

12-2012

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Recommended Citation

Nielsen, Chad, "Capturing the Holy City: The Latter-day Saint Quest for Zion" (2012). *Arrington Student Writing Award Winners*. Paper 10.

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CAPTURING THE HOLY CITY

Capturing the Holy City: The Latter-day Saint Quest for Zion

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Abstract

The quest to create a Zion community was a defining feature of the early Mormon movement. As they were forced to move from place to place in nineteenth-century America, the early Latter-day Saints attempted to gather to central locations and create holy cities—utopian communities based on religious principles taught by Joseph Smith. The practice of this ideal has changed within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints over time, resulting in a very different application of the Zion ideal in the Mormon community today. In many ways, the term “building Zion” has become an abstraction within the Church used to encourage righteous living in families and church communities. This study is an analysis of the application of the idea of Zion in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints over the course of its history with the intent of showing when, why, and how that ideal has changed within the Mormon community. A search of histories, sermons, Church manuals, and studies indicate that the change mostly took place during a period of intense transition within the Church around the turn of the twentieth century and that the concept of Zion continues to evolve to fit the needs of the time.

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The Prophecy of Enoch holds an important position in the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Joseph Smith felt that he was in a world of scriptural deficiency. This contributed to an extensive expansion of traditional Christian scripture as he recorded the Book of Mormon, revelations, and a revision of the Bible that included enlargements of the ministries of Moses and Enoch.¹ These scriptural expansions—particularly the final one mentioned—sowed the seeds of many of the most distinctive features of Mormonism.

Joseph was excited by the Enoch text and there are several distinguishing doctrines in the Church that were underscored by that record. Three of the most distinctive Mormon doctrines outlined in the Enoch revelation were first, a God with a compassionate nature; second, a premortal life; and third, theosis. The events depicted in that text sparked some of the earliest discussion among the Saints about these ideas.

While these doctrines hold an important place in Mormon theology, it might be said that the Prophecy of Enoch was even more influential in its description of a Zion community and the prophet that led it, giving a template for the Mormon experience that was to follow. In Protestant parlance of the time, Zion was generally meant to be an abstraction—a term meant to designate a heavenly people or project. It was used as a synonym for Jerusalem and had connections to the heavenly Jerusalem referred to in the New Testament. During the time leading up to and immediately following the formation of the Church in early 1830, Joseph Smith’s use of “the cause of Zion” seems to reference the “marvelous work and a wonder” he stated that he had been

¹ The expanded ministries of Moses and Enoch are published in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today as Selections from the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price—one of the canonical volumes of the LDS community. The Prophecy of Enoch comprises Moses 6:26-7:69.

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called to carry out rather than to build a city.² Wherever the initial idea came from, Joseph's fixation on the creation of an actual holy city seems to have come after he recorded the Enoch narrative in December of 1830, with its description of a Zion community that was righteous enough to be taken back into the presence of God.³

Joseph Smith was inspired and guided by Enoch's Zion, but the question arises: how close is the current perception of Zion in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the Enoch-inspired city building of the Church in Joseph's time? In many ways it seems that Mormonism has moved back to the Protestant parlance of an abstraction used for inspiration, but couched in the context of its own Zion-building attempts of the past. It is the intent of this essay to examine the historic use of the Zion ideal in the Church over the course of its history.

Zion's Beginnings

The city-building projects that dominated the early Church were inspired by the idea of continuing the Biblical stories in modern times. One historian noted:

The Enoch narrative created a deep history for the young church.... The writings gave the little flock a pattern for their own city-building.... [Harold] Bloom uses the word 'transumption' for this blend of a distant past with the present, when the people of one age think they are continuing the history of another.... More than restoring the New Testament church, the early Mormons believed they were resuming the biblical narrative in their own time. Linking the 'latter-day' church to an ancient sacred history was to become a hallmark of Joseph's prophesying.⁴

² See *Doctrine and Covenants* 6:6; 11:6; 12:6; 14:6; 24:7, 9

³ See Givens (2012). The information present to this point in the essay is a summary of his remarks at the annual Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture.

⁴ Bushman, 2005, pp. 141-2

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In continuing the narratives of the Bible, the city of Zion was designated as the holy city—the New Jerusalem or Zion of the Old and New Testaments and the city prepared to meet Enoch’s Zion when it was to return. A site was selected in Jackson County, Missouri, and Joseph proposed a plot or plan for laying out the city according to the highest ideals of the time, both physically and spiritually. This Zion community was essentially an exclusive one in Joseph’s mind, “a place of righteousness, and all those who build thereon are to worship the true and living God, and all believe in one doctrine, even the doctrine of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”⁵ All who were to live in Zion had to be true Saints and not be a part of “the vast wilderness of those that sat in darkness” of the surrounding communities.⁶ This led to emphasis on not only *where* the inhabitants of Zion were to live, but *how* they were to live: “this is Zion—THE PURE IN HEART” (D&C 97:21). This meant that Zion was to be holy both in word and in deed.

The concept of purity was connected with the idea of the community being a place set apart from “Babylon,” and a refuge from the promised destruction of the wicked. Just as the city of Enoch was “blessed” while “the residue of the people have [been] cursed (Moses 7:20),” the City of Zion in Joseph’s time was to be a “land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety for the saints of the Most High God (D&C 45:66),” while “among the wicked, men shall lift up their voices and curse God and die,” during the events leading up to the Lord’s Second Coming (D&C 45:32). The apocalyptic message undergirding these ideals—that the righteous must escape to Zion to be preserved while the wicked are to be destroyed—would become the driving force behind the idea of gathering to “be assembled upon the land of Zion (D&C 63:36).”

⁵ Smith, 1902-1912, p. 2:254; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007, p. 185

⁶ Smith, 1902-1912, p. 1:189

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The gathering to Zion serves as another example of ‘transumption’ in the Church as it became intertwined with the Biblical theme of the restoration and redemption of Israel. As early as September of 1830, missionaries were called to “bring to pass the gathering of mine elect” (D&C 29:7-8). The elect people they were gathering were designated as the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, marking those who joined the Church as the descendants of Israel scattered among the “Gentiles” (non-Israelites).⁷ These “elect” were to be “gathered from the four quarters of the earth... to be established an holy city.”⁸

An April 1832 revelation, however, gave an expansive definition to Zion beyond the focal point in Jackson County. It stated that “Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness: her borders must be enlarged; her stakes must be strengthened: yea, verily I say unto you, Zion must arise and put on her beautiful garments (D&C 82:14).” With reference to the imagery of Isaiah 54:2, this meant that:

Zion was to expand like a great tent, extending ever more curtains secured by stakes.

Kirtland was to be a stake of Zion, making it an outpost of the holy city and an authorized place of gathering... though the preeminence of Missouri went unchallenged....

Theologically, the revelation implied that Zion was not a single small spot in the center of the continent, but an elastic concept that encompassed any place where the Saints lived under divine law.⁹

By late 1833, the Saints had been driven out of their Missouri Zion and every attempt to return had failed. Kirtland—designated as a stake of Zion—became the primary focus of

⁷ The following references in the Doctrine and Covenants designate the members of the Church as Israelites: D&C 27:10; 35:20-21, 25; 38:33; 39:11; 45:17, 28-29; 52:2; 58:44-46; 64:36; 84:6-34, 99-100; 86:1-11; 96:6-7; 98:16; 100:3; 101:64-65; 103:15-19; 105:26-27, 30-31; 107:72; 109:58, 60, 67; 110:11-12; 111:2; 113:2-10; 124:1, 58, 91-92; 132:30-31; 133:12, 30, 32, 34; 137:6.

⁸ Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007, p. 189

⁹ Bushman, 2005, p. 176

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Joseph's efforts over the next several years, but in 1838, the Church leaders and many of the Kirtland Saints fled to Far West, Missouri. Far West was spoken of in the revelations as "a holy and consecrated land," implying that it was to replace the Zion in Independence.¹⁰ Within a year, they were forced to leave their land again, shattering their dreams once more. This time, they settled in Nauvoo, Illinois. Nauvoo was set up as a stake of Zion, not the Holy City itself, while the Saints looked to return to their promised land.¹¹

In each of these places, Joseph Smith displayed an inclination towards city building to achieve his religious ideals. With each successive community he attempted to follow adaptations of the plot he had laid out for the city of Zion (though expansion often was too rapid to do so), with temples standing at their centers. In each location, his followers strove to live the spiritual ideas of Zion as a community. It seems that the Church was seen by its earliest leader as more "an assemblage of cities, rather than a scattering of parishes and congregations."¹²

Pioneer Era

Eventually, Joseph was killed and the Saints had to flee from Nauvoo as well. The Church's leadership passed to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles under Brigham Young. They had to pick up the pieces of the shattered dreams of Zion and forge a new incarnation of the ideal.

Following an initiative that Joseph had started, the new leaders made and carried out plans to move to the Great Basin region of the American West. Many comparisons were made between these pioneers as a modern "camp of Israel (D&C 136:1)" on an Egypt-like exodus to settle a promised land "in the top of the mountains" that "all nations would flow unto" and where

¹⁰ D&C 115:7; see also Bushman, 2005, p. 345

¹¹ See Bushman, 2005, p. 384

¹² Bushman, 2005, p. 221

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“out of Zion [would] go forth the law (Isaiah 2:2; Micah 4:2).” Even as they built up Zion in the west, however, they looked back to Missouri. A theologian of the time wrote: “The plan of building up Zion has not yet been consummated. The saints were not permitted to enter into immediate possession of the land, which was promised them as an everlasting inheritance.... In the meantime the honest in heart are gathering to the valleys of the Rocky Mountains.... But Zion shall yet be established on the chosen site.”¹³

Led by Brigham Young and succeeding prophets, tens of thousands of Saints from across America and Europe immigrated to the west and established over 500 colonies in an area reaching from a core in Utah and southeastern Idaho across much of the American West and into Mexico and Canada. The concept of Zion utilized in these colonies was rooted in the ideals of Joseph Smith’s work and focused on a few central points of belief including: the gathering of the Saints to a central area, living in the Mormon village with its roots in Joseph’s Zion plat, property as stewardship from God rather than purely personal possessions, frugality and economic independence, unity and cooperation under Church direction, equality in the community, and redeeming the earth from the curse of the Fall of Adam and Eve through working the land.¹⁴

In the time of Joseph Smith, the imminence of the millennium in the Mormon mindset was a driving factor for the establishment of a utopian Zion. Likewise, the pioneer era leaders of the Church remained fairly apocalyptic in their vision as they directed the construction of what they termed the Kingdom of God on earth. For example:

During the Civil War the church had viewed the conflict as a prelude to the apocalypse.

Professing loyalty to the United States and declining to follow the southern states out of

¹³ Talmage, 1967, p. 353

¹⁴ See Arrington, 1993, p. 22-28

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the union, church leaders nevertheless expected the war to usher in the winding-up scenes prior to the Second Coming, and they urged the Saints to flee to Zion for refuge.¹⁵

The apocalyptic feelings associated with the war created more impetus for a gathering to Zion.

The pioneer era saw the Saints strive to create Zion by settling the Great Basin region while they waited to return to Jackson County, Missouri. The communities they settled strove to follow the religious ideals of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and were largely populated by converts gathered from America and Europe fleeing “Babylon.” As the region became less isolated, however, things would change.

Mormonism in Transition

Increased pressure from the contemporary American society led to changes in the concept of Zion and the practice of gathering. As early as 1898, President George Q. Cannon counseled against Saints being anxious to gather to Zion and other leaders, such as President Lorenzo Snow, followed suite within the next decade.¹⁶ Continuing the trend of his predecessors, President Joseph F. Smith repeatedly counseled Saints to “remain in their native lands and form congregations of a permanent character.”¹⁷ With these beginnings at the turn of the century, the idea of gathering began to be discouraged within the Church.

These changes are linked to a change of emphasis in sermons heard in the Church. One study found a decrease in eschatological references in General Conference during the period of 1890-1919 and an even more dramatic drop in end-day discussion during the following thirty years. As before, millennial imminence was tied to discussion of Zion, and the same period saw

¹⁵ Alexander, 1991, p. 320

¹⁶ Allan and Leonard, 1992, pp. 426-27; Alexander, 1986, p. 201

¹⁷ Clark, 1965-75, p. 4:222

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the prevalence of Zion in general conference almost entirely plummet out of discussion.¹⁸ The apocalypse and the impetus to gather to Zion were often connected to each other, and as the Church entered the modern world at the turn of the century, both largely dropped out of discussion.

