment, Joseph became far less certain of the relationship which existed between America and the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. One scholar, in fact, has argued that President Van Buren's refusal to act all but extinguished Smith's flame of patriotism.[24] This is somewhat of an overstatement; but at the same time, it is true that the Prophet's experience in Washington convinced him that a republican form of government could not respond effectively to the plight of his people. With this in mind, he began to envision the not-to-distant end of the American nation. On March 4, 1840, for example, after having returned home, the Prophet recorded his impressions of the state of affairs in Washington:

> Having witnessed many vexatious movements in government officers, whose sole object should be the peace and prosperity and happiness of the whole people . . . I discovered that popular clamor and personal aggrandizement were the ruling principles of those in authority; and my heart faints within me when I see, by the

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[23]James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Deseret Book Company, 1992), 158-9.

[24]Marvin S. Hill, "Quest for Refuge: An Hypothesis as to the Social Origins and Nature of the Mormon Political Kingdom," *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975):19.

> visions of the Almighty, the end of this nation, if she continues to disregard the cries and petitions of her virtuous citizens, as she has done, and is now doing.[25]

Smith had become alienated. He no longer trusted the government to act because, in his eyes, it had been subverted by wicked men seeking "personal aggrandizement" and power. The "cries" of "virtuous citizens" went unheard and if unchecked, the inevitable result of this situation would be destruction and desolation.

This sense of alienation became even more prevalent in Joseph Smith's later years. It is this same pessimism, in fact, which permeates another article by Smith which later appeared in the *Times and Seasons,* entitled "The Government of God." Unlike the earlier revelations in 1833 and 1838, there is no encomium to the glorious principles of the American republic in this article and no celebration of the symbols of American democracy. Instead, within its pages we find rough outlines for a new world order very different from the type of government established by the Constitution of the United States.

First published in 1842, "The Government of God" was Joseph Smith's attempt to explain the differences between the governments of men and the government of the Almighty. According to him,

> the government of the Almighty, has always been very dissimilar to the government of men; whether we refer to his religious government, or to the government of nations. The government of God has always tended to promote peace, unity, harmony, strength and happiness; while that of man has been productive of confusion, disorder, weakness and misery.

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[25]Smith, *History of the Church,* 4:89.

The comparison is a revealing one, especially considering the Saints' previous experience in Washington. As the Prophet now knew, the governments of men exalted certain interests at the expense of the innocent and "the blood of the oppressed." The government of God, on the other hand, was designed to "establish peace and good will" and to "promote the principles of eternal truth" and to "bring about a state of things that shall unite man to his fellow man."[26]

Having contrasted human and divine forms of political administration, Smith next made an observation of sorts about the future course of manmade governments, no matter what their form:

> The great and wise of ancient days have failed in all their attempts to promote eternal power, peace, and happiness. Their nations have crumbled to pieces; their thrones have been cast down in their turn; and their cities and their mightiest works of art have been annihilated; . . . .Monarchical, aristocratic, and republican forms of government, of their various kinds and grades, have in their turns been raised to dignity and prostrated in dust. The plans of the greatest politicians, the wisest senators, and most profound statesmen have been exploded; and the proceedings of the greatest chieftains, the bravest generals and the wisest kings have fallen to the ground.

According to Joseph Smith, the fate of all nations, whether monarchical, aristocratic, or republican was ultimate ruin. No government would escape the calamity, not even his own. In fact, in his mind, the process had already begun. In his view, "Our nation which possesses greater resources than any other, is rent from center to circumference, with party strife, political intrigue, and sectional interest; our counselors are panic struck, our legislators are astonished, and our senators are confounded. . . ."[27]

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[26]*Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, Illinois), 15 July 1842.

[27]Ibid.

Joseph Smith had learned from sad experience that the United States was fallible. Though God himself had established it, the American nation like all other nations was led by men and subject to their faults. Recognizing this fact, Smith then proposed an alternate solution to the problem. According to him, the evils of human government could be solved by the creation of a theocracy. In contrast to the chaos created by mortal governments was a government led by the great Jehovah. In his eyes, "the design of Jehovah, from the commencement of the world" was "to regulate the affairs of the world in his own time; to stand as head of the universe, and take the reigns of government into his hand." In other words, the government of God would be led by Christ himself; and as Smith now believed, only when this theocracy was in place, would "judgment will be administered in righteousness."[28] In other words, in 1842, Joseph Smith expressed his intention to replace American symbols with more religious ones. Absent from this document was his veneration of the Constitution and the principles of liberty. Rather, the Prophet reminded the Saints that the only true form of government would be the government of Christ.

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In 1842, the synthesis of Mormon and American values which emerged in 1833 was threatened. Smith had become convinced that the only possible solution to the problems of this world was a theocracy. Put simply, by 1842, the hope of a godly kingdom had begun to eclipse the notion of American liberty in the mind of this early

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[28]Ibid.

