ABSTRACT

THE KIRTLAND PENTECOST: EARLY MORMON TEMPLE WORSHIP IN THE CULTURE OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY EVANGELICAL REVIVALISM

Historians have long disagreed over the proper way to include Mormonism within the traditional narrative of American religious history. While some historians have almost exclusively focused on the similarities between early Mormonism and the dominant evangelical culture of the Second Great Awakening, others have portrayed the first Mormons as religious outsiders, who mostly rejected the beliefs and practices of their fellow American Christians.

This thesis argues that the Mormons initially emulated, but ultimately repudiated, their surrounding evangelical milieu. The 1836 dedication of the first Mormon temple in Kirtland, Ohio set the Latter-day Saints on a path that gradually led them away from most American evangelicals. In stark contrast to the egalitarian, individualistic, pragmatic, and modern nature of evangelical revivalism, Mormon temple worship was hierarchical, community-oriented, ritualistic, and directly inspired by Old and New Testament precedents. Early Mormon temple worship was an important component in the Latter-day Saints’ radical move away from mainstream American Protestantism.

Nathan Jones
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THE KIRTLAND PENTECOST: EARLY MORMON TEMPLE
WORSHIP IN THE CULTURE OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY
EVANGELICAL REVIVALISM

by

Nathan Jones

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For the Department of History:

We, the undersigned, certify that the thesis of the following student meets the required standards of scholarship, format, and style of the university and the student's graduate degree program for the awarding of the master's degree.

__________________________________
Nathan Jones
Thesis Author

__________________________________
Mark Arvanigian (Chair)  History

__________________________________
Ethan Kytle  History

__________________________________
Brad Jones  History

For the University Graduate Committee:

__________________________________
Dean, Division of Graduate Studies
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

From March 27 to April 3, 1836, in the town of Kirtland, Ohio, a remarkable religious gathering took place. For a span of eight days, over a thousand members of the Church of Christ, later renamed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, celebrated the completion of their first temple by participating in an elaborate dedication ceremony.¹ For several years the Saints in Ohio had been anxiously anticipating this event. It was neither an unexpected nor a spontaneous outpouring of religious enthusiasm, though it was certainly enthusiastic. Many participants reported seeing visions of Jesus and angels, while others spoke, sang, or interpreted messages delivered in unknown or mysterious languages. Benjamin Brown, then a recent Mormon convert, later remembered “Hundreds of elders [speaking] in tongues.”² In an autobiography written over forty years after the event, another witness named Prescindia Huntington recalled seeing on top of the new temple “angels clothed in white covering the roof from end to end…This was in broad daylight, in the afternoon. A number of the children in Kirtland saw the same.”³ Similar manifestations of supernatural


phenomena prompted the Mormons to refer to the temple dedication as the Kirtland Pentecost.

The dedication marked the culmination of a long and costly period of temple construction, which had been financially disastrous for the fledgling church. Nevertheless, the Saints regarded the dedication ceremony as a kind of spiritual reward for the time and money spent in the construction of this peculiar new edifice. More importantly, many Mormons interpreted the abundance of spiritual gifts present at the dedication as a clear fulfillment of prophecy. Under the guidance of their prophet and founder, Joseph Smith, the Saints began a general exodus from their place of origin in western New York and began settling in Kirtland and in the nearby towns of Geauga County, Ohio, as early as 1831.

That same year Smith communicated a revelation from God to the members of his young religious body, promising them that if they obeyed the Lord’s will by moving to Ohio, they would be “endowed with power from on high,” a clear allusion to the biblical day of Pentecost. In 1832 Smith received another revelation commanding the Saints to “establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God.” In 1833 the Saints officially began construction on their

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“house of God,” and three years later they received their much-anticipated endowment of power from on high.⁸

The Kirtland temple was unlike any other house of worship in 1830s America. “By seizing upon the temple rather than the church for a center of worship,” argues Joseph Smith biographer Richard Bushman, “Joseph put aside Christian tradition in favor of ancient Israel.”⁹ The dedication ceremony was just as unique as the temple itself. From a superficial glance the ceremony may have simply appeared to be the Mormon equivalent of a Methodist camp meeting, a Presbyterian revival, or a holy excursion into the mountaintops by the Shakers. Although it included practices and expressions of worship that found parallels among other contemporary Christian sects and denominations, the temple dedication constituted an altogether original and seemingly unorthodox form of Christian liturgy. In contrast to evangelical revivalism, for example, early Mormon temple worship was characterized by a strong adherence to religious ritual, orderliness, community, and hierarchy. Yet, the members and leaders attending the dedication unanimously celebrated the idea that the spiritual gifts promised by Jesus to his ancient apostles, which included visions, prophecy, and the power to speak in unknown tongues, could also be enjoyed by every member present, regardless of age, gender, or social status. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the Kirtland dedication was charismatic and bureaucratically formalized, democratic as well as authoritarian.

The Kirtland endowment ceremony marked a pivotal shift in the history of Mormon worship. In one sense it could be described as both a beginning and an

⁸ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 218.
⁹ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 216.
end: the beginning of new religious rituals among the Mormons, and an end to the somewhat informal approach toward worship taken by the early Saints from 1830 to 1836. The first Mormons commonly worshipped in homes or schools, partaking of the Lord’s Supper on Sundays, and organizing small prayer or testimony meetings during the week. The Kirtland temple provided the Saints with their first major center of worship, and it provided the prophet Joseph Smith with a better opportunity to directly shape the Saints’ worship practices than he had previously enjoyed. He later taught that the major purpose behind gathering the Mormons in Ohio “was to build unto the Lord a house whereby He could reveal unto His people the ordinances of His house and the glories of His kingdom, and teach the people the way of salvation.”\(^1\) Smith used the Kirtland temple dedication as a means of channeling diverse expressions of Christian worship within the framework of a ceremony that, from the Saints’ perspective, more closely resembled the religious practices of Old Testament Israel than those of nineteenth-century American evangelicalism. By so doing he once again forged a new path for the Mormons as they continued to distinguish themselves from practically all their fellow American Christians. In addition, Mormon temple worship assisted the Mormon prophet in his efforts to weed out excessively individualistic, emotional, and anarchic tendencies that were constantly threatening to splinter his new movement. These reasons make the Kirtland temple dedication an important episode in early Mormon history, especially for those wishing to better understand the relationship between early Mormonism and its surrounding religious environment.

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\(^1\) Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., *The Teachings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 283.
Historians seeking the best way to narrate the history of early Mormonism within the larger framework of American religious history have frequently produced contradictory results. Perhaps reflecting his own challenge of including the Mormon story within his classic narrative, *A Religious History of the American People*, Sydney Ahlstrom summarized this dilemma in Mormon historiography better than anyone before or since. “One cannot even be sure,” observed Ahlstrom, “if the object of our consideration is a sect, a mystery cult, a new religion, a church, a people, a nation, or an American subculture; indeed, at different times and places it is all of these.”\(^{11}\) The challenge of attaching a fixed label to the Mormons partly stems from the inability of historians to agree on how closely Mormonism mirrored the surrounding religious culture of the Second Great Awakening. Were the Mormons merely one more new Christian sect produced by the fervor of the Second Awakening, or did they constitute a religious body that quickly found itself on the outskirts of historical Christianity?

At one end of the scholarly divide lie historians such as Gordon Wood, Whitney Cross, and Nathan Hatch, who tend to emphasize the similarities between early Mormonism and the culture of the antebellum evangelical North. Wood and Cross both see Mormonism’s birth in 1830 as the natural byproduct of the religious experimentation so prevalent in western New York, an area of the country famous for harboring other fringe groups and prophetic movements like the Shakers, the Oneida Perfectionists, and the Kingdom of Matthias.\(^{12}\) Cross goes

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so far as to argue that Joseph Smith’s rise to the status of American prophet “might have happened to almost anyone of [his] fellow Yankee migrants.”

By focusing on what he calls “the populist vision of Joseph Smith,” exemplified by Mormonism’s rejection of the established clergy and its appeal to downwardly mobile types, Nathan Hatch argues that the Saints closely resembled other frontier religious movements, like the Methodists, Baptists, and Disciples of Christ. Like these other lay-driven movements, Mormonism provided a sense of empowerment to ordinary people who longed to preach the gospel without having to attend a New England seminary. Hatch further fits Mormonism within a populist milieu by calling the *Book of Mormon* “a document of profound social protest,” based on its message that the poor and downtrodden constitute the true followers of Christ, while wealth and prosperity are signs of wickedness. According to Hatch, early Mormonism can be comfortably situated within the broader theme of the “democratization of American Christianity,” which so strongly characterized the history of American religion from 1800-1850.

Other historians disagree, and have chosen to dwell on the Saints’ status as religious and cultural outsiders. Richard Bushman suggests that although “parts of early Mormonism did resemble aspects of the environment; other parts were alien and peculiar.”

His examination of Smith’s religious thought, the *Book of Mormon*, and the unique Mormon perspective on the Bible, has spurred Bushman to contend that “We can understand Mormonism better if it is seen as an

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13 Cross, *The Burned-over District*, 143.


independent creation, drawing from its environment but also struggling against
American culture in an effort to realize itself.” Historians Marvin Hill and Klaus
Hansen both believe that early Mormonism constituted a radical rejection against
mainstream American politics, marital relations, and economic practices.
According to Hill, the Mormons’ fear of religious pluralism motivated them to
seek refuge by physically separating themselves from the rest of “Gentile”
America, constructing theocratic settlements in Ohio, Illinois, and eventually
Utah, anxiously awaiting the imminent return of Christ and the enactment of his
millennial reign. According to Hansen, Joseph Smith’s rejection of democracy,
capitalism, and monogamy helped make nineteenth-century Mormonism “not
merely one more variant of American Protestant pluralism but a sophisticated and
articulate counterideology.” From a theological standpoint Mormonism strayed
further beyond the traditional Protestant scheme of salvation than any other
contemporary Christian sect, representing “the most extreme repudiation of
Calvinism in North America, possibly going beyond even transcendentalism in its
negation of original sin and in its apotheosis of the free agency of man and his
inherent divine potential.” Hansen suggests that the Saints’ unorthodox blend of
social conservatism and theological liberalism make it clear why they immediately
clashed with the evangelical culture of Jacksonian America.

16 Bushman, Beginnings of Mormonism, 7-8.
17 Marvin Hill, Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism (Salt
18 Klaus Hansen, Mormonism and the American Experience (Chicago: University of
19 Hansen, Mormonism and the American Experience, 63.
20 Hansen, Mormonism and the American Experience, 54.
Perhaps the boldest argument in support of the idea that “Mormonism ought not to be classified as a part of traditional Christianity” comes from historian Jan Shipps. To support her thesis that Mormonism’s break from traditional Christianity was analogous to early Christianity’s gradual transition away from its ancient Jewish heritage, Shipps carefully analyzes Mormon scripture, revelation, and history. Unlike most Christian sectarians, the Mormons did not base their unique status on an idiosyncratic interpretation of the Bible. Instead, they followed the early Christian and Islamic models of embracing new scripture altogether, this time in the form of the Book of Mormon, thus rejecting the traditional Protestant notion of a closed scriptural canon. Along with accepting the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the Mormons also embraced Joseph Smith’s revelatory experiences, which included his claims of having been visited by God, Jesus, and angels. According to Shipps, their belief in new scripture and continuous revelation, combined with their geographical separation from the bulk of mainstream American society, allowed the Mormons to establish their own sacred past. Like the three major world religions that either directly or indirectly grew out of the Biblical tradition, Mormonism came to possess its “own salvation history,” albeit one that took place in the nineteenth century. For these


22 Shipps, Mormonism. In the preface Shipps lays out her argument for Mormon exceptionalism. She states, “Despite the surprising similarity between some of the modern cultural manifestations of Mormonism and American evangelical Protestantism, Mormonism started to grow away from traditional Christianity almost immediately upon coming into existence.”

23 Shipps, Mormonism, 41-65. Shipps analyzes the process by which later Mormons canonized their early history in her chapter, “History as Text.”

24 Shipps, Mormonism, 52-53.
reasons, Shipps argues, “Mormonism differs from traditional Christianity in much the same fashion that traditional Christianity…came to differ from Judaism.”

The objective of this thesis is to reconcile the views of scholars who see early Mormonism as either quasi-evangelical, or completely outside the pale of normative Christianity. I will argue that Mormonism initially emulated, but eventually rejected, the broader evangelical milieu of the Second Great Awakening. I will pursue this argument by tracing the evolution of early Mormon worship practices, preaching styles, and religious rituals, with particular emphasis on the nature of early Mormon temple worship in Kirtland, Ohio. Mormonism from 1830 to 1836 was heavily influenced by its evangelical surroundings. Despite Joseph Smith’s opposition to all existing varieties of Christianity excluding his own, he could not escape the fact that his initial followers came out of a culture dominated by evangelical revivalism and Protestant pluralism. At least on a superficial level, the earliest manifestations of Mormon preaching styles and worship patterns were practically indistinguishable from those of other grassroots religious movements like the Baptists, Campbellites, and especially the Methodists. Overemphasizing these parallels, however, tends to discount the dynamic nature of the early Mormon movement. Indeed, Mormon history continues to divide scholars into opposing camps due in large measure to a failure among historians to recognize how dramatically Mormonism changed during the years of Smith’s leadership, which lasted no more than two decades. One of these dynamic changes was the introduction into early Mormonism of new forms and rituals of temple worship. By the time of the 1836 Kirtland endowment ceremony, for example, Mormons were worshipping in ways that would have seemed quite

25 Shipps, Mormonism, 148.
unfamiliar to most of their fellow American Christians, regardless of denomination.

Chapter 1 will discuss the birth of Mormonism within the cultural and religious environment of the Second Great Awakening, an environment that had a tremendous influence upon the first Mormon converts. As a teenager in Palmyra, New York, Joseph Smith developed a strong aversion toward the religious revivals taking place near his home. In his effort to find God’s true church on earth, Smith bypassed revivalism and chose the more unorthodox route of seeking personal revelation, ultimately declaring himself God’s chosen mouthpiece on earth. Early Mormonism initially appealed to many frustrated seekers who, like Smith, had been left unmoved or unconverted by the revival technique. Nevertheless, early Mormon converts brought important elements of antebellum revivalism with them into their new faith. For example, early Mormons embraced vernacular preaching and swore allegiance to religious leaders who lacked formal education or training in the scriptures. Smith embarked on an aggressive campaign of sending young and sometimes inexperienced preachers throughout the country to spread the Mormon message. In addition, early Mormons took part in the visionary and enthusiastic side of the Second Great Awakening, albeit in their own peculiar way.

