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Courtesy of Brigham Young University

A detail from a C. C. A. Christensen panorama showing the  
"Miracle of the Quail"

### Chapter Three

## History as Text

**W**HEN GOD'S IN HIS HEAVEN and all's right with the world, the nature of divinity is not debatable. The nature of humanity is also settled and the proper divine-human connection is firmly established. An ordered and harmonious universe rests on a complex body of right relationships between humankind and the natural world, on the one hand, and among all manner of persons, on the other. While the pattern of these relationships is rarely articulated, it is universally understood because it follows naturally from cultural conceptions of reality that—in circular fashion—depend on a culture's particular conceptions of divinity, humanity, and the natural world. If things are at sixes and sevens, however, as they are during periods of crisis, dislocation, and change, the equilibrium of assumed agreement that created and supported culture is disturbed. Disordered status relationships develop as novel ways evolve to organize and conduct the business of society under stress. Order and harmony dissipate, tradition disintegrates; only confusion remains.

When answers to questions arising out of concern about property and place are worked out so that the rights and responsibilities of persons in society are clearly specified, order reestablishes itself, harmonizing old and new to make everything right with the world again, although in a far different, much more legalistic atmosphere. But describing the precise character of the network

of right relationships on which a culture depends and spelling out the rights and responsibilities attending those relationships is extremely difficult. For that reason, attempts at such articulation often founder on the variability of human beings and the complexity of the changed state of affairs. If that happens, if the rights and responsibilities attending proper relationships cannot be effectively clarified, then confusion veers over toward chaos, a cultural situation that is not so much to be defined as a time in which fundamental questions have no answers as one in which every sort of question—important and unimportant—has too many answers, all of them tentative and subject to modification.

Enough is known about the origins of most of the world's religions to make it clear that this kind of cultural chaos was a precondition for the coming forth of the prophets and enlightened ones whose words and deeds became the focus of the movements that developed into major religious traditions. Yet similarity in the contexts in which these religions came into being is not always noted in general historical and theological surveys of the religion of Israel, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam. In fact, so much attention is normally concentrated on the leaders and early followers that it is often hard to discern the corresponding cultural patterns that nourished the different movements. Consequently, the voices of Moses, Gotama, Jesus, Muhammad, and the others may appear to have been heard at random, in circumstances having nothing in common. Actually, however, these voices were all first heard in troubled times and places in which new peoples, new ideas, or new methods of organizing political and economic life had so severely disturbed the traditional network of right relationships that chaotic situations obviously existed.

Moreover, in addition to originating in cultural conditions that had much in common, all these religions accomplished essentially the same thing as they developed. They transformed cultures that were dangerously close to being without form and void into ordered universes. In a manner never easy to determine precisely, the inhabitants of the several cultures under stress came to accept the messages spoken or written by the prophets or enlightened ones as absolutely reliable information that, by extension, could answer all imaginable questions and provide solu-

tions to problems that had appeared insoluble. When the voice of a new religious leader became authoritative for a community, the darkness that had been on the face of the deep gradually disappeared. Chaos was banished; order and harmony were restored.

The perspective provided by the thousands of years since the occurrence of the founding events of the world's major religions makes it easy to identify this characteristic movement from chaos to order. But since the mystery of antiquity shrouds their times of beginnings and since most extant accounts of their histories bear heavy theological burdens, not much is known about what really happened as these religions were established. Details are lacking even about the development of Christianity and Islam, the two youngest world religions. Through close study of artifacts and careful consideration of surviving written documents from the standpoint of both linguistics and literary form, scholars are trying to extend existing knowledge about the process by which cultures were restructured and regained equilibrium as new religions acquired followers and started to be regarded by whole populations as sources of ultimate authority. But the serious problem of missing information presents an immense challenge to students of the history of pre-exilic Israel, for example, or early Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and so on.

Students of Mormonism are not similarly confronted by the challenge of missing information. Because this movement started in the United States in the late 1820s and early 1830s, it is not difficult to establish the extent of cultural confusion, occasioned by dislocation and change that infected the milieu into which it came. In addition, there is evidence aplenty about the Mormons themselves since, as religious duty requires, they have been prodigious record-keepers from the very beginning, preserving for their posterity full accounts of what happened to them personally and what happened to the movement corporately. But if it seems, at first blush, that all this firsthand evidence would make describing the beginnings of Mormonism so simple that its story could readily serve as a modern analogue that could shed light on how the older religions started and became established, this is not exactly the case.

While neither temporal distance nor lack of evidence hamper the recovery of the Mormon story, conflicting data are a serious

problem. In addition to primary and secondary accounts written by Latter-day Saints who were there when things occurred and by Saints who became a part of the movement somewhat later, but who heard the principals tell the story of what happened, the genesis of Mormonism is described in a large number of contemporary accounts written by persons who had moved into and then back out of close association with the Saints and by persons who merely observed the movement from the outside. As a result, rather than one story, there are several stories of Mormon beginnings from which to choose.

As has been indicated, alternative narratives about Joseph Smith and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon evolved from these conflicting sources. One of them is about ancient records engraved on metal plates translated by a young man chosen by God for the task, and the other describes a work of nineteenth-century fiction somehow produced by a ne'er-do-well member of a disreputable farm family living on the fringes of society in western New York. The impact of these opposing narratives has already been explored and does not need to be reviewed here. Yet this is the place to consider the amazing persistence across time of both this elemental component of the Mormon faith-story and its antithesis. Since the days of its first telling, intense efforts have been made to explain the Mormon story away by citing contemporary reports of the unsavory character of Joseph Smith and his entire family, and by compiling a wealth of commonsense information about obvious Book of Mormon parallels to other nineteenth-century accounts tying the American Indian to Israel's lost tribes; also by pointing out the book's descriptions of situations, incidents, characters, and theology suspiciously like those within its so-called translator's ken, and its echoes of Masonic lore, its Isaiah passages, and its bountiful anachronism supply. But while new accounts ringing the changes on the anti-Mormon version of Smith's story have continued to appear, at what sometimes seem regular intervals since Alexander Campbell first analyzed the Book of Mormon in the *Millennial Harbinger* in 1831, and Eber D. Howe published *Mormonism Unveiled* in 1834, the prophet's testimony endures, unchanged in any particular, a stumbling block to scientific history and foolishness to many.

