

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

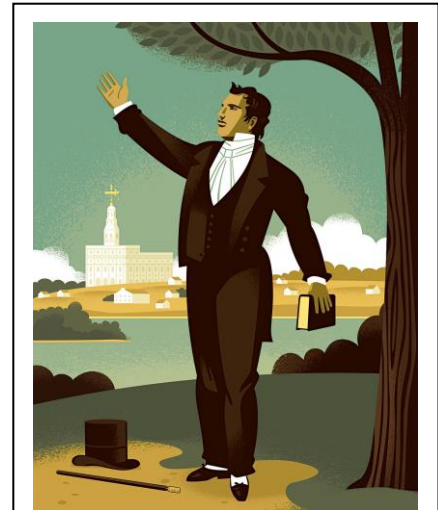
## How Joseph Smith and the Early Mormons Challenged American Democracy

*In Nauvoo, Illinois, Smith established a theocracy, ran for President, and tested the limits of religious freedom.*

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It was an unlikely candidacy: a thirty-eight-year-old mayor from the heartland who pitched himself as the solution to partisan gridlock, played up his military experience, talked often about his faith, and promised to end the country's moral decline. He was fond of quoting the Founding Fathers, had an army of grassroots supporters, and came from a swing state. But the year was 1844, the state was Illinois, the parties were the Whigs and the Democrats, and the candidate was Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



A new book, *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, examines Joseph Smith's theocratic visions. Illustration by Paul Rogers.

Whether or not the country would have been with Joe, we'll never know: on June 27th, a few months after announcing his candidacy, the first Mormon to run for President became the first Presidential candidate to be assassinated. Smith's death marked the end of a decisive period in Mormon history, one that is less familiar to most outsiders than the Church's founding, in New York State, or its eventual move to Utah, where, against considerable odds, its members came to flourish. But the chaotic months of Smith's Presidential campaign and his effort to establish a theocracy in Illinois are the subject of the historian Benjamin E. Park's new book, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (Liveright).

Park's book is a compelling history, built from contemporaneous accounts and from the previously unreleased minutes of the Council of Fifty, a governing body of sorts that Smith convened in Nauvoo, Illinois, when he was feeling besieged by his enemies and anticipating the Second Coming of Christ. Its minutes help clarify Smith's sometimes contradictory political theology, and Park's explication of them elevates "Kingdom of Nauvoo" from pure religious history to the realm of political theory. Park, an

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# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

ambidextrous thinker, is equally sensitive to the danger the state can pose to religious minorities and to the danger that a religious institution can pose to the secular state. In his account, the early Mormons were a rowdy band of neo-Puritans who mounted a fundamental challenge to the democratic experiment. The tensions that they experienced—between the right to religious freedom and the limits of religious tolerance—still persist today.

2

Smith was twenty-one and a few years into a floundering career as a treasure hunter when, per his own account, he unearthed a set of golden plates buried in upstate New York. This was in 1827, during the Second Great Awakening, when charismatic preachers were stoking religious fires around the country. Smith's parents had been drawn into this religious passion—especially his father, who dabbled in divination until his dreams were filled with prophecies. Smith's own visions were of an angel named Moroni, who appeared to him several times before finally instructing him to retrieve the plates buried in Hill Cumorah. By then, Smith had married a woman named Emma Hale, who helped transcribe the words that Smith claimed to translate from the plates—engravings in a language that he called “reformed Egyptian.”

Smith finished the transcription by 1830 and found a printer who agreed to run off five thousand copies. The result, the Book of Mormon, begins as the record of a Jewish family in Jerusalem, who, around 600 B.C., build a boat and sail to the Americas—where, six centuries later, the risen Christ preaches to their descendants. In an age when people were hungry for evidence of God's continued involvement in the world, and in a country anxious to assert itself on the global stage, Smith's scriptures offered appealing assurances: not only was the United States a holy land where Jesus himself had walked but God was still speaking to the men and women who lived there. Smith attracted a circle of followers, mostly men of modest means—farmers, clerks, small-time pastors, and schoolteachers—from New York and Pennsylvania at first, then from farther afield.

