

**Journal of Presbyterian History**  
**Presbyterians and Mormons: An Introduction**  
**by James H. Moorhead and Frederick J. Heuser, Jr.**

In April 1830, Joseph Smith, Jr., organized what soon was called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (popularly known as the Mormons) in Fayette, New York. The young founder, still seven months shy of his twenty-fifth birthday, did not understand himself to be starting merely one more new church among many others. He was restoring the only true church which had been lost for centuries due to the corruptions into which all supposedly Christian groups, whether Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox, had fallen. As warrant for this bold act, Smith claimed a series of visions and revelations from God. He also offered a new scripture supplementing the Bible. *The Book of Mormon*, first published in 1830, purported to be Smith's translation of ancient writings shown to him by an angel. These writings detailed God's dealings with the inhabitants of North America hundreds of years before Christopher Columbus. Armed, then, with contemporary revelation and a new sacred text, Smith set out to restore the church and moved his followers at various times to Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois.

From the outset, Mormonism met opposition. One European-born seminary professor in Pennsylvania, describing the religion for people in his native land, called it the "worst product of America" and suggested that if only half of its alleged abuses were true, Mormons were "on a decidedly immoral and abominable track; so that the Americans cannot be particularly blamed for wishing to be rid of such a pest." This statement would probably rank among the milder nineteenth-century criticisms of the Latter-day Saints. A full explanation of this hostility and the persecution it sometimes engendered is, of course, well beyond the scope of these introductory remarks, but a few words are in order to put Presbyterian-Mormon relations in context. Mormons aroused hatred not only because they advanced distinctive doctrines and claimed Joseph Smith to be a modern prophet, but also because they clung together in separate communities. Restoration of true Christianity, according to the Latter-day Saints, entailed the assembling of a separate people analogous to the Hebrews of the Old Testament; and they signaled their conviction by calling outsiders "gentiles." To the outsiders, however, these practices and beliefs made the Saints appear clannish, alien, and sinister. Hatred increased further once rumors (initially denied by the Saints) bruited that this suspect group practiced polygamy. Under pressure, Mormons had to abandon their communities, first in Ohio and later in Missouri. In Illinois during 1839–40, Smith established Nauvoo, a quasi-independent city-state on the banks of the Mississippi River. Soon, however, hostilities against the Mormons again mounted. After Smith sought to suppress a Nauvoo newspaper critical of him, he was arrested and incarcerated in Carthage, Illinois, where on 27 June 1844 a mob attacked the jail and murdered him and his brother Hyrum. In the wake of the prophet's martyrdom, Brigham Young became the new Mormon leader and guided his people west, where they settled in present-day Utah. There, as they created a community largely separate from the gentiles, the Saints openly avowed polygamy, or, in their terminology, "celestial marriage." By the late 1850s, they came dangerously close to fighting a war with the U.S. military; and in the post-Civil War era, they faced

increasingly stringent U.S. laws against polygamy. Instead of complying, many Saints went either to prison or into hiding.<sup>1</sup>

But then in 1890, the Latter-day Saints president reversed policy by announcing that the church no longer sanctioned polygamy. This action paved the way for Utah's statehood in 1896 and diminished the hostility of the outside world. Moreover, Mormonism in the twentieth century has muted the notion that the Saints should be a gathered people in communities separate from "gentiles." As the church has either removed or downplayed these practices that once set it at variance with others, the traits that have remained—emphasis upon patriotic loyalty, hard work, self-improvement, material progress, and the family—have given Mormonism new respectability. Thus, in many eyes at least, the hated sect of the nineteenth century has become by the twenty-first a paragon of rock-ribbed conservatism and traditional American values. Of course, deep theological differences still divide Mormonism from the historic Christian tradition; but for the most part, those disagreements now take place within a framework of assumed coexistence.

Like other major Protestant bodies in the nineteenth century, Presbyterians had a deep suspicion of Mormons, saw them as morally corrupt, and sought their conversion. But the actual interaction between Presbyterians and Mormons in Utah took on another dimension. Although Mormons might have been deemed a sect in the larger society and Presbyterians part of a dominant Protestant mainstream, the positions were reversed in the Salt Lake Basin. There Presbyterians were very much the minority and Mormons the local establishment. In his article in this special issue, R. Douglas Brackenridge provides an overview of the conflicts between the two groups in Utah. Jana Kathryn Riess's essay, which first appeared in the *Journal of Mormon History*, covers much of the same period, but with special focus on the efforts of Presbyterian women missionaries to convert first Latter-day Saints women and then to educate their children. Both articles explore roots of the accommodations that Presbyterians and Mormons had to make in the twentieth century. The continuing theological differences between the two traditions are probed in this issue's final selection. We reprint a portion of *Presbyterian and Mormons: A Study in Contrasts*, prepared by the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1990. It offers, from a Presbyterian perspective, salient features of the enduring theological differences between Mormonism and the classic Christian tradition.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of its Political, Social, and Religious Character*, ed. Perry Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961 [1855]), 198, 203. The literature on Mormonism is voluminous. One highly regarded sympathetic account by an outsider scholar is Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).