Chapter 2 will examine Mormonism’s transition away from evangelical modes of worship by first focusing on the Mormon rejection of evangelical revivalism. More than any other religious institution of its time, revivalism became the essence of nineteenth-century American Protestantism. Most American Christians from this era saw the revival as the most effective tool for converting the masses, fostering piety within the average layman, and rescuing backslidden Christians from their deplorable state. As Perry Miller once put it, “The dominant theme in America from 1800 to 1860 is the invincible persistence
of the revival technique.”

Notwithstanding its prominent influence, however, revivalism never gained unanimous acceptance throughout every corner of nineteenth-century America. Scholars have long been aware, for example, of a sizeable body of religious anti-revivalists, which included such disparate groups as conservative Calvinists, Unitarians, Universalists, and Mormons. In contrast to conservative and liberal critiques against the institution, the Mormon response is best understood as a radical form of anti-revivalism. Despite some early affinities between Mormon and evangelical styles of worship, the Saints eventually rejected the popular, middle-class revivalism of Charles Grandison Finney. As an alternative to revivalism, the Mormons developed rituals and expressions of worship derived from the New Testament and the biblical account of ancient Israel. The earliest Mormons’ strong sense of kinship with ancient Israel

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motivated them to construct their own version of the Old Testament temple of Solomon in the town of Kirtland, Ohio. The first Mormon temple stood as a visible symbol of the Latter-day Saints’ rejection of the pragmatic, modernist hue of Finneyite revivalism.
Chapter 2

THE ENTHUSIASTIC FACE OF EARLY MORMONISM

In the summer of 1832, a Mormon convert named Brigham Young moved with his family from Mendon, New York, to the town of Kirtland, Ohio. Young went to Ohio to join the community of Latter-day Saints that had been gathering in Kirtland for over a year, and to meet the Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith. Though he had only been a member of Smith’s religious body for a few months, Young quickly became a devoted disciple. Before moving to Kirtland, for example, he spent several months preaching the Mormon gospel in a number of small towns scattered throughout western New York. Prior to embracing Mormonism, he had experienced occasional opportunities to preach on behalf of the Reformed Methodist sect. He later confessed, however, that he was never wholly satisfied with the tenets of Methodism, and that inwardly he longed for a church that more closely resembled the one described in the New Testament.

When elders from the Mormon Church passed through Mendon in 1830, Young and his brothers immediately sought them out. He was impressed by the elders’ claims that the original New Testament church had been restored in its pristine condition, replete with the spiritual gifts that Jesus had given to the earliest Christians, including the ability to prophecy, see visions, heal the sick, and speak in unknown tongues. After studying the Book of Mormon and contemplating the elders’ teachings, Young accepted baptism into the Church of Christ. On April 15,
1832, he was immersed into the cold waters of a Pennsylvania pond, thereby beginning his new life as a Mormon.¹

When Young arrived in Kirtland in 1832, he wasted little time seeking out the Mormon prophet. Several years later he recounted his first meeting with Smith, in which the visionary and enthusiastic elements of early Mormonism boiled to the surface:

My joy was full at the privilege of shaking the hand of the Prophet of God...In the evening a few of the brethren came in, and we conversed together upon the things of the kingdom. [Smith] called upon me to pray; in my prayer I spoke in tongues. As soon as we arose from our knees the brethren flocked around him, and asked his opinion concerning the gift that was upon me. He told them it was the pure Adamic language. Some said to him they expected he would condemn the gift brother Brigham had, but he said, “No, it is of God, and the time will come when brother Brigham will preside over this Church.”²

In the first ever meeting between the founder of Mormonism and his eventual successor, the two chose to communicate in “the pure Adamic language.” What is so remarkable about this episode is not the fact that this charismatic form of communication was rare among the earliest Mormons, but that it was so normal. Brigham Young was certainly not the only Latter-day Saint to experiment with the gift of tongues. Indeed, speaking and interpreting mysterious words and phrases quickly became a common feature in early Mormon testimony and prayer gatherings. For example, Young had first listened to the Mormon elders with his friend and neighbor, Heber C. Kimball. Years later Kimball remembered the

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important role that the gift of tongues had played in the presentation of the Mormon message. “As soon as I heard them I was convinced that they taught the truth,” Kimball said of the Mormon elders. “I also saw and heard the gifts of the spirit manifested by the elders, for they spoke in tongues and interpreted, which tended to strengthen my faith. Brigham Young and myself were constrained, by the Spirit, to bear testimony of the truth, and when we did this, the power of God rested upon us.”3 Like Young and Kimball, many other Mormon converts became convinced of the truthfulness of Mormonism after witnessing the outpouring of Pentecostal gifts that often accompanied the Mormon elders. It confirmed their preconceived convictions that, as the Book of Mormon states, “God has not ceased to be a God of miracles.”4

Perhaps more than any other facet of the early Mormon experience, speaking in tongues demonstrates the degree to which the earliest Saints both partook of, and contributed to, the supernatural and charismatic spirit that so often characterized American Christianity during the first half of the nineteenth century. The religious enthusiasm that flourished during the Second Great Awakening first came to the fore at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801. During a week-long revival that attracted thousands of Americans living along the frontier, preachers encouraged lay men and women to manifest an inward conversion through such outward signs as running, spontaneously bursting into laughter, and uttering

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incomprehensible sounds.\textsuperscript{5} Emotional displays of religiosity tended to arouse suspicion and controversy among many Christian clergymen. Nevertheless, enthusiastic expressions of worship persisted throughout the Second Awakening, especially among such lay-driven bodies as the Methodists and Baptists. According to the historian of American Methodism, John Wigger, early Methodists “believed in the efficacy of prophetic dreams, visions, and supernatural impressions and were not afraid to base day-to-day decisions on such phenomena.”\textsuperscript{6} Other examples of visionary religion were on display among such heterodox bodies as the Mathiasites, who followed a self-proclaimed prophet who believed in continuous revelation, and the Millerites, whose founder, William Miller, had predicted that the second advent of Christ would come to pass in October of 1843. By the 1820s and 1830s, this kind of religious experimentation and even radical social reform had reached its zenith in the rural towns and canal cities of New York State. It was in upstate New York, for example, that Charles Finney first began his famed career as an evangelist, and where secular and religious groups, such as the Oneida Perfectionists and the Shakers, experimented with plans for quasi-utopian communities. It was also in upstate New York where the prophet and founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, first came of age.

Like his parents and grandparents before him, Smith was sensitive to religion but hesitant to formally join a church. At the age of twelve his mind became, as he put it, “seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul.” He soon fell into a state of guilt and


confusion, which he later described in these words: “I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world for I learned in the scriptures that God was the same yesterday to day and forever that he was no respecter to persons.” In an effort to relieve his guilt and perhaps find a church to unite with, he attended a series of revivals then passing through his hometown of Palmyra, New York. Though the revivals convinced his mother and several siblings to join the local Presbyterian congregation, Joseph’s experiences at the revivals were almost wholly negative. Somewhat ironically, however, revivalism indirectly assisted in laying the foundations of the early Mormon movement. For it was Smith’s frustrating encounters with revivals that first started him down his visionary and unorthodox path toward becoming a prophet.

In his official history written in 1838, Smith remembered the religious enthusiasm that hit Palmyra like a tidal wave during his teenage years. He was sincere and curious, but the revivals left a bad taste in his mouth. He saw only petty sectarian squabbles, with “priest contending against priest, and convert against convert.” He lost confidence in the Bible as the ultimate arbiter of divine truth, since he saw each sect and denomination interpret it according to their liking. The passion and energy so often present at revivals failed to move the future Mormon prophet, who later remembered wanting “to feel and shout like the

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rest but could feel nothing.” In a state of uncertainty over which church to join, Smith sought the truth through prayer, and in response he received the visitation of God and Jesus Christ. Modern Mormons regard Smith’s “First Vision” as the first in a series of foundational events that would give rise to Mormonism, or to what Smith would later call “the restoration of all things.”

The second foundational event in the emergence of Mormonism occurred on the night of Sept. 21, 1823, when the angel Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith in his Palmyra home. “A personage appeared at my bedside,” Smith remembered, “standing in the air, for his feet did not touch the floor.” After identifying himself by name, Moroni told Smith that “God had a work for me to do; and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations…or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people.” Moroni then informed Smith about a set of ancient records written on gold plates buried in a hill near his home, which contained “an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang,” along with “the fullness of the everlasting Gospel…as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants.” After a four-year period of spiritual preparation, Smith removed the plates from the Hill Cumorah for the purpose of translating them “by the gift and power of God” into English. In 1830 he published the translated product under the title, the Book of Mormon, and on


12 Joseph Smith, History of the Church, 1:11-12.

13 Joseph Smith, History of the Church, 1:59.
April 6 of that same year Smith legally established the Church of Christ in Fayette, New York.  

Smith’s new religious body could only boast around thirty members on the date of its official establishment. Despite its humble size, however, Smith was confident that Mormonism would become something more than simply another sectarian offshoot produced by the religious enthusiasm of the Second Great Awakening. As Joseph Smith biographer Fawn Brodie wrote of Mormonism, “It was a real religious creation, one intended to be to Christianity what Christianity was to Judaism: that is, a reform and a consummation.”

A revelation delivered by Smith to the Saints in 1831 reveals that the Mormons’ sense of exceptionalism is as old as Mormonism itself. The revelation begins by describing in some detail the wickedness that prevailed throughout the earth immediately prior to the beginning of Joseph Smith’s prophetic mission. “The anger of the Lord is kindled,” the revelation warned, “and his sword is bathed in heaven, and it shall fall upon the inhabitants of the earth.”

According to the revelation, which is now the first section of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, the world deserved punishment because the people had all rejected the words of the prophets: “They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world.”

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Midway through the revelation, the role of Joseph Smith is described like a burst of light coming down from heaven to save the world from God’s impending judgment. “I the Lord,” states the revelation, “knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments.”

According to the revelation, Smith’s ministry was intended to save the righteous from the wrath of God and prepare the world for Christ’s Second Coming. A concluding passage in the revelation speaks of Smith’s “power to lay the foundation of this church, and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness, the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth.”

Smith’s aims were far from modest; he claimed to be the prophet and founder of the only true Christian church on earth.

Considering the high degree of religious pluralism that existed in the antebellum United States, however, radical claims could hardly guarantee success. Jan Shipps argues that “an actual religious marketplace existed in the United States in the middle years of the first half of what has been designated as the Christian century,” in which “preachers of every stripe were proclaiming the gospel in the schoolhouses, courthouses, meetinghouses, and even barns that formed the public square in the towns, villages, and hamlets of the 1830s hinterland.”

In such a competitive religious marketplace it was difficult for the earliest Mormon missionaries to distinguish themselves from evangelical preachers. Indeed, an overview of the opening years of Mormon history makes it

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clear that evangelical modes of preaching frequently infiltrated the Mormon ranks, sometimes greatly aiding Mormons in their efforts to win converts and propagate their message. In particular, Joseph Smith adopted the Methodist strategy of commissioning an untrained, often uneducated missionary force, to preach to ordinary Americans in terms they could easily fathom. In fact, early Mormons may have taken this idea more seriously than any other evangelical body, since it was not uncommon for new Mormon converts to leave on preaching tours right after emerging from the waters of baptism. In the early years of Mormonism, so many affinities existed between Mormon and evangelical preachers that the latter often invited Mormon missionaries to preach within the walls of evangelical churches. As Richard Bushman has pointed out, from the perspective of many outsiders the Mormon Church in 1830 simply appeared to be one more new Christian sect among many, with little to distinguish itself by.

While reflecting on the period in his youth when he was confused over which church to join, Joseph Smith remembered that for a brief time he “became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and...felt some desire to be united with them.” Smith had every reason to admire the Methodists, who grew from a tiny sect during the American Revolution into the largest Protestant denomination in

21 For more on the Methodist itinerants, see Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 48-80.


24 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 112. Bushman argues that the earliest regulations for church governance “presented the Church of Christ as a church among churches, stable, disciplined, and orthodox.”

America by the time of the Civil War. In his 1835 *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, the popular evangelist Charles Finney sought to diagnose the reason for American Methodism’s remarkable growth. Finney’s explanation primarily focused on the kinds of people employed by the Methodists to preach and the precise nature of their preaching. “Look at the Methodists,” Finney wrote, “Many of their ministers are unlearned, in the common sense of the term, many of them taken right from the shop or the farm, and yet they have gathered congregations…Wherever the Methodists have gone, their plain, pointed and simple, but warm and animated mode of preaching has always gathered congregations.” By embracing a conversational, colloquial, and extemporaneous style of preaching, the Methodist movement harnessed the energies of ordinary, often untrained or uneducated young men, and turned them into successful preachers. “Nothing would have been more unthinkable to a Methodist itinerant,” writes John Wigger, “than the dispassionate reading of a prepared sermon.” Finney adopted a similar style of preaching in his revivals, and frequently criticized intellectually polished, written sermons, which prevented preachers from using gestures, talking directly to their audience, or adjusting their messages to meet shifting circumstances. “A minister must preach just as he would talk,” Finney counseled. “Nothing is more calculated to make a sinner feel that religion is some mysterious thing…than this mouthing, formal, lofty style of speaking, so generally employed in the pulpit.”

