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“LIKE THE HAJIS OF MECCA AND JERUSALEM”: ORIENTALISM AND THE MORMON EXPERIENCE

by

Richard V. Francaviglia

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The establishment of a lecture series honoring a library’s special collections and a donor to that collection is unique. Utah State University’s Merrill-Cazier Library houses the personal and historical collection of Leonard J. Arrington, a renowned scholar of the American West. As part of Arrington’s gift to the university, he requested that the university’s historical collection become the focus for an annual lecture on an aspect of Mormon history. Utah State agreed to the request and in 1995 inaugurated the annual Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture.

Utah State University’s Special Collections and Archives is ideally suited as the host for the lecture series. The state’s land grant university began collecting records very early, and in the 1960s became a major depository for Utah and Mormon records. Leonard and his wife Grace joined the USU faculty and family in 1946, and the Arringtons and their colleagues worked to collect original diaries, journals, letters, and photographs.

Although trained as an economist at the University of North Carolina, Arrington became a Mormon historian of international repute. Working with numerous colleagues, the Twin Falls, Idaho, native produced the classic *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints* in 1958. Utilizing available collections at USU, Arrington embarked on a prolific publishing and editing career. He and his close ally, Dr. S. George Ellsworth, helped organize the Western History Association, and they created the *Western Historical Quarterly* as the scholarly voice of the WHA. While serving with Ellsworth as editor of the new journal, Arrington also helped both the Mormon History Association and the independent journal *Dialogue* get established.

One of Arrington’s great talents was to encourage and inspire other scholars or writers. While he worked on biographies or institutional
histories, he employed many young scholars as researchers. He fostered many careers as well as arranged for the publication of numerous books and articles.

In 1973, Arrington accepted appointments as the official historian of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Lemuel Redd Chair of Western History at Brigham Young University. More and more Arrington focused on Mormon, rather than economic, historical topics. His own career flourished with the publication of *The Mormon Experience*, co-authored with Davis Bitton, and *American Moses: A Biography of Brigham Young*. He and his staff produced many research papers and position papers for the LDS Church as well. Nevertheless, tension developed over the historical process, and Arrington chose to move full time to BYU with his entire staff. The Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of History was established, and Leonard continued to mentor new scholars as well as publish biographies. He also produced a very significant two-volume study, *The History of Idaho*.

After Grace Arrington passed away, Leonard married Harriet Horne of Salt Lake City. They made the decision to deposit the vast Arrington collection of research documents, letters, files, books, and journals at Utah State University. The Leonard J. Arrington Historical Archives is part of the university’s Special Collections. The Arrington Lecture Committee works with Special Collections to sponsor the annual lecture.
About the Author

Richard V. Francaviglia is a historian and geographer who has studied the peoples and landscapes of the American West for more than forty years. He is past president of the Society for the History of Discoveries and former director of the Center for Greater Southwestern Studies and the History of Cartography at the University of Texas at Arlington. As Professor Emeritus, he now lives in Salem, Oregon, where he conducts research and teaches occasional courses in Religious Studies at Willamette University. His many publications include *Go East, Young Man: Imagining the American West as the Orient*; *Believing in Place: A Spiritual Geography of the Great Basin*; *Over the Range: A History of the Promontory Summit Route of the Pacific Railroad*; and *The Mormon Landscape: Existence, Creation, and Perception of a Unique Image in the American West*. 
“LIKE THE HAJIS OF MECCAH AND JERUSALEM”: ORIENTALISM AND THE MORMON EXPERIENCE

Introduction

I would like to begin by noting that the namesake of these lectures, Leonard Arrington, has inspired my scholarship since I first discovered his book *Great Basin Kingdom* while conducting research for my dissertation on “The Mormon Landscape” in 1968. By that time, Arrington’s book was a decade old and already recognized as a classic work on both the Mormons and their geographic setting. After reading and re-reading *Great Basin Kingdom* several times, I wanted to meet Leonard Arrington personally. As it turned out, however, nearly a decade transpired before I actually met Arrington in April of 1977, when he gave the official welcoming address to members of the Association of American Geographers at their annual meeting in Salt Lake City. During that address, Arrington surprised me by singling out my research on the Mormon landscape as the kind of geographically based, interdisciplinary study needed to help scholars better understand the role played by the Mormons in shaping the American West. Arrington did not know that I was in the audience, but I wasted no time in thanking him after the welcome session and in engaging him in a brief but productive discussion about several aspects of Latter-day Saints historical geography. During that discussion, Professor Arrington enthusiastically urged me to continue my studies of the Mormons. This I did, but as it turns out, more or less indirectly by studying many other subjects, including the history of cartography, the nature of semiotics and symbolism, and cultural theory.

I have never forgotten Leonard Arrington’s sage advice: the Mormons, as he put it, are a touchstone to understanding American history. Over the years, the Mormons kept appearing and reappearing, as if by magic, in the many American subjects and geographic locales that I wrote about. Moreover, although the Mormon experience was nominally “American,” it seemed to run far deeper into international history. Whether I traveled to South America, the Pacific Islands, or the Middle East, I kept running
into the Mormons. Only then did I realize how deeply Mormon roots were woven into parts of the world that were distant in both place and time—including the Orient.

Arrington was by many accounts a fairly traditional scholar, but some of his fellow Mormon intellectuals, such as the indefatigable Hugh Nibley, studied more unusual aspects of Mormon history, for example, connections between Mormon history and ancient Egypt. Some people called these subjects “quirky,” but I found them fascinating at the time. More than forty years later, I still find them to be interesting and controversial, but now understand that they are also crucial to fully understanding Mormon identity. Although subjects like these that connect Mormons to ancient peoples of the Near East were described as “Mormon Esoterica” in the program for the recent (2011) Mormon History Association meeting in St. George, they are far more than that. Esoterica suggests the arcane, but these subjects are actually important facets of a relatively new field of scholarship, namely, American Orientalism. Given recent developments in that field, including a more nuanced understanding of America’s cultural engagement with ancient Egypt and modern Islam, the time has come to place these varied aspects of Mormon history in the broader context of American Orientalism.

For the record, I realize that asking and answering questions about Mormons and “Oriental” peoples—which is to say peoples from almost anywhere east of Europe—including the Middle East and Asia—may seem paradoxical because the Mormons are, above all, American in origin. Moreover, the subject of Mormons conflated with Egyptians (or Mormons as Muslims, or Mormons as ancient Israelites) can be dicey because some of them fall into areas that serious scholars might still consider off limits to rational inquiry. I am here referring to powerful underlying themes and unanswered questions in LDS Church history that might lead a devout Latter-day Saint to break new, and sometimes controversial, ground—for example, by having the audacity to map the travels of Nephi or to seek possible connections between Joseph Smith and ancient Egypt, or even between Joseph Smith and the Muslim Prophet Muhammad.

My mentioning these unusual manifestations of Mormon beliefs will help prepare readers for what follows: this Arrington Lecture is as much about who and what other people thought (or think) the Mormons to be and even who the Mormons have thought themselves to be as it is...
about who the Mormons really have been. And yet, there is another paradox here, for who we think we are often effectively becomes who we really are.

This lecture, then, is ultimately about the creation of Mormon identity. It looks closely at Mormonism’s deep, and sometimes almost mystical, connections to Old World history, spirituality, and iconography to confirm something that I have long sensed about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: despite its relatively young age and seemingly American character, it is among the world’s most interesting, eclectic, and complex, religions. One of the more fascinating and enduring aspects of this American faith’s experiences relates to how and why it could readily connect the New World and the part of the Old World we call the Orient.

_Mormonism and Orientalism in Context_

In this essay, I hope to show that although Mormon history is normally, and quite understandably, studied in the context of American history, it should be placed in a broader geographic context for several reasons. First, even though the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a characteristically American religion, it held from its inception the ambition of being a universal faith. Mormons are active proselytizers, their goal being to spread the faith worldwide. Second, the church and its membership were, almost from its inception, scrutinized not only by fellow Americans but also by observers from far-flung corners of the globe. Mormons quickly gained an international audience despite the fact that their home base was American. To such audiences, the most common equation that observers could find was that there was something of the Old World—more particularly the “Oriental” part of that Old World—about the Mormon faith and its practitioners. This may explain why Mormon missionary activity is so successful, for it in effect brings peoples from various parts of the world home—home being on American soil but inherently exotic in that the original inhabitants were also from that ancient world. Lastly, and perhaps most significant of all, though, is the fact that the Mormon religion invites this type of comparison because its sources of inspiration are remarkably eclectic. This American religion boldly claimed a direct connection with Old World cultures and history, and that claim affected not only how it functioned but also how it was perceived.
The Mormons’ nearly constant depiction of their own faith as somehow directly connected to events that transpired in the Near East is also a major issue. I am less interested in the veracity of those claims than their pivotal role in characterizations of this faith and its faithful followers. Ultimately, this Arrington lecture seeks to answer why, as literature professor Terryl Givens astutely noted about fifteen years ago, “Generally, Mormons were depicted as a race among themselves, usually Oriental.”¹ Much more recently (2011), historian Jared Farmer confirmed this connection by noting that “Latter-day Saints were variously likened to ‘Oriental,’ ‘Asiatic,’ ‘Turkish,’ and ‘Mohammadan’ peoples.”

In the nineteenth century, all of the people Farmer mentioned would have fallen under the general rubric of Orientals.²

In addressing the Orientalization of the Mormons in the context of broader American culture and its views of the Orient, I shall dispel a misconception that Mormonism’s conflation with the Orient was simply coincidental. Far more than a case of mistaken identity by ignorant observers who could not tell the difference between, say, Mormons and Muslims, or Mormons and ancient Egyptians, it lies at the core of Mormon identity. In fact, the Orient emerges as one of the most powerful constructs that Americans in the early nineteenth century used in engaging and evaluating what they experienced on American soil.

