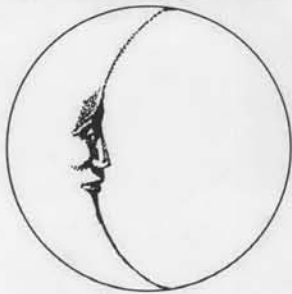


# MORMONS AND MOONMEN

VAN HALE



**A** LOOK AT NINETEENTH  
CENTURY BELIEFS  
ABOUT THE MOON—  
ITS FLORA, ITS  
FAUNA, ITS FOLKS



In 1892 the following one-page article appeared in the *Young Women's Journal*. Its author Oliver B. Huntington wrote:

Astronomers and philosophers have, from time almost immemorial until very recently, asserted that the moon was uninhabited, that it had no atmosphere, etc. But recent discoveries, through the means of powerful telescopes, have given scientists a doubt or two upon the old theory.

Nearly all the great discoveries of men in the last half century have, in one way or another, either directly or indirectly, contributed to prove Joseph Smith to be a Prophet.

As far back as 1837, I know that he said the moon was inhabited by men and women the same as this earth, and that they lived to a greater age than we do—that they live generally to near the age of 1000 years.

He described the men as averaging near six feet in height, and dressing quite uniformly in something near the Quaker style.

In my Patriarchal blessing, given by the father of Joseph the Prophet, in Kirtland, 1837, I was told that I would preach the gospel to the inhabitants upon the islands of the sea, and—to the inhabitants of the moon, even the planet you can now behold with your eyes.<sup>1</sup>

Opponents of Mormonism have tried to use Huntington's striking assertion that Joseph Smith believed in moonmen in order to discredit Mormonism.

"Can you respect a religious organization that will publish such nonsense?" they ask.<sup>2</sup> No true prophet could make a mistake of such magnitude.

Admittedly, in this scientific age 1000-year-old moonmen in Quaker dress being visited by Mormon missionaries do sound a bit farfetched. It becomes important, therefore, to set Huntington's account into context. What is the authenticity or accuracy of the account, for example? How outlandish would such ideas have seemed in the nineteenth century? Then one might more fairly judge whether Joseph's prophetic mantle is at stake.

The first question, of course, is what were Huntington's sources for his article, his own reminiscence or that of a second party? He made reference to two separate incidents—a statement of Joseph Smith and his own patriarchal blessing. These two incidents will be looked at separately.

Most have assumed his source for the Joseph Smith statement was his own memory and have thus questioned its credibility because he was only 11 years old in 1837, and 55 years separated his recollection from the event. Actually Huntington was not relating his own memories but someone else's. The immediate source for his article was an 1881 entry in his own personal journal.<sup>3</sup> But that entry is part of a 10-page collection of reminiscences he had acquired from several sources and

which he had "taken some time and pains to pick up."<sup>4</sup> The description from Philo Dibble reads as follows:

*Inhabitants of the Moon*

The inhabitants of the moon are more of a uniform size than the inhabitants of the earth, being about 6 feet in height.

They dress very much like the quaker style and are quite general in style, or the one fashion of dress.

They live to be very old; coming generally, near a thousand years.

This is the description of them as given by Joseph the Seer, and he could "See" whatever he asked the Father in the name of Jesus to see.

I heard him say that "he could ask what he would ask of the Father in the name of Jesus and it would be granted" and I have no more doubt of it than I have that the mob killed him<sup>5</sup>

The question must now be asked, what was Dibble's source? He did not indicate whether the story was his personal recollection or that of another party. I have found no further information on this except that Dibble was a collector and had expended considerable effort to collect and produce an exhibit about the life and death of Joseph Smith, which he presented in several Mormon communities. It was at one of these presentations in January of 1881 that Huntington acquired Joseph Smith's moonmen statement from Dibble.<sup>6</sup> So at best the moonmen statement is a sensational, late, third-hand reminiscence and, by itself, is a very poor source of dependable history. This and one other statement, even less impressive, represent the sum total of testimony that Joseph Smith ever said that the moon was inhabited.

