

Mormonism, A Racket Becomes A Religion

In March 1826 a court in Bainbridge, New York, convicted a twenty-one-year-old man of being "a disorderly person and an impostor." That ought to have been all we ever heard of Joseph Smith, who at trial admitted to defrauding citizens by organizing mad gold-digging expeditions and also to claiming to possess dark or "necromantic" powers. However, within four years he was back in the local newspapers (all of which one may still read) as the discoverer of the "Book of Mormon." He had two huge local advantages which most mountebanks and charlatans do not possess. First, he was operating in the same hectically pious district that gave us the Shakers and several other self-proclaimed American prophets. So notorious did this local tendency become that the region became known as the "Burned-Over District," in honor of the way in which it had surrendered to one religious craze after another. Second, he was operating in an area which, unlike large tracts of the newly opening North America, did possess the signs of an ancient history.

A vanished and vanquished Indian civilization had bequeathed a considerable number of burial mounds, which when randomly and amateurishly desecrated were found to contain not merely bones but also quite advanced artifacts of stone, copper, and beaten silver. There were eight of these sites within twelve miles of the underperforming farm which the Smith family called home. There were two equally stupid schools or factions who took a fascinated interest in such matters: the first were the gold-diggers and treasure-diviners who brought their magic sticks and crystals and stuffed toads to bear in the search for lucre, and the second those who hoped to find the resting place of a lost tribe of Israel. Smith's cleverness was to be a member of both groups, and to unite cupidity with half-baked anthropology.

The actual story of the imposture is almost embarrassing to read, and almost embarrassingly easy to uncover. (It has been best told by Dr. Fawn Brodie, whose 1945 book *No Man Knows My History* was a good-faith attempt by a professional historian to put the kindest possible interpretation on the relevant "events.") In brief, Joseph Smith announced that he had been visited (three times, as is customary) by an angel named Moroni. The said angel informed him of a book, "written upon gold plates," which explained the origins of those living on the North American continent as well as the truths of the gospel. There were, further, two magic stones, set in the twin breastplates Urim and Thummim of the Old Testament, that would enable Smith himself to translate the aforesaid book. After many wrestlings, he brought this buried apparatus home with him on September 21, 1827, about eighteen months after his conviction for fraud. He then set about producing a translation.

The resulting "books" turned out to be a record set down by ancient prophets, beginning with Nephi, son of Lephi, who had fled Jerusalem in approximately 600 BC and come to America. Many battles, curses, and afflictions accompanied their subsequent wanderings and those of their numerous progeny. How did the books turn out to be this way? Smith refused to show the golden plates to anybody, claiming that for other eyes to view them would mean death. But he encountered a problem that will be familiar to students of Islam. He was extremely glib and fluent as a debater and story-weaver, as many accounts attest. But he was illiterate, at least in the sense that while he could read a little, he could not write. A scribe was therefore necessary to take his inspired dictation. This scribe was at first his wife Emma and then, when more hands were necessary, a luckless neighbor named Martin Harris. Hearing Smith cite the words of Isaiah 29, verses 11-12, concerning the repeated injunction to "Read," Harris mortgaged his farm to help in the task and moved in with the Smiths. He sat on one side of a blanket hung across the kitchen, and Smith sat on the other with his translation stones, intoning through the blanket. As if to make this an even happier scene, Harris was warned that if he tried to glimpse the plates, or look at the prophet, he would be struck dead.

Mrs. Harris was having none of this, and was already furious with the fecklessness of her husband. She stole the first hundred and sixteen pages and challenged Smith to reproduce them, as presumably—given his power of revelation—he could. (Determined women like this appear far too seldom in the history of religion.) After a very bad few weeks, the ingenious Smith countered with another revelation. He could not replicate the original, which might be in the devil's hands by now and open to a "satanic verses" interpretation. But the all-foreseeing Lord had meanwhile furnished some smaller plates, indeed the very plates of Nephi, which told a fairly similar tale. With infinite labor, the translation was resumed, with new scribes behind the blanket as occasion demanded, and when it was completed all the original golden plates were transported to heaven, where apparently they remain to this day.

Mormon partisans sometimes say, as do Muslims, that this cannot have been fraudulent because the work of deception would have been too much for one poor and illiterate man. They have on their side two useful points: if Muhammad was ever convicted in public of fraud and attempted necromancy we have no record of the fact, and Arabic is a language that is somewhat opaque even to the fairly fluent outsider. However, we know the Koran to be made up in part of earlier books and stories, and in the case of Smith it is likewise a simple if tedious task to discover that twenty-five thousand words of the Book of Mormon are taken directly from the Old Testament. These words can mainly be found in the chapters of Isaiah available in Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews: The Ten Tribes of Israel in America*. This then popular work by a pious loony, claiming that the American Indians originated in the Middle East, seems to have started the other Smith on his gold-digging in the first place. A further two thousand words of the Book of Mormon are taken from the New Testament. Of the three hundred and fifty "names" in the book, more than one hundred come straight from the Bible and a hundred more are as near stolen as makes no difference. (The great Mark Twain famously referred to it as "chloroform in print," but I accuse him of hitting too soft a target, since the book does actually contain "The Book of Ether.") The words "and it came to pass" can be found at least two thousand times, which does admittedly have a soporific effect. Quite recent scholarship has exposed every single other Mormon "document" as at best a scrawny compromise and at worst a pitiful fake, as Dr. Brodie was obliged to notice when she reissued and updated her remarkable book in 1973.

Like Muhammad, Smith could produce divine revelations at short notice and often simply to suit himself (especially, and like Muhammad, when he wanted a new girl and wished to take her as another wife). As a result, he overreached himself and came to a violent end, having meanwhile excommunicated almost all the poor men who had been his first disciples and who had been browbeaten into taking his dictation. Still, this story raises some very absorbing questions, concerning what happens when a plain racket turns into a serious religion before our eyes.

It must be said for the "Latter-day Saints" (these conceited words were added to Smith's original "Church of Jesus Christ" in 1833) that they have squarely faced one of the great difficulties of revealed religion. This is the problem of what to do about those who were born before the exclusive "revelation," or who died without ever having the opportunity to share in its wonders. Christians used to resolve this problem by saying that Jesus descended into hell after his crucifixion, where it is thought that he saved or converted the dead. There is indeed a fine passage in Dante's *Inferno* where he comes to rescue the spirits of great men like Aristotle, who had presumably been boiling away for centuries until he got around to them. (In another less ecumenical scene from the same book, the Prophet Muhammad is found being disemboweled in revolting detail.) The Mormons have improved on this rather backdated solution with something very literal-minded. They have assembled a gigantic genealogical database at a huge repository in Utah, and are busy filling it with the names of all people whose births, marriages, and deaths have been tabulated since records began. This is very useful if you want to look up your own family tree, and as long as you do not object to having your ancestors becoming Mormons. Every week, at

special ceremonies in Mormon temples, the congregations meet and are given a certain quota of names of the departed to "pray in" to their church. This retrospective baptism of the dead seems harmless enough to me, but the American Jewish Committee became incensed when it was discovered that the Mormons had acquired the records of the Nazi "final solution," and were industriously baptizing what for once could truly be called a "lost tribe": the murdered Jews of Europe. For all its touching inefficacy, this exercise seemed in poor taste. I sympathize with the American Jewish Committee, but I nonetheless think that the followers of Mr. Smith should be congratulated for hitting upon even the most simpleminded technological solution to a problem that has defied solution ever since man first invented religion.