Mormon prophet. Considering this change of values, in fact, it should surprise no one that in Nauvoo Joseph Smith began to establish a political kingdom radically different from the political forms more familiar to republican Americans. But at the same time, we must be careful not to accept wholeheartedly the notion that Mormons were no longer American simply because of this change in focus. Though a new set of political institutions did emerge during the Nauvoo era, older symbols still remained intact and in force.

Perhaps the best evidence of an emerging political kingdom is in the establishment of the Council of Fifty.[29] Created officially on March 11, 1844; its roots go back further to April 7, 1842, when Joseph Smith received a revelation outlining the Council's official name and purpose.[30] Why the Prophet waited almost two years to act is unclear, but regardless of the Council's origins, the fact remains that during the time it existed, it served as an alternate form of government which was in many respects antithetical to the American ideals embraced by Mormon Americans in 1833 and reaffirmed in 1838.[31] For one, the Council of Fifty was to be organized under a "living" Constitution which resembled the Constitution of the England more than it did the

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[29]For a more in-depth study of the Mormon kingdom of God and the importance of the Council of Fifty to this kingdom, see D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 226-240 passim, 294-96.

[30]Andrew F. Ehat, "'It Seems Like Heaven Began on Earth': Joseph Smith and the Constitution of the Kingdom of God," *BYU Studies* 20 (1980): 254-257; D. Michael Quinn, "The Council of Fifty and its Members, 1844 to 1945," *BYU Studies* 20 (1980): 164.

[31]D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 122-125.

Constitution of the United States.[32] This was only a minor difference, however. An even greater threat to the established order was the fact that this body was intended to act as a theocratic rather than republican form of government, having at its head an earthly king whose voice alone represented the mind and will of a more heavenly king.

With the establishment of the Council of Fifty, a new political tradition was in the making which represented a major challenge to many long-held symbols within the Mormon American discourse. But before we sound the death knell for this discourse in Mormon religion, we must take another look at this emerging political institution. Admittedly, the Council was un-American in its forms, but despite this incongruity, what is even more amazing about this political experiment is the fact that within this secret world government symbols of a Mormon American discourse flourished. For instance, during the time Joseph Smith established the Kingdom of God on earth and crowned himself King, he still viewed himself as an American patriot. In the first session of the Council, the Prophet discussed,

> the best policy for this people to adopt to obtain their rights from the nation and insure protection for themselves and children; and to secure a resting place in the mountains or some uninhabited region, where we can enjoy the liberty of conscience guaranteed to us by the Constitution of our country, rendered doubly sacred by the precious blood of our fathers, and denied to us by the present authorities, who have smuggled themselves into power in the States and Nation.[33]

In exploring ways in which the Saints could obtain their liberties, Joseph Smith's actions indicate his continued acceptance of various American symbols in early Mormon religion.

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[32]Ehat, 257-261; Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 131.

[33]Smith, *History,* 6:261.

In the Council of Fifty, the Mormon prophet spoke of the "Constitution of our country" and of "the liberty of conscience . . . rendered doubly sacred by the precious blood of our fathers." He did not say anything of the "Constitution of *their* country" and the "blood of *their* fathers." This choice of words is important. It reminds us that Joseph Smith still believed himself to be a American patriot. True, he had established a political kingdom which was itself antithetical to the principles of republicanism, but his words and his actions within that body betray no intention to abdicate his American identity. Following this same example, other Latter-day Saints came to believe that they too could be members-in-good-standing of the American nation even while they embraced the concept of Mormon theocratic rule.

Now it is still true that the Council was different in many respects from other American institutions. There is no denying the fact that it was radically different from other forms of American government, but even in this secret council, the existence of which alarmed many outsiders because of its un-American character,[34] Joseph Smith still could speak positively of the Constitution and of the rights guaranteed to all Americans by the "precious blood of our fathers." In other words, even though Smith felt himself alienated from an American form of government, he still employed the symbols and values of his more American discourse. Yes, these symbols had become less important--but they remained intact. In other words, though the Council of Fifty challenged and radically diminished the influence of this American discourse in Mormon theology, it did

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[34]Klaus Hansen, "The Political Kingdom of God as a Cause for Mormon-Gentile Conflict," *BYU Studies* 2 (1960): 245. See also Kenneth W. Godfrey, "Causes of Mormon Non-Mormon Conflict in Hancock County, Illinois, 1839-1846" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young, 1967), 201-2.

not extinguish it completely. In Smith's eyes at least, even in the Council of Fifty, he could find some way to define himself as both Mormon and American.

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Council minutes are not the only evidence for the persistence of American symbols, however. If the stated mission of the Council of Fifty was in some ways ironic because of its inclusion of two seemingly incompatible sets of political values, what is even more remarkable about this period in Church history is the fact that the Council was also established to support Joseph Smith's campaign for President.