Although it has not been established that Joseph Smith believed in moonmen, several close to him did. Joseph Smith's own brother Hyrum stated his belief in an inhabited moon in an 1843 sermon on the "plurality of gods & worlds" preserved by George Laub:

... every Star that we see is a world and is inhabited the same as this world is peopled. The Sun & Moon is inhabited & the Stars. . . . The stars are inhabited the same as this Earth.<sup>7</sup>

President Brigham Young stated a similar view in a sermon of 24 July 1870:

Who can tell us of the inhabitants of this little planet that shines of an evening, called the moon? When we view its face we may see what is termed "the man in the moon," and what some philosophers declare are the shadows of mountains. But these sayings are very vague, and amount to nothing; and when you inquire about the inhabitants of that sphere you find that the most learned are as ignorant in regard to them as the most ignorant of their fellows. So it is with regard to the inhabitants of the sun. Do you think there is any life there? No question of it; it was not made in vain. It was made to give light to those who dwell upon it, and to other planets.<sup>8</sup>

The second interesting claim Oliver Huntington made in the 1892 article was that his patriarchal blessing had predicted that he might preach the gospel on the moon. He also mentioned this blessing in a second article for the *Journal* in 1894.<sup>9</sup> In the first he dated the blessing 1837 and in the second 1836. In both he identified Church Patriarch Joseph Smith, Sr., as the bestower of the blessing. The following excerpt is undoubtedly from

this blessing. It is dated 7 December 1836 at Kirtland, Ohio, but the record clearly shows that the blessing was given to Oliver by his own father, William Huntington, rather than Joseph Smith, Sr.:

I lay my hands on thee & bless thee with a father's blessing. . . . thou shalt be called to preach the gospel to this generation. . . . before thou art twenty one thou wilt be called to preach the fullness of the gospel, thou shalt have power with God even to translate thyself to Heaven, & preach to the inhabitants of the moon or planets, if it shall be expedient. . . .<sup>10</sup>

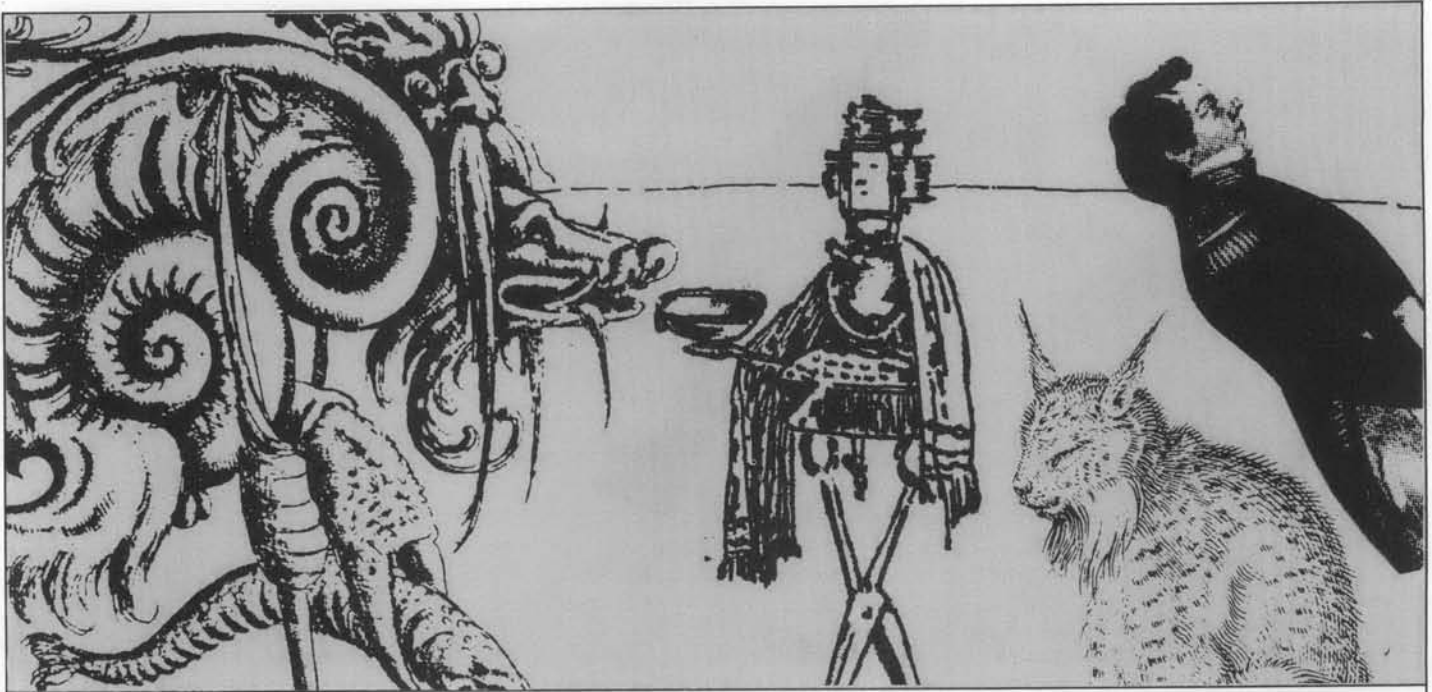
Although there is a discrepancy as to who gave Oliver the blessing, this is undoubtedly the same blessing mentioned in the *Young Woman's Journal*. Both content and setting are similar. In his 1894 article Huntington recalled that he received the blessing in 1836 at a blessings meeting for the Huntington family at the home of William Huntington. The meeting was appointed and conducted by Joseph Smith, Sr. It lasted the entire day, with Orson Pratt recording the blessings the best he could and "afterwards filled up from memory of all present that which he could not catch from the Patriarch's lips."<sup>11</sup>

