Go East, Young Man

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Chosen People, Chosen Land
Utah as the Holy Land

“Joseph Smith had a vision . . . was possessed of a vision, an expanding one of breathtaking scope and ambition for a chosen people.”

Philip L. Barlow, 2007

To appreciate the power of Orient-inspired religion in John Charles Frémont’s time, consider yet another part of the interior West—the eastern edge of the Great Basin, where the Great Salt Lake forms one of the West’s most prominent landmarks. In the early 1840s, the entire Great Basin was the home of Native Americans, and no whites lived there. At exactly this time, however, this huge, stark, interior region was poised to become a place of refuge for a religious group seeking deliverance from tribulations more than one thousand miles to the east. They too would Orientalize the landscape. In the mid to late 1840s, Frémont’s reports played a role in bringing the Great Basin to the attention of the public. Thousands of people read Frémont’s reports and studied Charles Preuss’s accompanying maps, but none more avidly than the Mormons.

The year in which Frémont named Pyramid Lake, 1844, was a tumultuous one for the Mormons. Despite their peripatetic, westward-moving nature, the Mormons had still not settled very far west of the Mississippi at that time. Controversial since their establishment of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830, the Mormons now settled into the heart of the North American continent, namely Missouri and then their new community of Nauvoo, Illinois, by 1840. They were part of the most successful and controversial religious drama on the American frontier—and in all of American history, for that matter. It began in the 1820s when a teenage boy scoured the Bible and his native New England for inspiration. Distressed by what he
perceived to be organized religion’s failures, Joseph Smith created his own; his vision had broad geographical consequences. Within fifteen years, Smith created a new church whose roots ran deeply into two different geographic locales: the fertile loam of the American frontier and the stony semiarid soil of the Holy Land. In his insightful book, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, biographer Richard Lyman Bushman observes that Smith was more like a biblical-style prophet than any other religious figure America has ever produced.¹ That biblical style of leadership involved many references to Old World precedents, but this new religion was characteristically American in other ways—namely, its production of a new literature, its millennialism, and its near obsession with order and progress.

In his presidential address to the Mormon History Association in 2006, historian Phil Barlow noted that “Joseph Smith pre-empted Steven Spielberg by going ‘back to the future’ and then pulling it into the present.” By this, Barlow meant that Smith was prone to interpret phenomena as “the ancient order of things”—an idea not original to Smith, but one associated with his religious beliefs. As Steven LeSueur observed, if Smith were given an “ancient manuscript,” he would interpret it as “the writings of the ancient prophet Abraham.” Similarly, Smith might interpret a human skeleton as “the skeleton of an ancient Nephite [one of the Israelite families of the Book of Mormon] warrior,” a new place of settlement as “the Garden of Eden,” and “a pile of stones” might be “an altar built by Adam to offer sacrifice to God.”² Note that Smith could effortlessly shift things and places between hemispheres through this process. To Smith, the American landscape was haunted by the memories of Old World peoples who ventured here more than two thousand years before Columbus. The American frontier thus became the Near East, with its Garden of Eden, altars of Abraham, and the like. On the one hand this might seem to devalue America as a place. However, looked at in another light, it dignifies America as being the site where ancient events transpired. America, in other words, was the place where God spoke to man and, according to the Mormons, still does.

To the Mormons, the Garden of Eden figures in frontier American history. In trekking westward, the Mormons were fleeing oppression, but they had yet another goal. According to Joseph Smith, the place called Adam-ondi-Ahman was literally the Garden of Eden. Its location? Not in the Middle East, but rather in frontier Missouri! This Mormon belief that the site of the real Garden of Eden is located in America is significant for several reasons. It reaffirms and underlies the Mormons’ belief that America was, and is, a special place where sacred biblical events took place. Then, too, it reaffirms
the Mormons’ nearly genetic patriotism—a belief in American exceptionalism that reaches to the core of their religion.

But it is the Mormon presence in Utah that will concern us here, for in a remarkably short time they would transform that area adjacent to the lofty Wasatch Range into both the Holy Land and New Zion. Even though the nineteenth-century Mormon appropriation of the North American West as a chosen land for a chosen people occurred quickly, it was a geographic metaphor long in the making. In fact, more than two centuries before the Mormons began moving west, metaphors equating North America with the Holy Land were common. They were especially well established in areas along the Eastern Seaboard—another reminder that the northern Europeans’ Orientalization of the American West depended on the earlier acceptance of Orientalism in the American East. The foundation of the America-as-Israel myth can be traced to the early Puritans, many of whom interpreted their transatlantic voyages as analogous to the Israelites’ miraculous passage through the parted Red Sea. This placed the British subjects who founded the American colonies in the 1600s in an ancient and heroic role. That process, of course, required specific places in which the drama could be enacted, or rather reenacted. Further building on the metaphor, American colonists conflated their new wilderness as a “desert” that could be transformed into “a land of milk and honey.” The desert here on the East Coast was obviously metaphorical and not physical, for they had settled in a humid, forested land. Nevertheless, they were prone to see geographic parallels between the Eastern Seaboard and the Holy Land. This was largely based on that area’s similar latitude to its Old World counterparts. Although the Eastern Seaboard’s geographic parallels to the Holy Land were not strong, it was widely believed that North America itself was the New Zion. That belief was widespread in the new colonies, but no American region acted on it with more conviction than New England.3

From the outset, New England had a special character linked partly to the mind-set of its early settlers and partly to its peripheral geographic location. Biblical scholar and explorer Edward Robinson implied that New England had been branded with a biblical identity that kindled its religious zeal at every turn. As Robinson’s biographer notes, “His yearning for the specific places mentioned in the Old and New Testaments derived from the ways in which his childhood in Connecticut was infused with an imaginary knowledge of Palestine and its neighbors, Syria and Egypt, so essential in the unfolding of sacred history.”4 The two things that stirred Robinson’s imagination and intellect were a spate of biblical place-names on the land and New England’s palpable heritage of Puritan religious history.5 As a testimony to the belief that
Americans were creating a New Zion, place-names of biblical origin—Mount Zion, Bethlehem, Mount Horeb, Canaan, Salem—soon proliferated.

The Holy Land’s past was appealing in this America-as-New-Zion myth, but it was the American future that offered particular appeal to a country inventing itself, or rather reinventing itself. By the early 1800s, in the Second Great Awakening, upstate New York’s “Burned over District” became the nexus of considerable Protestant zeal and utopian thought. The district was perfectly positioned as a funnel through which a zealous New England culture would spread westward toward the Great Lakes. The western New England frontier was the birthplace of an American religion that would ultimately transform much of the Intermountain West into Zion. Created anew on an American stage and solidly based on Holy Land history and mythology, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was strategically positioned in the nation’s westward move. The Mormons’ sequential migration from New England, to Ohio, to Missouri, and then to Illinois reveals their restless search for a promised land free of persecution.

Given Joseph Smith’s passionate espousal of the new religion, which challenged the belief that the Bible was the final word of God, animosities increased, especially when non-Mormons began to resent the Mormons’ growing political clout. In 1842, John C. Bennett offered a scathing, anti-Muslim-inspired opinion of Mormonism. In noting that “it is unnecessary to do more than to allude to the well-known history of Mohomet [sic], who, fatally for mankind, was enabled to carry out, to the fullest extent, schemes similar to those I have mentioned above,” namely those of the Latter-day Saints, Bennett linked the Mormon faith with Islam. “There is no doubt,” Bennett concluded, “that Joe Smith would, if he possessed the capacity, imitate the great Arabian imposter, even in his wars and conquests.”

This virulent prose was part of American Islamicism, which essentializes and oversimplifies Muslims and their faith. Such prose not only Orientalized Joseph Smith and his followers but added fuel to the fire of anti-Mormon passions. Smith, now a charismatic presidential candidate, was jailed in June of 1844 for destroying the printing press of a rival newspaper. Passions became incendiary, and a mob murdered Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum by storming the jail in which they were being held. Significantly, that violent incident led to Smith’s martyrdom and helped link his fate with that of other prophets, including John the Baptist and Jesus, who had died for their religious beliefs in the Holy Land.

Shortly thereafter, Brigham Young became president of the Mormon Church. A poorly educated man who possessed incredible talents as a leader
and colonizer, Young sought a place where the Saints could worship and build a religious empire unmolested. Young and his fellow strategists considered a number of locations, including Texas, but words allegedly spoken by Joseph Smith before his own death—prepare to take the Saints to the fastness of the Rocky Mountains—placed the Far West at the top of the list. In 1847, just three years after Smith’s death, an advance guard of the Saints reached the Intermountain West. Their long trek to the mountainous West across the Great Plains was interpreted as the Jewish Exodus. Although that comparison was not altogether alien as applied to non-Mormon migrants either, the Mormons were not traveling as individuals. Rather, they were consciously traveling west as a people, and that makes their experience decidedly different from the typical frontier American experience. The collective nature of their migration burns it into the pages of history as a broader cultural drama—namely, a diaspora.