Thus, the story of Mormon beginnings appears to be an excep-

tion to the normal modern expectation that natural explanation based on objective evidence will be more persuasive than supernatural explanation growing from subjective accounts. Like the gospels that include the story of the resurrection of Jesus without supporting it with objective evidence obtained from persons outside the incipient Christian community, the Mormon story includes an account of the translation of the Book of Mormon supported only by the testimony of members of the incipient LDS community. In both of these instances, the story of a tradition's beginnings rests on a paradoxical event that has proved anomalous enough to sustain the weight of supernatural explanation across a long period of time. Furthermore, in the Christian tradition, the story of the resurrection of Jesus in the flesh has not only been kept alive within the community of faith, but it has been brought to life again and again outside it. So, likewise, the LDS account of the translation of sacred records by one who became a prophet has been preserved within Mormonism and also has over and over again proved persuasive to individuals outside the community, notwithstanding the commonsense arguments that, in an open and public manner, have repeatedly called into question the supernatural explanation that undergirds the Mormon story.

Parallels between Christianity and Mormonism are not limited to their both having been introduced into contexts of cultural crisis and both having faith-stories that rest on paradoxical events. Before others can be pointed up, however, explicit distinctions need to be made among the several terms generally used to refer to communities of faith gathered under different circumstances for different reasons. *For the purposes of this discussion*, the most economical and unambiguous means of making such distinctions is developing definitions that all refer to the usual categories or dimensions—mythological, doctrinal, ritual/liturgical, ethical, social/institutional, and experiential—that scholars have developed over the years to facilitate discussion of religion.<sup>1</sup> Here, however, these dimensions need to be ranked so that the most significant is the mythological rather than the experiential (the classification very often receiving greatest emphasis in studies of specific religious traditions, because it is the one that includes the reports of direct encounters with the sacred that are turned into the founding stories of new religious movements), the doctrinal



(the area so often stressed in apologetic works), or the social/institutional (the dimension that was the main focus of both the sociological and historical study of religion for many years and the one that remains the primary focus of much of the sociological study of the topic). Moreover, besides elevating the mythological dimension to primacy in this instance, it is extremely important to keep in mind that when it is used in religious studies, mythological does not refer to fairy tales, fables, and other forms of patent untruth. It refers to *story*, to accounts of beginnings (dramatizing how the world came to be) and endings (holding out possibilities both of devastation and renewal), of sin and redemption, of heroes, heroines, and life lived out in the larger-than-life "olden days" when divinity is said to have dealt with humanity face to face, providing a foundation for culture.

Because the word *religion* is so general that it is difficult to use in a definite or precise sense, *religious tradition* will here be used as the umbrella category that will cover (1) all the corporate bodies and (2) individuals unattached to corporate bodies in whose systems of belief a particular story is central. Because Abraham's story and Israel's history are central to the mythological dimension of more than one tradition in Western religion, a distinction will be made here between the Jews, whose belief system rests on this story essentially as it is recorded in the Old Testament, and other traditions whose belief systems center on the same story plus significant additions or alterations. By this means the elements in the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition will be precipitated out, since the account of the resurrection of Jesus and the report of his everlasting existence at the right hand of God make it impossible to fit the Christian Messiah into any of the categories by which Old Testament figures are classified. As the Christian story is neither simply a reinterpretation nor continuation of the Hebraic-Judaic story, so the Mormon story departs significantly from the story of Abraham and the histories of Israel and Christianity as those stories are understood by Christians and Jews.

This departure started with the Book of Mormon. But even as it reiterated the Judeo-Christian story in a different framework, that work served as a conduit to bring Christianity's mythological

base into the New World more or less directly. Other LDS additions and modifications are much more consequential. Alterations to the story that came in Joseph Smith's revelations, especially the Book of Moses, and his translations of the Bible and the Book of Abraham—this last accomplished by means of inspiration using an Egyptian papyrus as text—are the truly important counters to charges that the Mormon story is merely an idiosyncratic interpretation of the Christian story.

*Church, denomination, sect, and cult* are the other widely used technical terms that refer to communities of faith. In a study in which establishing classifications for the various LDS communities is one of the principal goals, their use is indispensable. Yet these are vexing terms in which subjective rankings stubbornly inhere. For that reason, it must be understood at the outset that when they are used in this study no value load is attached. Descriptions of faith communities as churches or denominations are usually interpreted as expressions of respect, while descriptions of the same communities as sects or cults are generally thought to be expressions of disrespect, with *cult* being the more pejorative term, but that is not the case here.

A long tradition of the study of religion in society has produced a body of well-developed and fully articulated theory which makes useful distinctions among these four terms, with particular regard for the social and psychological makeup of the different communities and for the manner in which churches, denominations, sects, and cults are related to the sources of power in their cultures. Much use is made of these illuminating distinctions in the following chapters (where appropriate reference is made to the works of the sociologists and anthropologists who worked these distinctions out), but this particular study places more emphasis on the distinctions that grow out of considering religion's mythological dimension.