It seems unlikely that Oliver, on two different occasions in the same year, would have received the same blessing from two different men. It is more likely that Oliver, who was 10 years old at the time, was mistaken about who actually performed the blessing since both men were present. Or perhaps both men participated in giving him the blessing. Or, although I believe this less likely, an error was made in recording the blessing. The blessing was not copied into the patriarchal blessings book for at least nine years, at which time it was recorded by Albert Carrington along with several other blessings given to other members of the Huntington family.

Ultimately the fact of this discrepancy is far less interesting than the fact that such a blessing existed—a blessing which assumed the existence of moonmen and was given in the presence of the Patriarch, Apostle Orson Pratt, and the Huntington family and relatives. The patriarchal blessings books in the LDS archives are not open for research. Therefore, it is not possible at this time to determine if the idea of preaching to the inhabitants of the moon found in this blessing to Oliver Huntington was common or unique.

To me the surprising fact is that there have not been found more Mormon declarations of belief in an inhabited moon. Several of the earliest revelations, in 1830 (Moses 1) and in 1832 (D&C 76), committed Mormonism to a belief in many inhabited worlds. But Mormons, it appears, seldom speculated about which of the heavenly bodies were so inhabited. Those who believed in moonmen likely did so because of the prevalence of that view in their day rather than because they believed Joseph Smith had been inspired to reveal the existence of such beings. From the available sources one could hardly conclude that belief in an inhabited moon was general among Mormons of the nineteenth century, and further, to conclude that it was a basic position either of Joseph Smith or Mormonism is certainly false.

In the first half of the nineteenth century scientists may have differed on the question of intelligent life on



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the moon, but such a notion was by no means a discredited idea. In 1822 William Herschel died. He was the greatest astronomer of his time; he discovered the planet Uranus in 1781 and became official astronomer to King George III. In 1976 Patrick Moore, Director of the Lunar Section of the British Astronomical Association, wrote of William Herschel:

As an observer it is possible that he has never been equalled, and between 1781 and his death, in 1822, every honour that the scientific world could bestow came his way. His views about life in the Solar System were, then, rather surprising. He thought it possible that there was a region below the Sun's fiery surface where men might live, and he regarded the existence of life on the Moon as "an absolute certainty."

In 1780 Herschel, in a letter to a disbelieving astronomer, asked:

Who can say that it is not extremely probable, nay beyond doubt, that there must be inhabitants on the Moon of some kind or another?<sup>12</sup>

Also in 1822, the German astronomer Gruithuisen announced that he had discovered a lunar city with a collection of gigantic ramparts extending 23 miles in either direction.<sup>13</sup> It was not until 1838, with the publication of the writings of Beer and Madler, that the scientific world concluded that the moon is definitely unable to support higher life forms.<sup>14</sup> This, however, had little immediate effect upon popular belief. The scientific conclusion did not become the popular conclusion for at least 60 years.<sup>15</sup>