By July of 1847, the Mormons claimed almost the entire interior American West as their home, which they called Deseret, and they immediately began to put their distinctive stamp on the landscape. Not coincidentally, one source of their information about this region came from none other than John Charles Frémont’s 1845 report, which described what little was known about the geography of the Great Basin. Despite, or perhaps because of, Frémont’s proclamation of the area as “desolate” and home to “miserable” Indians, the Mormons found the place attractive. Shortly after they first laid eyes on the Great Basin, it effectively became the center of their religion. Under Young’s leadership, the area grew rapidly and was transformed in the popular imagination from “wilderness” into “Mormon Country” within a few short years.

Utah’s physical landscape, particularly the topography of the area surrounding Utah Lake and the Salt Lake Valley, played an important role in the process of Orientalizing the Intermountain West. The desert-mountain setting here was so visually compelling that it became part of the equation. Traveler and convert alike usually reached the area by crossing a portion of the Rocky Mountains, which afforded a stunning view of the Great Salt Lake valley as their long journey neared an end. Psychologically, the juxtaposition of mountains and valleys—which is to say the embrace of the valley as a final destination framed by the inspirational heights of the mountains—was a perfect combination. Brigham Young himself is said to have seen the area in a dream before he arrived with an early party of Mormons in July of 1847. His certainty about the location seemed foreordained and hence prophetic, much like a verse in the Bible: “Go forth from your native land, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12). This was a land seen in
a vision, and by moving here, Brigham Young did more than claim a lightly populated place for the Latter-day Saints. He also gave an ethereal dimension to a physical landscape and by so doing rendered wilderness into home.

Upon reaching Salt Lake City about a dozen years after the Mormons had first arrived, British explorer Richard F. Burton remarked that “every meridional street is traversed on both sides by a streamlet of limpid water, verdure fringed, and gurgling with a murmur which would make a Persian Moollah long for improper drinks.” Burton could also write seriously about his emotional reactions to what he saw in Utah. Emotion and mysticism are important elements in a phenomenon like Orientalization, for romantic movements rely more on the heart than on reason. When even the normally objective Burton reached the point overlooking the Great Salt Lake valley in 1860, he confessed that he was moved to tears, as had been migrating Mormons, when his party gazed upon the valley below. By 1861, Burton had helped to spread the word about Utah’s similarity to the Holy Land via his popular book *The City of the Saints*. This is remarkable, for it suggests that it took only about a decade for the new environment of Utah to be rendered, on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, into its Old World counterpart. In other words, the Utah landscape took on the cachet of a sacred place as folkloric imagination became accepted history through the words of “witnesses,” including writers, who confirmed its power as the Mormons’ Promised Land.

This happened in steps. In 1849, Mormon apostle Orson Pratt prepared a tract for prospective converts in England who wanted to relocate to this new Jerusalem in the American West. Mormon leaders were no strangers to the real Holy Land, apostle Orson Hyde having visited Jerusalem in 1841. References to the Holy Land were evident in Pratt’s publication *The New Jerusalem; or the Fulfillment of Ancient Prophecy*. Pratt claimed that the words in Isaiah—“O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain” (40:9)—prophesied the Saints’ move to Utah, which Pratt tellingly claimed was “one of the most wild, romantic and retired countries on [sic] the great western hemisphere.” As historian Ernest Lee Tuveson observed, “The idea of ‘retirement’—that Zion must establish itself and prepare for its work in complete isolation—supersedes any hope that the Saints would decisively influence the course of political affairs in the great world” despite the Mormons’ earlier high profile in national politics. It was, after all, Joseph Smith who felt so strongly about outlawing slavery in the new western lands that as president of the United States he would have granted a petition to “possess the Territory of Oregon, or any other Contiguous Territory . . . that they might extend the mighty efforts and enterprise of a free people from the east to the west sea, and make the
wilderness blossom as the rose.” As fate would have it, not just any people, but the Mormons themselves, would take up that charge with religious zeal.\footnote{12}

The timing and geography here were pivotal. The millennial zeal that was felt nationwide in the early nineteenth-century United States coincided with both the westward-moving frontier and the Mormons’ peculiar role in it. But an important distinction needs to be made. Although mainstream America’s belief in Manifest Destiny evidently had strong religious underpinnings, its motivations were largely secular. However, the Mormons as a unified group acted it out in a religious context on the frontier. Their move to the Rocky Mountain West in the late 1840s was a singular event in not only American but world history.\footnote{13} The wholesale movement of this one Christian religious group reenacted the Jews’ flight out of Egypt. By so doing, the Mormons recast a large portion of the American West as the Near East almost overnight.

In Utah, the Mormons found, or rather helped create, the perfect surrogate landscape in which to act out this drama. As art historian John Davis observes, “The singular landscape features surrounding them—such as the Great Salt Lake, with its evocation of the Dead Sea, or the ever present desert, which inspired such town names as Moab, Utah—only reinforced the connection and aided in the creation of their own ‘sacred’ space.”\footnote{14} As sociologist Thomas F. O’dea observed more abstractly half a century ago, the Mormons “feel the West to be their own peculiar homeland, prepared for them by the providential action of Almighty God, and its landscape is intimately associated with their self consciousness and identified with their past.”\footnote{15}

The Mormons are associated above all with making the desert blossom like the rose. This sentiment and phrasing is of course from Isaiah, but such a transformation is also described in Isaiah-like prose in the Mormon book Doctrine and Covenants: “And the Lord, even the Savior, shall stand in the midst of his people, and shall reign over all flesh. . . . And in the barren deserts there shall come forth pools of living water; and the parched ground shall no longer be a thirsty land.”\footnote{16} Like Isaiah, the Mormon passage reveals that parched land will become well watered. Note, however, a significant difference between Isaiah and the Mormon version. To begin with, the Mormon version is millennial; that is, it references the presence of a savior. Note, too, that the Lord’s people are also mentioned in the Mormon passage. By these additions, the Mormon version of Isaiah is updated into the latter days and becomes very specific as to the actual people who will be affected. It is, in other words, a prescription for Mormon empowerment in the Intermountain West yet was written well before the Mormons ever migrated there. That alone gave it the ring of prophecy to the Mormons.
At first, the Saints interpreted this passage as metaphorical, but after they arrived in Utah, it became literal. In April of 1853, Orson Hyde delivered a prayer just after the northeast cornerstone was laid at the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City. Hyde began the prayer with a reference to the spiritual importance of the temple itself but soon focused on the geographical setting. He thanked God for “thy manifold blessings and mercies extended unto us—that since we have been compelled to flee to the valleys and caves of the mountains and hide ourselves in thy secret chambers, from the face of the serpent or dragon of persecution, red with the blood of the Saints and martyrs of Jesus, thou has caused the land to be fruitful—the wilderness and desert to rejoice and blossom as the rose.”

In 1865, George Albert Smith delivered a speech in St. George, Utah, in which he noted that “flood water” could irrigate crops, including wheat fields and new vineyards. Late in this speech, Smith observed that the Mormons in St. George, despite settling a barren desert environment, had “the place looking like the Garden of Eden.” Smith also agreed with Elder Snow that “a people possessed of such great energy aided by the ready co-operation of their brethren in the north, are bound to conquer that desert and not only make it blossom as the rose, but make it one of the most delightful regions of the earth.” Here again the words of Isaiah are effortlessly applied to the Mormons’ Great Basin setting. The Latter-day Saints are the beneficiaries of both a literary tradition and a work ethic, and God has paid them handsomely for their belief.

Just two years later, in 1867, Orson Pratt observed that although the ancient church had failed to fulfill prophecies, the Latter-day Saints were already doing just that. They were, in Pratt’s words, fulfilling both ancient and latter-day prophecies—commanded by God to “go from all these nations [of the Old World] to the great western hemisphere, locate yourselves on the high portions of the North American Continent in the midst of the mountains, and be gathered into one.” Leaving little doubt as to which book in the Bible had been the catalyst, Pratt added: “The Prophet Isaiah, in the 35th chapter, says ‘The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.’”

By 1870, Pratt reflected on the changes that had occurred since the Latter-day Saints first arrived in Utah a generation earlier. Again referencing Isaiah, he observed, “After we are gathered, the desert is to rejoice and blossom as the rose,” adding that he often thought of this passage as he witnessed Utah’s many orchards and gardens blossoming in spring. As Pratt put it, “Every one knows that fruitful as it now is, when we came here it was called a desert.” Sensing
that some might doubt this, Pratt cited two types of evidence. First, he urged people to “go to the old maps, and you will find this section of the country laid down as ‘The Great American Desert.’” Second, he cited the actual level of the Great Salt Lake, whose waters had risen “some ten or twelve feet above the surface as it existed in 1847, when I first saw it.” As it was prophesied, Pratt added, “Streams have broken out in the desert, and waters in the wilderness.” This may be connected to the secular mid-nineteenth century myth that “rainfall follows the plow,” but Pratt recognized this as part of the predictions that Isaiah and David mention, adding, “the waters, rivers and springs that should break out to water the barren, thirsty land! The parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water.”