Therefore, the term *church* will be used to refer specifically to institutions that assume direct responsibility for the whole of a tradition's story: for proclaiming it, keeping it alive through liturgy and ritual, and transmitting it from one generation to another; for preserving the story's integrity through canonization and systematic doctrinal statement; and for drawing from it pat-

terns, examples, and principles that will insure the arrangement of a network of right relationships within the community, will prescribe the proper relationships to maintain with the world outside, and will serve as the basis for an ethical code. *Denomination* also refers to an institution, one that is by and large a subdivision of a church, the more inclusive term. Denominations likewise bear responsibility for a tradition's story, but as a result of their various histories, the different denominations within a tradition preserve the story in distinctive ways, emphasizing some things and neglecting others. *Sect* refers to a group that coalesces around a leader or leaders who find themselves in disagreement with ecclesiastical authorities over matters that manifest themselves as concern about ritual and liturgy, institutional structure, the pattern of relationships within and without the community, or the nature of authentic spiritual experience, but are matters ultimately rooted in disagreement over interpretation of a tradition's story and the implications following therefrom. *Cult*, by contrast, refers to a group that coalesces around a leader who mounts a challenge to the fundamental integrity of a tradition's story by adding to it, subtracting from it, or by changing it in some more radical way than merely setting out a new interpretation of the events and happenings in the existing story.

Churches and denominations resemble each other, especially in that—more inclusive than exclusive—they serve as unifying agents in culture. By telling and retelling their tradition's story, they perpetuate a common symbolic universe that strengthens the life of the community. But unlike churches and denominations that are more or less contiguous with culture, sects and cults separate themselves from the community, create alternative symbolic universes, and erect and maintain virtually impenetrable boundaries between inside and outside. The two are socially similar in the makeup of their membership, in their appeal to the disinherited (whether relatively or absolutely deprived), and in their tendency to become millenarian/millennial movements. Yet sects and cults stand in opposition to the world on different grounds. However much they are alike in the way their activities turn out to sanction simultaneously the social, political, and economic aspirations of those who join and question prevailing cul-

tural assumptions about power and prestige, it is important to remember that a sect grows out of disagreement over how a tradition's story ought to be understood, i.e. over interpretation, while a cult's antagonistic stance rests on acceptance of a story changed in essentials, not just by means of interpretation. Notwithstanding its quarrel with denomination or church over the correct understanding of a tradition's story, a sect remains under the same categorical umbrella as its adversaries. But the same cannot be said about a cult. If it survives and grows, the altered story eventually becomes central to a new system of belief that serves as the foundation of a new religious tradition.

As recently as the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, history again proved the truth of the maxim that when cultural confusion starts to tilt toward chaos, prophets and enlightened ones appear on every hand. Insufficient time has elapsed to allow knowledgeable assessment of the potential staying power of any of the new methods of reaching blissful states, new means of assuring redemption, or new candidates to messianic leadership that attracted such amazing numbers of followers ten or twenty years ago. But looking back to this recent period of frenetic religious novelty is instructive, because it provides a valuable comparative perspective from which to view the proliferation of unusual, different, and sometimes bizarre religious movements in the United States in the period of the early republic, from 1800 to 1860. For that matter, the comparison can likewise be extended backward in time to the volatile religious situation in Palestine at the turn of the ages. Just as Sun Myung Moon was not the first or even the twenty-first person to claim a divinely issued leadership mandate in the contemporary world, Joseph Smith was not the first or even the twenty-first American prophet of his day, any more than Jesus was the first or even the twenty-first Jewish prophet to claim a divine calling in inter-testamental times.

The babble of voices of potential prophets and the concatenation of religious claims during these three periods led to the development of more faith communities than it is now possible to count. Yet of that enormous number, a very select few developed into significant religious movements, and most of those were sectarian groups—Pharasaic Jews, for example, Seventh-day Ad-

ventists, Christian Scientists, or the so-called Jesus Freaks—who gradually found comfortable places for their interpretations of their traditions' stories within the religious traditions that spawned them. Of the cultic movements whose members accepted radically revised or fundamentally altered versions of the faith-stories regnant in their cultures, only Christianity and Mormonism are now full-scale religious traditions. How and why did these two movements take hold and develop into religious traditions while many other movements of essentially the same character lost followers and failed to last more than a decade or two?

When this question is posed to persons within a faith community, their response to the *why* part of the compound query often refers—directly or indirectly—to the will of the divine; their answers to the *how* part are then advanced in light of an ontological argument that uses the movement's survival and growth as evidence that it is "of God" and that, therefore, the ultimate explanation of its survival and growth is that it was God's will. As reassuring as such reasoning is within the community of faith and as useful as it is as a missionary tool, it finally convinces only those who are within (and those who are ready to move into) the faith circle. And yet, because this matter of why and how one religious movement flourishes while a virtually identical counterpart does not is so perplexing to persons interested in religion as phenomenon that there is no shortage of alternative explanations or bodies of theory to fit them in.

Still another theory that would make it possible to predict whether, out of the multiplicity of religious movements on the contemporary scene, Scientology, say, or Transcendental Meditation will be around 500 years from now is not being proposed here. Instead, in an important sense, Mormonism is being used here as a case study that falls generally into the ongoing wide-ranging exploration of the important question of what it is that makes one movement thrive while others wither and die. More specifically, an examination of Mormonism from this perspective fits into efforts currently under way to investigate the *process* by which religious movements survive and grow. But unlike many social science analyses that focus on a triad composed of (1) the cultural situation, (2) potential converts, and (3) leaders and their

claims, this one concentrates on what went on within the movement itself as Mormonism moved along the rigorous and treacherous path from cult to religious tradition.

Religion in nineteenth-century America was like a collage made up of a huge number of diverse materials put together in a pattern that made sense to the artist but that still appeared to many observers to be a jumble and little more. The one common element that pulled American religion together was the religious history of Europe. Despite the Reformation and a good deal of less formidable sectarian splintering, the story of European Christianity provided a thread that, while it did not bind American religion together internally, did connect all the separate parts to the Apostolic era. European religious history was even shared by the Jews, who, as descendants of the people shamefully treated for something their ancestors had reputedly done to Jesus, were also bound, unhappily, to New Testament times. Latter-day Saints, however, were not tied to the ministry of Jesus and the world of the early church through the history of Christianity in Europe. Theirs was a different past.