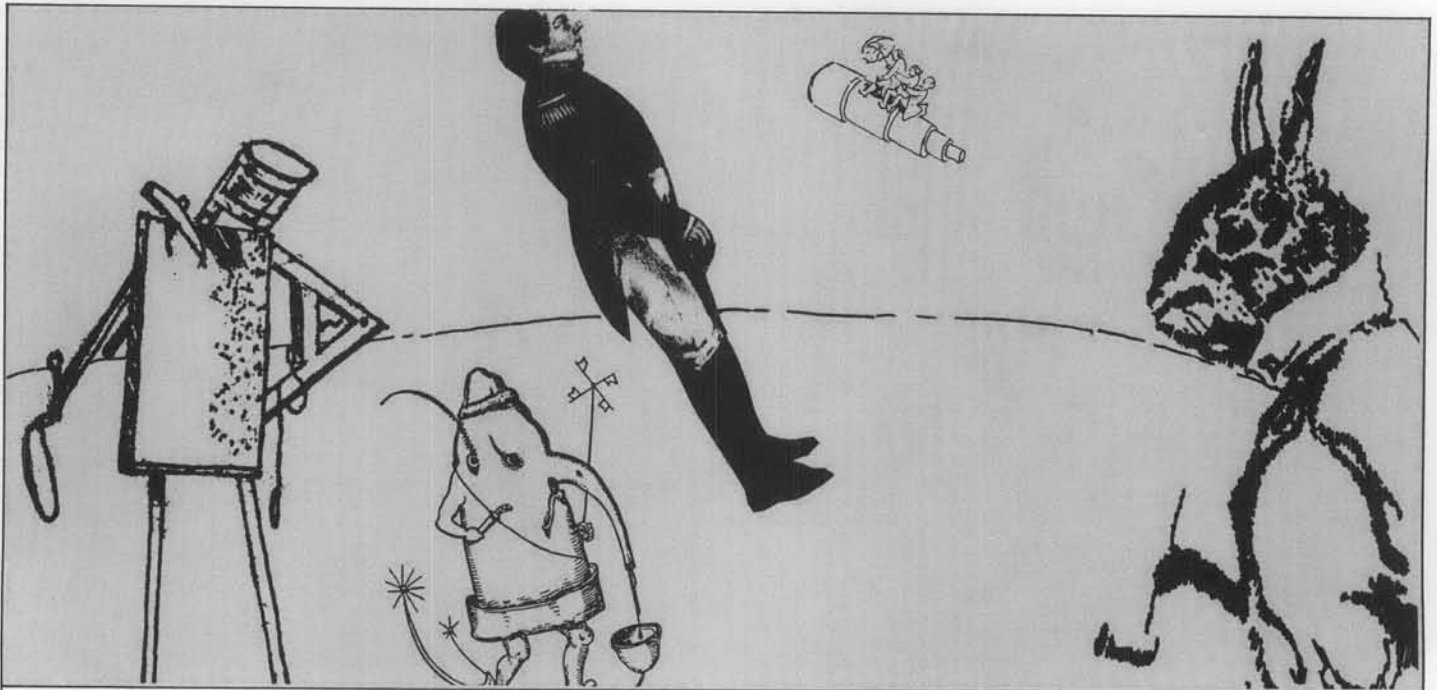
Throughout the era of belief in moonmen, no year can compare with 1835 for interest and publicity. In that

year was perpetrated the Great Lunar Hoax—perhaps the biggest scientific practical joke of all time.

In 1833 the renowned astronomer John Herschel, son of William Herschel, set sail for the Cape of Good Hope to survey the skies of the southern hemisphere as his father had so thoroughly done of the northern. He remained there for five years until 1838. In 1835 Richard Locke, a reporter for the *New York Sun*, decided to take advantage of three facts: it was well known that John Herschel was on the other side of the world with a large telescope; interest in the moon was high; communication was slow.

On 23 August 1835 the *New York Sun* published the first installment of Locke's six-part report under the headline "Great Astronomical Discoveries Lately Made by Sir John Herschel at the Cape of Good Hope." The remaining five installments appeared the following five days. The articles were cleverly written and were widely accepted.