As geographer Richard Jackson noted, the Mormons here appear to be revising history to make their act of settling this part of the West more heroic. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, Mormon leaders used similar language to claim that the Latter-day Saints were becoming successful, thereby confirming their status as the chosen people. These chosen people had thus transformed the desert wilderness into their promised land, a veritable Garden of Eden. The fact that this occurred about three millennia after Isaiah likewise confirmed not only the Latter-day Saints’ geographic mission but also their actions in a preordained time—the actual latter days themselves.

The Mormons almost instantaneously branded Utah as the Holy Land, and place naming was part of the process. It is ironic that the details surrounding Brigham Young’s proclamation “This is the place” are known (and often recited) for the general site of Salt Lake City, but there is no record of exactly who named the river connecting freshwater Utah Lake with the waters of the Great Salt Lake the “Jordan.” An early reference to Utah’s Jordan River is found in an official message that was provided to Mormons in England and Council Bluffs, which is to say, those Saints bound for the Great Basin. The message noted that the area “will require irrigation to promote vegetation, though there are many small streams emptying in from the mountains, and the western Jordan (Utah outlet) passes through from south to north.”

The term “western Jordan” certainly confirms that the Mormons imagined the Utah river in terms of its eastern counterpart. The ultimate source, of course, is biblical. Utah’s Jordan River does much the same thing as its namesake, which connects the fresh waters of the Sea of Galilee with the salty waters of the Dead Sea. The Bible mentions the River Jordan and its valley about two hundred times, mostly as a border between peoples. Moreover, the border also separates a relatively well-watered land to the west and the much drier lands (Canaan, for example) to the east. The Mormons must have been aware of
that geographical distinction as they looked westward over the valley from
their relatively well-watered site at Salt Lake City to the rather barren slopes
of the Oquirrh Mountains. To those living an almost biblical drama, that
river would logically be called the Jordan. Across it lay an absolute wilderness,
while on the Salt Lake City side, which is to say the Jerusalem side, the land
would be bountiful, as confirmed by the denser vegetation on the slopes of
the Wasatch Range.

But the river serves not only as a landmark but also as a source of water,
and that water has two very different purposes. First, it is a source of life, as
people, animals, and crops depend on it. Second, and equally important for
peoples of faith, the Jordan River serves a spiritual purpose. Like its proto-
type in the Holy Land, which had been used for Christian baptisms since the
time of Christ, and later during the Crusades, immersion in this new Jordan
River represented spiritual renewal. Early descriptions and photographs reveal
that Utah’s Jordan River served a similar purpose to that of the River Jordan.
Although baptism in rivers was common in the United States, in this case it
likely helped further equate the river in Utah with its counterpart in the Holy
Land. Moreover, the fact that this river was in America—a land sacred to the
Mormons as a location where Jesus had once actually preached—endorsed it
as part of the New Zion.

In addition to sacred waters, topography itself branded the Mormons’
new homeland as sacred ground. In the 1840s and 1850s, with persecution
such a dominant theme, the mountainous setting sequestered the Saints from
their sometimes violent detractors. So, too, did the desert itself. Speaking in
Utah, Mormon leader George A. Smith revealed how the Mormons’ identi-
fication with Israel perfectly matched their new home in the Intermountain
West: “I thank the Lord for these deserts, rocks and mountains, for they may
be a protection to us.” Quoting, or rather paraphrasing, the Bible, Smith
continued, “And while our enemies are trying to exterminate us, Israel dwells
safely in the tops of the mountains.” As the Old Testament had prophesied:
“The house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains.”
This difference was acted out as a separation from non-Mormons, who were
labeled Gentiles.

The Mormons themselves used this theme throughout much of their
nineteenth-century history. As early as the 1840s, they “took on the role of
fostering the Jewish revitalization of Jerusalem, the other heavenly city.” There
was, of course, an ulterior motive here that related to scripture: “Like many
dissenting religious sects, they [the Mormons] felt that the restoration of the
Jews to the Holy Land was a necessary prelude to the return of the Messiah.”
And yet something else was also occurring. Through the process of cultural identity formation, the Mormons became surrogate kin to the Jews of the Old World. That primal Judeo-Christian tribal identity is more than folkloric, in fact, because the Mormons, like all Christians, can ultimately trace their cultural roots and religious ideology to a source in the Middle East. But the early Utah Mormons went further into the Holy Land for inspiration than most Protestant sects. That the Mormons felt themselves to be divinely inspired to live out Exodus as recipients of the Promised Land in the Intermountain American West is quite instructive. It reminds us of the power of the human mind to draw comparisons to sacred places that linger in the memory and are resurrected, first through human imagination, and then through the application of considerable labor, in lands far away from their originals. Another geographic factor helped the Mormons make the transition. The Mormons’ Israel is associated with the wilderness—that is, a place like that remote location where Moses and other prophets were both inspired and tempted. It is this connection that made the desert frontier the perfect place for Mormons—and Mormons the perfect people for the desert frontier.

The Mormons moved west with an almost insatiable zeal for new experiences in lands that were increasingly distant from their birthplaces and alien to their experiences. They viewed themselves as “pilgrims marching to a promised land, the center of which is a Zion, a New Jerusalem.”28 The search for a place of perfection, a place that God can look upon with pleasure, is deeply embedded in Mormon ideology. That place would be a holy city, or rather many holy cities, but there would be one crowning city at the center of that empire. Ironically, however, once that city was founded, it would become “a kind of world center to which the scattered peoples of Israel (more strictly, of Judah—that is, Jews descended from that tribe) were to return.”29

This connection plays out in an interesting way when Native Americans are brought into the picture. If, according to Mormon ideology and the beliefs of many other nineteenth-century observers, Native Americans were actually remnants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, then that cast them into the role of Orientals. On the American frontier, the Mormons moved westward only to find the East, in a manner of speaking, when they got there. American Orientalism, in other words, is not only a transoceanic phenomenon but also a characteristically nativistic phenomenon. By reaching the continental interior (either the Garden of Eden site in Missouri, or later the Salt Lake Valley as the New Zion), a group of Americans found a surrogate not only for the landscape of the Middle East but also for its native peoples.30
The belief that Native Americans represent lost tribes who scattered across the earth following the Diaspora was an idea whose time had come. The belief reveals that Americans were engaged in a dialogue about the origins of a people who seemed exotic as well as familiar. Who were these Indians? More to the point, how and where did they originate? In words that seemed right out of the Bible in some places and yet radically different and new in places, the Book of Mormon answered questions about racial makeup and migration. It claimed that the Indians were descendents of the Lost Tribes who left the Holy Land in about 600 BC and traveled for thousands of miles, finally landing in America. Mormons called these people Lamanites. With this declaration, the Mormons solved a long-standing theological dilemma. The Mormons, however, were not the first to draw such conclusions. As early as the 1520s, the Spaniard Pedro Mártir de Anghiera had concluded that the Indians had been sent to the New World by King Solomon, while later in the century Juan Suárez de Peralta stated that they were remnants of the ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. addressed “Christian Cosmogony and the Problem of Indian Origins” in his seminal work *The White Man’s Indian* (1978). As Berkhofer concluded, “A scriptural solution to the problem of origins demanded efforts to plug up the loopholes left in the Mosaic account.”

In the nineteenth century, many people saw similarities between the Indians and people in the Middle East. Their dark skin color and different dress may have been reasons why the American Indian was often conflated with tribal peoples of the Middle East. As early as the 1830s, John Lloyd Stephens commented that a Bedouin chief he met in Arabia reminded him of a “wild, savage, and lawless” Native American. If Stephens could opine about such things in the 1830s, why couldn’t Mark Twain three decades later? In his classic *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), Twain described Arab women and children as “worn and sad, and distressed with hunger.” As Twain succinctly put it, “They reminded me much of Indians, did these people.” Twain was in a good position to use this analogy, for he had considerable experience with Native Americans from his sojourn in the Intermountain West earlier in the decade.

In times of frenetic mobility and changing social relationships, including democratization, answering troubling questions about the origins of Native Americans was not an idle pastime but an essential endeavor. According to the Book of Mormon, Native Americans had a direct line of descent from the house of Israel. However, having fallen away from the values of Judeo-Christian religion, the Indians lost their fair features. Nevertheless, these same Indians could be forgiven if they embraced the Mormon faith. In one fell swoop, then, such beliefs explained race (the Indians had lost their
physical traits by being exposed to a harsh environment but could now get their whiteness back), reconstructed a genealogy for the first Americans, and also redeemed the word of God (who had sent colonists westward to bring that word to these pagans). One of the Lamanites who became a Mormon was Wakara (aka Walkara or Walker), a Ute who served as a military leader to his people. In addition to being known as “Napoleon of the Desert,” Wakara was also called “Soldan [Sultan] of the Red Paynims.” In the Mormon view, Indians are conceptualized as being from the Middle East originally—hence, they are vestiges of Eastern tribes. If this has a ring of irony, it should, for it means that Anglo-Americans are actually kin to the Native Americans, and that the latter can become the former through the process of cultural assimilation. Moreover, Native Americans purportedly have a more direct line of descent from the house of Israel, so ironically, less pure-blooded people (European Americans) redeem the purer through assimilation.

