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## Early Mormonism and Early Christianity: Some Providential Similarities

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# Early Mormonism and Early Christianity

## Some Providential Similarities

*John W. Welch*

I wish to ponder over an interesting puzzle and put together a few pieces of a complex picture. In particular, I am intrigued that, with relative ease, a sizable list of parallels or analogues can be observed between the settings and experiences of early Christianity and early Mormonism. Of course, I am well aware of the hazards of excess “parallelomania,” and I recognize that there are important differences between the first century and the nineteenth century; but, at the same time, broad views and careful descriptions of these two worlds deepen and embolden the similarities in several significant respects. Seeing the sizable collection of these similarities strengthens the claim that the world was prepared in many of the same ways for Jesus as it was for Joseph.

Indeed, for people who believe that God prepared the way for the Restoration of Christianity by Joseph Smith, it should be natural to entertain the possibility that He also similarly

prepared the world for the coming of Jesus Christ in the meridian of time, for surely God is in the business of preparing things. John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for the ministry of Jesus, but he was only the last step in a long process of stage setting that had been under way for many years and in many ways. Times needed to be right before the advent of Christ was possible, as some early Christians also noted and believed.<sup>1</sup>

Providential history allows more room than does secular, humanistic history for interpreters of the past to acknowledge God’s hand in history. This is because direct evidence of God’s involvement in history is rarely present; God is not usually found at the end of syllogisms. Providential history, however, is particularly interested in pictures and patterns that include divine purposes and influences as part of the human drama. A Latter-day Saint approach to history invites careful detection of places and ways in which God may have been involved in the affairs of history.

While making some historical sense of the following providential analogues or similarities remains an elusive challenge,<sup>2</sup> looking for God in history is at least as interesting a quest as is trying to detect the influences of other metaforces at work in the sweep of history, such as economic pressures, class conflicts, or intellectual developments.

What I find most interesting here are the similar patterns of preparation, emergence, reception, and growth in the worlds of early Christianity and early Mormonism. My purpose here is simply to identify possible parallels between these two worlds in these four areas. Identifying an isolated parallel here or there may easily be discounted as happenstance, but when a more complicated set of variables comparably aligns in a comparable pattern, it becomes more difficult to dismiss the congruence as a random event. Doctrine and Covenants 52:14 reveals that God gives “a pattern in all things” to serve as a tool of recognition “that ye may not be deceived.” Just as Albert Einstein concluded that the discovery of a watch implies the existence of a watchmaker, one may find evidence—even if not conclusive evidence—of the divine hand in the pattern of providential similarities between the historical settings and events of the first and nineteenth centuries. Several studies over the years—both serious and popular—have articulated a variety of commonalities between the early historical stages of Christianity and of Mormonism.<sup>3</sup> Such points of commonality raise the question in connection with the theme of this volume: what might the pattern of these parallels reveal about God’s providential involvement in human history?

As the different approaches taken by authors in this volume and elsewhere demonstrate, the notion of providential history may be understood in several different ways, degrees, or varieties.<sup>4</sup> It would be a mistake to assume that God acts in only one way or for only one purpose in human history. Of course, His principal incursion into the salvation history of the world at the

meridian of time with the incarnation of His Son Jesus Christ was the most demonstrative and efficacious instance of divine intervention in world affairs, but it was neither the first nor the last of His acts, large and small, with respect to world history. Some approaches to providential history may focus on detecting a subtle guiding hand as the broad movements of world history unfold in the epic of human experience. Other approaches take a greater interest in the lives of ordinary people who are sustained by God’s power from day to day in giving them breath and in guiding their steps along the simple paths of life. Others, where great issues of creation or eternal salvation are involved, may acknowledge God’s direct hand in the course of human affairs.

The following discussion takes a mixed and middle path between the macroscopic and microscopic views. It looks at two specific centuries featuring an interesting series of common elements—both minute details and individual events—that combined to create a receptive matrix into which Jesus and Joseph Smith could be introduced to accomplish crucial purposes in the expansive plan of God’s eternal purposes for this world. Mere mortals unaided by divine revelation are not in a position, of course, to judge whether providential forces were active agents in causing any or all of these events to coalesce so that similar conditions would be similarly hospitable to the coming of the Savior and to the commencement of the Restoration by Joseph Smith. And one may well wonder if comparable conditions needed, or simply happened, to exist at other important moments when major dispensations of the gospel were brought forth, such as through Abraham or Moses, who were also prepared from the foundation of the world and presumably sent from the premortal sidelines onto the playing field of human history at the time when God judged the circumstances to be propitious, opportune, or necessary for them to accomplish their particular missions. But regardless of what we do not know, I believe and conclude

from what can be known that God pays attention to circumstances in the lives of His children, allowing them adequate independence and autonomy while at the same time preparing or confirming that circumstances are sufficiently secure that His divine purposes can ultimately be met and that His intercessions into the events of human history are wise, effective, and good.

For several years, I have had my feet in these two worlds.<sup>5</sup> I mention this point simply because, with a grounding in each camp, my mind has been drawn quite naturally to analogues between the emergence of Christianity and the rise of Mormonism. But to detect and assess the significance of these similarities, modern readers may need to be reminded that things did not begin the way they eventually turned out. People in the twenty-first century need to strip away a number of presuppositions to encounter earlier centuries on their own terms. For example, at the outset both Christianity and Mormonism were very fragile. With relatively few followers and a high number of defectors, schismatics, and opponents, both movements needed to come forth at times when certain conditions were present that would allow for the possibility of success, which was neither automatic nor assured. Indeed, the failure rate for all new religious movements is high. By its 175th birthday, Christianity could claim only about 218,000 members, or about 0.36 percent of the population of the Roman Empire, according to Rodney Stark's projections.<sup>6</sup> By that time, Christian communities had taken root in many cities, local bishops had risen to prominence, writings of the founding generation had been collected, books such as the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* tried to regularize the policies and practices of Christian life and worship, and apologetic defenses of Christianity by Tertullian and Justin Martyr were written, but as yet, Christianity had seen no Constantine, no Athanasius, no Augustine or Aquinas. Likewise, Mormonism around

its 175th birthday still has much of its future ahead of it.

In the meantime, one may chart several congruent angles in the trajectories of early Mormonism and early Christianity during their formative years. The following pages suggest numerous parallels. Many more could be collected, classified, and categorized. They come from several domains: historical, political, legal, economic, intellectual, religious, or geographic. They are grounded in various characteristics or behaviors of new religious movements: policies, procedures, mechanisms, modes, costs, systems, and tensions within and without the fledgling organization. Some of these factors are obviously more significant than others, and readers will undoubtedly vary in their personal assessments of the strengths or weaknesses of this array of data. I do not see them all as equally indicative, but all seem worthy of inclusion. Some of these factors are within human control, but many others are beyond any human guidance or determination. In their totality, they present an interesting array of parallel elements, each of which needs to be examined and evaluated further.

### **PARALLELS IN PREPARATIONS AND HISTORICAL SETTINGS**

In certain essential respects, comparable political, cultural and religious environments prepared the way for the founding of Christianity and Mormonism. As the elements on table 1 show, parallel preparations had been under way for many years.

