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Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts

Steven C. Harper

In March 1830, the Grandin Press in Palmyra, New York, published the first edition of the Book of Mormon. On April 6, Joseph Smith, Jr., organized the Church of Christ—Mormonism—in Fayette near the Finger Lakes. Shortly thereafter, Joseph's unschooled younger brother Samuel filled a knapsack with copies of the book and traveled to villages westward to make converts to what he believed to be *the* restoration of primitive Christianity. From these beginnings, a small army of itinerant missionaries gathered several thousand American converts throughout the 1830's.

Alexander Campbell, leader of the Disciples of Christ and a contemporary of the Smiths, attributed Mormon origins to the cultural milieu of the time and place. Campbell's competition with Smith for a limited number of potential converts led him to misjudge the cogency of the Book of Mormon—and of Joseph Smith—and to attribute Mormon conversions to unadulterated gullibility.¹ Otherwise learned scholars have assumed Campbell's argument, and, as Jan Shippo has noted, they have written histories that depict Mormonism as pandering "to the superstitious, the gullible, and the fearful, at least in the beginning." David Brion Davis, for one, has argued that, "since Mormonism is a Biblical religion, taking every word literally, its peculiarities can be interpreted as what happens when all classes of ignorant and superstitious people have freedom to draw their own conclusions from Scripture."²

Autobiographical accounts of early Mormons and recent scholarship emphasize different "peculiarities" of Mormon biblicism than did Davis. Phillip Barlow has argued that early Mormon use of the Bible was an amalgam of conservative, liberal, and even radical elements, which is a better informed and more thoughtful interpretation than the strict construction "taking every word literally"—asserted by Davis. Early converts were sometimes repelled by the literalistic Bible reading of revivalists and turned instead to Mormonism. Benjamin Brown, for example, "believed the Bible just as it read, where the self-

evident rendering of the context did not prove it figurative or parabolic." For Brown, then, previous to learning of Mormonism, the "Universalist system appeared . . . the most reasonable of the various denominations" since the "horrible hell and damnation theories of most of the other parties" were, he thought, "inconsistent with the mercies and love of God." This type of evidence aside, Davis preferred the conclusion that "Mormonism can be seen as the extreme result of the evils of literal-mindedness" and that "Latter Day Saints represented an outburst of mysticism and superstition." People unsophisticated enough to join Mormonism must have been, Davis reasoned, "literal minded" followers of the "practically illiterate" author of the Book of Mormon, which, to Davis, was the "gibberish of a crazy boy."³

Other scholars have used the cultural context of Mormonism to explain its appeal to persons other than the strictly superstitious and gullible. Mario S. DePillis has argued that early Mormons sought an especially authoritative church, and he suggested that the stresses of "social dislocation" made Mormonism attractive to those on the fringes of American society.⁴ Marvin Hill has stressed the role of Christian primitivism in converts' decision to unite with Mormonism. Dan Vogel has added a distinction between Christian primitivists in general, such as those drawn to Campbell's Disciples of Christ, and the particular type of seekers who were looking for the direct restoration of divine authority that Mormonism claimed to have. At the same time, a penetrating essay by Richard Hughes and C. Leonard Allen has argued that "restoring first times" functioned as the "central" theme of American history in defining periods such as "the Puritan epoch and the revolutionary epoch." This perspective interprets primitivism as a major determinant of American identity, but it is flawed in asserting an either/or characterization of Mormonism's distinct primitivism, as when the authors argue that "the converts despaired of Common Sense rationalism and longed instead to experience the Holy Ghost with power and authority from on high." Thomas G. Alexander has emphasized the mysticism of Mormonism, faith healing, spiritual gifts, visions, and all manner of miracles. Grant Underwood has emphasized that the relatively moderate millennial aspects of Mormonism addressed the anxieties of those who adhered. He also drew attention to the plentiful primary accounts of Mormon converts who traced their conversion to an abiding, internal experience of the Holy Spirit.⁵

In the 1980's, Mormonism was rocked by a forgery scandal that implied Joseph Smith's reliance on white magic. Michael Quinn and then John Brooke followed with books that emphasized the influence of popular cultural currents on Smith's "cosmology" and

his “magic world view.” They argue that Smith owed his theology to the folk traditions of Early Modern Europe—intellectual currents Herbert Leventhal aptly described as being “in the shadow of the Enlightenment.” Simultaneous to these developments, a trio of senior scholars concentrated on the dimension of antebellum American culture that emerges most prominently from the primary sources of early Mormonism. Richard Bushman, Jan Shipps, and Klaus Hansen argue that Enlightenment rationalism and the forces of democratization shaped the predominantly Christian culture from which potential Mormons studied the Bible and Book of Mormon and listened to Samuel Smith and the other itinerant preachers.⁶

Time and scholarship have shown early Mormonism to be more than “the inconsequential product of ignorance,” as early critics claimed and later historians argued. Clearly, scholarly attention has increasingly been turned from debunking early Mormonism to comprehending it, which, as Jan Shipps has observed, makes it all the more “necessary to examine the cultural context that made this curious work so appealing to so many persons.”⁷ That examination should concentrate on the profuse output of early Mormon writers, and it should try to determine what it was in Mormonism that held so much meaning for Americans acculturated by the twin influences of the Bible and the democratization of rationalism.