Mind-boggling? Actually, it becomes even more intriguing when one realizes that the Mormons themselves were figuratively transformed into peoples from, or of, the Middle East (Israel). By adopting the identity of Israelites, the Mormons become the Oriental “other” despite the fact that they were white northern Europeans—and Christians. As if this were not complex enough, consider this: if, as is often noted, the Mormons assumed an Israeliite identity so completely that they transformed Jews into Gentiles, that occurred because they so effectively transformed themselves into ancient Israelites.

The Mormons’ increasing talk of resistance to US authorities, coupled with their practice of polygamy, made them an easy target. Such determination gave Mormons an Old Testament (and even Koranic) quality of ancient desert patriarchs. When critics complained that the Mormons enslaved their women, they used the same logic as Stanley Lane-Poole, who wrote that “the degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten into the whole system of Islam.” Even that admirer of the Mormons Richard Burton observed that “‘Mormon’ had in fact become a word of fear; the Gentiles looked upon the Latter Day Saints much as our crusading ancestors regarded the ‘Hashshashiyun,’ [i.e., assassins] whose name indeed, was almost enough to frighten them.” Deftly weaving Mormon patriarchs into an Old World desert kingdom tapestry, Burton further noted that “Mr. Brigham Young was the Shaykh-el-Jebel, the Old Man of the Hill redivivus, [while] Messrs. Kimball and Wells were the chief of his Fidawin, and ‘Zion on the tops of the mountains’ formed a fair representation of Alamut.” In Burton’s mind, the Mormons had essentially become Arab Muslims.
Small wonder that the Mormons were so easy for other non-Mormon peoples to Orientalize. Frontiers are traditionally places where identities are in flux, and this conundrum of Mormon-as-Israelite (or Muslim) proves that maxim several times over. Oleg Grabar observed how complex things were becoming in the nineteenth century as American Orientalist identities were being created. As he put it, “The complexity of modern American culture is such that there are many ‘others’ in its psychological makeup and that the ‘others’ of some are the ‘us’ of others.”

The process of Orientalizing the American West required that both the physical landscape and its peoples be rendered as exotic. One pro-Mormon observer used vegetation to describe the Mormons and Indians metaphorically. Although he despised the extensive cover of sagebrush and other native desert vegetation in the Great Basin, British travel writer Phil Robinson rhapsodized about lucerne, which was (and is) also known by its Arabic name alfalfa in the American West. Robinson noted that the Mormons cultivated this forage crop with considerable skill. It enabled the Saints to raise fine livestock that provided meat and cheese. “Indeed,” Robinson observed, “as the Mormons say, the territory could hardly have held its own had it not been for this wonderful plant.” Robinson was not content to stop with the economic aspects of alfalfa, however, for he fancied a racial comparison here that he employed with abandon: “Once get it well started (and it will grow apparently anywhere) the ‘alfalfa’ defies the elements [because it] becomes aggressive, and, like the white races, begins to encroach upon, dominate over, and finally extinguish the barbarian weeds, its wild neighbours.” As if this were not explicit enough, Robinson then added that “fences and such devices cannot of course keep it within its bounds, so the Lucerne overflows its limits at every point, comes down the railway bank, sprouts up in tufts on the track, and getting across into the Scythian barbarism of the opposite hill-side, advances as with a Macedonian phalanx to conquest and universal monarchy.” This is Robinson at his most effusive, florid, and Orientalist, making allusions to not only clashes of cultures but ancient Near Eastern history. So rapt was Robinson about the dominance of lucerne over barbarian weeds—which is to say Mormons over natives—that he confidently but erroneously predicted that Utah “in time . . . will become the Lucerne State.”

Robinson’s Sinners and Saints (1883) reveals much about the process by which both landscapes and peoples of the New World were Orientalized. Sometimes Robinson’s references are direct; for example, he describes the barren countryside south of Manti, Utah, as “white with desperate patches of ‘saleratus,’ the saline efflorescence with which agriculture in this Territory
is for ever at war, and resembling in appearance, taste, and effects the ‘reh’ of the Gangetic plains.” Note that Robinson here relies on more than one sense (appearance, taste, and so forth) to describe the countryside, a not so subtle way of reminding the reader that Robinson himself has personally experienced the original place and is thus qualified to comment. “Here, as in India,” Robinson continues, “irrigation is the only known antidote, and once [the farmers] wash it out of the soil and get crops growing . . . the enemy retires.” In other places, Robinson describes the beauty of the landscape using that same comparative and Orientalist model. For example, in describing the hilly country along the Sevier River’s “curiously fantastic path,” he notes that the dry landscape changes as “verdur creeps over the plains, and vegetation steals on to the hill-sides, and then suddenly as if for a surprise, the complete beauty of Long Valley bursts upon the traveller.” This area, Robinson exclaims, “rivals in its beauty the scenery of Cashmere.” The reader here senses that Robinson has seen the real Cashmere (Kashmir), and is thus qualified to make that comparison.

Although there are many geographic and cultural differences between the Holy Land and Utah, a culture eager to seek Old World connections found it easy to blur these. Consider again how vegetation could serve as a metaphor for a religious figure from the Holy Land. In the southern Great Basin and Mojave Desert, the bristly Yucca brevifolia tree was often mistaken for more familiar types of vegetation. For example, it was commonly called a “Prickly Pine” by early Mormon travelers. Addison Pratt described it in 1849 as “a Solitary looking vegetable [sic], of the prickly pear order, called prickley pine, that are scattered over those deserts, growing from 3 to 30 feet high.” In that same year, George Q. Cannon noted that his group encountered “Prickly Pine as large round the butt as a man’s body,” adding that “it resembled Pine apples [in] the leaves [and] the bark was a good deal like oak bark.” Many people in the nineteenth century, however, considered them to be palm trees or even palmettos. As late as about 1930, a postcard noted that “the Joshua Palm abounds throughout certain sections of the Great American Desert, and once seen, is a sight rarely forgotten.”

There is nothing remotely like this plant in the Middle East. And yet in a widely told story, the American yucca tree was transformed into a biblical character through a process involving both folklore and popular culture. Mormon missionary Elisha Hunt, traveling across the Mojave Desert in 1851, is said to have told his followers, “Look, Brethren, these green trees are lifting their arms toward heaven in supplication. We shall call them Joshua Trees!” (fig. 3-1). The Mormons appear to have named the Joshua tree, but this act
by Hunt is likely apocryphal. It first came to us in the twentieth century, re-inforced by Maureen Whipple’s *The Giant Joshua* (1942).

In her later book *This is the Place: Utah* (1945), Whipple observed that Mormon country had an Old World religious stamp, what she described as the “Biblical peace of tiny green oases set against the savage violence of the hills.” The reference, of course, is pure Old Testament, wherein the desert and its wilderness challenges contrast with the order of the sedentary oasis.
If Salt Lake City represented New Jerusalem to many people, then a new Sodom and a new Gomorrah had to be nearby. In Utah, that equivalent of “sin city” was located near the shore of the Great Salt Lake in much the same position as the fabled Sodom and Gomorrah bore to Jerusalem. That place was Corinne, a veritable den of iniquity. How did such a place arise in Mormon Utah? Generally, mining towns might fill the bill, but in this case the railroad was the facilitator. As the transcontinental railroad neared completion in 1869, Corinne blossomed several miles northwest of patriarchally named (and all Mormon) Brigham City. Corinne was named after a woman with that name, but exactly who she was remains a mystery. Railroad historian Lucius Beebe called Corinne “the new scarlet woman of the Utah desert.” Certainly, Corinne had earned its wicked reputation, for it was a far more “wide-open” town than Salt Lake City. Another historian calls it “The City of the Ungodly.” Actually, some observers believed that Corinne’s strategic location positioned it to be “the Queen city of the Great Basin,” perhaps even the capital of Utah. That, however, was not in the cards. Although Corinne never grew to become the prominent city hoped for by its promoters, neither did it meet the wholesale destruction meted out by God to Sodom and Gomorrah. As a reminder that all things change, though, Corinne ultimately became a predominantly Mormon town and today presents a completely bucolic image. In other words, the “sinner” became a “saint”—in more ways than one.

