1 Introduction

The Mormon tradition is among the best known of new religious movements that have appeared in the United States. Emerging in the early nineteenth century, in a world of combat among Protestant denominations and competition among revivalists, it has consistently taken on a denominational cast. Its major branches envision themselves as "churches," mirroring the emphasis on doctrine, ecclesiology, and priestly leadership characteristic of many Protestant denominations.

Several dozen churches belong to the Mormon tradition, which we might define as those that trace their origins to the career of Joseph Smith Jr. (Some prefer "Restorationist" or "Latter Day Saint" tradition.) Of these, the largest and best known is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS church) headquartered since 1847 in Salt Lake City, Utah. As of 2023, it claimed approximately seventeen million members around the world – slightly under half of those inside the United States. But there are a number of other Mormon churches as well, including the quarter-million-strong Community of Christ, which was organized in 1860 and from 1872 to 2001 was known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Also well known is the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which traces its history to a schism from the LDS church in the early twentieth century and has approximately 6,000 members. A number of other Mormon churches exist as well; for instance, the Church of Jesus Christ (Bickertonite) and the Church of Christ (Temple Lot), though the LDS church and Community of Christ are by far the largest. The spectrum of these movements shows the diverse ways Christianity itself might be envisioned, and the complicated politics surrounding non-Protestant movements in the United States.

Therefore, I use "Mormon" to refer to the religious tradition that includes all of these movements, including the movement during Joseph Smith's lifetime. After Smith's death I refer to the "Latter-day Saint" or "LDS" church, as that which Brigham Young headed and moved to Salt Lake City; the "Reorganized," "RLDS" or eventually "Community of Christ" church, that which was organized under the leadership of Joseph Smith III in 1860; and finally the "fundamentalist movement," which emerged in the 1920s, and its most-studied denomination, the "FLDS" or "Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." I explore these three among the various Mormon denominations because they represent a spectrum of assimilation to the broadly Protestant culture of the United States, ranging from great comfort to much resistance. These three traditions, then, illustrate the range of possibilities for Mormonism in the nation.

This Element first discusses the history of the Mormon movement, emphasizing its origins as a restorationist Christian movement, one which maintained that genuine Christianity had vanished and required renewal. However, Mormonism's distinctive restorationism and its collisions with American government and culture led to a series of schisms. I will then survey the beliefs and practices of the three branches of the movement noted earlier, emphasizing how their particular interpretations of Mormonism emerge from the career of Joseph Smith Jr., but also how they responded to the cultural and political pressures of the United States in different ways.

A survey of the historiography of Mormonism follows. Scholarship on the Mormon denominations emerged from the denominations themselves, and often initially reflected those denominations' priorities and self-conceptions. However, as it has evolved over time, that scholarship has come to reflect broader trends in the academy, and has shifted toward the exploration of how Mormonism might illustrate how the category of religion functions within the United States. The diversity of movements within the Mormon tradition can be read as a variety of responses to the modes by which the American state and the bulk of its population conceived of "genuine" religion. The differing expressions of the various Mormon churches, then, reveal how a new religious movement might seek to establish an identity in resistance to or in accommodation with these expectations.

2 Joseph Smith and the First Mormons

The religious career of Joseph Smith Jr. (1805–1944) and the Mormon churches that grew from it are rooted in Christian restorationism. A number of scholars have pointed out the significance of the Smith family background for the character of Mormon restorationism.[1] The Smith family, Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith and their eleven children, were Puritan-descended on both sides. Joseph Sr. was born in Topsfield, Massachusetts; Lucy Mack in New Hampshire. They married in 1796, and Joseph Smith Jr., their fourth child, was born in Sharon, Vermont, in 1805. Joseph Smith Sr. moved his family back and forth across New England seeking a sustainable profession. By 1816, the family had settled on a farm just outside Palmyra, New York.

The Smiths lived in a world of religious disestablishment. The collapse of state-sponsored religious organizations that followed the American Revolution ended with a Massachusetts state law in 1833. This process paralleled another, a long period of growth of new Christian movements scholars have called the

[1] On Smith's life the best biography is Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

Second Great Awakening. In places like Palmyra, the ragged frontier of the white population of the United States, the strong Christian ecclesiastical organizations of Puritan New England, or Anglican Britain did not exist. Instead, there emerged the Methodists and Baptists, revival-driven denominations that leaned on lay charismatic preaching and were often suspicious of trained ministers who graduated from seminaries. Even the older denominations like the Presbyterians felt the pressure of these movements and adopted some revivalist qualities – emotional meetings, impromptu preaching, and what has been called the plain style of reading the Bible. This style dismissed the notion that one needed an education or knowledge of ancient languages to properly understand what the Bible was saying. Instead, like all knowledge, it was comprehensible to anybody with common faculties.[2]