Examining these writings in the light of the culture described by Bushman, Shipps, and Hansen reveals a pattern that contrasts quite starkly with the idea that early Mormons came from the ranks of the superstitious and gullible. Moreover, one finds nothing to suggest that alchemy, magic, or hermeticism were influential determinants in converts’ decision making. Instead, one finds the word “reasonable” and its relatives used frequently by writers trying to describe what it was in Mormon theology that caused conversion in them. This does not diminish Joseph Smith’s ties to popular intellectual currents conspicuous in early modern Europe and the early American republic. Nor does it depreciate the influence of the “visionary culture” in which Joseph Smith and others functioned. Similarly, the argument to be made hereafter will not replace emphasis on seeking and primitivism, metaphysics, or millennialism and spiritual communication. Indeed, all those are components of the type of conversion described hereafter. What I aim to illuminate, revise, and qualify is the larger intellectual framework in which converts thought about the primitive gospel, restoration of divine authority, healing, and the signs of the times. Gordon Wood articulated the dimensions of this framework well when he described it as simultaneously “revelatory and empirical.”⁸

The little we know about the social origins of early Mormon converts suggests that Klaus Hansen was mostly correct in observing that, "though many of them, like the Smiths, were beyond the edge of genteel society, they were on the whole better educated than their social and economic position might have suggested."⁹ An analysis of tax assessments in Erie County, Pennsylvania, where almost 150 converted to Mormonism between 1831 and 1833, suggests that converts could not be distinguished from their neighbors in any outwardly observable way. These people listened to Samuel Smith and the other missionaries along with their neighbors. It is useful to think of all these Americans as forming a broad spectrum of belief (and unbelief) in which vivid colors represent clearly articulated and varying theologies. In the areas where colors border and blend, theologies come close and often overlap. Those who joined Mormonism came from a band of the spectrum where contemplative belief in the Bible melded into democratized rationalism. To be sure, other Americans in the 1830's were close to converts along this spectrum. Mormonism held no monopoly on antirevivalist sentiment, nor were Mormons the only Americans to emphasize the combination of "the observable and verifiable" and an "internal witness."¹⁰ There was also a "pulsating diversity that set Methodists apart from Mormons, Disciples from Baptists, Universalists from Adventists." Nathan Hatch has already grappled "with certain defining characteristics of belief systems that in this culture were broadly communicated," which necessarily meant that he could not then "trace the social composition of religious groups: who joined churches, under what conditions, and with what effect." Relying on Hatch and others, the purpose here is to deduce in the opposite direction. By examining larger cultural patterns and systematically studying conversion accounts, it is possible to discern some of the "differences" that made some people more inclined to become Mormons than to follow Alexander Campbell, Emanuel Swedenborg, Charles Finney, or others.¹¹ Since the purpose here is not to locate Mormons within larger currents and traditions but to illuminate what was distinctive about Mormon converts, what follows will focus on the intellectual framework informing conversion that emerges most clearly from a systematic study of dozens of early Mormon conversion accounts.

The conversion of New York newspaper editor William Phelps is roughly typical of a distinct band of the belief spectrum that was most likely to yield Mormon converts. Phelps was unchurched when he first learned of Mormonism. He believed, however, "in God, and in the Son of God, as two distinct characters," as well as being a believer in "sacred scripture." He had "long been searching for the

right way," and, after a "suitable time to investigate," Mormonism "prove[d] its truth by corresponding evidence from the old Bible, and the internal witness of the spirit." He became a Mormon.¹² A few thousand other Americans replicated this process throughout the 1830's. What follows may help explain why.

When Samuel Smith proselytized in 1830, American culture was both roughly democratic and essentially Christian. Nathan Hatch has shown that "popular religious movements in the early republic articulated a profoundly democratic spirit" by denying any distinction between learned divines and ordinary men. "These movements empowered ordinary people by taking their deepest spiritual impulses at face value rather than subjecting them to the scrutiny of orthodox doctrine and the frown of respectable clergymen."¹³

Enlightenment rationalism simultaneously loomed large as a cultural component.¹⁴ "Faith as well as doubt," wrote Richard Bushman, "had embraced the Enlightenment by the beginning of the nineteenth century," and "Christianity claimed to be as reasonable by Enlightenment standards as science or philosophy." Enlightenment skepticism influenced Joseph Smith's family at least as much as did Protestantism. Jan Shipps has described Joseph Smith, Sr., as "a curious combination of deist and seeker." His wife, Lucy Mack Smith, was frustrated by interdenominational strife and remained an unchurched Christian until she joined the Palmyra Presbyterian congregation. Their son apparently inherited the amalgam of faith and skepticism that characterized his parents and, from it, the capacity to reveal Mormonism.¹⁵