But self-declared prophets seldom sit well with the political establishment, and, almost immediately, Smith and his adherents got into trouble with the law. Some of their antagonists were motivated by personal animus toward Smith dating to his pre-Prophet, huckstering, treasure-hunting days; others were dismayed by the unconventional nature of Mormonism, with its new scriptures, its occasional glossolalia, and its insistence that other churches had fallen away from Christ's true gospel. It wasn't long before Smith was arrested for being a “disorderly person,” one in a series of charges by various authorities attempting to stymie his religious movement: banking fraud, illegal banking, fornication, threatening a public official, conspiring to assassinate a public official, incitement of a riot, perjury, polygamy, and treason against two states.

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics

As grave as some of those charges were, they were the least of the problems faced by members of the new faith. Anti-Mormon mobs harassed known believers and attacked their houses; they even tarred and feathered Smith one night in 1832. Hostilities like these gradually pushed the Mormons farther and farther toward the frontier: they established their first new Jerusalem in Kirtland, Ohio; then a newer new Jerusalem in Independence, Missouri; and their newest new Jerusalem in Far West, Missouri. In each place, local opposition increased in tandem with the growth of the Mormon population. It worsened when, at Smith's command, Mormons voted as a bloc, upsetting the political order. In 1838, having already been evicted from one Missouri county, they went to vote in the county seat of another, where a mob attempted to stop them. There were allegations of violence in what came to be known as the Gallatin County Election Day Battle, and subsequent vigilantism left more than twenty people dead. During this period, the Missouri governor, Lilburn Boggs, declared in an executive order that "the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the state if necessary for the public peace." Three days later, seventeen Mormons were murdered by soldiers near Shoal Creek, in Caldwell County.

The next day, Smith was arrested and imprisoned for four months, during which time thousands of Mormon refugees moved to Illinois, where they had been promised protection by the state legislature, whose members included a young Abraham Lincoln. Smith escaped from jail before standing trial—possibly with the help of sympathetic guards—and he and other Mormon leaders then went to Washington, D.C., to plead their case before the federal government. Aggrieved but also entitled, they carried four hundred and eighty-one individual petitions for reparations from harm suffered in state-sanctioned violence, demanding compensation for everything from lost livestock to lost husbands. The largest of the claims came from Smith himself, who demanded a hundred thousand dollars for loss of property and what he described as false imprisonment.

Those petitions represented a peculiar understanding of American federalism: predictably, the Mormons got nowhere with their argument that the national government should compensate them for the actions of a particular state. "What can I do?" President Martin Van Buren asked incredulously, before giving the same answer that Congress offered when presented with the petitions: "I can do nothing for you." It was the first of many contradictory lessons the Mormons would learn about how the federal government adjudicates between the will of the majority and the rights of a minority. Disillusioned and angered, Smith and the others headed back to Illinois, where the Mormons had already chosen a place to resettle. The town was called Commerce, so they bought it. Smith changed the name to Nauvoo, which he believed to be the Hebrew word for "beautiful city."

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The city of Nauvoo took shape in an age when Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed that every intellectual had “a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.” But Smith’s plans went far beyond the scribbling stage: within a dozen years of its founding, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had more than twenty thousand members, and Nauvoo quickly grew to be more populous than Chicago. But, unlike the Windy City, Nauvoo, operating under a permissive charter from the state of Illinois, developed a distinctly theocratic character: its independent judiciary could deny the validity of arrest warrants issued by neighboring authorities in order to shield Church members from prosecution, and its standing militia of several hundred armed men, known as the Nauvoo Legion, was empowered to protect citizens from any threat. Smith was made a Lieutenant General, a title previously held in the United States only by George Washington, and organized parades to show off the legion’s strength. (This was the military experience he would boast about during his Presidential campaign; he later added to his résumé a term as Nauvoo’s mayor.)

The city’s grandest feature was its enormous tabernacle. Smith wanted the temple of Nauvoo to rival the one built by Solomon; when it was finished, thanks to the tithe in time and muscle required of every resident, it was twice as tall as the White House. Smith had continued to receive revelations about how the faithful were meant to serve God, so this new sanctuary housed new religious rituals. One of them called for posthumous baptism, through which Mormons could baptize a living person as a proxy for someone already deceased. Another—which would divide the Church, attract the permanent suspicion of the state, and forever taint the public perception of the faith—called for plural marriage.