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vernacular preaching” was one of the key features of the Second Great Awakening.  

Of all the characteristics of American Methodism and Finneyite revivalism, this tendency to embrace colloquial sermonizing by informally trained preachers may have had the most positive impact on early Mormonism. Indeed, the many parallels between early Mormonism and Methodism are hardly coincidental, not only because both religions operated in the same environment and appealed to a similar constituency, but because so many early Mormons were in fact former Methodists. Mormon converts brought this element of revivalism with them into their new faith, and often delivered emotional, charismatic-driven sermons that challenged their hearers to immediately embrace Mormonism, just as the revivalists challenged their audiences to embrace immediate salvation.

Brigham Young was a master of extemporaneous, colloquial preaching. “Every sermon he gave in his lifetime,” notes his biographer Leonard Arrington, “was delivered without a prepared text or notes.” Like many Methodist exhorters, Young came from an artisan background, and had received no formal training as a minister, but he began to preach the gospel almost immediately after embracing Mormonism. Future Mormon apologist Orson Pratt also began preaching only weeks after his baptism into the Mormon fold. Pratt’s mission journals describe his experiences traveling “on foot, without purse or scrip,” through the villages of Ohio, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, preaching the gospel under just about any condition. Within the religious marketplace of

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31 Arrington, *Brigham Young*, 31.

the antebellum evangelical North, Pratt often engaged in debates against rival ministers. “I was opposed…by two priests, one Methodist, the other a Presbyterian. The meeting continued from 2 o’clock till near sundown.” Then Pratt proudly concluded, “The people saw the weakness of their arguments and desired to hear more.”

Like the Methodist itinerants whom they so often resembled, Mormon traveling elders relished the fact that they possessed the ability to preach the gospel without having been formally trained or educated. It seemed to strengthen their faith that the Lord was manifesting his power through such weak instruments. Smith taught his followers that the restoration of the ancient gospel, which was Mormonism’s primary objective, was meant to show that “the weak things of the world shall come forth and break down the mighty and strong ones, that man should not counsel his fellow man, neither trust in the arm of the flesh.”

Inspired by their literal reading of the New Testament, early Mormon preachers saw themselves as reincarnations of Jesus’ original disciples, who had merely been fishermen.

As part of this broader culture of unregulated evangelism and vernacular preaching, the earliest Mormon elders delivered simple, straightforward messages that avoided theological speculations and doctrinal wrangling. Charles Finney had counseled his fellow evangelists to focus on practical preaching, and to avoid any subjects that risked either confusing or dividing Christians. As he instructed in his Lectures on Revivals, “All sectarianism should be carefully avoided. If a sectarian spirit breaks out, either in the preaching, or praying, or conversation, it will

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33 Orson Pratt, Journals, 78.
34 Joseph Smith, The Doctrine and Covenants, 1:19.
counteract all the good of the meeting.”

According to Wigger, the Methodist exhorters “were more interested in the affect of experience than in what they considered theological abstractions.” To reach potential converts from various walks of life, the first Mormon missionaries were advised: “And of tenets thou shalt not talk, but thou shalt declare repentance and faith on the Savior, and of remission of sins by baptism, and by fire, yea, even the Holy Ghost.”

The early Mormon preacher Henry G. Boyle became upset with his missionary companion for teaching “other things beyond the first principles of the gospel,” and for telling his audience “they would all be damned if they did not believe and obey them.”

In the earliest days of Mormonism, Joseph Smith and other Mormon leaders were often described as unpolished, yet powerfully charismatic preachers. Lorenzo Snow’s account of an address by Joseph Smith is one that would have sounded equally familiar if applied to either a Methodist exhorter or a Baptist farm-preacher. “He was only twenty five years of age and was not…what would be called a fluent speaker. His remarks were confined principally to his own experiences…giving a strong and powerful testimony in regard to these marvelous manifestations.” Snow then added that Smith “became very strong and powerful and seemed to affect the whole audience with the feeling that he was honest and

35 Finney, Lectures on Revivals, 266.
36 Wigger, Taking Heaven by Storm, 17.
sincere.”  

As Wigger observes regarding the Methodist itinerants, “Their conversions formed a base of experience without which no Methodist could hope to obtain a public platform.”  

Preachers lacking a formal education or intensive training in the Bible often had to fall back on their own religious experiences, which, like Smith’s, often came in the form of visions and dreams.

In many respects, the rise of vernacular preaching is best understood as a populist reaction against traditional sermons delivered by educated, elite clergymen. Indeed, nineteenth-century evangelical preaching constituted a dramatic shift away from the intellectual and deliberate modes of preaching that had once prevailed among seventeenth and eighteenth-century Congregationalist ministers. As Perry Miller observed in his study of the seventeenth-century Puritans, “A Puritan preacher never surrenders to feeling…but argues his way step by step, inexorably disposing of point after point, quoting Biblical verses, citing authorities, watching for fallacies in logic, drawing upon the sciences for analogies, utilizing any information that seems pertinent.”  

As part of their rejection of the rational side of the Puritan tradition, nineteenth-century evangelicals embraced the idea that a truly inspired preacher need not rely on any written texts. So attached were many early Mormons to this notion that preaching should be a spontaneous, informal kind of activity, that many of them later

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39 Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus, eds., They Knew the Prophet (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 32-33.

40 Wigger, Taking Heaven by Storm, 53.

expressed disappointment when Joseph Smith read a written prayer at the dedication of the Kirtland temple. \footnote{Dan Vogel, \textit{Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism} (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 147.}

The most accomplished preacher within the early Mormon movement was probably Sydney Rigdon, a former Campbellite minister. In a detailed account of one of Rigdon’s sermons by a non-Mormon named John Barr, it is obvious that much of what made Rigdon a powerful Mormon preacher was his ability to emulate the strategies of revivalists like Finney. With a friend he only referred to as Mr. Card, Barr witnessed a sermon delivered by Rigdon near a small pool of water where the Mormons were baptizing. “Standing in the water,” Barr remembered, “Rigdon gave one of his most powerful exhortations. The assembly became greatly affected. As he proceeded he called for the converts to step forward. They came through the crowd…and were immersed.” This became too much for Barr’s friend Mr. Card, who urgently pleaded with Barr to take him away. After they had traveled for some distance, Mr. Card told Barr, “‘if you had not been there I certainly should have gone into the water.’ He said the impulse was irresistible.” \footnote{William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, eds., \textit{Among the Mormons: Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 63-65.} In a move that Finney and his fellow revivalists utilized to near perfection, Rigdon waited until his audience had reached a kind of spiritual high before inviting them to come forward and embrace conversion.

Like the Methodists and other evangelical bodies, early Mormons embraced vernacular preaching due in large measure to a phenomenon that Nathan Hatch has called, “the democratization of American Christianity.” Hatch’s important work on popular religious movements during the Second Great Awakening reveals that
the ideals and rhetoric of the American Revolution convinced ordinary Americans that they no longer needed to rely on formally trained ministers to receive the Christian message. Hatch’s work convincingly demonstrates that in the history of American religion since at least the 1820s, the people have been more powerful than the clergy, and have thus forced the clergy to conform their practices to the will of the people. As Wigger argues in his study of Methodism, “From the Revolution on, no American church would become a large-scale movement without answering first and foremost to the desires of ordinary folk.” Within such a lay-oriented religious environment, ordinary Americans “exalted religious leaders short on social graces, family connections, and literary education.” The earliest Mormon leaders certainly fit this mold.

Another example of how early Mormonism was affected by its surrounding religious culture can be seen in the enthusiastic manifestations of worship that often attended the earliest Mormon gatherings. During the Second Great Awakening, colloquial preaching was designed to incite an emotional response from Christian audiences. The legendary 1801 revival at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, became famous due in large measure to the highly emotional outbursts among many in the crowd, which often took the form of physical exercises such as dancing, fainting, or barking like a dog. Finney did not necessarily condone these kinds of physical exercises in his revivals, and according to historian

44 Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity, 10.
45 Wigger, Taking Heaven by Storm, 11.
46 Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity, 5.
47 For a summary of the “physical exercises” at Cane Ridge, see Conkin, Cane Ridge, 102-106.
Timothy Smith, revivals in general during the 1840s and 1850s seemed to become more toned down, and less conducive to volatile behavior among members of the audience. \(^{48}\) Even the Methodists, who had promoted a supernatural religion of dreams and visions in their early years, began a “shift away from overt enthusiasm” during the 1820s and 1830s. \(^{49}\) Despite this subtle move among many evangelicals toward greater social respectability, evangelists like Finney still believed that stirring the emotions of their audience was an absolute necessity in the conducting of a successful revival. “God has found it necessary to take advantage of the excitability there is in mankind,” Finney wrote, “before he can lead them to obey.” \(^{50}\) Revivals were designed to convert the unconverted, bring wayward souls back into the Christian fold, and convince the drunkard to abandon his ardent spirits. To achieve this end, Finneyite revivalism was almost exclusively focused on arousing the emotions and feelings of the audience, rather than on stimulating intellectual or rational introspection. Though Finney’s revivals were slightly more restrained than the gathering at Cane Ridge, they were still famous for the passion and energy they instilled within their audience.

Where did early Mormonism fit within this paradigm of enthusiastic religion? Consistent with his argument that Mormonism was in many ways a kind of anti-evangelical movement, Klaus Hansen argues that “Mormonism itself was clearly no enthusiastic religion.” \(^{51}\) Richard Bushman points out that even though


\(^{50}\) Finney, *Lectures on Revivals*, 9.

he “was the chief visionary of his age,” Joseph Smith “preferred edification and orderly worship to the uncontrolled emotion of the camp meeting.”\textsuperscript{52} It is certainly true that Smith did not emulate evangelists like Finney by intentionally going out of his way to stir up the emotions of his followers. But he rarely needed to, since most early converts embraced Mormonism due to the influence of the \textit{Book of Mormon} and the Mormon concept of restoration, rather than to Smith’s personal charisma.\textsuperscript{53} In addition, Smith was almost immediately aware that excessive enthusiasm had the potential to create religious factionalism. Had he not witnessed a “war of words and tumult of opinions” among the revivalists as a teenager?\textsuperscript{54}

Nevertheless, undeniable elements of religious enthusiasm clearly made their way into the psyches and gatherings of the earliest Mormons. As we have already seen, Mormon missionaries often took advantage of enthusiastic modes of preaching to win more converts. For the critics of Mormonism there was no mistaking the fact that Smith’s movement constituted yet another enthusiastic body of religious fanatics. A New England newspaper commented on Mormonism’s ability to “give expression to the various forms of enthusiasm that pervade the religious sentiment of the day.” It then called Mormonism “An asylum to all the disaffected or dissatisfied of other persuasions, and much that is congenial to almost every shade of erratic or radical religious character.”\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, 285.
\item[53] Bushman, \textit{Rough Stone Rolling}, xxi.
\end{footnotes}
The critics were not wrong to categorize early Mormonism as an enthusiastic religion, but Mormon enthusiasm was of a slightly different shade than that of the revivalists. Given the dynamic nature of the early Mormon movement, moreover, it was a mode of religious enthusiasm that was constantly subject to dramatic alterations. Joseph Smith himself was often very tolerant of enthusiastic displays of religiosity, even to the point of celebrating or promoting them. This was especially true of the early Mormon phenomenon of speaking in tongues. The Mormons found inspiration for this practice through their literal reading of the New Testament, which promised that “these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues.” It was also based on their conviction that the spiritual gifts enjoyed by the primitive church would be restored in modern times, inspiring the Mormon poet W.W Phelps to pen the following lines,

The Spirit of God like a fire is burning!
the latter-day glory begins to come forth;
The visions and blessings of old are returning,
and angels are coming to visit the earth.57

Though Smith rarely spoke in tongues, he tended to endorse its practice during the earliest period of Church history. In a diary entry from Oct. 26, 1833, Smith reported that a meeting was held in which “one of the sisters got the gift of tongues which made the saints rejoice may God increase the gifts among them.” In a written prayer delivered at the dedication of the Kirtland temple, Smith pleaded with the Lord to “let the gift of tongues be poured out upon thy people,

56 Mark 16:17 (King James Version).
57 Joseph Smith, History of the Church, 2:426.
58 Jessee, Personal Writings, 20.
even cloven tongues as of fire, and the interpretation thereof.” These examples show Smith condoning manifestations of religious enthusiasm that appeared to be sanctioned by the Bible, while on other occasions he criticized emotional displays of religiosity that he deemed unbiblical.

One of the ironies of early Mormonism is that its initial success often hinged on its ability to attract the kinds of people who would later prove troubling to its long-term progress as an organized church. Within the context of the Second Great Awakening, there existed a class of religionists whom Richard Bushman has described as religious visionaries, who were “hungering for more of God than standard church worship provided.” Some of these people were attracted to Mormonism’s unorthodox side, most notably its practice of speaking in tongues. An early Mormon named Jesse Crosby attended a small gathering of Latter-day Saints that would have certainly appealed to someone with visionary inclinations:

The Holy Ghost was poured out insomuch that many were healed of their infirmities, and prophesied, some saw visions, others spoke in different languages by the gift and power of God as on the day of Pentecost. The language or dialect of various tribes of the American Indians was spoken, and that too by persons who had never spoken with an Indian in their lives.

