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Social Science Information 1991; 30: 107
DOI: 10.1177/053901891030001006

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John L. Brooke

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

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-seared 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

Social Science Information (SAGE, London, Newbury Park and New Delhi), 30, 1 (1991), pp. 107-132.

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 antinomian 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 G. 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 marrying 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 (Bushman, 1984: 186; Brodie, 1971: 93, 96, 109–10, 113–14).⁵ 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 indeterminacies 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 antinomian, perfectionist wing of the Protestant tradition. As had radical sectarians for centuries before him, Smith declared himself God's anointed 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 manifested 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 antinomian and law-giver, antistructural destroyer and structural builder, to use