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that in what appears to be the earliest review of the Book of Mormon (1831)—a critique by Shaker religious leader Richard McNemar—we find the Mormons Orientalized. As McNemar put it, “In looking into this curious volume it reminded me of the Persian tales which I used to read when a boy & with which I was much delighted.” McNemar’s statement is a reminder that Near Eastern fables and tales (such as The Arabian Nights) were staples for youth and grown up alike during the 1810s and 1820s, when English translations became common. Joseph Smith himself may have been exposed to such vivid tales since they were read as bedtime stories in many homes. McNemar, however, was prepared to use one of the qualities of such Oriental-style tales—that they were fantasies—against

the Book of Mormon, for he quickly added “and excepting what this inspired writer & dictator [i.e., Smith] took from the scriptures I supposed there was as much truth & reality in the one as [in] the other.”

With these biting words, McNemar turned the Orientalist reference back upon Joseph Smith, casting doubt on the veracity of what was revealed to the Mormon leader. Even at this relatively early date, observers associated the Orient with both truth and falsehood.

As I will show, the depiction of the Mormon faith in Orientalist terms not only occurred from the inception of that new religion, but in fact appears to have been almost inevitable. It occurred so readily because the Orient was so prevalent in the minds of outside observers and Mormons alike at the time. The nation was in fact awash in references to the Orient, especially the part of the Orient then commonly called the Near East. The lens through which the Mormons were viewed as exotic had been ground and polished over millennia as part of the western experience, but it took on renewed meaning in nineteenth century America, where (and when) the Orient was almost constantly on the mind of the public. Small wonder, then, that this new religion and its followers could be so easily conflated with that exotic, and mysterious, part of the world.

If the Mormon experience infused the New World, or at least portions of it, with an Old World identity, that was part of a broader phenomenon, namely Orientalism, which is defined as any trait characteristic of peoples of the Orient, and more specifically as the serious study of Oriental art, history, languages and the like. I am, however, especially interested in yet a third definition of Orientalism as an imitation, or assimilation, of that which is Oriental. This latter definition hints at the fact that Orientalism is a process by which something can take on the trappings of the Orient. Imitation and assimilation are key words here, for they suggest that cultural identity is not only transferable, but also malleable. The premise of this lecture, then, is that the Mormons played a significant role in the Orientalization of the Americas—that is, the process of giving the American landscape and its inhabitants an identity linked to the Near East or Far East.

This process, I hasten to again suggest, was both involuntary and voluntary. In other words, although Mormons might be branded as
Oriental people (and their religion as Oriental in nature) by outsiders, many of whom were anti-Mormon, those same Mormons also readily adopted Oriental identities as part of the process of becoming and remaining Mormon. On one level, this happened because the Mormons conceived of themselves as Israelites as they shaped their new religion and transformed the American frontier. However, because so many other Oriental identities were also grafted onto the Mormons’ main identity as Jews, it clearly transcended that. By the time the Mormon migration westward was underway, it was common to confuse the Latter-day Saints with Jews, Egyptians, Muslims, Persians, and the like. In this process, Mormons were part of a broader American tendency to Orientalize the landscapes and peoples of the New World, assisted by European travelers who also often perceived the Orient in this otherwise new, frontier land with its fascinating indigenous peoples and spectacular landscapes.

As readers will see, Mormon identity was not only closely connected to Orientalism, but an integral part of it. Moreover, as this revisionist essay will demonstrate, Mormon identity was so dependent on Orientalism that any interpretation of Mormon history is incomplete unless it accounts for the manner in which it was influenced by Orientalism. Distilled to its essence, then, the thesis of this Arrington lecture is that Mormonism itself is a product of Orientalism. I am not suggesting that Orientalism is the only factor in the development of Mormon faith, of course, but rather that it is one of the key factors that must be considered for all who hope to fully understand the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I will leave to theologians the subject of whether or not this new religion was divinely inspired, focusing instead on how it flourished in light of broader cultural forces, a major one of which was Orientalism.

As hinted at above, this fascination with the Orient pre-dates the Mormons by many centuries. It actually began in classical times, perhaps even earlier than Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), who looked eastward with world conquest in mind. In the Common Era, it was a force in the early Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land and later a factor in the Crusades of the Middle Ages. In more modern times, it was given new impetus as a result of European colonial expansion. Although the modern fascination with the Orient began in France (ca. 1700), and soon spread to England and other European countries (ca. 1750), it also diffused to the New World colonies. As part of this developing
European-American world, the young United States soon developed its own interest in the East (Near East, Asia Minor, and Asia itself). Within a few years of its founding, in fact, the United States found itself squaring off in a hostage situation against militant Islamic tribes along North Africa’s Barbary Coast. In one way or another, the Muslim world has been on the mind of Americans ever since.

In the early-to-mid nineteenth century, this engagement with, and interest in, the Near East was facilitated by developments in technology, including a robust publishing industry and the rapid development of steam-powered transport on water and land. At this time, a new breed of writer—the travel writer—began to enlighten and enchant Americans. These technological and literary forces teamed up to effectively shrink the world and to bring the exotic into American domestic life. At this time, too, a series of social and religious movements aimed at rediscovering connections between the mystical past and the modern present also took center stage.

One of the most common trends at this time was the search for mystical roots in an increasingly rational world. Another related trend was the search for enduring truths in an increasingly secular, pragmatic, world. History would position the Mormons to become, in effect, peoples of the ancient Oriental world on American soil. The fact that this happened to people who were largely native born, white, and English-speaking reminds one just how malleable identity could be on the rapidly expanding American frontier. These essentially modern people also took a step back in time in the process of becoming the Other.

One of the many misconceptions I would like to dispel is the belief that Orientalism is simply a colonialist impulse that victimizes or abuses the peoples of the Orient. That claim was famously made by Edward Said in his now-classic 1978 book *Orientalism*. Whereas Said stated that Orientalism was invariably based on the racist western/European mind treating peoples of the Orient as inferior, his conclusions have now come under considerable scrutiny and found to be based on limited (elite) sources. Although Said in effect essentializes the West, a more nuanced take on Orientalism is that it can be both an instrument of oppression and a way of informing and enlightening the West about the Orient. This paper thus employs a post-Saidian perspective by noting that the West has regarded the Orient with considerable ambivalence.
Mormonism and Oriental Mysticism/Materialism

The creation of the Mormon faith in the 1820s is intricately bound up with two paradoxical themes about body and soul, namely materialism and mysticism. On the one hand, the Mormons were nominally Christians but deviated from many other denominations regarding, one, their ways of divining and revealing hidden truths, and, two, their beliefs about the meaning of the material or corporeal world in light of spirituality. The first involved the use of mysticism, while the second often involved considerable intellectualizing. Although the Orient is normally associated with the former, and mysticism is an undeniably important part of its appeal, the flip side—materialism—is also a factor in popular perceptions of the region. This is a reminder that Orientalism is largely composed of a series of binary distinctions such as good and evil, light and dark, and flesh and spirit, to name just a few.4

Consider, first, mysticism as exemplified by an act that was in fact essential in revealing the faith that would soon reshape the American religious landscape, namely Joseph Smith’s use of seer stones. Smith himself noted that his translation of ancient scriptures involved the use of “two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim—deposited with the plates; and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted ‘seers’ in ancient or former times, and that God prepared them for the purposes of translating the book.”5 This leaves no doubt that the stones possessed mystical powers, which were foretold in the Bible, but also that their source was Old World in origin. Although many cultures throughout history have ascribed power to stones of various types, the wisdom that these particular stones would reveal is linked to the ancient Near East. This is not surprising as the arts of scrying and geomancy were thought to have originated in ancient Persia, and were linked, in popular culture, with places such as ancient Egypt.

As with many aspects of early Mormon history, these stones are clouded in mystery. Smith himself is said to have used three stones. Two

4. For a more complete listing and interpretation of these binary aspects of Orientalism, see Richard Francaviglia, “Crusaders and Saracens: Orientalism in Historically Themed Motion Pictures about the Middle East,” in Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film, ed. Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 53–90.
of them (the Urim and Thummim) mentioned above served as spectacles and were evidently clear and likely colorless. Given the description later offered by Smith’s mother, one wonders if they may have been “Herkimer Diamonds,” the local name given to clear and colorless, well-formed (euhedral) quartz crystals that abound in portions of upstate New York. Smith’s mother reportedly claimed that these crystals were three-sided, and that accurately describes the pointed faces (terminations) of quartz crystals. At any rate, the third stone Smith possessed was quite different. Reportedly unearthed while Smith was digging a friend’s well, it was brown and apparently translucent or opaque rather than transparent; perhaps a variety of chalcedony, which is also commonly found in that area. Examples of surviving seer stones suggest that they were apparently of either a color or shape to be quite distinctive from other stones found.

For our purposes here, the most important thing to remember about these stones was that they were said to possess magical powers (or to magically empower their users). It was said by some that in the case of Smith’s stones, these powers (and the stones) ultimately originated in the ancient part of the world from which the Jaredites set out—namely the Near East. The stones’ power and source area thus links them to the hearth of Oriental mysticism (and Oriental mystics), namely, the ancient Near East and its rich tradition of magic.

Here we may consult the unofficial Mormon press for a nonscholarly interpretation—one that sheds light on folk views of Mormon history. As Ogden Kraut observed in a self-published book called *Seers and Seer Stones* (1971), “In certain ages of the world seers were commonly known, and occasionally many seers lived at the same time.” As with other aspects of Mormon history, *place* is an important operative here, for Kraut quickly added that “Egypt was a land famous for men with this rare gift.” According to Kraut, the Holy Land is the source of Mormon seer stones. As he put it, in a sentence that seamlessly fuses biblical text with Mormon history, “The white stone mentioned in Revelations 2:17 will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one, whereby things pertaining to a higher order of Kingdoms will be made known (D & C, 130:10).”

The point here, of course, is not whether these stones actually possessed powers, nor whether these seer stones were really Near Eastern in

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origin. Rather, it is to underscore the popular belief that Joseph Smith was heir to arcane rites that linked him to the geomancers of the ancient world generally and the Near East in particular. In 1831, Abram Benton reported that Oliver Cowdery characterized Smith’s seer stones as “two transparent stones resembling glass, set in silver bows.” By looking through these stones, Smith was able to read ancient texts that revealed the Mormons’ religion. When David Whitmer recalled, more than half a century after the event, that “Joseph Smith would put the seer stone [sic] into a hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine,” his words reaffirmed Smith’s connections to what was even then broadly called the occult. Such magic was associated with the Old World mystics, including the gypsies (Roma), who themselves likely originated in ancient India. Once again, the finding of these stones in American soil gave the New World an effectively Old World identity ultimately traceable to a source in the Orient. Note as well that a form of magic was required to translate the Mormons’ earliest sources, a fact that further associated both the Mormons and their religion with Oriental mysticism.

Although it was not uncommon for people in this part of the frontier at this time to “find strange stones that could be used as ‘peep stones’ and [for] every person finding such a stone at once [to] set out in search of a hidden treasure,” as Cumorah’s “Gold Bible” so aptly puts it, the fact that the Mormons linked these stones to spiritual matters was both noteworthy and disturbing. Although the spiritualist movement would embrace such techniques, the plumbing of information of this type for theological truth was generally frowned upon by mainstream Christians in the early nineteenth century. It went against the grain, so to speak, of organized religion and threatened the established order—something the Mormons were never hesitant to do. At this time, many Christians believed their faith to be rational and linked to “free will,” while the use of magic involving tangible objects smacked of “idolatry” and “superstition” and suggested a connection to darker forces that Christianity should hold at arm’s distance, or at bay.

8. David Whitmer, An Address Before for All Believers in Christ (Richmond, Missouri, 1887), 12.
9. E. Cecil McGavin, Cumorah’s “Gold Bible” (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1940), 145.
Oriental Materialism

A second aspect of the early Mormon faith, however, was far more earthly than mystical, and that involved the Mormons’ belief in materialism. Like other aspects of LDS faith, this belief evolved over time. As historian Thomas Alexander astutely noted, early LDS doctrine was similar to that which might be found in other, prevalent faiths on the frontier. However, as Alexander further noted, “between 1842 and 1844, Joseph Smith spoke on and published doctrines such as the plurality of gods, the tangibility of God’s body, the distinct separation of God and Christ, the potential of man to become and function as a god, the explicit rejection of ex nihilo creation, and the materiality of everything including spirit.”10 In contrast, the popular reasoning of Christians went that those who believed one’s physical or corporeal existence had real value were deluded. Thus, at the time that many mainstream churches emphasized the ephemeral (and insignificant) nature of the flesh in light of the spirit, Mormons had the audacity to suggest that ordinary men could become God-like. This concern about Mormons—and, for that matter, Buddhists and other “heathen” Asian faiths—intensified after about 1850, when Chinese and other Asians began to enter the American West in increasing numbers.

And yet, by this time, the American intellectual elite had also become interested in alternative spiritualities, as evidenced by the intellectually active component of the Boston Brahmins (note that Hindu term), who readily experimented with Hinduism and other exotic beliefs. Among the major proponents of such Oriental, or Eastern, experimentation was New Englander Henry David Thoreau. As an Orientalist, Thoreau sought alternatives to rigid American beliefs in Christianity, which is a reminder that Orientalism can be subversive to the dominant colonial culture as well as exploitative of the peoples of the Orient. I am suggesting that Mormons, with their propensity to seek and find alternative spiritualities, were part of a broader American phenomenon of experimentation with exotic beliefs. As a ready supplier of such alternatives, the Orient had considerable appeal. The fact that some of these spiritual doctrines (for example Hinduism and even Islam) more readily incorporated the pleasures of the flesh into notions of the hereafter is noteworthy, for that is exactly what the Mormons would soon be accused of doing.

There is a third element that needs to be discussed under the topic of how Orientalism relates to both body and soul, and that is the concern about what happens when the human will is subverted by excessive materialism and overzealous spirituality. An increasingly common anti-Mormon theme—the growing belief that Mormons were a people enslaved by their faith—relates to the popular perception that they had resigned themselves to the arbitrary will of their leaders rather than thinking for themselves. To many, such a prospect was terrifying: if an individual Mormon’s fate was determined by forces beyond his or her control, then Mormons were much like the hordes of people in the Old World who succumbed to spells and magic controlled by religious leaders who were given too much power by their followers. Quite aside from the fact that most followers of other religions also obediently followed the rules set by their own church leaders, this concern about the power wielded over followers by Mormon leaders was disquieting to non-Mormons. This concern bordering on paranoia served detractors of the Mormon faith well. Like the ancient peoples of the Old World, their reasoning went, the Mormons had surrendered to arcane rites; hence the outrageous claims that the Mormon temple in Salt Lake City was the site of human sacrifices and the like gained traction. The fear was that the Mormon faith was, in a word, mesmeric, that is, capable of putting its followers into trance-like states that denied them of their own free will and reasoning. It should be noted that many Americans understood the entire Orient—from the Near East to the Far East—to be steeped in this kind of mesmerism, which amounted to mind-control in the popular imagination.

If the suggestion that someone other than the individual worshipper is in control is a frightening prospect for believers in free will, then the belief that women were especially susceptible to this new religion’s persuasive charm was equally disquieting. That association of enslaved women further linked Mormonism to the popular notion that the Oriental mind was easily seduced by intoxicating and stupefying falsehoods. As one can imagine, a society concerned about manhood and the purity of women found this type of seduction particularly disconcerting, if not downright threatening.

In a sense, the linking of Mormons with people of the Orient hinted at something nefarious and unsettling. One concern that made many
uncomfortable with the Mormon faith was a popular belief that its leaders were, as they commonly put it, despotic, a term that immediately brought up the specter of a more endemic Oriental despotism. Hidden in definitions of Orientalism is the characteristically nonwestern trait of resignation to both a higher authority and submission to an oppressive political ruler, or despot. In the first case, something is said to be fated or destined, and an individual is both foolish and blasphemous to try to deny or resist it. Even today, many Muslim Arabs are associated with the mantra that “it is written.” Hindu philosophy claims that there are things beyond our control, as does Buddhism, meaning that—in the popular Western mind, at least—a kind of fatalism characterizes much of the Orient from North Africa to Eastern Asia.

More to the point, though, is the popular belief that the Orient itself tends to be a place where political rule is inherently undemocratic, and that to resist it is to not only bring disaster but to defy a cosmic order in which rulers are selected not at the polls but in secret meetings. In this scenario, people cannot change because an authority—the Sultan, King, or Ayatolla, for example—will resist that change. Lest one think that religious predestination and this political repression are unrelated, the current situation in Iran reveals how religion and political tyranny can work hand in hand to create despotism. Argentine poet and essayist Jorge Borges plumbed this concern about despotism when he opined that the Orient “is above all a world of extremes in which people are very happy or very unhappy, very rich or very poor. A world of Kings who do not explain what they do. Of kings who are, we might say, as irresponsible as Gods.”

Although the recent “Arab Spring” (2011) began to challenge this endemic condition in some places, overall it still prevails. Despots such as Mommar Ghadafi and Bashar al-Assad became so firmly rooted that removing them from power required major social upheaval and military force. The same might be said for the ayatollas of Iran, who seemingly emerged by popular democratic revolt but who now rule with an iron hand that suppresses all dissent. As even more recent events in the Arab Spring suggest, the toppling of dictators may result in the reassertion of Islamist control rather than the liberal reform originally envisioned.

Given Americans’ longstanding concerns about despotism generally and their suspicions about the concentration of power among a vaguely conceived “priesthood” in particular, it is not surprising that the Mormons were so easy for other, non-Mormon peoples to Orientalize. But this is to be expected on frontiers, which are places where social identities are in flux. In America, where Orientalist identities were taking shape in the nineteenth century, the die was cast. Mormons could be conflated with Near Eastern potentates at the drop of a hat despite the fact their leaders were actually white Anglo-Americans. With this in mind, I would like to explore several distinct aspects of Mormon identity that can help us better understand how and why Mormons were—and in some case still are—so easy to Orientalize. One of the factors most structurally significant to Mormon belief and identity concerns the origins of indigenous peoples in the Americas, and it is therefore with the Native Americans that I shall begin.

The Lamanites: Orientalizing Indigenous America

The Mormons’ perception of time and space affected their beliefs about the Native Americans. As historian Philip Barlow noted, “Joseph Smith pre-empted Steven Spielberg by going ‘back to the future’ and then pulling it into the present.” Smith’s interpreting phenomena in light of “the ancient order of things” was closely associated with his religious beliefs and teachings. As Steven LeSueur observed, if Smith were given an “ancient manuscript,” he would interpret it as “the writings of the ancient prophet Abraham.” Similarly, Smith might interpret a human skeleton as “the skeleton of an ancient Nephite warrior,” a new place of settlement as “the Garden of Eden,” and “a pile of stones” might be “an altar built by Adam to offer sacrifice to God.”12 Note that Smith could effortlessly shift things and places between hemispheres through this process. Smith’s extemporaneous archaeological explorations, conducted as part of Zion’s Camp as early as 1834, provide a case in point. Smith’s discovery of the ancient Lehite general Zelph in what was otherwise a fairly typical Indian mound in North America’s mid-section

is noteworthy, for it energized and elated Smith and his followers and seemed to corroborate the Book of Mormon.13

As suggested above, Smith believed that a pivotal site of immense importance to God’s relationship to mankind—the Garden of Eden—was actually located in the American interior rather than Mesopotamia. The place is called Adam-ondi-Ahman and its location in a land between rivers on the Missouri frontier reaffirmed the Mormons’ belief that America was, and is, a special place where sacred biblical events took place. Related to the theme of this lecture, too, is the fact that the word Adam-ondi-Ahman itself has an implicit linguistic connection to Middle Eastern peoples and places—suggested by the names Adam (the biblical person) and Amman (the city in Jordan).

Mormon religion infused American geography and prehistory with an Old World flavor. To Smith and his followers, the American landscape was populated by Old World peoples who had ventured to the New World almost two thousand years before Columbus. In Smith’s restless intellectual inquiry, which was inseparable from his faith, the American frontier thus became the Near East, with its Garden of Eden, altars of Abraham, and the like. At first glance, this process and its conclusions might seem to devalue America as a place inferior to the real thing, namely, the Old World where most non-Mormons believe such sites to be located. However, looked at in another light, just the opposite was true. Smith in fact dignified America in a remarkably revisionist way, for through his experiences and teachings, America was no longer on the periphery of world-class religious events but rather central to them in that it possessed the sites where these ancient events transpired. To the Mormons, the New World was important enough for Jesus himself to visit after his ascension. In this Mormon theological context, America becomes the place where God spoke to man, and, according to the Mormons, still does. This theological conflation of Old World and New World helps explain how and why Mormon and Oriental identities were so easily conflated in the nineteenth century.

With sacred places in abundance, the American landscape became a treasure trove of ancestral memories. This association between Old World and New was epitomized by the Mormon belief that American Indian peoples represent the Lost Tribes of Israel. In adopting this belief

13. See W. Godfrey The Zelph Story, and David Cannon, Zelph Revisited
about what they call the Lamanites, the Mormons configured Native Americans into an essentially Oriental people, namely Near Easterners. This suggests that the American frontier was populated by people who were not really indigenous, so to speak, but exotic. Given this view, American Orientalism was not only a transoceanic phenomenon, but also a characteristically nativistic phenomenon. Joseph Smith was not the first Anglo-American theologian to suggest that Native Americans were, in effect, Near Easterners. The Reverend Ethan Smith (no relation) had written a treatise on the subject in 1825, but it became associated with the Mormons in ways that reveal much about cultural identity and religion on the frontier.

In adopting this belief, the Mormons in fact addressed a vexing theological issue dating from the earliest European discoveries in the New World. A common question—who were these Indians and where did they originate?—needed to be answered on theological grounds. The question addresses a quandary: if the Bible is an unerring document, but Native Americans are nowhere mentioned in it, then that is troubling indeed because it means the Bible is incomplete or in error. However, if these indigenous peoples are already mentioned in it, as claimed by the Mormons, then that not only explains the origins of Native Americans but also vindicates the Bible. This idea had actually been around for a long time. As early as the 1520s, Pedro Mártir de Anghiera concluded that the Indians had been sent to the New World by King Solomon. Later in that same century, Juan Suárez de Peralta stated that these Indians were remnants of the lost ten tribes of Israel.

Addressing “Christian Cosmogony and the Problem of Indian Origins” in his seminal work The White Man’s Indian (1978), Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. astutely, if somewhat cynically, concluded that “a scriptural solution to the problem of [Indian] origins demanded efforts to plug up the loopholes left in the Mosaic account.”

14. Ethan Smith’s book View of the Hebrews: or the Tribes of Israel in America (Poultney, VT: Smith & Shute, 1825), was published five years before Joseph Smith claimed that the same belief was divinely revealed to him; this, as might be anticipated, led to claims of plagiarism, which Joseph Smith effectively refuted.

15. Peter Martyr, De Orbe Novo, the Eight Decades of Peter Martyr d’Anghera, translated by Francis August MacNutt, as referenced in Benjamin Mark Allen’s “Naked and Alone in a Strange New World: Early Modern Captivity and Its Mythos in Ibero-American Consciousness” (PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Arlington, 2008), 211.

This the Mormons did as no other religion had before or since. In words that seemed right out of the Bible in some places, and yet radically different and new in places, the Book of Mormon addressed questions about racial makeup and inter-hemispheric migration. In claiming that the Indians were descendents of the Lost Tribes who left the Holy Land as early as about 600 B.C. and traveled about halfway around the globe, finally landing in America, the Mormons resolved a long-standing theological dilemma, namely, how to account for the indigenous people in the New World that the Bible fails to mention.

The Mormons were not alone in their tendency to link Native Americans and Near Easterners. In the nineteenth century, many people imagined, and attempted to document, connections between the Indians that they encountered and the peoples of the Near East that they had read about in books. The Indians’ dark skin color, distinctive facial features, and unusual dress were often noted as linking Indians to tribal peoples of the Middle East and southwestern Asia. Travel writers were especially helpful here. As early as the 1830s, John Lloyd Stephens commented that a Bedouin Chief he met in Arabia reminded him of a “wild, savage, and lawless” Native American. Three decades later, Mark Twain opined about the same fascinating subject. In his classic *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), Twain noted that Arab women and children were “worn and sad, and distressed with hunger.” As Twain observed, “They reminded me much of Indians, did these people.”

The point here, however, is that although the Mormons were not the only people to see similarities between Native Americans and Old World tribes, they were without peer in seamlessly incorporating the supposed similarities into their actual religious beliefs. In times of changing social relationships, including increasing democratization, answering vexing questions about the origins of Native Americans was essential. In Mormon belief, the Indians had once possessed, but had now lost Judeo-Christian religion. Nevertheless, by embracing the Mormon faith Indians could be forgiven or redeemed. Mormons beliefs seamlessly explained race, and redeemed the word of God by reconstructing the genealogy of Indian origins.

The conversion of Lamanites was one goal of the Mormons’ westward migration and effective settlement of the Intermountain West. The

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first proving ground for Lamanite conversion may have been along the Missouri frontier, but the effort played out farther west as Mormons settled the Intermountain West and quickly developed missions to serve the Indians. For example, in northern Arizona and southern Utah, Jacob Hamblin and others devoted years to efforts that, in effect, transformed Indians from members of the Lost Tribes into Latter-day Saints. Consider perhaps the most famous example, namely Wakara (aka Walkara and Walker), the charismatic Ute Indian who served as a military leader to his people. In addition to being known as “Napoleon of the Desert,” Walkara was given an Oriental identity as “Soldan [Sultan] of the Red Paynims.”

In the nineteenth century, the term paynim generally referred to heathens (that is, non-Christians), and was often used for Muslims. This is in itself ironic, for Mormons considered Indians to pre-date Islam and so the characterization was not quite accurate. In the Mormon view, Indians are conceptualized as being from the Middle East originally but they had left in Old Testament times, and this means that Anglo-Americans are actually distant kin to the Native Americans. Both are descendants of Adam and Eve. The main point to recall here, then, is that the indigenous people encountered in early Mormon experience were simultaneously American and Near Eastern in origin. This interest endures. Not only the Book of Mormon itself, but also art, posters, novels and films based on the stories therein are popular with Mormons into the early twentieth century.

**Latter-day Saints and Ancient Egyptians**

In addition to beliefs about the tribal, Near Eastern origins of American Indians, the Mormon faith is linked by text and scripture to several specific places in the Near East. Consider first Egypt, which has long fascinated Americans generally and Mormons in particular. Much fantasy and misinformation surrounds this issue, but it must be discussed here because it is one of the phenomena that link the Mormons to both the Near East and a distant past. It was, in fact, the kind of issue that Mormon scholar Hugh Nibley bravely tackled on occasion, to the

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Like the Hajis of Meccah and Jerusalem”

The Book of Mormon places the “lost tribes’ of the ancient Near East in a New World setting, as exemplified by the missionary travels of Ammon to the land of the Nephites, illustrated here in a detail from a modern poster titled “Ammon—A Mighty Servant,” by Legends of the Dust. (Author’s collection)

delight of many rank and file Mormons. Nibley was the type of theologically oriented scholar who sought connections to many places, including ancient Egypt, as his studies of Aten attest. Far from being frivolous, the purported association between Mormons and ancient Egypt can now be understood in terms of a key structural element of Orientalism, namely, American Egyptomania.

This association in turn hinges on several connections the Mormons had with others who sought ancient truths in modern times. Consider

first the Freemasons, who incorporated or appropriated certain symbols that were supposedly, but never verifiably, derived from ancient Egypt. The subject of Mormonism’s relationship to Freemasonry is of enduring interest, but it was the supposed belief that Masons and hence Mormons inherited “Egyptian” traits that piqued the popular curiosity. The Mormons themselves added fuel to this fire, for the Book of Mormon itself employs the term “reformed Egyptian” to describe the language in which inspiration came to Joseph Smith, though there is considerable debate as to just what that language actually was. Nevertheless, the use of the term in early Mormon scripture cements the belief that Egypt or Egyptians were somehow involved. The term reformed is noteworthy because it suggests that what Smith received may have differed from the ancient texts, perhaps through the very process of translation.

The claims by witnesses that Joseph Smith had received “a quantity of records, written on papyrus, in Egyptian hieroglyphics” in the late 1830s certainly reinforced the Mormons’ association with ancient Egypt. After he left the church, and could thus reveal seemingly protected secrets, Warren Parrish claimed “I have set by his side and penned down the translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks [sic] as he claimed to receive it by direct inspiration from Heaven.”21 The controversial Joseph Smith papyri, about which Hugh Nibley famously wrote and LDS Egyptologist John Gee urged caution,22 again reminds one that perceptions may be more important than reality. This Egyptian artifact, which was purchased from a traveling road show or museum in 1835, is a case in point. Smith claimed to have translated much of it through divine inspiration as the Book of Abraham, though later investigation by Egyptologists casts doubt on his interpretation. Whether or not Smith erred in translating the work is not the concern here, however. My point is that the papyri itself was valuable enough to be acquired outright by the early church and quickly became part of the canon of scriptural material. The papyri acquisition and translation fueled the belief that ancient Egyptian was being revealed to Smith at exactly the time that there was widespread popular interest in ancient Egypt. In other words, Smith’s act (acquisition and translation of this ancient document) helped associate the Mormons with Egypt in the popular mind.

