



The Palgrave Handbook of Global Mormonism

Edited by

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*To Armand L. Mauss, respected colleague and distinguished scholar of
Mormon Studies*

PREFACE

A majority of the many books written so far about Latter-day Saints (or “Mormons”) and their church—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—are histories that focus on its nineteenth-century American origin, peculiar doctrinal beliefs, political conflicts, and religious controversies in the United States. Many of these books have been written by academically trained Mormon scholars who nonetheless retain a commitment to their church and its leaders. Meanwhile, as the twenty-first century continues to unfold, Mormonism has become an expanding, international faith with an official worldwide membership today approaching 17 million people who congregate for worship in close to 190 countries around the globe. This is a story that needs to be dispassionately and objectively updated and understood.

The scope of this book is purposely broad. The fact that the LDS Church is increasingly a global religion, portending both foreseeable and unseen consequences for its future, is a reality that scholars of religion need to address. We want to give readers a clear idea of where and how the LDS faith has penetrated national and cultural boundaries in Latin America, Oceania, Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as in North America beyond the borders of Mormon Utah. Furthermore, we do not wish to merely provide readers with a travelogue tour of exotic countries where Mormonism has managed to establish a foothold and appears to be flourishing. We want readers to understand a host of growing concerns within a multinational, multicultural church: What does it mean to be a Latter-day Saint in different world regions? What is the faith’s appeal to converts in these places, and how is this both the same and different than being a Latter-day Saint in the United States? What are the peculiar problems for members who must manage Mormon identities in conjunction with their different national, cultural, and ethnic identities? How are LDS ecclesiastical authorities dealing with such issues as the status of women in a patriarchal church, the treatment of LGBTQ members, current trends of greater questioning of religious authority, increasing disaffiliation of young people, and

decreasing growth rates in North and Latin America while sustaining increasing growth in parts of Asia and Africa?

Our book aims to provide an up-to-date, accurate, but nuanced picture of a historically American religion in the throes of the same kinds of global change that virtually every conservative faith tradition faces today in the world's troubled religious economy. Each chapter is an original essay. Our chapter authors include a good mix of both self-identified Mormons (some employed by LDS institutions of higher education) and non-Mormons, believers and non-believers, senior researchers and younger scholars, and female as well as male authors. All of our authors have academic credentials. Most are currently affiliated with institutions of higher education, but some are independent scholars. All, however, have qualifying backgrounds in teaching and/or researching and writing about topics pertinent to their assigned chapters for this book.

Our book's chapters are data driven, featuring both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the topic of global Mormonism. Several of our chapters rely on survey research and other types of statistical data collection. Other chapters utilize historical narratives based on documentary sources. And some combine ethnographic studies, interview data, and even highly personalized narratives. We believe that the complex nature of our subject matter is enriched by a blend of different disciplinary perspectives, methodological approaches, and actual lived experiences, as well as by the different religious or secular backgrounds that our authors bring to their interpretive study of global Mormonism and the LDS Church.

We should note in this regard a subtle distinction between the formal properties of a religious institution and the unofficial properties of its religious culture. When referencing the institutional church, we endeavor to employ its full and correct name—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—and avoid common but incorrect reference to “the Mormon Church.” At the same time, for convenience sake and in conformity with standard abbreviation practices for frequently used terms and names in scholarly work, we also employ “LDS Church” and “LDS” as an adjective for referencing the institutional church and its organizational aspects. Some of our authors choose to economize further by simply referring to “the Church” when the context makes perfectly clear that it is the LDS Church and its programs or policies which are being described. When, however, referencing the broader *religious culture and its people* that are sponsored and sustained by the institutional church—but which do not bestow official recognition, sanction, or ownership—many of our chapter authors have taken the liberty of applying the popular designations of “Mormon” and “Mormonism” in their exposition and analysis. Admittedly, these distinctions are not always easy to make or rigorously maintain. When referencing church members, for example, some authors alternate between the terms Latter-day Saints (formally correct) and Mormons (widely recognized informally). Readers will also note that, as editors, we use the terms Mormon and Mormonism in our table of contents headings, and chapter titles, as well as in this preface.