The plan to run for President was concocted early in 1844 after a letter writing campaign to possible Presidential candidates proved unsatisfactory. In November of 1843, Smith had written to John Calhoun, Lewis Cass, Henry Clay, Richard Johnson, and Martin Van Buren, desiring to know how each man would treat the Mormons if elected. In December, Calhoun, Clay, and Cass responded,; but in Smith's view none of these men gave a correct answer. None seemed willing to act on behalf of this small and unpopular minority and in response to this cool reception, Smith decided that he would need to run.[35]

Smith made the decision in consultation with the Twelve, probably in January 1844.[36] The next order of business was to draw up a platform. This was accomplished

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[35]Richard D. Poll. "Joseph Smith and the Presidency, 1844," *Dialogue* 3:3 (Autumn 1968): 18; Edward G. Thompson, "A Study of the Political Involvements in the Career of Joseph Smith" (MA Thesis, Brigham Young University, 1966), 133-48. See also Smith, *History,* 6: 63-65, 155-6, 376.

[36]See George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 125.

over the next few weeks with the help of William Phelps and on February 7, 1844 the platform was presented to the Saints in pamphlet form. Entitled "Joseph Smith's Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States," the platform began with an appeal to certain American values:

> Born in a land of liberty, and breathing an air uncorrupted with the sirocco of barbarous climes, I ever feel a double anxiety for the happiness of all men both in times and in eternity.
>
> My cogitations like Daniel's, have for a long time troubled me, when I viewed the condition of men throughout the world, and more especially in this boasted realm, where the Declaration of Independence "holds these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal: that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; . . ."[37]

Citing the Declaration of Independence as his text, Smith again situated himself as an American patriot concerned with the protection of American rights. With this said, Smith continued by expressing his view of what the American political system was intended to accomplish:

> The wisdom which ought to characterize the freest, wisest and most noble nation of the nineteenth century, should, like the sun in his meridian splendor, warm every object beneath its rays: and the main efforts of her officers, who are nothing more or less than the servants of the people ought to be directed to ameliorate the condition of all: black or white, bond or free; . . .
>
> Our common country presents to all men the same advantages; the same facilities; the same prospects; the same honors; and the same rewards: and without hypocrasy, the Constitution...meant just what it said, without reference to color or condition: ad infinitum. The aspirations and expectations of a virtuous people, environed with so wise, so liberal, so deep, so broad, and so high a charter of equal rights, as appears in said Constitution, ought to be treated by those to whom the administration of the laws are intrusted, with as much sanctity, as the prayers of the saints are treated in heaven. . . .[38]

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[37]Smith, *History*, 6:197.

[38]Ibid, 198.

According to Smith, then, the President of United States had the responsibility to protect the liberties of all American, Mormon or non-Mormon. Just as God listened with interest to the prayers of all saints, the president had the obligation to heed the "aspirations and expectations" of all true Americans.

The next section of Smith's *Views* is an brief and simplistic overview of the history of the Presidency outlining the achievements of Washington through Jackson. Each of these past Presidents honored his high office and sought to preserve the rights of the people. But then came Van Buren. Still burning with anger because of Van Buren's refusal to act in 1839, Smith interpreted the President's four year term as a major turning point in American history--the beginning of the end--and with this in mind, Joseph Smith offered a solution:

> . . .Seventy years have done much for this goodly land; they have burst the chains of oppression and monarchy; and multiplied its inhabitants from two to twenty millions; with a proportionate share of knowledge: keen enough to circumnavigate the globe; draw the lightning from the clouds: and cope with the crowned heads of the world.
>
> Then why? Oh! Why! will a once flourishing people not arise phoenix like, over the cinders of Martin Van Buren's power; and over the sinking fragments and smoking ruins of other catamount politicians; and over the windfalls of Benton, Calhoun, Clay, Wright, and a caravan of other equally unfortunate law doctors and cheerfully help to spread a plaster and bind up the burnt, bleeding wounds of a sore but blessed country. . .
>
> We have had democratic presidents; whig presidents; a pseudo democratic whig president; and now it is time to have a *president of the United States*. . .
>
> In the United States the people are the government; and their united voice is the only sovereign that should rule; the only power that should be obeyed; and the only gentleman that should be honored; at home and abroad; on the land and on the sea: Wherefore were I the president of the United States, by the voice of a virtuous people, I would honor the old paths of the venerated fathers of freedoms:

> I would walk in the tracks of the illustrious patriots, who carried the ark of the government upon their shoulders with an eye single to the glory of the people. . .[39]

According to Joseph, the politicians of the day had wreaked havoc on the nation. Smith celebrated the birth of a noble nation but as his own experience had informed him, America was now crumbling. Wicked men held the reigns of power. They had forgotten that the voice of the people reigns supreme; and recognizing this, Smith offered himself as an alternate, one committed to the "old paths" of Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson. In this presidential platform then, Joseph Smith sounded very much like other patriotic democratic Americans. He spoke the language of liberty and equality. Though he was already involved in establishing an alternate form of government, the Kingdom of God, he was still willing to embrace American institutions and to work within the system in order to preserve and protect the will of the American people. He believed still that the people were sovereign and as President of the United States he would live by the rule of their voice, not his own.

Now the question is often asked why Joseph Smith would run for President when he was at the same time preparing to establish a Kingdom of God on earth. In answer to this question, some historians have argued that he ran for office simply to provide the Saints with a suitable candidate since no others were available.[40] Others have argued that he ran for the presidency in an attempt to establish the kingdom within the United

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[39]Ibid, 207-8.

[40]B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century I* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1930), 2:208-9.

States.[41] There is no clear cut evidence on either side; but on February 8, 1844, in a small gathering of Saints in the upper room of his red brick store Joseph Smith gave his own explanation of his presidential bid. According to him,

> I would not have suffered my name to have been used by my friends on any wise as president of the United States or Candidate for that office If I & my friends could have had the privelige of enjoying our religious & civel rights as American Citizen[s] even those rights which the Constitution guarantee unto all her Citizens alike but this we as a people have been denied from the beginning. . .[42]

In other words, the Prophet believed that he and his people were "citizens" who had been denied their God-given rights. Moreover, since "no portion of the government as yet [had] stepped forward for our relief," he believed it right "to obtain what influence & power" he could "lawfully in United States" claim "for the protection of injured innocence." In other words, the campaign was intended at least in part as a means of protecting the rights of Mormons because they were after all, in Smith's eyes, American.[43]

This was not his only concern however. In this same sermon, Smith added that "If I loose my life in a good cause I am will[ing] to be sacrificed on the alter of virtue rightousnes & truth in maintaining the laws & Constitution of the United States if need be for the general good of mankind." In other words, Joseph Smith saw his presidential bid

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[41]Klaus Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 72-9. See also Robert B. Flanders, *Nauvoo, Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 301-2 and Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism*, 139-40.

[42]Andrew J. Ehat and Lyndon Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 319-320, 386-387. See also Smith, *History*, 6: 210-211.

[43]Ibid.

as a means of promoting the general good of all mankind. That "good" was the Constitution of the United States, and if elected he would save it. In other words, he was to become a savior to the nation. Joseph Smith would be one among those who had sacrificed themselves for liberty in that glorious Revolution. He saw himself as a true patriot, and a protector of American liberty, not only for his people but for all Americans.[44]

How accurately this sermon represents Joseph Smith's own sense of American identity is debatable. It could be argued that his words were nothing but empty rhetoric, even though he was speaking directly to the Saints. But to argue this is to overlook the effect of Smith's campaign and his pronouncement regarding it on the mind-set of his followers. In the February 8 sermon, with only a small gathering of Saints attending, Joseph Smith still presented himself as an American. Even more important however is the fact that they truly believed him.[45] To his followers the Prophet appeared, even at the end of his life, a lover of liberty and American republicanism. In other words, in the minds of to the Saints, Smith could be both a king and an American patriot. The synthesis of American and Mormon values that had emerged in 1833 remained intact in 1844 and it was this survival, represented by Smith's own willingness to combine two alternate discourses, that would continue to guide the views of other Mormon Americans long after the Prophet's murder at Carthage Jail in June 1844. Put simply, his bid for the

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[44]Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism*, 138.

[45]Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 135; Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977)*, 378.

Presidency combined with his creation of the Council of Fifty became for the Saints a blueprint of sorts. The Saints could maintain both a Mormon and an American identity. They did not have to abandon one set of values for another because their prophet had succeeded in maintaining some type of meaningful balance of the two.

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This chapter began with a question: Why did Parley P. Pratt in 1851 link two symbols together, the United States with the Prophet Joseph Smith? The answer is a simple one. Regardless of our conclusions regarding the nature of Mormon religion, whether we think it is American or not, what is clear is that from almost the beginning of the Restoration of the Mormon gospel, an American discourse survived in Mormon theology. It was not the most important discourse in Mormon theology. Over time, a discourse of prophecy became far more important to Latter-day Saints than did American republicanism. But American symbols survived nonetheless. Canonized in the *Book of Mormon* and *Doctrine and Covenants* they remained a part of early Mormon theology nonetheless. Though an American dicourse in Mormon religion was severely challenged by persistent violence and persecution by non-believers and by changing perceptions of the kingdom of God among the Saints themselves, the Prophet Joseph Smith and many of his followers continued to believe that they were American and they spoke accordingly.

