

quaint subculture, like that of the native Indians or the Amish, to be added to the 'gorgeous mosaic' of American cultural pluralism."

## *Mormon Prophecy and Authority*

**T**he history of the Mormons shows both how a movement changes the nature of its authority from charismatic (in this case, prophetic) to bureaucratic, and how it adapts to demands made by an encompassing political structure (in this case, the U.S. government).

### **Joseph Smith, Prophet**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, commonly known as the Mormon Church, traces its origins to a man Mormons consider a prophet, Joseph Smith (Anderson 1942; Shippo 1985). In the 1820s Smith received divine revelations concerning certain records that had been written on golden plates and buried near his home near Palmyra, New York. According to his own account, Smith unearthed the plates and translated them "from Reformed Egyptian" to English with the aid of two translation stones. By 1829, two years after he found the plates, Smith had completed translating them. He had kept the plates away from the vision of others, working on one side of a curtain while his scribe—initially his wife—remained on the other. He was then given further directions through divine revelation, and in particular he was directed to found a new church of Christ. In it, he would speak as a prophet and would initiate others, who would also speak God's words. The church would baptize people in a new covenant with God, augmenting the earlier covenants delivered through Moses and Jesus Christ.

Smith published the translation as the Book of Mormon in 1830. Smith was thoroughly familiar with the King James Version of the Bible, and the Book of Mormon is written in the same style, with a similar organization into books and sections. The Book of Mormon tells of a tribe of Israelites who, in about 600 B.C.E., sailed to the Americas. There they built cities and temples and continued to obey the Law of Moses. They were visited by Jesus Christ after his death and resurrection. Christ performed miracles and organized a new church with 12 disciples. But the Israelites fought among themselves. In a reprise of Cain versus Abel, one group, the Lamanites, who had become hunters, disobeyed God's word, but it was they who prevailed over the other group, the peaceful farming Nephites. (The Lamanites' descendants are said to be today's Native Americans.) The last remaining Nephite prophet was Mormon, who wrote an account of the travels and struggles of these Israelites on gold plates and passed them on to his son, Moroni. Moroni buried the plates for discovery by the people who could restore the church that had once existed in America. It was Moroni's angel who revealed to Smith the location of the tablets. The "Latter-Day Saints" of the church are those who respond to the new direct revelations from God, the first revelations since those delivered through Christ. In the Mormon view, Christianity was misled soon after its founding. God had decided to reestablish his true church, with Smith as its prophet.

Soon after the book's publication, Smith began to attract a small group of followers, a few of whom attested to having seen the gold tablets. The group grew over time, and eventually followed Smith from New York. His success as a prophet must be seen in the religious context of his place and time. In the northeast United States of the 1820s, a diversity of religious faiths and movements abounded. This diversity was due in part to the intensity of the religious emotions following on the Second Great Awakening, a period of religious revival throughout the region that had begun three decades earlier. The revival encouraged religious experimentation and the questioning of established churches. (Adventism also began in this region during the same period.) Many people sought more direct forms of contact with Jesus Christ than those offered through standard liturgies. Joseph Smith himself said he was confused by the diversity of religions open to him, and his first revelation was mainly a message from a divine figure telling him not to join any of the existing churches, but to recover the authentic form of Christianity. As with Islam, Mormonism began as, and remains today, a call to return to the purity of the early worship of God.

Smith's part of New York State was also replete with Native American populations and mounds of ancient origin, and the Book of Mormon responded to a deep curiosity about the origins of Native Americans and the identities of the mound builders. (This curiosity also spurred on early archeological speculation in North America.)

Smith himself already had a reputation as a person in touch with the unseen. Before he received the revelations, he had found a "seerstone," a smooth, egg-shaped stone used to locate lost objects. Indeed, he and his father worked as treasure hunters, benefiting from generally accepted beliefs in the powers of seers. After his first revelation, members of his family stopped attending the local Presbyterian church, and joined him in waiting to found a new church of apostles of Christ.