In the 1830's, when "the Enlightenment seemed to be over, and evangelical Protestantism had seized control of much of the culture," Mormonism grew rapidly by appealing to Americans who were by no means deists—rather they were Bible believers, or willing to be—but their approach to Christianity had been influenced by rationalism.¹⁶ Mormonism simultaneously satisfied both the intellectual and spiritual longings of these adherents. Missionaries proclaimed this synthesis to Protestants from a variety of denominations, to a surprising number of "deists, scepticks, and infidels," and to many who were individual conglomerations: men and women who were professed Christians but who, as a result of the Enlightenment, had a preoccupation with skepticism. The Ohio farm couple and followers of Alexander Campbell, John and Julia Murdock, for instance, read the Scriptures as skeptical Christian primitivists. John "searched" what he called the Church History, and various other available books including "the Pedobaptist writings, to see what proof they had. And the more I searched their confessions of faith, Catechisms and Scott's

Notes on the Bible and all such writings, the more I disagreed with them." Murdock had learned, as he wrote, that "my father, or mother, or priest, or anybody else, saying a thing was so, did not make it so. There is nothing makes it so, only its being truth."¹⁷

How, after all, did Murdock and others who converted come to the conclusion that Mormonism was truth? What were the dimensions of their rationality? Hughes and Allen argue that the Murdocks "despaired of Common Sense rationalism," but this seems an unportable claim made in an effort to find significant contrast between "rational to the core" Campbellism and what they see as extrarational Mormonism. This is too neat a cleavage, for the Murdocks made a progression from Presbyterianism to Campbellism to Mormonism. All along the way, they considered themselves quite rational, and clearly they approached both Campbellism and Mormonism rationally, if also with hope of finding the primitive gospel, which they could identify empirically by its manifestation of the Holy Ghost, which would be manifest according to certain prescribed patterns set down in the Bible. The Murdocks and other converts relied heavily on scriptural precedent as proof. Those who became Mormons were almost always first contemplative Bible believers who were skeptical of false prophets. They considered it reasonable that signs would follow true believers, and they held out for empirical confirmation. Dozens of primary accounts of early Mormon conversions emphasize this pattern.¹⁸

One of these belongs to Esaias Edwards, who wrote that, "after reading the Old and New Testament and other books, I became a believer in the existence of a supreme being who created and upholds the universe." Edwards concluded

that it was no more reasonable that He should have the privilege of governing the same. . . . Therefore, I thought it reasonable that he should have the privilege of forming a code of laws with penalties, and next deliver them to man whom he had formed after his own image. . . . Hence, . . . [I] believe[d] that the Bible and New Testament contained the revealed laws of God to man with their penalty annexed. I therefore, as one of God's creatures, thought it my duty to become obedient to the laws of God, my Heavenly Father.¹⁹

Edwards's intellectual conversion resulted from such rationalism, but that was only part of what attracted him to Mormonism. Part of him was skeptical and longed for an empirical conversion as well. Mormonism provided him that, too.

By "a close examination of the scriptures," Edwards concluded that "the Latter-day Saints was the only people that believed

and practiced them in full." He determined that the saints could prove that beyond reasonable doubt by healing his sick wife, upon which he "covenanted" that he would be baptized. Edwards invited Alexander Williams, a Mormon elder, to "administer to my wife that she might be healed of her sickness." The two men prayed, and Williams "layed his hands upon her head and rebuked the disease in the name of Jesus Christ. Her pains immediately left her, and she was filled with the spirit of God." The couple became lifelong converts.²⁰

Another convert, Joel Johnson, thought this way:

[I determined to] take my Bible with me and attend all their meetings and investigate the subject thoroughly with prayer for divine direction, which I did for several days, comparing their preachings with the scriptures, which brought me to the following conclusions: Firstly, that as all Protestant sects had sprung from the Church of Rome, they have no more authority to administer in the ordinances of the Church of Christ than the Church of Rome had, and if she was the mother of harlots, they must consequently be her daughters; therefore, none of them could be called the Church of Christ. Secondly, that a supernatural power did attend the Mormon Church, and it had risen independent of all denominations; therefore, its origin must be from Heaven or Hell. Thirdly, that it is unreasonable to suppose that God would suffer the devil to bring forth a work with the gifts and blessings of the ancient Church of Christ corresponding with that which he has promised to bring forth in the last days for the gathering of the House of Israel and by that means lead astray all the honest men of the earth. And fourthly, that as the principles taught in the Book of Mormon corresponded with the Bible and doctrine of the Church was the same that was taught by Christ and his apostles with signs following the believer, I concluded that the work was of God and embraced with all my heart and soul, and was baptized on the first day of June 1831.²¹

Johnson's rationalism assumed the dualistic premises of a believer in the Bible; he was no deist. But neither could he rationally accept the idea that Protestantism was primitive Christianity. The alternative he chose was Mormonism, which he studied and observed and finally joined. For Americans with such views as Johnson's, Mormonism served as a spiritually and intellectually stimulating option when missionaries expounded it in terms alike to Johnson's.