The Smiths, like many of these Christians, were unchurched, but were descended from Puritans on both sides, were Bible readers, and considered themselves Christians. Joseph Smith's mother Lucy Mack Smith came from a visionary family; many of her siblings had powerful spiritual experiences that confirmed to them that Jesus Christ had saved them. In Palmyra she and several of the children sought a church home, eventually joining the Presbyterian church. Joseph Smith Sr. was less interested, though not because he did not believe. He had visionary dreams and spoke of valuing the original religion of Jesus, which he did not hold was on the earth at that time.[3]

Joseph Smith Jr thus grew up in a family with restorationist leanings. Many antebellum American Protestant Christians, with limited experience with and interest in the churches of the day, believed it necessary to restore original biblical Christianity, which they did not believe currently existed. Often these restorationists were Christians descended from the English Puritans, who believed that the best way to restore original Christianity was to strip away all the barnacles of ritual and practice and theology that had latched onto the hull of the Christian ship. This was true, for instance, for Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) and Barton Stone (1772–1844), founders of the Disciples of Christ and contemporaries of Joseph Smith whose ideas were widely influential. Many antebellum Baptist and nondenominational Christian churches sought to achieve something similar, founding simple, plain churches that required little

[2] William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 107–12; Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2012), 155–56; George Marsden, "Everyone One's Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth Century America," *History of Education Quarterly* 17 (Spring 1977), 17–30.

[3] Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2001), 296–98.

more than a pulpit and a Bible. They spurned what they deemed excessive ritual, liturgy, and decoration.[4]

Much of this work reflected impulses widely shared among American Protestants influenced by the British Puritans, who spurned features found in other Christian traditions, like Roman Catholicism or the Church of England, such as elaborate art and architecture, extensive and complex music, special clothing, and ritual for services. Instead, they emphasized plainness and simplicity. Their worship focused almost entirely on Bible reading and sermonizing. Some such groups would only sing the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible itself, spurning any modern hymnody.

At the same time, many other groups believed that the restoration of biblical Christianity required expansion. New text, new revelation, new ritual; the reenactment of first-century spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues or miraculous healing; the reemergence of biblical designations like priest or prophet. Charismatic groups began speaking in tongues. Mother Ann Lee (1736–1784), leader of the Shaker movement, declared herself a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, and her movement embraced ecstatic ritual, dancing, bodily contortion, singing in unknown languages, and rolling about. The New York visionary Robert Matthews (1778–1841) believed he was the biblical apostle Matthias reborn. Multiple groups, like the incipient Seventh-day Adventists and the Shakers, produced new revelatory texts. Jemima Wilkinson (1752–1819), calling herself the Public Universal Friend, dictated divine revelations "as was done in the days of the prophets of old," as one follower put it. Ellen Gould White (1827–1915), who became a prophetic figure to the Adventist movement, wrote vast volumes of revelations of which one follower declared, "Sister White is not the originator of these books. They contain the instruction that during her lifetime God has been giving her." Restoration, then, could take on a variety of forms.[5]

[4] C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes discuss these sorts of restorationists in *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[5] David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Paul Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); and Robert Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), all emphasize restoration as the creation of new scripture, practices, and new forms of life. Shaker practices are described in Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 16–19. Wilkinson's follower cited in Paul B. Moyer, *The Public Universal Friend: Jemima Wilkinson and Religious Enthusiasm in Revolutionary America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 72. Arthur White cited in Arthur Patrick, "Author," in Terrie Aamodt, Gary Land, and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *Ellen Harmon White: American Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 92.

Joseph Smith's movement fell into the latter camp. As the religious studies scholar Jan Shipps observed, Smith sought to blend the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, to stand high priests and prophets next to apostles and disciples and build the temples and tabernacles of Moses and Solomon next to the house churches of Paul.[6] Later in his life, Joseph Smith described experiencing a series of visions in his youth. The first, sometime in his teenage years, describes an encounter with God and Jesus Christ. The sources that describe this vision date to the 1830s and place the date somewhat differently. This sort of vision was not entirely unique in early antebellum America; a number of Christians at the time described such encounters that resembled Smith's own. God and Christ reassured the worried mortal about the salvation of their soul. By the time Smith was an adult, though, he credited this vision with another thing as well: he emerged from it convinced that no Christian group on earth was practicing Christianity correctly, and that a restoration of biblical Christianity was necessary.[7] This restoration would innovate in a number of ways, creating new priesthood hierarchies, new scripture, and new ritual.

The Prophetic Career of Joseph Smith

Throughout the 1820s Smith claimed he experienced a series of encounters with an angel who directed him to a set of plates bound together by metal rings buried in a hill near his home. Smith said that these plates contained the records of an ancient civilization. Under the charismatic influence of the Holy Spirit and using the tools of folk magic – seerstones and divination – familiar to common folk throughout the Anglo-American world, Smith translated the writings on these plates and in 1829 published the results as the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon is a quarter-million-word-long narrative written in English reminiscent of the King James Bible Smith was familiar with. It purports to be the record of an ancient civilization in the Americas founded by Israelite refugees from the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in the 590s BCE. It is written in the voices of multiple leaders of this civilization over the course of a thousand years. Having been led to a new land by God, these people divide into rival nations called the Nephites and the Lamanites, respectively. In their religion they mirror the complex restorationism of the later Mormon movement. The book's narrators revere the prophet Isaiah, the Law of Moses, and the House of Israel. And yet, they are resolutely Christian as well, describing Jesus by name before his birth and insisting that the Hebrew prophets

[6] Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 51–3.