Around three hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Alexander the Great spread the influence of Hellenism and Aristotelean rationalism, breaking down the old orders of traditional civilization and religion; likewise, about three hundred years before the birth of Joseph Smith, Europe saw the beginnings of the expansive discoveries of Columbus and the spread of European influence through other explorers, the emergence of the Reformation, and the coming of

the rationalist Enlightenment. Around 160 years before Jesus, the Maccabean revolt installed a form of extremist conservative Jews into power in Jerusalem; and 165 years before the birth of Joseph Smith, the year 1640 saw the commencement of the Cromwellian Revolution, putting the extremist conservative Puritans into power, with continuing influence in New England. In 31 BC, Augustus Caesar defeated Marc Anthony at the battle of Actium and ushered in an unprecedented era of world peace known as the Pax Augusti.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, thirty years before the birth of Joseph Smith, the American colonies united in revolution against England and defeated the British forces to establish a new American nation that championed liberty and peace. In both of these worlds, optimism abounded.<sup>8</sup> People were open to new ideas and forms of organization. Old legal and social arrangements had been overthrown.<sup>9</sup> New horizons beckoned temptingly. The feelings of instability that result from overturning traditional orders were in both cases assuaged by elevating new figures or families to demi-divine status. In the Roman situation, the family of Augustus Caesar provided the overall society with a fundamental organizational foundation. In the American situation, the leading families of Virginia and Massachusetts became icons of the new republic, providing its first forty years of presidents.

The list of parallel patterns in their preparations is perhaps more substantial than has been previously recognized. Some factors are relatively mundane: in both worlds, one finds a new and previously unprecedented religious freedom<sup>10</sup> and ability to travel,<sup>11</sup> economic expansion especially in the immediate neighborhoods of Jesus and Joseph,<sup>12</sup> urbanization, slavery and social disease,<sup>13</sup> objections to kingship, widespread literacy,<sup>14</sup> religious pluralism,<sup>15</sup> controversy, and the legal capability to organize new religious associations.<sup>16</sup> Other factors were more spiritually significant. About two hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek produced a stan-

dardized Old Testament that was used as coin of the realm by Jews throughout the Roman empire.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, about two hundred years before the birth of Joseph Smith in 1805, the King James Version of the Bible produced a standardized English translation in 1611 that served as a common authorized text that was then carried by the British Empire throughout the world. Without such texts, the gospel could not have been spread abroad as it was in either dispensation.

Moreover, in both cases, prophets and visionaries prepared the way, fueled by a high sense of anticipation and apocalypticism or millenarianism. In both worlds, emotions and tensions ran high. More than coincidentally, about thirty-five years after the establishment of the Church by Jesus, its host culture was torn apart by a devastating civil war or war of attempted secession, the Jewish War. It lasted four years, from AD 66 to 70, and resulted in catastrophic losses of people and property in Jerusalem and throughout Judea. The Christians in Jerusalem escaped this destruction because they left a decade earlier when James the Just was martyred. Likewise, thirty-one to thirty-five years after the organization of the Church by Joseph Smith, the host American culture was torn apart by its most devastating war ever, the Civil War, a war of attempted secession. It also lasted four years, from 1861 to 1865, and resulted in unspeakable losses of men and property from Gettysburg to New Orleans. The Mormons escaped this destruction because they left Nauvoo when Joseph and Hyrum Smith were martyred seventeen years earlier in 1844. Due to prophetic utterances, both the Christians and the Mormons had thought that these wars would precipitate the return of Christ to earth, but both groups would have to deal with the similar consequences of rethinking their expectations in this regard.

None of these factors could have been arranged by Joseph Smith. They were all influential factors in the Restoration, providentially in place at the time he was born. The puzzle, of course, is what to make of these similarities. And



admittedly, there are differences; for example, Augustus was revered as a god, whereas George Washington eschewed public adoration. The Roman Senate was not a popularly elected body; the American Senate was. But the differences are not always as great as they may seem at first; for example, the Roman judiciary was significantly independent from the executive branch of Roman government, a concept that reemerges in the American separation of powers.

In considering the following chart, one might notice that in the opening pages of his bi-

ography of Joseph Smith, Robert Remini emphasizes certain elements as crucial to the American context of Joseph Smith.<sup>18</sup> Remini mentions religious frenzy, spiritualism, jolting social and governmental change, political parties, freedoms, religious turmoil, the industrial revolution, a burgeoning independent economy, the transportation revolution, optimism, millenarianism, and a few other such things. As the following tabulation shows, many similar features also characterized the age of Augustus and the world of Judea in the first century.

<b>TABLE 1. PARALLELS IN PREPARATIONS AND HISTORICAL SETTINGS</b>	
<i>Early Christianity</i>	<i>Early Mormonism</i>
c. 330 BC Alexander the Great spreads widely the new influence of Hellenism and rationalism; Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Epicurus	c. 300 years before Joseph Smith, rationalism, Renaissance and Reformation widely influential; Copernicus, Columbus, Luther, Descartes
Septuagint Greek version of the Old Testament is translated by c. 200 BC, becomes accepted as standard by many Jews, translated by seventy scholars into the common daily language, used heavily in early Christian writings	King James Version is completed in 1611, 200 years before Joseph Smith, becomes accepted as the standard English Bible, translated by fifty-five scholars into the common daily language, used heavily in Restoration writings
167 BC Maccabean revolt against Seleucids in Jerusalem; reign of strict Jews; their descendants become the Pharisees, purists, separatists	165 years before Joseph Smith, Cromwell rebels; strict Puritans reign; their descendants flee from secularism
Battle of Actium, 31 BC; Augustus Caesar defeats Antony and Cleopatra, ushering in a new era of Roman government and society	In 1775, thirty years before Joseph's birth, the American Revolution dramatically begins a new era; George Washington defeats the British
The Pax Augusti affords worldwide peace; general civil and individual freedom with unprecedented optimism and unity	United States Constitution and Bill of Rights protect individual freedoms, promote peace, and engender great optimism and unity
Old aristocratic arrangements overthrown while underlying Roman mores remain in place; period of legal transition; new horizons beckon	Tory ties to England broken while underlying common law and economy remains intact; period of legal transition; new frontiers beckon

**TABLE 1. PARALLELS IN PREPARATIONS AND HISTORICAL SETTINGS, CONTINUED**

<i>Early Christianity</i>	<i>Early Mormonism</i>
Romans very attentive to their own gods while mostly tolerating the worship of other gods such as Isis and Mithras; a pluralistic religious world	Most states and religious groups very attentive to their own observances while mostly tolerating religious freedom; a pluralistic religious world
Religious freedoms for the Jews are protected by legal decrees by Julius Caesar and others	Religious freedom is specifically protected by Bill of Rights and constitutional provisions
Opportunity to form private organizations, including funerary collegia, client cults, house churches, and business partnerships	Freedom of association is protected, the rise of corporations and trusts allows formation of private religious and business organizations
Expansion of Roman road system; travel becomes common over considerable distances; Paul travels extensively, including trips to Asia Minor, Greece, Jerusalem, and Rome	Opening of Cumberland Gap, canals, and federal roads allows for explosive mobility; Joseph Smith travels extensively, including four trips to Missouri; others to Boston, Canada, and Washington
Mediterranean made safe for sea travel as pirates are eliminated, harbors built	Safety and efficiency of Atlantic crossings allow missionary travel and immigration; piracy controlled
Economic expansion in Judea under Herod the Great produces unprecedented prosperity, independent opportunities, fabulous construction projects, worker dislocations, and family and social changes	Economic opportunism blossoms with new markets, financial independence and ability, the Erie Canal, western boom towns along the Mississippi, personal mobility, and family and social changes
Roman innovation brings an age of new construction, engineering, and science, building aqueducts, roads, harbors	Industrial revolution brings new age of innovations and inventions; making of steam engines, railroads, machines
Education and literacy is high, even higher than once thought, noticeably among Jews	Education and literacy is widespread and highly valued; converts are educated readers
Greek is spoken as the common language in the eastern empire, a second language in the west	English as a widespread language carried abroad by the expansion of the British Empire
Books, parchment production, scrolls, and libraries are more common and available; a blossoming of literature; Horace, Virgil	Printing presses, books, newspapers, and libraries are available in most towns; blossoming of romantic literature; transcendentalism