Actually, the very first Mormons did not merely have a past that differed from the past of other nineteenth-century Americans; they had no recent past at all. Just as the outcome of the American Revolution had left the former English colonies without a usable political history, by designating all existing churches—not just the Roman Catholic variety—as corrupt abominations growing out of a "Great Apostasy" that began in the days of the ancient apostles, the Book of Mormon left the Saints with an enormous 1,400- to 1,800-year lacuna in their religious history. This huge hiatus meant that parallels between their experiences and experiences described in the Bible came so naturally to the Saints that, as immensely egotistical as it now sounds, even Sidney Rigdon's observation that his agonizing imprisonment in Liberty Jail was comparable to the sufferings of Jesus is not terribly surprising, since the LDS pantheon of saints and martyrs did not include Joan of Arc, Savonarola, and the "inhabitants" of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, from which a more appropriate comparative referent might have been found. Yet the profound historylessness of early Mor-



monism cannot be satisfactorily explained entirely in terms of the Saints' conscious rejection of the institutional history of Christianity.

Something more fundamental had happened, and, although it involves dealing in abstractions to some extent, comprehending what it was is so critical to this study that it needs to be spelled out one step at a time:

1. History, the story of the past, is linear. It moves from step A to step B, from promise to consummation, from prophecy to fulfillment.
2. Since it was at one and the same time prophecy (a book that said it was an ancient record prophesying that a book would come forth) and (as the book that had come forth) fulfillment of that prophecy, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon effected a break in the very fabric of history.
3. This interruption of history's presumably inexorably linear movement wiped clean the slate on which the story of the past had been written, making a place for the story of a past that led directly up to "the new dispensation of the fulness of times" whose events would be recorded there.
4. Standing on the threshold of a new age, the first Mormons were, then, suspended between an unusable past and an uncertain future, returned as it were to a primordial state.
5. But as their future unfolded, the activities the Saints engaged in—reestablishing the covenant, gathering the Lord's elect, separating Israel from the Gentiles, organizing the church, preaching the gospel, building up the kingdom—took on such a familiar cast that it is plain to see that they moved out of the primordial present into the future by replicating the past.
6. This replication was not conscious ritual re-creation of events, but rather experiential "living through" of sacred events in a new age.
7. Although it seemed strange and even dangerous in the modern world of nineteenth-century America, this activity allowed the Saints to recover their own past, their own salva-

tion history, which, despite its similarity to words and acts, places and events in the biblical stories of Israel's history and the history of Christianity, was the *heilsgeschichte* of neither Christian nor Jew.

Analyzed in this fashion, this process may sound more complicated than it really was. People who base their understanding of reality on a new set of religious claims often (perhaps always) come to the conclusion that the past is utterly irrelevant in view of an imminent *eschaton*. In truth, however, the past is a matter of fundamental importance to new religious movements. The assertions on which they rest inevitably alter the prevailing understanding of what has gone before, creating situations in which past and future must both be made new. Believing that Jesus fulfilled Mosaic law and Hebrew prophecy with his life and death, early Christians, for example, could no longer share a vision of the past with other Jews. They were as much constrained to create a usable past for themselves in the years between 50 and 150 C.E. as were the Mormons between 1830 and 1930.

Actually, Christianity and Mormonism both rest finally on claims that in them Hebrew prophecy has been fulfilled. Jesus was said to be Messiah, the king who would rule Zion in righteousness, whose coming Isaiah had foretold. The Book of Mormon was said to be the "stick of Joseph in the hand of Ephraim" of which Ezekiel spoke as he described the coming of the undivided Kingdom of God. By recognizing this structural parallel, and by paying close attention to what happened as the early Christian saints appropriated a vision of Israel's past that could be ritually re-created to serve as meaningful background to the Christian story, it is possible to discern the pattern of reappropriation that allowed the Latter-day Saints to take as their own a vision of the past of both Israel and Christianity that now serves both directly and through ritual re-creation as meaningful background to the Mormon story.

While the difficulty of reconstructing exactly how things happened nearly 2,000 years ago frustrates the development of an elaborate theoretical model that could be rigorously tested, it is clear that in early Christianity, the pattern of recovery included

four principal activities: *reiteration* of Israel's story, with heavy emphasis on the means by which the life and death of Jesus fulfilled Hebrew law and prophecy; theological *reinterpretation*, based on consideration of the meaning of the story in light of what was seen as the eschatological event of the ages, the resurrection of Christ; actual *recapitulation* of key events of the story in a new setting; and appropriate *ritual re-creation* of the story in a Christian context. Furthermore, it is also clear that through these acts of appropriation, Christianity transformed Israel's past so that it seemed as alien to the Jews as did the developing Christian tradition whose belief system was supported not only by the proclamation of a resurrected messiah, but also by a particular vision of Israel's history that gave meaning to the life and death of Jesus. In the nineteenth century the Mormons were engaged in similar activities, out of which emerged a similar result. This time, however, reiteration, reinterpretation, recapitulation, and ritual re-creation of the significant events in Israel's past and the significant events in the story of early Christianity were both required.

Just as the early Mormons tended to be persons who were well versed in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, and hence sufficiently familiar with both the story and prophecy to be sensitive to the claims that were set forth in the Book of Mormon, so it was that the first Christians were persons who not only knew what had happened to Israel before their time, but knew prophecy intimately enough to appreciate all the fine points of the declaration that Jesus was the long-anticipated Messiah. For that reason, and since the Hebrew Bible served as the basic Christian scripture, it is very likely that the sort of reiteration of Israel's story preserved in chapter 7 of the Book of Acts occurred repeatedly in the initial stages of the formation of the Christian community.<sup>2</sup> The Book of Hebrews is perhaps the most explicit example of theological reinterpretation of key portions of the Old Testament story in the Christian canon. But the entire New Testament makes it obvious that, in addition to repetition of the assertion that Hebrew prophecy had been fulfilled, reinterpretation of Israel's story was an integral part of what was going on.