The origins of this rite are not well known. As Park observes in “Kingdom of Nauvoo,” it is striking that a faith so devoted to record-keeping did not document the doctrine of polygamy. “As committed as he was to the ritual’s significance,” Park writes, of Smith, “he was similarly committed to its secrecy, knowing that its exposure would lead to Nauvoo’s downfall.” Smith publicly denied knowledge of polygamous marriages, and the few records of those unions which do exist refer to them as “sealings” —or, even more cryptically, simply connect the names of the united with “was,” an abbreviation for “wed and sealed.” One of the only documents Smith ever recorded which attests to the practice is a blessing he wrote for the family of one of his teen-age wives, assuring her and her relatives of their salvation. Another of Smith’s plural wives—whose marriage to Smith was followed, within a few weeks, by that of her sister—later explained that these marriages were “too sacred to be talked about.” Such furtiveness makes it difficult to track the development of the doctrine, much less Smith’s theological justification for it. Some historians, including Park, believe that he took his first plural wife in April, 1841, though whenever it happened, he did not tell Emma, and it was some time before she

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

learned the truth. If he'd been elected President, the nation's cumulative total of First Ladies would instantly have tripled: by then, he had taken more than thirty wives, the youngest of whom was thought to be fourteen, and the oldest of whom was fifty-six.

Originally, only Smith had multiple wives. But he gradually revealed the practice to other Mormon leaders, inviting them, selectively, to witness his plural marriages, then encouraging them to pursue their own. Not everyone approved: Smith's brother Hyrum initially led the opposition, condemning polygamy and calling for a moral revival in Nauvoo. Hyrum was a widower, and his hostility to the practice weakened after he learned of its supposed posthumous benefits, through which he could be united in the afterlife with both his late wife and any future ones. Other Mormons remained unenthusiastic. Emma tried to marshal resistance among women through the Church's all-female Relief Society; in response, Smith tried to stifle the organization. Emma then threatened him with divorce, at which point he promised to take no additional wives and signed his property over to her and their children, in order to secure their financial well-being in case of rival claims.

It would be years before any Mormon leader formally acknowledged the practice of polygamy. Instead, somewhat shockingly, the Nauvoo city council passed a law punishing adultery with six months in jail and a fine of up to a thousand dollars. (Because the city's municipal leadership overlapped entirely with its spiritual leadership, Smith could choose to protect colleagues from prosecution under this new law.) Even more audaciously, Smith cursed "all Adulterers & fornicators" in a speech, then excommunicated two Church leaders for attempting to expose his secret marriages. The first, John C. Bennett, had been the mayor of Nauvoo; when his own polygamy became public, he accused Smith of having sanctioned it. The second, William Law, had denounced plural marriage after Smith propositioned his wife. After being banished from the faith, Law started a breakaway movement called the True Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Such two-faced dealing was characteristic of Smith's leadership during the Nauvoo years, both within and beyond the bounds of the Mormon Church. Not only was he struggling to maintain control of his followers—suppressing dissent over plural marriage and quashing concerns about his own moral purity—he was also trying to expand his secular power. Since arriving in Illinois, Smith had, ahead of every election, courted the favor of the two major political parties, the Whigs and the Democrats, dangling the Mormon vote in exchange for political favors and personal protection. In a state where a few hundred votes could determine the outcome of an election, particularly at the county and congressional levels, the thousands of active and enfranchised Mormons became a sought-after constituency. After a few election cycles, though, this courtship soured,



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

partly because Smith did not reliably follow through on his promised endorsements; in one congressional race, he supported the Whig candidate while instructing other Church leaders to support the Democratic opponent, dividing the promised bloc vote. Moreover, he was becoming politically toxic. When Boggs, the Missouri governor, was shot, in 1842, rumors circulated that Smith had placed a bounty on his head. Missouri forced Illinois into an extradition arrangement for the Mormon leader, but the municipal courts in Nauvoo thwarted it, in a scandalous act of disregard for the rule of law.