We have divided the book's chapters into five general parts. Our intent in Part I ("Foundations of a New Religious Tradition") is to provide readers—especially those who may be largely unfamiliar with the LDS Church's complicated history, distinctive beliefs and teachings, and institutional changes over time—with a foundational background in order to appreciate the material more clearly in subsequent chapters on Mormonism as a contemporary global religion. This part begins with an overview account of Mormon history—its early internationalization and change—followed by chapters on its authority structure and ecclesiastical organization, LDS missiology and its organized system of lay missionary service, and its geographical dispersion and growth patterns worldwide since World War II.

In Part II ("Contemporary Concerns and Issues Facing an International Church") we provide chapters that spotlight some of the LDS Church's major concerns as a global religion moving forward in the twenty-first century. These concerns include (1) negotiating issues of ethnic, national, and religious identity in international Mormonism; (2) fluctuating (and particularly declining) growth rates in different parts of the world; (3) growing retention and disaffiliation concerns; (4) gender and exclusionary male priesthood-authority issues; (5) issues of sexual identity and the current standing of LGBTQ Mormons; and (6) the changing religious attitudes of Mormon young people in an increasingly secular world. These concerns, of course, are not peculiar to the modern LDS Church and are shared worldwide by many other contemporary religions.

In Part III ("Living Global Mormonism") we look closely at what it means to be a Latter-day Saint in different world regions. We cannot, of course, include a chapter on every country where the LDS Church has missionaries and members, but we have attempted to judiciously select particular countries for which we have qualified authors to produce national case studies in order to illustrate the broad diversity of contemporary Mormonism as an international religion. We begin this part with a summary overview chapter on Mormons in major world regions—North America, Latin America, Oceania, Europe, Africa, and Asia—followed by specific chapters on Mormons in Canada, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Hawaii and the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand, Ireland and the United Kingdom, the Nordic and Low Countries, South Africa, Ghana and Nigeria, and Japan. Moreover, we also include a chapter on the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) in the Philippines and conclude with a chapter on "Fundamentalist" Mormons who, though officially repudiated by the LDS Church, maintain their claims to be legitimate Mormons and persist in practicing polygamy in both the United States and Mexico.

In Part IV ("Mormon Ethnic Diversity in North America"), we continue highlighting the cultural and ethnic diversity of religious experience for modern Latter-day Saints by drawing attention to different groupings of minority church members in North America. In particular, we have included chapters on Black Mormons, Latinx Mormons, and Native American Mormons who must

reconcile and practice their religious faith in the national context of a predominantly white church.

Finally, in Part V (“Final Concerns and Reflections”), we have added two concluding chapters. The first of these chapters addresses the massive impact of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic and is written as a real-time description of the response of ecclesiastical leaders and managers at LDS headquarters in Salt Lake City as they cope with and attempt to manage a sudden global crisis with seismic repercussions for every institutional nook and cranny of the contemporary LDS Church. The second concluding chapter offers a reflective summary of our contributors’ scholarship concerning Mormonism’s current concerns and future prospects as a global religion in the twenty-first century.

As readers will discover, there is a fair amount of overlapping, thematic material produced by the 42 authors who have written the 31 chapters of this book. This should be expected of any competent anthology of this type. The religious, cultural, political, and historical complexities of our subject matter demand the intersecting attention of a range of scholars and practitioners, trained in different academic disciplines and/or schooled by their own first-hand experience. That their accounts of modern Mormonism coalesce on certain critical points about its history, religious turning points, organizational development, international spread, and current challenges and prospects for the future in different parts of the world should be regarded as a strength, not a failing. This is not to say that there is perfect agreement among our authors and certainly not the same emphasis is to be found in what they have written, from either a faith standpoint or a strictly academic point of view. This too we count as a virtue.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are indebted to Palgrave Senior Editor, Philip Getz, for generating the idea behind this book. He first contacted us at the 2018 annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion to say that he was intrigued with the set of sessions sponsored by the Mormon Social Science Association (MSSA) at that conference. He asked if we thought we could secure a sufficient number of scholars to produce an edited collection on contemporary global Mormonism. We, of course, said yes and, in consultation with one of MSSA's co-founders, Armand Mauss, began developing a roster of qualified authors who could make significant contributions to such a project. A quick examination of *Global Mormonism's* table of contents and list of contributors will confirm the basis for our confidence. We salute the 42 authors and co-authors of this book whose collective efforts have produced what we consider to be a unique and important work of scholarship on the global spread of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its distinctive religious culture and institutional challenges and prospects in the twenty-first century. Last but far from least, we acknowledge and appreciate the helpful professionalism of Palgrave Associate Editor, Amy Invernizzi, who patiently guided us through the maze of editing protocols necessary for the publication of this book.