To many observers, Salt Lake City in the early 1880s represented both the West and the East. The Mormon city was, according to Phil Robinson, “Oriental in its general appearance, English in its details.” But some of those details could have an Eastern quality, as some perceived them. When the Mormons encountered a scarcity of building materials for their new homes in Great Salt Lake City, they used adobe. As George A. Smith put it, because “the children of Israel built of sun-dried bricks we have done the same.” Building on the Oriental theme in words reminiscent of Burton’s flowery Orientalist prose, Robinson observed that Salt Lake City was “the young rival of Mecca, the Zion of the Mormons, the Latter-Day Jerusalem.” Not content to end his comparisons there, Robinson added that Salt Lake City was a place where “Shepherd Kings” governed “the place of the tabernacle of an ancient prophet-ruled Theocracy.” Affected by the Orientalism of his times, Robinson recognized that the Mormons’ difficulties with Gentiles placed Salt Lake City as “a beautiful Goshen of tranquility in the midst of a troublous Egypt.”

In another example of just how quickly landscapes as well as peoples may become surrogates for their originals elsewhere, the comparison of Salt Lake City with Jerusalem was made very soon after the Mormons arrived. It was
made in writing and in images, including maps. On the German map entitled *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nord-Amerika* by Dr. F. W. Streit (Leipzig, 1851), Salt Lake City is indicated as “Mormonenstadt N[eu] Jerusalem” (fig. 3-2). The “Mormon City” lies west of the Schnee Gebirge (i.e., the Snowy [later Rocky] Mountains), and the Gr. Salz. S. (Great Salt Sea, i.e., Great Salt Lake) lies to its northwest. The word *sea* here may suggest this body of water’s similarity to the Dead Sea far better than *lake*. However, that reference to New Jerusalem is particularly evocative for several reasons, not the least of which is Jerusalem’s central location in Judeo-Christian religion. As a community steeped in religious history and mysticism, Jerusalem had been visited by Christian pilgrims since the second century ad. Small wonder that it resonates as strongly to Christians as Mecca does to Muslim pilgrims. Both represent birthplaces, so to speak, in the lives of religions.

In describing Utah in terms of the Holy Land, many travelers were influenced by popular literature about that region. Consider, for example, the scientist Howard Stansbury. After months of experiencing the desolate area around the Great Salt Lake in 1849, Stansbury sought a way to declare that Salt Lake City’s setting, or “studding” as he called it, was a joy for the weary traveler to behold. Stansbury claims that “this beautiful city with noble trees, will render it, by contrast with the surrounding regions, a second ‘Diamond of the Desert,’ in whose welcome shade, like the solitary Sir Kenneth and the princely Iderim, the pilgrim, wayworn, and faint, may repose his jaded
limbs and dream of the purling brooks and waving woodlands he has left a thousand miles behind him.”

For those familiar with Stansbury, this is about as poetic as he ever got. Note, however, that the sobriquet “Diamond of the Desert” that Stansbury used is a literary reference to a life-giving spring in the Holy Land encountered by Sir Kenneth and Iderim—two of Sir Walter Scott’s memorable characters in the popular novel about the Crusades called *The Talisman* (1827). Here, in Scott’s own words, is the prototype description that influenced generations of writers:

> The Christian Knight . . . said to his pagan associate of the journey, ‘I would I knew the name of this delicious fountain, that I might hold it in my grateful remembrance.’

> ‘It is called in the Arabic language,’ answered the Saracen, ‘by a name which signifies the Diamond of the Desert.’

With this literary reference, we see the power of a writer of fiction to influence Stansbury the writer of scientific literature. Significantly, John Lloyd Stephens had also used and credited Scott’s term “Diamond of the Desert” in describing how he longed for relief from “the intense heat and scorching sands” in Egypt. Through Scott’s and Stephens’s passages, we better understand the process by which Stansbury the scientist came under the spell of both the real Mormon city and the fictional and travel literature about the Holy Land. Like the prototype Jerusalem, the Mormons’ Great Salt Lake City was an oasis adjacent to burning desert.

By the 1850s, Mormon settlements had spread to a large portion of the Intermountain West. Salt Lake City was now the hearth of Mormon culture, but the Saints’ presence was felt as far away as San Bernardino (California) and Genoa, a small community near present-day Carson City, Nevada. Nineteenth-century travelers to Utah not only commented on how effectively the Mormon settlements utilized scarce resources but also cast those settlements in the context of another arid region—the Middle East—that was never far from their thoughts. Comparisons between the Mormon West and the Holy Land were inevitable for several reasons. First, many had read about places of stark desert and rugged topography in the Bible and thought the Mormons’ new homeland a natural fit.

Second, as explorer Burton had observed, the Mormons’ polygamy, temple worship, and desert setting conspired to impart both an Old Testament and an Islamic character to people and place here. Burton made the connection from his extensive travels in the Middle East and his whirlwind tour through the Victorian West. As a renowned explorer, Burton spoke, or rather
wrote, with considerable authority. In 1861, for example, Burton noted the Mormons’ belief that Salt Lake City was, as he put it, “New Hierosolyma, or Jerusalem, alias Zion on the tops of the mountains, the future city of Christ.” With the Orient he knew so well firmly in mind, Burton noted that Mormon “pilgrims” traveling to this city, “like the Hajjis of Meccah and Jerusalem, give vent to emotions long pent up with their bosoms by sobs and tears, laughter and congratulations, psalms and hysterics.”56 The place was sacred enough that it made an impression on people coming and going. Leaving Salt Lake City in the 1850s, Mormon leader Hosea Stout observed that a “light cloudy fog rested on it, in which we could see President Young’s House, like Solomon’s Temple in the midst of the glory of God.”57

Burton, of course, was at the forefront of this Orientalist trend. During his travels in the Middle East, Burton went undercover to better understand Islamic traditions and tenets. Like many Orientalist-inspired European travelers of the period, Burton often dressed in the style of Middle Eastern desert dwellers; covering himself with flowing garments, he wore sandals and armed himself with the same weapons used by natives. Photographs and paintings of Burton show him as almost indistinguishable from a Middle Easterner. In one image, he is called El-hadj Abdullah (The Pilgrim Servant of God), no doubt a reference to his very risky trip to Mecca disguised as an Arab. In others, he is dressed like a half-Arab and half-Persian, further adding to his mystique and authority. It was, after all, Burton who famously—or rather infamously—endorsed polygamy as a viable form of marriage (fig. 3-3).

American writers also had plenty to say about the Mormons’ “peculiar” type of marriage. Mark Twain, who had considerable experience with the polygamous Mormons, drew a snide East-West allusion in The Innocents Abroad. As only Twain could, he noted that although polygamy was prohibited for the common man in Turkey, “they say the Sultan has eight hundred wives.” This, Twain opined, “almost amounts to bigamy.” Not content to let things rest there, Twain added that “it makes our cheeks burn with shame to see such a thing permitted here in Turkey” while “we do not mind it so much in Salt Lake, however.”58 For his part, the ever-humorous Twain stated that Mormon men should actually be commended for marrying so many wives. Why? According to Twain, Mormon women were so homely that a real social service was being performed by these brave Mormon men who married them when, presumably, no one else would.

Mormons took much criticism in the mid to late nineteenth century. Some writers criticized the Mormons caustically, while others tried humor to get their point across. Of all the Europeans who cast the Mormons in an
Orientalist light, the Frenchman Albert Robida (1848–1926) was one of the most humorous. Robida was an adventure and travel writer as well as an illustrator. His *Voyages très extraordinaires de Saturnin Farandoul* (1885) features an image of a train carrying sailors departing for the city of the Mormons that is rendered with classic Orientalist flourish (fig. 3-4). As the passenger train careens across a tall, curving trestle, sailors clad in Middle Eastern style costumes lounge on the cars’ roofs as they casually smoke long pipes in the fashion of the Orient. This is one of the scenes in an absurd tale about the adventurous Farandoul, who learns about the Mormons’ polygamy and decides to become a Mormon in order to marry several women who will be provided to him by Brigham Young. Farandoul has a political as well as personal motive. He claims that Turkey had declined after polygamy was denied to

Fig. 3-3. In this hand-colored image of renowned Orientalist Richard F. Burton, ca. 1848, the British explorer wears the turban and robes of a half-Arab and half-Persian from Bushire.
Fig. 3-4. This humorous illustration of a train departing for the city of the Mormons appeared in Albert Robida’s *Voyages Très Extraordinaires* (1885).
all men except “the great statesmen, the pashas and the sultans.” The women Farandoul marries are from different ethnic groups and constitute a nearly perfect multicultural harem. The list includes French, Polish, American, Parisian, Mexican, Peruvian, German, Russian, and Chinese women, and even one “Negress, age and place of birth unknown.” Surrounded by these beautiful, adoring women, the ecstatic Farandoul finds immediate—though short-lived—bliss in Utah. 59

Voyages très Extraordinaires is delightfully satirical, and it joins a long list of writings that poked fun at the Mormons and denigrated their seemingly Old World Eastern beliefs. And yet, for all the detractors and humorists who criticized Mormon decadence in Utah, the Mormons had their supporters. Burton was one of their admirers, and even the usually caustic Phil Robinson praised them on occasion. Other observers noted the Saints’ honesty, integrity, spirituality, intelligence, and so on. It is safe to say that the Orientalists who wrote about Utah were—like all Orientalists—of varied backgrounds and had varied agendas. Sometimes even the same writer could be positive or negative about the Mormons depending on which trait he or she selected for scrutiny.