The community's recapitulation of the salvation history of the Hebrews must be recaptured mainly through its reflection in

the construction of the gospels, which means that it is hard to determine precisely whether this (perhaps necessary) phenomenon preceded, accompanied (as is probable), or followed theological reinterpretation. Also difficult to determine with any precision is where Christianity's ritual re-creation of Israel's story entered the developmental sequence. Notwithstanding when they started, however, Christianity's activities of recapitulation and ritual re-creation are evident in the way that, as retold, the life of Jesus played out Israel's story once again. John the Baptist was clothed in Elijah's raiment, for example, and the miraculous circumstances surrounding his conception and birth practically parallel the story of the conception and birth of Samuel; Mary and Joseph carried Jesus down into Egypt, where the children of Israel once sojourned; the crossing of the Red Sea was symbolically repeated in the baptism of Jesus; the days He spent in the wilderness numbered forty as did the years the Israelites spent in the wilderness; like the tribes of Israel, the disciples Jesus led numbered twelve; He went up into a mountain, from which He dispensed the law; and so on. More directly, Christianity's recapitulation of Israel's story is revealed in the account of what went on at Pentecost. And while its incorporation into the community's ritual and liturgical life leaves the impression that the Eucharist recalls only the Lord's Supper, it is possible that, even though the communal meals in early Christian times probably were not consciously conducted as Passover meals, they were nevertheless recapitulations of events connected with the Exodus, the Passover, and God's miraculous provision of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness.

So delineated, the activities by which the early Christians appropriated Israel's past, made it an integral part of their ritual and liturgical life, and used it as the foundation for the development of a new religious tradition appear more spontaneous than calculated, more open than esoteric, more transparent than opaque. Because the LDS reiteration of the Hebrew-Christian story was inaugurated with the Book of Mormon, because its theological reinterpretation came through Joseph Smith's revelations and translations as well as through the sermons of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and the sermons and writings of such persons as Orson and Parley Pratt, because the Saints were obliged to recapitulate the significant events in the stories of Israel and Christi-



anity virtually simultaneously, and because the ritual re-creations of such extremely critical parts of the story as creation and redemption were introduced in the LDS temple ordinances that are not in the public domain, the process by which Mormonism recovered its salvation history from the Hebrew-Christian story is not nearly so open and transparent. For those reasons, despite the availability of an enormous body of primary source material, early Mormonism has proved to be almost impervious to objective study.

The Christian structural parallel suggests, however, a means of ordering the data that clarifies the picture of the reiteration and reinterpretation of Christianity's mythological dimension that was at the heart of early Mormonism. More important, the Christian pattern illuminates Mormon history by suggesting that Mormonism's ritual re-creation of the stories of Israel and Christianity rests not only on theological reinterpretation, but on a recapitulation of biblical events much more complex than scholars have heretofore recognized. When Russell Mortensen and William Mulder pulled together their extremely useful collection of source documents, published under the title *Among the Mormons* in 1958, they designated the sections of the book "Genesis," "Exodus," "Lamentations and Judges," and "Psalms," for example.<sup>3</sup> But as they made no effort in the editorial matter to argue that the Mormons had actually replicated these scriptural accounts, it is clear that the titles were simply descriptive labels suggesting a connection between the nineteenth-century Mormon experience and the events described in the Bible. This connection has also been noted by virtually every person who has ever attempted a narrative reconstruction of the Mormon past. But the extent to which the Saints recapitulated the Hebrew-Christian story by living it through again does not really reveal itself in chronological accounts of LDS history.

Linear recounting divides the first sixty years of Mormon history into chronological units that reveal an almost unrelieved movement from east to west in the United States and a consistent pattern of growth despite unceasing opposition. It describes important LDS doctrinal and institutional developments and concentrates heavily on the conflict between Mormonism and the national government, as well as the governments of the several

states in which the Saints settled for a time. Told in this fashion, the story begins with Joseph Smith's First Vision in 1820, proceeds to the publication of the Book of Mormon, the organization of the church, and its subsequent removal from western New York to Kirtland, Ohio. The construction of the Kirtland temple, economic and political troubles in the Old Northwest, and Mormon settlement in Independence, Missouri, make up the second chronological segment. The Missouri period, which concludes with a Mormon war in which the Saints are driven back across the Mississippi River, dramatizes Mormon-Gentile conflict and points up fundamental differences in the character of the socio-political organization of Mormon and non-Mormon society. Accounts of the Nauvoo years following the Missouri episode stress this *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* distinction, the introduction of plural marriage into Mormonism, and the murders in 1844 of Joseph and Hyrum Smith that bring the first linear unit of Mormonism to an end. The struggle for possession of the "mantle of the prophet" which led to an atomization of the movement opens Mormonism's second chronological unit. From that point forward there are several Mormon histories, not just one. But all the others are ordinarily treated as footnotes to the more dramatic story of the Saints' journey to the intermountain region and their establishing the State of Deseret there.

Narratives of the pioneer period are dominated by the Mormon War of 1857, the continuing practice of polygamy, the struggle for political hegemony between the Latter-day Saints and the representatives of the federal government, the "Raid," in which polygamous Saints were driven into hiding in order to escape imprisonment, and the "Manifesto," in which the president of the LDS Church acknowledged Mormon acquiescence to the government's demand for a cessation of the practice of plural marriage. Emphasis is placed on Brigham Young and other Mormon leaders, on the Saints' achievements in making the desert "blossom as a rose," on the sophisticated political and economic organization of the community, the systematizing of LDS doctrine, the efficient bureaucratic structure of the church, and so on.