**TABLE 1. PARALLELS IN PREPARATIONS AND HISTORICAL SETTINGS, CONTINUED**

<i>Early Christianity</i>	<i>Early Mormonism</i>
A time of individual religious choice, particularly between many Jewish sects and movements: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, as well as devotees of numerous Greek and Roman gods, Stoics, Cynics, Epicureans, and others	A time of personal religious choice in America between many churches: Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Quakers, Mennonites, Unitarians, Seekers, Transcendentalists, and others
Religious controversy is bewilderingly common; spontaneous religious questions and arguments, especially in Jewish culture	Religious controversy is an ordinary part of public discourse; strong opinions on religious issues mattered to individuals in America
Old religions threatened, for example Artemis cult in Ephesus (see Acts 19); old ways becoming expensive to maintain	Old religions are vulnerable to revivals and reforms; new religions offer less expensive and challenging alternatives
Messianic expectation is high; ideal utopian age expected by many groups; religious agitation is high; large crowds come out to see John the Baptist or Jesus	Apocalyptic fervor is high; millenarianism is popular; visionary utopian societies flourish; religious frenzy is high; large crowds gather for revivals throughout the country
Divination, incantations, exorcism, and mysticism present in respectable popular culture	Visions, dreams, seers, amulets, and supernaturalism present in respectable popular culture
Galilee an expansion area for Jewish settlement in the first century before Christ	New England an expansion area for settlement in the eighteenth century
Galilee, a land of stony soil, demanding hard work, harboring revolutionary tendencies; freedom Zealots distrusted	New England, a region of stony soil, hard work, and revolutionary independence; freedom advocates disdained
Rise of powerful parties battling for control in the Jewish world: Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots	Rise of political parties struggling for control over state, regional, and federal politics
Christians flee Jerusalem; James (brother of Jesus) killed; Christians dispersed; Peter, Paul and others martyred; nowhere to gather	Exodus of Mormons out of Illinois; Joseph and his brother Hyrum martyred; the Saints trek across the Plains and gather to Zion
Jewish Civil War (four years long) and destruction of the Temple, AD 66–70, about thirty-five years after the ministry of Jesus	American Civil War (four years long), devastation of Missouri and elsewhere, 1861–65, thirty-one to thirty-five years after the organization of the Church



### COMPARABLE FOUNDINGS

Notable similarities of a different kind also exist between the actual foundings of Christianity and Mormonism as new religious movements. Here the pattern becomes less one of general history and more an illustration of common group behaviors. Indeed, if these two movements began from the same divine root or stalk, as the Restoration asserts, it should be natural to find them both being tended and behaving in similar systemic ways. Indeed, both came dramatically, innovatively, and controversially. Angels and divine manifestations were prominent in both cases. The roles of key families, important pairs of brothers, early record keeping,<sup>19</sup> instant proselytizing, central emphasis on temples,<sup>20</sup> generation of new scriptures, similar claims of

divine authority, performance of miracles,<sup>21</sup> allegations of magic, and martyrdom all find parallel manifestations in the founding characteristics of the two movements or dispensations of the gospel. As table 2 shows, several significant characteristics of early Christianity and early Mormonism find echoes, one in the other. On some occasions, these parallels could have been engineered by Joseph Smith in a conscious effort to follow the pattern of the Savior. Of course, he was conscious that his work was to stand as a restoration of early Christianity, but it does not appear that he designed experiences in order to create an impression of providential parallelism. In many of these cases, the similarities arise from conditions, coincidences, or experiences that were beyond his control.

<b>TABLE 2. COMPARABLE FOUNDINGS</b>	
<i>Early Christianity</i>	<i>Early Mormonism</i>
Jesus's ministry is sudden, dramatic, innovative, controversial, and polarizing	Joseph Smith's ministry is sudden, dramatic, innovative, controversial, and polarizing
The new religious movement is initiated by angels appearing to Zacharias, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds at Bethlehem; Gabriel appears at least five times	The new religious movement is initiated by angels including Moroni, John the Baptist, Peter, James, and John; Moroni appears at least twenty times
The voice of God the Father at baptism acknowledges the Son	God the Father at the First Vision introduces the Son in similar words
Opposition by Satan, temptations of Jesus, expelling devils	Confrontations with Satan and his forces, exposing angels of darkness
The movement grows around a central kinship family, that of Jesus, Mary, John the Baptist, James the brother of Jesus, John	The movement centers on the Smith family: Joseph Sr., Lucy, Joseph Jr., Emma, Hyrum, Samuel, uncles, cousins
Family ties are crucial among the earliest converts: Peter and Andrew; the sons of Zebedee; family of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha	Family ties are close among the Smiths, Whitmers, Knights, Johnsons, Pratts, Snows, and many other member families

**TABLE 2. COMPARABLE FOUNDINGS, CONTINUED**

<i>Early Christianity</i>	<i>Early Mormonism</i>
Jesus is a remarkable youth, answering the rabbis' questions at the temple and teaching in the synagogue	Joseph Smith translates at a young age, gives bold new answers to prevailing questions
Memories and sayings are preserved, letters and books are written and kept very early	Extensive record keeping from the beginning, revelations recorded, diaries and minutes kept
Jesus and Paul preach in the synagogues	Missionaries preach in others' churches
Jesus opposes the temple establishment, runs counter to the prevailing culture	Joseph Smith opposes many democratic themes, runs counter to dominant politics
Moses and Elijah with Peter, James, and John on Mount of Transfiguration; Jesus draws strength by association with powerful figures	Appearances of Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John; Joseph draws strength by connection with powerful past figures
House churches at first, in Capernaum, Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth	House churches at first, at Peter Whitmer farm, John Johnson home
Some teachings not openly shared with all; cast not your pearls or "holy thing" before the dogs (see Matthew 7:6)	Ritual teachings kept esoteric, sacred; certain teachings or experiences not openly taught at first
Jesus and the temple: He always went there when in Jerusalem, taught there daily, healed there, would rebuild the temple	Joseph Smith and the temple: always concerned about establishing temples in Kirtland, Independence, Far West, Nauvoo
Jesus and missionary fervor: very early, sent out the Twelve and then the Seventy, eventually to remote locations	Joseph and missionary fervor: at time of great risk, sent out the Twelve and then Seventies, eventually to remote locations
Jesus's words are echoed in the writings of His followers—James, Paul, and others	Joseph Smith's words are echoed in Orson Pratt's articles of faith, by Brigham Young and others
New scripture created; Christian texts added to Jewish	New scripture created; Mormon revelations added to Jewish and Christian writings
Bold new practices; some do not last, such as selling all and holding property in common	Bold new practices; some do not last, such as united order and redefinition of wealth

