

Religion Today  
September 24-30, 2006  
*Errand into the Wilderness*  
Paul V.M. Flesher

The observation that Mormonism is the quintessential American religion has long been a scholarly commonplace. One way this statement holds true is with regard to Mormonism's parallels with the Puritans, the first religious movement of America's European settlers. Although the Puritans' goal was religious reform, their exodus to the New World laid the basis for a new nation.

Since the Mormons were already in the New World, their religious reform became a new religious tradition. If Puritan belief provided an American model for interpreting new religious ideas, then the early Mormons used that model to understand the meaning of their movement.

For decades, college students have studied Perry Miller's portrayal of the early Puritans in his book, "Errand into the Wilderness." His key point is that Puritans saw themselves not merely as a Christian reform movement, but as God's re-creation of the people Israel, as a "new Israel."

Their flight from persecution in England reenacted the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. Just as the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and entered into the Wilderness of Sinai, the Puritans sailed the Atlantic Ocean and settled in the American Wilderness. This parallel was not accidental, the Puritans believed, but came from God's guiding hand. In America, they would build a new Zion, a light shining out to the world to lead it to divine renewal. The difficulties of the voyage and their life in the New World gained meaning as they drew strength from their belief that they were God's new Israel.

In the two centuries after the Puritans, many American religious movements envisioned themselves as the new Israelites. Although Puritan belief was left behind, their model provided a way to understand religious revival and renewal. In most cases, the religious movements that survived simply became one more Protestant denomination in the increasing variety of the American religious scene.

In the 1830s and 1840s, Joseph Smith and his followers likewise drew upon the Puritan model as they preached their new message. Their creative use of that model lifted Mormonism beyond mere religious reform, however, and helped to establish the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a new religion, as a new stage in God's divine

plan. While this difference helped them win converts, it also brought about antagonism and persecution.

The main difference between the Puritans and the Mormons is their understanding of the early Christian Church. The Puritans' symbolism of ancient Israel was shaped by the New Testament's use of the Old. Matthew's Gospel and other New Testament writings provided the interpretation through which they understood Moses, ancient Israel, and the Old Testament. Although they revered Moses as a leader, he was a leader like Jesus. The Puritans were Israel, but they were like Israel as the early church -- Jesus' followers -- were like Israel.

By contrast, early Mormonism took a different route to Jesus and his message. As the religious historian Jan Shipps has shown in her book, "Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition," instead of seeing themselves as ancient Israel through the lens of the New Testament, they understood themselves as the direct recreation of Israel. In their movement, for example, God restored the ancient Israelite priesthoods of Aaron and Melchizedek. Their Council of Twelve followed Jacob's twelve sons. The prophecies given to Joseph Smith and other early leaders carried forward God's prophetic interaction with Israel, while the divinely-revealed Book of Mormon had important parallels with the Torah God had revealed to Moses.

From this self-image as Israel, Mormonism became a church. Out of the soil of Israel, it blossomed forth, recreating itself as parallel to the early Christian church rather than its extension. In this way, it used the New Testament as a guide to build upon its Old Testament foundation rather than to limit that foundation.

It was this reshaping of the Puritans' model that led Mormonism down a different path. Although it began as a typical American religious movement, its difference prevented it from fitting among them. This led them ultimately to embark upon a new errand into the wilderness.

Jan Shipps will speak on "Locating Mormonism in the American Religious Landscape" Thursday, Oct. 5, at 7 p.m. in the UW College of Education auditorium. All are invited.