

Mormon Rationalism in the Life and Conversion of Anson Call

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Abstract

In his article, “Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts,” Steven C. Harper argues that Mormon conversion was a rational commitment and that Mormonism was an attractive, newly restored religion. He states that Mormon conversions did not come, “from the ranks of the superstitious and gullible” but, “Those who joined Mormonism came from a band of the spectrum where contemplative belief in the Bible melded into democratized rationalism.” He explains, “Converts thought about the primitive gospel, restoration of divine authority, healing, and the signs of the times,” not to mention the Book of Mormon, rationally and empirically. The purpose of this paper is to support Harper’s thesis, by illustrating, through the experience of one particular man, that early converts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints became Mormons not because of irrational emotionalism or extreme spiritualism typical among the various Christian denominations of the Second Great Awakening, but because of empirical evidence, the most compelling of which was the Book of Mormon, rational thought, prayerful guidance, and a conscious decision. To elucidate how this Mormon rationalism unfolded, Harper tells the stories of sundry Mormon conversions including that of Anson Call. This short work will expound on Anson’s experiences to further support the thesis of this article and that of Harper’s essay. Mormonism grew steadily from its infancy. After its official organization on April 6, 1830, church membership increased and continues to do so today. Why did people find Mormonism attractive? What was the allure? “Mormonism simultaneously satisfied both the intellectual and spiritual longings of the adherents.” For Anson Call (1810-1890), this new religion answered life’s most significant questions, and he saw the Book of Mormon as indisputable evidence of its verity.

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Anson Call - Courtesy of Utah State Historical Society

Anson Call was born May 13, 1810 in Fletcher, Franklin County, Vermont. He was the son of Cyril and Sarah Tiffany Call. Anson, the fifth generation of his family to be born in New England, came from a line of military veterans who fought in the French and Indian War and the War for Independence.¹ At the time of Anson's birth, religious revivalism and spiritual awareness abounded in New England and other areas of the

¹ "The Late Anson Call," *Deseret Weekly*, 13 September 1890, 1.

coast, slowly working inland. Anson was very much involved in the period known as the Second Great Awakening (1800-1840), residing in the affected areas for thirty years. Born and raised Methodist, Anson was part of the quantitative statistics presented in articles such as Finke and Stark's "How the Upstart Sects Won America: 1776-1850," and books such as Heyrman's *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*,² both of which show the growth and decline of the Methodists prior to, during, and after the Second Great Awakening. Anson was part of the growth, and after abandoning Methodism, part of the decline.

When Anson was a young boy, he and his family moved to Ohio. Land was plentiful and affordable. Although he was raised in a large, supportive family, Anson's childhood was not without difficulty. He was the second of thirteen children. His brother Harvey was two years his senior. Following Anson were Salmon, who died in infancy, Samantha, Fanny, Lucina, Josiah, Mary, Sonora, Sarah, Melissa, Omer and Homer. With such a large family in a new territory, Anson and his brothers and sisters had little opportunity for formal education. The family spent time together on the farm, where Anson learned the importance of hard work and perseverance. Despite his lack of formal education, Anson learned to read and write, and to do simple arithmetic. Anson's family made life in Ohio a success despite serious illness and financial hardship. Adverse conditions made his family stronger.³

Anson grew to be a handsome young man and a proficient farmer. At the age of twenty-three, he fell in love for the first time. On October 3, 1833, he married Mary Flint in Madison, Geauga County, Ohio. Mary was the daughter of Rufus and Hannah Hawes Flint, and was also a native of Vermont. Together, they raised eight children.⁴

² See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, "How the Upstart Sects Won America: 1776-1850," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 1 (1989). Christine L. Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

³ Shann L. Call and Hadyn B. Call, eds., *The Journal of Anson Call* (Bountiful, UT: Eborn Books, 2007), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.