Rather than debate the merits of Joseph Smith’s translation of the papyri, therefore, I think a more appropriate course here is to demonstrate how such material became culturally iconic in the process of creating Mormon identity. The same is true of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, said to be guides created by Joseph Smith and/or his scribes to aid translating Egyptian texts into English, much like the Rosetta Stone. For our purposes here, such church artifacts are most effectively viewed in light of prevailing belief systems, regardless of their authenticity. Both the Joseph Smith papyri/Book of Abraham and the Kirtland Egyptian Papers are, by the church’s own admission, important documents. They underscore the importance of Egypt as a touchstone to Mormon identity.

Consider in this context the word Deseret, which was first used in the Book of Mormon but later applied to a geographic territory. This word is characteristically Mormon in that it is reportedly of ancient usage and distant in origin. As stated in Ether 2:3, the ancient Jaredites “did carry with them deseret, which, by interpretation, is a honey bee; and thus did they carry with them swarms of bees, and all manner of that which was upon the face of the land, seeds of every kind.” According to some sources, the word deseret is remarkably similar to the Egyptian Deshret, or the Land of the Bee, as Lower Egypt was called. Proponents of this connection point to the ancient Egyptian Red Crown, which bears the curving tongue of a bee as a symbol. Like the Egyptians, the argument goes, the Mormons and the ancient Egyptians used the term to refer to both a geographical area and the honey bee itself.

As should be apparent by now, it is the perceived connection between Mormons and Egypt that is of interest here, rather than the veracity of claims about the connection. The enduring belief in a connection between Mormon beliefs and ancient Egypt is what should interest us regardless of whether or not the connection was real. With this caveat in mind, we can consider Mormon identity in light of the broader American fascination with Egypt. The historical record confirms that the Mormon Church has been associated with ancient Egypt since its inception, through the writings and actions of the Prophet Joseph Smith himself. That alone makes the phenomenon of Mormon Egyptomania worth discussing and deconstructing.

To better understand this connection between Mormons and ancient Egyptians, we should first place popular ideas and beliefs about Egypt in the broader context of American popular culture. We are ambivalent
about Egypt, which is to say one perception of it is positive and the other negative. On the one hand, we recognize that ancient Egypt was a powerful, advanced civilization possessing considerable knowledge. However, a second, negative perception ran deep in Judeo-Christian tradition. This associated Egypt with slavery and despotism, the pharaohs serving as the epitome of oppressors. As Scott Trafton astutely noted, “At times Egypt was a symbol split by politics of power and oppression: half secular greatness, pure and progenitive, half religious oppression, despotic and destructive.” Trafton underscores the importance of Egypt in a developing American consciousness, noting that “the semiotic and ideological links between the Nile and the Mississippi were formative links for the iconography of western expansion.”

It was on the westward-moving frontier, in the vicinity of the great Mississippi River, that Joseph Smith’s fascination with Egypt, as metaphor and inspiration, reached its zenith. Joseph Smith and the early Mormons were not alone in their fascination with ancient Egypt. With the publication of travelogues like John Lloyd Stephens’s wildly popular 1838 book *Travels to Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land*, American Orientalism flourished at exactly the same time that the Mormon faith took root in fertile soil on the doorstep between the Old Northwest and the Far West. At this time, Americans were seeking answers to many questions about the age of their continent, the origin of the Native Americans, and the meaning of the distinctive new landscape they encountered as they moved farther west. As Americans inquired, they found a ready source of answers in what they had learned about the peoples and places of the Old World—particularly the Orient. In short order, the Mississippi River was conflated with the Nile, and the native peoples equated with the lost or ancient peoples of the Orient. In a sense, Americans were giving their own Native peoples and landscapes Old World identities—naming cities along the Mississippi River Cairo and Memphis or, closer to what would become the Mormons’ new homeland in Utah Territory, branding a triangular shaped rock in a Nevada lake the Pyramid of Cheops as John Charles Frémont did in 1844. All of this was part of a broader Orientalization of the American frontier that I have written about elsewhere.


Keeping in mind that American Orientalism and its offshoot American Egyptomania flourished at the same time that the Mormon Church flowered on the frontier, it is no surprise that the new faith became embroiled in a subject of growing national concern—the involuntary enslavement of an otherwise free people. For the record, Smith held strong anti-slavery views, as did many Mormons who hailed mainly from New England. This, however, did not stop them from being equated with slave ownership as anti-Mormons often turned a trope against the Mormon leadership by branding them as enslavers of their own followers. The issue of slavery was closely tied to race, of course, but it also resonated in terms of the free-will issue raised earlier. Ultimately, Egypt was symbolically associated with both darkness and light in the popular mind.

One aspect of darkness associated with Egypt and the Near East was the worship of not only numerous gods but also the sun. Sun worship has a long and colorful history, and Judeo-Christian religion generally is heir to it, albeit in abstract form: For example, in a subliminal association of the sun with the son (of God), Jesus is said to be the light and his resurrection promises to renew life like the rising sun. In another words, the son also rises. The placement of churches and graves facing east is a vestige of these beliefs, but the Mormons' explicit reference to the sun caught the attention of followers and detractors alike. In placing statues of the Angel Moroni to face eastward, for example, the Mormons made explicit something that had long been forgotten in other Judeo-Christian faiths. Moreover, the Mormons' use of sunstones at the Nauvoo Temple honored this celestial body in ways that were both arcane and straightforward. The beautifully crafted sunstones are said to reflect a passage in the Doctrine and Covenants: “These are they whose bodies are celestial, whose glory is that of the sun, even the glory of God, the highest of all, whose glory the sun of the firmament is written of as being typical.” (D & C, 76:70) In literally placing images of the sun on their temples, the Mormons stepped across a divide. Although Christianity in its deeper meanings in fact plumbs the sun, it had distanced itself from such outright solar iconography.

By essentially anthropomorphizing the sun in these sunstones (that is, making it a sentient being with a human face), the Mormons had fearlessly resurrected ancient ideas on the modern American frontier. The Mormons, of course, were not really sun worshippers. However, to the
uninitiated and those seeking to brand the Mormons as strange throwbacks, such explicit language as that in the Doctrine and Covenants and symbolism such as the sunstones gave the impression that their faith and loyalties were somehow divided between the spiritual and the physical world. It was easy for American Christians to imagine the Mormons as somehow linked with worshippers in the ancient world, including Egypt and Mesopotamia.

How long have Mormons associated their own past with that of ancient Egypt? A modern example dates from the mid-twentieth century, when Thomas Child erected the fascinating Gilgal Sculpture Garden in Salt Lake City. As Child searched for material that could represent the profound beliefs of Joseph Smith, he relied on one of the world’s most venerable symbols—the ancient Sphinx of Egypt. This selection some might consider whimsical, but Child regarded it as serious indeed, for he transformed Smith into an ancient icon that has symbolized both wisdom and mystery. Child’s goal, of course, was to venerate Smith as the possessor of secrets not known to mortals. Far from being irreverent, then, Child called upon Egypt for assistance. What better way to personify the enigmatic Smith than to conflate him with the world’s most enigmatic figure? In using these symbols, Child built on a long tradition of venerating Egypt, for many Americans agree[d] with Herodotus, who noted about two thousand years ago, “concerning Egypt . . . there is no country that possess so many wonders, nor any that has such a number of works that defy description.”

Mormons as New Zionists

So far, I have discussed the Mormons’ supposed connections to Ancient Persia and Egypt as factors in their identity. These were important, but a core belief that the Latter-day Saints were/are the new Jews—and their land the New Zion—was the bedrock upon which other Orientalist perceptions about Mormons developed. In his book *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, biographer Richard Lyman Bushman observes that Smith was more like a biblical-style prophet than any other religious figure America has ever produced.

leadership involved many references to Old World precedents, but this new religion was characteristically American in other ways, namely its production of a new literature, its millennialism, and its near obsession with order and progress.

Long before they moved into the Intermountain West, the Mormons looked eastward for inspiration, and the Holy Land was the gold standard of references. In 1841, Orson Hyde travelled to Jerusalem, where he built an altar on the Mount of Olives. In so doing, Hyde endorsed the Mormon belief that the Saints were the counterparts of the ancient Jews. The nineteenth century Mormon appropriation of the North American frontier as the Holy Land occurred quickly, for by 1850 many observers were making comparisons between the Saints and their biblical ancestors.

Mormon symbolism, too, hints at connections to ancient Israel. This again brings up the Mormons’ controversial early connections to Freemasonry. Given the Mason’s ecumenical beliefs—one could
theoretically be a good Mason and a good Muslim, for example—it is not surprising that the Mormons also found themselves branded as non-
Christians who had exotic, mysterious roots in the Temple of Solomon. The Mormons’ use of several traditional Masonic symbols, such as the square and compass, reinforced this association with ancient Israel. However, it should be noted that some Mormons claim this similarity is coincidental, that is, a result of Mormons and Masons separately basing their beliefs on knowledge of ancient Temple worship. Regardless of inspiration, though, the end result is much the same: Mormons, like Masons, are said by critics to derive their inspiration from arcane, ancient, “non-Christian” sources. That, to the popular mind, helped cast both groups as not only secretive, but also exotic. This is ironic in light of the broader popular belief that the American religious drama—which of course included the Mormons—was somehow linked to ancient Judea.

The creation of the America-as-Israel myth can be traced to the early Puritans, many of whom interpreted their transatlantic voyages as modern-day version of the Israelites’ miraculous passage through the parted Red Sea. This placed the British subjects who founded the American colonies in the 1600s in an ancient, and heroic, role. That process, of course, required specific places in which the drama could be enacted, or rather re-enacted. On the western frontier in the 1840s, Nauvoo represented such a place, seemingly biblically named and positioned along the American Nile. Although it would be in Utah that the Mormons’ claim as Israelites took firmest root, the trek westward to that new homeland was filled with Near East-inspired metaphors.

The Mormons’ exodus to Utah was understandably cast as a biblical drama. These were challenging times, and stories from the Bible shaped peoples’ perceptions of everyday places. As an imaginative eighteen year old girl travelling to meet the Mormons leaving Nauvoo in February of 1846, Emmeline B. Wells wrote that “we reached the destined place about sunset when we came in view of,” as she called it, “the Mormon encampment.” To the impressionable Wells, the scene “…looked like pictures I have seen of ancients pitching their tents and journeying from place to place with their cattle and their goods.” There is considerable

27. See, for example, the website FAQ–General Questions About Mormonism. www.utlm.org/faqs/faqgeneral.htm.
28. Emmeline B. Wells (1828-1920), Diaries, entry for February 27, 1846 (BYU electronic resources, Vault MSS 510), 27
evidence that Wells was not alone in drawing analogies to biblical times and places here. In preparing to lead the Saints westward from Winter Quarters, Brigham Young himself is said to have stated that “I feel all the time like Moses.” In July of 1847, just three years after Smith’s death, an advance guard of the Saints reached the Intermountain West after a long trek to the mountains across the Great Plains, a diaspora that was also commonly interpreted as the Jewish Exodus. Through such prose, the Mormon experience was equated with a much older drama from the ancient world, namely, the travails (and travels) of the nomadic tribes of the Near East. That mindset helped recast a large portion of the American frontier into the Old World desert and steppe. The point to remember here is that both the Mormons and their adversaries participated in the process of Orientalization.

Mormons had been easy to equate with “Orientals” as part of their Middlewestern frontier experience, but no part of their far flung geographic spread helped cast them in the role of Old World patriarchs than did their desert experience in the Intermountain West. After 1847, the Mormons claimed the entire interior American West as their home—which they called Deseret and whose landscape soon bore their distinctive stamp which some saw as patently “biblical” in appearance. Under Brigham Young’s leadership, the area grew rapidly and was transformed from “wilderness” into “Zion” within a few short years. In Utah, physical geography and group psychology worked hand in hand to Orientalize both people and place. The juxtaposition of prominent mountains and desert valleys along the Wasatch Front was indeed reminiscent of the Holy Land. Brigham Young’s certainty about the location seemed foreordained, and hence prophetic, much like a verse in the Bible: “Go forth from your native land, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12) Young had reportedly seen this land in a vision, and this further reinforced the Mormon’s mission to transform the wilderness into home after 1847. By 1849, when Mormon

Apostle Orson Pratt prepared an inspirational publication titled *The New Jerusalem; or the Fulfillment of Ancient Prophecy* for prospective converts in England, he was sure to draw links between this New Jerusalem in the American West and the Holy Land. Pratt claimed that the words in Isaiah—“O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain” (40:9)—foretold that the Saints would move to Utah, which was, in his words, “one of the most wild, romantic and retired countries on [sic] the great western hemisphere.” Romantic is the operative word here, for the Mormon experience was part of an emotionally uplifting drama that both created a new/old identity and also created new/old places. As if to endorse this connection between Utah and Ancient Israel, a ram’s head is rendered in stone as an ornament atop the arch in the front door of the old Providence meeting house chapel (now the historic Providence Inn). This nineteenth century artifact reminds one that the Saints’ Zion was built with the Old Zion in mind.

Pratt’s sentiment represents what historian Ernest Lee Tuvesson called “[t]he idea of ‘retirement’—that Zion must establish itself and prepare for its work in complete isolation.…” It was part of a plan voiced by many church leaders, beginning with Joseph Smith, to “extend the mighty efforts and enterprise of a free people from the east to the west sea, and make the wilderness blossom as the rose.” That metaphor would be used again and again as the Mormons transformed the Intermountain West into a garden, further enhanced by the region’s semi-aridity. In Utah, the Mormons found, or rather helped create, the perfect landscape in which to act out this biblical Near Eastern drama. As art historian John Davis observes, “… the singular landscape features surrounding them—such as the Great Salt Lake, with its evocation of the Dead Sea, or the ever present desert, which inspired such town names as Moab, Utah—only reinforced the connection and aided in the creation of their own ‘sacred’ space.”

One of the most enduring tropes for Utah as the Near East was that biblically-inspired concept of a chosen people making the desert blossom like the rose. The sentiment and phrasing originates in Isaiah, but is also mentioned in Isaiah-like prose in the *Doctrine and Covenants*:

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Mormons have been associated with ancient Israel since the inception of their Church in the 1830s. An ornamental keystone in the shape of a ram’s head—a symbol long associated with the ancient Jews—crows the arch above the front door of the Old Rock Meeting House (ca. 1870) in Providence, Utah. (Photograph by Dan Miller, 2012)

“And the Lord, even the Savior, shall stand in the midst of his people, and shall reign over all flesh …. And in the barren deserts there shall come forth pools of living water; and the parched ground shall no longer be a thirsty land.”34 Note, however, that the Mormon passage was written well before the Saints ever migrated into the arid West, thus giving it a ring of prophecy. By the 1850s it was frequently used to endorse the presence of the Mormons in their New Western Zion. In April of 1853, Orson Hyde thanked God for “thy manifold blessings and mercies extended unto us—that since we have been compelled to flee to the valleys and caves of the mountains and hide ourselves in thy secret chambers, from the face of the serpent or dragon of persecution, red with the blood of the Saints and martyrs of Jesus, thou has caused the land to be fruitful—the wilderness and desert to rejoice and blossom as the rose.”35

34. Doctrine and Covenants 133:25,29.
In 1865, when he delivered a speech in St. George, Utah, George Albert Smith noted that the Mormons had “the place looking like the Garden of Eden.” Smith also agreed with Elder Snow that “[a] people possessed of such great energy aided by the ready co-operation of their brethren in the north, are bound to conquer that desert and not only make it blossom as the rose, but make it one of the most delightful regions of the earth.” Two years later, in 1867, Orson Pratt observed that the ancient church had failed to fulfill prophecies, but that the Latter-day Saints were already fulfilling both ancient and latter-day prophecies; namely, to “[g]o from all these nations [of the Old World] to the great western hemisphere, locate yourselves on the high portions of the North American Continent in the midst of the mountains, and be gathered into one.” Pratt reminded his listeners that Old Testament was the catalyst. As he put it, “The Prophet Isaiah, in the 35th chapter, says ‘The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.’”

The phrase seemed inescapable. Three years later, Pratt again referenced Isaiah and Mormon scripture, observing “After we are gathered, the desert is to rejoice and blossom as the rose,” adding that he often thought of this passage as he witnessed Utah’s many orchards and gardens blossoming in Spring. It also endorsed the Saints as bona fide desert dwellers. As Pratt put it, “Every one knows that fruitful as it now is, when we came here it was called a desert,” but desert now had a positive connotation. As pressure from Gentiles mounted, G. A. Smith noted that “I thank the Lord for these deserts, rocks and mountains, for they may be a protection to us,” observing that “…while our enemies are trying to exterminate us, Israel dwells safely in the tops of the mountains.” Smith words closely parallel an original passage in the Old Testament, which had prophesied that “the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains.” The Mormons had now become, as I put it in Go East, Young Man…, a Chosen People in a Chosen Land.

This, too, built on pre-Utah experiences. In the early 1840s, the Mormons “… took on the role of fostering the Jewish revitalization of

39. Historical Records of Parowan, Utah, 1856-1859 (August 23, 1857), 25, Salt Lake City, Church Historians Office.
40. Micah 4:15.
Jerusalem, the other heavenly city.” In this the Mormons had an ulterior motive, for, “like many dissenting religious sects, they felt that the restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land was a necessary prelude to the return of the Messiah.” The Mormons, of course, still have a strong interest in Jerusalem, as evident in the BYU center there. However, it should be understood that they consider their presence there rather uniquely—simultaneously as both Christians and Jews. That search for a primal Judeo-Christian tribal identity is atavistic enough for Mormons who—like all Christians—can ultimately trace their cultural roots and religious ideology to a source in the Middle East. However, few Christians in modern times adopted it with such zeal. The important thing to recall here is that geography helped the Mormons make this transition. As W. D. Davies concluded, the Mormons viewed themselves as “…pilgrims marching to a promised land, the center of which is a Zion, a New Jerusalem.”

As British traveler Phil Robinson observed in the 1880s, Salt Lake City was “Oriental in its general appearance, English in its details.” Building on the Oriental theme, Robinson observed that Salt Lake City was “the young rival of Mecca, the Zion of the Mormons, the Latter-Day Jerusalem.” He sensed a connection between Mormons and Muslims, but especially between Mormons and Jews. Not content to end his comparisons there, Robinson added that Salt Lake City was a place where “Shepherd Kings” governed “the place of the tabernacle of an ancient prophet-ruled Theocracy ….” As George A. Smith observed in describing similarities between Mormons and Jews in Utah, “The children of Israel built of sun-dried bricks [and] we have done the same.” For his part, when Robinson summarized Salt Lake City as “a beautiful Goshen of tranquility in the midst of a troublous Egypt” he subliminally conflated them with their Jewish counterparts in the Bible.

43. See Richard E. Bennett, *We’ll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus, 1846-1848* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1997), 254, “General Epistle from the Council of the Twelve Apostles to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day [sic] Saints Abroad Dispersed Throughout the Earth,” 23, December 1847. (LDS Church Archives).
44. Phil Robinson, *Sinners and Saints: A Tour Across the States and Round Them: with Three Months Among the Mormons* (Boston: Roberts Bros., 1883), 68-71. In Genesis (46:31-47), Goshen is described as a land where the Israelites could remain four hundred years until Moses led them to the Promised Land. In this passage, Robinson appears to be positioning the Mormons as Israelites, though one wonders just how “beautiful” Goshen really was.
This, as noted above, had been going on for a long time. Upon leaving Salt Lake City in the 1850s, Mormon leader Hosea Stout observed that a “light cloudy fog rested on it, in which we could see President Young’s House, like Solomon’s Temple in the midst of the glory of God.” Such references to biblical history were common among Mormons and non-Mormons. In 1875, Nelson’s popular travel book described the steaming hot springs north of Ogden in biblical terms as “clouds of vapour [that] rise far away at the foot of the mountains, reminding one of the ‘cloud’ which protected the Israelites by day on their march through the weary wilderness.” Those Israelites, of course, had a modern day counterpart—the Mormons.

**Mormons as Muslims**

In addition to ancient Egypt and Judea, however, Arabia and much of the area claimed by Islam also loomed as a reference point to the newly-created Mormon faith in the 1800s. Those outside of the faith found it tempting indeed to brand Mormons as neo-Muslims, so to speak. In fact, no aspect of Mormon identity linked it more palpably to the Orient than its supposed similarities to Islam. Certainly, some superficial or perhaps coincidental factors helped conflate Mormon and Muslim identity, not the least of which was the name “Mormon” itself, which subliminally resonates as “Moorman,” the name commonly given to Moors, or Muslims from North Africa. Then, too, both the Mormons and the Muslims prohibited their followers from imbibing alcohol (wine, in particular, is mentioned by the latter). In a remarkable convergence, smoking tobacco was recently named as *haram*—that is prohibited, in Islam.

In the earliest years of the Mormon Church, some of these similarities were apparently coincidental, though there is evidence that Joseph Smith himself was aware of Islam and its theology, and in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Brigham Young even more so.

There are some noteworthy similarities between the two faiths that demand closer scrutiny. Consider again the honey bee, which only

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appears in the Bible as something that will sting, but about which chapter (sura) 16 (“The Bee”) in the Qur’an states: “And the Lord taught the bee to build its cells [hive] on hills [mountains], on trees, and in men’s habitations [thatch].” To the Muslims, the honey bee is one of God’s/Allah’s creatures that not only provides sustenance (honey) but also symbolizes the power of collective action. The hive mentioned in the Qur’an symbolizes the omnipresence of the bee’s industriousness and, perhaps by coincidence, the beehive also became an important symbol to western culture at the dawn of the industrial revolution in northern Europe. As a 1724 Masonic catechism put it, the beehive was a “Grand Hieroglyphick” [sic] because the industrious honey bee “excels all living creatures in the Contrivance and Commodiousness of its Habitation or Combe.” For their part, the Mormons thought so too. The point to remember here, however, is that claims linking Mormons and Muslims need to be based on more than shared symbols or theological similarities. Rather, smoking guns such as actual quotes by church leaders are needed to substantiate any alleged connections. Again, though, the point to remember is that what people believe becomes real if they believe it fervently enough.

Let us now look more closely at the many alleged connections between Mormons and Muslims. A BYU-sponsored conference in the early 1980s on the subject of “Mormons and Muslims: Spiritual Foundations and Modern Manifestations” did just that. In the resulting book from those lectures, Spencer Palmer concluded that there was indeed “Common Ground” between both faiths. As Palmer noted, both require total commitment of their worshippers, demand obedience to a living God “with retribution and judgment for the sinner,” share “the common belief in the physical resurrection of the dead,” and “…greatly emphasize the importance of prophets” who reveal new written scriptures (the Qur’an and Book of Mormon), restore the patriarchal religion of father Abraham, strongly oppose idolatry, and address the issue of fallen angels.\textsuperscript{47} As BYU Vice President Noel B. Reynolds also concluded in introducing that same volume, “…there are many important elements

of Mormon thought in which we [Mormons] would feel closer to the followers of Muhammad than to the contemporary Christian culture in which we have been located since our beginnings.”

In this statement, which would be viewed as far more controversial today than it was in the pre-9/11 world, Reynolds echoed more than a century of scholarship, some of which it very enthusiastic, about such similarities. As classical scholar Eduard Meyer famously wrote more than a century ago (1901), “Mormonism excited my interest at an early age before all else because of the surprising analogy, extending even to the smallest details, between it and the fundamental drives, external forms, and the historical development of Islam.” Meyer, too, was building on a venerable tradition linking Mormons and Muslims.

From the outset, in fact, Mormon identity was conflated with Islam in popular culture. Early observers quickly noted that the young American prophet Joseph Smith, like the Middle Eastern prophet Muhammad, challenged the established religious and social order. Controversial since their establishment of their Church in 1830, the Mormons relied on post Mosaic revelation as a core of their new religion. Created on the periphery of a settled world, they quickly became part of the most successful and controversial religious drama on the American frontier—and in all of American history, for that matter. Similar claims, of course, are made about the rapid spread of Islam shortly after its founding.

Although the Mormon faith deviates in many significant ways from Islam, many observers stressed the similarities and conveniently overlooked those differences. This happened in part because there was a preoccupation with Islam even before the Mormon Church came into existence. As early as 1829, for example, R. Southey opined that “America is in...danger from religious fanaticism” because the people had not been provided adequate religious instruction. As Southey put it, “Were there ANOTHER MOHAMMAD to arise, there is no part of the world where he would find more scope, or fairer opportunity, than in THAT PART of the Anglo-American Union.”

To many nineteenth century observers, the Mormons represented exactly that threat—a

50. R. Southey, Sir Thomas More; or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society, vol ii, (1829), 42
religion that seemed to be built on the shoulders of—yet might transcend and even supersede—Christianity.

Southey’s words were prophetic, for that is exactly what happened shortly thereafter. In the eyes of many, America had indeed given birth to, as was commonly claimed, “Another Mohmmad.” Given European and American awareness of, and concerns about, Islam, it is no surprise that Mormonism was quickly conflated with that much older, but still relatively recent (at least compared to Judaism and Christianity) faith. As early as 1831, for example, critics of the Mormons called Joseph Smith “the Ontario Mahomet.” Like Islam, Smith’s recently-revealed religion challenged the belief that the Bible was the final word of God. Smith’s far more sensual view of heaven also helped ensure that he would be compared to Muhammad.

It is here that skeptics would rightly demand proof that Mormon leaders were aware of Islam and its history and teachings. According to some sources, Smith himself invoked the name Muhammad and compared himself to that prophet. In 1838 when the Mormons were increasingly threatened, for example, Smith reportedly claimed that “I will be to this generation a second Mohammed, whose motto in treating for peace was ‘the Alcoran [Qur’an] or the sword.” Such wording was not only colorful; it was downright inflammatory to Christians who associated Islam with Near Eastern tyranny. In 1842, John C. Bennett offered a scathing, anti-Muslim inspired opinion of Mormonism, noting that “[i]t is unnecessary to do more than to allude to the well-known history of Mohomet [sic], who, fatally for mankind, was enabled to carry out, to the fullest extent, schemes similar to those I have mentioned above,” namely the Latter-day Saints. Bennett cleverly, some might say deviously, linked the Mormon faith with Islam to make a point about the falsity of faiths of which he disapproved: “There is no doubt,” Bennett concluded, “that Joe Smith would, if he possessed the capacity, imitate the great Arabian imposter, even in his wars and conquests.”

This made for sensational press as it seamlessly linked the Mormons to the Muslims. It should be noted, however, that these comparisons would not have been made, or would have made little sense, unless

Smith’s detractors—American Protestant clergymen in particular—had not been preoccupied with the dominance of Islam in a land that they still claimed as their spiritual homeland, namely, Palestine and the Holy Land. In other words, as Timothy Marr astutely observes in his 2006 book *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, both Islam and Mormonism were threats to the established religious order. And yet, those same efforts to discredit Mormon faith as Muslim idolatry ironically had the opposite effect intended. As curious people pondered the Mormons in these provocative passages, some of which addressed sexual or sexual issues, they became fascinated if not titillated. In other words, rather than being revolting, the Mormons-as-Muslims analogy actually kindled considerable popular interest in the Mormon faith.53

This virulent and sensationalist prose further Orientalized Joseph Smith and his followers. Those who compared both religions found it relatively easy to equate Joseph Smith with Muhammad and the Mormons with Muslims because there were, in fact, some similarities. After all, the leaders of both faiths were called prophets. Both challenged the existing religious order, offering as an alternative a complete set of beliefs and texts. Both were charismatic and spoke of their religious system possessing the truth, and their followers being enlightened, while non-believers were somehow benighted. Interestingly, both faiths soon split into two camps based on hereditary lines. To this day, the Sunnis and Shiites dispute whether a direct hereditary connection to Muhammad is necessary for leadership of the faithful (Shiites claim that it is); so, too, do the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Christ) disagree about the importance of ancestry in leadership (members of the Reorganized Church claim that it is).

Then, too, both of these relatively new religions—Islam and Mormonism—were the subject of considerable tumult and even violence as they established themselves. To continue placing the Mormon faith in an Old World, Middle-Eastern context, when the Mormons finally stood up to violence—that is, stopped turning the other cheek after their religion suffered outright persecution—Mormon leaders were readily compared to the warrior Muhammad and his zealous followers. As early as 1834, when Joseph Smith founded the ill-fated Zion’s Camp,

the Mormons were associated with paramilitary organizations. These, according to the Saints, were solely for protection, but others viewed them with considerable suspicion. To those concerned about the growing power of the Mormons, the Nauvoo Legion was considered more offensive than defensive in nature; detractors thus viewed Mormons as a group of religious warriors having the potential to force religious beliefs upon the surrounding populace. For his part, Joseph Smith’s martyrdom helped link his fate with that of earlier prophets, including John the Baptist and Jesus, who had died for their religious beliefs in the Holy Land. Then, too, Smith was conflated with Muhammad’s grandson Husayn, who was also “martyred” for his faith, albeit in battling other opposing Muslim forces. By contrast, Muhammad survived attempts on his life, but that only helped equate Smith’s successor, Brigham Young, with the Muslim prophet who unified the faithful in a desert setting. That move to Utah recalled the Muslim’s earlier escape from persecution as Muhammad led his followers from Mecca to Medina, an event called the Hijra that is recalled to this day by Muslim pilgrims in Arabia.

In addition to interpreting Young’s flight to Utah with Muhammad’s flight to Medina from Mecca, others envisioned the Mormons to be Near Eastern desert warriors in the mold of Muhammad’s early followers. Leaving little doubt that the desert-dwelling Latter-day Saints had been transformed into the desert tribes of Arabia, E. Boteler Chalmer wrote in 1852 that “From the far west a voice arises claiming sovereignty; proclaiming the advent of a second Mahomet, the unleashing of a sword as devastating as was his, backed by the same omnipotence, and calling upon all the nations of the world to give way before its might.” Leaving little doubt about who he had in mind, Chalmer quickly added: “That second Mahomet was Joseph Smith; that kingdom is the Mormon settlement.”

Ironically, Chalmer’s term second Mahomet takes on two meanings as Brigham Young became the second Mormon figure to be readily equated with the Muslim prophet. By this time, in fact, the popular mind had transformed Young into a Muslim potentate, in no small measure assisted by the Saint’s adoption of polygamy, which, though endorsed in the Old Testament, was more often associated with Muslims in nineteenth century popular culture.

Few writers had more experience with Islam than explorer Richard F. Burton, who travelled to Utah in 1860 and readily equated Mormons with Islamic patriarchs. The title of this paper, in fact, derives from Burton’s conflating the Mormons with peoples of the Holy Land and Arabia, but he was only one of many travelers who sensed—perhaps imagined is a better word—a seamless connection between Mormonism and “Mohammedism,” as it was commonly called. Burton’s mentioning Mecca and Jerusalem in the same sentence is significant, for the latter city had long ago been conquered by Muslims despite its origins as a Jewish city later associated with the birth of Christianity. More broadly speaking, though, both Old World cities were sired by the Abrahamic traditions of the Near East, which includes Judaism and Islam among its followers. So, too, was Great Salt Lake City, which now offered a counterpart on American soil.

With good reason, Burton was recognized by Church authorities as “the famous Orientalist” when he visited Utah. As the American public knew well, Burton had traveled extensively in the Middle East, where he developed a lifelong interest in Islam. It was, after all, the zealous Burton who defied Muslim law to travel to Mecca as a hajji in the 1850s. This trip was dangerous as well as exhilarating, but then again Burton relished life on the edge. By this time, in fact, Burton had morphed somewhat, often being pictured in Middle Eastern/Muslim dress—a reminder that he was as much a cultural chameleon as an ethnographer.

Burton found himself at home in Utah as the locale seemed to resonate as the Near East. He observed of Salt Lake City that “every meridional street is traversed on both sides by a streamlet of limpid water, verdure fringed, and gurgling with a murmur which would make a Persian Moollah long for improper drinks.”55 This, of course, was a reference to the fact that Islam also prohibits the consumption of alcohol. Despite his Christian faith, Burton could also write more seriously, or even reverently, about Islam. When Burton reached the point overlooking the Great Salt Lake Valley in 1860, even he confessed that it was easy for migrating Mormons and others to be moved to tears when gazing upon the valley below. As Burton’s writings reveal, the Mormons’ polygamy, temple worship, and desert setting conspired to impart both

an Old Testament and an Islamic character to people and place here. Ultimately, as he put it, Salt Lake City was “New Hierosolyma, or Jerusalem, alias Zion on the tops of the mountains, the future city of Christ ....” With the Orient he knew so well firmly in mind, Burton added that that Mormon “pilgrims” traveling to this city, “... like the Hajis of Meccah and Jerusalem, give vent to emotions long pent up with their bosoms by sobs and tears, laughter and congratulations, psalms and hysterics.”

Burton recognized that the Orient offers two often divergent aspects of life in the West—faith and sex—in abundance. That, one suspects, is one of the reasons why he found the Mormons so interesting. Burton was, after all, a student of both religion and sexuality. A touchstone here was polygamy. Muslims, who continue to practice polygamy to this day, served as the prototype of polygamists in the nineteenth century. For that reason alone, it is no surprise that Mormons would be conflated with Muslims as soon as the secret escaped. Consider, for example, the words of Mormon critic John C. Bennett, who wrote in 1842: “The most extraordinary and infamous feature of the social and religious system established by the Mormon Prophet, and one in which he closely resembles his master and model, Mahomet, is the secret regulations he has formed regarding the sexes.”\(^{57}\) When critics complained that the Mormons enslaved their women, they often used the same logic as British Orientalist Stanley Lane-Poole, who wrote that “[t]he degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten into the whole system of Islam.”\(^{58}\)

The critique could also be humorous. Mark Twain made reference to the Mormons’ “peculiar” type of marriage in his travel epic to the real Orient called *The Innocents Abroad*. In one notable passage, Twain observed that although polygamy was prohibited for the common man in Turkey, “[t]hey say the Sultan has eight hundred wives.” This, Twain opined, “… almost amounts to bigamy.” As Twain snidely concluded, “[i]t makes our cheeks burn with shame to see such a thing permitted here in Turkey” while “[w]e do not mind it so much in Salt Lake….”\(^{59}\)

In Utah, the Mormons’ decision to use force, if necessary, in defending their faith helped cement their image as fierce desert tribesmen. As an admirer of both the Mormons—and all desert warriors generally—Richard Burton observed that “‘Mormon’ had in fact become a word of fear, the Gentiles looked upon the Latter Day [sic] Saints much as our crusading ancestors regarded the ‘Hashshashiyun,’ [i.e., assassins]

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whose name indeed was almost enough to frighten them." Deftly weaving Mormon patriarchs into an Old World desert kingdom tapestry, Burton further noted that “Mr. Brigham Young was the Shaykh-el-Jebel, the Old Man of the Hill redivivus, [while] Messrs. Kimball and Wells were the chief of his Fidawin, and ‘Zion on the tops of the mountains’ formed a fair representation of Alamut.”60 In Burton’s vivid imagination, and the imaginations of many others, Mormons had essentially become Arab Muslims.

By 1877, when H. M. Field wrote his popular book From Egypt to Japan, this popular theologian could, with near impunity, denigrate both the Muslim prophet and his Mormon counterpart. Field noted that that “By many he [Muhammad] is dismissed at once as a vulgar imposter, a sort of Joe Smith, who invented monstrous lies, and by stoutly sticking to them got others to believe in them, and as soon as he rallied a few followers about him, compelled neighboring tribes to accept his faith by the unsparing use of the sword.”61 Reading between the lines, one can sense that Field was as worried about the Mormons’ growing power as he was about their theological missteps. Tellingly, Field’s book was still being published in 1897, when Mormons had officially distanced themselves from polygamy and Utah had attained statehood. This is a reminder that stereotypes die hard, for even though the supposed Mormon threat had diminished, Field’s vitriolic (and almost clumsily archaic) prose still painted them as sinister Oriental Others. For its part, the Mormon Church of a century ago seemed little concerned about the Mormons as Muslims issue, having built a thriving lakeside amusement pavilion (Saltair) in a patently Moorish style in 1893. More to the point, the impressive Granite Stake Tabernacle in South Salt Lake City was built in 1903 to resemble a mosque, complete with a spectacular dome and minarets. It was demolished in 1956.

Are comparisons between Muslims and Mormons still made today? The answer is yes, especially when they serve critics. Consider, for example, the bruising Republican presidential primary race of 2011, when the religious right became concerned about Mormon candidate Mitt Romney’s presence among the field of candidates favored by the religious right, especially Rick Santorum, Michelle Bachmann and Rick Perry.

61. H. M. Field, From Egypt to Japan (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1877 and 1897), 49.
Concerned that Romney’s religion disqualified him as a “real” Christian, and that the Mormon Church has some conspiratorial agenda in taking over American politics, these conservative Christian critics focused their ire on Glenn Beck, the conservative Mormon celebrity who presumably supported a Mormon candidate. In September of 2011, with the dialogue heating up, a Christian radio show host noted that Beck should be regarded with suspicion because “he is a Muslim, oops, I mean a Mormon.” The host quickly added that her error might actually be correct because, as she put it, Muslims and Mormons do not seem that different. That this host still found it so easy to use Oriental stereotypes for Mormons, ostensibly because they represented a threat, is a reminder that the Mormons are still being Orientalized negatively by some. As one conservative Christian succinctly opined in 2011, Mormonism is the “Islam of the West.”

62. As heard on the OliveTree, a syndicated FM radio program, broadcast by Olive Tree Ministries, Maple Grove, Minnesota, on September 17, 2011.

Conclusion

Time will tell whether the twenty-first century will present a set of new challenges for Mormon identity. As hinted at above, with the rise of Christian fundamentalism in recent times, the Mormons are again having to work hard to demonstrate that they are part of the [Judeo-Christian] American mainstream—this, ironically, despite their own fairly conservative political values. The fact that Orientalism still applies to the Saints is evident whenever one of their members is equated with Islam. Given the impact of 9/11 on the American psyche, one wonders if the Mormons will again be given an exotic identity, or if they can continue to assimilate.

American Muslims are facing similar challenges with varying degrees of success. Ultimately, of course, everything hinges on cultural identity, which is remarkably malleable. As Islamic art historian Oleg Grabar observed in an insightful essay about Orientalism in the United States: “The complexity of modern American culture is such that there are many ‘others’ in its psychological makeup and that the ‘others’ of some are the ‘us’ of others.”64 The Mormons have learned many lessons about assimilation, but their history repeatedly shows how easy it is to be regarded as both them and us—sometimes simultaneously.

The Mormon experience spans almost two centuries, and calls for increasingly interdisciplinary approaches to be comprehended. As a new lens through which we can interpret Mormon history, Orientalism helps explain a number of enduring Mormon stereotypes. The thing to remember here is not whether such stereotyping is accurate or not, or even fair or not, but rather that it served, and still serves, a purpose in shaping and sustaining identity. That, I believe, makes Orientalism a key to understanding not only the Mormons’ frequent conflation with seemingly foreign stereotypes such as Muslim patriarchs and Egyptian hieroglyphics, but also explains the Latter-day Saints’ own enduring interest in the peoples and places of the huge area stretching from the Middle East through Southeast Asia and well into the Pacific Islands. We may call these places and peoples by many different names today, but in the nineteenth century one evocative name—the Orient—covered it all.