Of course, there is a great deal of irony involved in arguing this point. If Mormons sounded like other democratic republicans their actions were oftentimes something else. The Council of Fifty was not very American in its form. Neither was the

law of consecration with its communitarian elements. Also questionable was the apparent lack of separation between Church and State which existed in Nauvoo and even earlier in Kirtland and Missouri. In fact, many facets of LDS theology do not fit easily into an American context.

But there are reasons for this apparent incongruity. For one, early Latter-day Saints held an almost absolute view of religious freedom as guaranteed by the First Amendment. According to Smith, for example, religious liberty was an "indefeasible" right, inalienable and unannullable.[46] It was a right protected in part by the Constitution,[47] but it was also a right given to men by God, and men were responsible to God alone for their exercise of it. As noted in the *Doctrine and Covenants:*

> We believe that religion is instituted of God; and that men are amenable to him, and to him only for the exercise of it, unless their religious opinions prompt them to infringe upon the rights and liberties of others; but we do not believe that human law has a right to interfere in prescribing rules of worship to bind the consciences of man, nor dictate the forms for public or private devotion; that the civil magistrate should restrain crime, but never control conscience; should punish guilt, but never suppress the freedom of the soul.[48]

The Saints here admitted that the practice of religion should not infringe upon the rights of others. At the same time, however; they also expressed their belief that in religious matters, human law had no power. In other words, according to them, American law was absolutely constrained in religious spheres.

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[46]Smith used the term at least twice. See Smith, "To the Church of Latterday Saints at Quincy, Illinois, and Scattered Abroad, and to Bishop Partridge in Particular, March 20, 1839," 406. See also Smith, *History*, 1:97, 3: 304.

[47]Ibid., 4:37.

[48]*Doctrine and Covenants* 134:4. See also Smith, *History*, 2: 248.

Such an absolute view of religious rights held important implications. Like many other Americans, the Saints believed that the Constitution allowed them to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience. But unlike other Americans, the Mormons carried this right one step further. According to them; the Constitution not only allowed for religious freedom, it also protected the right to exercise religious influence in areas most other Americans considered outside the scope of religious worship.[49] Thus the Saints felt little concern when Joseph Smith and other Mormon leaders attempted to establish a Mormon kingdom within the American republic. Of course, the irony is apparent to us today, but their logic was straightforward and surprisingly simple: Because a God-given Constitution protected their right to practice religion according to the dictates of their conscience, it therefore protected their right to create theocratic institutions even when those institutions challenged the established American political tradition.

Other Americans were not so easily convinced, however. The establishment of a Mormon political kingdom demanded that the Saints submit themselves to the dictates of a prophet-leader, but such subservience bothered those who more clearly embraced the notion of liberty and freedom and who decried any attempt to mingle affairs of church and state.[50] Put simply, those behaviors the Saints accepted as logical extensions of their

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[49]John F. Wilson, "Some Comparative Perspectives on the Early Mormon Movement and the Church–State Question, 1830-1845," *Journal of Mormon History* 8 (1981): 75.

[50]Robert Bruce Flanders, "The Kingdom of God in Illinois: Politics in Utopia," *Dialogue* 5:1 (Spring 1970): 33-6; John E. Hallwas, "Mormon Nauvoo from a Non-Mormon Perspective," *Journal of Mormon History* 16 (1990): 53-58; Klaus Hansen, "The Political Kingdom of God as a Cause for Mormon-Gentile Conflict," 249.

religious rights, non-believers interpreted instead to be not-so-subtle acts of coercion, tyranny, and persecution.[51]

This divergence of perceptions points to another irony inherent in the Mormon position. Though the Saints held an absolute view of religious liberty, claiming for themselves the privilege of worshiping God as they pleased, in the implementation of this policy they ultimately failed to see that their political and economic involvement would inevitably interfere with rights of other Americans who did not accept Mormon principles. Put simply, in defending and laying claim to their religious liberty in political and economic spheres, they sometimes challenged and even undermined the political, economic, and religious liberties of others. The classic example of this irony is found in the destruction of the *Expositor* printing press. In May 1844, a group of Mormon dissenters formed an opposition newspaper with the intent of exposing Joseph Smith. According to the dissenters, the paper was viewed as a tool to achieve reform within the Church. Joseph Smith and other Mormon leaders, on the other hand, interpreted this action as a means of inciting mob action. Acting to protect themselves and their city, then, the Saints led by Joseph Smith abrogated the rights of Mormon dissenters.