The missionaries taught potential converts that God's everlasting covenant had been taught by God to Adam and handed down via the prophets throughout the Old Testament until its terms were fulfilled through the atonement of Christ. It had been taught in purity

among the first Christians but lost in centuries of apostasy that followed.²² It appeared both reasonable and biblical that God would restore the ancient order of things by sending new scripture, calling new prophets, and sending new signs to believers. It was from within this intellectual framework that John Greene wrote from his missionary assignment in Canada:

I . . . showed the gospel as it was in the beginning; also in the days of the apostles, and in the present day: being careful to compare the Jews' religion with the apostles', and also the religion of the many sects of this day with the Corinthian and Ephesian churches; and then giving them the testimony of the *New and Everlasting Covenant*, as established in these last days: being confirmed by many infallible proofs, both human and divine—the Lord himself speaking from the heavens unto men who were now living!²³

This blend of infallible proofs, both human and divine, that Greene thought should convert Canadians, included, as we have seen, appeals to the rational coupled with accounts of miracles and gifts received by Mormons as in the ancient church. This argument satisfied the revelatory and empirical longings of converts at once, convincing them that Joseph Smith and his followers possessed the same attributes as the first Christians by a deductive process that was simultaneously analytical and faithful.

The greatest aid in this effort, and the component that most distinguished Joseph Smith from the many other would-be prophets of his day, was the Book of Mormon, which Smith offered to the world as evidence that the primitive Christian gospel had been authoritatively restored and that he was the instrument of its reestablishment. Klaus Hansen has written of early convert Brigham Young "and all those who were not converted by the personal magnetism of Joseph, it was the Book of Mormon, more than any other vehicle, that convinced him of the truthfulness of Smith's claims."²⁴

Joseph Smith claimed throughout his life that the book was no creation of his own but that an angel had led him to a stack of thin "golden" plates covered with ancient "reformed Egyptian" writing. After a period of spiritual preparation, God permitted Smith to take the plates, which he translated, he said, "by the gift of God." Before and during publication, rumors of Joe Smith's "gold bible" spread through New York State and elsewhere. Responses to the work ranged from vituperative and violent to curious and delighted. Alexander Campbell, leader of the Disciples of Christ, implied that Joseph Smith simply compiled a roundabout book of answers to doctrinal questions, since the Book of Mormon circumscribed "every error and

almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years." The Book of Mormon did that, but so did Campbell's less successful attempt, *Christianity Restored* (1835). The complex plots of the Book of Mormon introduced readers to sundry prophets whose penchant for "plainness" explained, often in semisylogistic terms, confusing tenets like the fall, the atonement, and other important debated doctrines (including definitions of faith, repentance, mode of and legitimate candidates for baptism by immersion, laying on of hands to give the gift of the Holy Ghost). Bible-believing rationalists appreciated the clarity and precision the Book of Mormon offered on doctrinal subjects. One of them, a Tennessean schoolteacher named William McLellin, wrote in his journal that the Mormons "expounded the Gospel the plainest I thot [*sic*] I ever heard in my life." He wrote to his relatives about his conversion process, explaining, "I examined the book [of Mormon], the people, the preachers, the old scriptures, and from the *evidences* which I had before me I was bound to believe the book of Mormon to be a divine Revelation; and the people to be christians. Consequently, I joined them."²⁵

Jan Shippy asserted accurately that the Book of Mormon "provided the credentials that made the prophet's leadership so effective." Thomas O'Dea emphasized the Book of Mormon's "rationality in contrast to the religious enthusiasm of American revivalism." Klaus Hansen wrote that the Book of Mormon "had an internal consistency as well as a kind of common sense rationality that set it very much apart from much of the emotionally infused, nonintellectual emphasis of antebellum American revivalism." Many early converts contrasted the rationalism of the Book of Mormon to the revivalism of the day, in which they found little thought-provoking theology. Among converts drawn by the rationality of the Book of Mormon was George Laub. He thought the tenets of revivalism "unreasonable doctrine."²⁶

Most potential converts approached the Book of Mormon with open but cautious minds. Lewis Barney, for instance, "after a year and a half of careful investigation" of the Book of Mormon and "also . . . becoming acquainted with Joseph Smith and the Mormon people generally and their principles, finding them an honest, industrious people, and wickedly misrepresented," presented himself for baptism. Elsewhere, Levi Jackman, a Portage County, Ohio, carpenter, remembered that "Joseph Smith and another person came to [his] village," testifying that the Book of Mormon "was a revelation of Jesus Christ." He determined to conduct "a fair investigation," upon completion of which he "became satisfied of its truth and was baptized," explaining that "the doctrines taught and embraced by the Mormon people were so plain and reasonable."²⁷