In the earliest days of Mormonism, before Smith had converted his church into a highly organized ecclesiastical body, there were many such displays of religious enthusiasm among Mormon visionaries that the Mormon prophet found threatening.

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60 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 147.

The most serious incident of this kind occurred in Kirtland in 1831, right after Smith arrived there from New York. A small group of recent converts known as “the family” was holding enthusiastic gatherings that Smith and other New York Mormons immediately found troubling. Joseph’s mother Lucy remembered them as “good brethren,” who nonetheless “had imbibed some very erroneous ideas…which manifested itself among them in strange contortions of the visage, and sudden, unnatural exertions of the body.” The famed Mormon preacher Parley P. Pratt was more critical, calling their activities “disgusting, rather than edifying.” Like many of the lay people at Cane Ridge, these visionary Mormons “would seem to swoon away, and make unseemly gestures, and be drawn or disfigured in their countenances. Others would fall into ecstasies, and be drawn into contortions, cramps, fits, etc.” Much like Joseph Smith, Pratt saw such behavior as evidence that “a false and lying spirit seemed to be creeping into the Church.”

Smith wanted to put an immediate end to their activities, but in a tactful manner. “Some strange notions and false spirits had crept in,” Smith remembered, “With a little caution and some wisdom, I soon assisted the brethren and sisters to overcome them.” As Bushman observes, Smith had to suppress the activities of “the family” without wholly discrediting the idea of visionary religion: “Joseph

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had to restrain the excesses without discouraging spiritual gifts altogether.” His solution, which he often resorted to during times of intra-church tension, was to receive a revelation for the church. In what is now section 50 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, Smith taught the Saints how to distinguish between Godly expressions of worship, and those ascending from the devil. In an indirect reference to the gatherings of “the family,” the revelation stated, “Verily I say unto you, that there are many spirits which are false spirits, which have gone forth in the earth, deceiving the world.” Then the revelation laid out the ideal manner of preaching and worship among the Saints. “Wherefore, he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together. And that which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness.” Smith’s revelation sought to replace irrational emotional outbursts with edification and understanding. On a later occasion Smith instructed the Saints that even though divine manifestations were available to all members of the church, not all revelation carried the same weight. An individual might receive revelation for himself or a father could receive it for his children, but only Smith possessed the authority to receive divine guidance for the entire church.

In the late-1830s and early-1840s, after his hold over Mormonism was more secure, Smith and the Mormon hierarchy became more aggressive in their efforts to restrain excessive religious enthusiasm. Smith even began to discourage the Saints from excessively indulging in the gift of tongues. “Be not so curious

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66 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 151.
about tongues,” he wrote in 1842. “The gifts of God are all useful in their place, but when they are applied to that which God does not intend, they prove an injury, a snare and a curse instead of a blessing.” Following his early experiments with charismatic expressions of religion, Brigham Young’s enthusiasm toward speaking in tongues soon waned. According to his biographer, “Only rarely did [Young] speak in tongues after 1832.” After succeeding Smith as president of the Mormon Church, most of Young’s references to speaking in tongues were designed to warn the Saints of its potential dangers. In a discourse from 1856, he hearkened back to the early days of Mormonism, when naïve members of the church were often deceived by “young boys or girls [who] would get up and speak in tongues.” He mocked these early Saints for following the words of visionary boys and girls as if they had come from God himself. Young’s lifelong friend Heber C. Kimball had been thoroughly moved when he first heard the Mormon elders speak in tongues back in 1830. Yet by 1857 he was declaring from the pulpit of the Salt Lake Tabernacle, “As for the gift of tongues, I do not speak in tongues often.”

An 1842 publication from the Mormon First Presidency warned the Saints that “many false spirits existed in their day,” and that it was the members’ responsibility to discern the false spirits from the true ones. In denouncing the kinds of exercises present at Cane Ridge as obvious products of the devil, the

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70 Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., The Teachings of Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 671.
71 Arrington, Brigham Young, 34.
article gave the Mormon leadership a further chance to criticize “Gentile” revivalists:

The Methodists, Presbyterians, and others frequently possess a spirit that will cause them to lie down, and during its operation, animation is frequently entirely suspended; they consider it to be the power of God, and a glorious manifestation from God—a manifestation of what? Is there any intelligence communicated? Are the curtains of heaven withdrawn, or the purposes of God developed? Have they seen and conversed with an angel—or have the glories of futurity burst upon their view? No! but their body has been inanimate, the operation of their spirit suspended, and all the intelligence that can be obtained from them when they arise, is a shout of “glory,” or “hallelujah”…If such ignorance as this is manifested about a spirit of this kind, who can describe an angel of light? If Satan should appear as one in glory, who can tell his color, his signs, his appearance, his glory?  

Perhaps the most illuminating insight that can be drawn from these critiques against enthusiasm is how much they reveal about the persistent quality of Smith’s own visionary inclinations. Rather than attack the visionary impulses from an Enlightenment perspective by labeling all of them as nonsense, Smith instead categorized some manifestations of visionary religion as stemming from God, while others emanated from the devil. Indeed, throughout his life Smith never downplayed his own visionary experiences, nor did he attempt to retract them. He continued to retain a religious worldview that placed invisible battles between the forces of good and evil at the core of God’s dramatic plan. Near the close of his life, he even composed a revelation that went as far as to instruct the Saints on how they could distinguish between true angels and false ones. 

The religious and cultural environment of the Second Great Awakening played a key role in shaping Joseph Smith’s new religious body. In many ways,

74 “Try the Spirits,” *The Times and Seasons* 3 (April 1, 1842): 744.

75 Joseph Smith, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, 129:4-8.
early Mormons benefited from their environment. Gordon Wood has written that
the birth of Mormonism in 1830 “was providential. It appeared at precisely the
right moment in American history; much earlier or later and the Church might not
have taken hold.” The celebration of vernacular preaching, coupled with the
tendency among many Americans to exalt unpolished religious leaders with
humble backgrounds, certainly contributed to early Mormonism’s initial success.
Expansion into the frontier during the antebellum period added to an already large
rural population, many of which lived in areas without established churches or
ministers. While the Methodists and Presbyterians set up protracted camp
meetings to reach many of these people, the Mormons took advantage of this open
environment and aggressively pursued a campaign of proselytizing that included
preaching to people in the streets, in their homes, or in the church buildings of
other denominations. The gradual separation of church and state and the
subsequent rise of religious voluntarism gave unorthodox movements like
Mormonism the chance to succeed in America at a time when their chances of
succeeding in Europe would have been very unlikely.

On the negative side, Joseph Smith’s young church had to compete against
established denominations and ingenious new sects within a very competitive
religious marketplace. Smith’s movement promised something unique to many
Americans who, like Smith, had been left unsatisfied by the culture of revivalism.
Had it been too radical at the outset, however, early Mormonism may not have
been successful. On the other hand, if the Mormons emulated the culture of

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76 Gordon S. Wood, “Evangelical America and Early Mormonism,” *New York History* 61
(October 1980): 386.

77 Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America,
1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 166.
revivalism too much, they risked being swallowed up by evangelicalism and losing their unique sense of identity. Yet if they appeared too unorthodox by sharing nothing in common with their evangelical surroundings, they risked alienating potential converts.

As we have also seen, the supernatural side of the Second Great Awakening was both advantageous and problematic for Smith’s movement. Many early Mormon converts came out of this visionary culture, initially adding much-needed numbers to the young Mormon movement. Yet visionary impulses also threatened the stability of Mormonism with their spontaneous, excessively democratic expressions of worship. As William McLoughlin has written, “Successful prophets…must be able to organize their followers and routinize their charisma. The spontaneous, ecstatic experience of a revival meeting…must be canalized, ritualized, linked to regular services.”

Prior to 1836, however, the Mormons had yet to develop exclusive forms of religious worship to call their own. Until this happened Smith would be unable to achieve a clean break from the evangelical world surrounding him, thereby turning Mormonism into a radically new definition of Christianity.

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Chapter 3

ANTI-REVIVALISM AND THE ORIGINS OF MORMON TEMPLE WORSHIP IN KIRTLAND, OHIO

On May 15, 1835, a modest farmer from upstate New York named Benjamin Brown became a member of the Church of Christ. His decision to embrace Mormonism came in the wake of a long and arduous spiritual journey. He grew up in the town of Queensbury, where he was “much deprived,” as he put it, “of the benefits of education, owing to my father’s removing from place to place.” He was religious to the core, though as a young man he had failed to unite with any of the local churches. His early religious outlook was summarized in the following words: “My ideas of religion were just those which are naturally instilled into the mind by the statements of scripture, where no priestcraft to pervert them, diminish their force, or cloud their meaning, consequently I believed in the Bible just as it read, where the self-evident rendering of the context did not prove it figurative or parabolic.” At a young age he came to the conclusion that if visions, prophecies, and miraculous healings existed in biblical times, they should likewise appear in his own day. In many ways Brown was typical of the kind of person who embraced Mormonism during its early period.

Brown gradually became acquainted with the various religious options that were so available during the Age of Jackson. He was initially sympathetic to the views of Universalists, who denounced the idea that a loving God would send any of his children to hell. He also experimented with evangelical revivalism, often attending the protracted meetings that, as he remembered, “were very popular in America.” He loved the enthusiasm present at the revivals, yet one thing troubled
him: He became increasingly convinced that revivals bred contention among Christians. On one occasion he felt compelled “by the Spirit of the Lord” to berate a revival minister for “increasing the spirit of division between those who ought to be united.” Though he continued to attend revivals on a fairly regular basis, his belief that they undermined the potential for Christian unity prevented him from joining any of the nearby evangelical churches.

His religious inclinations, therefore, remained personal and visionary. Indeed, his autobiography is laced with references to divine visions, dreams, and voices. After returning home one evening from a hard day of labor on his farm, Brown beheld a vision of his brother, who had been dead for many years. His brother spoke to him about “a great work to be done on the earth during the last days.” On a subsequent occasion he “received a more important communication than either of the previous ones. A knowledge was given me that the ancient gifts of the gospel…were just about to be restored to the believers in Christ.” This motivated him to wait patiently for a church that boasted spiritual gifts, prophets and apostles, and all of the other features that, in his mind, had characterized the primitive church of the New Testament.

Shortly after this divine communication, Brown recounted, he met with elders from the Mormon Church. According to Brown, the elders’ message centered on the Book of Mormon, which they interpreted as a sure sign from God that a new prophet was among them. This prophet’s role was to reveal ancient scripture and establish Christ’s kingdom on earth in preparation for a cataclysmic millennium. After praying to know whether the Mormon message was true, Brown received a vision confirming the elders’ warnings that the plagues foreseen by ancient prophets were indeed “impending over this generation.” Against the
wishes of his wife, Brown was soon baptized into the Mormon fold, and quickly thereafter embarked on a preaching tour of his own.¹

In 1836 he traveled to Kirtland, Ohio, to attend the dedication of the Saints’ newly constructed temple. From the perspective of the Mormon faithful, the Kirtland temple was a modern-day version of the Old Testament temple of Solomon. Like the ancient edifice, this nineteenth-century temple was meant to bring God’s people closer to their maker. For several years the Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith, had been preparing the Saints to be “endowed with power from on high.”² As Richard Bushman writes, “Joseph hoped his Saints would face God as Moses’ people never could.”³ Smith himself recorded in his diary, “All who are prepared and are sufficiently pure to abide the presence of the Saviour will see him in the solemn assembly.”⁴ The endowment for the Saints, therefore, included promises that they would experience an outpouring of miracles not witnessed since New Testament times.

On the morning of March 27, Brown and over a thousand of his fellow Saints crowded into the first floor of the temple. The services began with typical expressions of Christian adoration. The Saints sang hymns, listened to a choral performance, prayed, and received the Lord’s Supper. The meeting then deviated


² Joseph Smith, comp., The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 38:32.


⁴ Dean C. Jessee, ed., The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 83.
from common modes of contemporary Protestant worship. The Mormon prophet initiated a time-consuming and tedious ritual of recognizing and publicly sustaining each member of the new Mormon hierarchy. He followed this by reading a written prayer of some six pages in length. After conducting further church business, the segment of the ceremony known as the endowment began, which included ritual washings, anointings, and prayers, all reminiscent of Old Testament practices. Brown heard many of the participants speak in unknown tongues, and “Angels were seen by numbers present.” The Old Testament-inspired rituals continued throughout the week, as did the numerous manifestations of supernatural phenomena. Brown called the dedication “a most glorious and never-to-be-forgotten time.”

Other participants expressed similar feelings about the ceremony. Prescindia Huntington attended the dedication with her cousin, who was not a Mormon at the time. According to Prescindia’s autobiography, her cousin had expected to mock the Mormons for their bizarre rituals and behavior. Instead, she came away from the proceedings having been deeply moved. As Prescindia later remembered, “While the congregation was thus praying, we both heard, from one corner in the room above our heads, a choir of angels singing most beautifully.”

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Zebedee Coltrin summed up his experiences at the temple dedication by enthusiastically declaring, “In Kirtland Temple, I have seen the power of God as it was in the day of Pentecost!”

Mormon temple worship was an anomaly in the America of 1836. At precisely the moment when Brown and his fellow Mormons were worshipping within the walls of an Old Testament-inspired temple, most American Christians were celebrating the achievements of evangelical revivalism. As his autobiography makes clear, Brown was well aware of the popularity and prevalence of the revival technique, as were most of his fellow Latter-day Saints. In fact, the birth of Mormonism directly coincided with one of the most successful periods for revivalism in American religious history.