The reasons for all of these changes are not unknown or even a distinctively Mormon experience. During the 1800's, the United States waged a war on the LDS Church in Utah, attempting to break the Church's power over the people of that area and force it to conform to the norms of Victorian America. A series of anti-polygamy laws were passed, culminating in the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 that drove the majority of Mormon leaders underground, disincorporated the Church and the Perpetual Emigration Fund (the Church's means of bringing the poor to the west), and confiscated all Church properties valued over the limit of \$50,000. This was "a trial even greater than that of Jackson County, Far West, and Nauvoo" that forced "the goal of the Kingdom... to be tragically revised, or largely abandoned,"¹⁹ causing the Church to enter an era of transition.

Due to the difficulties that the anti-polygamy legislation caused, the Church's influence over the temporal affairs of the region shrank considerably and the society in which the majority of Mormons lived was opened to greater pluralism. In addition to the challenges caused by the government, Utah was becoming overpopulated, and economic opportunities for newly-gathered Saints were becoming limited as a result.²⁰ Also, the population of Utah was becoming increasingly diverse when it came to religion: By 1890, only about half of Salt Lake City's forty-

¹⁸ See Shepherd and Shepherd, 1984, p. 34

¹⁹ Arrington, 1993, p. 354

²⁰ See Arrington, 1993, p. 354.

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five thousand residents were Mormon.²¹ This meant that the Church to be “in the world, but not of the world”²² instead of the exclusive, isolated society of Saints they initially had attempted to create in the Great Basin. These changes in the Church’s environment led to changes in the Church itself, as is often the case in similar scenarios:

A pluralistic situation [such as the one the Church entered at the end of the nineteenth century] undermines the taken-for-granted character of religious traditions and results in religious institutions becoming subject to the logic of market economics.... Religious organizations tend to become increasingly bureaucratized, result-oriented, and sensitive to problems of public relations. Religious belief systems tend to become more changeable; less bound to tradition, myth, and supernatural concerns; more preoccupied with personal morality and family issues; and more reflective of a standardized belief content which is broadly shared by competing religious systems....

Squeezed out from its former locus of supreme social authority... religion is perceived by contemporary consumers to have greatest relevance for the family and private spheres.... Contemporary leaders present to their conference audiences a view of society in which the etiology of modern problems is ascribed primarily to the apparent demise of spiritual and family values in a secular age, rather than to deficiencies in American political or economic institutions. Prayer, pious living, and obedience to God's commandments, not institutional reforms, are the prescribed remedies....

Today the Mormon nuclear family, rather than Zion or the Kingdom of God, appears to have become the major sociological frame of reference for conference

²¹ Galli, 2005, p. 124

²² See John 15:19

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speakers. The Mormon Church is portrayed as serving the basic needs of the family, and the family in turn is defined as the basis of the church.²³

As a result of intense pressures, the Church has changed how it presents itself to the world and how it directs its members' lives. It has adapted to fit the needs of the time, privatizing Zion to a family and congregational level rather than a utopian project of city construction.

Modern Mormonism

The shift in focus that the new situation created laid the foundation of the Church as we know it today. As the Church was faced with an increasingly international organization during the mid-twentieth century, further changes were made. These changes resulted in a need to redefine the focus of both Zion and the gathering. Both are concepts that are important to the Mormon people and are mentioned often in their sacred literature. Thus, instead of being abandoned, these ideas evolved.