6

Like the Quakers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony before them, and the Rajneeshees in Oregon after them, the Mormons in Illinois came to be seen as a danger to democracy: not a mini-America, where the saints could take refuge, but an anti-America, where social deviance threatened the moral order, and religious authorities sought too much power. In the case of the Mormons, that perception was not entirely inaccurate. This became clear in 2016, when the sealed minutes of the Council of Fifty were finally made public. Smith first convened the secret organization in the spring of 1844, and it immediately began drafting an alternative to the United States Constitution, rejecting democracy as a failed political project and outlining a theocratic kingdom to replace it.

Park's access to these minutes is part of what makes "Kingdom of Nauvoo" so illuminating. The documents offer new insights into Smith's decision to run for President, a campaign that exasperated authorities in Illinois and in Missouri and drew criticism of the Mormons from around the country. It was the Council of Fifty that appointed Smith "Prophet, Priest & King," helping him shape a political platform while also making plans for what would happen if he lost the election and the Mormons needed to leave Nauvoo. The Council sent missionaries south and west, to see about resettlement, and Smith, in his Presidential platform, called for the annexation of Texas from Mexico, suggesting that the sale of the nation's public lands could be used to buy the freedom of enslaved persons around the country, thereby ending slavery and promoting Manifest Destiny at the same time. (That suggests a stronger commitment to racial equality than existed. In the Book of Mormon, dark skin is depicted as a curse from God; after Smith's death, the Church began withholding the priesthood from black members, a policy that lasted for much of the twentieth century.)

Smith had queried the five other Presidential candidates before deciding to run. Only three responded, and none expressed a willingness to protect the Mormons if elected. Smith's ensuing campaign was not so much a vanity project as an attempt to advocate for a more assertive federal government and a stronger executive branch, making the case that the Union should intervene against the states whenever the rights of minorities were threatened. "Persecution has rolled upon our heads from time to time, from portions of the United States, like peals of thunder, because of our religion," Smith lamented, after

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics

announcing his candidacy. “And no portion of the Government as yet has stepped forward for our relief. And in view of these things, I feel it to be my right and privilege to obtain what influence and power I can, lawfully, in the United States, for the protection of injured innocence.”

Nearly three hundred Mormon missionaries were sent into all twenty-six states to evangelize for Smith’s candidacy. Political conventions were just becoming popular, and his newly created Reform Party planned to hold them in every state—and to hold a national one in Baltimore later in the summer. But, not long before it was to take place, Smith was imprisoned in Illinois. The arrest stemmed not from forces outside Nauvoo but from forces within it: William Law, the excommunicated leader who founded a rival church, had, with a group of other dissenters, begun publishing a newspaper, which accused Smith of polygamy and detailed the ways in which he was supposedly dangerous to American democracy.

Smith and his Council of Fifty ordered the Nauvoo Legion to destroy the press that printed Law’s *Nauvoo Expositor*. Smith then declared martial law. The state of Illinois responded by threatening military retaliation against Nauvoo, and by adding a new charge to all the outstanding ones against Smith: attempting to incite a riot. Smith surrendered himself at Carthage, the county seat. Two days later, a mob of more than two hundred men stormed the jail where the Prophet was being held and shot him as he tried to escape by jumping from a second-story window. He died not long after hitting the ground, either from the fall or from the bullets the mob fired at him once he landed.

Only five of the vigilantes were tried for Smith’s murder, and none were convicted. Smith’s First Counselor and Vice-Presidential running mate, Sidney Rigdon, tried to take control of the Mormon Church; then Brigham Young, a former carpenter who’d been ordained to an advisory council called the Quorum of the Twelve, made the more politic suggestion that the whole Quorum should oversee the Church, with Young as its president; the congregation agreed. (The Council eventually excommunicated Rigdon, who later established a competing church, which condemned polygamy, in Pittsburgh.) Young was a forceful figure—“a man of much courage and superb equipment,” per the weathered stone that marks his birthplace, in Whitingham, Vermont. Ignoring the criticisms of the surrounding secular authorities, he began to “marry for eternity” more than a dozen women, seven of whom had also been “M.E.” to Smith, while also organizing the Mormon vote for county elections. The state retaliated by revoking Nauvoo’s charter, and the antagonism between the theocratic city and its surrounding democratic neighbors intensified until, finally, the Mormons were forced out of Nauvoo.

