"Of whole nations being born in one day": marriage, money and magic in the Mormon cosmos, 1830-1846

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I met with the whole church of Christ in a little log house about 20 feet square . . . and we began to talk about the Kingdom of God as if we had the world at our command; we talked with great confidence, and talked of big things . . . . We talked of people coming as doves to the windows . . . of whole nations being born in one day; we talked of such big things that men could not bear them.1

To the average observer, the Mormon church, the Latter-Day Saints of Jesus Christ, seems to be simply another American denomination. But throughout the nineteenth century and even to some degree today, Mormons have seen themselves as a distinct nation, the inhabitants of a “Kingdom of God” which in the millennial world-view will one day rule the world. The degree to which this “nation” was indeed created is subject to some debate among modern scholars: Mark Leone argues that a functioning nation-state existed prior to the assertion of United States Federal authority over the Utah territories in the 1880s; Thomas O’Dea argues for an “incipient nationality”; while Jan Shipps sees the forging of a Mormon “ethnicity” (Leone, 1979; O’Dea, 1954; Shipps, 1985). The deeper roots of a Mormon “nationality” lie in the millennial aspirations of the tangle of Protestant sects which emerged in the American colonies and in Britain itself, the heirs to the apocalyptic eschatology of the radical wing of the English Revolution and, more distantly, in the hopes for a literal, physical restoration of Israel which drove the Radical Reformation.2 More immediately, the Mormon church was forged in the revival-scared regions of northern New England, western New York, the mid-western frontier, and the English industrial Midlands where Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, worked to forge a distinct Mormon identity and

culture among a heterogeneous, shifting following of Christian
primitivists. Dreams of Mormon nationhood and theocratic
hegemony were only imperfectly realized in the decades to come,
constrained by the secular realities of the American nation-state, but
they held powerful attractions for poor artisanal and farming
families, dislocated by economic transformation. Moving from his
origins as a village diviner in 1827 to the leader of an autonomous
city-state and a candidate for the presidency of the USA in 1844,
Smith forged this proto-national culture in ways which pose
interesting questions about the relationships between animist
lawlessness and national legitimacy. This essay approaches these
questions in an examination of marriage, money and hermetic
magic in early Mormon culture.

I

On 24 November 1835, Joseph Smith, as the leader of the Mormon
settlement at Kirtland, Ohio, defiantly challenged the statute law.
Specifically prohibited from marrying by the local county court,
Smith brushed aside a state-licensed church elder to perform the
rites of marriage between Newell Knight and Lydia C. Bailey. Lydia
was not divorced from her non-Mormon husband, so this marriage
also challenged a broader moral code. Newell Knight later wrote in
his journal that Smith had said, “I have done it by the authority of
the holy priesthood and the Gentile law has no power to call me to
account for it. It is my religious privilege, and even the Congress
of the United States has no power to make a law that would abridge
the rights of my religion.” Lydia Bailey Knight remembered him
saying, “Our Elders have been wronged and prosecuted for marry-
ing without a license. The Lord God of Israel has given me authority
to unite the people in the holy bonds of matrimony”. Over the
next two months Joseph Smith performed five more such illegal
marriages, and at one he spoke of the “ancient order of marriage”—
an early and veiled reference to the idea of plural, polygamous
marriage which would become a secret cornerstone of Mormon
faith in the early 1840s.3

Sixteen months later, on 24 March 1837, Smith would appear in
county court for violating the statute law in a quite different arena.
Accused of operating an illegal, unchartered bank, colorfully
known as the Kirtland Safety Society Anti-Banking Company, he
was fined $1000. Three months later the bank was still in operation,
and in July Smith’s associate, Sydney Rigdon, was brought into
court “for making spurious money” (Brodie, 1971: 198).

Joseph Smith was the prophet of a new religion, based on texts
supposedly written from golden tablets he claimed to have discovered
in Palmyra, New York in 1827, when he was deeply involved in a
magical culture of treasure-hunting.4 While the Book of Mormon
recounted a sacred history of lost Hebrew tribes, the doctrinal
framework and institutions of the Mormon church would rest on
visions and revelations which Smith pronounced to the faithful at
sporadic intervals from 1829 up to the time of his assassination in
1844. These revelations announced the restoration of “the ancient
order of things”, a collective economy, powerful priesthoods and
the Prophet Enoch’s city of Zion. In a literal restoration of Israel,
this city was to be rebuilt at Independence, Missouri where —
according to Smith — it had been miraculously carried up to heaven,
and where Adam had gathered his posterity into a priesthood

However, in 1835 the main body of Mormons were not yet in this
promised land, the center of “Adam’s tent”, but were still caught at
one of the “stakes” in Kirtland, Ohio, dealing with the indeter-
minacies of a half-formed religious tradition. It was in this context
that Joseph Smith began to put himself above the law.

Control over marriage and currency is typically monopolized by
the modern state; with organized violence, they comprise two of the
bulwarks of legitimacy and authority, and the means by which the
state regulates routine social behavior. In defying the law in
these arenas, Joseph Smith put himself into the animist, perfec-
tionist wing of the Protestant tradition. As had radical sectarians
for centuries before him, Smith declared himself God’s appointed
seer, above the control and reach of mere human law. And where
Protestant ministers had given up the priestly powers of the Catholic
Church — ecclesiastical magic and primary authority over marriages
and funerals — Smith reclaimed these powers for the priests of the
Mormon restoration. Not only was he above the law, but he was a
law-giver; the next decade would see the unfolding of his plan to
establish a theocratic state, the Kingdom of God, a plan first mani-
ifested in 1834, when he had marched an armed Mormon militia —
“Zion’s Camp” — to rescue Mormon settlements in western
Missouri. Thus, Smith was simultaneously both animist and
law-giver, antistuctural destroyer and structural builder, to use
the useful categories of the late Victor Turner (1969, 1974; see also Thomas, 1971; Weisman, 1984; N.Z. Davis, 1981; and Goody, 1983).