Though revivals are certainly not an American invention, and they began long before the nineteenth century, according to historian William McLoughlin, the birth of “modern revivalism” took place in nineteenth-century America, and no one was more responsible for turning revivalism into a modern institution than Charles Grandison Finney. Like many early Mormon converts, Finney hailed from western New York. He grew up near Lake Ontario, not far from where the Mormon prophet came of age. In 1830 he conducted one of the greatest revivals of the Second Great Awakening in Rochester, New York, less than forty miles

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10 McLoughlin, Modern Revivalism, 15.
from where Smith published the *Book of Mormon* that very year. “For six months,” writes the preeminent historian of the Rochester revival, “[Finney] preached in Presbyterian churches nearly every night and three times on Sunday, and his audience included members of every sect.”11 As much as any one individual, Finney was responsible for the revivals that flourished in western New York at such a high level of intensity that the whole region was later nicknamed the “burned-over district.”

Finney transformed revivalism into a modern institution partly through his emphatic position that a revival “is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means.”12 The responsibility for adopting such means to ensure the conversion of individuals and even entire societies, Finney argued, rested upon Christians like himself. By emphasizing man’s duty over God’s sovereignty, Finney illustrated the prime difference between what McLoughlin calls “the medieval and the modern temper. One saw God as the center of the universe, the other saw man.”13 While the eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards described the revivals affecting his congregation as “the surprising work of God,” Finney criticized Christians who simply waited for God to miraculously cause a revival, referring to such passivity as “the devil’s most successful means of destroying souls.”14


An even more modern facet of Finney’s philosophy of revivalism, however, was his own idiosyncratic brand of religious pragmatism. Simply put, Finney utilized any and every kind of revival technique that effectively pushed the greatest number of people closer to conversion, regardless of how controversial such measures may have been. As McLoughlin explains in his introduction to Finney’s *Lectures on Revivals*, “Finney was a child of his age, not an enemy of it.”\(^{15}\) While critics often accused his revival methods of being unbiblical, Finney countered that even controversial measures such as protracted meetings, publicly praying for sinners by name, and allowing women to lead prayer circles deserved consideration based on the simple fact that they worked.\(^{16}\) Finney believed that Christianity could only succeed in nineteenth-century America by adapting to an increasingly modern society. Religious sectarianism, along with increased urbanization, a maturing economy, a lively print culture, and westward migration, forced nineteenth-century evangelists to compete for people’s attention against a host of distractions. “There are so many things to lead [men’s] minds off from religion,” Finney lamented, “that it is necessary to raise an excitement among them, till the tide rises so high as to sweep away the opposing obstacles.”\(^{17}\) In order to excite his revival audiences and “sweep away the opposing obstacles,” Finney codified a whole range of revival techniques that soon fell under the label of “new measures” revivalism. These measures included emotional praying, singing, preaching, and protracted meetings that sometimes went on for days at a

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time. Finney’s most controversial method was his use of the anxious seat or bench, which was an actual bench positioned in front of revival congregations where prospective candidates for conversion sat as they contemplated their willingness to accept Christ.\footnote{For a more detailed summary of Finney’s new measures, see McLoughlin, \textit{Modern Revivalism}, 87-100.}

Finney wanted to convert as many Christian ministers as possible to his brand of revivalism. He published his \textit{Lectures on Revivals} to serve as a guide for the “getting up” of a form of revivalism that became more and more uniform. Though initially controversial, Finney’s highly aggressive revival methods were gradually adopted, or at least tolerated, by other leading evangelists, including Finney’s one-time opponent Lyman Beecher.\footnote{On the relationship between Finney and Beecher, see McLoughlin, \textit{Modern Revivalism}, 30-64.} Moderate evangelists like Beecher had long held prejudices against the revival strategies that Baptists and Methodists had implemented since the early part of the century. But due in large measure to Finney’s success, more revivalists adopted the populist, emotional, individual-oriented brand of revivalism that helped make the Baptist and Methodist movements the two fastest growing Christian bodies of the antebellum period.\footnote{Nathan Hatch, \textit{The Democratization of American Christianity} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3.} Finney’s most crucial contribution, argues Nathan Hatch, was to serve as a “bridge between cultures,” conveying “the indigenous methods of popular culture to the middle class.”\footnote{Hatch, \textit{The Democratization of American Christianity}, 199.} By the mid-nineteenth century, McLoughlin argues, “Finney
stood for the evangelical outlook that became the prevailing one among middle-
class churchgoers.”

As the spiritual journey of Benjamin Brown demonstrates, however, not
every Christian from this era supported Finney’s methods for converting the
American people. Indeed, anti-revival sentiment was so prevalent throughout the
antebellum period that historian James Bratt has argued, “Anti-revivalism touched
every dimension of organized religious life…If revivalism was ‘everywhere’ in
the antebellum United States, then anti-revivalism was too.” Though Bratt
acknowledges that religious anti-revivalism likely existed to some degree in nearly
every Christian body, some groups were clearly more opposed to revivals than
others. Among these anti-revival bodies were conservative Calvinists, liberal
Unitarians, and Mormons. In addition to criticizing revivalism, these various anti-
revival bodies and spokesmen put forth their own ideas on how to best
Christianize the American people.

One of the most vocal critics of revivalism from an Old School Calvinist
background, though very idiosyncratic in his own right, was the German
Reformed theologian John Nevin. Nevin’s fundamental disagreement with
Finneyite revivalism stemmed from his rather old-fashioned commitment to the
external forms and rituals of historical Protestantism. The “heresy of New
Measures,” Nevin argued, was a product of the revivalists’ arrogant belief that
they could simply brush aside the sacred forms upon which true conversions to

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Christ had always relied. Replacing biblically sanctioned practices such as communion, Nevin argued, with modern measures like the anxious bench, bordered on blasphemy. “The form in one case is of divine prescription,” he wrote, “while in the other it is wholly of man’s device. His alternative to revivalism called for a return to the sacraments of baptism and communion, interpreting their significance in ways that would be compatible with the teachings of the Protestant reformers. The superiority of communion over the anxious bench, Nevin concluded, lay in the ability of the former to promote an active, consistent, and long-term devotion to Christ, rather than a brief spiritual high that risked fading with time.

While Nevin found inspiration by hearkening back to the original meaning of the Reformation, the liberal Christianity of American Unitarianism urged people to look to the future by emphasizing education, social reform, and what they called “the formation of a Christian character.” What Unitarians most disdained about revivalism was its dogmatic assertion that a bona fide conversion had to be instantaneous and emotionally felt. As Daniel Walker Howe points out, Unitarians did not neglect the role of heart religion, but they sought to balance the emotions with sound reason and knowledge of the scriptures. In contrast to Finneyite piety, Howe adds, Unitarian piety was “gentle, not harsh; warm, but not all-encompassing.” As a group predominantly composed of ex-Calvinists,

26 Nevin, The Anxious Bench, 35.
28 Howe, The Unitarian Conscience, 158.
Unitarians also grew to disdain the doctrine of a vengeful God, and the belief that humans could accomplish nothing good without that God’s help. It therefore made little sense for them to subscribe to an institution that threatened people with hellfire and damnation. They increasingly insisted that men had the potential, through patient righteousness and education, to become more and more God-like. The perfectionist impulses of American Unitarianism, therefore, steered liberal Christians away from the God of either John Nevin or Charles Finney.

The Mormon response to modern revivalism was cut from an altogether different cloth than either John Nevin’s conservative Calvinism or Unitarian-style liberalism. However, the Mormon rejection of popular evangelicalism was not radically different by virtue of being any more outspoken than either conservative or liberal critiques. In fact, unlike Nevin or several Unitarian spokesmen, Mormon leaders did not publish pamphlets specifically aimed at undermining revivalism. Joseph Smith rarely mentioned revivalism outside of his personal history, wherein he recounted his firsthand experiences with revivals as a young man. What made Mormon anti-revivalism so different, then, were the alternatives that Joseph Smith implemented for bringing his people closer to God. As Richard Bushman has pointed out, no other church in the nineteenth century envisioned temple worship as their ideal alternative to revival worship.

To understand why early Mormons embraced the concept of temple worship, we must go back and closely examine the religious attitudes of early Mormon converts prior to the time they united with Joseph Smith’s movement. In his study of Finney’s 1830 revival in Rochester, Paul Johnson demonstrates that

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30 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 216.
the evangelist’s methods largely appealed to the successful members of Rochester’s booming middle-class, which included such professions as “millers, merchants, master craftsmen, and county-seat lawyers.” Early Mormonism, on the other hand, drew its initial adherents from among those antebellum Americans who found themselves, in Klaus Hansen’s words, “uprooted by the emerging new order.” The history of Joseph Smith’s family perfectly illustrates this point. In his study of Smith’s ancestry Richard Bushman reveals that “migration, war, and economic adversity” had dislodged Smith’s parents and grandparents from such mainline denominations as Congregationalism and Presbyterianism. Like many of their fellow residents of the “burned-over district” of western New York, the Smith family’s detachment from orthodoxy left them more open to such heterodox belief-systems as Universalism and folk magic. Smith’s parents both subscribed to a religious worldview that the Catholic scholar Ronald Knox has called “ultrasupernaturalism,” which is partly defined by a strong belief in visions, dreams, and prophecy. Smith’s father had a series of religious dreams in the years before his son declared his own prophetic status, and his mother Lucy Mack came from a family of visionaries and healers.

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Such unorthodox religious views spurred many eventual Mormon converts to adopt a religious posture known at the time as Seekerism, which constituted a more radical form of Christian Primitivism. Nineteenth-century Christian Primitivists rejected the available forms of Christianity, which occasionally included evangelical revivalism, and desired to model their movements after the primitive church as outlined in the New Testament book of Acts. According to Seeker scholar Dan Vogel,

Seekers shared with Primitivists the belief that there had been an “apostasy” from an original church established by Jesus and that a “restoration” was necessary. But Seekers differed on matters of authority and restoration. They disagreed with [Alexander] Campbell and others that the Bible provided all necessary authority to establish a church. Seekers believed that ordinances would be inefficacious until there was a new, literal, and evident dispensation of divine power.  

Religious Seekerism blended the Primitivists’ infatuation with the New Testament church with the supernatural worldview so evident in Joseph Smith’s parents.

No theme is more prominent in the conversion accounts of early Mormons than a complete lack of trust in supposedly man-made creeds, and the subsequent desire to find God’s pristine, ancient church once again on the earth. After attending a Presbyterian service that left her profoundly unsatisfied, Lucy Mack Smith resolved to “examine my Bible and, taking Jesus and His disciples as my guide, to endeavor to obtain from God that which man could neither give nor take away.” Her husband Joseph Smith, Sr. refused to join any church until “the

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ancient order, as established by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and His Apostles,” was established. Orson Pratt recalled in his journals that his parents “had no faith in the modern sectarian principles of Christianity, yet they looked upon the history of ancient Christianity, as recorded in the Bible, as something most sacred and worth possessing.” And the early Mormon hymnist W.W Phelps remembered his religious posture before discovering Mormonism, when “I always believed the scriptures, and believed that there was such a sacred thing as pure religion; but I never believed that any of the sects of the day, had it, and so I was ever ready to argue up, or down, any church.” Many early Mormon converts, therefore, had already lost faith in the existing varieties of Christianity before they knew anything about Mormonism.

By embracing Mormonism, these converts solidified their rejection of every existing manifestation of Christianity excluding their own. When he wrote his personal history in 1838, Joseph Smith remembered that when he received his “First Vision” of God and Jesus Christ, he was informed that the surrounding creeds and sects were “an abomination in [God’s] sight,” that contemporary professors of religion “were all corrupt,” and that they “draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Mormon scripture immediately distinguished the Saints of God from the rest of the “Gentile” world. Mormon pamphlets and periodicals throughout the 1830s and 1840s rarely hesitated in

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denouncing the rest of Christian America as a modern-day Babylon, where “darkness covered the earth, and gross darkness the people; when no man did walk in the old paths, nor did search out the everlasting gospel; when the church of Christ, and the gifts which he left in it, could not be found; when men built up churches in the glory of the world, and when all flesh had become so corrupt, that a few more years might have left the cities of the world, like Sodom and Gomorrah.”

The Mormon belief that God’s true church and gospel had been absent from the earth since the days of Christ’s apostles implied that all religious leaders lacked God’s permission to either preach or baptize, and all creeds and sects were simply the inventions of men. In the introduction to Joseph Smith’s 1838 *History of the Church*, the future apostle B.H. Roberts laid out the Mormon doctrine of apostasy and restoration: “For a time the Gospel in its purity was preached in the world by the chosen Apostles,” but “when the Apostles were all fallen asleep, then corruptions ran riot in the Church, doctrines of men were taught for the commandments of God; a church made by men was substituted for the Church of Christ.” Unlike many American Protestants, the Mormons did not believe that the efforts of Luther and Calvin had remedied the corruptions that had long plagued historical Christianity. “In vain men sought to establish reforms,” Roberts continued, “and through them bring back the religion of Jesus Christ…To do that, however, was beyond the power of these men, however good their intentions…There was but one way in which all these could be restored, viz.: By

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42 “The Book of Mormon.” *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 8 (January 1833).
43 Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, XCVI.
reopening the heavens and dispensing again a knowledge of the gospel.” In contrast to many conservative critics of revivalism, the Mormons did not look for inspiration from the Protestant Reformation, or from any period in Christian history that came after the book of Revelation. The Mormon stance against popular evangelicalism was merely one manifestation of a complete and utter rejection of over eighteen hundred years of historical and traditional Christianity as a whole.

Considering the Mormons’ fierce repudiation of mainstream American Christianity, it is hardly surprising that their critiques of revivalism came in many forms. Some early Mormons like Brigham Young criticized revivalism for focusing too much on ethics and morality, and not teaching enough doctrine. After seeing a revival conducted by the popular itinerant Methodist Lorenzo Dow, Young complained that Dow “could tell the people they could not work on the Sabbath day, but when he came to teaching the things of God he was as dark as midnight.” George Laub also attended Methodist revivals somewhat regularly, and even experimented with the anxious bench on three consecutive nights, “very anxious to embrace religion.” He quickly became convinced, though, that the anxious bench and the whole system of revivalism only worked when people were motivated by peer-pressure, thus making it appear “unreasonable” in his eyes.