**TABLE 2. COMPARABLE FOUNDINGS, CONTINUED**

<i>Early Christianity</i>	<i>Early Mormonism</i>
Great promises of exaltation, entering God's presence and obtaining all; testimonials of benefits in spite of costs	Great promises of exaltation, becoming as God and progressing eternally; testimonials of benefits in spite of costs
Built on ideas found in the basic surrounding culture; parallels can be seen in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls and contemporary writings	Built on words and attitudes in surrounding environment; parallels can be found in the nineteenth-century religious milieu
Cultural continuity with conventional Jewish religion was high	Cultural continuity with conventional Christianity was high
Heavy dependence on the Old Testament, making strong truth claims about the original meaning of old scripture	Heavy dependence on the Old and New Testaments, making strong truth claims about understanding their original meanings
Adapting broad Old Testament themes for Christian purposes	Reworking of biblical themes for Mormon purposes
Claims of power to speak and act with divine authority	Claims of power to speak and act with divine authority
Pre-creedal statements of belief are fluid, simple	Early articles of faith are fluid, uncomplicated
Prophecy about impending destruction, apocalyptic eschatology (see Matthew 24)	Prophecy about impending millenarian destruction, the last days (see D&C 45)
Miracles of Jesus are impressive and abundant	Miracles of Joseph are important and persuasive
Fears of occult powers are part of the undoing of Jesus after the raising of Lazarus, as seen in the accusation that he was a trickster	The undoing of Joseph Smith is traceable to his claims of access to the supernatural, suspicions that he was a deceiver
Violent crucifixion of Jesus, age 33	Violent shooting of Joseph Smith, age 38
Death of Jesus is caused by the failure of Pontius Pilate to protect Him	Death of Joseph is caused by the failure of Thomas Ford to protect him



## ANALOGOUS APOSTLESHIPS

The work of early Christianity was not the work of Jesus alone, nor was early Mormonism the work of Joseph Smith alone. In both cases, an inner circle of close disciples was essential for the establishment and propagation of the fledgling Church. In both instances, some of those friends would betray or turn away from their leader. Indeed, the acts of the early Apostles are mirrored by the acts of these modern Apostles.

In the introduction to the volume on the 1831–36 missionary journals of William E. McLellin, one of the original Apostles ordained in 1835, I characterized his journals as a “modern Acts of the Apostles.”<sup>22</sup> The rediscovery of the William E. McLellin journals is perhaps as significant to Latter-day Saint history as the discovery of an original diary of an early Christian Apostle or bishop would be to New Testament studies. Just as Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, and Luke journeyed and preached with Paul during the earliest years of Christianity, so McLellin traveled and proclaimed the gospel with many significant early Mormon figures from 1831 to 1836. His companions included such prominent men as Hyrum Smith, Samuel Smith, Parley P. Pratt, and his brethren in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Both the book of Acts and the McLellin journals tell about the miracles, healings, conversions, doctrines, beliefs, difficulties, and successes of early adherents. Both allow us to follow the growth away from the early centers of Jerusalem and Antioch, or Kirtland and Independence. Both stress faith, repentance, baptism, and bestowing the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, little reference is made in either to the stories of Jesus, His miracles, or His Resurrection; the writer assumes that the reader knows these foundational elements. Both works share an essential enthusiasm for the impending return of Christ (see Acts 1:11),<sup>24</sup> and both prove their points by making substantial use of the scriptures accepted by their hosts.<sup>25</sup> Both report magnificent manifestations

of divine power and speaking in tongues, and both place a high premium on cultivating the virtues of unity, harmony and humility. The point of this list of similarities is simply to give a sense of the degree to which the work went forward in similar ways in both cases.

The New Testament depicts early Christianity as being tolerated at first by Jewish leaders, such as Gamaliel, who argued that Christianity should not be seen as a threat (see Acts 5:34–39); but persecution of the Christians intensified as they began to succeed (see Acts 14:1–7). In much the same way, the initial reception of Mormons by some Christian congregations was quite hospitable. Mormon missionaries were often allowed to preach in the buildings of other churches, sometimes being preferred over other speakers by vote of those congregations. Before long, however, reactions to the burgeoning Mormonism became increasingly antagonistic.

Dissension soon developed within early Christianity as certain doctrines—such as the use of circumcision and the proper relationship of Christians to the law of Moses (see Acts 15)—needed to be further defined. Pharisees who believed in Christ continued to promote their own ideas about the observance of the law (see Acts 15:5). Fledgling branches of the Church in Greece and Asia Minor needed direction and strengthening. In much the same way, the early Latter-day Saint leaders found themselves dealing with problems in the young branches of the restored Church in Ohio and Missouri. Members of both groups soon suffered extreme hardships and were proud to be “counted worthy to suffer shame” and other deprivations for the name of the Lord (Acts 5:41), and sharp contrasts were drawn between the righteousness of the believers and the wickedness of the surrounding world.<sup>26</sup>

Without overstating the significance of these similarities, and while allowing for normal historical and personal differences (for example, Paul spent much of his time in court or in prison; McLellin was not a lawyer and avoided



confrontations in court—those encounters would be Joseph Smith’s lot), we can see that the basic factors in the history of early Christianity are substantially congruent with the most visible characteristics of the McLellin journals. Whatever implications or conclusions one may choose to draw from these points, the parallels between the experiences reported in Acts and in the McLellin journals are extensive.

Further points of congruence can be deduced in the infancies of both movements. Table 3 traces some of the workings of the Apostles in

these initial years. Similarities can be seen in such factors as divine indications of apostolic succession, patterns of membership, social cohesion, frontier regions, dissenters, imprisonment, promised rewards, Church administration, and elements of worship. Some of these parallels could, of course, have resulted from a conscious effort at imitation or reinstitution, but the comparable degrees of successful restoration of these first-century elements in the composite edifice of the nineteenth-century Church was not so easily controlled or assured.