The concepts of liminality, antistructure and animonism provide useful perspectives on the emergence of the Mormon "nation". As developed by Victor Turner, following Max Weber and Arnold Van Gennep, the idea of liminality bears within it both destructive and constructive forces. In liminal situations "the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements" (Turner, 1974: 13-14). In Turner's and Van Gennep's analysis, liminality characterizes a fleeting moment of transition; here I extend this meaning to cover the entire period of the Mormon emergence, from the formation of the church to the succession of Brigham Young and the migration to Utah in 1846-7. In this sense, the era of Mormon emergence can be compared to national revolutions, which are unstable and liminal in quality from the first challenge to the legitimacy of the old order to the final revolutionary settlement.6

But the animonim and liminal qualities of the Mormon emergence were not limited to challenges to civil law. In these years Joseph Smith was groping toward a routinized, institutional antinomianism. What he arrived at was a permanent theology promising not just salvation but divine godhood to the faithful, rooted ultimately in the hermetic tradition of Adam as a primal magus, the model for a human divinity. This promise of divinity, deeply "antistructural" in relation to contemporary religious norms, would be strictly controlled by a priestly hierarchy administering temple ritual, a religious theater rooted in Masonic and hermetic traditions. In effect Smith routinized the popular magic of youth into structured ecclesiastical magic.

While the period as a whole comprised a liminal transition from the Old Mormonism of the Golden Plates to the New Mormonism of the Nauvoo Temple, Smith sought to make liminality a permanent, institutionalized feature of the Mormon cosmology and a continuing source of charismatic power. Mormons were to be differentiated from the world by their promised transformation from mere sinful humans into divine gods. But, as the affairs at Kirtland between 1835 and 1837 suggest, animonim and hermetic perfectionism was a tricky, slippery commodity: one man's legitimate authority was another's fraudulent counterfeit.7

II

Joseph Smith was well aware of the necessity of religious theater when he first began to challenge openly Ohio law in 1835. The young Mormon church was already far into its first monumental construction project, the building of the Kirtland Temple, which had begun in June 1833 (Brodie, 1971: 133; Andrew, 1978: 33-4). The temple was finished in March 1836, two months after the six illegal marriages were performed, and it was dedicated in a week of ceremony and ritual between 27 March and 3 April 1836. The events of that week confirmed to the faithful that the temple was no simple meetinghouse, but the sacred, numinous conduit of spiritual communication between humanity and the divine. In preparation for the great day, Smith gathered his elders and instructed them in new ceremonies; the men of the hierarchy soon felt "that the Holy Ghost was like fire in their bones", and fell into visions and prophesy (Brodie, 1971: 177-8). The temple was formally dedicated in a series of meetings of the men of the church spanning a week, and reaching climax on the two Sundays. On the first Sunday afternoon after Smith was received as a prophet and seer by the congregation, he exhorted the men to help prophesy the future; Smith recorded that "many began to speak in tongues and prophesy; others saw glorious visions; and I beheld the Temple was filled with angels, which fact I declared to the congregation". These ecstatic meetings, with ritual annointings and washings, continued through the week, reaching another highpoint on Sunday 3 April. Late that afternoon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, one of the first Book of Mormon witnesses, were hidden from the congregation by cloth veils dropping from the ceiling. When they reappeared they reported more visions. They had seen "the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us; and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold, in color like amber". Following this vision they had seen and received the "keys" of successive "dispensations" from Moses, Elias and finally Elijah — the Biblical prophet who, like Enoch, had been "translated" directly to heaven (D. Hill, 1988: 196-7; Brodie, 1971: 178-80; Andrew, 1978: 33-4; Vogel, 1988: 720-1; DC: 110).

Smith had been providing miracles, revelations and visions on a regular basis — the core of the sacred theater which validated his authority for a sometimes unruly following. And if the Kirtland Temple dedication involved a degree of popular experience of ecstatic visions and prophesy, this seems to have been a unique
moment, perhaps driven by the political necessity of releasing and focusing turbulent religious and social emotions at Kirtland. More typically, Smith attempted to reserve the prophetic role for himself and perhaps one or two leading elders. His exorcism of evil spirits from one follower in the spring of 1830 had been critical to the initial forging of Smith's charisma, but the next summer and fall he had to defeat efforts by others — all witnesses to the miracle of a physical Book of Mormon — to have a broader sharing of charismatic prophetic power, specifically in receiving revelations through magical seerstones. After asserting his claim to be the sole spiritual authority in the new church, establishing a permanent precedent, Smith avoided using his seerstones and claimed that the "Urim and Thummim" — the Biblical spectacles and breastplate with which he claimed to have translated the Book of Mormon — had been carried up to heaven with the Golden Plates (D. Hill, 1988: 116–18; Brodie, 1971: 178–80; DC: 28, 30). Similarly, after Smith suggested early in 1831 that some members would be able to commune with spirits, the new Mormon settlements at Kirtland, Ohio were filled with converts having visions, speaking in tongues and uttering prophesy. Suppressed by revelation in May 1831, claimants to spiritual powers would re-emerge to challenge Smith's authority (Parkin, 1966: 66–89; DC: 50).

Over the next five years Smith worked to solidify his authority as a "seer" and "revelator" by simultaneously creating a hierarchical theocracy and the outline of a new cosmic order. On the one hand he established an array of priesthoods, apostleships, presidencies, councils and quorums, inaugurated a collective economy called the United Order of Enoch, guided by a Law of Consecration, and set into action plans for Mormon settlements and the building of monumental architecture. On the other hand, he began to develop a body of sacred text — from visions, revelations and inspired translation — which sketched out the promise of the restoration of the ancient order of things for the Mormon faithful, the promise of "keys to mysteries" and ritual "endowments" which captured and held the loyalty of his following.