But the Mormon presence above all positioned the Intermountain West as a place where Old World religion was thriving, and this calls for a brief digression into how Orientalism generally builds on religious themes. The tendency to experience the American West as the Near East is closely related to the way Europeans and Americans conceptualized the real Near East as sacred ground. Art historian Brian T. Allen observes that nineteenth-century “American treatments of the Near East and Middle East, amazingly diverse in subject matter, were generally very positive and so various that it is difficult to tag them as ideological.” As Allen put it, “American Orientalism was a distinct phenomenon with some European currents but ultimately unresponsive to formulas based on the schemes of domination or denigration first identified by [Edward] Said.” As proof, Allen identifies several themes in American Orientalist paintings, most of which emphasize the continuity between America and the Bible lands. An important theme in paintings by Frederick Church, for example, is similarities rather than differences, with, as Allen put it, “the similarities arising from the American world’s descent from an older order of chosen people.” 60 Allen concludes that American Orientalists’ “basic impulse seems to have been to make the Islamic world more familiar rather than more exotic or even inferior through their concentration on its connection to American spiritual traditions and their view of Islamic subjects through the lens of American iconographic traditions.” 61
The process by which Utah’s physical landscape was configured into the Holy Land by those who experienced it about a century and a half ago depended in large measure on their seeing analogies between this new place and the familiar places in the Bible. Gold Rush–bound travelers like Franklin Langworthy were well aware that by entering Utah Territory, they were experiencing a drama that was both very new and very old. As he observed the Great Salt Lake, he wrote that this huge body of salty water “in some of its characteristics, bears a striking resemblance to the Lake of Asphalts, or the Dead Sea in Palestine, upon which once stood the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.” The comparison of the Great Salt Lake with the Dead Sea was very common, as writers often drew comparisons between both “brooding” and “dead” bodies of salty water. In his diary entry of August 5, 1864, Howard Stillwell Stanfield noted that “I had set this day apart for the especial purpose of using it for taking a trip to Salt Lake the dead Sea of the Saints.”

To better understand this, we can deconstruct the poetic prose of Emmanuel Henri Domenech. Born in France and ordained as a Catholic priest in Texas in 1848, Domenech claimed that he traveled extensively in the West, as documented in his popular book *Seven Years’ Residence in the Great Deserts of North America* (published in London in 1860). Two years later, likely as a result of its success in both England and the United States, Domenech published a French translation called *Voyage Pittoresque dans les grands déserts du Nouveau monde* (1862). Of the Great Salt Lake, which is one of the numerous aquatinted images in his beautifully illustrated book (fig. 3–5), Domenech had much to say. He observed, or rather intoned, that “the malédiction of heaven seems to weigh heavily on this solitude, which reminds one of the desolate shores of the Dead Sea, where Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed.” Not content to merely draw this biblical comparison, Domenech explained that two factors—the topography and the atmosphere—gave the Great Salt Lake its ominous demeanor. He noted that the mountains to the east “appeared inaccessible . . . whilst thick vapours moved above their summits.” In one of the most haunting descriptions of the Great Salt Lake ever written, Domenech noted that light mists, produced at twilight, hovered amidst its vague glimmer, and danced over the waters, looking like crepe tinged with the most lovely pink . . . a transparent veil that shed upon nature the charm of a faint light, which, as it gradually rose to the summit of the mountains, assumed a more somber hue, an indescribably dismal appearance, that filled the soul with sadness and the eyes with tears. The immense valley, of a lugubrious and funereal aspect, recalls to mind that of Jehoshaphat, the valley of graves.
The Dead Sea itself was the subject of considerable poetic and scientific discourse at this time. Domenech’s illustration of the Great Salt Lake owes much to American scientific reports (e.g., Stansbury) and also to similar illustrations of the Dead Sea, which drew scientists anxious to unlock its geological and hydrological secrets. Evocative illustrations of the Dead Sea were common in the popular guidebooks used by pilgrims and tourists in the nineteenth century (fig. 3-6). Ultimately, Domenech was a moralist rather than a scientist, and his description of the Great Salt Lake was based on cultural history as well as similarities in physical geography. Further drawing the Dead Sea comparison like a tightening noose around the Great Salt Lake, he states that “an imposing silence continually reigns around this deserted lake, which might well be called the ‘Lake of Death.’” Note here the not so subtle reference to the original Dead Sea. This is a remarkable description made all the more so by the fact that Domenech may never have actually seen the Great Salt Lake.

Domenech had now primed readers for the final judgment, and he was quick to deliver it. Ever imaginative and judgmental about the Indians who had fallen from God’s grace, Domenech posited a reason for this dead lake’s gloomy, sepulchral quality: “One would say that God, in a day of wrath, had cursed these solitudes on account of the crimes of their inhabitants, whose ashes lay moldering for many centuries beneath the sands of the desert.” These “ashes,” one assumes, serve much the same purpose as the salt pillar into which Lot’s wife had been transformed for her disobedience to God. That horrific retribution had occurred on the shores of the Dead Sea in the vale of Siddim (Genesis 19:26). This large lake in Utah made such a strong impression on Domenech and other travelers that it brought to mind another of God’s actions—this one in the future; Domenech’s reference to Jehoshaphat recalls the biblical prophecy of the place where the terrible battle of Armageddon will take place.

What lay behind Domenech’s harsh statements about the native peoples’ past lives? Taking a cue from the Mormons, perhaps, Domenech considered Native American tribes to be descendents of lost tribes from the Old World. Unlike the Mormons, however, he held little hope that these “savages” could ever be reclaimed. In condemning both the Indians and the environment, Domenech worked himself into an intellectual quandary that he himself was unaware he had created. He claimed that the Indians had fallen from grace and gradually assumed distinctive racial qualities, including a copper-red skin color, as a consequence of being cast into this hellish environment—much like something cast into a furnace. Yet he also stated that the Indians themselves could be blamed for actually creating that degraded and moribund character.
that had transformed the environment—a paradox of the first order generated by the prevailing environmental determinism and the ideological racism of the nineteenth century.

But it was the environment of the Great Salt Lake that so impressed Domenech as forlorn and dejected. Like a somber symphony full of minor chords, Domenech’s passage about the lake employs dark imagery. True, the passage begins with a “glimmer” of hope as mists dance over waters tinged with lovely pink—the glow of life. However, the adjectives “somber,” “dismal,” and “lugubrious” are carefully placed to accentuate the real message here, which is revealed by the words “crepe,” “funereal,” “sadness,” and “tears.” Whereas the countenance of the Great Salt Lake does change depending on weather conditions, Domenech emphasizes its darker moods. To him, this lake is dead in several meanings of the word. Unaware of the lake’s brine shrimp and other organisms, Domenech thinks it to be completely devoid of life. To him, it is not only lifeless, but moreover capable of inducing depression of both mind and soul. It is, in a word, a metaphor for the ephemerality of all life and the wrath of God’s final judgment.

Domenech was not alone in possessing such a morose mind-set. About a decade later, another French traveler, Eugene Buissonet, traversed this same area in December of 1868. Buissonet’s diary entries from the vicinity of the Great Salt Lake convey a common sentiment about the area that we might
today attribute to psychological depression. Like others traversing the huge and desolate desert region west of this formidable body of water, Buissonet observed that the mountains were stark and bare, “and the plains are covered by alkali sheets which are not thick but very spread out, which makes this countryside look even more sterile and sad to behold.”

Buissonet’s exact words—“de plus triste a contempler” are difficult to translate exactly; one might also say he felt they were too sad to contemplate without a feeling of depression because they reminded him of what Domenech would call the physical world’s ultimate fate.

Utah was rich in landscapes that suggested biblical places. When Union Pacific Railroad surveyors entered the Great Basin in 1864, they encountered fascinating topographic features. When tasked with drawing these landforms for their report back to the railroad’s headquarters in Omaha, they faced a quandary. Although their scientific impulse was strong, their tendency to romanticize was even stronger. Consider, for example, Point of the Mountain, from Camp 2, drawn by A. J. Mathewson under the direction of Union Pacific division engineer S. B. Reed (fig. 3-7). Although the real Point of the Mountain in Utah is a distinctive topographic feature, it became even more so under Mathewson’s fanciful pen strokes. Most people who glimpsed Mathewson’s illustration must have experienced déjà vu. This Point of the Mountain seems to be more of an archaeological ruin than a geological feature. If Mathewson’s
rendition of Point of the Mountain calls to mind the Tower of Babel, there is a good reason. As the subject of artists since the Middle Ages, who envisioned the Tower of Babel as a huge conical feature ascended by a ramplike spiral staircase, it was a familiar icon to artist and public alike. In 1563, Pieter Bruegel (circa 1525–69) depicted the tower as a ruin ascended by a spiral ramp in at least two paintings. By the time Mathewson rendered Point of the Mountain, other artists rendered the Tower of Babel with much less architectural detail, giving it the appearance of a stack of stratified but tilted rock layers. A comparison of Mathewson’s Point of the Mountain with Gustave Doré’s dramatic The Tower of Babel, also called The Confusion of Tongues (1865–66; fig. 3-8), reveals a remarkable convergence. Both images are so architectonic—and romantically geological—that they mirror the blurring between science and art—and geology and archaeology.