Anson Call and first wife, Mary Flint
Courtesy of Utah State Historical Society

Just three years after their marriage, Anson and Mary Flint's life changed drastically. Cyril, Anson's father, was baptized a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1831. Following this event, LDS missionaries frequently visited Anson and Mary Flint over the course of five years. Although the preaching of LDS missionaries caused much excitement in the town of Madison, they had little effect on Anson and his wife for several years. Anson, a Methodist, considered these preaching men annoying, and did not care for their words. Mormon missionary efforts were persistent however, and Anson described the following:

In the Elders passing through our country they frequently stopped at my house. In discussing with them upon the principals of the Gospel, they would cuff me about like an old pair of boots. I came to the conclusion that the reason of my being handled so easy was because I did not understand the Bible and the Book of Mormon. I resolved to prepare myself for the conflict by investigating the two books. I accordingly furnished myself with the Book of Mormon. I then commenced the Book of Mormon and the Bible, compared the two, and read my Bible from Genesis right through, praying and searching diligently for six months.⁵

Without any interest in the Mormon Church, Anson decided to re-read his Bible as well as the Book of Mormon simply to avoid, "being handled so easy" or cuffed about, "like an old pair of boots."⁶ He made a conscious and rational decision to read both books. He was not driven by heavenly beings, by the story of Joseph Smith's first vision, or by any other form of spiritualism.

After reading the two books back to back, Anson gained an understanding of the meaning and power of the scriptures. His feelings toward these Mormon preachers began to change. No longer could Anson be "handled so easy," or cuffed about "like an old pair of boots."⁷ When the missionaries met with Anson, he had mastered the scriptures and was ready to either accept or reject the message of the missionaries once and for all. He accepted. Anson became a firm believer in the Book of Mormon and began to obey the principles taught by this new book and infant religion. Like other believers in the Book of Mormon, Anson, through rational thought, believed Joseph Smith to be a prophet of God. This process for Anson as well as other Mormons was: if one was true,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

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the other must be true as well. Early Mormon logic suggested that a false prophet could not bring to light a true book, and that a true prophet could not bring to light a false book. Such logic exists among LDS members today. Harper argues that this reasoning and the belief in the Book of Mormon was “The greatest aid... and the component that most distinguished Joseph Smith from the many other would-be prophets of his day...”⁸

Somewhat embarrassed by his change of heart, Anson told no one except his wife. Born and raised Methodist and living amongst divergent religious opinion, he exclaimed:

I was proud and haughty, and to obey the Gospel was worse than death. I labored under those feelings for three months, becoming at times almost insane. To be called Mormon, I thought, was more than I could endure. I lamented that my lot was cast in this dispensation. My dreams and my meditations made me miserable. I at last covenanted before the Lord that if he would give me confidence to face the world in Mormonism I would be baptized for the remission of my sins, and before I rose from my knees, the horrors of my mind were cleared.⁹

The rationalism of Anson’s decision came from prayerful guidance and a conscious decision. Anson had read the Book of Mormon and believed in its veracity. Because the Book of Mormon was true in Anson’s mind, Joseph Smith had to be a prophet of God. Despite this belief, Anson was filled with dismay that he would become a Mormon. Claiming that fervent prayer eased his mind, he did what he felt he had to do. No irrational emotionalism or extreme spiritualism played a role in the conversion of Anson Call. Other early Mormon converts had similar experiences.¹⁰

Anson and Mary Flint were baptized on May 21, 1836 by William Smith, Joseph Smith’s brother. This choice would forever change Anson’s life. Mormonism would prove to be a challenging, yet, rewarding religion to follow. Anson and Mary Flint knew that their decision would cause an uproar in the family; nevertheless, they stood firm in their desire to become Mormon. Sadly, upon finding out about their baptism, Mary

⁸ Steven C. Harper, "Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 10, no. 1 (2000): 106.

⁹ Call and Call, *The Journal of Anson Call*, 6 - 7.

¹⁰ Harper, "Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts," 99 - 118.

Flint's parents disinherited them and took them out of their will. Regardless of familial hardships, Anson pressed on as a stalwart follower of the faith.