There was no reason to believe, at that point, that the Mormon Church would survive. Some supporters had proposed giving the religion its own sovereign reservation, like

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics

those that had recently been designated for Native Americans; opponents of the faith advocated, outright, for the extermination of its adherents. Park suggests that the Mormons' migration to Utah was a preview of the sorts of secessionist tendencies that would play out two decades later, when Southern states left the Union, though the Mormons departed the country entirely—or tried to. When the faithful settled in the Salt Lake Valley, more than twelve hundred miles from Nauvoo, they were pleased to find themselves outside American territory, then displeased to discover, after the Mexican-American War, that their foreign soil was suddenly domestic. In yet another example of their continually complicated relationship to the United States, the Mormons almost immediately petitioned for statehood, trying to get federal recognition for the State of Deseret.

Nearly half a century later, Utah finally became a state, and the Mormons rejoined the Union—but not before they had mounted an armed resistance against the National Guard, in response to the American military entering the territory, in 1857. Five previous applications for statehood had been denied, on the ground that the Mormon Church's political theology clashed with the country's democratic values: the same conflict that had forced the Mormons out of Nauvoo was now playing out, over and over again, in their new home. Unlike the separatist Shakers and Mennonites, the Mormons wanted to participate in the democratic process, and they tried to consolidate enough political power to bend the laws of the majority to protect their minority beliefs. But polygamy, for the U.S. Congress, was a non-starter; eventually, judicial debates over its legality went all the way to the Supreme Court. In *Reynolds v. U.S.* (1879), the Justices ruled that the free-exercise clause did not protect plural marriage, and that a federal law banning polygamy was constitutional. Congress then passed more laws punishing the Church, including one that called for the seizure of its property. Finally, Mormon leaders, who had previously called for open defiance of federal laws, declared an end to plural marriage. Six years after this public capitulation, in 1896, Utah was recognized as the forty-fifth state.

Such compromises are the stuff that democracy is made of—and, it seems, the stuff that successful religions are made of, too. Many denominations came and went during the proliferation of faith and fanaticism that characterized the Second Great Awakening. What kept Mormonism from joining their ranks was its willingness to change its political theology. Park suggests that part of what the Mormons learned at Nauvoo was the limits of theocracy. Adapting their beliefs and practices in Utah strengthened their standing with the federal government; by balancing religious liberty with democratic authority, they survived persecution and persisted, eventually coming to play a significant role in the political life of the nation.



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Although a Mormon was elected to state office in Illinois in 1838, it wasn't until 1896 that one was elected to the federal legislature. That achievement did not end the suspicion on both sides of the church-state divide: when a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, Reed Smoot, won a United States Senate seat, in 1903, he endured several years of congressional inquiries into whether his duties as a Mormon apostle would keep him from exercising secular authority. Such was the uneasy evolution of the relationship between the faithful and their government: enmity and mistrust slowly gave way, on both sides, to accommodation and alliance. So it was that earlier this year, on the floor of the Senate, another onetime Mormon Presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, could declare that he had sworn "an oath before God to exercise impartial justice," and become the first politician in American history to vote to impeach a member of his own party. In explaining why he would convict President Donald Trump on the charge of abuse of power, Romney said, "I am profoundly religious. My faith is at the heart of who I am."

9

It was a remarkable gesture, the sort of profile in courage that so many people had been waiting for during the impeachment trial. It was also a vote to constrain the power of the executive branch, which Joseph Smith had wanted to strengthen, and to uphold traditional democratic principles, which Smith and his early followers had sought to undermine. And it was a vote at odds with some of Romney's co-religionists in Congress: of the three other Mormons in the Senate, one, Tom Udall, a Democrat, joined Romney in voting for impeachment, while the other two, Mike Crapo and Mike Lee, both Republicans, voted to protect the President. That schism might have dismayed Smith: this time, there was no Mormon bloc. But, nearly two hundred years after the founding of Nauvoo, there was, within his faith, something that Smith had demanded from his country, even if he had not always permitted it in his church: room for dissent. ♦

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