While it is all fascinating, it is by and large an exterior story rather than an interior one. Nevertheless, whether it has been set out as a mass of undigested information in need of analysis or

analyzed with great skill by scholars trained to apply the canons of professional/scientific history to the records the Saints left behind, most Mormon history has been written in this mode. As a result, although many details need to be filled in, the main outlines of the institutional history of Mormonism are well known, and the story of the interrelationships between Mormonism and American culture is reasonably clear. But exoteric history does not always provide satisfactory answers to questions about the essential differences between the Mormonism of the early period and modern Mormonism, or to queries about how each of the several forms of Mormonism differs from all the others. The answers to these and many other questions about the LDS past are related to Mormonism's recapitulation of the biblical stories of God's chosen people.

This recapitulation process started with the discovery of a book whose contents told Saints in the nineteenth century what had happened to the people of God who came to America before them in much the same way that the priests' discovery in the recesses of the temple of a book said to have been written by Moses told the people in King Josiah's reign about those who came to Israel before them. Then the process moved forward through a series of "reprises" of events in the Hebrew-Christian story. But because the Saints had both to appropriate Israel's story and *reappropriate* Christianity's appropriation of the same story, the process did not involve linear movement through the story from beginning to end. Hence, the "restoration" of the Aaronic (Levitical) priesthood in 1829 was followed in less than a year by the organization of a "Church of Jesus Christ." A temple modeled on the pre-exilic temple of Solomon's day was constructed in Kirtland, but in the initial ceremonies conducted there, the Christian ordinance of washing of the feet was introduced. More directly integrating old and new was an 1836 vision in which Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, who had separated themselves from the congregation in the temple by retiring behind the veils surrounding the pulpit, were visited by "the Lord." The eyes of their understanding were opened, and they saw this personage, who spoke with a voice that "was as the sound of the rushing of great waters, even the voice of Jehovah," and yet one who—in accepting the temple as a place in which he would manifest himself to his people—identified him-

self by saying, "I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father." In that same visionary episode, recalling Matthew 17, the prophet and his Second Elder were visited by Moses, Elijah, and Elias, who committed into LDS hands the keys to the gathering of Israel and the "new dispensation of the fulness of times."<sup>6</sup>

The Saints started to build a City of God that would be the jewel of a literal kingdom organized on the Hebrew model. But when the Mormon kingdom was buffeted with troubles as dreadful as any with which ancient Israel had to contend, opinion among the Saints divided, as in the olden days, about whether God would continue to act inside history or outside it. Apocalyptic expectation likewise integrated the experiences of the Israelites and early Christians with Mormon experience, since no matter whether they looked back to the Book of Daniel or to Revelation, Saints came to believe that they were living in the world's "winding-up scene."

For complex reasons related to the fact that the Nauvoo experience was a recapitulation of the so-called Patriarchal Age for only a part of the Mormon population, Joseph Smith's murder was not generally perceived as a reprise of the crucifixion. He sealed his testimony with his blood, as Brigham Young said, but the result did not unify Mormonism. Instead, the prophet's death ushered in divisions in Mormonism that are as dramatic and potentially as long-standing as the sundering of Israel's northern and southern tribes, because the murder brought the recapitulation process to an abrupt halt in the experience of one part of the community, while the same murder exponentially intensified it in the other part. For the former, Mormonism ever afterward took on the character of primitive Christianity that it had had in the very beginning. For the latter, the prophet's observation that he was "going as a lamb to slaughter" apparently suggested suffering servant more than crucified messiah, Israel more than early Christianity, since his death turned these Latter-day Saints away from New Testament stories to an even more elaborate and direct reprise of Old Testament times.

Historical accounts of the corporate movement of the Saints from Nauvoo to the Great Basin are rarely written without mentioning that the Saints who followed Brigham Young westward re-

solved themselves into a Camp of Israel organized into companies with captains of hundreds, fifties, and tens over them, as had the ancient Israelites during their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land in Palestine. But the real extent of the Exodus-like character of the Saints' journey from Illinois to the Great Salt Lake Valley is only fully disclosed when it is remembered that an ice bridge over the Mississippi River facilitated the Mormon departure from Nauvoo. It is neither so wide nor so deep as the Red Sea, but at Nauvoo the river is more than a mile broad, and "running ice" had made crossing difficult in the days before the main body of Mormons was ready to leave. The fact that many Saints walked across the river without getting their feet wet is enough to serve as a means of separating the Mormon trek from all the other pioneer companies who left for the west from St. Louis, Quincy, and the other cities and towns along the river's edge, especially as more than one group of starving and desperate Saints reported miracles in which quail and a manna-like substance called honeydew kept them from perishing. Moreover, even as it continued in some ways for virtually forty years, while Saints from across the world traveled through the wilderness to the valleys of the intermountain region, this LDS exodus led directly to the building up of a latter-day Zion in the tops of the mountains, a kingdom with a religious leader at its political helm and a temple at its center.

Full and complete records of the Mormon pioneer period contain so many references to the extensive use of militant "kingdom language" in the sermons and public statements of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Jedediah Grant, and other LDS leaders that some scholars are convinced that nineteenth-century Saints were engaged in a quest for empire. Others disagree, interpreting the often-used "kingdom language" as a metaphor, mere repetitive allusion to passages of scripture that refer to the Kingdom of God. A wide-ranging and sometimes rancorous scholarly debate that turns on whether references to the kingdom should be understood metaphorically or taken literally has developed in recent years. Recognition of the Exodus-like character of the Mormon trek and the kingdom-like character of Utah Mormonism during the pioneer period (note this narrowing from Mormonism, in general, to Utah Mormonism) will not entirely settle this issue, but it will make it obvious that, as recapitulations of episodes in

Hebrew history, these events took on an experiential character appropriately described as metaphorical only if metaphor is understood as something more than literary device.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson provide a persuasive demonstration of their thesis that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."<sup>16</sup> Their demonstration is helpful here, for the River Jordan flowed north from Utah Lake into the Great Salt Lake, rather than south through the Waters of Merom and the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, but it still coursed through Zion. Brigham Young was not king—after 1858 he was not even governor—but he might as well have been, since Latter-day Saints actually, if not officially, lived in a literal LDS kingdom over which an ecclesiastical establishment presided for nearly fifty years. Thus this delineation of the Mormon replication of the Hebrew-Christian past tends to support the contention that scholars across the years have underestimated the importance of the political kingdom of God.