The core of Smith's message was the idea of restoration, shared with the Campbellite "Christians" who were joining the Mormons in large numbers in these years. In addition, rooted in a fascination with the linkages and connections between spiritual and material worlds first manifested in Smith's money-digging in the 1820s, these revelations increasingly incorporated ideas which have direct parallels in occult religious traditions. Writing an inspired revision of the Book of Genesis in the summer and fall of 1830, Smith wrote an important section in December in collaboration with Sydney Rigdon, a recently converted Campbellite preacher, which involved a vision of the prophet Enoch. This text had striking parallels in Masonic lore, recently published by George Oliver, about primitive and spurious Masonry running back to Adam, Seth and Cain. The Masonic tale of the discovery of Enoch's buried secrets, an important part of the Royal Arch degree ritual and mythology, seems to have shaped Smith's account of the discovery of the Golden Plates in 1827. The Royal Arch degree also centered on the Biblical Melchizedek priesthood, whose restoration Smith announced in June 1831, followed by detailed revelations in February and September 1832. Smith's revelations recounted the passing of the priesthood from Adam (through Enoch) to Solomon, as Masonic mythology proposed, and described the magico-religious powers ("wonderful works") of these priests: exorcism, faith-healing and immunity from poisons. Eventually these priests would learn "all the hidden mysteries"; they would "administer the gospel and hold the key of the mysteries", mysteries which he promised would allow men to "see the face of God, the Father, and live". Thus Smith would share his charismatic, mystic powers, but only within the framework of a rigidly controlled hierarchy (Oliver, 1823; Adamson, nd; Durham, nd; DC: 76: 7, 84: 5–22, 107; Smith, Book of Moses, 1985: cts 6, 7).

In his revelation of February 1832 he began to describe the shape of the cosmic order to which these mysteries would provide access. The popular attraction of early Mormonism lay in Smith's claims to prophetic and apostolic powers, his promise of a restoration of ancient mysteries and his rejection of Calvinist predestination. Shared in common with other back-country Arminian sects, these concepts were developed in Smith's Mormonism far beyond the ideas of the Campbellites and the Universalists (Marini, 1982: 136–55; Hatch, 1989: 167–79; C. Hansen, 1981: 73–6; Vogel, 1988: 25–41, 69–72, 1985: 57–90). Just as he elaborated Campbellite restoration with Masonic mythology, Smith carried the Universalists' free salvation to a hermetic promise of divinity. Echoing the three-tiered heavenly hierarchy of the Jewish Cabala, Smith announced the existence of three Heavens: the telestial — a heaven for sinners; the terrestrial — a heaven for pious non-Mormons; and the celestial — where the Mormon faithful would
dwell. But rather than being merely saved, they would be exalted. Ritual preparation and elevated through layered orders of priesthoods, Smith assured his followers in 1832 that “they are gods, even the sons of God... all things are theirs... and they shall overcome all things”. Smith’s cosmic order thus promised a radical departure from Protestant Christianity. Complete with metaphors of the stars, the moon and the sun, Smith’s Mormon cosmos offered the promise of divinity in a pantheon of gods, the same restoration of the god-like powers of the primal Adam which Neoplatonic hermeticism offered as the reward to the true adept (DC, 76: 58-60, 96-112).9

Smith further elaborated his vision of the new cosmos in May 1833, in urging his following to begin the building of the Kirtland Temple. The temple would be the vehicle for communication between heaven and earth, and Smith began to describe a new vision of the connectedness between spirit and matter.

For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy. And when separated, man cannot receive a fulness of joy. The elements are the tabernacle of God; yea, man is the tabernacle of God, even temples; and whatsoever temple is defiled, God shall destroy that temple.

Ten years later, he would restate this thesis more plainly, as he sketched out the doctrinal basis for the covenant of celestial marriage or polygamy: “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All Spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure”. Along this continuum between earth and heaven, Mormons would be called to a progressively more exalted divinity by their submission to the ritual temple endowments (DC, 93: 35-6).

In the mid-1830s the details of this sacred theater had not been established and the central idea of plural marriage had not yet been broached. But in 1835 and 1836 enough spilled out in a disorganized fashion to almost destroy the new church.

The years 1833 and 1834 were dominated for the Mormons by violent events in Missouri, culminating in the disastrous “Zion’s Camp” of the summer of 1834, when Smith attempted to march a Mormon militia to the aid of their brethren in Independence. But the relatively peaceful interlude of 1835 and 1836 brought a confluence of very interesting developments. As work progressed on the Kirtland Temple, Smith elaborated the church’s governing hierarchy and turned to serious study with his School of Prophets, including instruction in Hebrew from a noted Jewish scholar, Joseph Seixas. He also began writing the “Book of Abraham” from a “translation” of parchments purchased with an Egyptian mummy from a traveling showman, Michael Chandler. And in the summer of 1835, he had his first extramarital affair, with a servant girl named Fanny Alger, who was subsequently seen as the first of Smith’s forty-odd plural wives. Smith’s initial revelation on plural marriage may have come in 1831, as he was “translating” chapters of the Old Testament, but reputedly he and Martin Harris had claimed in the summer of 1830 that “adultery was no crime”. Among the non-Mormons in Ohio there were suspicions that the community of property dictated in the “Law of Consecration” included wives, and in 1832 Smith was tarred and feathered for appearing to have been too forward with a girl, Nancy Marinda Johnson, from one of the Mormon families. Ultimately, Smith did not begin to reveal his polygamous order to his following leaders until 1841, although he resumed his experiments in “spiritual wifery” in 1838, after the collapse of the Kirtland community. In the summer of 1835 his liaison with Fanny Alger created a stir of scandal, alienating most importantly his old follower Oliver Cowdery (Van Wagoner, 1985: 3-14; England, 1985: 75-6; Newell and Avery, 1984: 64-6; Bachman, 1978).