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PART I

Foundations of a New Religious
Tradition



Global Mormonism: *A Historical Overview*

Colleen McDannell

In early February of 1831, Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, and Frederick G. Williams walked across the frozen Kansas River to Delaware Indian villages lining its north bank. The tribes, originally pushed out of their ancestral lands by the British, now were forced to live outside of the United States on unsettled lands west of the Mississippi River. Like other Native people, the Delaware were treated like a sovereign nation—although one whose treaties were constantly being broken and who were addressed as if they were children. When the American missionaries crossed the river near Independence, Missouri, they entered into the foreign territory of “Indian Country.”¹

Like the Delaware, the missionaries had also traveled far from their homes. Beginning in October of 1830 (shortly after the founding of their church) Cowdery and Pratt, as well as Peter Whitmer Jr. and Ziba Peterson, began a 1500-mile journey from upstate New York to find the “Lamanites” (a Book of Mormon term for native Indians). The men were seeking converts to what would eventually become known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While Whitmer and Peterson set up a tailor shop in Independence, Missouri, to earn the funds needed to support the groups’ preaching, Cowdery, Pratt, and Williams pressed on to the Indian villages. In later years, Parley Pratt remembered how Oliver Cowdery preached to the “red men,” explaining they had once occupied the whole continent and were strong and mighty believers in the one God. Over the centuries, however, they had become wicked and killed each other. God then stopped their dreams and visions. The men coming from afar were bringing them a book, which told of this lost history—a book

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that had been buried and now recovered. The missionaries left a newly printed copy of their sacred text, called *The Book of Mormon*. If the tribe would accept this new message, they would recover their rights and prosperity.²

Historians speculate that the Delaware might actually have been interested in these ideas about their divine right to their lands as it echoed their own prophetic placement of Native people at the center of a religious story.³ In his autobiography, Parley Pratt remembered the frustration of a displaced people and their leader: “It is now winter, we are new settlers in this place,” Pratt reported being told. “The snow is deep, our cattle and horses are dying, our wigwams are poor; we have much to do in the spring—to build houses, and fence and make farms.” The Delaware also looked forward to better days: “We will build a council house,” they told the visitors, “and meet together, and you shall read to us and teach us more concerning the Book of our fathers and the will of the Great Spirit.”⁴ Pratt felt hopeful.

Unfortunately for the Latter-day Saint missionaries, in spite of Indian country being perceived as a foreign land, the federal government controlled who had access to the Delaware. Cowdery and his companions had not secured the proper documentation to travel and preach to the Indians. Many Christian communities wanted to convert the “savages,” and traders wanted to sell them guns and liquor. To control who interacted with Indian nations—those forced to exist outside of the United States—federal agencies issued permits. With no permit, “the Saints” (a self-identifying abbreviation adopted by converts to the new faith) were told to stop their efforts and to leave. Methodists and Baptists would later be given the chance to convert the Delaware.

The story of the 1831 mission to the Delaware is emblematic of how Latter-day Saints sought converts in foreign countries in order to bring about a new social and spiritual order. The very earliest efforts of the Latter-day Saints entailed crafting their religion into a “world” or “global” faith. Cowdery’s mission to the Delaware was stimulated by a revelation proclaimed by the prophet Joseph Smith that the New Jerusalem, the city of Zion, would be built “on the borders by the Lamanites”⁵—basically in a foreign country. Although Mormonism would become famous as the most successful of the “American”-born religions, throughout its history much of its energy was directed outside of the nation’s boundaries. If all had proceeded as the missionaries had planned, the Lamanites and the Latter-day Saints would have joined together to usher in a new era. However, as would be the case throughout much of Latter-day Saint history, neither the foreigners nor the US government embraced the truths embedded in the message presented by the missionaries.