At the same time, this manner of interpreting the historical data calls into question the intimate connection that most scholars posit between the patriarchal order of marriage (polygamy) and the LDS political kingdom. As printed in section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormon prophet's revelation about plural marriage is dated 12 July 1843. This date seems to place the inauguration of plural marriage in the same time period as Smith's organization of a Mormon political kingdom. But it is ever more obvious that the revelation is given an 1843 date because it was first written down at that time. In reality, along with the introduction of the temple ordinances and the ordination of Joseph Smith, Sr., as patriarch (which led directly to the custom of conferring patriarchal blessings), plural marriage entered Mormonism in Kirtland. All were part of a latter-day recapitulation of the ancient Patriarchal Age, which, in the Bible, is separated from the kingdom-building of David and Solomon by a great span of years and which, in Mormonism, is analytically distinct from the creation of the political kingdom of God. This means that a literal plurality of wives was one of the main elements figuring in the Saints' recapitulation of the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, while the LDS



experience of living in a kingdom that the Saints themselves controlled politically recapitulated the stories of David and Solomon, kings of Israel during a much later era.

By indicating that the prophet made separate inquiries about the plural marriages of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, on the one hand, and those of Moses, David, and Solomon, on the other, the opening verse of the revelation about the plurality of wives suggests that Joseph Smith was aware of the differences that existed between these two periods in Hebrew history. But Smith's distinction was not communicated to his followers. It was even missed by the scribe to whom the revelation was dictated, William Clayton, whose diary account says that the revelation showed "the designs in Moses, Abraham, David, and Solomon having many wives and concubines & c."<sup>6</sup> And the distinction apparently was not later recognized, even after 1852, when the revelation was finally published. Although the Latter-day Saints did not fully realize at the time that they were living through reprises of the ages of the Hebrew patriarchs and kings simultaneously, the distinction is nevertheless significant in the context of this study because it highlights the non-linearity and complexity of the recapitulation process.

The subliminal, often involuntary nature of the process is revealed in the final Utah-Mormon reprise of Hebrew history: exile. Equally outraged by evidence that the patriarchal order of marriage was a reality and that an unofficial yet actual Kingdom of God was organized, non-Mormons mounted an all-out campaign in the late 1880s to stop the practice of polygamy and destroy the political kingdom. Seen from a Mormon perspective, the "Raid" was a Gentile threat to turn to ashes all the Saints' accomplishments in building cities for habitation and making the barren land fruitful. An army of "greedy politicians," intent on dismantling the political kingdom, and an army of federal marshals, intent on casting polygamists into prison, drove Mormons from their homes and made Zion desolate. Some of the patriarchs hid in the mountains, others sought asylum in Mexico or Canada, but when the Corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was dissolved and its property (including the nearly completed temple in Salt Lake City) confiscated, the Saints acceded to the superior strength of the Gentile government. Appropriately, as be-

fits the end of exile, the Saints were allowed to return to their homes and everyday pursuits on the condition that they would give up marital plurality and that their kingdom would thereafter take on the political status of client state.

As was the death of Joseph Smith in 1844, the end of the practice of plural marriage was an event of overriding importance in Mormonism. Before LDS Church President Wilford Woodruff's Manifesto was issued and accepted as authoritative by the Saints, Mormonism was one thing; afterward, Mormonism was something else. Unlike Smith's martyrdom, however, the demise of plural marriage was not an inexplicable event that was sudden and unforeseen. The issuing of the Manifesto was preceded by years of struggle with the larger culture over what was permissible in the United States insofar as the organization of the Mormon kingdom and the behavior of the Saints was concerned. For that reason, chronological narrations of Mormon history must always explain this event in terms of cause and effect. In the context of this work, however, the matter of whether the Manifesto was the result of divine revelation or whether it was an extreme instance of religion accommodating itself to the world is far less important than the fact that the promulgation of this document and the informal political accords that accompanied its appearance brought the Mormon recapitulation of the Hebrew-Christian story to a close. With Zion and Babylon come to terms, the past was filled up. Complete.

Henceforth that past would be continually reiterated and sometimes reinterpreted. But its replication would come in the form of ritual re-creation, which differs fundamentally from recapitulation in that in ritual re-creation the Saints consciously and purposely played out the story of what had once happened to Israel in order to call up to modern memory the times when God tested, or tried, or was good to his chosen people. With temples and priesthood in place and sacred ordinances ever ready to signal renewal of divine-human covenants, the necessity of recapitulation, of living through the particular events of Hebrew-Christian history, disappeared. But the story of Mormonism's recapitulation of that past stayed very much alive as it moved out of experiential reality into Mormon history.