**TABLE 3. ANALOGOUS APOSTLESHIPS**

<i>Early Christianity</i>	<i>Early Mormonism</i>
Uncertainty about immediate apostolic succession in leadership in Jerusalem and Corinth after the unexpected death of Jesus	Similar uncertainty about immediate apostolic succession in leadership in Nauvoo after the unexpected death of Joseph
Group validation at Pentecost in Acts 2, rapid initial growth, enthusiasm; validation of Peter as successor	Group spiritual outpourings, rapid burst of growth, enthusiasm; validation of Brigham Young as successor
Separation of spiritual and temporal administration by the early Apostles in Acts 6	Division of responsibilities between Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods
Joining requires little teaching; membership marked by baptism, Acts 3 and 8	Converts join after little time or training; membership marked by baptism
People join from all social and economic groups, but mainly middle class, unaffiliated	People join from all strata of society, but mainly middle class, mobile
Great success comes in territories that have been recently populated: Philippi, Corinth	Great success comes in settling in expansion areas: Western Reserve, Missouri, Nauvoo
Women play important roles in the community, exceeding the opportunities normally afforded in the surrounding culture	Women given important roles, organization, vote, and service, exceeding those normally afforded in nineteenth-century culture
Great interest in prophecy, foretelling the future	Prevalence of futuristic speech, prophetic predictions

**TABLE 3. ANALOGOUS APOSTLESHIPS, CONTINUED**

<i>Early Christianity</i>	<i>Early Mormonism</i>
Speaking in tongues in Acts, other gifts of the spirit in Corinth	Speaking in tongues in Kirtland, other gifts of the Spirit in Nauvoo
Divisions arise quickly in Corinth and Galatia	Divisions arise soon in Kirtland and Missouri
False apostles reject Paul's authority, apostasy under way	Apostasy of half of the Twelve Apostles in Kirtland in 1837
Free riders and false prophets are dealt with severely; social costs of membership are high	Nonconformists expelled quickly; distinctive stigmas of membership present entry barriers
Leaders are often imprisoned; Peter, John, Paul in Jerusalem; Paul in Philippi and Caesarea	Leaders are often imprisoned; jails in Richmond, Liberty, and Carthage
Paul rises above the rough treatment of the prison guard in Philippi	Joseph rises above the vulgar treatment of the prison guard in Richmond
Paul articulates phrases that become elements in enduring statements of faith	Joseph Smith articulates similar statements that become Articles of Faith
Paul travels to Rome to plead his cause and to testify to Caesar	Joseph travels to Washington to set his cause before the president
Letters of Peter, John, James, Jude, and Paul become scripture in the New Testament	Joseph Smith's letters are canonized in Doctrine and Covenants 121–23, 127–28
Concerns arise in Thessalonica and Corinth over those who had died before knowing the truth	Concerns arise in Nauvoo over those who had died, such as Alvin, before the restoration of the truth
Great promises to become sons of God	Great promises to rise to celestial glory
Earliest priesthood instructions in 1 Corinthians deal with administration of the sacrament	Earliest instructions in the 1830 Articles and Covenants deal with administration of the sacrament
Borrowing of Jewish psalms while writing new Christian hymns	Borrowing of Christian hymns while writing new Latter-day Saint hymns

## PARALLEL ENCOUNTERS AND GROWTH

If like attracts like, the similarity of Mormonism and early Christianity can also be seen in a fourth stage, in the similar responses they received from their surrounding worlds. Both encountered similar forms of ideological opposition, persecution from the mainstream religious groups, and removal or expulsion from their initial gathering places. Some converts clung to their old ideas or traditions, schismatics tore fledgling congregations apart, and political powers that ruled in Rome or Illinois were suspicious. Christians and Mormons were used as scapegoats, and members in both eras suffered or were tested by the high social costs they paid for their church membership, including in both cases the confiscation of their property. Both movements responded to these pressures in similar ways, typically emphasizing the family, charity, welfare, and caring for the sick and needy.

The outcome in both cases was a discernibly common pattern of growth. The seeds of both movements took social and demographic nourishment from their surrounding conditions, adversely opposed though they often were. For support and analysis of several of these similarities, one may consider the observations of Rodney Stark, who has projected the growth rates of early Christianity in his book *The Rise of Christianity*.<sup>27</sup> Anyone interested in the Latter-day Saints should take particular note of Stark's explanations for the extensive Christianization of the Roman Empire by the middle of the fourth century. In particular, Stark draws several explicit parallels between much that transpired in the first centuries of Christianity and the early experiences of Latter-day Saints, and many other parallels are implicit in his reconstruction of early Christian history based on sociological data extracted from good sources on the world of post-apostolic and pre-creedal Christianity.

In the course of playing out his account of the rise of Christianity, Stark brings to the table a set of sociological theories, developed and vali-

dated through modern social scientific research, explaining to a large extent many phenomena, such as the dynamics of conversion, upper-class preferences for new religious movements, profiles of why mission activity succeeds, effects of networking in close social circles, demographic impacts of epidemics, birth rates, as well as the roles of women, urbanization, and cost-benefit analyses of martyrdom and sacrifice as rational human choices. Along the way, Stark compares what he has learned through his study of the growth of new religious movements in modern times with what he finds in the ancient experience. On five occasions, Stark uses the Mormon experience, more than any other, to inform his opinions about what happened in early Christianity:

1. Steady Mormon growth without the need for mass conversions in modern times shows Stark that Christianity could equally have grown at a similar manner and rate. "The numerical goals Christianity needed to achieve [in its first three hundred years] are entirely in keeping with the modern experience" of Mormonism, which has grown at a rate of 43 percent per decade. Evidence shows that early Christianity grew at a rate of 40 percent per decade, which under purely normal circumstances would have brought Christianity to a total of 56.5 percent of the population by the year 350.<sup>28</sup>

2. Stark's research among new religious movements has shown that "attachments lie at the heart of conversion and therefore that conversion tends to proceed along social networks formed by interpersonal attachments."<sup>29</sup> Again asserting another comparison between early Christianity and early Mormonism, Stark argues that "the statistics . . . require that Christianity arose through pre-existing networks."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, very little historical evidence can be deduced from the records to clarify what social networks and affiliations actually existed in advance of early Christian conversions. But assuming that the early Christian mission to the Jews continued and succeeded well into the second century, as

Stark argues, then preexisting networks of Jews throughout the Roman Empire probably existed and were crucial in the growth of early Christianity, consistent with the modern findings and Mormon data that Stark uses.

3. In researching the economic class of typical converts, Stark has found that the people most prone to embrace new religious movements are those who have a substantial privilege or capability in society but are not in the top economic echelons. Converts are typically educated and sophisticated enough to embrace the new ideas inherent in a new religion. Stark produces significant evidence that enough early Christian converts were well educated and blessed with intellectual capacity and that they possessed sufficient social standing and privilege to host and perpetuate the new religious congregations. Likewise, a critical mass of early Mormon converts came from a relatively prosperous and sophisticated area of western New York, were better educated than their neighbors, and displayed considerable intellectualism. Moreover, extending this parallel, Stark points out that neither Mormonism nor early Christianity remained “a middle- and upper-class movement forever but eventually penetrated all classes.”<sup>31</sup> I would add that although it does not take phenomenal wealth to launch a new religion, without sufficient resources from a person like Martin Harris or the benefactors who contributed to the building of the Kirtland Temple, the new movement would have failed. Likewise, it appears that several of Paul’s essential collaborators, such as Lydia in Philippi and Prisca and Aquila in Corinth and Ephesus, were comfortably wealthy people; and beyond that, many factors indicate that Paul himself (with his special status as a Roman citizen, his exceptional education away from home, his ability to travel extensively, and the means to correspond with the aid of a personal scribe) was also very comfortably situated financially.