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44 Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, XCVI.


Like most early Mormon converts, Warren Foote attended revivals regularly, but “when they all got to praying, shouting and singing at once…I could not see anything in such proceedings, like the gospel as taught by the ancient apostles of Christ.”

As Foote’s complaints illustrate, Mormon anti-revivalism was based on the underlying Mormon belief that revivals, somewhat akin to temperance, Bible tract, and anti-slavery societies, were not acceptable because they were not consistent with what Mormons called “the ancient order of things.” This “ancient order” referred to “things revealed in the Bible, and taught to mankind by the holy prophets and apostles, who were divinely inspired to teach them the way of life and salvation.” In the minds of early Mormons, revivals and middle-class varieties of social reform were based on the mistaken notion among Christians that they could cleanse America of its problems without closely following Old and New Testament practices. Finney had predicted that the impact of revivalism and social reform would directly lead to the millennium in America within only a few years. Early Mormons mocked such notions as hopelessly naïve, as well as dangerous. “Many are flattering themselves with the expectation that all the world is going to be converted and brought into the ark of safety,” wrote an 1837 Mormon tract, “Thus the great millennium, in their opinion, is to be established. Vain delusive expectation…God will soon begin to manifest his sore displeasure


to this generation, and to your own country by distressing famine.”

Early Mormon literature often manifested a degree of pessimism toward the contemporary religious and cultural situation in Jacksonian America that stood in stark contrast to the typically optimistic assessments put forth by evangelists like Finney and democratic spokesmen like John L. O’Sullivan.

It was the modern hue of antebellum revivalism, symbolized so powerfully by Charles Finney’s optimism and religious pragmatism, which many early Mormons found objectionable. Yet in their cynical outlook toward modernity, and in their longing for a more innocent, pristine past, the Saints were hardly unique among nineteenth-century religionists. As Richard Hughes and Leonard Allen demonstrate in their book on “Protestant Primitivism in America” from 1630-1875, restoration movements and manifestations of Christian Primitivism are as old as America itself. However, Hughes and Allen also acknowledge that “the Mormon commitment to restoring first times…took a radically different form” from that of seventeenth-century Puritanism, Barton Stone’s nineteenth-century Christian movement, or Alexander Campbell’s Disciples of Christ.

The radical nature of Mormon restorationism lies in the unique Mormon approach toward the Old Testament and the history of ancient Israel. More than any other Christian body of its time, early Mormonism incorporated Old

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52 Hughes and Allen, Illusions of Innocence, 133.
Testament models, practices, and stories into its belief-system. The Old Testament had provided important lessons for American Christians as far back as the days of the Puritans. Indeed, seventeenth-century Puritans often believed that they were reenacting the stories of ancient Israel within the American context. “The predisposition to read Scripture typically and to regard the United States as a new Israel,” writes Mark Noll, “led ministers to stress the grand narratives of the Old Testament.”

But according to Harry Stout, the Puritan connection to the Old Testament was largely perceived in symbolic terms, with the Puritans valuing the Old Testament primarily for what it could teach them about the New Testament. By contrast, Joseph Smith’s sense of kinship with ancient Israel was stronger than anything in American religious history. Under his guidance, early Mormons very quickly regarded themselves as the literal, rather than merely figurative, continuation of ancient Israel. This understanding began with the *Book of Mormon*, which taught that Joseph Smith was an actual descendent of the Old Testament prophet Joseph. Later Mormon scripture declared, “We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes.” The Mormons understood “the literal gathering of Israel” as the process of actually going out into the world and preaching the gospel to those whom, like Joseph Smith, had the literal blood of Israel coursing through their veins. In a sermon delivered in 1855, Smith’s successor Brigham Young elaborated on this unique Mormon doctrine,

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Recollect that we are now calling upon the Elders to go and gather up Israel; this is the mission that is given to us. It was the first mission that was given to the Elders in the days of Joseph. The set time is come for God to gather Israel, and for his work to commence upon the face of the whole earth, and the Elders who have arisen in this Church and Kingdom are actually of Israel...You understand who we are; we are of the House of Israel, of the royal seed, of the royal blood.\(^{57}\)

By stressing this literal connection to ancient Israel, Joseph Smith accomplished what the literary and religious scholar Harold Bloom has called a “transumption,” whereby “earliness and lateness change places, while everything that comes in between is voided.”\(^{58}\) Applying this concept of transumption to more specific matters, Bloom argues, “Joseph Smith nullified the distinction between Old Testament and New Testament, and cast out all of church history that intervened between the biblical texts and himself.”\(^{59}\) The Mormons’ belief that they constituted the literal continuation of ancient Israel, combined with their rejection of over eighteen hundred years of Christian history, motivated the Saints to draw upon the models, practices, and religious rituals of Old Testament Israel just as liberally as most nineteenth-century Protestants drew upon precedents from the New Testament, prompting Bloom to claim that “Joseph’s design indeed was as radical as the history of religion affords.”\(^{60}\)

The true genius of Joseph Smith, argues Bloom, was his ability to follow the ancient Judaic model of turning a religion into a people, thereby ensuring its

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\(^{59}\) Bloom, *The American Religion*, 100.

This process of transforming a religion into a people was based on the radical Mormon understanding of restoration, which rested on the Saints’ intimate sense of connection with both the Old and New Testament. This radical interpretation of restoration motivated Smith to pattern his church after ancient Israel by embracing the idea of “gathering,” which called for the Mormons to live together in specific geographic locations. Furthermore, many of the early Saints wanted to emulate ancient Israel by establishing quasi-theocratic Mormon communities within the confines of the United States. Mormon apostle Wilford Woodruff gloried in his belief that “the day…is now at hand & hath already begun in fulfillment of ancient prophecy in bringing the Church of Christ out of the wilderness in establishing Israel upon those lands by a Theocratical government in fulfillment of the covenants God made with Abram Isaac & Jacob.”  

The most controversial measure that demonstrates how literally early Mormons approached the concept of restoration was their decision to embrace the Old Testament practice of plural marriage, which received public sanction from the Mormon Church in 1852.

In addition to all of these examples, another important Old Testament model that contributed to the Mormons’ sense of otherness was the Old Testament temple of Solomon. As part of their mission to literally reenact the story of ancient Israel in America, the Mormons constructed their own version of Solomon’s temple in the town of Kirtland, Ohio. After three years of economic sacrifice and arduous construction, they celebrated its completion in 1836. The

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Kirtland temple dedication officially marked the beginning of Mormon temple worship. Not only did it provide the Saints with a distinct mode of religious liturgy to call their own, but it also proved to be an ideal Mormon alternative to revivalism. In at least three fundamental ways, Mormon temple worship stood in sharp contrast to Finney’s modern revivalism.

To begin with, Mormon temple worship placed tremendous emphasis on various forms of religious ritual. The first temple ritual was the ordinance of washing one another’s feet, inspired by the New Testament episode when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. Wilford Woodruff was immediately struck by the ancient nature of this ritual, writing in his journal that “one of the twelve apostles attended to the washing of my feet & prophesied upon my head & pronounced me clean from the Blood of this generation this as it was with JESUS when he washed his disciples feet.”  

Smith first introduced this ritual at the School of the Prophets, the name given to a series of classes designed by Smith for educating and training future Mormon preachers. As early as 1832, he instructed the members of this school that “the ordinance of washing of feet is to be administered.” Later on, however, Smith revealed that the ordinance would remain incomplete until it took place within the walls of a temple. In an 1833 meeting of the School of the Prophets, Smith spoke of “certain duties that we have not as yet attended to,” which included the washing of feet, and that “we must have a place prepared, that we may attend to this ordinance, aside from the world.” The purpose of this ordinance, he taught, “is calculated to unite our hearts that we may be one in feeling and sentiment and that our faith may be strong, so that satan

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64 Joseph Smith, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, 88:140.
cannot over throw us.” This ritual reached its culmination among the Mormons at the Kirtland temple dedication, when members of the Mormon priesthood washed each other’s feet in a laborious, organized, and exceedingly exact manner. The ritual was even honored in a hymn written by W.W Phelps, and sung at the dedication ceremony,

We’ll wash and be washed, and with oil be anointed,
Withal not omitting the washing of feet;
For he that recieveth his penny appointed
Must surely be clean at the harvest of wheat.  

The second temple ritual was the washing and anointing, which consisted of washing the entire body with pure water, perfuming the body by bathing in whiskey perfumed in cinnamon, and anointing the head with a holy oil. Following the anointing of the head with oil, a blessing or a prophecy was usually pronounced upon the individual. Joseph Smith recorded in his personal history that after assisting his father with this ordinance, “We then laid our hands upon our aged Father Smith, and invoked the blessings of heaven. I then anointed his head with the consecrated oil, and sealed many blessings upon him…And in my turn, my father anointed my head, and sealed upon me the blessings of Moses, to lead Israel in the latter days, even as Moses led him in days of old.” This time the rituals were inspired by scriptures from the Old Testament, specifically several from the book of Exodus that mention a form of ritual purification that Aaron and his sons underwent using water, perfume, and holy oil. Smith had previously

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65 Jessee, The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, 81-82.
66 Joseph Smith, History of the Church, 2:426.
promised the Saints that the temple dedication would give them “that power, which characterized the ancient saints.” In order to become as the ancient saints, he taught, the Latter-day Saints would have to participate in similar rituals.

The concluding temple ritual became known as “sealing the anointing.” Its purpose was simply to make valid, or to “seal,” as the Mormons put it, all previous rituals, prophecies, prayers, or blessings. The sealing ceremony required the Saints to lift their hands high into the air, and to repeat three times the following phrase, “Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna to God and the Lamb. Amen, amen, and amen.” Smith’s desire to establish more organized forms of worship prompted him to blend the various rituals together under one general ceremony, which began with the washing of the feet, followed by the washing and anointing of the body and the head, and concluding with sealing the anointing. As Richard Bushman observes, “One searches in vain for such rituals among Joseph’s Protestant contemporaries.”

During the construction of the temple Smith had consistently promised the Saints that if they were faithful and diligent in building up the temple, they would receive their own endowment of power on par with that given to the ancient apostles on the day of Pentecost. Smith intended the temple rituals to be the tools whereby the Saints could enjoy their own unique religious experiences, wherein the mysteries of Godliness might be unlocked, and the distance between themselves and the heavens closed. As Smith revealed to them in the eighty-

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71 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 313.

72 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 312.
fourth section of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, “In the ordinances thereof, the power of Godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances…no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live.” Following their participation in the rituals, many of the Saints purported to have received supernatural manifestations. Heber C. Kimball recorded the following in his journal: “During the ceremonies of the dedication, an angel appeared and sat near President Joseph Smith…he was a very tall personage, black eyes, white hair, and stoop shouldered.” The endowment of power reached its culmination for the Saints when Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery received their now famous vision of the Son of God, followed by visits from various ancient prophets that included Moses, Elias, and Elijah.

Ritualism among the early Mormons allows us to analyze the first major difference between Mormon temple worship and evangelical revivalism: While temple worship revolved around the importance of ritual, revivalism placed most of its emphasis on preaching. So convinced was Smith that ritual would bring his people closer to God than any other mode of worship, for example, that he never even delivered a formal sermon at the temple dedication. On the other hand, Finney consistently instructed his fellow evangelists that preaching was the most powerful way to convert a sinner. In making this contrast, however, it would be wrong simply to brand revivalism as anti-ritual. Indeed, the revivalists had their

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own rituals, which eventually included the new measures that Finney had utilized so successfully. Though they may have emerged onto the revival scene in a somewhat spontaneous manner, practices like the anxious bench and group prayer eventually became so standard at revivals that they unquestionably fell into the category of ritual. The ritualizing of his new measures received additional impetus as Finney wrote books advising evangelists around the country on how to implement such practices in effective ways.

In his study of Cane Ridge, Paul Conkin reveals that the most famous revival of the nineteenth century actually began as an extended Presbyterian communion service that was part of a tradition stretching back to seventeenth-century Scotland. One of the consequences of revivals like Cane Ridge, Conkin argues, was “the gradual erosion of the traditional sacraments,” and their replacement with newer rituals “that were presumably more congruent with the vital experience of Christians.” Even the physical manifestations of religiosity that had appeared so spontaneous at Cane Ridge, such as laughter, shaking, and barking like a dog, became somewhat common and hence ritualized for future revivals. Indeed, one could even argue that revivalism itself became the most prominent religious ritual for nineteenth-century American Protestants. Many of Finney’s critics certainly saw things this way, often complaining that his revivals had become so uniform that they no longer possessed their initial spontaneity.

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78 Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 168-169.

79 Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 106.