To some historians, this act of violence is clear evidence that Joseph Smith had little or no interest in religious liberty. Notwithstanding his several pleas in defense of the First Amendment, they argue that the concepts of liberty and democracy meant nothing in the context of Mormon theocracy. Pushing this interpretation one step further,

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[51]John E. Hallwas and Roger D. Launius in, *Cultures in Conflict: A Documentary History of the Mormon War in Illinois* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995) , 4-8.

they also accuse the Mormons of being the only party guilty of religious oppression. They do admit that others employed violent tactics against the Mormons, but in their view this persecution was economic or political in nature, having little or nothing to do with Mormon religious sentiments.[52]

To make such an argument is to overlook several key factors regarding the Mormon response: First, it requires that we accept wholeheartedly the religious categories of non-believers and that we reject the way in which the Saints themselves interpreted their First Amendment rights. As I have argued, the Latter-day Saints embraced an absolute view of religious liberty. For this reason, unlike other Americans, they did not balk at the notion of incorporating politics and economics into their religious life. Politics and economics were intimately tied to religious concerns in Mormon theology; therefore, what some scholars regard as legitimate political and economic resistance by non-believers and Mormon critics must also be regarded as religious persecution, at least from a Mormon point of view.[53] This leads me to a second point regarding the Mormon response to opposition: In arguing that the Saints had little or no interest in preserving religious liberty, these scholars tend to overlook the way in which Mormon perceptions shaped the Mormon response to political and economic resistance. If the principle of absolute religious liberty had operated independently upon the mind of Joseph Smith and his followers then perhaps the Prophet would have allowed the

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[52]Hallwas and Launius, *Cultures in Conflict*, 1-8, 149-50. See also Hallwas, "Mormon Nauvoo from a Non-Mormon Perspective," 60-63.

[53]Givens, 3-9, 40-59 *passim*.

opposition paper to continue printing. But this ideal did not act independently upon the Mormon leader. Like many other Latter-day Saints, Smith still remembered Missouri. A cutthroat band of militiamen under orders from the governor had taken from the Saints their lands, their homes, and their liberties. When the Expositor printed its first issue, the Prophet remembered all too well this unfortunate episode. He feared that his people would now suffer the same fate in Nauvoo, and faced with this unpleasant prospect, Smith allowed the past to inform his constitutional ideals.[54] This interplay of ideals and experience offers a far more plausible explanation for this act of coercion. Because the Saints interpreted political and economic opposition as religious persecution, they viewed the *Expositor* as an attempt to undermine Joseph Smith's authority, which according to them was also an attempt to limit their religious freedom. Seen in this light, we must view the destruction of the printing press not as an attempt to undermine the religious liberties of Smith's enemies, but rather as an attempt to preserve and protect the liberties the Saints had once lost and were unwilling to lose again. According to the Saints, then, their actions with respect to the *Nauvoo Expositor* were consistent with their strong faith in the principles of the First Amendment. Of course, to non-believers, the Mormon response was something incomprehensible. Joseph Smith may have sounded American, but he did not act the part. He used the symbols of an American discourse, but in many instances these symbols were redefined to fit into a Mormon frame of reference. In other words,

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[54]Minutes of the council meeting, held June 8 and 10, 1844, which describe Joseph Smith's views regarding the *Expositor* were later printed in the *Nauvoo Neighbor*, 17 June 1844, 1. See also Smith, *History*, 6: 432-44.

the Mormon American discourse as it evolved over time became far more Mormon than it was American.

Sizing up these apparent incongruities between Mormon and American symbols a number of scholars have concluded that the Saints at their very heart were less than American in their political, social and religious sentiments.[55] But before we define early Mormons as something un-American, we must reexamine the perceptions these Mormons had of themselves and the way in which their perceptions shaped their behavior. Because they believed they were American, the Saints embraced certain values and ideals and institutions. They did so because they believed these principles were god-given. In their eyes, the United States of America had been established under the direction of the Almighty. Of course, this view of America was idealistic, but the Saints' idealism matters not so much as the effect this idealism had on their behavior. In sum it created within them a willingness to accommodate two competing value systems. In their view, they could not abandon one discourse in favor of another. Instead, from the very beginning these Mormons interwove into their belief system, controlled by an emerging prophetic discourse, various symbols of an American discourse. The principles of American liberty were principles of God; therefore, they became part of the gospel of Mormonism.

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[55]See for example, Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 45-83; and Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons*, 2nd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 2-3 .

Such a statement, if true, has an important implication regarding modern interpretations of early Mormon religion. Because early Latter-day Saints accepted certain ideals, they interpreted the surrounding world in terms that would accommodate these values. Moreover, these values and ideals directed their actions down certain prescribed channels. In effect, they had to act as American republicans even while they sustained a prophet figure. For instance, as I have already shown, Joseph Smith was anointed a king over Israel at the same time he was approved to be a candidate for the Presidency of the United States. In this instance, just as in many others, his actions were influenced by the symbols of an American discourse just as they were influenced by the symbols of an emerging prophetic discourse in Mormon religion.