4. Another social law important for Stark is that “people are more willing to adopt a new re-

ligion to the extent that it retains cultural continuity with conventional religion(s) with which they already are familiar.”<sup>32</sup> Just as “the message of John the Baptist and of Jesus gave form and substance to the dreams of a kingdom which had haunted many of their compatriots for generations,”<sup>33</sup> and just as early Christians emphasized continuity with the Old Testament by quoting frequently from the law and the prophets, so converts to Mormonism can retain much of their original cultural heritage while adding to it.<sup>34</sup> By asking converts to not discard the Bible but to add a new set of scriptures to their religious library, “Mormonism does not present itself as an alternative to Christianity, but as its fulfillment. Joseph Smith did not claim to bring revelation from a new source, but to bring more recent tidings from the same source.”<sup>35</sup>

5. Likewise, in exploring the question “How could a rational person accept grotesque torture and death in exchange for risky, intangible religious rewards?”<sup>36</sup> Stark again draws an interesting comparison between the Mormon experience and what we know of the early Christian persecutions. In both cases, the movements retained members precisely because of the high costs involved, not in spite of them. “When much is invested into a cause, its worth inevitably increases proportionately.”<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, Stark points out that the persecutors of early Christianity were interested in seizing and punishing only its leaders, while crowds of obvious, ordinary Christians went unpunished.<sup>38</sup> In attempting to destroy Christianity from the top down, the Romans made the mistake of assuming that the flocks of early Christians would disperse as soon as their shepherds were eliminated. Interestingly, early opponents of the Saints made a similar assumption and error. Mormon opponents in Nauvoo assumed that the death of Joseph and Hyrum would end the Mormon fervor, and the *Salt Lake Tribune* predicted on the day that Brigham Young died that Mormonism would follow him to the grave. In both cases, the opponents



underestimated the commitment of the rank-and-file members of the movement, as well as the organizational opportunities afforded by the host society to allow them to perpetuate their mode of worship.

While Stark draws parallels to Mormonism on these five occasions, he could have done so even more often. Consider the following parts of his portrait of early Christianity that have easily recognizable parallels in the Mormon experience: a slow but steady growth rate at first (page 7); the eventual emergence of a central seat that directed the broadening organization (9); the importance of a few major group conversions in the initial stages of growth (13); and, more significantly, the steady expansion of the religion based on friendship networks of members (17). The epidemics that plagued the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries, which allowed Christianity to grow more rapidly when compared with the general population and forced relocations (77), can be compared with the catastrophic destructions brought upon the general society by the U.S. Civil War, World War I, and World War II, each of which allowed for Mormon advances vis-à-vis the rest of the population. Early Christianity responded to the social crises of its day by giving theological meaning to deep suffering (80) while providing physical welfare and relief (87). Miracles were especially important in confirming religious growth in early Christianity (90). Women converts were in the majority in early Christianity (100), as reflected in the significant roles offered to women in early Christian congregations (109). An early papal approval for concubinage even allowed for early Christians to participate in polygamy (111); an approving policy toward mixed marriages increased the relative fertility of Christians over and above the normal society (115). Stark also mentions the ease of travel (135) and the chaos of new urban settings (144) in the world of early Christianity, conditions that also existed as new developments in the nineteenth century. High social costs of conversion were also

involved (167), but evidence of benefits and strong testimonials of eternal rewards, even in the face of martyrdom, encouraged membership loyalty (173–74), while the problems of free riders and false prophets were firmly handled (175). Certain stigmas of membership were happily borne (176), and barriers to group entry were simply subsumed into the enormous promises of future rewards (187). Christianity arose at a time when the state provided open opportunity for associations and organizations to form (191–93), while at the same time the strength of old religions was waning (191). Early Christianity offered an inexpensive, popular form of worship, compared with the extremely expensive and aristocratic models of patronage, temple building, and cult observances common in Greek and Roman religion (198). Moreover, Christianity seemed to follow only a few steps behind the trails blazed and the beachheads established by the worship of Isis and Serapis (199), and it attracted loyal membership by requiring exclusive loyalty to the Christian faith, while other religious options available did not require exclusivity.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

What is to be made of all this? To be sure, I do not wish to overstate this lengthy array of parallels or analogues, but neither do I wish to understate them. I am just as impressed by the length of this list of sequentially correlatable points as I am with the details of most of these comparisons in particular. One cannot explain early Mormonism on the basis of three or four points. It is the totality of this pattern or profile, like a fingerprint or a DNA molecule, that is uncommon here. To borrow a model from the life sciences, the challenge is to map these historic genomes of early Christianity and early Mormonism, and to identify the gene sequences that are substantially similar in these two cases. To this end, I reflect in several directions:

*The historical Christian tradition.* To those interested in whether Mormonism is a part of the

grand historical tradition of Christianity, the foregoing data display the great extent to which Mormon history is consonant and congruous with indigenous Christianity. Time and time again, predominant elements in Mormon history are also elements that were essential to the earliest tradition of Christianity. Admittedly, one of the hallmarks of most historical methods is establishing temporal continuities, but the Mormon concept of restoration and the concept of providential history do not require or look primarily to temporal contiguities. The assumptions of providential history allow the possibility that lost truths may be reintroduced through divine revelation as a new dispensing of the same religion that had previously been revealed in an earlier period of time.

*A shared providential plan.* Seeing an analogical pattern between early Christianity and early Mormonism invites reflection on the common plan that thus seems to stand behind them both. Some people have concluded that because God and his ways are consistent and because human nature tends to respond in a similar pattern to God's positive or negative interventions into world events, the historical accounts in the Bible tend to see history in a more or less cyclical pattern, with history repeating itself almost deterministically. Latter-day Saint scholars, however, would see the idea of God's ways in "one eternal round" as implying not cyclical redundancy but merely repeating patterns prescribed in the eternal plan for God's dealing with mankind as established from before the foundations of the world. As Joseph Smith once said, God's purpose "in the last dispensation is that all things pertaining to that dispensation should be conducted precisely in accordance with the preceding dispensations."<sup>39</sup> Hence, certain similarities can be expected within broad patterns and outlines, even though individual choice and unique iterations of patterns will still occur.

By seeing God's plan in evidence in history, Latter-day Saint scholars need not rewrite early

Christian history as just another form of providential history. Most often, the usual form of history is a kind of triumphalist view of a miraculous emergence and survival of Christianity in the face of near extinction at the hands of a brutal and perennially hostile Roman Empire. Latter-day Saint religious history, however, is not the traditional form of providential history, which places God in complete control, miraculously, over the full spectrum of human activity. Latter-day Saint doctrine demands too much room for human agency, failure, apostasy, and choice.

Thus, the comparative approach I am exploring here may be aligned methodologically somewhat with a new historicist approach which constructs a view of the past that opens up the complexity of the past by reconsidering its "infinitely interrelated network[s]" and rethinking them as recognizable "forms" and converting its reappearing themes into "tropes."<sup>40</sup> Or perhaps my approach is more akin to the application of broad social scientific theories that explain the way things typically happen and thus may offer greater "explanatory power" than the usual chronological preferences.<sup>41</sup> Historical research that takes such factors into account might be seen as a new *religious* historicism. In that context, the idea of a master narrative may simply imply the existence of a master, whose basic narrative it is.