The major difference, then, is not that temple worship embraced ritual, while revivalism rejected it. The difference lies in the distinct manner in which revivalists like Finney viewed ritual in comparison to how the early Mormons viewed it. Finney viewed ritual from the perspective of a pragmatist; he saw it as a means to an end. The purpose of revivalism was to save souls, not to adhere to outdated or ineffective Christian sacraments. In Finney’s mind, the external forms of religion were expendable depending on their practicality. As far back as biblical times, he declared, God’s messengers had adjusted their methods to respond to shifting historical circumstances. Even Jesus chose to dispense with the Law of Moses in favor of a better system. When Christ commissioned the apostles to go out and preach to the world, Finney wrote, his counsel was simple, “Do it-the best way you can…the form is left out of the question.” "81 Even long-standing biblical practices like baptism had only been utilized because they served the pragmatic purpose of motivating people to publicly renounce sin and adopt a Christian life-style. The most controversial of Finney’s new measures was the anxious bench, which his critics often maligned for creating a false scenario wherein people might be tempted to feign an emotional conversion simply to satisfy their peers. But for Finney the anxious bench was nothing more than a nineteenth-century version of baptism. Like the anxious bench, baptismal services had been implemented as a means of providing those wishing to convert with “a public manifestation of their determination to be Christians.” "82 Furthermore, because nineteenth-century Protestants often argued amongst themselves over the

81 Finney, Lectures on Revivals, 251.
82 Finney, Lectures on Revivals, 268-269.
proper mode of baptism, revival rituals like the anxious bench often appeared less
divisive, and therefore more conducive to an interdenominational revival setting.\footnote{McLoughlin, \textit{Modern Revivalism}, 97.}

Early Mormons tended to treat religious rituals with more reverence than
most American evangelicals. From the Latter-day Saint perspective, divinely inspired rituals were of ancient origin, and therefore should not be tampered with or modified. “The order of the house of God,” wrote Joseph Smith, “has been, and ever will be, the same, even after Christ comes; and after the termination of the thousand years it will be the same.”\footnote{Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., \textit{The Teachings of Joseph Smith} (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 455.} Oliver Cowdery boasted that the Saints replicated the ancient ceremonies with such exactness that they even used the same kind of holy oil in their rituals.\footnote{Leonard J. Arrington ed., “Oliver Cowdery’s Kirtland, Ohio, ‘Sketch Book,’” \textit{Brigham Young University Studies} 12, no. 4 (1972): 419.} The man who later became the fourth president of the Mormon Church, Wilford Woodruff, blasted the anxious bench and other revival measures, not because they induced insincere conversions, but because they lacked ancient origins. “O, ye gentile religionist,” Woodruff wrote, “What knowledge have ye of the ordinances or blessings or virtues of the house & Church of God?”\footnote{Jessee, “The Kirtland Diary of Wilford Woodruff,” 390.} While the critics viewed their temple ceremonies as perverted aberrations from the normal flow of Christian history, the Mormons responded that their seemingly unorthodox rituals were in fact older than the practices and measures adhered to by any other contemporary Christian body, going all the way back to the days of Solomon’s temple.
The second major difference between Mormon temple worship and evangelical revivalism was that the former encouraged a community-oriented approach toward worship and salvation, while the latter increasingly interpreted Christian salvation as a personal affair between the individual and God. This focus upon the individual partly resulted from the prominent status given by revivals to the conversion experience, which gradually replaced baptism and communion as the key event in the life of American evangelicals. The prominent status afforded to the conversion experience largely stemmed from the fact that antebellum revivalism was largely a nondenominational phenomenon, in which creeds, doctrinal confessions, and disagreements over the correct way to administer Christian sacraments were viewed as obstacles preventing the establishment of what Richard Niebuhr called “the kingdom of God in America.”

With interdenominational Protestant unity as their goal, evangelists like Finney tended to reduce the Christian message to a simple two-step process of conversion and morality. Unlike baptism and communion, the revival-induced conversion experience was an experiential, subjective, and therefore personal event, which could take place quite apart from the presence of either a visible church or an established ministry. So even though revivals physically brought people together to worship, and often encouraged them to ban together to enact social reform, in its efforts to stimulate subjective conversion experiences within increasingly nondenominational settings, revivalism embraced a very individualistic theology of salvation.

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Much of revivalism’s individualist-centered ethos also stemmed from the diminishing importance of Calvinism during the Second Great Awakening. In a nutshell, the theology of John Calvin argued that God was absolutely in control of everything, including the eventual salvation or damnation of every human creature. According to historian George Marsden, Calvinists like the seventeenth-century Puritans believed that “If there were a question as to whether God or humans should be given credit for anything good, particularly in matters of salvation, the benefit of the doubt should always go to God.”\(^88\) Revivalism’s increasingly proactive and aggressive efforts to stimulate conversion experiences caused many Christians to question Calvinism’s somewhat passive approach toward salvation, along with its traditionally pessimistic view of human nature. Finney was especially critical of Calvinism, blaming it in part for the hesitancy among so many Christians to act as free moral agents and immediately embrace conversion. Protestant theologians such as Nathaniel William Taylor indirectly supported Finney’s aggressive revival strategies by developing newer theologies of salvation that coincided rather well with the realities of modern revivalism. “Taylor’s fundamental insistence,” writes Sydney Ahlstrom, “was that no man becomes depraved but by his own act, for the sinfulness of the human race does not pertain to human nature as such.”\(^89\) Far from being bound by the mysterious will of Calvin’s deity, revivalists like Finney and theologians like Taylor embraced a less arbitrary God, who would provide all of his creatures with their own personal choice of accepting or rejecting salvation.


This strongly individualistic element in revivalism has prompted Harold Bloom to argue that the essence of the American religion is the desire to be “alone with God or with Jesus.”\(^\text{90}\) Elaborating more fully on this point, Bloom writes, “Urging the need for community upon American religionists is a vain enterprise; the experiential encounter with Jesus or God is too overwhelming for memories of community to abide, and the believer returns from the abyss of ecstasy with the self enhanced and otherness devalued.”\(^\text{91}\) For several important reasons, early Mormonism, and early Mormon temple worship in particular, do not fit into Bloom’s paradigm. For one thing, the religious rituals that took place at the Kirtland dedication were entirely communal activities. The Saints washed one another’s feet, anointed each other’s heads with oil, and gave each other blessings. According to Joseph Smith, an individual’s salvation was ultimately dependent upon their willingness to take part in these ancient rituals. “The question is frequently asked,” wrote Smith, “‘Can we not be saved without going through with all those ordinances, &c.?’ I would answer, No, not the fullness of salvation.”\(^\text{92}\) In contrast to revival salvation, Mormon salvation could not take place without an intermediary, for only someone holding the proper priesthood authority could administer these rituals. In this regard Mormon temple worship more closely resembled Roman Catholicism than American evangelicalism.\(^\text{93}\)

There is still another reason that explains why Mormonism did not interpret salvation as a personal affair between the individual and God alone. Around 1832

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\(^{91}\) Bloom, *The American Religion*, 27.


\(^{93}\) Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 205.
Joseph Smith began to teach his people that salvation did not actually consist in making a choice between heaven and hell. Instead, Smith taught that “if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body the term ‘Heaven’ as intended for the Saints’ eternal home, must include more kingdoms than one.” In the seventy-sixth section of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, Smith introduced the Mormon doctrine of the three degrees of glory, which completely rejected the traditional Christian belief in a stark divide between heaven and hell, and replaced it with a heaven full of multiple realms and kingdoms. From Smith’s point of view, the Bible implicitly confirmed this new Mormon doctrine with such statements as, “In my Father’s house are many mansions.” The meaning of this and other verses would have been clearer, Smith explained, if not for “ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests.” Although the Saints were avid Bible readers who mostly accepted the miracles and historicity of the King James Version, they never saw the Bible as infallible. Consistent with their stance that time had corrupted the original Christian message, Smith once said, “I believe the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers,” but too many changes had been made to the original to accept the notion that the Bible contained all of God’s teachings for his people. As Philip Barlow points out in his book on Mormon biblical usage, it would be a mistake to

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95 Joseph Smith, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, 76.
96 St. John 14:2 (King James Version)
categorize Mormons as biblical fundamentalists, especially considering their willingness to embrace new scripture such as the *Book of Mormon*.  

Prior to converting to Mormonism, many of the Saints had shown a great deal of interest in the teachings of the Universalists, who believed that a loving God would eventually save all of his children in heaven. Smith never quite embraced Universalism, but by introducing the doctrine of the three degrees of glory, he gradually undermined the idea among his people that they needed to immediately choose between salvation and damnation. The crisis conversion, which became the focal point of antebellum revivalism, never gained as prominent a place within the Mormon experience. This explains why the Saints who attended the Kirtland temple dedication rarely if ever resorted to revival language, such as being “born again” or “saved,” to describe their experiences. Unlike a typical revival service, the purpose of the Kirtland dedication was not to stimulate emotional conversion experiences. Instead, it was designed to fulfill Smith’s promise to his people that they would be, as a collective unit, “endowed with power from on high.” The most individualistic element of revivalism, therefore, failed to take hold within the culture of Mormonism.

As his ministry progressed, Smith’s theology of salvation continued to become even more unorthodox, adding even greater distance between Mormons and evangelicals in their respective approaches toward worship and salvation. The fullness of salvation, Smith began teaching around 1832, did not consist merely in being with God, but in becoming like him. This became known as the Mormon doctrine of exaltation. Perfectionist impulses were rampant during the Second

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Great Awakening, influencing the political rhetoric of Andrew Jackson and the liberal Christianity of American Unitarianism. But Joseph Smith’s teachings on the origin and destiny of man constituted a rejection of Calvinism that most of his fellow Christians considered far too extreme. In his most famous and controversial sermon, Smith taught his followers that they were co-eternal with God, essentially sharing with him the same origin and nature. “All learned men and doctors of divinity say that God created [the soul] in the beginning, but it is not so: the very idea lessens man in my estimation.”

Instead, Smith explained, “The spirit of man is not a created being; it existed from eternity, and will exist to eternity.” Speaking on mankind’s true potential, Smith unambiguously proclaimed, “You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves…the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree another, and from a small capacity to a great one…to inherit the same power, the same glory and the same exaltation, until you arrive at the station of a God.”

With exaltation as their loftiest goal, it made little sense for the Mormons to emulate the strategies of revival preachers like Finney, who sought to bring people to God by frightening them with vivid descriptions of hell.

As presumptuous as Smith’s teachings on the eternal destiny of man may have sounded to some, he reminded his followers that exaltation should not be thought of as an individual endeavor. For example, he eventually taught that a man could not inherit exaltation without his wife and family. Adding to the community-oriented nature of Mormon exaltation, Smith revealed to the Saints that they could not arrive to the status of Godhood without performing vicarious

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work on behalf of their ancestors, which consisted in performing proxy baptisms, marriages, and other essential ordinances for all of those people in history who had died before hearing the message of the restored gospel. In section 128 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, Smith instructed his people regarding a new doctrine called baptism for the dead. In his exegesis of the last verse in the Old Testament, wherein the prophet Malachi spoke of the Lord turning “the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers,” Smith wrote the following: “The earth will be smitten with a curse unless there is a welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children.” In Smith’s mind this link was the doctrine of baptism for the dead, writing that “we without [our ancestors] cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect.”

In short, all of these doctrinal developments made the Mormon approach toward worship and salvation even more group-oriented, prompting Jan Shipps to argue that the fundamental difference between Mormonism and Protestant Christianity is that “Mormonism is a form of *corporate* Christianity.”

The final noteworthy difference between these two distinct modes of Christian worship was that the temple’s focus on religious ritual and community-based salvation strengthened the authority of the Mormon hierarchy, and hence the very foundations of the Mormon Church. By contrast, antebellum revivalism contributed to a phenomenon in early American religious history that Nathan Hatch calls the “Blurring of Worlds.”

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105 Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 34.
Christianity from 1780-1830, Hatch shows that “the democratic revolution of the early republic sent external religious authority into headlong retreat and elicited from below powerful visions of faith that seemed more authentic and self-evident.”¹⁰⁶ Finneyite revivalism played a significant role in the gradual undermining of traditional religious leadership. Due to the stress it placed on stimulating conversion experiences within increasingly nondenominational settings, revivalism gradually weakened the status of the traditional Protestant sacraments. John Nevin decried this trend within popular American evangelicalism of “embracing an unchurchly spirit,” which risked “calling the soul away from a religion of forms and outward show.”¹⁰⁷ By “forms and outward show” Nevin had in mind the sacrament of communion, which remained inextricably connected to the idea of a visible church and an established ministry. Revivalism also brought about a noticeable shift in the role of the Protestant clergy from shepherds in charge of overseeing their own flocks, into salesmen responsible for bringing new blood into the Christian fold. Finney wholeheartedly embraced this phenomenon. In his ideal world “All ministers should be revival ministers, and all preaching should be revival preaching.”¹⁰⁸ The declining importance of the Christian sacraments, and the egalitarian spirit of the Jacksonian period, created an atmosphere where reverence toward traditional religious leadership suffered serious blows, eventually causing the age-old distinction between clergy and lay people to become dissolved.

¹⁰⁶ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 34.
¹⁰⁷ Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, 4-5.
Early Mormonism initially benefited from the anticlericalism and egalitarianism of this period. Mormon preachers like Brigham Young were just as willing to criticize orthodox clergymen as were George Whitefield, Charles Finney, or the Methodist Lorenzo Dow.\(^\text{109}\) The Mormon leadership was open to men from all walks of life, but it tended to attract the relatively poor and undereducated. Like the traveling Methodist exhorters, Mormon elders preached for free and supported themselves by working on the side. Joseph Smith never required anyone to attend a seminary or earn a degree in theology before taking on an important leadership role. Lay people ended up fulfilling the most important duties within the Mormon hierarchy, and on a strictly voluntary basis, much as Mormonism on the local level is run today. Smith’s church “was a religion for and by the people,” writes Richard Bushman, “If democracy means participation in government, no church was more democratic.”\(^\text{110}\)

However, even while these egalitarian features within Mormonism continued to take shape, the Mormon Church gradually began to take on a more authoritarian cast. In the years immediately prior to the temple dedication, Joseph Smith began to place more emphasis on the idea of lineal-based religious authority, which the Saints referred to simply as the priesthood.\(^\text{111}\) According to the *Doctrine and Covenants*, section 107, this priesthood was composed of “two divisions or grand heads—one is the Melchizedek Priesthood, and the other is the Aaronic or Levitical Priesthood.” Smith claimed that angelic messengers


\(^{110}\) Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 559.