[7] Stephen C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

testified of Jesus's miracles and divine nature. At the climax of the book, the resurrected Jesus Christ appears to these people and establishes his church among them.[8] In theology, the Book of Mormon's Christian teachings resemble Protestantism, emphasizing the incapacity of human beings to save themselves, the merciful atonement of Jesus Christ, and teaching the importance of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In its attempt to reconcile the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the book might be read as a model for Smith himself. After publishing the Book of Mormon he claimed the mantle of prophet, citing as his models Isaiah and Moses. In 1830 he organized a church, which he led for fourteen years until his assassination in 1844. In 1830 he called it the Church of Christ. Eight years later he changed its name to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He marked the new faith with offices, practices, and traditions drawn both from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Smith initially populated the church with the same sort of ministerial offices as many Protestant churches at the time – deacons, bishops, teachers and the like, all named in the New Testament. But by the mid-1830s, he began speaking of priesthood, an authority that overlapped all of these offices. He cited the Hebrew Bible figures Aaron, the brother of Moses who became the first Israelite priest, and the shadowy figure Melchizedek from the book of Genesis, who, Smith said, echoing the Epistle to the Hebrews, held a "high priesthood." Smith said that each priesthood, that of Aaron and Melchizedek, was restored to him by resurrected New Testament figures – Peter, James and John and John the Baptist. Ecclesiastical offices like deacon, teacher, and priest were sorted into either the Aaronic or the Melchizedek priesthoods. By the early 1830s Smith ordained every man who joined his church to the priesthood and assigned to them some office.[9]

Later he added the office of patriarch, inspired by the Book of Genesis figures Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and twelve apostles, modeled on the closest disciples of Jesus in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. He built temples in Kirtland, Ohio, and Nauvoo, Illinois, in which he instituted ritual practices

[8] On the emergence of the Book of Mormon and its hybrid theology, see Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), particularly 185–209 on the Book of Mormon's high Christology embedded in the context of the Hebrew Bible; Michael Austin, *Testimony of Two Nations: How the Book of Mormon Reads, and Rereads, the Bible* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2024); and Joseph M. Spencer, *A Word in Season: Isaiah's Reception in the Book of Mormon* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2023).

[9] On the formulation and creation of priesthood, see Jonathan Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Michael Hubbard MacKay, *Prophetic Authority: Democratic Hierarchy and the Mormon Priesthood* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

inspired by the Bible. He embraced some charismatic practices described in the epistles of Paul, like healing, prophecy, and to a certain extent speaking in tongues. And most famously, he reinstituted polygamy.

A number of scholars have observed that Smith's restoration of biblical practices accelerated as his career went on.[10] The church began in the neighborhood of Smith's home in Palmyra, New York, and moved to Kirtland, Ohio, near Cleveland, at the end of 1830. Smith took his followers to Kirtland to join the congregation of Sidney Rigdon (1793–1876), a popular restorationist Baptist preacher and associate of Alexander Campbell. Rigdon and his entire congregation had been converted by missionaries Joseph Smith had sent out bearing the Book of Mormon, and Rigdon's people more than doubled the size of the small church. While he was in Ohio, Smith dictated several revelations that embraced the notion of economic communalism and universal salvation. This version of Mormon restorationism emphasized the New Testament, following Rigdon's group, and presented a Christianity that attempted to replicate that as described in the Acts of the Apostles.

By the mid-1830s, though, Smith's ideas were moving steadily toward incorporating more of the Hebrew Bible. In 1836 he dedicated a temple in Kirtland, announcing it was modeled on the temple of King Solomon. He also began to discuss "Zion," a concept described in the prophetic and historical books of the Hebrew Bible. It means a specific place – most often Jerusalem – but also a concept; a holy site where God will commune with and protect his people. In 1831, Joseph Smith dictated a series of revelations indicating that Zion was to be found near Independence, Missouri. There, Smith said, a New Jerusalem would be built around a series of temples. This Zion site was where Adam and Eve lived after departing the Garden of Eden, and it was also where Jesus Christ would descend when he returned to the earth at the end of times.

Accordingly, Joseph Smith and his followers began to purchase land in and around Independence, Missouri, and Mormon converts began to settle there. But both the Kirtland and the Missouri settlements were torn apart. In both places, the church began to behave as something other than a Protestant denomination, adopting practices beyond the restorationist theology of Alexander Campbell or other reformist groups. Purchasing land, building temples, instituting ritualized practices there, gathering the entire group of believers in a single location—these were things unfamiliar to Protestants. Many of Joseph Smith's converts objected.[11]

[10] See, for instance, Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 216–18.

[11] Overviews of the Kirtland and Missouri periods of Mormon history include Mark Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake