Heaven and Earth: A Peculiar American Romance

> *"…he confided to me an episode of his life, and today I can tell it. I will change the occasional detail, as only to be expected."* — Jorge Luis Borges

IN THE LONG AGO OF CHILDHOOD, I lived among people who had once thought they could create a kingdom of God, a new Zion, on America's western frontier. It was a romance of heaven and earth. The reality didn't entirely match the fictions, and things didn't always add up, but that doesn't mean no one was in love.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — the Mormons — are the people. My family was three generations deep in rural Utah (I was as a fourth generation, "baby boomer" Mormons). My great-grandparents came from the coal country of Scotland and the farm country of Denmark, converts to a uniquely American faith who were willing to do their bit in building the kingdom. Their emigration and faith were part of a sanctified history of direct experience, heroes and myths. It was stylized over generations and transmitted to their children as the way to be Mormon.

Despite earnest efforts of my family, I long ago stopped being a believer. Life has turned out to be a series of terrains, each one requiring a more or less coherent mythology to move through it. A childhood among Mormons was the first terrain. This is a somewhat mythopoetic excavation of that terrain, its mythologies and heroes and me. You can read it as a personal counterhistory, and therefore not entirely trustworthy, and not be wrong. However, you'll be wrong if you take me to be someone who has simply taken up literary arms against his religious past.

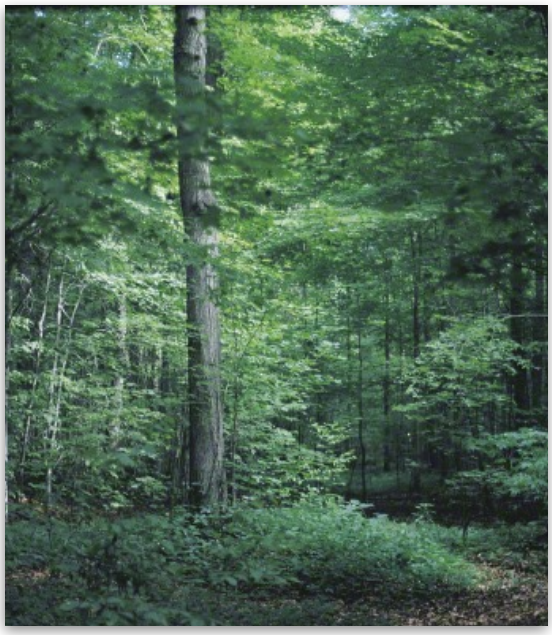
Part I – The Origin Story

AS BOY, I WAS THRILLED BY SECRET HISTORIES. I tried writing a few myself. One I remember clearly was titled "The Secret of Purple Mountain." Sadly, I've lost the (probably quite short) manuscript, but I can tell you that a young boy and his friends find skulls, scattered bones and a cache of crude weapons in a cave. They presume all of it is from a very old and different people of the mountain, or perhaps their victims. The boy swears his friends to secrecy until he can tell his tale of discovering what may well have to do with origins and fates.

We yearn to know about origins (human history tells us so). The best origin stories have a cosmic act and a cosmology. They tell us about the past and the future and the nature of human existence. They become an inseparable part of a community's life and tell us how to behave. The Mormons have that kind of story, and it has persisted over generations as a source of power.

Made in America

As I learned it, the Mormon origin story has a beginning with two parts: one ancient, the other relatively recent. The recent one was around 1830, when there was a cosmically significant act on the frontier of upstate New York. An angel, who called himself Moroni, appeared to a farmer's son, Joseph Smith, who was of common origins but full of uncommon religious yearning. Joseph's questions opened the heavens.

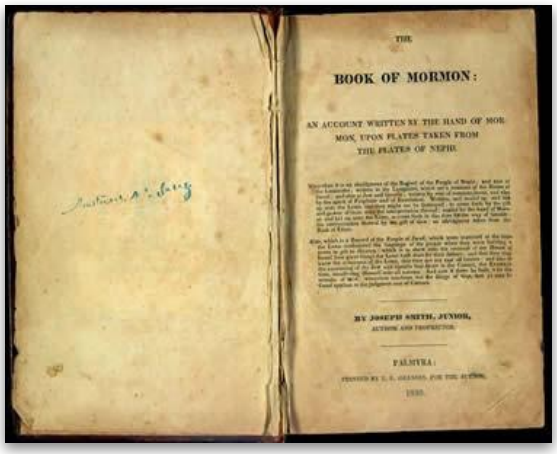


THE SACRED GROVE
— PHOTO FROM THE LDS MEDIA LIBRARY

He was led by the angel to a grove on a wooded hill where he unearthed gold plates inscribed with the ancient part of the story. They had been buried centuries before by the then human Moroni, a last survivor of internecine wars among an ancient people of the Americas (they turn out to be the lost tribes of Israel). In angelic form, he was the guardian of the gold plates.

The angel became our symbol of God's intervention in human affairs. We had statues and paintings of him. Mormons still put him atop their temples and shine bright lights on him. But I often thought about the woods. I imagined them as the dark forests of frontier romances, landscapes where a legendary frontiersman could transform himself into the "new man" through the conquest of a symbolically untouched garden of wilderness, where a white woman was captured and held by Indians until rescued in a shower of tears. I did not see this preference for the woods over the angel as a sign of religious doubt, but it may have been.

The plates were inscribed in a peculiar script ("reformed Egyptian," Joseph called it). He translated it with a seer stone, a mysterious device attributed to biblical prophets and treasure hunters alike. The translation is a collage of scriptural genres in awkward, archaic English that sounds more or less biblical. It tells a genesis story as a memoir. Multiple narrators represent groups of ancient Israelites — Jaredites, Mulekites and Lehites — instructed at different times by God to flee Jerusalem in order to avoid destruction, mostly by the Babylonian armies. Heeding the warning, they sailed to Central America.


THE
BOOK OF MORMON:
AN ACCOUNT WRITTEN BY THE HAND OF MOR-
MON, UPON PLATES TAKEN FROM
THE PLATES OF NEPHI.
BY JOSEPH SMITH, JUNIOR,
AUTHOR AND PROPRIETOR.
PALMYRA:

BOOK OF MORMON, CIRCA 1830

Joseph published his translation as the *Book of Mormon* and declared himself a "prophet, seer and revelator." Critics regarded it as a suspicious text of dubious origins. Some found it barely readable — Mark Twain called it "chloroform in print" — and others called it scripturally unoriginal revivalism and ecclesiastical despotism embellished with strange names and odd characters.

Such a book deserved a movement. With his miraculous text as a centerpiece, Joseph formed a new church. He called it the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). He believed it was a restoration of the "True Church" lost through Catholic and Protestant apostasies. Another angel visited, this time John the Baptist (unsurprisingly on the banks of a river). He conferred the authority of baptism and ancient priesthood on the new church. Joseph began to think about building a holy city, confident that was his calling from God.

"I, NEPHI," is how the book begins. Each narrator is a character in their own story, with motives — mostly sorrow and regret — for recounting the history of their people. It's largely a history of human folly and civilizations in states of destruction.

The last of the ancient emigrations from Jerusalem is the most important (Mormon teaching puts it around 600 B.C.). God appeared to a man named Lehi and warned him the city was certain to be destroyed. Lehi tried to warn others but was ignored. He and his family heeded the warning and fled to "the wilderness" — presumably the landscape of the Arabian peninsula — for the next several years.

LEHI SAILING FOR CENTRAL AMERICA
— ARNOLD FRIEBERG, ARTIST

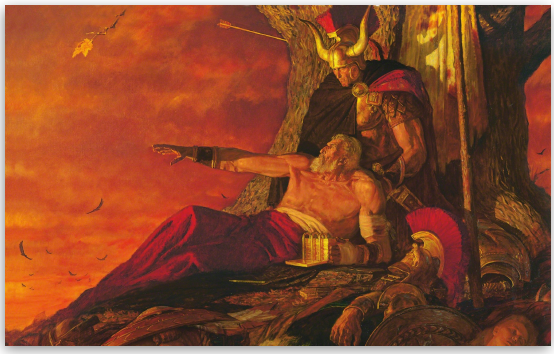
Upon reaching the sea they built ships "unlike any other," illuminated by stones the Lord caused to "shine as lights." They either sailed past modern Malaysia and Indonesia, arriving somewhere in modern-day Central America, or south of Australia to arrive in Chile. Among the Mormons, opinions have varied as to the exact route.

"I, Nephi … make a record of my proceedings in my days; yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and language of the Egyptians."

— Book of Mormon

Once in the Americas they formed civilizations that began well but ended poorly, usually due to pride, wickedness and warfare. Lehi's sons, Nephi and Laman, split into warring civilizations: Nephites (mostly good and white-skinned) and Lamanites (mostly bad and made darker-skinned as a consequence). They fought terrible wars, suffered defections and moved their civilizations into North America. Millions died in a final great battle in western New York state and the Nephites were wiped out. Mormon, one of their leaders, and his son, Captain Moroni, were left to summarize all of this on gold plates. Moroni buried the plates in the woods to await Joseph (the text prophesied he would seek them in the Last Days). The surviving Lamanites became the American Indians, who could now be correctly identified as remnants of Israel who had forgotten their past.

Jesus paid a visit to the warring factions sometime between the Resurrection and the Ascension (a visit entirely overlooked in the bible). He showed up in modern-day Missouri, the original Garden of Eden as it was later revealed to Joseph. He came to counsel peace and teach his gospel as a way to correct the failings of the expatriate Hebrews, who, in their moral intentions and the nature of their shortcomings, were surprisingly like American Protestants, even before the time of Christ.



THE DYING MORMON AND HIS SON, MORONI
—ARNOLD FRIBERG, ARTIST

MORMONS ILLUSTRATED THEIR STORY. My family was delighted by the art used to vivify the *Book of Mormon* themes and make the characters engaging, especially for children. Like most religious art it was representational in style and didactic. It was what you might expect of a story where moral triumph was the goal but tragedy was possible. It self-consciously reminded me of our "historically true gospel," and that it set us apart as a chosen people.

I mostly remember illustrations of warriors and mighty men who were hypermasculine, muscular and larger than life. Nephite warriors (more or less the good guys) were clearly the heroes. They usually wore recognizably Roman or Nordic military garb. They fought from chariots as we understood the Egyptians and Romans had done. The Lamanite warriors (ancestral Indians) were not as well-armored. They wore only Mesoamerican garb into battle. But they had fearsome spears and nearly always outnumbered the Nephites. That apparently paid off in the end.

CAPTAIN MORONI
— GEORGE REYNOLDS

NORSE SUPERHERO
— MARVEL COMICS

It was the Cold War years, and the warriors bore a passable resemblance to the heroes in my comic books (a comparison I never brought up in any situation having to do with my religious education). I wondered on occasion how the best Nephite warriors would handle a merciless alien warlord or a Soviet secret agent named Igor. It seemed that powerful men are always compelled by inclination and circumstances to impose morality on the world.

In fairness, it should be pointed out that no one knew what the ancient ones looked like. The book is inexact in that regard. One of the illustrators, Arnold Friberg, explained that exaggerated masculinity was "an expression of the great spirit within … I'm painting the interior, the greatness, the largeness of spirit."

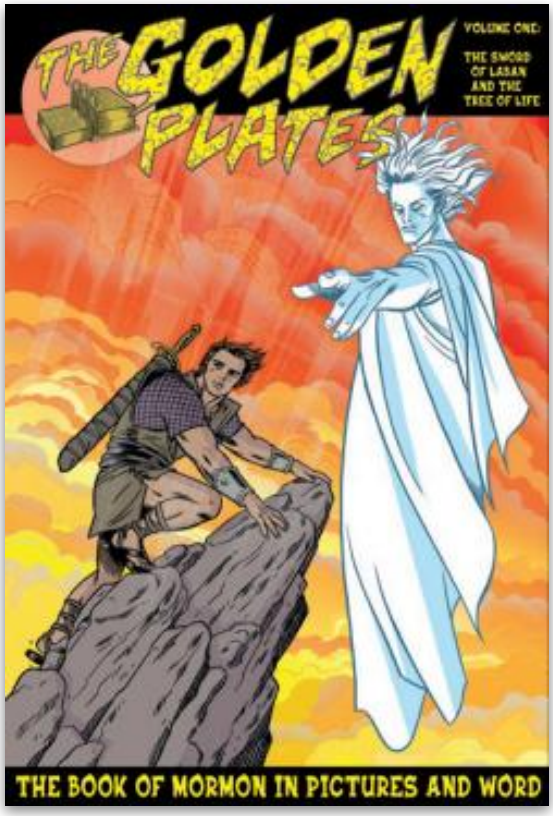
The book had one woman illustrator, Minerva Teichart, who felt the story was not illustrated "to my satisfaction." She painted a more impressionist style, evoking a feminine and expressive side to the story. She portrayed queens, and children who are not mentioned in the book. I was taken in the company of other children to a Mormon temple to perform a peculiar ritual of baptism for the dead (Mormons took it quite literally). Her murals graced the walls around a monumental baptismal font. They were incomparable to anything else in my young visual experience.

A LAMANITE QUEEN AND HER CHILDREN
— MINERVA TEICHART, ARTIST

I remember that geography was important in defending the story as true. Illustrations suggesting pre-Columbian architecture and a leaning column here and there endorsed Mesoamerica as the ancient promised land. Some favored the landing in Chile, but Guatemala seemed to be the consensus favorite. I had no firm opinion, but a pan-hemispheric storyline with a tragic end in upstate New York appealed to whatever I had in the way of a world view.

DESTRUCTION OF THE CITY ZARAHEMLA
— GEORGE REYNOLDS, ARTIST

Comic book artist Michael Allred, known for his Roy Lictenstein-esque penciling, adapted the *Book of Mormon* into a multi-part graphic novel, *The Golden Plates*. It's an action-packed gospel story starring Nephi, Omni, Jacob, and a cast of hundreds. Allred describes himself as a faithful and knowledgable Mormon, and the *Book of Mormon* as "fascinating on any level, fact or fiction. If true, we know that God exists, there is life after death, and life has an eternal meaning. If fiction, it's a phenomenal story."



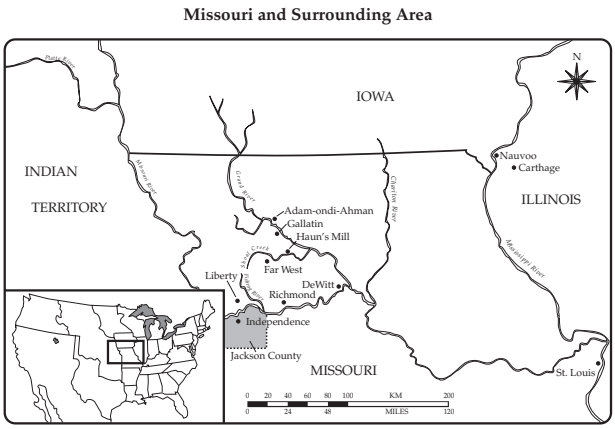
THERE IS OMINOUSNESS and apocalyptic melancholy aplenty in the *Book of Mormon*. Whenever I read the phrase "and it came to pass" — which is used *a lot* — I assumed something wouldn't end well for someone. The narrators give up in disappointment, having been witnesses to the perpetual collapse of their buildings and their political systems. They wrote cautionary tales for the future generations — "and it came to pass" is usually followed by "and thus we see."

There is also tragedy — "And my father also was killed by them, and I remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people." The ultimate cause of downfall is the nature of people in relation to God. Even Nephites become occupied by sliver, fine clothes, covetousness, murder and hunger for power — "all the vain things of the world." Without righteousness, cities fall and armies are defeated. I was encouraged to read it all as prophetic.

YOUNG NEPHI CONDEMNS HIS REBELLIOUS BROTHER
— ARNOLD FRIEBERG, ARTIST

Paradise Lost and Found

HUMAN HISTORY is full of places and creatures that represent the elements of existence. Woods and deep ponds, serpents and frog princes and other heralds of the deep unconscious. The Garden of Eden is one of our oldest origin stories, with numerous updates. It all began with verses in Genesis: "A river flows out of Eden to water the garden ..." Christopher Columbus assumed the Garden of Eden was in Venezuela. He had simply not gone far enough up the Orinoco River, but he was sure it was there — somewhere. Puritans made pious references to the New World and the Garden of Eden. Colonial land promoters promised the whole continent was available as a "garden of the New World," and nineteenth-century Americans were reminded that "we are still in Eden."



THE SECOND COMING (GOSPEL ART PICTURE KIT) .

"To help the children look forward to and prepare for the second coming of Jesus Christ and the Millennium."

—Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Lessons, LDS Church

Joseph reformulated the story. As I learned it, the original Garden of Eden had been revealed to him as a valley in Missouri. It was the same valley where Christ made that unexpected visit to ancient America, and where the early Mormons would be driven out at gunpoint. Joseph renamed it "Adam-ondi-Ahman" and prophesied that Adam himself would reappear in the Last Days to facilitate an introduction of the New Israel (basically Mormons) to the returning Christ. There was doctrinal haze around who among us would be there, and who would stay home to do support work, when the call to gather came.

My father saw no haze. He expected to be called back to Missouri. He assumed that all modern transportation infrastructure would collapse at that point, so it was likely we would have to walk in a kind of reverse frontier exodus. "There will be hundreds of thousand people making their way back across the great plains, enduring the hardships of a journey again."

He admonished preparation. That meant attending to practical matters of food and other supplies, “We’ll need to assist those who are less prepared. When the time comes, the prophet will instruct us.” His preparations seemed conflated with nuclear warfare and natural disasters, even economic ones — anything likely to collapse civilization. Our storage room held indistinguishable materials for any such event.

I looked at a map of Missouri. There were towns in that valley — Adam-ondi-Ahman to us, Jackson County to the rest of America — whose populations I couldn’t guess. Would they be eliminated or would they be absorbed when we showed up? The legitimacy of our claim to the land seemed problematic in a modern and decidedly democratic America. But for entirely practical reasons I hoped there would be an alternative to pulling up stakes.

The Nature of Heaven and Earth

AN ORIGIN STORY addresses beginnings. Knowing the beginning helps us know our place in a cosmology and construct myths. Joseph met this need with a narrative about God, humanity and salvation. It came to him, he insisted, as another revelation, one that was according to “law, irrevocably decreed before the foundation of the world.” It offered a comprehensible theory of heaven and earth at the human scale: the universe is made for us and we for it. It was a cosmology in which God continued to communicate with people on the earth.

Diagrams helped. There are actually three kingdoms in Joseph’s heaven: Telestial, Terrestial and Celestial. It’s a kind of meritocracy of glory where you will be graded. The Celestial kingdom is reserved for those with the highest grades. As I understood it, there is a progression, a sacred journey of the soul that begins in a pre-mortal world of interlocking of families of greater and lesser sizes and glories. From there it’s on to a short time on earth as human to prove ourselves worthy through the exercise of “free agency,” trying to make mostly right choices when faced with good and evil, both of which are deemed a complimentary necessity for progress. It seemed to me they should be oppositional but somehow they were not.

The Celestial kingdom comes with special perks and powers. My pre-mortal being was made of rarified "matter, more fine or pure" that is essentially not much different at its base from God himself. He was simply eons ahead of me in eternal progress. He had worked his way up and so could I — within limits. For example, it was possible to become a god in my own right, and I might even have my own world. But I would always be subordinate to *the* God, the Eternal Father. I occasionally imagined my planet and how I would administer it.

"That which is below is above, that above is also below … the substance below, was the compliment and reflection of the divine realm above."
— *Journal of Mormon Thought,* Lance S. Owen

My family was pragmatic, like nearly all Mormons. Faith and good works were the way to a family life in heaven. They were not interested in cosmological questions about creation or the nature of universe, nor in how I imagined my extra-planetary possibilities. I received little clarification in the matter. But it was clear to me that a high degree of confidence in the afterlife depended on how well I did with my time on earth. Failing to reach the Celestial, I would be assigned to a lesser kingdom, which I likened to getting average grades at school. If I totally flunked out, there was a fourth place known as Outer Darkness. I assumed that meant I would be eternally cold and hungry and alone, which is still my idea of a hellish state of affairs.

JOSEPH ENVISIONED A SOCIAL ORDER that mirrored the interlocking families of heaven. That was what God had intended. Unlike the Victorian emphasis on a small, nuclear family, he was interested in the tradition of Abraham, Issac and Jacob and their many wives and concubines. After another visit from an angel he declared his most incendiary doctrine — the "Principle of plural marriage" (e.g. polygamy). Joseph now believed God had sanctioned polygamy as something other than adultery, and he was restoring the true patriarchy.

"During the third and final appearance, the angel came with a drawn sword, threatening Joseph with destruction unless he went forward and obeyed the commandment fully."
—LDS Church, official website

The “Principle” would, he hoped, direct the procreative power of marriage away from isolated earthly love and into the eternities. There the patriarch would symbolically be as a sun, with wives and children in a sort of planetary orbit around him. Each woman would add to glory of her husband, each son would remain his subordinate. These were heavenly rewards for a great and faithful patriarch.

Joseph believed society was not aware of God’s intentions, and that monogamy was partly responsible for urban decay that left many women abandoned, unsupported and vulnerable. His worry over the decay of cities wasn’t so different from the moralistic apocalypticism of many American Protestants — rejecting monogamy was the new twist. He believed polygamy would foster graciousness and love. It would change society by changing the nature of the family.

In the minds of outsiders, polygamy was another reason Mormons could not be left alone. It was lasciviousness, a thumb in the eye of Victorian morality and a threat to democracy. Mormon women were called “breed cows in the national stable” and “unholy mothers.” Joseph’s redefinition of marriage and family branded his church as one whose central oddity was sexual. It’s still difficult to persuade friends and acquaintances that it had any historical sincerity.

A polygamist community affiliated with fundamentalist offshoots and disavowed entirely by the modern church operated a coal mine in the canyon above our town. The Salt Lake City newspaper favored by Mormons wrote in 1956, “What exists among these cultists is far worse than anything the Negroes have, and some people are not even concerned about it. Flies and coal dust are thick …Children play in the street with farm animals.” They kept to themselves, and the town tried to keep them as invisible as possible, but one of the daughters attended our high school until she was “married off,” as rumor put it. “Too bad about that poor girl,” grandma said. “They used to pick her up from school in an old truck as dirty as a coal mine itself.”

WIVES QUARTERS AT NOW ABANDONED POLYGAMOUS COMMUNITY’S COAL MINE

My grandparents were children when the church ended any lingering polygamy by threatening excommunication. So far as I know, they were happy to begin competing with the public memory of polygamy and "the Raid" (as Mormons knew it), when United States marshals arrived in every town bent on enforcing anti-polygamy laws. They joined the church leadership in rebranding Mormonism as a religious minority of monogamous families.

"The talk of polygamy is agitating the people. If it is not true, there is a way for the circulators of such stories to be punished. If it is true, there is a remedy for the state and the church to apply."

— editorial in *The Progress*, our local newspaper (1910)

In their private memories I'm sure they still knew who was descended from a "plural wife." Probably a dozen or so families among the original settlers were polygamists. The last living child of a polygamous family died in 1972. My mother addressed her as aunt Mary Ellen, though she was not of any blood relation to our family. Her father was a Danish convert who had walked across America pulling a hand cart.

My parents considered the matter of polygamy closed. The new public image was Mormons trying to be good Americans. In 1940, Darryl F. Zanuck produced an epic movie of the Mormon exodus away from violence in Illinois to the safety of the Salt Lake Valley, *Brigham Young:Frontiersman*. Zanuck thought the Mormon pioneers represented what Americans believed in — freedom seekers, hard workers, settlers. Their persecution as a religious minority was a timely moral tale. Brigham is portrayed as a great leader, and a family man with only one wife (he had about 50 wives). A young couple whose love and romance is central to the plot is decidedly wholesome and monogamous. They avoid the temptation of the California gold rush and stick to settling Utah through diligence and with the help of divine intervention.

The church leadership was delighted, "a splendid moving picture that has been made of Brigham Young … considering how people generally have treated us and what they have thought of us."

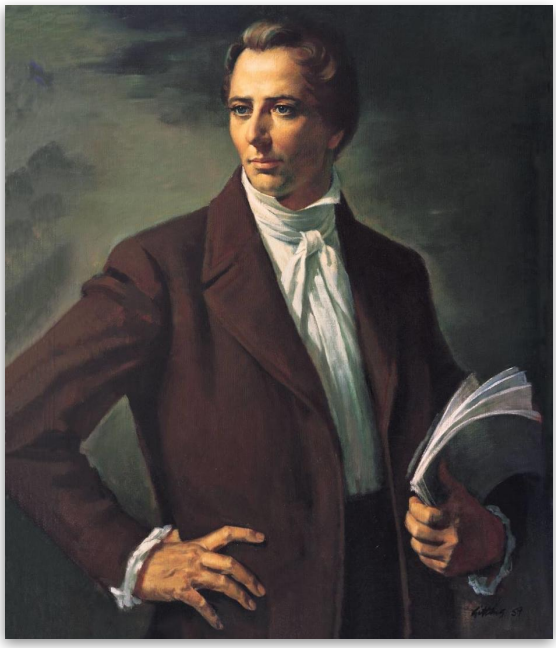
That's how the historical consciousness of a community evolves when spiritual ancestors challenge the current situation in which the group finds itself. Certain points in the narrative are dropped and others emphasized. A new narrative is enforced by the elites even if it exists in tension with competing public and private memories. History can be reinvented when there are functional goals.

Joseph's Golden Shoulders

THE MORMON ORIGIN STORY rests on the golden shoulders of Joseph Smith. He was no New England parson writing discourses in his study. He wrote himself into the story. Ancient characters who prophesied, went to battle and wrote their stories in the *Book of Mormon* provided a subtext for him to step onto the world stage in a messianic role: "A choice seer will I raise up out of the fruit of thy loins. And he shall be great like unto Moses ... Behold, that seer will the Lord bless; and they that seek to destroy him shall be confounded."

And yes — to satisfy those not otherwise satisfied — Joseph was authoritarian and sensitive to challenges to his authority, and he was pedantic. He disliked emotional ecstasies and wanted obedient action and order in a decidedly undemocratic church. The goal of our sanctified history, written into doctrine and policy and Sunday School lessons, was to sculpt his image as a man chosen by God as carefully as the statues of the angel on our temples were sculpted.

If you regard the *Book of Mormon* as the primary text of an emerging world religion, you might one day have to reckon with it as one of world's foremost religious texts, and not merely as a curiosity of nineteenth-century American religion. You might have to concede it offers insights into scriptural production and human religious yearnings. Yet there is nothing esoteric in its appeal despite the rhetorical haze and odd names.



JOSEPH SMITH, AS TYPICALLY IMAGINED BY THE MORMON FAITHFUL
— ALVIN GITTINS, ARTIST

"... ambiguous, unreliable, inaccurate, vain, charming, stands the most potent of living creatures, a man with a vision."

— *The Gathering of Zion,* Wallace Stegner

"Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations, and where is our religion? We have none."

—*Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service*, LDS Church

You can read it as a literary narrative by an unusually imaginative young farmer seeing an unknown American past in his mind's eye. There are narrators with distinct voices, each with self-doubts and shortcomings. Minor characters complete the structure and add to the moral themes. But regarding it as literary means reading it start to finish and surrendering to its organizing logic, and there is a world of difference between a nineteenth-century farmer and what was written by pre-Columbian prophets. You will almost certainly read a different book than a faithful Mormon reads.

"…relating and evaluating a literary text in relation to its truthfulness has to have some kind of religious and moral, probably Protestant, possibly Puritan, roots. In that context the model for truth-telling is, of course, the Holy Book, while non-truth-telling books are always suspect, only permissible if morally rewarding." "

— Aleksandar Hemon, Bosnian-American author

You can read it as social criticism. Writings from the margins often are. Joseph called for a profound reimagining of American society, from its economic classes and cities to the love of capitalism and its protector, the government. He wanted to create an egalitarian utopia where all his people were loyal to each other and to God. Zion would replace a corrupted and unharmonious nation.

You can subordinate Joseph's book to larger arguments about Mormonism as a religious movement, its derivative nature and problematic archaeology, and corroborate your skepticism about miraculous texts and prophets. Or you can approach from outside the book itself, looking for the story of a young man fired up by the spiritualism of his time and on a personal spiritual quest. You parse out what you can about the particulars of his family life and personality, and maintain your skepticism toward angels and miracles. You end up where your started.

Or you can not read it at all. It seems to be a book that is not necessary to read in order to have an opinion about it (I suspect this includes a surprising number of Mormons who favor pre-selected passages as a set-piece of religious testimony). Read it or not, you have to weigh the relative probability of human creativity against divine intervention, and how much to worry about whether the mind responsible was Mormon or Joseph Smith. You will essentially come down on one side or the other according to faith. Mormon himself would remind you the truth shouldn't be based on text, and that everything fails, sooner or later, except the love of God.

I acknowledge those who wish to see all gods destroyed. I can only wave a figurative arm and offer remarks about our human yearning for an origin story and our need for mythologies. We need more than a collective cynicism or cherishing our personal perspectives to hold our lives together. We need to share stories. It seems to me that it's just a matter of which stories.

I long ago stopped quarreling over whether this particular origin story is the literary work of an imaginative young man or a true history of ancient civilizations. Neither the quarrel nor judging the merits of the arguments interests me anymore.

In this account, admittedly personal and somewhat mythopoetic, Joseph Smith is a romantic figure of imagination, will and flaws. He meant his church for people not satisfied with believing that a long time ago such things happened, and would live such adventures themselves. However he came to his story, however implausible you think it is, I think he should be credited with a fabulous American romance of heaven and earth. Like other romance stories, it's not bound by the normal operations of the world in which we live.

"The reader must begin this book with an act of faith and end it with an act of charity. We ask him to believe in the sincerity and authenticity of this preface, affirming in return his prerogative to be skeptical of all that follows."

— *The Sot-Weed Factor,* John Barth