*A shared historical purpose.* These comparative excursions may also reflect the fact that all histories of the founding of religious movements are written to promote specific purposes; in this role, the purposes behind the earliest Christian histories may have much in common with the purposes behind the writings of early Mormons about their beginnings. Why do humans tell such stories? To a large extent, historians in both groups seek to retell the "creation account" of their respective movements. Such accounts seek to inform the collective memory and reinforce values through ritualistic repetition, for "the collective memory is transmitted more actively through ritual than through chronicle."<sup>42</sup>

Virtually all organizations relish their creation stories. This is largely because people naturally see a providential hand guiding or facilitating the success of the fledgling organization. The law firm I worked for in Los Angeles, which had grown by the 1970s to be one of the largest law firms in the country, loved to remember its humble origins in the late nineteenth century when Jack O'Melveny hung out his shingle in a sleepy little village of the angels (this was before Hollywood was even on the map) and waited for several days before the first client walked in. This creation story, like so many others, epitomizes the primary virtues (at least in the eyes of the beholding partners) cherished and demanded by this organization. Indeed, a significant body of literature exists in business management handbooks encouraging large modern corporations to maintain corporate histories that perpetuate such mythic or providential beginnings into the succeeding group's self-identity.

And where religious organizations are involved, the tendency to wax poetic under the influence of suggestive schemata may be irrepressible. No one loved to rehearse the quasin miraculous creation story of the BYU Law School more than did Rex E. Lee, its first dean and primeval champion. No serious law school occasion went by with Rex at the microphone without a recitation of the creation story. It made no difference that everyone had heard the story multiple times—the purpose for reliving its stock elements was not informational. These stories essentially told how the embryonic law school faced insurmountable odds but succeeded beyond everyone's wildest expectations due to uncommon faith, commitment, inspired guidance, and divine providence.

Perhaps the human tendency, especially in a religious setting, is to emphasize the David and Goliath syndrome, how the organization was small at first but was able to slay the mighty Goliath by the help of God. Similar is the bulrushes syndrome: the helpless infant Moses is groomed

by the very house of Pharaoh that he will soon curse with plagues and bring to its knees. None of this is to say these events did not really happen. What is significant is the fact that the contours of these stories were selected from among numerous facts to be remembered and repeated. Out of them we make sense of our past and project our self-image into the future. It may well be that early Mormons irresistibly recognized events transpiring around them that had a familiar ring to them because of similar events from the New Testament, and the objective similarities were concrete enough to be highly indicative and purposeful.

*Self-consciousness.* Historians, especially providential historians, need to be self-conscious and self-critical. Is it legitimate to selectively view early Christian history through a process that chooses to emphasize points of providential commonality with Latter-day Saint experience, and vice versa, or is this merely an exercise in myth building? Can the writing of such a history be seen as a candid recognition of the fact that the writing of all histories, to one extent or another, is autobiographical? As Jacqueline Dowd Hall has recently and trenchantly stated:

Narratives, like all memories, depend upon forgetting. To function at all, we must forget most of the scenes and sensations that constitute the vast rush of "experience" and overlay them with what Sigmund Freud called "screen memories," memories that protect us from fear, anxiety, and pain. Turning memories into stories—whether humble life stories or pretentious master narratives—is also a potent form of forgetting. For every narrative depends on the suppression and repression of contrary, disruptive memories—other peoples' memories of the same events, as well as the unacceptable ghosts of our own pasts.<sup>43</sup>

The same holds true in writing the histories of early Christianity and early Mormonism. Each historian tends to emphasize or deemphasize

certain factors to invent a cultural and religious identity. In constructing history, as Robert E. McGlone has explained, the roles of scripts used for encoding personal experiences, semantically processed memories, and aphoristic filtered memories are sober reminders of ways in which individual memories as well as institutional histories project us into the past.<sup>44</sup>

Jewish scholars have cultivated a similar approach in their awareness of Jewish history and Jewish memory. Conceding that memory is selective and even dangerous, Yosef Yerushalmi embraces the fact that "far from attempting a flight from history, biblical religion allows itself to be saturated by it and is inconceivable apart from it."<sup>45</sup> Continuing, he observes: "Memory is, by its nature, selective, and the demand that Israel remember is no exception. The fact that history has meaning does not mean that everything that happened in history is meaningful or worthy of recollection. . . . It is, above all, God's acts of intervention in history, and man's responses to them, be they positive or negative, that must be recalled."<sup>46</sup> Thus, the writing of providentially informed history may be no less objective, if carried out rigorously, than any other type of historical writing.

*Future directions.* Providential thinking opens our minds to possibilities that one would not otherwise consider. Good questions are rare commodities, and puzzling over interesting phenomena can set the agenda for much further research. As Robert M. Grant begins his review of Stark, "This book raises, simply and brilliantly, just the kinds of questions anyone concerned with early Christianity should ask."<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith likewise sees the main value of Stark's work as being "as significant for the questions it brings to the historical data as for its answers."<sup>48</sup> Stark's questions and their broader parallels can guide historians as they rethink and reexplore early Christian history. For the most part, past Latter-day Saint approaches to the early centuries of Christianity have been far too negative.

Typical works on the Apostasy by Latter-day Saint authors present the story as one of dark despair with little good happening, as early Christianity was warped and distorted beyond recognition. Stark's great interest in conversion patterns, missionary work, the sexual purity of early Christians, their loving care for the sick and needy, their willingness to consecrate and sacrifice all, and their tendencies towards effective organization show that several important elements, although not all, survived through many centuries of Christianity. Thus, the search for providential parallels may bring to light important factors that might otherwise go unnoticed. To understand early Mormonism, one should spend more time studying early Christianity, and vice versa.

*Circumstantial evidence of the Restoration.*

In probing the extent to which the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ restores the same religion as existed in the primitive Church, this approach highlights ways in which the two are providentially of the same substance (to borrow a word from the creeds). In a clinical diagnosis of a search for the early Church, detailed comparisons are indicative. If the one movement in its earliest stages acts like the other, looks like the other, and launches trajectories that persist for some time like the other, then it becomes logical to conclude that the two movements are isomorphic, as claimed.

As proof that God has once again set His hand to work in a divine restoration of His kingdom as originally established in the meridian of time, the foregoing data can, of course, provide only circumstantial evidence, but such evidence is not without merit. As Joseph Smith said in 1842, "It will be as it ever has been, the world will prove Joseph Smith a true prophet by circumstantial evidence."<sup>49</sup> While evidence of spiritual truths will always remain in the domain of testimony and the Holy Ghost, "secondary evidences in support of truth, like secondary causes in natural phenomenon, may be of first rate importance and mighty factors in the achievement of



God's purposes." As B. H. Roberts has said, "To be known, the truth must be stated, and the clearer and more complete the statement is, the better opportunity will the Holy Spirit have for testifying to the souls of men that the work is true."<sup>50</sup> Careful examination of these two worlds allows modern minds to see in bolder relief memorable elements in the providential working of the Spirit among God's faithful children.

In sum, much more remains to be said in illuminating early Mormon and early Christian experience through the lens of providential history. In retrospect, it may always appear that every significant development in any historical period was uniquely generated by conditions that extraordinarily combined to make that development possible. Nevertheless, some epochs are more uniquely conducive to the inception of a new religious movement than others. The flourishing of both early Christianity and early Mormonism owed much to the conditions that happened to prevail in the decades that immediately preceded and followed their inceptions, and these circumstances extended far beyond the broad elements of a "supportive cultural tradition," a manifestation of "revelation," a "period of social crisis," and "reinforcement by a support group" that sociologists consider "necessary for the career of the [founder of a new religious movement] to progress."<sup>51</sup> In the cases of early Christianity and early Mormonism, extensive conditions formed a receptive matrix that set a stage on which God and His agents could propitiously act.