The Fanny Alger affair led in two directions. First, in December 1835, Smith began to violate Ohio law flagrantly in marrying Mormons at Kirtland, including the bigamous Knight/Bailey pair. Here he was asserting the power of his Melchizedek priesthood, and connecting it with Adamic origins: “marriage was an institution of heaven [not the state], instituted in the garden of Eden; that it was necessary it should be solemnized by the authority of the everlasting Priesthood”. Unlike Protestant ministers, Mormon priests would have magical powers and primary authority over marriage (Van Wagoner, 1985: 8; Brodie, 1971: 183-4; Foster, 1981: 138). Second, the inclusive charismatic ritualism of the dedication of the Kirtland Temple the following spring was shaped by the explosive tensions among the Kirtland Mormons set off by the Alger affair. In choosing Oliver Cowdery to retire behind the veil to receive the visions of God and the prophets, Smith was passing over Sidney Rigdon, with whom he had shared revelations in 1832. A Book of Mormon witness and a central follower since 1830, Cowdery had been particularly hostile to Smith’s affair with Fanny Alger. By choosing him to share the highpoint of the sacred theater of the temple dedication, Smith was doling out prophetic charisma
in an effort to reunite his unstable church polity. Ultimately the dramatic ceremonies and visions dedicating the Kirtland Temple were not sufficient to hold the church together in the face of a mounting series of internal disputes. In addition to the Alger affair, the failure of the march of Zion's Camp in 1834 and restiveness with the growth of church autocracy also contributed to the collapse of the Kirtland Mormon community by the end of 1837. So too did an explosion of credit-buying, monetary speculation, and the rise and collapse of the illegal Kirtland Bank.

By 1836 the financial structure of the Mormon communities in Ohio and Illinois was stretched to breaking-point, with old debts coming due and new debts being incurred as the church purchased supplies on credit in the East. Under these pressures, Smith reverted to the occult. In August 1836 Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery and a small group of elders appeared in Salem, Massachusetts, and spent several weeks attempting to find treasure reported to have been hidden in an old house on Union Street (Proper, 1964; DC, 111; Brodie, 1971: 192–4; Quinn, 1987: 206–11). This effort failing, in November Smith and Rigdon conceived of the Kirtland Bank, which went into operation the following January, with the authority of a specific revelation but not a state charter. The Mormon leadership had great plans for this institution. Backed only by land mortgages in Kirtland it was to have a capitalization of $4 million. The bank would, in Smith's words - 'like Aaron's rod ... swallow up all other Banks ... and grow and flourish and spread from the rivers to the ends of the earth, and survive when all others should be laid in ruins'. With "the greatest of all institutions on earth", the bank, behind them, and reputedly boxes of lead shot covered with a layer of coin in the treasury to convince the skeptical, the Kirtland Mormons were soon awash with money, and the "spirit of speculation" swept the community. In a dream of transmutation through banking which, among New Englanders, ran back to the Land Bank plans of 1720–40, and before that to banking proposals of the 1660s, Mormons assumed that their paper wealth would multiply and remultiply under their prophet's blessing.

But within two months Smith and Rigdon were in court for operating an illegal bank, and the bubble burst. Over the next nine months Smith would be the target of at least thirteen lawsuits for outstanding debts, and he spent months in Missouri to avoid prosecution. In his absence the Kirtland community fragmented into warring factions. By July David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris, all Book of Mormon witnesses who maintained a fervent belief in seerstones, declared themselves the followers of a young girl who could read the future in a black stone, and who would whirl in a Shaker-like trance until she fell to the floor, spouting revelation. Her accusation that Smith was a fallen prophet fused with Cowdery's doubts of the previous summer, as well as those of the numbers of people who felt that the Kirtland Bank had been a serious error. This group became the nucleus of the "Old Standard" dissenters who continued to challenge the authority of Smith's hierarchy for the next few years until their excommunication. With other clusters of dissenters who peed away from the Mormon establishment over the next decade, they provided the core of the "Reorganized Church of Latter Day Saints", opposed to polygamy, established in 1860 (Brodie, 1971: 194-206; D. Hill, 1988: 205–17; L. Mack Smith, nd: 241–3).

These months of crisis thus brought a contest for control of the charismatic power over which Smith had been attempting to gain a monopoly since the confrontation over seerstones and spiritual powers in September 1830. In the wake of the Fanny Alger affair the church had passed an explicit statement against polygamy (in Smith's absence) and, in November 1837, Elder Solomon Freeman was tried for having bigamously married a second wife - exactly what Smith had facilitated for Newell Knight and Lydia Bailey the year before. In the same month James Brewster and his family were disfellowshipped for using a seerstone to search for treasure and to have revelations (Cook and Backman, 1983; Brodie, 1971: 187; Quinn, 1987: 201–2, 209–10). But just as they were accused of violating the church monopoly on spiritual power, the dissenters were quick to counter that Smith and his loyal leadership were in violation of moral codes and statute laws, that they were antinomian powers unto themselves. According to dissenter William McLellin, Joseph Smith and his cohorts in the Kirtland Bank "seemed to think that everything must bow at their nod - thus violating the laws of the land". John Whitmer declared that...
Reed Peck, another dissenter, introduced another theme that would appear again and again over the next decade of Mormon history.