And yet, as Parley Pratt and Oliver Cowdery traveled toward Indian country, they found others receptive to the teachings of Joseph Smith. The global orientation of the Latter-day Saints has often produced for them unexpected benefits. In an Ohio town called Kirtland, missionaries baptized 127 people within a few weeks, with the number soon ballooning to one thousand.⁶ While Pratt would eventually return to Ohio, the other missionaries would stay near Independence, which would come to figure prominently in Latter-day Saint

history. In 1847, after the death of Joseph Smith, the Saints would travel across the continent to foreign territory then claimed by Mexico. There they would establish their own nation, with economic and social mores that would enflame many of the citizens of the United States. Outreach to foreign peoples might often fail, but in the process Latter-day Saints would alter, develop, and deepen their spiritual sensibilities. Throughout its history, this “American” religion would be intimately connected to the world.

THE GATHERING, 1830–1887

The motivating spirit behind Cowdery’s mission to the Delaware was the notion of “the Gathering.” Parley P. Pratt, as well as fellow converts Sidney Rigdon and Orson Hyde, shared a notion common in antebellum America: the world was “spiraling downward to its cataclysmic conclusion” in a whirlwind of wars, pestilence, natural disasters, and apostasy.⁷ “None doeth good,” declared the God of the Mormons, “mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to their ungodliness.”⁸ Men like Sidney Rigdon believed their duty was to “usher in the glory of the last days by converting the world” or else the “scorner shall be consumed.”⁹ To accomplish this, the Lord had raised up apostles, prophets, evangelists. The gifts of the ancient times had been restored; an elect, chosen group of men and women began to heal, speak in heavenly languages, make prophecies, and exert miraculous powers. The anxieties of the last days drove the Saints to venture near and far to instruct and baptize.

While many American seers warned of the End Times, the Latter-day Saints offered an additional vision. Those who understood the sacred message were not to wait hopelessly in the storm but, like the animals of Noah, to seek safe refuge in the ark. Believers were to gather together in a special place to work and wait. The sun may darken, the moon may turn to blood, and the stars fall from the sky but “the remnant shall be gathered unto this place.”¹⁰ The Jews, the American Indians, and those “adopted” into the House of Israel through conversion would come from all nations to build a New Jerusalem. The Saints would share a promised land, a city of Zion, “a land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety”¹¹ (D&C 45:66). This place would first be in Nauvoo, Illinois, and later in Salt Lake City, Utah.

As early as 1837, Wilford Woodruff, John Taylor, and Heber C. Kimball and eventually church president Brigham Young, traveled to Great Britain to gather the citizens of “Babylon” to Zion. The Protestants and Catholics, just like the “heathen” of Asia and Africa, needed to be instructed, re-baptized, and gathered. In 1840 Orson Hyde went to Palestine and dedicated it for the “return” of the Jews. In 1844, before the Saints in their wagons had even arrived in Utah, Mormon missionaries had sailed off to the South Pacific. Barely after they built their adobe homes, missionaries were sent to France (1849), Italy (1849), Scandinavia (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway) (1850), the Sandwich Islands (Hawai‘i, 1850), India (1851), Chile (1851), Australia

(1851), China (1853), Switzerland (1850), South Africa (1853), and the Netherlands (1864). Building up Zion required the conversion of the world.

It was in the industrial sectors of Great Britain that the missionaries had the most success. During the peak year of 1851, missionaries counted 32,894 newly baptized souls.¹² At that point, there were only 12,000 Mormons living in Utah.¹³ England boasted 222 separate Latter-day Saint meeting places with 60 percent established in London and the rest in northern towns.¹⁴ Because publishing was much more developed in Great Britain than on the American frontier, England provided the foundation for a growing Mormon print culture. In 1840, ten years before Mormons in Utah had a newspaper, the *Millennial Star* published its first issue. Read in both Europe and the United States, the *Millennial Star* was the longest-lived Latter-day Saint periodical, ceasing publication only in 1970 when the church consolidated many of its publications. The first comprehensive treatment of the doctrines of the church, Parley P. Pratt's *Key to the Science of Theology*, was published in Liverpool in 1855. From mission headquarters in the port city, Latter-day Saints distributed their literature across the British Empire—from Ireland to India to South Africa.