Anson Call “furnished” himself with the Book of Mormon and compared it closely with the Bible, reading “from Genesis right through, praying and searching diligently for six months.” When he “finished the two books,” he wrote, “I became a firm believer in the Book of Mormon.” Eli Gilbert’s conversion account, published in the *Messenger and Advocate*, further clarifies what converts found in the Book of Mormon:

I gave it a close reading. And it bore hard upon my favorite notions of universal salvation. I read it again, and again with close attention and prayer. I examined the proof; the witnesses, and all other testimony, and compared it with that of the bible (which book I verily thought I believed) and found the two books mutually and reciprocally corroborate each other; and if I let go the book of Mormon, the bible might also go down by the same rule.

Barney, Jackman, Call, and Gilbert exemplify the important but often ignored rational attraction that the Book of Mormon held for potential Mormons. Critics among their contemporaries and modern authors have wondered how a supernatural explanation for the book’s origins can be called rational, but in doing so they miss the key to the certainty of Mormon conviction, which Klaus Hansen understood when he wrote, “once having accepted its message, believers found it easy to accept the manner of its origin.” In fact, having accepted its message, believers would have been less compelled by the Book of Mormon had they believed its origins to be strictly naturalistic. For Mormon converts, the rational Book of Mormon corroborated the miraculous powers of Joseph Smith and vice versa. “It was this gold bible that first attracted adherents to the movement,” Jan Shippo reminds us, and it was the Book of Mormon’s blend of supernatural origins and reasonable theology that converted many of them.²⁸

Besides the actual contents of the book, a testimony of three witnesses greeted every reader, providing a certain empirical element not found in the proselytizing efforts of others. This introductory statement simultaneously piqued curiosity and channeled skepticism. Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer, prominent players in the publication and promotion of the Book of Mormon, declared to the reader of every copy, “in words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon.” Eight other witnesses, relatives of Smith and Whitmer, included their testimony that they, too, had seen the plates, “and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle

with our hands"; they collectively claimed that "Smith has shown unto us, for we have seen and hefted, and know of a surety that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken."²⁹

These were challenging, compelling words for many Bible believers made skeptical by the democratization of reason and empowered by the democratization of religion. For many Americans, angels were tolerable unless they appeared in the 1830's. In July 1831, a twenty-five-year-old Tennessee school teacher named William McLellin "conversed with a number of villagers [in Independence, Missouri] about those people that they called Mormonites. They thought" the Mormons "were generally a very honest people but very much deluded by Smith and others. Notwithstanding," McLellin confided to his journal, "I felt anxious to see them and examine for myself." The first Mormons he met were David Whitmer and Martin Harris. McLellin reported to his journal that Whitmer "bore testimony to having seen an Holy Angel who had made known the truth of this record to him."³⁰

McLellin bought a copy of the Book of Mormon to "see if the testimony of the other witnesses would agree" with Whitmer's. He found it did. Moreover, he met privately and for long periods with Hyrum Smith, Joseph's brother and one of the eight who hefted for himself. "From all the light that I could gain by examinations searches and researches," McLellin recorded as a result of these visits, "I was bound as an honest man to acknowledge the truth and Validity of the book of Mormon, and also," it necessarily followed, "that I had found the people of the Lord."³¹

As McLellin then went throughout the Midwest preaching Mormonism, his sermons regularly "consisted of a brief history of the book of Mormon, of its coming forth, Then reasoned upon and expounded prophecy after prophecy and scripture after scripture, which had reference to the book." When either Hyrum or Samuel Smith (another of the eight witnesses) were accompanying McLellin, they "gave testimony respecting the truth of the book. I then arose," McLellin wrote of a typical occasion, "and read the testimony of the three witnesses and reasoned upon the power and force of it."³² Such sermons convinced some seeking skeptics.

This kind of conversion proved durable. Forty years after they both left Mormonism over intrusive revelations and power struggles between themselves and Joseph Smith, McLellin met with Whitmer "and heard him bear his solemn testimony to the truth of the book—as sincerely and solemnly as when he bore it to me in Paris, Ill. in July 1831." For his own part, McLellin, who never saw the Book of Mormon plates, nevertheless maintained in an 1880 letter:

I have set my seal that the Book of Mormon is a true, divine record and it will require more evidence than I have ever seen to ever shake me relative to its purity. I have read many "Exposes." I have seen all their arguments, but my evidences are above them all.³³

The Book of Mormon thus appealed to a seeking Christian audience made skeptical by an age of reason, and a democratized one. American institutions shaped ordinary men and women like McLellin who, when they "felt anxious to see . . . and examine for myself," were free to do so. The Book "exhorted" readers to "experiment upon the word," to reason or "ponder" on the theology presented, and then pray for their own revelation, upon which, they were told, God would "manifest the truth of it unto you by the power of the Holy Ghost."³⁴

In 1831, in Onondaga County, New York, Zerah Pulsipher, a mill owner and lay Baptist leader who leaned toward universal salvation, was convinced that "the pure church with its gifts and graces was" either "not on the earth" or hid from him. Then someone gave him a Book of Mormon, and he "read it twice through and gave it a thorough investigation and believed it was true." He was not sure, though, so he quizzed a Mormon missionary to see "if he had ever laid hands on the sick and they had recovered." A positive reply bought the missionary an opportunity to preach to Pulsipher's church the next evening, during which he "held up the Book of Mormon and declared it to be a revelation from God." Pulsipher then addressed those assembled in democratic fashion:

We had been hearing strange things and if true they were of the utmost importance to us. If not true it was one of the greatest impositions and as the preacher had said that he had got his knowledge from heaven and was nothing but a man and I the same, that I had just as good a right to obtain that blessing as he, therefore I was determined to have that knowledge for myself which I considered it my privilege, From that time I made it a matter of fervent prayer.³⁵

John and Julia Murdock in Ohio, John and Caroline Butler in Kentucky, and John and Rhoda Greene in New York joined New Englanders who became converted through this process.³⁶

These people saw themselves not as hoodwinked by Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon but empowered. He was their prophet, but their experience was their own—it was both revelatory and empirical—and they clung to it with intensity. Both prominent and little-known converts of Mormonism's earliest days left Joseph

Smith but would not forsake what to them was convincing, compelling Scripture.³⁷ Many others walked a thousand miles sustained by the powerful conviction. Neither the social nor psychological benefits of being Mormon in the 1830's can adequately explain this phenomenal faith in the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith.³⁸

Thoughtful Americans whose position in the belief spectrum laid outside of the band from which converts came nevertheless recognized the attractiveness of Joseph Smith's theology. Congressman Matthew Davis, for instance, "went to hear Joe Smith, the celebrated Mormon, expound his doctrine" when Smith was in Washington, D.C., in February 1840. Detailing the experience in a letter to his wife, Davis noted that Smith "spoke rationally on the attributes of Divinity, such as foreknowledge [and] mercy." Smith particularly impressed Davis when he emphasized the contemporarily distinctive though Platonic idea that eternal objects, the soul especially, never began and could never end. Davis found this line of thought "irresistible."³⁹

He further noted Smith's "total unbelief in what is termed *original sin*" and predestination. Arminian is an unsatisfactory adjective, yet Joseph Smith clearly disbelieved in a god that saved or damned indiscriminately. He preached that Christ would redeem all but cognizant apostates who "suffered themselves through the power of the devil to be overcome."⁴⁰ The remainder of humanity was destined to be saved in degrees of heaven compatible with each individual's adherence to God's commandments while on earth, with even the most base, through the atonement of Christ, being heirs to a degree of heaven hereafter.

American historians have long divided American religion between liturgical and evangelical expressions. Recognizing that it does not fit in the Protestant evangelical category, scholars have traditionally placed Mormonism in the liturgical class. But it does not belong there, either.⁴¹ Mormonism, as taught by Samuel Smith and his fellow missionaries, did not convert Americans by giving them an extrarational, revivalistic rebirth. Nor did Mormonism attract converts to a religion with an "intervening history, mythic origins, or tradition." Rather, as Terryl Givens has eloquently argued, "the church is reintegrated into the ongoing flow of human history, origins are concrete and proximate, the process of doctrinal formation is laid bare."⁴²

The sermons of Samuel and Joseph Smith and their fellow missionaries set down the parameters of the primitive gospel and ended by asking Americans to give rational assent to a set of doctrines communicated directly from heaven. This simultaneously revelatory and empirical theology is capsulized perfectly by Congressman Davis's summary of Joseph Smith's two-hour sermon. His precepts,

Davis wrote, "would soften the asperities of man towards man, and would tend to make him a more rational being than he is generally found to be." Then Joseph Smith "closed by referring to the Mormon Bible," or Book of Mormon, which, "he said, was communicated to him, direct from heaven."⁴³

This remarkable blend of revelation and reason made Mormonism compelling to Americans acculturated by the Bible in an age of democratized reason. Contrary to David Brion Davis's claims, Mormonism had little appeal to the particularly gullible or superstitious. Missionaries thought of the situation as just the opposite, in fact, and noted that it was "hard work to preach to old formal professors who are prejudiced and superstitious." A less partisan contemporary observed that many converts were "intelligent and respectable individuals," and an otherwise unsympathetic onlooker noted that they were "by no means men of weak minds."⁴⁴

Much of Mormonism may be somehow connected to ideas that increasingly lived on only "in the shadow of the Enlightenment," but it should also be clear that, for the most part, Mormonism attracted skeptical seekers who believed the Bible but despaired at the enthusiastic exegetical chaos of antebellum revivalism. They therefore sought someone who gave them good reason to be trusted as an authoritative interpreter, and they remained suspicious until they experienced proof of spiritual efficacy.⁴⁵ The primitivism described by earlier scholars, along with the spiritual gifts emphasized by others and the distinctive millennialism delineated by still others, were fruits of the religion, but the writings of many early converts attest that, at its core, Mormonism owed its persuasive quality to the empirical and revelatory blend by which it simultaneously catered to the metaphysical, rationalistic, and democratic—coexisting features of the intellectual framework that most frequently informed conversion. Moreover, early conversion accounts show that this type of conversion prevailed from the beginning of Mormonism and was not incorporated "rather dramatically and suddenly in the 1880s," as Klaus Hansen has uncharacteristically asserted.⁴⁶

It was, in fact, a combined faith in the powers of ordinary men and women to use reason and access revelation that led John Greene, a Methodist itinerant preacher, and his wife, Rhoda, to become converted as they studied, considered, and prayed over the implications of the Book of Mormon left at their house by Samuel Smith in 1830. And that is what Greene urged others to understand when he preached about Mormonism's infallible proofs, both human and divine.

Notes

1. Campbell's assessment of the Book of Mormon was first published in his newspaper *Millennial Harbinger* 2 (February 7, 1831): 85–96. It was published as *Delusions* (New York: E. H. Green, 1832) and is most easily accessible in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, 2 vols. (Independence, Mo.: Zion's, 1951), 2:101–9. See also see Hugh W. Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 127–50.

2. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 3; David Brion Davis, "The New England Origins of Mormonism," *New England Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (June 1953): 157. Grant Underwood reviews this article in "The New England Origins of Mormonism Revisited," *Journal of Mormon History* 15 (1989): 15–35. Richard L. Bushman addresses Davis's interpretation in *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 7.

3. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 228 (see also Timothy Smith, "The Book of Mormon in a Biblical Culture," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 [1980]: 3–21); Benjamin Brown, *Testimonies for the Truth* (Liverpool, England: S. W. Richards, 1853); Davis, "The New England Origins of Mormonism," 153, 157–58.

4. Mario S. DePillis, "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," *Dialogue* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1966): 68–88; Mario S. DePillis, "The Social Sources of Mormonism," *Church History* 37, no. 1 (March 1968): 50–79. DePillis offers a weak sociological argument that rests on a sample of six Mormon converts with half being prominent land owners.

5. Marvin Hill, "The Role of Christian Primitivism in the Origin and Development of the Mormon Kingdom, 1830–1844" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1968); Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987) (Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], 168, emphasizes this same distinction); Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), xiv, 142–43; Thomas G. Alexander, "Wilford Woodruff and the Changing Nature of Mormon Religious Experience," *Church History* 45, no. 1 (March 1976): 56–69; Grant Underwood, "The Meaning and Attraction of Mormonism Reexamined," *Thetean* 9 (March 1977): 1–15.

6. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987); John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The*

Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Herbert Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: Occultism and Renaissance Science in Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1976); Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*; Shippis, *Mormonism*; Klaus Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

7. Quoted in Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, 2:267; Shippis, *Mormonism*, 3.

8. Richard L. Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–98): 183–204; Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61, no. 4 (October 1980): 359–86, quote on 380.

9. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 41. It is telling that Hansen's statement is itself shaped by the presumption pervading earlier historiography that converts came from among the gullible, i.e., the socially peripheral. Hansen's observation is corroborated by the obvious abundance of early Mormon writers and by Whitney R. Cross's finding that antebellum western New Yorkers were comparatively quite literate. See Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1950), 78–109. Approximately one-fifth to one-quarter of American converts to Mormonism between 1830 and 1839 converted in western New York. See Steven C. Harper, "The Evangelical World of Early Mormonism" (M.A. thesis, Utah State University, 1995); and Lawrence M. Yorgason, "Preview on a Study of Early Mormon Converts, 1830–1845," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1970): 279–82. My analysis of Erie County, Pennsylvania, tax records shows that persons who converted to Mormonism there between 1831 and 1833 were representative of the overall pattern of property ownership. In 1830, the median dollar value of persons who were to convert less than three years later was \$3.7 higher than that of their neighbors. All we know so far suggests that converts came from all but the very most affluent social circles.

10. For instance, see R. Lawrence Moore, *In Search of White Crows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 7. On page 50, Moore argues that the intellectual framework informing conversion to Mormonism or Spiritualism was similar in that both "had a passion for collecting witnesses to certify the facts of their faith. Both in their own way strove after a religion whose evidences, however strange they seemed on first telling, fell entirely within the domain of advancing science." Accepting that argument, I am interested in distinguishing, insofar as possible, the Mormons' "own way."

11. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 12, 166; Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 142.

12. William Phelps in *Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio), May 1835.

13. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 9–10.

14. See Edward H. Davidson and William J. Scheick, *Paine, Scripture and Authority: The Age of Reason as Religious and Political Ideal* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 1994).

15. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 6 (see also 8, 14–39); Shipps, *Mormonism*, 8.

16. This aspect of Mormonism has been addressed by Leonard J. Arrington and David Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), esp. chap. 2; and Leonard J. Arrington, “Faith and Intellect as Partners in Mormon History,” no. 1 in the Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture Series, November 7, 1995, Utah State University.

17. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 6; John Murdock, *Journals* (1832, 1830–59), holographs, Historical Department Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; typescripts, archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. See also John W. Welch and Jan Shipps, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin* (Urbana, Ill., and Provo, Utah: University of Illinois Press and *BYU Studies*, 1994), “Journal II,” 60–78; and McLellin to Beloved Relatives, August 4, 1832, in Welch and Shipps, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 82.

18. Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence* (142–44), used a loaned copy of John Murdock, “An Abridged Record of the Life of John Murdock, taken from his Journal by himself,” 4–10. I relied primarily on his journals noted above.

19. Esaias Edwards, *Autobiography*, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Joel Johnson, *Excerpts from Autobiography* (1802–1868), Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 3–4.

22. For an example of a missionary who recorded his efforts to teach this way, see the journal of Zebedee Coltrin (1832–34), Historical Department Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

23. John P. Greene to Oliver Cowdery, *Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio), October 1834, 7–8 (emphasis in original).

24. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 39–40.

25. See the title page of the *Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981); William Cahoon, *Autobiography*, in *Reynolds Cahoon and Sons* (n.p.: privately printed, 1960), Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 3–4; Alexander Campbell, “Delusions,” *Millennial Harbinger* (Bethany, Va., 1831), 2; Welch and Shipp, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 29 (journal entry for July 18, 1831); McLellin to Beloved Relatives, August 4, 1832, in Welch and Shipp, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 80 (the emphasis is in the typescript, Archives, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Independence, Missouri).

26. Shipp, *Mormonism*, 33; Thomas O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 41; George Laub, *Autobiography*, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 2–3.

27. Lewis Barney, *Autobiography*, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 18; Levi Jackman, *Autobiography*, typescript, Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

28. Anson Call, *Autobiography*, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; Eli Gilbert to the Editor, *Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio), October 1834, 10 (for another example, see Milo Andrus, *Autobiography*, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah); Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 40; Shipp, *Mormonism*, 33.

29. See the testimonies of three and eight witnesses at the beginning of each copy of the Book of Mormon.

30. Welch and Shipp, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 33, 29.

31. *Ibid.*, 33. All eleven Book of Mormon witnesses maintained their testimony throughout their lifetimes, as did McLellin. At the same time, each of the three witnesses, most of the eight, and McLellin defected from Joseph Smith. See Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981).

32. Welch and Shipp, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 37.

33. McLellin to Cobb, August 14, 1880, as cited in Larry C. Porter, “William E. McLellan’s [sic] Testimony of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1970): 485–87.

34. Welch and Shipp, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin*, 33; Book of Mormon (Alma 32: 26–43, Moroni 10:3–5); Howard Coray, *Journal*,

typescript, Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 6–7.

35. Zerah Pulsipher, *Autobiography*, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

36. See Milton V. Backman, Jr., *The Heavens Resound* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 5–6, for more on the Murdocks; Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 150–51, on the Greenes; and William G. Hartley, *My Best for the Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: Aspen, 1994), on the Butlers.

37. Besides McLellin, see John Corrill, *History of the Mormons* (n.p.: privately printed, 1839), a copy of which is housed in Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; John Whitmer, “Book of John Whitmer,” typescript, Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; and Lyndon Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1994).

38. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1985), argues that Joseph Smith and his followers had a psychological and social need for each other, thus explaining the attraction of Mormonism.

39. Matthew L. Davis to Mary Davis, February 6, 1840, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 32–34.

40. See *Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), section 76. Smith “referred to the [lack of] charity of the sects, in denouncing all who disagree with them in opinion, and in joining in persecuting the Saints, who believe that even such may be saved, in this world and in the world to come (murderers and apostates excepted).” Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1976), 192.

41. For a summary of the relevant historiography with this view in mind, see Daniel Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), s.v. “Mormonism, an Independent Interpretation,” by Jan Shippo.

42. Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 83.

43. Matthew Davis to Mary Davis in Ehat and Cook, comps. and eds., *Words of Joseph Smith*, 32–34.

44. Evan M. Greene, Journal, May 3, 1833, Historical Department Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; *Western*

Courier (Ravenna, Ohio), May 26, 1831; James H. Wells to Br. Leavitt, 1836, in William Mulder and Russell A. Mortensen, *Among the Mormons: Historical Accounts by Contemporary Observers* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 86–88.

45. Brigham Young's conversion is particularly illustrative of this idea, as are Nancy Tracy's and Sarah Leavitt's. See Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 24; Nancy Tracy, *Autobiography*, typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; Sarah Studevant Leavitt, *History*, edited by Juanita Pulsipher, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

46. Klaus Hansen, review of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, by D. Michael Quinn, in *Church History* 59, no. 1 (March 1990): 111.