Very many persons in the society have asserted that while the money fever raged at Kirtland, the leaders of the church and others were, more or less, engaged in purchasing and circulating Bogus money or counterfeit coin; and a good evidence that the report is not without foundation is that each of these contending parties accuses the other of this crime. (D. Hill, 1988: 206; Whitmer, nd: 21–2; Peck, nd: 5)

Peck was referring to a final drama in Kirtland, when — three days before Smith departed for Missouri for good — there had been a near violent confrontation in the temple between the dissenters and the loyalists. Sidney Rigdon accused the dissenters of “lying, stealing, adultery, counterfeiting, and swindling”, and they apparently responded in kind. The following April Oliver Cowdery was excommunicated for “falsely insinuating” that Smith was “guilty of adultery &c;” and for having been “connected in the Bogus’ business”. For the next year, as civil war disrupted Mormons and Gentiles in Missouri, the Mormon leadership in Missouri would continue to accuse dissenters — and be themselves accused — of counterfeiting money. Counterfeit money was a reality in the American frontier settlements, but it was also a metaphor for the breakdown of legitimacy. True or false, these accusations were one manifestation of Joseph Smith’s failure in his efforts to fuse charisma and authoritative institutions in the 1830s. He, followed by Brigham Young, would be more successful in the 1840s (see Cannon and Cook, 1983: 163).¹²

III

If spiritual wifery and miraculous powers are manifestations of an antinomian challenge to religious and statute law, so too is counterfeiting. Pervasive in the frontier West, where perhaps one-third of the money in circulation was “bogus”, counterfeiting was only marginally different from the operations of the more flimsy wildcard banks. Both rested on the hope that public confidence in the printed note would make it genuine; the simple multiplication of notes would fuel an ever-expanding prosperity. Perhaps it was merely coincidental that counterfeiting accusations erupted as the Kirtland community collapsed, but the production of currency and thus

wealth would continue to be an important theme in the Mormon experience for at least the next few decades. And this was not the first time that an American perfectionist movement had challenged the prevailing law of marriage and had brushed up against the world of the counterfeit.

The relationship between religious perfectionism and marital and sexual “autonomy” has a history running deep into the European Middle Ages. Where Cathars and Albigensians rejected sexuality as the emblem of the Fall, prefiguring Pietist and Shaker celibacy, the adepts of the Free Spirit, sometimes known as Adamites, ranging across Europe in the late Middle Ages, made sexual freedom the touchstone of their assurance of divine perfection, claiming the primordial innocence of Adam and Eve. Besieged in a separatist city-state, the militant Munster Anabaptists declared an antinomian restoration and a polygamous marital regime before they were overwhelmed and massacred in 1535; in 1567 a remnant of these militants defiantly re-established a polygamous commune in Westphalia. During the English Revolution, Ranter and others defied laws and customs of marriage and sexuality to establish sexual relationships between spiritual equals. John Milton and Henry Neville composed polygamous “utopias”; Ranter Lawrence Clarkson said of adultery, “till acted that so-called sin, thou art not delivered from the power of sin” (Cohn, 1961: 179–81, 262–71, 280; Williams, 1962: 208, 515–17; C. Hill, 1972: 306–23; 1977: 117–45).¹³

In the seventeenth-century colonies, similar ideas cropped up among the Gortonists in the Rhode Island settlements in the 1640s. They re-emerged a century later among the Separates of the Great Awakening in Rhode Island, in the Blackstone Valley in Massachusetts, and a scattering of towns in northeast Connecticut. Counting themselves to be perfect in holiness, immortal and even divine, some claimed the right of spiritual wifery. Most notable among these were the Wards and Finneys of Cumberland, Rhode Island, whose notoriety reached down to the 1770s to influence Jemima Wilkinson’s celibate Universal Friends, and the followers of Shadrack Ireland in the Blackstone towns of Grafton, Upton and Hopkinton, Massachusetts, among them Sarah Sartell, the wife of the Rev. Solomon Prentice of Grafton, who slept with Ireland as his spiritual wife. And such ideas continued to thrive among the Separate and Baptist churches of southeastern New England for decades: in 1765 Baptist leader Isaac Backus complained that some among the Attleboro Baptists had “been ensnared this year with antinomian notions so as not to

Whether or not European perfectionists dabbled or not in coinage is an open question; their American counterparts certainly did. John Finney Jr of Cumberland, Rhode Island, had baptized his father and others on a personal conviction of perfection; in 1751 he declared for "the new covenant or a spiritual union" of marriage, declaring "that Christians ought to marry in the church without any regard to Babylon, as he called rulers in the State". His antinomial assurance took Finney in two familiar directions: within two years he had both taken a spiritual wife and been arrested for counterfeiting, a charge he escaped by fleeing from Rhode Island to New York, where he served in the French and Indian War, before dying in Grafton, Massachusetts, in 1759. Counterfeiting seems to have passed down through the family, for his nephew Apollos Finney was convicted of counterfeiting in Vermont in 1797 (McLoughlin, 1974: 77–8; Scott, 1965: 299; Finney, 1957: 9, 17, 18, 1938, 85). Similarly, Solomon Prentice Jr, son of Immortalist Sarah Prentice, was arrested for counterfeiting in 1773; after the Revolution he moved from Alstead, New Hampshire, to the Carolinas, where he was reputed to have "searched for Capt. Kidd's treasure". Suggestively, another member of this Immortalist family, Nathaniel Sartell of Groton, was also drawn into the occult hunt for treasure in the 1780s, with a similar lack of success (Shipton, 1951: 257; Binney, 1852: 22–4, 33; Butler, 1848: 256n).