Anson wanted to share this new knowledge with his former Methodist congregation. His newfound beliefs made sense to him, and he wanted others to see what he saw. "I went to the Methodist meeting and declared unto them the truth of Mormonism." The truth, in Anson's mind, was empirical. The Book of Mormon was solid, truthful evidence, which proved that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. He stated, "[I was] prepared to tell my Methodist brethren many things they were strangers to. I improved every opportunity in their meetings, Class meetings not excepted. Here was my brothers and my mother and my schoolmates. I was much desirous that they should obey the Gospel with me."¹¹ It is not clear how many of Anson's Methodist friends or family followed his example in Mormonism, but with the help of a friend and fellow Mormon, Almon Babbitt, success came swiftly. Anson recalled:

Almon Babbitt soon commenced preaching in our town. He approved of the course I was taking [in teaching his former Methodist congregation] and said before many months I should have them with me. Within three months he raised a branch of 20 members which consisted mostly of the Methodists including my wife and father's family, my mother excepted.¹²

Other Mormon converts were equally successful — some persuading whole congregations to become Mormon.¹³

In February of 1837, just eight months after Anson's baptism, he was ordained to the Quorum of Seventy, a high leadership position in the LDS Church.¹⁴ Holding such responsible positions so early on was not uncommon during the first decade of the church. This calling, as well as other opportunities for Anson to serve, allowed him to foster a relationship with Joseph Smith. Their friendship and affiliation with

¹¹ Call and Call, *The Journal of Anson Call*, 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Richard S. Van Wagoner, *A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2005).

¹⁴ Anson wrote February 1836 in his journal, but his baptism date was May 1836 in his journal and with the records of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, so I have concluded that he was in error and the correct year was 1837, eight months after his baptism. Anson would never have been given a leadership position in the church prior to his baptism and confirmation. Call and Call, *The Journal of Anson Call*, 9.

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Mormonism led to many years of persecution and hardship. Never would Anson deny that his decision to become Mormon was wrong. The rationality of that choice stayed with him forever even with the challenges it brought.¹⁵

Anson and his family moved with a group of other Mormons to Missouri in 1838. The Missourians vehemently opposed the incoming Mormons, clearly wanting them out of the territory. The Missourians threatened and abused Anson and his family. They moved from one county to another, always encountering persecution. In 1839, Anson and other Mormons traveled to Illinois. Despite harassment and suffering, Anson managed to work hard and make a living for his family. He was a railroad overseer and heavily involved in the brick business, but his main occupation was farming.¹⁶

When the Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith died, panic struck many in the Mormon Church. Who would lead the church? Who would be the next prophet? Anson witnessed good men consumed by pride and greed as they sought to claim Joseph Smith's position. Anson was disgusted by the behavior of these men, as were many other Latter-day Saints. Soon after Joseph's death, Brigham Young and other Mormon Apostles went to Nauvoo during which time many Mormons witnessed what they claimed to be a miracle. Anson described this experience in his journal:

On the Sunday following, Brigham and a portion of the Twelve presented themselves in our congregation. He said he had not come to electioneer, nor set up any particular claim, but to do his duty, and it was for the people to judge between truth and error. Before he had spoken many sentences, I discovered that it was the voice of Joseph, and had I have been where my eyes could not have beheld him, I should have believed that Joseph had been speaking. It was Joseph's voice and Joseph's gestures through the entire discourse, I became perfectly satisfied that it was the voice for me to follow in connection with the majority of the brethren.¹⁷

Spiritual experiences like Anson's did not reduce the rationality of Mormonism. Mormon rationalism "does not depreciate the influence of the 'visionary culture' in which Joseph Smith and others [like Anson Call]

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7 and 21.

¹⁷ Ibid., 31 - 32.

functioned.”¹⁸ Nor would Mormon rationalism “replace emphasis on seeking and primitivism, metaphysics, or millennialism and spiritual communication.”¹⁹ Mormonism did entail marvelous visions, angelic visitations, speaking in tongues, treasure seeking, modern day revelation, and all manner of remarkable occurrences, yet, these events did not undermine Mormon rationalism.