What does this have to offer to a discussion of Latter-day Saint approaches to world history? The notion of providential history may be understood in several different ways. Some approaches to providential history may concentrate on the individual lives of ordinary people who are sustained by God from day to day as He guides their steps along the simple paths of private life. Other approaches may focus on detecting a subtle divine hand in the unfolding of the broad movements of world history. And others may acknowledge

God's direct hand in key events of world history, especially where great issues of creation or eternal salvation are involved. I have taken a mixed path, combining these macroscopic and microscopic views. The proposed series of common elements emerges out of minute details as well as broad trends that combined to create similar receptive situations into which Jesus and Joseph Smith could be introduced to accomplish crucial purposes in furthering God's plan of eternal purposes for this world. I conclude from this that God watches over His children, allowing them to act as they will while simultaneously making sure that circumstances are secure enough that His divine purposes can be met at a needed time. God purposefully orchestrates or capitalizes on the confluence of certain conditions that make the achievement of divine purposes possible. In other words, providential history should not be viewed only as a simple matter of isolated divine interventions. God and mankind both act on a world stage with all its necessary props and fixtures. A Latter-day Saint approach to world history sees God as an agent among agents. Divine providence is His story among their stories.

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## NOTES

*Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Mormon History Association in Copenhagen, Denmark, in July 2000, and at a Church history conference in Independence, Missouri, in September 2000.*

1. See D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Eusebius of Caesarea* (London: Mowbray, 1960), 168–69, citing passages asserting that the Pax Augusti providentially prepared the way for the establishment and rapid advance of Christianity. I thank Carl Griffin for this observation and reference.

2. For a useful discussion of the intellectual "magic" that dwells in any comparative study of religions, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 19–35. Although the ultimate significance of comparisons may elude us, noticing parallels is a natural process in

recognition and understanding. For a useful discussion of some of the values and pitfalls of seeking parallels, see Douglas F. Salmon, "Parallelomania and the Study of Latter-day Scripture: Confirmation, Coincidence, or the Collective Unconscious?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 2 (2000): 129–56. Salmon rightly calls for a clear statement of methodology when using particular parallels to prove a specific claim. In the present paper, however, I do not attempt to prove a specific claim, only to show that similar broad patterns can be spotted between early Christianity and early Mormonism, which composites may be significant as comparable instances of divine influence in history.

3. Eugene England, "A Modern Acts of the Apostles, 1840: Mormon Literature in the Making," *BYU Studies* 27, no. 2 (1987): 79–95, compares the writings of the latter-day Apostles working in England in 1840 with the acts and letters produced by the early-day Apostles. Barry Robert Bickmore has collected dozens of doctrinal and organizational congruencies between the ancient and the restored churches in his *Restoring the Ancient Church* (Ben Lomand, CA: Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 1999). For further similarities, see Almon Fackrell, *Parallels of Moses, Jesus and Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1996).

4. See, for example, chapters by Brian Q. Cannon on Providential History and Malcolm R. Thorp on Butterfield in the present volume; Ronald A. Wells, ed., *History and the Christian Historian* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998); Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: Bell and Sons, 1950).

5. I became especially immersed in the world of the New Testament in producing, with John F. Hall, *Masada and the World of the New Testament* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1997). At the same time, as editor-in-chief of *BYU Studies* and publisher for the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, I have been engaged with various publications on early Mormon history.

6. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 6–7; reviewed and discussed by John W. Welch and Kathryn Worlton Pulham in *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 197–204.

7. For information on the details of the first century, see M. Cary and H. H. Scullard, *A History of Rome* (New York: St. Martin's, 1975), 295–98.

8. See Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 470–75.

9. See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 160.

10. Discussed in John F. Hall, *New Testament Witnesses of Christ* (Pleasant Grove, UT: Covenant, 2002), 49–50. "In many respects Rome provided for a greater level of religious freedom than was seen again until after the American Revolution." (Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 192).

11. See Syme, *Roman Revolution*, 402; Cary and Scullard, *A History of Rome*, 250–51.

12. For an idea of the economic growth in Judea and Galilee, see Andrew Teasdale, "Herod the Great's Building Program," in *Masada and the World of the New Testament*, 85–98. Similar expansion was rampant in New York with the opening of the Erie and the Ohio canals.

13. See James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 220–36.

14. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 31. Roger T. Macfarlane, "Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Latin: Languages of New Testament Judea," in *Masada and the World of the New Testament*, 228–38.

15. See Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World*, 103–9.

16. See Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 191–93.

17. See Elias J. Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 101–16.

18. See Robert Remini, *Joseph Smith* (New York: Viking, 2002), 1–8.

19. See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 2–3, 109–11.

20. See Jostein Adna, *Jesu Stellung zum Tempel* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

21. "Miracle was intrinsic to religious credibility in the Greco-Roman world. Modern scholars have too long been content to dismiss reports of miracles in the

New Testament and in other similar sources" (Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 90). The role of miracles and divine manifestations in the success of Mormonism is equally prominent.

22. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994), 13–26.

23. In addition to the teachings of Peter on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:38), several accounts in the book of Acts, such as Philip's baptism of the eunuch in Acts 8, follow this pattern. "Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost" (Acts 8:17).

24. Especially the early chapters of Acts reflect the attitudes of a community preparing for the imminent return of the Lord and living in anticipation of the promised coming of his kingdom (see Acts 2:39).

25. Thus, for example, Acts 2:17 quotes Joel's words, "Pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh," and Acts 2:25 quotes David's claim of seeing the Lord, in both cases interpreting the older biblical passages Christologically.

26. Acts 3:14–15 speaks of the wicked people of the world who "denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; and killed the Prince of life."

27. Reviewed by John W. Welch and Katy Worlton-Pulham in *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 197–204.

28. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 6–7.

29. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 18.

30. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 18.

31. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 18.

32. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 55.

33. Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), 10.

34. See Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 55.

35. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 55.

36. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 178.

37. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 177.

38. See Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 208, citing Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 129.

39. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 168.

40. Rick Duerden, "Cultural Poetics: The New Historicism," in David Cowles, ed., *The Critical Experience* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1994), 23, 236.

41. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 26.

42. Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 15.

43. Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "'You Must Remember This': Autobiography as Social Critique," *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (September 1998): 440. I thank Grant Underwood for bringing this article to my attention.

44. See Robert E. McGlone, "Deciphering Memory: John Adams and the Authorship of the Declaration of Independence," *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (September 1998): 411–38.

45. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 9.

46. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 10–11.

47. Robert M. Grant, review of *The Rise of Christianity*, by Rodney Stark, in *Christian Century* (November 6, 1996): 1081.

48. Jonathan Z. Smith, review of *The Rise of Christianity*, by Rodney Stark, in *American Journal of Sociology* 102, no. 4 (January 1997): 1663.

49. *Times and Seasons*, September 15, 1842, 922.

50. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1909), 2:vii.

51. Rodney Stark, summarized in Jack T. Sanders, *Charisma, Converts, Competitors: Societal and Sociological Factors in the Success of Early Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 70–71.