The doctrine of gathering continued to be both an official and unofficial belief while being semi-officially discouraged. By the mid-twentieth century it had become a burden to growth rather than an impetus. "As long as church members believed they should gather to Zion as a place of refuge against the holocaust prior to the Second Coming, membership outside the American West would remain small and would be drawn principally from the lower ranks of society."²⁴

Official modification to the doctrine finally came in the early 1970's. In 1971, at the first regional conference in England, regional representative Derek A. Cuthbert stated, "There is no longer a need for British Church members to leave their homeland to partake of the blessings of

²³ Shepherd and Shepherd, 1984, pp. 29, 33, 36-37

²⁴ Alexander, 1986, p. 237

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Church membership.”²⁵ A similar conference was held in Mexico City the next year. At this conference, Elder Bruce R. McConkie clearly enunciated the new idea of gathering:

The place of gathering for the Mexican Saints is in Mexico; the place of gathering for the Guatemalan Saints is in Guatemala; the place of gathering for the Brazilian Saints is in Brazil; and so it goes throughout the length and breadth of the whole earth. Japan is for the Japanese; Korea is for the Koreans; Australia is for the Australians; every nation is the gathering place for its own people.²⁶

These statements mark an official shift in doctrine that ended the idea of gathering to a physical location of Zion. Prior efforts to discourage emigration to the American West were done with an unspoken belief that Utah was Zion. Now, things had changed—Zion was officially no longer a specific location, but a worldwide effort centered on the Church, families, and individuals. The future gathering to Missouri is still a part of the Mormon millennial plan,²⁷ but anywhere the Church has stakes and temples, or even exists, can be a gathering place for the Saints.

Zion had been defined as “the pure in heart,”²⁸ and it became and continues to function as an inspiration for personal purity. In September 2012, for example, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland stated:

In these last days, in this our dispensation... Zion would be everywhere—wherever the Church is. And with that change—one of the mighty changes of the last days—we no

²⁵ Quoted in Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001, pp. 575-76

²⁶ Quoted in Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001, p. 576

²⁷ See Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009, p. 255; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004, pp. 189-190

²⁸ See Moses 7:18; D&C 97:21

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longer think of Zion as *where* we are going to live; we think of it as *how* we are going to live.

He went on to explain a figurative fleeing of spiritual Babylon (wickedness) to enter Zion—righteousness and purity.²⁹ Most other general conference addresses of the last fifty years that speak of Zion follow a similar pattern of using Zion as a term to encourage personal purity and serving the poor.

Elder Holland's comments hint at the adaptation of the gathering doctrine to modern society. A Church manual states:

God gathers His children through missionary work. As a people come to a knowledge of Jesus Christ, receiving covenants, they become 'the children of the covenant' ... The Israelites are to be gathered spiritually first and then physically. They are gathered spiritually as they join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and make and keep sacred covenants.³⁰

With the new take on an old ideal, the Church organization has become the focus of the gathering doctrine. Elder D. Todd Christofferson said, "Today the Lord's people are gathering 'out from among the nations' as they gather into the congregations and stakes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that are scattered throughout the nations."³¹ Temples are a part of this gathering function of the Church as faithful members travel to these sacred, exclusive spaces to enter the highest ordinances of the Church. In doing so, they become "covenant people" by making covenants to live many of the ideals governing the utopian Zion concepts of

²⁹ Holland, 2012

³⁰ Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009, pp. 247-48

³¹ Christofferson, 2008, p. 37

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the past. To fit the needs of the time, today the focus of Zion is on the Church as a spiritual institution rather than a specific geographical location.

Conclusion

Zion is a concept that has held widespread appeal in Christianity for centuries. Generally, it is used as an abstraction to represent a heavenly people or project. Inspired by the Enoch text, Joseph Smith took the idea a step further and attempted to create an actual heavenly city on earth. The term was expanded to allow for outposts to the holy city, called stakes. After church leadership passed to Brigham Young, the church moved to the Great Basin and sought to create a series of Zion colonies as a kingdom of God in the American west. After intense social pressures necessitated change, the Church entered an era of transition that resulted in a reshaping of the Zion ideal. The physical gathering gradually ground to a halt and was finally officially abandoned in the early 1970s.

The traditional Mormon concept of Zion was replaced by a spiritual, figurative gathering into the church itself, wherever it is found, shifting from a utopian community ideal to one represented in families, church association, and individual purity and righteousness. While an extensive history of attempts at creating ideal societies and hopes of a millennial Zion in Jackson County, Missouri are used as inspiration and direction for Latter-day Saints to be righteous—giving the Zion ideal a uniquely Mormon flavor—the general use of the term today has come full circle, returning to the abstraction it was at the beginning of LDS history. This indicates that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has evolved to fit the needs of the time and that it will most likely continue to do so in the future.

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