

Mormons as Israel

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List of Abbreviations

PoGP – Pearl of Great Price – LDS Canon published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

D&C – Doctrine and Covenants – LDS Canon published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

LDS – Latter-day Saint

Introduction

Joseph Smith established Mormonism¹ not simply as an appendage to traditional Christianity, but rather, as an active participant in and a continuation of, the biblical narrative.² Smith had a particular affinity for the Old Testament and thus the concepts of biblical Israel, prophecy, communal ritual, and a shared collective memory, as they have been applied in modern Mormon settings, have all served to both form and continually reinforce LDS culture, doctrine, and social teaching. The result is an incredibly cohesive and consistent LDS community throughout the United States and the world. Rather than simply *imitate* biblical Israel, Mormonism has attempted to *become* biblical Israel. This paper will illustrate, by examining how the LDS Church applies biblical teaching and practice, as contained in the Hebrew Bible, how modern Mormonism may be seen as a reflection of Old Testament community.

Prophecy and a Foundational Story

Prophets and prophecy are the central theme which both define and inform the Latter-day Saint community. At the center of Mormon teaching is the idea that God reveals himself to humankind. Mormons view their founding prophet Joseph Smith, as well as his successors, just as they view Jeremiah, Amos, Samuel and even Moses: as prophets who literally commune with God and relay his will. The modern Mormon Church has at its head, a president who is sustained as “prophet, seer, and revelator” as

¹ Often referred to as the Mormon Church. The name Mormon comes from *The Book of Mormon* and was originally used as a derogatory term by Smith’s opponents. Today the term Mormon is often used to describe the various sects that originated with Smith’s initial organization. However, in this paper, the terms Mormon and Mormonism will be used only to describe the largest of these sects which is currently based in Salt Lake City, Utah.

² Bushman, Richard L., *Rough Stone Rolling*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2005) 142

well as a Quorum of Twelve Apostles who also serve as “prophets, seers and revelators.”³ Prophecy provides two essential pillars to the Latter-day Saint community. First, a central figure or figures that Mormons look to for spiritual guidance. Second, the assurance that the Lord speaks through these prophets and guides the direction of the LDS community.⁴

To the people of ancient Israel, the story of Moses’s prophetic calling and the resulting exodus became a singular historical event upon which the Yahwistic notion of community was built. According to Paul Hanson, “Israel’s birth ... occurred in this miraculous passage from bondage to freedom.” Indeed, [the celebration of the exodus] echoes through the Bible as its most persistent theme and it continues today to find annual expression in the Jewish celebration of the Passover.”⁵ The exodus represents much more than a simple story. To Israel, the exodus was a cornerstone of faith which encompassed both theological and social teaching. Similarly, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints view the story of Joseph Smith in a similar light. From this singular prophetic figure come the foundations of LDS culture, community and teaching.⁶

Just as Moses spoke to God “face to face”⁷, Joseph Smith also encountered God in a very real and dramatic way. At age 14 or 15, Joseph experienced what is now known

³ The mechanics of LDS ecclesiastical governance is not relevant here but D. Michael Quinn has done extensive research on the dynamics of these prophetic relationships. See Quinn, D. Michael, *The Mormon Hierarchy, Origins of Power*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994) also Quinn, D. Michael, *The Mormon Hierarchy, Extensions of Power*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997). At times, Quinn’s method of interpretation is flawed by his tendency to be polemic, but the information is generally accurate and interesting.

⁴ Certainly this type of community dynamic can have some interesting and undesirable effects which will be discussed in a later supplement.

⁵ Hanson, Paul H, *A People Called*, (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 20-21

⁶ Such parallels between ancient Israel and modern Mormonism are highly appropriate considering that Joseph Smith established Mormonism *literally as Israel* as will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

⁷ Exodus 33:11

as the First Vision. In response to Joseph's inquiry of which church to join, God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph and told him join "none of them for they were all wrong." Interestingly, Joseph's prophetic call did not come during the First Vision, but rather, came several years later when he was visited by an angel named Moroni. According to Joseph Smith's personal history, Joseph had begun to question his standing with God because in the years following the First Vision

"I was left to all kinds of temptations; and, mingling with all kinds of society, I frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the foibles of human nature; which, I am sorry to say, led me into divers temptations offensive in the sight of God."⁸

