

IN THE LAND OF URIM AND THUMMIM

(Extracted From *The Poet and The Murderer*, by Simon Worrall)

On a clear winter day, Salt Lake City seems to float above the Great Salt Basin like a *fata morgana* in the Sahara. It is partly the light but most of all, it is the way the city suddenly rears up out of the desert, framed by the Wasatch Mountains, which rise, jagged and sublime, like the backdrop to a Wagner opera. Looming at the end of the wide avenues that crisscross the city in a severe, Euclidean grid, the mountains foreshorten distances, and distort scales. This sense of unreality is heightened by the presence, in the heart of the city, of a cathedral-like, neo-gothic building. Towering over the downtown area, its spire topped by a golden angel, The Temple of the Church of Latter Day Saints dominates Salt Lake City as St.Peter's dominates Rome.

Most cities are established because of their accessibility to transport networks, the presence of raw materials, or the clemency of the climate. Salt Lake City was chosen as the site of the Mormon capital because of its remoteness and the hostility of the natural environment. Ringed by impenetrable mountains and canyons, and surrounded by one of the most forbidding deserts on the planet, it was the ideal location for an outlaw

religion that had thumbed its nose at the greatest Shibboleth of Christian civilization, and the bedrock on which society had been built: the monogamous union between a man and a woman.

Laid out in an uncompromising grid of squares emanating from a central, ten acre plot around The Temple, streets are numbered according to their geographic relation to what is known as the Base and Meridian, a marker placed on the north-east corner of the Temple, which serves as Salt Lake's version of the Greenwich meridian. This Euclidean geometry is the outward expression of a deep devotion to order and discipline. " No other organization is as perfect ", a cleric wrote of the Mormons at the end of the nineteenth century. " Except for the German army. " Ways of thinking that deviate from the norm are as alien as crooked streets.

The Mormon God is a God of order. And business. Mormons, more than any other Americans, believe that it is a religious duty to make money. With assets estimated at \$30 billion dollars, and annual revenues from tithing of nearly \$6 billion, more than Nike's annual turnover, the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints is today one of the wealthiest religions in the world. It owns vast tracts of land, including the United States' largest ranch, the 312,000 acre Deseret Cattle and Citrus Ranch, in Orlando, Florida; and oversees a multi-billion dollar portfolio of real estate, media and securities

assets. With a worldwide membership of nearly twelve million, and an annual growth rate far-outstripping any other denomination, it is also one of the most dynamically expanding religions in the world. Some of America's most successful corporate titans are Mormons, like Steve Marriott, of the Marriott Hotel chain, or Jon Huntsman, the chemical billionaire. No religion has a better organized, or more aggressive, lobbying machine in Washington.

The founder of this religion, and its first Prophet, was born on a hardscrabble farm near the town of Sharon, in eastern Vermont, in 1805. His name was Joseph Smith. The Smith household was sustained by an eclectic jumble of beliefs and superstitions. Smith's father was interested in folk magic. His mother was what we would today call a fundamentalist Christian. The Bible was always open on the kitchen table. God was harder to find. The soil was rocky, the economy in depression. People lived in cramped, wooden houses without toilets or drains. There was widespread poverty and disease. Alcoholism and suicide were common. To people at the bottom of the economic pile, like the Smiths, the American dream felt more like a nightmare. In nine years, between the ages of two and eleven, Joseph Smith and his family moved seven times in Vermont and New Hampshire, working

as tenant farmers, doing odd jobs like building work or tapping maple-sugar. In 1816, they settled in Palmyra, New York.

Religion thrives on human suffering, and throughout Joseph Smith's childhood New England was swept by numerous, spiritual revivals. An upstate New York farmer named William Miller predicted that the world would end in 1843 (he later changed the date to 1844), and within a few months, 100,000 mostly poor, uneducated Americans had nailed their hopes of salvation and a better life to Miller's mast. Eventually, the Millerite movement, as it became known, would mutate into the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

If God couldn't deliver, maybe the Devil would. Throughout the New England of that period, there was widespread interest in magic and the occult. In Palmyra, the Smiths earned a reputation for scrying, or crystal gazing. Scrying, the use of crystals or seer stones, had been widely practiced in pre-Christian times, as a way of divining the future, but the medieval church had banned it. But in the nineteenth century, along with palmistry and astrology, " glass looking ", as it was known, enjoyed a revival. Practitioners believed that they could gain direct access to the spirit world. Or find gold. The young Joseph Smith and his father would tramp the hills around Palmyra with their " seer stones " hoping to strike it rich. It was said

that a seer stone worked best at the northernmost declination of the sun. There were elaborate rituals for cleaning them. When that had been done, they were placed in a hat. The " glass looker " then walked across the fields, much as people troll beaches today with metal detectors looking for watches or jewelry. If the seer stone, or " peep stone ", as the crystals were also known, misted up, gold was believed to be at hand.

Joseph Smith's favorite seer stone was a brown, egg-shaped piece of rock that he had found while digging a well for one of his Palmyra neighbors, Willard Chase. By all accounts, the tall, lanky farmer's son, with blue eyes and a limp he had been afflicted with after a bout of typhoid, was an expert " glass looker. " He was also deeply fascinated by Masonic rites (when Smith's pockets were searched after his death, a Masonic talisman known as a Jupiter Stone was found) Soon, he was being hired by other families in Palmyra to look for gold and buried treasure. One of these men was Josiah Stowell. But though Smith seems to have conducted an exhaustive search of the Stowell property, he did not find any gold. Instead, he found a new religion.

In the fall of 1823, when he was seventeen, Smith claimed that an angel, whom he named Moroni, had appeared to him in one of his visions and told him that a set of golden plates were buried in a stone box on a

hillside near the family farm. Smith dug up the golden plates and found, encrypted on them, in a language that came to be known as " reformed Egyptian " the gospel of the first, major religion to have appeared on Earth since the Prophet Mohammed rode out of the deserts of Arabia.

Smith had been home-schooled. His handwriting was messy and full of errors. He knew no foreign languages, and certainly not Greek or Latin. How could he read Egyptian hieroglyphs? To help him decipher the inscriptions on the gold plates, he would claim that the angel Moroni provided him with a pair of magic goggles. These came to be known as the Urim and Thummim. Imagine a virtual reality headset with crystal seer stones as lenses, mounted on a breastplate that strapped around the viewer's chest. Lucy Smith, the prophet's mother, would later describe the Urim and Thummim as " two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass and the glasses set in silver bows. " The breastplate, she said, was " concave on one side and convex on the other, and extended from the neck downwards as far as the center of the stomach of a man of extraordinary size. "

By then, Smith's treasure hunting had got him into trouble. Scrying was illegal in New York State. " All who pretend to have skill in physiognomy, palmistry or like crafty science ", declared an 1812 legal manual, " or pretend to tell fortunes, or to discover where lost goods may be found " were

to be prosecuted for disorderly conduct. In 1826, when he was twenty-one, Smith was hauled before the courts in Bainbridge, New York, and found guilty of "glass looking." The neighbors hissed rumors of witchcraft and the occult.

Smith had fallen in love with a girl from Harmony, Pennsylvania, named Emma Hale. But her well-to-do father, Isaac, disapproved of Smith's nefarious activities with seer stones, and forbade the match. The young lovers eloped. Isaac Hale relented. Smith and his young bride moved into the Hale house in Harmony, where Joseph Smith turned his attention from gold digging to the translation of the golden plates.

He started work in September 1827. Emma Smith worked as her husband's scribe. A blanket divided the room. On one side, sat Emma, pen in hand, with a sheaf of parchment in front of her. On the other side of the curtain sat Joseph Smith with the Urim and Thummim strapped to his chest. When he was about to dictate, Smith would bury his face in the battered, wide-brimmed hat that he had worn to tramp about the hills looking for gold, "drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light", wrote a contemporary who witnessed Smith at work. The golden plates, Smith gave onlookers to understand, were buried somewhere in the woods. When he looked into his hat through the seer stones the images of the hieroglyphs

would magically appear, like data scrolling across the screen of a computer with wireless Internet access. Not surprisingly, Emma, his wife, was never allowed to see the golden plates. But eleven witnesses would later declare that they had " seen and hefted " them.

The visions Smith saw at the bottom of his hat rescued America from the outer reaches of the Christian universe and gave hope to poor, beaten down people like him that America was, after all, the Promised Land. Mormonism was religion, Made in the USA. According to Smith, the true church of Christ had been hijacked not long after Christ's death in what is called the " Great Apostasy ". The building of the Vatican, Luther and the Reformation, indeed all western history from circa 100 A.D to 1832, when Joseph Smith was born, was one, long collective hallucination. Only with Smith's revelations the true church was restored. To prove its authenticity Smith's followers highlighted three things. Smith had direct, prophetic contact with God; he had restored the ancient priesthood, which dated back to Abraham and the Old Testament; most important of all, the Mormon church had a priceless, historical document - a piece of supplementary scripture called The Book of Mormon.

Imagine a cross between Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and the most long-winded sermon you have ever heard - the phrase " and it came to pass "

occurs more than two thousand times - and you have The Book of Mormon. Mark Twain called it " chloroform in print. " But to the poor, uneducated people who flocked to Joseph Smith's banner, it offered a reassuring illusion, and a history lesson. One of the problems with traditional Christianity was that its founding myths were set in far off places like Palestine, Egypt and later, Europe. The Bible offered plausible accounts of how the seed of Abraham had gotten from Jerusalem to, say, Dublin. But there was no mention of Sandusky, Ohio or Palmyra, New York. America was a black hole on the fringes of the Christian cosmos peopled by dark-skinned " savages " for whose existence the Bible offered no explanation. If God had created America, as he created the Holy Land and Europe, why were the Apache and the Sioux not white? Why didn't they live in houses, read the Bible, and pay taxes, like god-fearing men and women should?

Smith had always been fascinated by the Indian burial mounds surrounding the family homestead. As a child, he had spun fantasies about a lost race that he believed was buried in the tumuli. " During our evening conversations, Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined ", his mother wrote in her Biographical Sketches of 1853. " He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of traveling and the animals upon which they

rode; their cities; their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their religious worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life with them. "

The Book of Mormon took this imaginary history and transformed it into a religious myth. Its most extravagant claim was that America had been settled by a proto-Mormon, Hebraic tribe around 2250 B.C. A second wave of immigrants from the Near East, The Nephites, settled here around 600 B.C. According to Mormon lore, a descendant of the biblical patriarch, Joseph, named Lehi, sailed to the New World via the Indian and Pacific Ocean. Christ even visited America, after the resurrection. Jackson County, Missouri, is identified as the place where the Second Coming will occur.

In the pre-Columbian America imagined by Joseph Smith, good battles evil as the Nephites, who have remained true to the teachings of Christ, square off against a tribe known as the Lamanites. The Nephites are great culture builders and Mormon scholars have expended huge amounts of time and effort trying to link Mayan civilization to the fictional heroes of Joseph Smith's narrative. Their written language was the one Smith would claim to find on the golden plates: Reformed Egyptian. The Lamanites were the wicked descendants of Lehi, a craven, godless people who had turned their

backs on God and been cursed with a dark skin. These " red sons of Israel ", as Smith called them, are today known as Native Americans.

According to the Book of Mormon, the Lamanites the Nephites in an epic battle in 400 A.D at a place called The Hill Cumorah in upstate New York. This was Smith's fantastic explanation for why there were no white Christians left in America when Columbus arrived. But as the battle raged, a valiant young man named Moroni, who was the son of the leading Nephite general, Mormon, managed to hide a set of golden plates in a hillside. Fifteen centuries later, this revelation of Christ's true church would be revealed to a poor, illiterate, white farm boy from Palmyra named Joseph Smith.

There is no archaeological evidence to support any of these claims. DNA evidence has proved a connection between Native Americans and Asia, but none to the Near East. But despite this, every year, tens of thousands of Mormons from all over the world make the trek to the Hill Cumorah to watch a spectacular theatrical re-enactment of the battle.

Not surprisingly, at the outset Smith's new religion faced something of a credibility problem. Most Americans regarded it in much the same way as they today regard the Raliens, or The Moonies. From its beginnings on the wild, lawless frontier, where guns talked louder than words, Mormonism

was also steeped in violence. Schisms within the church left a trail of blood. Assassination and violence were common. Most infamous were the Danites, or "Avenging Angels," a secret society pledged to exterminating the enemies of the new religion. The most controversial aspect of the new religion, however, was that it sanctioned polygamy.

Joseph Smith had what we would call today a sex addiction. As far back as 1830, when he was twenty-five, he had to beat a hasty retreat from Harmony, Pennsylvania, when his wife's cousin, Hiel Lewis, accused him of "improper conduct." Another woman, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, claimed that he tried to seduce her when she was twelve. Smith used a standard chat-up line: that God had commanded him in a vision to take her as his plural wife. He was to have many more such visions, and by the time he was murdered in 1844, he had formed "celestial marriages" with an estimated forty-one women. He seems to have been particularly fond of nubile teenagers. Typically, Smith would ask his close friends for their wives, or daughters, using threats and religious blandishments, to get his way. It was simultaneously a test of loyalty, and a way of forging a primitive, tribal form of solidarity. By impregnating his friends' wives and daughters, he could ensure that, even at a genetic level, they were united. By 1842-3, when he was thirty-seven, this semi-illiterate farm boy from

Vermont had become the patriarch of a large colony in Nauvoo, Illinois. The tents and lean-tos of the earliest followers had been replaced by 1,500 log cabins, shops, and more than 300 brick buildings (including a Masonic Lodge). In one of them Smith opened a general store. Goods were bought on credit, and never repaid. And in 1842 Smith adopted the remedy of all scoundrels: he declared bankruptcy.

One teenager, Lucy Walker, whom Smith had taken into his house after her mother had died - and after he had sent her father off on a mission - left a pitiful record of what it was like to be chosen by God to be one of Smith's concubines. " No mother to council; no father to tell me what to do, in this trying hour," she wrote. " Oh, let this bitter cup pass. And thus I prayed in the agony of my soul. " Nancy Rigdon, one of the few women brave enough to refuse Smith's advances, described how, in 1842, he forced her into a private room at a printing office, and propositioned her. Only when she threatened to scream the house down did he unlock the door.

Among the women Smith forced into bed were four pairs of sisters and a mother-daughter pair. His youngest child-bride was fourteen. When he tried to seduce a sixteen-year-old in Kirtland, Ohio, a mob tried to castrate Smith, but the doctor refused to perform the operation. Through all this, Emma Smith, the Prophet's wife, stood by her man: and suffered. Occasionally, she

rebelled. When Smith brought a woman named Eliza Snow into the family home, in 1842, Emma is reputed to have kicked her down the stairs into the snow. To keep her in line, as he did with other women, Smith used threats. "If she will not abide this commandment she shall be destroyed," he wrote bluntly.

By 1844, Smith's megalomania had reached its apex. He announced that he would run for President. He declared himself "King, Priest and Ruler over Isreal on Earth" and predicted that all the governments of the world, including that of the United States, would eventually give way to "the government of God," a New World Order with Joseph Smith as its head. By then, the Mormon colony at Nauvoo had begun to feel like Waco, Texas, an hundred and fifty years later. There were charges and counter-charges of immorality and wife stealing. The Avenging Angels, whom Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would portray in his story, *A Study in Scarlet*, rode through the countryside bullying and intimidating, and sometimes murdering, dissenters. The economy was collapsing.

Smith died in spectacular, Wild West fashion. In June 1844, as he and his brother, Hiram, sat in a jailhouse in Carthage, Illinois, an armed mob broke in and began firing. Smith had a six-shooter, which had been smuggled in to him the day before, and he began firing back. A bullet struck

him from behind. Going to the window, Smith looked down on the angry mob. “Is there no help for the widow's son?” he cried, uttering the Masonic sign of distress, then jumped from the window. He landed on his shoulder. He tried to roll away, but was cornered against the edge of a well and quickly surrounded. As he lay bleeding to death, four men stepped forward and discharged their guns into him. Another drew a bowie knife to cut off his head. According to Mormon lore, his hand was stilled by a pillar of light...