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# Mormons

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## MORMONS

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Mormonism was one of many religious movements that emerged in antebellum America during the ferment known as the Second Great Awakening. In 1820 a youthful Joseph Smith (1805–1844) told his family and skeptical neighbors that he had been visited by Jesus Christ in response to his prayerful request for guidance in choosing a true religion. All Christian denominations had gone astray, the personage told him. Smith created little subsequent stir on the religious stage until ten years later, when he produced the *Book of Mormon*, a lengthy narrative purportedly written by ancient American prophets of Israelite origins and revealed to him by the angel Moroni. It detailed three migrations to the Western Hemisphere from the Old World but focused on the clan history of one group in particular—the Nephites—from their arrival until their demise (c. 600 B.C.E.–400 C.E.), narrating their wars, their belief in a coming Messiah, and his eventual visitation to the New World after his Jerusalem crucifixion.

Almost immediately after publication of the record, Smith assumed the role of prophet, seer, and revelator and organized the Church of Christ (subsequently designated the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), conceived as a full restoration of ancient priesthood authority and gospel truth. Mormon claims of new scripture, modern prophets, and angelic visitations offended prevailing religious sensibilities. Rapid growth of the sect, cultural differences, and the Mormon practice of gathering into cohesive, self-dependent communities created tensions and upset the local political balance of power, leading to violent confrontation and expulsion from successive areas of Missouri settlement in the 1830s. Most inflammatory of all was the rumored Mormon practice of plural marriage, which created disaffection within and attacks from without, culminating in the murder of Smith and the expulsion of Mormons from Illinois in the mid-1840s. Resettling in the Salt Lake Basin under the leadership of Brigham Young (1801–1877) in 1847, Mormons publicly announced their devotion to plural marriage in 1852 and thereby provoked public outrage and a moral crusade that would involve literary, military, political, and judicial responses over the next four decades.

Consumed with the challenge of surviving in a harsh, arid environment, and characterized by a predominantly puritan morality (polygamy aside), Latter-day Saints devoted little time and energy to literary pursuits in their early Utah period. The *Book of Mormon* was consistently distributed in those years but has historically served more as a palpable manifestation of Smith's prophetic status than as a text receiving attention or investigation in its own right. Although a



**"Lizzie Monroe in her prison—Brigham Young Making Insulting Proposals."** Illustration from Orvilla S. Belisle, *The Prophets; or, Mormonism Unveiled*, 1855. A common theme among authors was the abduction of "gentile" women for the "harems" of Mormon leaders. Women who resisted were tortured or killed; those who acquiesced frequently went insane and took their own lives. COURTESY OF TERRYL GIVENS

*Baptist Herald* editor admitted in 1840 that "we have never seen a copy of the book of Mormon," he felt confident in declaring the Book of Mormon "a bungling and stupid production. . . . We have no hesitation in saying the whole system is erroneous" (Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, p. 86). Such *prima facie* dismissal has been typical of public response to the book. However, the Book of Mormon is in fact a text of remarkable structural complexity, incorporating multiple layers of narrative, a cast of hundreds, approximately one thousand references to geography and chronology, and numerous generic forms—from psalm to midrash to epic to sermon. Mormon apologists stress the miracle of the book's ninety-day production by a process of spontaneous dictation corroborated by several witnesses; point to the book's pervasive Hebraic patterns and resonances, especially its many intricate instances of chiasmus, or inverted parallelism; and note its parallels with Old World ritual and cultural elements.

Skeptics draw attention to the unlikelihood of detailed pre-Christian references to Christ and his earthly ministry, apparent anachronisms (such as references to horses and steel), and assert a number of parallels with elements of nineteenth-century culture and religion.

With well over 120 million copies in print, the Book of Mormon is easily the most widely published book ever produced by an American. However, given the supernaturalistic elements surrounding its appearance and the challenges raised by the few archaeologists and evangelicals who have looked at it, convincing secular scholars to examine the book is no easy task. However, religious scholars and historians are increasingly noting the undeniable cultural significance of the book, especially as Mormonism appears poised on a trajectory to become a world religion.

The book's primary value to Mormons, however, has been as a sign of Smith's prophetic status, and it

became an object of serious theological investigation only in the late twentieth century. And although Mormon scholars have been engaged in serious textual study of the Book of Mormon for apologetic purposes since the 1950s, few of them have plumbed the book's literary features or value.

Other than lending its name to the new movement, then, the Book of Mormon did little to shape public perceptions of early Mormonism. Neither did the Mormons find any significant voice in the secular press or publishing industry to promote their cause or shape their own image. Into this void stepped critics, crusaders, and pulp fiction writers happy to appropriate the latest cultural villain to their own moral and literary agendas. In the process, fiction writers reveal more about the peculiar anxieties Mormonism provoked than any culturally or historically authentic features of Mormonism. At least two patterns of representation emerge from several dozen novels and stories of the era. First, is a conspicuous tendency to Orientalize or otherwise exoticize Mormonism. Such portrayals—beyond simply exploiting the shared sensuous appeal of Eastern harems and Mormon polygamy—had the advantage of recasting religious intolerance in patriotic terms. Reconstructing an unpopular but homegrown Christian sect as a variant of Islam, which E. D. Howe did as early as 1834 (*History of Mormonism*), made it possible to parallel the anti-Catholic practice of making the target church an enemy of republicanism, domestic values, and American womanhood. That tendency would become most pronounced in the decades after the Civil War.

More striking in the prewar representations of Mormonism were themes of coercion and bondage. The sensationalistic appeal of a system of virtual white slavery evoked by polygamy is obvious. But the first generation of novels suggests more is at work here. The first anti-Mormon work of fiction, *The Mormoness* (1853), by John Russell (1793–1863), does not even address plural marriage. It does depict Mormonism as a system of “fatal snares” (p. 42) and “ingenious sophistry” (p. 53). The kindly protagonists—both male and female—are “deluded,” guilty of only “too much . . . gentleness and goodness” (p. 42). In Maria Ward's *Female Life among the Mormons* (1855), Smith is a “serpent-charmer” (p. 9) who learned to mesmerize his victims of both sexes with skills acquired from a German peddler. Similarly, Theodore Winthrop's *John Brent* (1862) is “compelled” to listen by the Mormon leader's “unwholesome fascination” (p. 92). In Orvilla S. Belisle's *The Prophets; or, Mormonism Unveiled* (1855); Alfreda Bell's *Boadicea, the Mormon Wife: Life-Scenes in Utah* (1855); and Metta Victoria Fuller Victor's *Mormon Wives* (1856), women are more blatantly coerced into harems through kidnapping and violence

(as they are in the most famous, but British, treatment of Mormonism, Arthur Conan Doyle's 1888 *Study in Scarlet*). In every single case, the common feature of these early works is Mormonism's erasure of the will to resist. “Choosing” Mormonism is not conceivable in this universe, where deliberate embrace of the religion is rendered unthinkable, as if the literary imagination were not expansive enough to comprehend the spiritual yearnings that the appearance of a new prophet and new Christian scripture fulfilled for so many seekers.

*See also* Protestantism; Religion; Utopian Communities

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