On September 21, 1824 Joseph offered up "prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all [his] sins" and also a "manifestation ... that [Joseph] might know of [his] state and standing before [God]." Immediately following this prayer, Joseph saw a light appear in his room and "a personage" at his bedside who's "feet did not touch the floor." This personage was Moroni and appeared to issue Joseph his prophetic calling. Moroni announced he had been sent from the "presence of God" and that "God had a work for [Joseph] to do." Moroni instructed Joseph Smith that "there was a book deposited, written on gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of [the American continent], and the source from whence they sprang" which contained "the fullness of the everlasting Gospel... as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants." In perhaps the first direct link between Joseph's prophetic calling and the priesthood and prophets of the Old Testament, Joseph was instructed to use the "Urim and Thummim"

⁸ PofGP, Joseph Smith History 1:28

which accompanied the gold plates, to translate the record he was to receive. The resulting translation was published as the *Book of Mormon* in 1830.⁹

From 1830 until the time of his death in 1844, Joseph Smith continued to receive revelations instructing him in both theological and community matters.¹⁰ To this day, Joseph Smith's revelations on the House of Israel, the requirement to "gather" as a people, and the concepts of priesthood and ritual continue to shape LDS community dynamics.

Mormons as the House of Israel

Latter-day Saints view themselves *literally* as the restoration and resumption of Israel.¹¹ Joseph Smith, "by revelation", learned that he was a descendant of Ephraim¹² and ordained his Father, Joseph Smith Sr. as the first Patriarch of the church. As Patriarch, the elder Smith gave "patriarchal blessings" which declared the "lineage" of the recipient.¹³ Most early members of the Church were declared to be literal descendants of Ephraim or Manasseh.¹⁴ This practice continues today and patriarchs are

⁹ In the *Book of Mormon* we find an emphasis on the preeminence of Israel as God's chosen people as well as on the lineage of the various tribes. The book tells of descendants of Manasseh who are led out of Jerusalem before the Babylonian exile and brought to the American continent. Joseph Smith later taught that the American Indians were descended from these migrants and therefore, were privileged to the blessings of the House of Israel because of their lineage. Subsequently, he organized several missions to the Indians to teach them of their true heritage and thereafter, ministering to the various Indian tribes always remained a priority. The translation of the *Book of Mormon* then, was Joseph Smith's first prophetic work which directly linked the physical lineage of the House of Israel, to his prophetic calling.

¹⁰ These revelations were first collected in 1831 and published as the *Book of Commandments*. They were later added to and published as the *Doctrine and Covenants* (D&C) and are part of the modern LDS canon. Interestingly, this book is considered "open", meaning that any revelation received by the current LDS prophet and subsequently approved by the Quorum of the Twelve and the church as a whole, may be added to the D&C and canonized.

¹¹ This concept is not related to so-called Anglo-Israelism or British-Israelism. Latter-day Saints believe descendants of all ten "lost" tribes can be found in all nations.

¹² Quinn, D. Michael, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998) 225

¹³ Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 51

¹⁴ The vast majority of Latter-day Saints today are declared to be descended from Ephraim and Manasseh as well. This extensive progeny, in addition to the descendants of Joseph described in the *Book of Mormon* are viewed as fulfillment of Genesis 49:22. In Mormonism, the apparent contradiction present in Genesis

designated and ordained in every region. Therefore, every Latter-day Saint who has received his or her patriarchal blessings is physically associated with one of the twelve tribes of Israel.¹⁵ According to Mormon teaching those Latter-day Saints who are not literal descendants of one of the twelve tribes are spiritually “adopted” in to a tribe at the time of their baptism and thus, their “adoptive” lineage is declared upon receiving their patriarchal blessing.¹⁶ The declaration of lineage reinforces to Latter-day Saints that Israel’s community is *their community* and Israel’s promises are *their promises*. Thus, the notions of community which demand compassion, equity and a singular devotion to Yahweh¹⁷, are shared by the Latter-day Saint community as the conception of Israel becomes “us” rather than “them.”

In *Christian Engagements with Christianity*, W.D Davies points out that Mormons “regard themselves not only as returning by descent to Israel, but as reliving the life of Israel in their own lives” and thus “Mormonism is a restoration of Israel.”¹⁸ Joseph Smith learned in his First Vision that he should join no existing church because they “were all wrong” due to an apostasy sometime after the death and martyrdom of the Apostles. Therefore, “Mormonism is an attempt to go behind the corruption of this ‘ecclesiastical’ fall and to restore a kind of primordial Jewish pre-Christian communion between man and God, to reestablish Christ’s church, and at the same time to reenact the

49:8 and 49:26 is harmonized by the belief that after Christ’s second coming, Judah will rule from Jerusalem and Joseph from Zion, which is to be established on the American continent. See PoGP Articles of Faith.

¹⁵ There is absolutely no differentiation in the church based on tribal lineage in actual practice. However, doctrinally, Ephraim, Manasseh, Levi and Judah are all expected to play significant roles in the run-up to the Second Coming of Christ. These beliefs are firmly rooted in the Old Testament and expounded on by modern revelation to Joseph Smith.

¹⁶ Smith, Joseph Fielding, *Doctrines of Salvation Vol 3 of 3*, (ed. Bruce R. McConkie ,Salt Lake City: Bookcraft 1954) 247

¹⁷ Hanson, 148-166

¹⁸ Davies, W.D, *Christian Engagements with Judaism*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999) 217

life of the Israel of God.” Furthermore, “this was to be not simply a restoration of Hebrew ideals but also a restoration of the Hebrew institutions and experience.” The cornerstone of the restoration was the communion between Joseph Smith and God.¹⁹ Davies writes that Joseph Smith “received commandments as did Moses” and “like Israel of Old, Joseph Smith and his people are pilgrims marching to a promised land, the center of which is a Zion, a New Jerusalem.”²⁰

The Gathering

From the beginnings of Mormonism, Joseph Smith sought to establish “Zion” and gather the Latter-day Saints (Israel) to this holy city. The first attempt to establish Zion was at Independence, Missouri which upon visiting in 1831 Joseph Smith named New Jerusalem and in the process “sanctified Independence just by [re]-naming it.”²¹ The goal of Zion was to put into practice the ideals of the Old Testament community.²² In fact, Joseph Smith initially attempted to institute the “United Order”, an economic system wherein peopled deeded their property to the Church and then were given back a “stewardship” in the form of farm land, a business or other asset, based on their family needs. The goal was to create an equal, yet comfortable and prosperous society with no poor. Unfortunately, Joseph’s economic experiment didn’t work because most Saints arriving in Zion “had almost nothing on arrival.”²³ Persecution forced the Mormons from Missouri to Illinois and finally to Utah.²⁴ From 1830 – the mid 1870’s, becoming Mormon meant leaving one’s home and moving to join the Saints in America. During

¹⁹ D&C 103:17

²⁰ Davies, 220

²¹ Bushman, 165

²² D&C 78, 84, and 104

²³ Bushman, 181

²⁴ Doctrinally, Independence is still viewed as the city of Zion which will be built at some time in the future.

these early years, Mormonism saw a large influx of converts from Great Britain and northern Europe. Brigham Young, who served as president for most of this time established the Perpetual Immigration Fund to assist poor converts as they traveled to Salt Lake City.²⁵ Before the completion of the railroad, over 80,000 LDS immigrants made their way to Utah and much of the western United States was colonized by these Mormon immigrants seeking community in Zion. “In 1880, on the fiftieth anniversary of the organization of the Church, President John Taylor, in the tradition of the Israelite jubilee year, forgave half of the outstanding debt owed by the poor to the fund” even though the church was facing serious pressure from the federal government and under substantial financial duress. The goal of the Church of these years was to build Zion and establish Israel.

Today, converts are no longer required to gather to a central location but rather, are encouraged to establish “stakes of Zion” in their own countries. These disparate stakes remain remarkably committed to the LDS community as a whole. As mentioned previously, this commitment stems from both a unifying commitment to prophecy and self-awareness as members of greater Israel. They view Israel’s Old Testament history and calling as their own and feel that sense of calling amplified by God’s continuing love for his people.

Priesthood, Ritual and Covenant

In *The People Called*, Paul Hanson observes “the eternal order, symbolized by the Torah took form in [the] world ... through the annual festivals, the observance of the

²⁵ “The perpetual emigrating fund, a revolving loan fund, helped poorer immigrants, including handcart immigrants, make the trek. In the 1860s Church wagon trains were sent from Utah to convey immigrants from the railroad terminus. After they arrived in Utah, the First Presidency and Presiding Bishopric directed immigrants to settlements where they were needed. “ from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* vols 1-4 (ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, New York:McMillan, 1992) 1039

Sabbath and the rite of circumcision.” Futher, the “priests were the guardians of these observances”²⁶ and naturally, played a significant role in both individual and community life. Priesthood also plays a significant role in the community of Latter-day Saints.

According to W.D Davies:

“The priestly tradition has ... come into its own in Mormonism ... [as] part of the restorative aspect of Mormonism was the reintroduction of the importance of priesthood: the Aaronic priesthood and that of Melchizedek came to be revived or reintroduced into the Mormon community. There is an endemic anticlericalism in Mormonism from its beginning: in true democratic fashion it has emphasized the active participation of all the members in the religious life of the community. But simultaneously it has also combined this with a developing concept of the priestly office.”²⁷

In Mormonism, the Aaronic priesthood is the “lesser priesthood” and “holds the key of the ministering angels and the preparatory gospel.”²⁸ This priesthood is identical to the priesthood held by the Levites in the Old Testament but is exercised in a clearly Christian context.²⁹ And, “as in ancient Israel, priests are ordained by the laying on of hands.”³⁰ Boys as young as twelve years old are ordained to this “preparatory” priesthood and new male³¹ converts to the Church are always ordained to the Aaronic priesthood as a precursor to being ordained to the “higher” Melchizedek priesthood.³²

Latter-day Saints have adopted covenant language to encapsulate the various ordinances, practices and rituals surrounding the priesthood. By becoming ancient Israel,

²⁶ Hanson, 332

²⁷ Davies, 220-221

²⁸ D&C 84:26-27

²⁹ Aaronic priesthood holders are charged with preparing, blessing and passing the Sacrament each Sunday as well as tending to the “temporal” needs of the members of the Church.

³⁰ Davies, 221

³¹ Currently, only males are ordained to priesthood office. However, women in the Church exercise priesthood authority in Mormon Temples and perform ordinances therein.

³² The *Book of Mormon* and *Doctrine and Covenants* states that the true name of the Melchizedek priesthood is the “The Holy Priesthood after the Order of the Son of God” but out of respect and in an effort to avoid “too frequent repetition of His name”, the ancient Church “called it after Melchizedek.” D&C 107:3-4

Mormons conceive their “communal growth from birth to fulfillment in the perfect fellowship intended by God was to be faithfully directed by God within the shelter of divine covenant.”³³ Each ordinance in Mormonism is, in one way or another, a renewal or extension of the Abrahamic covenants.

The Mormon view of ritual is unique amongst Christian traditions. Baptism, the sacrament, and other ordinances are called “saving ordinances” and are required for the remission of sin.³⁴ However, obedience to the “law” and performing these ordinances without first having faith that salvation comes through Christ, is of no effect because obedience to ritual without faith is meaningless in the Latter-day Saint community.³⁵

Latter-day Saints are also connected to ancient Israel through the preeminence of the Temple.³⁶ The first Mormon temple was constructed in Kirtland, Ohio and today there are over 100 LDS Temples across the world. In 1833 Joseph Smith introduced ritual “Washings and Anointings” similar to those found in Exodus 40 and Leviticus 8 and these ordinances continue today as part of Latter-day Saint covenant-making/renewal and worship.³⁷ Ordinances known as “Endowments” are also performed in LDS temples and incorporate some of the ritual clothing used by Aaron and his sons when they were set apart as priests.³⁸ These rituals include both men and women.

³³ Hanson, 28

³⁴ Similar to atonement offered in Leviticus 16.

³⁵ The Latter-day Saint community, much like ancient Israel, often struggles with striking the balance between obedience to the law and exercising faith in God. See Robinson, Stephen A., *Believing Christ, The Parable of the Bicycle and other Good News*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992)

³⁶ It must be noted that there are significant differences between the ancient conception of the Temple and modern Latter-day Saint temples. For purposes of the present discussion however, it is important to recognize that the Temple is a central place of worship and is believed to be the “House of the Lord”. In fact, each LDS temple is inscribed with the words: “Holiness to the Lord, House of the Lord” – See Exodus 28:36, 39:30. Also, just as the Tabernacle, some LDS temples have an area set aside as the Holy of Holies.