Music also became a vital aspect of Latter-day Saint worship under the influence of British sensibilities. Parley P. Pratt, along with Brigham Young and John Taylor, published a hymnal in Manchester (1840) that became the favorite of English-speaking Saints.¹⁵ This text-only hymnal relied on popular English tunes to provide the music and went through twenty-five editions before falling out of favor in the early twentieth century. The celebrated Mormon Tabernacle Choir also has British heritage. The designer of the famed organ, the first organist, and seven of the first eight Mormon Tabernacle choir directors were all born in Great Britain. During the nineteenth century, Mormonism was as much a British religion as an American one.

The Latter-day Saints, however, did not become yet another nonconformist, British denomination singing hymns and passing out tracts. Mormonism may have started out as a suitcase religion—with Latter-day Saints always on the move—but the Saints intended to build their own fully physical religious kingdom.¹⁶ Converts were to “gather” in the Great Basin of the American West and create a self-sustaining, cooperative, and fully righteous society. Historian William Mulder explained that at baptism and with the laying of hands in confirmation, new converts felt an “irresistible longing, which ravished them and filled them with a nostalgia for Zion, their common home.”¹⁷ The Gathering succeeded in disciplining the fervor of conversion into something useful and productive. Once temples were built, emigrants would be able to participate in rituals that allowed for eternal spiritual progress toward godhood. While “the Gathering” was a religious principle and practice, it also fits within a colonial mentality that had little difficulty in asserting that God had “given” his Chosen People the rights to land claimed by others.

To facilitate emigration to Utah Territory, church leaders in 1849 established the Perpetual Emigration Fund. The church paid for travel and then expected the newly arrived Saints to pay off their debt through community

labor. Those who paid into the account made it possible for more to come. Liverpool missionary agents screened the converts for what was needed in Zion, sometimes looking for skilled artisans and farmers and sometimes for long-time church members who were thought to be more conscientious about repaying their loans.¹⁸ Although there were never enough funds to go around, the Perpetual Emigration Fund succeeded in actualizing both the idea of the Gathering and the collective values that would enable a religious colony to thrive in the desert. Between 1870 and 1880 an average of 1620 converts came each year from Europe. In the four years between 1880 and 1883, over 8000 emigrants arrived.¹⁹ The fund also transported machinery and construction materials in addition to people. The Perpetual Emigration Fund continued until 1887 when the federal government ended it as a punishment for Mormon polygamy.

Latter-day Saints celebrate the migration of Europeans to the Great Basin and boast that “Gentile” visitors reported a land of industry and productivity. What is less acknowledged is the impact of the Gathering on the global communities of Saints. Those who did not gather to Zion (even if they counted themselves among the Saints) were “queer fish in the gospel net.”²⁰ Unlike Protestant and Catholic missionaries who expected foreign converts to transform their native lands through the civilizing power of Christianity, Latter-day Saints leaders expected the opposite. In the Mormon mind, European civilization was actually “Babylon,” and it was Mormon community life in the “wild” American frontier that was given to God’s chosen people. What was needed to enable spiritual progression and economic growth of the Saints was to build up the American church, not sustain those unable or unwilling to gather.

Not surprisingly those European Saints “left behind” became frustrated, disillusioned, and often inactive. Missionaries were few and stretched across the continent. Publications like the Danish *Skandinaviens Stjerne* (1851–1856) introduced converts to Mormon history and doctrine, but leaders made no effort to fully train newly baptized men in leadership roles.²¹ In Finland, and probably in much of Europe, more women converted than men, which also contributed to leadership problems.²² In 1852 Lorenzo Snow arranged for the translation of the Book of Mormon into Italian, but neither he nor any other missionary stayed long enough in the country to truly master Italian or its local dialects. Before the mission closed a few years later, approximately 180 had converted but 39 percent of those were excommunicated for a variety of reasons.²³ By 1863 only ten members remained in Italy.²⁴ Salt Lake leaders supported an emigration office in Liverpool but not church buildings. Converts struggled to rent meeting places. In Belfast in 1854, “women pawned their shawls and the men their watches and rings, and even the furniture out of their homes to help pay the expenses for a meeting-place.”²⁵ In northern Italy, members walked miles on Sunday to meet with their fellow Saints. Their poverty was not relieved by church funds, and they were “left alone to deal with their destitution.”²⁶