Relatives and neighbors began to accept Joseph's claims, not despite his reputation as a practitioner of magical arts, but *because* that reputation supported his claims to have found a true treasure. Soon the church had 40 members, with Joseph as its Prophet, Seer, Apostle of Jesus Christ, and Elder.

In 1831 Smith moved the church to Kirtland, Ohio, which he proclaimed was on the eastern edge of Zion, the church's ultimate destination. There he attempted to construct a communal form of economy based on sharing, the legacy of which is the tithe, one-tenth of one's income that members are expected to pay the church. Financial difficulties and local hostilities led Smith to move some of the Ohio Mormons to Missouri. Their partial economic success in Missouri, their perceived socialism and the large numbers of immigrants they attracted, led to local attacks on the Mormons (Leone 1979, 11–16). Smith at one point made explicit the parallel to Muhammad's experience of a call for religious purity followed by persecution, when he publicly proclaimed, "I will be a second Muhammad." This parallel hardly improved his image locally, and in 1838, after renewed attacks on the community, the Mormons moved back across the Mississippi to an Illinois town they renamed Nauvoo.

In Nauvoo, Smith rebuilt the church around the divine revelations he continued to receive. These instructions included the doctrine, written down privately in 1843, that God intended males to take more than one wife. This doctrine, announced publicly from Salt Lake City in 1852, was part of a new vision of the afterlife, in which marriages

properly conducted by the church would be for eternity, and a man with his wives and all his progeny would move on to rule new worlds. Taking plural wives would mean a larger retinue of progeny, and it followed the example of the Hebrew patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Foster 1981, 123–180).

Smith attracted many additional adherents, most of whom, poor, had left unprofitable farmlands or poorly paid factory jobs, and were attracted by the utopian message of the Mormons. The community grew into tens of thousands, with Smith as its leader, now declared to be King of the Kingdom of God. He became increasingly despotic, and in 1844 he destroyed an opposition press, an action that led to his arrest. On June 27, 1844, a mob stormed the jail where he was held and lynched him.

### The New Prophet and Conflicts with the United States

As with most prophet-led movements, Smith's death left no automatic successor. Struggles for leadership produced several factions. In particular, two lines of reasoning emerged. One group argued that the Smith's descendants had inherited his right to rule. This group followed members of Smith's family back to Missouri, where they established the Reorganized Church of Latter-Day Saints. This church is headquartered today in Independence, Missouri. A second group, the majority, continued the leadership of Smith's church, arguing that the followers had the right to choose their leader. They chose an elder, Brigham Young, to become the new Prophet and Elder. Young led the community westward, across the Great Plains, to the Great Salt Lake in what is today Utah. (A similar debate over succession, at the break between charismatic and "routinized" authority, occurred in Islam, as we shall see in the next section.)

By 1849, Brigham Young had established an autonomous, theocratic (religion-ruled) state on the lake called Deseret. Hundreds of small communities sprung up in orbit around the lake, extending into today's Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, and California. The need for cooperation in creating irrigation provided a material base for authority in these new communities; the church held them together through an intricate hierarchy of leaders and through its ownership of numerous enterprises.

In 1850 the territory came under U.S. rule, and tensions quickly mounted between the Mormons and a U.S. government toward which Mormons had always felt uneasy. For its part, the government feared that the Mormons might refuse to acknowledge U.S. sovereignty. During the 1850s, armed conflict occurred on several occasions between Mormons and "Gentiles" (non-Mormons), and in 1857 President James Buchanan sent an army of five thousand troops to try to occupy Utah. Polygamy, now made public, became a symbol of the conflict, and in 1862 Congress banned it (Firmage 1991). In 1879 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the U.S. statutory ban on polygamy, declaring it not to infringe religious freedom but rather to protect the vital social institution of monogamous marriages. In 1890 the Court upheld additional, severe legislation that dissolved the Mormon Church as a corporation and confiscated most major church properties. The Mormon Church president responded to these assaults by advising his followers not to contract plural marriage or polygamy. However, he did not characterize the directive to be a revelation, as most other important directives had been and would

continue to be characterized. Some Mormons continued to practice polygamy. By statehood, in 1896, the church was deeply in debt. Mormons had become part of a larger economy of the Western states, characterized by industries of mining, livestock, timber, and railroad, all bankrolled from the East. But since the 1930s the church has regenerated its wealth, building on its tithing requirement, and Mormons have become successful capitalist entrepreneurs.