Another manifestation of New England's separatist antinoianism had a known connection to early Mormonism. Around 1800 a New Israelite cult, compounding treasure-hunting, alchemy, counterfeiting and perfectionist dreams of a "New Jerusalem", rose and fell in the towns of Middletown, Wells and Poultney, Vermont. Oliver Cowdery's father, and possibly Joseph Smith's father also, were involved in this movement, and historians are generally agreed that it had a formative influence on the emergence of Mormonism. It also had direct connections in eighteenth-century antinomanian culture. The Wood family, who were the central players in this drama, came from the Separate community in Norwich, Connecticut, one of the places touched by perfectionism (Frisbie, 1867: 43–64; Quinn, 1987: 30–2, 84–90; Garrett, 1987: 135; Scott, 1965: 299). These scattered manifestations of occult treasure-hunting and counterfeiting, spiritual wifery, immortalism and bibliclist restoration running through antinomanian perfectionism in eighteenth-century New England would reappear in the Mormon experience. Chaotic in the 1830s, these elements would find a more enduring institutional form in the 1840s.

IV

Since 1830 Joseph Smith's prophetic authority for "a restoration of all things" had rested upon his followers' confidence in the miracle of the witnessing of the plates from which the Book of Mormon had been translated. But by 1839 there were only two of the eleven witnesses still remaining within the fold, Joseph's father, Joseph Sr, and his brother Hyrum. Two of the Whitmers died in 1835 and 1836, and the others, with Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery and Hiram Page, either left the church or were excommunicated in 1838. Though several would return in the years following, they would stand well outside the inner circle. In 1839 Mormonism stood poised at a serious crisis. Without a new departure, the momentum of the Mormon movement might evaporate, particularly in the wake of violent attacks by the Missouri militia and mobs.

But within five years a new Mormonism would emerge from the ashes of the old, a new Mormonism in which the hints of a priestly antinomanism which had destroyed the Kirtland Mormon community would find full articulation. An institutionalized antinomanism would be forged in temple rituals and a radically different moral order of marriage — together promising hermetic perfectionism. Linked with the establishment of a church-controlled militia (the Danites and the Nauvoo Legion) and the production of currency, the ritual performances articulating the new Mormon cosmology and marital order comprised the drama which created a Mormon identity — a new national identity, in the eyes of the Mormon hierarchy in 1845.

Smith is reported to have muttered that "I have had enough trouble with this thing", as he buried the last surviving manuscript of the Book of Mormon in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House, a church hotel (Brodie, 1971: 275–6). The Book of Mormon would still be a central article of faith for the Mormons after Nauvoo; but it would be overlaid with a completely new ritual order, one in which the strands of hermetic ideas running through the Mormon experience of the treasure-hunting of the 1820s would be given structure and form by an encounter with the
ritualism lying at the core of Freemasonry.

The roots of this new departure, framed as a central cadre of Mormon leadership, lay in jail in Liberty, Missouri, in the winter of 1838–9, imprisoned at the end of a second Mormon war. These men would be central figures during the five-year interlude when the church was based in the town of Nauvoo, Illinois, and in the movement to the Great Basin of Utah, where Brigham Young would come close to realizing Smith’s emerging dream of a politically autonomous Kingdom of God. It was in the Liberty jail that Parley Pratt wrote The Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter, a text which would be an important underpinning of the progressive perfectionism of the New Mormonism forged at Nauvoo (England, 1985: 56–7).

In 1839 the Mormons began to settle at Nauvoo, a malarial flat on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River, the title to which they acquired from sometime horse-thief, counterfeiter and Thompsonian doctor, Isaac Galland. A year and a half later, after Mormon membership topped 30,000, Smith had a revelation ordering work to commence on a new temple which would provide the ritual focus for the church. Unlike the Kirtland Temple, the Nauvoo Temple would make accommodation for the ritual of the baptism of living proxies for the dead. In Smith’s conception, the living and the dead comprised an organic whole which must be ritually reunited in baptism before the ancient mysteries could be fully restored (Andrew, 1978: 79–80; Brodie, 1971: 249, 260; D. Hill, 1988: 295, 314–15).

Smith’s ideas on the baptism of the dead were developed in two revelations announced in January 1841 and September 1842. In Smith’s vision, the living and the dead must be linked in a sacred and organic covenant:

For we without them [the dead] cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect . . . it is necessary in the ushering in of the dispensation of the fullness of times . . . that a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glory should take place, and be revealed from the days of Adam even to the present time. (DC 124: 128: 18).

If this covenant of kinship spoke of a tradition of New England religious tribalism, it also reflected the influence of Freemasonry. The previous March, Smith had formed a Masonic Lodge among the Nauvoo Mormons. In part the lodge would contribute to political ties with important figures throughout the state, but Smith was clearly attracted to Masonic ritualism and hierarchy. His exposure to Masonry extended back to the 1820s, when his brother Hyrum was a Mason in Palmyra, and to his family’s experience in Vermont. Within six months the Nauvoo Lodge had 286 members, more than all of the other lodges in Illinois combined, and by May Smith had incorporated Masonic ritual and symbolism into the Mormon system, when he began to introduce a series of temple endowments and anointings. These temple endowments were bound up in the gradual announcement between 1842 and 1844 of the full cosmology of the connection between spirit and matter, the pre-existence of intelligences, the hierarchy of heavens, and celestial (plural) marriage as the key to eternal progression into divinity (Brodie, 1971: 279–83; Godfrey, 1971: 79–90; Lyon, 1975: 435–46).

It was with this cosmology, which departed fundamentally from mainstream Christianity, that Smith reproduced the essence of the Renaissance hermetic tradition and recapitulated various strands of the early American occult experience. In describing Adam’s spirit as an immortal “intelligence . . . coequal with God”, Smith was working with concepts drawn from the core of the hermetic tradition, concepts which he had suggested in his (1830) Book of Moses, and which Brigham Young would perpetuate in his controversial Adam-God doctrine. And, potentially, Adam’s “coequality” with God was no greater than that of the Mormon faithful. In his cosmology, all human “intelligences” were immortal and potentially divine (Kirkland, 1989: 171–83; White, 1987: 67–73).