This being the case, perhaps it is true that Mormons in the early nineteenth century were more American than we give them credit for. We know that Mormons were American, at least rhetorically. They spoke the same tongue. They used many of the same symbols as other Americans. They viewed themselves as sons of liberty. They also believed in religion freedom even though they decried sectarianism. The Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights became an integral part their sacred history. Indeed, in almost every instance, American symbols can be clearly detected in early Mormon religion. But as I have also tried to illustrate, the rhetoric meant more than just words to them. It also provided the Saints with a means to interpret the world around and a means of responding to that world. The Mormon response to the persecutions and violence they faced in Missouri is a clear sign that American symbols and values still defined their actions. Rather than separate themselves from the rest of the

world, they chose instead to work within the system to protect their rights as Americans. The same could be said for their willingness to support Joseph Smith's bid to become President of the United States while at the same time they were engaged in establishing the kingdom of God. In both instances, the Saints operated within an American context, even though their actions were something more radical. Put simply, the symbols they accepted influenced their behavior. The same could be said of all other Americans. True, behaviors may be different, but the same symbols act in both cases. If so, it seems more plausible to define Mormonism as an alternative American discourse, something not completely American, but also not completely un-American.

Of course, it is true, as I have said this all along, that the Mormon American discourse was not same discourse used by other Americans--but this fact alone does not make Mormons un-American. In fact, as many scholars have pointed out, no one American discourse exists in the American past. Rather, a series of alternate discourses exist at once, each one using the same symbols but rearranged and redefined to fit a particular context. According to Isaac Kramnick, for example, in the early republic, Federalists and Anti-federalists alike used the same symbols, but their conceptions of the future nation were diametrically opposed.[56] The same is true of both camps involved in the great slave debate in the early nineteenth century. Although some Americans believed in the principle of liberty for all men, others readily defended the practice black slavery--yet they all believed themselves to be American and they all used the same basic

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[56]Isaac Kramnick, "The 'Great National Discussion': The Discourse of Politics in 1787," in *William and Mary Quarterly* 45 (January 1988): 3-4, 32.

symbols, redefined to harmonize with their particular world-views. True, we could argue that only one or the other group was truly American, but at least some historians have been willing to define both parties as Americans, though each possessed competing definitions of America, one more liberal and the other more conservative.[57]

A similar type of argument could be made regarding early Mormon Americans. The American discourse which existed in Mormon religion was but one possible American discourse available to Americans, an alternative. It was not American, but neither was it un-American. Instead it was simply a different type of American. Whatever one may choose to call them, however, it is clear that Mormon Americans in the nineteenth-century were not imbued with separatist values. They did not reject their American heritage, even when they dreamed of a new theocratic kingdom. Rather than abandoning the symbols and values of other Americans, these Latter-day Saints instead proposed an alternate way of interpreting them. In other words, they redefined the terms so they could fit two conflicting discourses together into some type of workable arrangement. True, their re-definitions seemed strange to those who were not Mormon, but to these early Saints both discourses still meshed and that is all that mattered.

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[57]See for example, Eugene Genovese, *The Slaveholder's Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought, 1820-1860* (University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 2-3, 46-72 passim. In his view, the ambivalence of southern slaveholders' towards American values such as freedom and progress represented an alternative American discourse in early nineteenth-century America, more conservative than liberal, of course, but no less American.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

The previous two chapters have explored more fully the various dimensions of two discourses within early Mormon religion. The first examined the emergence of a prophetic discourse and the second traced the persistence of an American discourse in early Mormon theology. Moreover, both chapters have shown various ways in which these two discourses affected the minds of those who believed in the Latter-day gospel and how these discourses clashed with one another. Recognizing this clash, we now have a greater understanding of some of the ironies and complexities which exist in the early Mormon past. We can better comprehend, for instance, the lives of some early Latter-day Saints who struggled to accept the implications of a new discourse of prophecy. We gain a greater empathy for David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery, both of whom left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and we can better understand the motives of Sidney Rigdon, who sought to use a prophetic discourse for other means. Furthermore, we can now find answers to some perplexing questions in the Mormon past. We can better explain Joseph Smith's attempt to close down his brother's debate school in Kirtland, we can understand the *Nauvoo Expositor* affair, and we can come to terms with the Council of Fifty's strong advocacy of Joseph Smith's presidential campaign.

Such are the benefits from our examination of the multiple discourses in early Mormon religion. Of course, this thesis is only a starting point. Many other discourses

acted upon the minds of those who believed the Latter-day gospel, and it would be good for us to examine each of these to determine what role they played in shaping early Mormon behavior. We need to know for example what role American Christianity played in shaping early Mormon religion. It would also be helpful to study the influence of non-American political views. Many early Latter-day Saints were immigrants from Canada, Great Britain, and Scandinavia. Their values and ideals too influenced the course of early Mormon religion, and in order to fully understand the nature of early Mormonism, we must take them into account. Other important discourses also exist. We could study the discourse of millenarianism, the discourse of marriage and family, or the discourse of persecution. Each of these definitely influenced the early Mormon world view, and as a result they would affect our view of the complexity of early Mormon religion. Unfortunately, that work will have to wait. In this brief monologue, I have focused on only two discourses of many possible. But regardless of the limited scope of my work, I think I have shown how useful such an approach could be.