Those who did not emigrate faced limits on their religious practices, social isolation, and community prejudice. In Denmark, as the Mormons left for the

New World, it took little effort to brand those who remained as insufficiently patriotic.²⁷ Newly emboldened by their conversion experience, Danish Saints also became less obsequious to their social superiors.²⁸ Latter-day Saints upheld the bifurcation between righteous Saint and evil Gentile. Such antagonism between the Saints and their neighbors was heightened by a literary context of anti-Mormonism. Newspaper stories, popular novels, and even theater performances created a hostile climate not only for missionaries but for those Saints who did not immediately emigrate.²⁹ As far away as India, missionaries preaching among British colonists found that polygamy was “a large pill for many to swallow, and in fact the very first sight of it so nauseates their stomachs, that at present they can scarcely receive anything else.”³⁰ By the end of the nineteenth century, even disgruntled Saints like Englishman William Jarman returned to their home countries to forge careers in anti-Mormon public speaking.³¹

Competent Saints, both religiously and professionally, were consistently siphoned off to fuel God’s kingdom in the Great Basin. Those who remained overseas struggled. A pattern had been established: as Utah became stronger, global Mormonism suffered. Some missions quickly closed: Chile (1852), China (1853), India (1856). By the 1860s, church leaders came to believe that “sweeping the nations” for the “blood of Israel” had concluded—at least in Europe.³² Missions effectively closed or were consolidated in Germany (1861), France (1864), and Italy (1867). An imaginary “Mormonism” was created in the minds of intellectuals and newspapermen—as either a harbinger of an oppressive, sexually deviant, anti-modern theocracy that “trapped its members within a secret web of surveillance” or a hopeful glimpse of a future utopia that would transform European castoffs into a stable, productive society.³³ Although the South Pacific would become fertile mission territory later in the century, in 1852 the Saints left the Society Islands (Tahiti). The South African mission closed in 1865.

The closing of the South African mission was a result of the church’s racial policy. While Protestants and Catholics directed their missionary efforts toward the non-European residents of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, Latter-day Saints did not. In 1852 church president Brigham Young announced that men of black African descent would not be permitted to be ordained to the priesthood. Men determined to have “African blood” could not even hold the lowest priesthood office offered to twelve-year-old white boys.³⁴ Both black men and women were also barred from participating in temple rituals, necessary for any eternal spiritual advancement. Church leaders used biblical interpretations and stories about premortal life to justify their discriminatory beliefs. The priesthood ban reflected both general racial prejudice of the era and the specific pressure of Southern Latter-day Saints who sought to maintain their slaves as they gathered to the Utah territory. While the racial policy departed from an earlier and more open church perspective on converting African Americans, during the nineteenth century, there were only a few active black Latter-day Saints. Occasionally, African Americans were baptized and confirmed, but missionary work was not specifically directed toward their communities.³⁵

Racial prejudice generated from America shaped global missionary efforts. Abroad, missionaries sought converts among the Europeans colonizing Africa but not among its vast native populations. Between 1857 and 1865, approximately 281 white South African members migrated to Utah. Unable to create a sustaining leadership among black Africans and harassed by the white African churches, the mission closed and was not reopened until 1903. Race, however, is not a clear-cut, “obvious” category determined by the country of origin. In Australia, missionaries were influenced by the assumptions that Aborigines were “of the Negro race.” A similar attitude restricted missionary work on the Pacific islands of Papua New Guinea and Fiji.³⁶

PROMISED LANDS IN THE PACIFIC, 1850–1898

Other indigenous people of the Pacific were perceived much more positively. In 1851, as he sought converts on the Hawaiian island of Maui, George Q. Cannon believed that the people he met were “descendants of Israel because they resembled them very much.” He noted a native Hawaiian leader also believed that certain local customs “made him think that they were of this race.”³⁷ At the same time in Tahiti, missionary Louisa Pratt identified the Nephites (Israelites who had traveled to the New World) as “the ancient fathers of the Tahitians.”³⁸ Back in Utah, Brigham Young taught in 1858 that “those islanders, and the natives of this country are of the House of Israel.”³⁹ By 1900, George Q. Cannon’s conviction of the chosen heritage of the Pacific Islanders had solidified into a divine vision. Mission president Samuel E. Wooley recalled that Cannon told a group of Hawaiians “they were of the seed of Abraham, he knew it because the Lord told him so at Lahaina.”⁴⁰ While ascribing ancient Jewish origins to Polynesians was not unique to the Mormons, they used the idea both to explain why Islanders were converting (and not Europeans) and to continue their work among them.