The persecutions did not cease when Brigham Young became the de facto leader. Westward Mormon migration continued from Nauvoo, Illinois to Winter Quarters, Nebraska. From there, the Mormons continued their journey to the high western desert in the Rocky Mountains. Anson and his family arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on September 19, 1848.²⁰

On May 1, 1849, Anson and many others experienced their initial disaster with farming in the Salt Lake Valley. Considered as another miracle, the following event described by Anson could be written off as coincidence, nevertheless Anson and others saw God’s hand in this event:

*The crickets commenced to devour us about the 1st of May, on which I had a continual warfare with them until the 1st of September. They damaged my corn continually and probably would have used up every vestige of grain that there was growing in the Valley had not the gulls assisted us. They came when nearly every ray of hope was gone. They would eat until they filled their cran, and throw them up and fill it again. Thus they laboured almost incessantly from day to day.*²¹

In 1850, after helping settle Iron County, Anson took a second wife, Anne Mariah Bowen on April 15, 1851, to help populate the new settlement. They had six children. Taking another wife was another form of Mormon rationalism. This decision was not only Anson’s, for Mary Flint, Anson’s first wife would have to approve. Both made the conscious decision to follow the counsel of their leaders and practice polygamy.²²

With all of the activities occurring in the Salt Lake Valley and the surrounding areas, Mormon leaders counseled eastern Saints and new

¹⁸ Harper, "Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts," 101.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Call and Call, *The Journal of Anson Call*, 39.

²¹ Ibid., 40.

²² Ibid., 41.

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converts to make the journey westward to Zion, the utopia for Latter-day Saints. In 1856, two companies of travelers going to Utah left late in the season. The company leaders were James G. Willie and Edward Martin. Both groups became stranded in deep snow and freezing temperatures in the Wyoming Territory. When word reached Salt Lake City that people were struggling to survive, Brigham Young immediately sent rescue teams to go and relieve the desperate handcart companies. Young appointed Anson to be a leader of one of the search and rescue teams. Young did not merely ask Anson to rescue these people, but to “join the rescue and also marry a couple of the English women.”²³ In February 1857, Anson married Margaretta Unwin Clark of the Martin Handcart Company and Emma Summers of the Willie Handcart Company. Margaretta, his third wife, had six children with Anson. Emma Summers, Anson’s fourth wife, had five.²⁴

In October 1858, Anson saw his brother Josiah for the last time while on a trip to Fillmore. On Josiah’s return to Salt Lake City, he and his friend, Samuel Brown, were murdered by Indians. Three years later, Anson married Josiah’s widow, Henrietta Caroline Williams on April 9, 1861, presumably to help care for and protect his brother’s family. Henrietta was Anson’s fifth wife.²⁵

As the years passed, Anson worked diligently to care for his family, and he managed his finances well. Because of his business acumen and financial astuteness, Anson married Ann Clark, older sister of Anson’s third wife, who arrived in Utah at the age of fifty-three. She became Anson’s sixth and final wife on January 24, 1870. Twenty years later, just three months after turning eighty years old, Anson Call died in his home on a Sunday evening, August 31, 1890 in Bountiful, Davis County, Utah.²⁶ From the time of his conversion until death, Anson remained faithful and dedicated to Mormonism.

As Stephen Harper wrote, for believers, “Mormonism owed its persuasive quality to the empirical and revelatory blend by which it simultaneously catered to the metaphysical, rationalistic, and democratic—coexisting features of the intellectual framework that most frequently informed conversion.” Anson Call and other Mormons “saw themselves not as

²³ Gwen M. Barney, *Anson Call and the Rocky Mountain Prophecy* (Salt Lake City: Call Publishing, 2002). 270.

²⁴ Call and Call, *The Journal of Anson Call*, 66.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Death of Anson Call," *Deseret Evening News*, 2 September 1890, 3.

hoodwinked by Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon but empowered.” To them Joseph “was their prophet, but their experience was their own—it was both revelatory and empirical—and they clung to it with intensity.”²⁷ It did not end with the death of Joseph Smith. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to grow with a membership of over 15 million worldwide, exemplifying the fervid dedication and unwavering belief of men like Anson Call.

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²⁷ Harper, "Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts," 110.