Put simply, an examination of the multiple discourses in early Mormon religion should lead us to redefine this new world religion as a clash of discourses. Recognizing this fact, we will no longer face the difficult of reconciling conflicting evidence for there is none to reconcile. We will no longer find ourselves in an either/or situation. Instead we will see how it was possible for the Saints to accept the idea of a new political kingdom even while they maintained their respect and admiration for their republican form of government. We will no longer wonder why Joseph Smith acted both as a king and a candidate for President. Instead, we will realize that early Latter-day Saints

operated in many worlds at once. In their eyes, they could accept the dictates of a prophet-leader even while they embraced the symbols of American republicanism because, in their world, they somehow managed to create a workable synthesis of these two competing sets of symbols.

This synthesis is what determined their behavior and it is this synthesis, then, which holds the key to our understanding of early Mormon religion. Of course, our resulting analysis may seem confusing, but to them it was natural. In other words, even though we as historians may argue that they sometimes acted Mormon and other times American, we must realize that in their own minds there was no irony involved. They saw themselves instead as both. The compartmentalization which exists in our minds did not exist in theirs. Rather their actions were the result of a synthesis which had emerged over time which brought prophetic symbols and republican symbols together into a workable framework of behavior. Of course, not all accepted the implications of this synthesis. But many did, and they acted accordingly.

This is what our focus on multiple discourses teaches us and why it is a valuable historical tool. Put simply, it gives us another way in which to resolve an age-old historiographical problem, one which I raised from the very beginning. Historians have long wondered about the nature of early Mormon religion. They have focused on different aspects of this new world religion in order to define it, but in each attempt, they must overlook part of the puzzle in order to make sense of their own argument. Thus, we have some who argue that Mormonism was a response to certain conditions, a symptom of these conditions, or a new tradition in one form or another. Each of these views is

correct to a point, but if we stand a little farther away from the debate and realize that early Mormon religion was composed of many symbols from many discourses, we realize that these various schools of thought are simplified abstractions of reality. Mormonism was many things at once, that is how we should define it, that is how we must study it, and through an examination of multiple discourses we can better handle this inherent complexity. Of course, by so doing, we no longer can search for any easy answers regarding the nature of early Mormon religion. We cannot say for certain that it was a quest for order, or a quest for refuge, or a democratic populist movement. We can no longer say that Mormon religion was authoritarian or republican. Instead we must couch our terms more carefully and allow for both sides and for the complexity which exists. But that is the challenge all historians must face.

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Multiple Discourses in Early

Mormon Religion

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ABSTRACT

The development of early Mormon religion is best viewed in the context of multiple discourses, each of which contained various competing symbols. These discourses shaped the mind and world-view of early Latter-day Saints and determined in part their behavior. Prophetic symbols existed simultaneously with other, more American symbols; and while neither discourse excluded the other, a prophetic discourse gradually came to dominate. At the same time, however, the American discourse in Mormon religion remained intact and continued to influence the behavior and actions of early Mormons.

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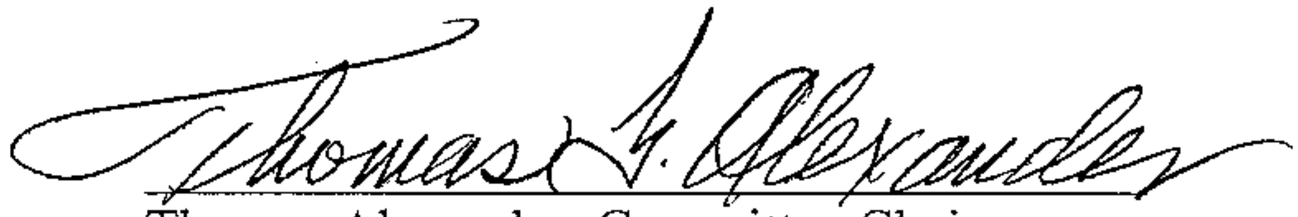

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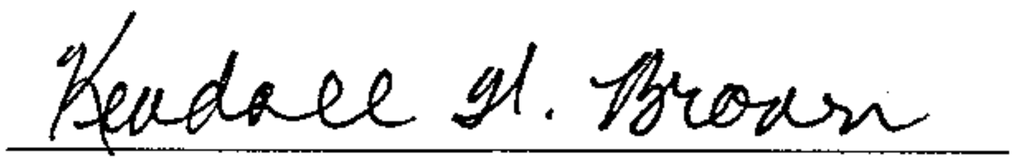

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