Is it logical to say that the intelligence of spirits is immortal, and yet that it had a beginning? The intelligence of spirits had no beginning, neither will it have an end. There never was a time when there were not spirits; for they are co-equal with our Father in heaven. (Cannon, 1978: 179–92)

The centrality of Adam and his Godlike powers were critical to the new temple endowments, and underscore both Mormonism’s diversion from orthodox Christianity and its affinities with Masonic lore. At the core of the new temple ritual was a miracle play depicting the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, followed by the ritual granting of “keys”, passwords and secret names which would admit the Mormon into heaven. In Masonic theology, Adam had had Godlike powers in the Garden, but he also carried the “keys to the mysteries” out into the world, “keys” which descended through long lineages of patriarchs to modern Masonry. Even as he
was attracted to Freemasonry, Smith saw Mormonism as the true restoration of the "ancient mysteries", "Freemasonry, as at present", he told Benjamin F. Johnson, "is the apostate endowment, as sectarian religion is the apostate religion". In 1858 Mormon Heber C. Kimball put it even more plainly: "We have the true Masonry. The Masonry of today is taken from the apostacy which took place in the days of Solomon and David. They have now and then a thing that is correct, but we have the real thing" (Godfrey, 1971: 86; Kimball, 1986: 85; Durham, nd).

The Mormon/Masonic conception of Adam as primarily a bearer of knowledge of the "mysteries" seems to have played an important role in the Mormon reinterpretation of the Fall of Adam and Eve and of original sin. In short, Mormons rejected the idea of original sin; the Fall had merely been a transgression allowing Adam and Eve to become mortal and to propagate a lineage—a species—which gave eternal "waiting spirits" the same opportunity (White, 1987: 68–80; McMurrin, 1965: 57–68). The result was a new sin-free dispensation: Mormons were inherently perfect and beyond the bounds of human law. As I have suggested throughout this article, they were offered an antinomian perfectionism—if only they obeyed the authority of the prophet leader.

The most dramatically antinomian departure was of course "Celestial Marriage", which was finally announced as revelation in the summer of 1843. In May, in the revelation in which he specified that "all spirit is matter", Smith announced that the higher degree of "celestial glory" and its promise of "increase" would be restricted to those entering a new "order of the priesthood". Two months later Smith established the guidelines for a religious doctrine of plural marriage in the last recorded revelation of his life, written down as justification of secret practice which had been spreading among the leadership since 1841, and intended to silence the objections of his wife of sixteen years, Emma Hale Smith. Citing the multiple wives of the Old Testament patriarchs, Smith announced a "new and everlasting covenant": marriages sealed in the temple would be "for time and eternity" and would guarantee exaltation into the Celestial Kingdom. Those faithful to the new temple covenant shall "be gods, because they have all power and the angels are subject to them".

Celestial marriage would ensure godhood; plural marriage and the "continuation of the seeds forever" would enhance the level of godhood attained. Abraham was the model of the polygynous patriarch: his concubines who bore him children "accounted unto him for righteousness"; his "seed... both in and out of this world... as innumerable as the stars" ensured his endless rise in exaltation. With a stern admonition that "mine handmaiden, Emma Smith, receive those that have been given unto my servant Joseph", Smith's divine oracle granted him ten virgins "to multiply and replenish the earth". The groundwork had been established for "an endless procreative order" resting on a controlled yet enormously productive sexuality, simultaneously mystical and physical. Antinomian impulses were finally routinized into theology, into a sacred law which defined a dramatic sociological boundary between Mormons and Gentiles. And just as baptism for the dead elaborated a sacred kinship through time, plural marriage elaborated the kinship ties among the Mormon elite, fusing them in their common purpose (DC 131: 1, 2, 7; DC 132: 19–20, 30–9, 52, 61–3; Foster, 1981: 144–5; M.S. Hill, 1989; Kern, 1981: 144–57; Quinn, 1976).

At the same time that the Mormon cosmology moved sharply away from its Protestant Christian milieu, the Mormon polity moved closer to true state-formation, independent of the United States. The secrecy, hierarchy and civil power which developed in Nauvoo had its roots in the Mormon experience in Missouri in 1838, after the collapse of Kirtland. Mormons in Missouri had formed their own county, and in 1838 a secret military society known as the Danites was formed to protect against anti-Mormon attacks and to punish apostate dissenters. The dissenters included a number of fervent Antimasons, and their departure seems to have facilitated the establishment of secret orders, beginning with the Danites. The conception of sinlessness under a new dispensation emboldened Sampson Avard, the Danite leader, to justify looting of non-Mormon households:

... for it is written, "he riches of the Gentiles shall be consecrated to my people, the house of Israel"; thus you shall waste away the Gentiles by robbing and plundering them of their property, and in this way we will build up the kingdom of God and roll forth the little stone that Daniel saw cut from the mountain without hands, until it shall fill the whole earth.

The most recent analyses of the Missouri conflicts find that Smith was fully in support of the Danites, and that the Mormon soldiers "saw nothing amiss in Avard's teachings" (LeSueur, 1987: 40–5, 114–15; D. Hill, 1988, 76–7, 225 n. 65). In Illinois, Smith obtained a
charter for the city of Nauvoo which gave the Mormons wide powers of habeas corpus over state and local law, and which stipulated the establishment of a Nauvoo Legion, an independent Mormon militia. Church leaders were almost invariably leading city officials or high-ranking Legion officers; under its state charter, Nauvoo functioned as a virtually autonomous theocratic city-state, and as conflict with non-Mormons escalated in 1844, Smith petitioned the US government for a federal charter. This Mormon institution building would be enlarged into a plan to establish a Kingdom of God first in the Great Basin of Utah and then throughout the world. In March 1844, one month before the King Follett sermon, a Council of Fifty was formed to govern the civil affairs of the church, the Kingdom of God. The Council acted in great part as a committee to support Smith's presidential candidacy, announced in January; as president Smith planned to impose Mormon theocracy on the nation as a whole. As Gentile persecution increased, and particularly after Smith's assassination, plans were made to move the church beyond the territorial limits of the United States, perhaps to establish an independent inland empire, certainly to establish the Kingdom of God (Hansen, 1967; Flanders, 1965; M.S. Hill, 1989).