In 1868 a church periodical asserted that “the fairer races” of Polynesia were the descendants of the Nephites who left South America.⁴¹ According to this line of thought, Hagoth, one of the followers of Lehi’s righteous sons, Nephi, was “an exceedingly curious man.” He built a large ship and “launched it forth into the west sea.” The ship and others like it sailed “to the land northward,” carrying women, children, and provisions. The Book of Mormon writer, Alma, speculated that the ships were “drowned in the depths of the sea.”⁴² But if Hagoth’s ships ended up in Hawai‘i, could this explain why the natives were the descendants of the House of Israel? Could they have traveled on to New Zealand?⁴³ Native Islanders thus were *unlike* Native Americans as they were free from the debilitating association with the evil Laman. They descended from the virtuous Nephi via the ships of Hagoth.

This positive perspective on Pacific Islanders enabled the missionaries both to expand their preaching outside of the colonializing European community and to foster the curiosity of native peoples regarding Mormonism. Thus, as historian John-Charles Duffy has written, missionaries inserted Native people

directly into the sacred story. “The Book of Mormon is *your* book,” missionaries informed their listeners, it is “the record of *your* ancestors.”⁴⁴ Baptism among Pacific Islanders reinforced this understanding of their chosen heritage. “Polynesians” thus assumed an elevated status in the eyes of white Latter-day Saint missionaries, who sought to gather them together into a religious community.⁴⁵

Establishing a “Hawaiian Zion” was no simple task. Some missionaries who arrived in 1850 quickly returned home, but those who stayed met success among the Hawaiians. By late 1854, 4000 Hawaiians had been baptized and missionaries began to seek a way for them to gather as the Saints were doing in Utah.⁴⁶ They established a village in Lanai in the Palawai Basin, clearing land and planting corn, melons, and potatoes. Even oxen were brought in on boats. A school was established and homes “of native style” were built.⁴⁷ But, the crops did not produce as planned and worms were eating what did sprout.⁴⁸ The newness of the religion had worn off and converts were becoming inactive and criticizing church leaders. A similar pattern occurred in the Pacific as had in Europe: “The gathering at the island of Lanai has gleaned out most of the faithful and diligent brethren,” explained then missionary Joseph F. Smith in 1856, “perhaps, this is one cause why the Saints feel so discouraged on the other islands.”⁴⁹ In the fall of 1857, Brigham Young decided it was best for the missionary elders to return home and let the Hawaiian Saints themselves promote the gospel.⁵⁰

Into this void in church leadership came the controversial Walter Murray Gibson.⁵¹ Coming to Mormonism after adventures in North Carolina, Java, and Europe, Gibson offered Brigham Young his services as a missionary to the East Indies, but he ended up overseeing the declining settlement on Lanai. Throughout the islands, people were dying of diseases brought in by foreigners. Gibson’s leadership of the Saints was rocky and after some disgruntled Hawaiians wrote Brigham Young of their discontent, a coterie of church leaders were sent to check up on Gibson. They found the community acceptable, but Gibson unwilling to submit to their authority. He was excommunicated shortly after in 1864. Gibson initially remained with his schismatic followers but eventually became a figure in Hawaiian politics.

A year later, in 1865 the Latter-day Saints purchased 6000 acres of land on the northern side of the island of Oahu that stretched from the sea to the mountains. The Saints would then abandon Lanai for the village of La‘ie. Unlike Protestant and Catholic congregations where foreign missionaries were supported by domestic donations, Latter-day Saint missionaries came without “purse or script” (D&C 84:86) and had to earn their own keep. In La‘ie as in Utah, Latter-day Saints attempted to integrate faith, family, and farming. In contrast with other plantations in Hawai‘i, workers were paid wages and not yoked to the land through long-term contracts. Mission presidents, who served as both plantation managers and religious leaders, stressed that both the missionaries and the residents were to build up the Kingdom of God through cooperative labor. Both groups planted, cultivated, harvested, and processed