³⁷ Buerger, David John, *The Mysteries of Godliness, A History of Mormon Temple Worship*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 11

³⁸ Bushman, 312

To Latter-day Saints, the temple represents the pinnacle of worship, and guidelines are established to determine “worthiness” to enter LDS temples.³⁹ As individual Latter-day Saints attend the temple they make serious commitments to righteous living in the presence of others. These temple rituals represent the continual renewal of the covenant with God and help to reinforce both individual and communal obligations which contribute to the overall cohesiveness of Latter-day Saint community.

Polygamy

Any discussion of the Latter-day Saint connection to Old Testament would be incomplete without some mention of the Mormon practice of plural marriage.⁴⁰ Joseph Smith, in response to a direct commandment from God⁴¹, began practicing plural marriage as early as 1835.⁴² Richard Bushman makes it very clear that in “plural marriages, Joseph did not steal away the prospective bride; [rather], He approached the parents first to ask for their daughter’s hand.” In at least one case, the bride’s father performed the marriage ceremony. To Bushman, “the whole process was formal and, in a peculiar way, old-fashioned.”⁴³ Joseph “did not explain plural marriage as a love match or even as companionship... He understood plural marriage as a religious principle.” To Joseph, “plural marriage had the millennial purpose of fashioning a righteous generation on the eve of the Second Coming.”⁴⁴ In other words, it served as a means of building a community and restoring Israel. W.D Davies observes that Mormons “justified

³⁹ For example, a Latter-day Saint must be pay a full tithing, observe the LDS code of health known as the Word of Wisdom, and keep the law of Chastity in order to enter the temple.

⁴⁰ This practice was officially discontinued in 1890. Any member of the LDS Church who enters the practice of plural marriage is excommunicated. This has given rise to a number of groups in the intermountain West who consider themselves “fundamentalist” Mormons.

⁴¹ D&C 132

⁴² Bushman, 323

⁴³ Ibid, 325

⁴⁴ Ibid, 326

polygamy in terms of the patriarchs” and that plural marriage was “a symbol of [Mormonism’s] separateness and of its innovative character [and] was ... an aspect of its restorative thrust.”⁴⁵

Conclusion

Latter-day Saints consider themselves to be modern members of the House of Israel and consequently, have formed a community which in many ways resembles the community of ancient Israel. Through a unifying voice of prophecy, a self-conception as Israel, various doctrinal practices and distinctive communal ritual, the Latter-day Saint community throughout the world remains cohesive, consistent and for the most part, seeking to honor their communal covenant with the Lord to care for each other. The peculiar aspects of Mormonism certainly make it a distinctive Christian tradition but Latter-day Saints revel in their peculiarity as they attempt to become an “ensign to the nations.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Davies, 222

⁴⁶ Isaiah 5:26

Appendix

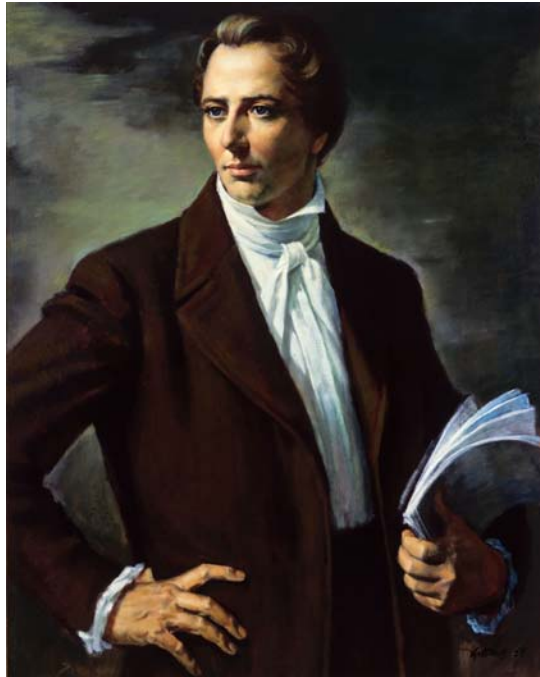


Figure 1 - Joseph Smith, Mormonism's founding Prophet



Figure 2 - Gordon B. Hinckley, current President, Prophet Seer and Revelator for the LDS Church



Figure 3 - Salt Lake City Temple