The opening of the transcontinental railroad provided plenty of opportunity for writers to speculate about the austere landscape that they experienced in Utah. Not surprisingly, they too often used Orientalist language to describe
the Great Salt Lake. After 1869, travelers on the recently completed transcontinental railroad could not resist drawing parallels between what they saw in Utah and what their biblical training as well as their actual travel experiences had taught them about the Holy Land. For example, travelers were awed by the cloud of vapor that rose from the hot springs along the Wasatch Front north of Ogden. Searching for ways to describe this phenomenon, they turned
to their knowledge of the Bible. As a travel writer put it in the 1870s, “The chief feature of interest here is the Hot Springs, whose clouds of vapour rise far away at the foot of the mountains, reminding one of the ‘cloud’ which protected the Israelites by day on their march through the weary wilderness.”

In another example, one of Nelson’s *Pictorial Guide Books* describing scenes along the Central Pacific Railroad (1871) notes that as the train moved westward beyond Promontory Summit, “the air is impregnated with alkaline and saline odours from the Salt Lake.” Here, the writer observed that “Monument Point is a grassy promontory, stretching far out into the waters of the Dead Sea of the West.” This reference is more telling when we recall that Corinne, at the northern edge of the Great Salt Lake, was often cast as Sodom and Gomorrah—sinful cities that were destroyed on the shores of the Dead Sea.

It is here that physical and cultural features of the area become confused. We know that not everyone who visited Utah held the Mormons in high regard; some even suggested that Salt Lake City itself was the new Sodom, no doubt because of the Mormons’ practice of polygamy. In the early 1850s, Franklin Langworthy seamlessly linked the Latter-day Saints and the physical environment they inhabited to biblical history. Traveling along a road at the southern edge of the Great Salt Lake, Langworthy speculated about geology and vengeance:

> It would seem that this whole region rests upon subterranean volcanoes, and at some future day a fiery deluge may fill the entire valley of Salt lake with a sea of molten lava. This would be to the modern Sodom a fate like that which we are told in ancient times befell [sic] the cities of the plain. If such a catastrophe should happen, and if in their flight, any Mormon should look behind, he might easily be turned to a pillar of salt, if he should chance to fall into certain springs along this road.

Here Langworthy is both dramatic and judgmental. As an exemplary anti-Mormon, he found little to praise about the Saints, and one senses that he wishes just such a fate would befall the Mormons before they, as he put it, “transform this free Republic into a despotism, with some Mormon prophet for an autocrat.”

Subtle and sometimes not so subtle comparisons of Utah with the Middle East bring to mind two remarkable illustrations that make the comparison very explicit. By the late nineteenth-century, when the railroads sought aggressively to promote Utah, they employed landscape images and maps. For example, in 1886, a promotional pamphlet on the Great Salt Lake called this geographical feature “the Dead Sea of America,” Employing a stunning color lithograph to make the comparison (fig. 3-9a). A decade later, the Rio
Grande Western railroad published a promotional brochure called *Pointer to Prosperity*. That informative brochure lauded the amenities of the new state of Utah, and its back cover featured “A Striking Comparison” (fig. 3-9b). Drawn from a “Bird’s eye” perspective as if the mapmaker were high above the earth, this ingenious map juxtaposed a portion of the Holy Land with Utah’s Wasatch Front. This comparative map reveals that the general configuration of the areas adjacent to Jerusalem and Salt Lake City are very similar. To many people of a century ago, this map’s Utah-as-Holy Land comparison was not only physically “striking” but culturally significant: after all, the Mormons had settled their new Zion creating what the map calls a “Promised Land” that was reminiscent of the Jews’ homeland (today’s Israel, Palestine, and adjacent parts of Jordan). Thus this “striking comparison” map suggests more than a simple topographical comparison: it also implies a strong historical and geographical connection between the Holy Land and its Utah counterpart.

Statements by the Mormons themselves helped cement their identity as an Old World people living in a new land. Moreover, at this time, the term *Promised Land* is heard in light of the Mormons’ aggressive and successful colonizing of the desert between the mountains. Significantly for both the ancient Jews and the earliest Mormons arriving in Utah, that Promised Land was lightly settled and between two major empires—Mesopotamia to the north and Egypt to the south. Similarly, the Mormons’ Promised Land was essentially unclaimed, lying between the United States and the more populous shores of Mexican California.

The publication of this “striking comparison” map illustration could not have been better timed. In 1896, the national economy was rebounding after the financial panic three years earlier. Significantly, the railroad that commissioned the *Pointer to Prosperity* pamphlet was undergoing a transformation, as was Utah. Originally built as a narrow gauge line from Denver to Salt Lake City, the energetic Rio Grande Western was being converted to standard gauge at just that time. This meant that the rolling stock of any railroad could pass over its line via interchange—which is to say that the Rio Grande Western was now in league with a nationwide rail network. Similarly, with the polygamy issue essentially resolved and Utah now part of the Union in 1896, entrepreneurs could feel less apprehensive about investing in the Beehive State. Had the “striking comparison” map been created two decades earlier, that Promised Land would have seemed more like a contested but largely Mormon-controlled kingdom rather than a land open to all comers.

Ironically, then, this “striking comparison” map is a modern device that builds on an ancient biblical prophecy updated after centuries of westward
migration, originally across the Atlantic, and then overland to the Pacific. That such an ancient text is called upon so effectively reminds us that slogans are as malleable as identities. Above all, the “striking comparison” map instills nationalism as well as encourages the growth of an individual state. Through its use as an iconic device, the striking comparison equates a part of America with the Holy Land in order to reaffirm that the promise of success is inevitable through wise investment, hard work, and the blessings of Divine Providence.

In 1897, on the golden anniversary of the Mormons’ arrival into the Great Salt Lake valley, a special event called “the wedding of the waters” witnessed “the Baptism of the Jordan River.” Whereas that Utah river had long served as a locale for baptisms—in recognition, perhaps, of its namesake in the Holy Land serving the same purpose for nearly two millennia—this baptism was more public and promotional. A container of water from the “real” River Jordan was “merged” into the Utah river. This ceremonial merging of the waters of the two rivers Jordan was both symbolic and cathartic and made real the persistent belief that these waters were natural counterparts.
The Mormons not only recognized the similarity between their new homeland in Utah and their ancestral homeland in the Middle East but also helped reinforce it by transforming the edge of the Great Salt Lake into the Intermountain West’s first Orientalized tourist mecca—Saltair. Although the Great Salt Lake presented a somber, Dead Sea–like spectacle in the 1850s and 1860s, things began to change as the railroads revolutionized travel. By the early 1890s, when the Mormons began to assimilate or Americanize (for example, by
disavowing polygamy and deemphasizing collective enterprises), the shore of the Great Salt Lake presented an opportunity to enrich the previously inward-looking Mormon culture. Whereas early travelers had complained about the harshness of the lake’s salty waters, now the unusual nature of this lake, namely its hypersaline waters, actually lured people. Realizing the lake’s potential as a tourist destination, the Mormon Church built a huge recreation pavilion there in 1893. Reached by a fifteen-mile-long railroad running in a straight line due west of Salt Lake City, Saltair represented “an effort to provide a wholesome place of recreation under church control for Mormons, particularly families and young people.” Ten years earlier, the Deseret News, which was owned by the LDS Church, had expressed a concern to parents about the dangers of typical pleasure resorts: “To allow children of either sex of tender years to go unprotected to pleasure resorts where all classes mingle indiscriminately is criminal.” The paper was especially concerned about “practiced voluptuaries” and rough elements who provided a bad example for Mormon youth.73

Given the Mormon Church’s concern, it is interesting that the architectural style chosen for the huge Saltair pavilion was Moorish. The Mormon-owned Deseret News described the stunning effect the building created at lakeside as follows: “The magnificent pavilion, rising, Venice-like, out of the waves in stupendous and graceful beauty, deepened in its semi-Moorish architectural lines, the suspicion that what one saw was not firm structural reality but a rather delightful oriental dream.” That is not surprising considering that Saltair’s lavish eclectic design expressed the high Oriental style so common in pavilions and amusement parks elsewhere. Note that the term Oriental is used positively here. The Orient was associated with lavish and beautiful spectacles that could enchant, so why not employ its architecture for just that purpose?