\(^{111}\) For the most thorough history of the Mormon Priesthood, see D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994).
bestowed these two priesthoods upon him in 1830, thereafter giving him the authority to bestow the priesthood upon other men within the Mormon Church. The Saints believed that the priesthood made up the governing body of the church, possessing the authority to administer to the members’ temporal and spiritual affairs.

Under the aegis of the priesthood, Smith became more aggressive in his efforts to structure Mormonism into a highly organized church that could better cope with internal schisms, and even survive his death. “In a time when Protestant churches had lost interest in organizational forms, save to democratize them as far as possible,” writes Richard Bushman, Smith “built an ever more elaborate structure in emulation of the ancient church as he understood it.”

He did this in part by forming new councils and quorums. In 1834 he established the Kirtland High Council, a body of twelve priesthood holders placed in charge of the church’s finances and the administering of church discipline in the Kirtland area. A year later he formed the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the Quorum of the Seventy, adding more complicated and sometimes confusing levels to the Mormon hierarchy. By distributing his authority in such a liberal manner, Smith encouraged many of Mormonism’s populist features to remain. By building up the bureaucratic structure of the church, however, and by deciding for himself who to place in the church’s most important leadership positions, Smith’s authority over Mormonism actually became more secure by the eve of the Kirtland dedication than it had been at the Church’s founding in 1830.

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113 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 254.
The temple ceremony provided the Mormon prophet with a public forum in which to display the authority of his newly established councils and quorums. The first way to accomplish this was through the hierarchy-based seating arrangement set up for the dedication. In what could be thought of as the perfect antithesis to a traditional Quaker service, which did not distinguish in any way between leaders and lay folk, the various Mormon priesthood bodies were positioned at the very front and rear of the temple, with the general membership seated between them. Based on their importance within the Mormon hierarchy, each council or quorum sat within a different pulpit, with each pulpit positioned at a distinct level of elevation.\footnote{Joseph Smith, \textit{History of the Church}, 2:411.} As Heber C. Kimball recalled, “The first or highest apartment was occupied by the First Presidency over the whole Church; the second apartment by the Melchizedek High Priesthood; the third by the President of the High Priests’ Quorum; and the fourth by the President of the Elders and his two counselors.”\footnote{Kimball, \textit{Heber C. Kimball, 1801-1868}, Milton V. Backman, Jr., in “Journals, Diaries, Biographies, and Autobiographies of Some Early Mormons and Others Who Knew Joseph Smith, Jr. and/or His Contemporaries” http://boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/HCKimball.html (accessed February 27, 2009).} In a laborious procedure, Smith invited the general membership to “acknowledge the Presidency as Prophets and Seers, and uphold them by their prayers. They all covenanted to do so, by rising.”\footnote{Joseph Smith, \textit{History of the Church}, 2:417.} Smith then required the various priesthood bodies to take turns sustaining all of the separate quorums and councils in a similar manner. Given the exactness with which such business was carried out, it is little wonder that the opening session of the temple dedication lasted from the morning hours until late in the evening.\footnote{Joseph Smith, \textit{History of the Church}, 2:410-428.}
Smith relied on the presence of this relatively new Mormon hierarchy to ensure that the dedication services would proceed in an orderly and reverent manner. In an effort to avoid the excessive emotionalism so rampant at many revivals, Smith drew up a list of rules and regulations on how to behave within the temple. The first rule sought to root out the anarchic tendencies that had plagued so many early Mormon gatherings: “No man shall be interrupted who is appointed to speak by the Presidency of the Church, by any disorderly person or persons in the congregation, by whispering, by laughing, by talking, by menacing gestures, by getting up and running out in a disorderly manner.”\footnote{Joseph Smith, \textit{History of the Church}, 2:368.} Although Smith wanted reverence to characterize the services, he still encouraged biblically sanctioned displays of religiosity, most notably speaking in tongues; but he wanted such practices to proceed within a reasonable, ordered environment. One of the things that most impressed Wilford Woodruff about the dedication was the profound orderliness that went hand in hand with the release of Pentecostal gifts: “Some had a tongue, others an interpretation & all was in order.”\footnote{Jessee, “The Kirtland Diary of Wilford Woodruff,” 386.} The second rule reinforced the concept of religious hierarchy. It stated, “An insult offered to the presiding Elder of said Church shall be considered an insult to the whole body.” Rule number five reminded the general membership that only priesthood holders could occupy the important pulpits to the front and rear of the temple, while other regulations reminded the Saints to respect the building, and to prevent their children from running amok inside.\footnote{Joseph Smith, \textit{History of the Church}, 2:369.}
What had most burdened Joseph Smith about the revivals he witnessed as a teenager was their potential for creating religious factionalism and disagreement over the proper way to interpret the Bible. Many elements of the early Mormon experience were based on Smith’s attempts to bring order to what he and his followers regarded as a chaotic world. The *Book of Mormon* was intended to clarify once and for all the true meaning of the Old and New Testaments. Mormon communities in Ohio, Illinois, and eventually Utah became noted for their orderly streets and uniformly built homes. And perhaps most importantly, Smith’s calling as the Lord’s mouthpiece in modern times was meant to transcend the sectarian squabbles and political upheavals that marked the Age of Jackson. The Kirtland temple dedication was a critical part of this general Mormon effort to provide a confused population of religious seekers with a mode of Christian adoration patterned after “the ancient order of things.”

Early Mormon temple worship and evangelical revivalism were two distinct religious responses to a period in American history that was characterized above all else by dramatic and rapid change. As Daniel Walker Howe has written,

The America of 1848 had been transformed in many ways: by the growth of cities, by the extension of United States sovereignty across the continent, by increasing ethnic and religious diversity as a result of both immigration and conquest-as well as by expanding overseas and national markets, and by the integration of this vast and varied empire through dramatic and sudden improvements in communications.¹²²

In effect, the fundamental difference between Mormon temple worship and Finneyite revivalism was that the former represented a primitive-based solution to the dilemmas of its age, while the latter was a modern, forward-looking

movement. In his essay on revivalism and reform in America, William McLoughlin has defined the various “great awakenings” in our nation’s history as “periods of fundamental ideological transformation necessary to the dynamic growth of the nation in adapting to basic social, ecological, psychological, and economic changes.” In other words, our great awakenings have provided American Christians with the ability to adapt to changing times, even while helping them maintain some semblance of continuity with the past. The New Light movements that have so often been at the forefront of revivalism, McLoughlin continues, have invented new methods, strategies, and rituals for the accomplishment of traditional Christian goals. As much as any New Light movement, Finneyite revivalism conforms to this definition. According to McLoughlin, the New Light tradition has always won out in the course of American religious history, thus becoming the mainstream choice for the vast majority of American Protestants.

However, there has been another important phenomenon in the history of America’s great awakenings. As McLoughlin points out, New Light movements have consistently provoked opposition from conservatives and traditionalists, or from those who fear that “God is displeased because the old rituals have not been adhered to.” John Nevin’s desire to model American Protestantism according to the sixteenth-century vision of Luther and Calvin is just one example of an Old Light response to the progressive strains inherent in American revivalism. Early Mormon temple worship also looked to the past for models; but to a past that was

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even more remote. Indeed, what made the Mormon response to revivalism so radical was that, by searching the Old Testament and the history of ancient Israel for inspiration, it was as traditional and conservative as any Old Light movement could possibly be.

For early Mormons, hearkening back to primitive times did not signify a return to an archaic, barbaric, or backward era. Instead, Joseph Smith taught his Saints that the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs were more enlightened, at least from a spiritual standpoint, than most modern Christians. What added weight to this optimistic view of the ancients was the Mormon doctrine that the gospel of Jesus Christ, in its fullness, was actually as old as the earth itself. “The gospel…is of great antiquity,” wrote Mormon apostle B.H. Roberts, “Nor were men left in ignorance of the plan of their redemption until the coming of the Messiah in the flesh.”126 Unlike most Christians, Mormons did not believe that the message of God had become progressively truer as the birth of the Savior drew nearer. Even Adam and Eve had access to the gospel of Christ in its fullness, along with the opportunity to embrace rituals such as baptism. “God conversed with [Adam] face to face,” Smith taught. “He heard his voice, walked before him and gazed upon his glory, while intelligence burst upon his understanding.”127 From the Mormon perspective, therefore, the best way to respond to the challenges of the mid-

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126 Joseph Smith, The History of the Church, 1:XXVI-XXVII.

nineteenth century was to adopt the practices and rituals of those who, like Adam and Eve, had actually walked and talked with God.
Chapter 4

CONCLUSION

In 1843 the Presbyterian minister Robert Baird published *Religion in America*, one of the most influential manifestos promoting interdenominational Protestant unity written during the nineteenth century.¹ In his book Baird grouped a diverse assortment of denominations, including the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians, under the general heading of America’s evangelical churches.² He contrasted the evangelical bodies, for which he considered himself an apologist, with those he labeled “unevangelical,” which included Catholics, Unitarians, Shakers, and the most deluded nonevangelical group of them all, the Mormons.³ According to Baird, the Mormons were a dangerous group of religious fanatics, whose leaders “are evidently atrocious imposters, who have deceived a great many weak-minded but well-meaning persons.” Baird then compared Mormonism to Islam, a religion regarded by most Americans of his time as exotic, backward, and potentially threatening to the progress of Christianity in America. His indictment of the Mormons concluded with this prediction: “‘Joe Smith,’ as he is commonly called,
will soon find that America is not another Arabia, nor he another Mahomet; his hope of founding a vast empire in the western hemisphere must soon vanish.\footnote{Baird, \textit{Religion in the United States}, 649.}

Thirteen years before the publication of Baird’s book, when a handful of Joseph Smith’s followers assembled in the home of Peter Whitmer for the purpose of legally establishing the Church of Christ, the controversial side of nineteenth-century Mormonism had yet to fully blossom. Far from seeking political office or founding any large cities, Smith had merely established a spiritual refuge for frustrated seekers like his parents. Although early Mormon missionaries brandished a new American Bible in the form of the \textit{Book of Mormon}, few aspects of early Mormonism were alien to American Christians of the nineteenth century. The Mormon prophet organized an unpolished army of blacksmiths and farmers to preach the gospel in the vernacular of the common man. Their message was simply that God had restored his ancient church to modern times, and that the Second Coming and the thousand-year period of peace known as the millennium were fast approaching. Yet neither restorationism nor millennialism was a novel concept during the Second Great Awakening, which partially explains why the early Mormon message appealed to so many people.\footnote{On the importance of millennialism during the Second Great Awakening, see Daniel Walker Howe, \textit{What Hath God Wrought}, 285-327.} Indeed, most early Mormons would have defined their new religion as a New Testament-based, chiliastic-driven sect, which promised charismatic gifts such as visions, prophecy, and new tongues to those who converted.\footnote{On the content of the earliest Mormon preaching, see Jan Shipps, ed., \textit{The Journals of William E. McLellin: 1831-1836} (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1994), 3-24.} Though many Protestant ministers looked down on some of these elements, they hardly placed Mormonism outside
the pale of normative Christianity. What explains the fact that by at least 1843, critics such as Robert Baird were comparing Mormons to Muslims, and branding Joseph Smith an American Muhammad?

Part of the answer is that Joseph Smith’s Mormonism never stopped evolving. As Richard Bushman argues, “[Smith] perpetually initiated new campaigns and taught new doctrines. His administrative style was almost excessively dynamic.”

Throughout his prophetic tenure, Smith introduced new theological concepts, including the Mormon doctrine of the three degrees of glory, exaltation, and baptism for the dead. He implemented new policies, such as the decree to Mormons around the country to gather in specific geographic locations. He also initiated controversial practices among the Mormon people, the most famous of which was polygamy. Whether intentionally or not, these internal developments gradually pushed Mormonism away from traditional Christianity, thus provoking the ire of critics like Baird.

As this thesis has sought to illustrate, the concept of temple worship also played a critical role in the process by which early Mormons repudiated their evangelical heritage. Indeed, the Kirtland temple dedication represented one of the first clues that Joseph Smith was looking to the Old Testament and the history of ancient Israel, rather than to American evangelicalism, for inspiration. Smith’s growing desire to incorporate the rituals and practices of ancient Israel not only aroused criticism from outsiders such as Baird, but it also convinced many Mormons to abandon Smith’s movement. As Jan Shipps has pointed out, many early Mormons who expected their new religion to retain its original New

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Testament-based, millennial-centered message, became uncomfortable when the Hebraic elements of early Mormonism, which were so well embodied in the Kirtland endowment ceremony, rose to the surface.⁸

Several years after the publication of Robert Baird’s book, the Mormons had indeed become a people apart from their fellow American Christians. Their practice of polygamy became more widespread, while their theological positions grew even more unorthodox. In one of the most dramatic episodes of the nineteenth century, the Saints emulated ancient Israel’s sojourn through the Arabian wilderness by following Brigham Young, their “American Moses,” and trekking across the Great Plains to settle west of the Rocky Mountains. Mormon temple worship persisted among the Mormons in Utah, though it had matured from its beginnings in Kirtland. The Saints built temples in Salt Lake City, Manti, and Saint George. As Mormon temple worship took on greater importance, the quasi-evangelical features that had once infiltrated early Mormonism gradually waned. Though the Saints continued to embrace vernacular preaching, the practice of speaking in tongues all but disappeared among the Mormons during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.⁹ The enthusiastic gatherings that had frequently erupted among early Mormon visionaries such as Jesse Crosby no


longer seemed relevant within the culture of Utah Mormonism. Consequently, as the nineteenth century progressed it became increasingly difficult to remember how intimately the origins of Mormonism had once been tied to the evangelical world of the “burned-over district.”
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