### Authority and History Today

The Book of Mormon continues to serve as a sacred book to today's Mormons, who number nearly 5 million in the United States, and about 2.5 million overseas. The Mormon following expands both through extensive missionary activities and by encouraging large families—children are said to incarnate already existing spirits and to advance one's own standing in the next world. Beginning at age 12, every Mormon male passes through several grades in each of two orders of priesthood. At about age 18, most men also go on a two-year mission for the church and are rewarded by passing into the second, adult priesthood order.

Mormons are grouped into wards of about 700 persons; 10 wards make up a Stake of Zion, headed by a president. The center of Mormon activity is Salt Lake City, where the Quorum of Twelve Apostles manages the church. The senior apostle becomes the church's president on the death of the previous president. Mormons attend local chapels and at intervals also attend services at one of the temples found in different parts of the United States and overseas. Chapels hold Sunday services, centered on a form of communion that is quite similar to that held in Lutheran and some other Protestant churches. Lay persons preside over the service and do most of the talking. Rituals held in the larger temples are kept secret from non-Mormons, but they include services held both for the living and for deceased ancestors of living Mormons.

Mormons attach great importance to the long-term historical record. They do so in part because of their ideas about salvation, and in part because of the particular historical account provided in the Book of Mormon. First, Mormons see themselves as capable of saving the souls of deceased persons. Ancestors of Mormons who lived before the advent of Mormonism may be baptized into the church, with a living person standing in for the ancestor. These souls may then be taken through the successive temple rites that move persons up the ranks of the priesthood. These ancestors may be very far removed, and in theory those who can be aided include a large percentage of the world's people. But to do so one must establish the connection to a living Mormon. Therefore, Mormons carry out extensive research into the family trees of, in theory, everyone in the world. The resulting vast holdings of genealogical records, located in Salt Lake City, are available to non-Mormons as well as to members of the church.

Second, history matters because history underlies the church's claims to authority. The Mormon Apostles see themselves as the direct heirs of God's message to humankind, through the media of the buried tablets and succeeding direct revelations to the church's prophets. The rationale for these revelations lies in the saga of Israelites fleeing Jerusalem, founding a new community, witnessing Christ, and establishing a new covenant with

God. Though the community was eventually destroyed, it left its message for the latter-day prophet, Joseph Smith, through whom God's communication with his people was reopened.

History thus provides the rationale, the reasonable account, of why it was that Joseph Smith became a new prophet. The historical record of continued revelations to his successors depicts them, too, as prophets. In the eyes of the outside analyst, the charismatic authority of Joseph Smith was replaced by the bureaucracy of the church in Salt Lake City. In the eyes of the church leadership, however, Smith's successors continue to serve as prophets, seers, and apostles. They continue to receive charisma, divine blessings, from God, in the form of revelations. Charismatic authority is changed but not lost.

This historical account does, however, present Mormons with dilemmas in everyday life, especially in their attitudes toward Native Americans. Believed descended from the Lamanites, the ancient people who disobeyed God and wiped out the obedient Nephites, Native Americans are nonetheless also descended from Israelites. They are thus of the same origins as are Mormons, and for a group that places great emphasis on genealogy this connection gives Native Americans a special status. They are entitled to convert and become full members of the church, a privilege long denied to African Americans. Mark Leone (1979, 174–177) describes a service in an Arizona chapel at which a missionary couple described their experience living for several years on a Navajo reservation. The couple spoke from their experience in business about how Navajo were like anyone else. The couple's talk encouraged their listeners to put aside conflicting attitudes toward the Navajo and to get on with their twin concerns of commerce and conversion.