Saltair was a magical place indeed. About the size of the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, the Saltair pavilion was huge. Its dome was a characteristic central feature, but it was complemented by six-sided domes at each corner of the 140’ x 250’ building. Moreover, at the ends of two sprawling, ornate wings that flanked the pavilion, bud-shaped domes rose to add to the architectural spectacle. Tall towers resembling domed mosques rose from the middle of each wing, so that the entire design did indeed seem like something out of the Arabian Nights.74 Saltair was built just at the time when a new and more sensual aspect of Orientalism swept the United States and Europe. Emphasizing the exotic aspects of bazaars in the Muslim world as well as portions of Asia, Saltair itself was majestic, and its setting at the edge of a huge body of water in the desert provided a surreal quality. Note, however, that it was built in a lavish Moorish style and yet intended to serve as an antidote
to moral decadence—a subtle reminder that Oriental was not universally regarded as negative in American popular culture. A lantern plate image of the Saltair pavilion with a small steam launch tied up to the huge Moorish hulk of a building suggests some of the grandeur of Venice, Italy—a city we think of as European or Italian but which owes much of its appeal to its trade with, and copying of buildings from, the Oriental cities of the Middle East.75

Colored postcard views of Saltair reveal how impressive this Orientalized pavilion appeared in the early twentieth century. One popular postcard, “Bathing in Great Salt Lake, Saltair Beach,” published about 1910, features bathers, some standing, some evidently bobbing like corks in the lake’s salty water (fig. 3-10). Behind them rises the magnificent Saltair pavilion, whose four towers crown a spectacular structure that epitomizes America’s romanticized version of Near Eastern architecture. In this view, the postcard colorists tinted the bulk of the building ocher, the main domes slate purple, and the turrets crimson. These color combinations, so popular among Orientalist revival architects, heighten the building’s ornateness and further add to its exotic and sensual quality.

Oriental-style buildings such as Saltair are based on antiques, which constitute what the late French philosopher Jean Baudrillard called “marginal objects.” Rather than functioning as the originals, they “answer to other kinds of demands, such as witness, memory, nostalgia or escapism.” Although inspired
by mosques, palaces, or other buildings in the Near East, they have a different meaning in the American West. Their presence has atmospheric and symbolic value but is suspect. Likening a fascination with such objects—Oriental rugs, Oriental-style buildings—to imperialism, Baudrillard cautions that these “ancestral objects, sacred in essence but desacralized . . . are called upon to exude their sacredness (or historicalness) into a history-less domesticity.”

Although the type of criticism rendered by Baudrillard is widely shared by academicians, most people do not live their lives pondering the deeper meanings of (in)authenticity. They easily succumb to the magic of such imitations.

In a remarkably candid retrospective article titled “Xanadu by the Salt Flats—Memories of a Pleasure Dome,” western writer Wallace Stegner (1909–1993) recalled Saltair in the 1920s as “an enchanted palace whose onion domes float on the desert afternoon, and whose halo of light at night pales the stars.” In addition to the sound of “gritty salt underfoot, or the sight of potted palms glittering with salt like tinsel,” Stegner was impressed by the smells of the place. Here, at “the great Moorish pavilion that rose on pilings out of the lake,” Stegner cooked burgers and hot dogs during the summer. These smells seared themselves into his memory. As Stegner put it, the “incense of hamburgers and hotdogs” made him “rise on my hind legs with a spatula in one hand and a bun in the other and give voice to an atavistic howl, a nasal, high, drawn-out ululation like that of a muezzin from a minaret or a coyote on a river bluff.”

That reference to the minarets of Islam as well as the coyote reveals the power of Stegner’s youthful imagination to transform Utah into the Middle East. Significantly, though, Stegner was aware of Saltair’s ephemeral nature, for the magical place was continuously assaulted by the corrosive brine of the Great Salt Lake and pummeled from time to time by winds. Culture and economy likewise would prove unkind to Saltair. Sequestered in Stegner’s memory, though, Saltair became a place sacred enough that he remembered it “like lost Eden.” That Eden is in part metaphorical, for Saltair was a place that had a seedy, earthy side that challenged Stegner’s youthful innocence. This is revealed by the stories Stegner’s older brother told him about the goings-on there—“most of which I could not believe but would have liked to.” Stegner’s and the nation’s morality were changing with age, but the point of his entire essay is that his time there was sacred and never to be repeated. Like Xanadu, this “pleasure dome was never built” but rather “was decreed, [and] it rose like an exhalation.” Apparition is as likely a word, for Stegner’s Orientalist dream suggests the inseparability of times and places that are simultaneously real and make-believe.
At the same time Saltair was booming and Stegner was about to come of age, Utah was changing into a more cosmopolitan state, but it would forever owe a debt to the early Mormons’ transformation of wilderness into Zion. In his inaugural address on January 1, 1917, Utah governor Simon Bamberger reflected on how effectively the Mormons had settled the Salt Lake Valley seventy years earlier. Using words that must have resonated with his own Jewish background, Bamberger declared: “This valley lying before us, such a short while ago but a bare plain with here and there a little stream of water, along which a few willows and rushes, and here and there a clump of sage brush, has indeed been made ‘to blossom like the rose’ and we can truly say, ‘This is the Place.’”

Like the earlier words that Abraham heard decreed, Bamberger’s speech empowered the chosen people while not even mentioning the others who occupied the land. This convergence of geographic locale and providential decree can be identified as specifically in time and place as any seminal act in religious history. Bamberger’s speech references the most significant four words in Utah history—Brigham Young’s “This is the place” declaration made on July 24, 1847. But as we can sense in Governor Bamberger’s declaration, this place was not only geographically correct but also metaphysically perfect to position the early Latter-day Saints and ultimately all of their descendants as the rightful inheritors of this land.

That land itself took on new meaning with the building of the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad in the early 1900s. Now, Los Angeles and Salt Lake City were finally connected by a direct line, and the remote but spectacular landscape of southern Utah was accessible to tourists. Mormons and the National Park Service had a role in opening up this area to visitation. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the SP, LA & SL railroad became part of the Union Pacific Railroad, whose shareholders included a high percentage of Mormons. For its part, the National Park Service had a long record of working with railroads to develop national parks (for example, Yellowstone). Working in harmony, Mormons and Park Service officials opened up the awesome ramparts of granite that would come to be known as Zion National Park in 1919. This name Zion was natural enough, given the presence of the Mormons nearby. The Union Pacific Railroad ran trains to Cedar City, from which buses transported park visitors into the wild canyons, which featured “fair cities in painted stone,” as a Union Pacific brochure put it. The Utah Parks Company, which was a subsidiary of the Union Pacific Railroad, was incorporated in March 1923 for the express purpose of building the camp and hotel facilities at Zion National Park and operating the bus tours to the other spectacular parks in the area, including Cedar Breaks, Bryce, and even the north rim of the Grand Canyon.
The spectacular rock-ribbed landscape of southern Utah has resonated as distinctive country since the arrival of the Spaniards in the 1770s and was likely so to the Indians before them. However, as we have seen, the Europeans, and later European Americans, found it easy to equate such country with landscapes of the Old World. What especially impressed travelers in this corner of Utah was the labyrinthine nature of the landscape; deep canyons flanked by austere, nearly vertical walls of stone. In point of fact, only a few places in the Holy Land approach this grandeur, but the operative factor in rendering these western lands into biblical places was the human imagination, and the fact that both writers and artists tended to exaggerate it. Then, too, the solitude here—it was always lightly populated—added an element of drama.

Although the seemingly modern Mormon presence was a fact of life in this part of the West, the theme of Old World religion carried over to particular features in Zion and other nearby parks. Consider, for example, the fabulous “Temple of Osiris” in Bryce Canyon National Park (fig. 3-11). It represents a series of statuesque columns that simultaneously appear recognizable as architectural features, or rather architectural ruins, and a surreal fantasyland of spires. The stratified rocks here range in color from greenish to pink, orange, and buff. To the imaginative visitor, the Orientalist-inspired names of these features served to make these varicolored rock units appear much like
the polychrome columns of the famous temple of the same name in Egypt. That underscores the enduring power of Egypt to stimulate the imagination and reinforce the popular cultural perception of the West as a wonderland possessing scenery rivaling the wonders of the ancient world.

In nearby Cedar Breaks National Monument, the evocatively named “Walls of Jericho” (fig. 3-12) bring to mind the blowing of trumpets and the shouting after which the city of Jericho was “utterly destroyed,” as described in Joshua (6:2–21). The “Walls of Jericho” is actually a natural bridge, which is to say a testimony to the erosional power of running water. This spectacular rock feature is solid enough, but that gaping hole needed some explaining. As translated into biblical story, in which the wall simply “fell down flat,” the hole suggests something miraculous. It reminds visitors of the power of God to destroy the enemies of Israel, in which, as the popular gospel song claims, “the walls came tumbling down.” In contrast to the Temple of Osiris, Jericho’s tumbled-down walls were known only from the biblical narrative; and yet the passage in Joshua was so evocative that early travelers (and later, park employees) perpetuated the story in stone here. Two forces operate in this type of landscape promotion. The first instills appreciation; the second stimulates visitation to the area via tourism. With this one-two punch, the iconizing of Utah’s natural environment as spiritual place was firmly fixed in the popular mind.