As temple ceremonies kept ancient times and the covenants of

the new dispensation alive in Latter-day Saint minds, so festival, pilgrimage, and the recital of the stories of the nineteenth-century past preserved the vitality of the pioneer period. Moreover, because that history recapitulated more ancient pasts, it opened out to reveal Mormonism's reappropriation of Christianity's appropriation of Hebrew history and, especially in the case of the Saints who went to the Great Basin, its own direct appropriation of Israel's story. In "The Ritualization of Mormon History," an important article published in the *Utah Historical Quarterly* in 1975, Davis Bitton described the rapidity and "cumulative intensity" with which the Saints ritualized their past.<sup>7</sup> But there is still more to be said about this process, because it not only allowed the Saints to take hold of their own past, it also gave them a tenacious hold on the reality of the biblical story. For example, even as Mormonism continued the activity of recapitulation, an annual 24 July festival developed. Each year the Saints reenacted the fulfillment event of the LDS exodus, reentering the Salt Lake Valley with appropriate ceremony, thus symbolically reentering not only the Great Basin but also the Promised Land. Episodes in the Mormon past that reflected other sacred events, such as temple buildings or the journey through the wilderness, also called the Saints to pilgrimage, making eventual historical restoration inevitable at Kirtland, Nauvoo, Mt. Pisgah, and all the many other sites where LDS pioneer events took place. More important, because the nineteenth-century Saints had engaged in reestablishing the covenant, organizing the church, preaching the gospel, living the patriarchal order of marriage, and building up the kingdom—in short, in replicating sacred story—Mormon history itself took on a sacred character.

As a result, Mormonism's salvation history begins with the story of Abraham, the beginning point of the salvation histories of Judaism and Christianity, but it extends across the LDS experience in the pioneer period. It happened in the here and now, in the United States less than two centuries ago. And yet the story of the LDS past is in many ways as much a "historical product of a visionary tradition" as is the Bible, a work in which, according to literary critic Northrop Frye, religious and historical saga is continuously reshaped. Specifically, in *Fearful Symmetry* Frye writes that "the Gospels consolidate [the] vision of the [Old Testament]

Messiah into the vision of Jesus, who has the same name as Joshua, and the proof of the events in Jesus' life, as recorded in the Gospels, is referred not to contemporary evidence but to what the Old Testament prophets had said would be true of the Messiah."<sup>8</sup> The modern critical mind makes reference to the biblical accounts rather than contemporary evidence well-nigh impossible in the scholarly reconstruction of the Mormon past. Yet in its popular recital within Mormonism, the same pattern of referring to biblical prophecy operates in Mormon history.

The framework of interpretation in this work makes it possible to see, then, that accounts of Mormon history that reflect the experience of the Saints themselves consolidate and reshape the vision of Old and New Testaments in much the same way that accounts of the experience of the early Christian community consolidated and reshaped Israel's story. Moreover, it is equally true that as early Christianity's experience gave it a unique understanding of the gospel of the God of Abraham, so Mormonism's pioneer experience figures more prominently than has been recognized in the development of the Latter-day Saints' unique understanding of the "principles of the gospel." While Mormonism's transition from cultic movement to religious tradition follows the pattern by which other traditions made the transition, its unique understanding of "the gospel," which rests on its history as well as its theology, turns the story of Mormonism into a story that has meaning for all persons interested in religion as generic phenomenon.

after it was said to have happened. In the *Salt Lake City Messenger*, published by Jerald and Sarah Tanner, and *The Utah Evangel*, published by the Rev. John Smith, contradictions in various accounts of the vision are also regularly pointed out. The most substantial efforts to question Smith's veracity in regard to the date given for the vision are Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, n.d.); and Rev. Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," which was first published as an Evangelical Theological Society tract and afterward reprinted in *Dialogue* 4 (Spring 1969): 60-81.

19. Marvin S. Hill, "The Rise of Mormonism in the Burned-over District: Another View," *New York History* 61 (Oct. 1980): 411-30, is a revisionist study that summarizes and questions scholarship about the Burned-over District from the work of Whitney R. Cross forward.

20. A recent and very useful study of the state of confusion in early nineteenth-century America is Gordon Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61 (Oct. 1980): 359-86.

21. Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), chap. 7.

22. This statement is not put forward as a challenge to William G. McLoughlin's interpretation of revivalism in *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) so much as to point out that revitalization took several forms.

23. Nathan O. Hatch, "Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum," in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 59-78; Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

24. David A. Hollinger, "T. S. Kuhn's Theory of Science and Its Implications for History," *American Historical Review* 78 (Apr. 1973): 370-93.

25. John S. Dunne, *Time and Myth* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 50.

26. Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism."

27. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism* is, in fact, a book-length argument that the Book of Mormon was a response

to skepticism. His argument is entirely supported by circumstantial evidence, however.

28. In the documentation for his 1980 article on the First Vision, James B. Allen notes, on p. 59, that both George Q. Cannon and Joseph Fielding Smith made use of this "heavens no longer brass" phrase.

29. Doctrine and Covenants 124: 125.

30. Shipps, "The Prophet Puzzle," pp. 19-20.

### Chapter Three

1. Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983) is a recent volume which devotes separate chapters to these dimensions of religion.

2. Such reviews of a new tradition's past serve, to a great degree, as creedal statements.

3. Mortensen and Mulder, *Among the Mormons* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958) is a collection of documents about the Saints written by non-Mormons. Its content tells the LDS story from the outside and thus could not have captured the same sense of replication as documents written by the Mormons themselves.

4. The Doctrine and Covenants text indicates that Moses, Elijah, and Elias appeared to Smith and Cowdery. Since *Elias* is simply the Greek form of the name Elijah, it is not clear whether the reference refers to two or to three biblical figures.

5. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

6. James B. Allen, "One Man's Nauvoo: William Clayton's Experience in Mormon, Illinois," *Journal of Mormon History* 6 (1979): 52.

7. Davis Bitton, "The Ritualization of Mormon History," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 43 (Winter 1975): 67-85.

8. Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p. 317.

### Chapter Four

1. Bangerter, "The Best of All Good News: The Gospel Is Restored" (edited version of a Brigham Young University devotional address delivered Apr. 1979), *Ensign*, Apr. 1980, pp. 56-59.

2. As Elder Bangerter's entire address is based on the assumption that Mormonism is the only church, he does not deal with other "true church" claims.