Territorial separation and military organization were both means to this Mormon state-formation: the creation of currency may have been another. The story of counterfeiting at Nauvoo, and its echoes along the trail west in Utah and in early California, is complex and controversial. In Nauvoo, it is indisputable that non-Mormon outlaws living in the Mormon city-state as well as a number of Mormons themselves were involved in the extensive manufacture of false coin and bills—“bogus-making”—which was endemic throughout the Mississippi Valley. It is very much a question whether or not the Mormon leadership was involved in this enterprise in Nauvoo. One account had Joseph Smith contracting for a large quantity of counterfeit bills, with the press located in the room where temple endowments had once been administered. A federal indictment against counterfeiting in Nauvoo in the fall of 1845 listed Brigham Young and five other leading Mormons as co-conspirators; this indictment compelled Young to move to the territories several months ahead of schedule.

Once again counterfeiting, the multiplication of money, emerged as a subtext to the Mormon story. The precise role of the Mormon elite is obviously critical, and it must be said that the evidence for their direct involvement is dubious at best. What seems to be most likely is some sort of murky middle ground, with the inner circle not directly involved, but allowing counterfeiting to be directed at the “world”, while they elaborated the Mormon cosmology for the faithful. The state of civil war in Hancock County in 1844–6 makes one inclined to believe the contemporary opinion that Mormon counterfeiting was a dimension of their broader war on the Gentiles. The sequel to the Nauvoo story in Utah and California suggests that the inner circle were indeed aware of the counterfeiting at Nauvoo, and that this episode comprised a part of a longer process of state-formation, as the Mormon leadership sought to stabilize their polity and to assert governmental authority, not unlike the way in which Smith challenged the martial and currency laws of Ohio in 1835–6. Along the trail to Utah, Young and other Mormon leaders denounced the “bogus-makers” in their midst, in language which would be repeated in their condemnation of Mormon involvement in the California goldfields in the late 1840s and early 1850s. But, just as J. Kenneth Davies (1984) has demonstrated with regard to Mormon mining policy, the Mormon elites in early Utah seem to have had a different policy regarding their own production of currency. Mormon miners comprised a majority in the early California gold strikes, and the Mormon church in Utah in fact encouraged them to continue their mining and to deposit their gold in the Mint or National Bank, formed in 1848 at Salt Lake. This bank issued paper money, for a while using old Kirtland Bank notes, minimally backed by gold secretly brought in from the central California goldfields, and produced underground coins at the mint (Davies, 1984). When Young and others preached against “bogus-makers” and counterfeiting on the trail west to Utah, their concern may have been that the Mormons were now isolated from the Gentiles — or it may have been part of an effort by the Mormon leadership to gain a state-like monopoly over this secular antinomianism.

V

The emergence of Mormonism should be viewed in the perspective of a broader nineteenth-century era of nationalism and nation-building. Its uniqueness lay in its construction of nationality not based on language and territory, but on an absolutist religious tradition, a tradition which inspired men to speak “of whole nations being born in one day”. The strength of Mormonism’s appeal lay in
its certainty of revealed truth, and its dramatic theocratic solution to the disruptions and turmoil of a rapidly changing world. But the ways in which marriage, money and hermetic magic were mobilized worked to frame the cultural and institutional fabric of a Mormon national world-view. Legitimacy lies in the eye of the beholder, and by the 1840s Mormons and other Americans looked at each other through very different lenses. Each saw the other as fraudulent, as counterfeiters and “bogus-makers”. Counterfeit money may only have been a tangible metaphor summarizing wider conflicts over legitimacy. And what was fraudulent in the eyes of Americans—Mormon theocracy revelation, ritual and plural marriage—was conversely the core of the Mormon corporate identity and the test for rejecting a corrupt America. By 1844 committed Mormons were immersed in a world-view so fundamentally alien to contemporary America that geographic separation was the only option available. In retreating into the desert wilds of the Utah Great Basin, the Mormons withdrew from the American nation to form something approaching a nation within a nation, which would endure until the end of the nineteenth century, if not well into the twentieth century.11


Notes

1. Spoken in 1844 by Sidney Rigdon at a Mormon conference at Nauvoo, Illinois. He was referring to an early church meeting in Waterloo, New York in 1830. The Prophet 4, 8 June 1844, p. 2; quoted in M.S. Hill (1989).
4. This treasure-hunting culture has been described in Bushman (1984: 70-83); Quinn (1987), Taylor (1986) and in a series of essays by R.W. Walker and M.S. Hill in Brigham Young University Studies, Vol. 24, 1984.
5. The Doctrines and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (1850) 107: 41-57 (in the following referred to as DCS).
6. I have explored this question with regard to the American Revolution (Brooke, 1989).
7. This approach to Mormon antinomianism was suggested by J.F.C. Harrison (1979: 188). For a somewhat different view, see O'Dea (1957: 30).
9. On hermeticism, see Yates (1979); French (1972) and Jung (1967).
11. I am struck by the interest of hermeticists S. Hartlib and J. Winthrop II in land bank plans (see Davis, 1900-1, vol. 2: 63-7; for the broader issue, see Appleby, 1978).
13. For recent discussions of the Runners, see J.C. Davis (1986) and Friedman (1987).
14. Andrew (1978: 89) argues that the Utah temples, planned after the encounter with Masonry, were built facing east towards the rising sun, while the Nauvoo and Kirtland temples had no such orientation.
15. For the temple rituals, see Brodie (1971: 280-2) and Tanner and Tanner (1982: 462-94).

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