Locke first described the construction and operation of Herschel's new telescope. John Herschel, by perfecting his father's innovations and with the financial backing of none other than the King of Great Britain himself, reported Locke, succeeded in constructing a telescope so powerful that it brought the surface of the moon to an "apparent proximity of about eighty yards." The lens was 24 feet in diameter, and "its weight was 14,826 lbs after being polished, and its magnifying power estimated at 42,000 times." It was an amalgam of two parts crown to one part flint glass "cast with perfect success, by Hartley & Grant Dunbarton Jan. 27, 1833. . . . It was therefore presumed capable of representing objects of eighteen inches in diameter with perfect



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distinctness." Locke went on:

Such profound secrecy has been preserved throughout the whole, that the present publication . . . is the first that even the scientific world of Europe have known of this grand system of discoveries.

The telescope was finally ready for operation 10 January 1835. After his final adjustments, Herschel

made a solemn pause of several hours, to prepare his mind to tear away the veil that could make him, for the time, sole depository of the wondrous secrets of that hitherto unseen world. Columbus discovered a continent, he was about to discover a globe.

After these preliminaries, Locke told it all, with each installment more wondrous than the last.

In his first glimpse Sir John saw various rock formations and then a precipitous shelf covered with a dark red flower, "the first organic production of a foreign world ever revealed to the eyes of man." He was then delighted by the sight of a lunar forest. He succeeded in classifying 38 species of forest trees and nearly twice that number of plants. Next he saw a level green plain and a deep blue lake breaking in large white billows upon a beach of brilliant white sand. But, as yet, he observed no animal life.

The excitement mounted as the telescope was adjusted to the limit of its magnification. Then in the shade of the woods, he "beheld continuous herds of brown quadrupeds, having all the external characteristics of the bison" but with a "fleshy appendage over the eyes which was lifted and lowered by means of the ears. . . . It immediately occurred to the acute mind of Dr. Herschel that this was a Providential contrivance to

protect the eyes of the animal from the great extremes of light and darkness."

Other animals included a gregarious, single-horned antelope, engaging in "all the unaccountable antics of a young lamb or kitten." On one of the lakes he saw a variety of water birds plunging their long necks into the lake. He watched for a long time hoping to catch sight of a lunar fish but never did. However, the most remarkable animal was the

biped beaver, which exactly resembles the Beaver, only it has no tail, and walks always on its hind legs, carrying its young in its arms. Its huts are higher and better than those of many human savages, and from the appearance of smoke in nearly all of them, it is supposed the animal is acquainted with fire. Man can no longer be distinguished as the cooking animal!

This, of course, was all leading to Locke's climax—the discovery of moonmen, which he recounted in his final article. They were winged men who were first observed flying. "When their attitude was erect and dignified, their stature [was] about four feet." They were covered with copper-colored hair. "They appeared to be constantly engaged in conversing, with much impassioned gesticulation; and hence it was inferred, that they are rational beings. Others, apparently of a higher order, were discovered afterwards. . . . And finally a magnificent temple for the worship of God, of polished sapphire, in a triangle shape, with a roof of gold."<sup>16</sup>

The articles were an immediate sensation and were reprinted in many of the papers. Reverend Harley gave this assessment:

When the first number appeared in the *New York Sun* . . .

the excitement aroused was intense. The paper sold daily by thousands; and when the articles came out as a pamphlet, twenty thousand went off at once. Not only in Young America, but also in Old England, France, and throughout Europe, the wildest enthusiasm prevailed.<sup>17</sup>

Patrick Moore also detailed the reception the articles received:

The articles met with a mixed reception, but some eminent critics swallowed the bait hook, line and sinker. "These new discoveries are both probable and plausible," declared the *New York Times*, while the *New Yorker* thought that the observations "had created a new era in astronomy and science generally."<sup>18</sup>

The *New York Evangelist* published a lengthy summary of the articles which was reprinted on 11 September 1835 in the *Painesville Telegraph* (Ohio), a paper commonly read in the neighboring Mormon center of Kirtland.

In Massachusetts a women's club wrote to Herschel for his views on how to contact these moonmen and convert them to Christianity.<sup>19</sup> One minister

told his congregation that, on account of the wonderful discoveries of the present age, he lived in expectation of one day calling upon them for a subscription to buy Bibles for the benighted inhabitants of the moon.<sup>20</sup>

On September 16 the *Sun* confessed its hoax. Still the articles only described what many firmly believed existed on the moon, and popular belief was undaunted by the confession which was, after all, not nearly so widely publicized as the original articles. The *Painesville Telegraph* near Kirtland did not even carry the story of the confession.

The following year the American theologian Dr. Timothy Dwight, in his book *Theology*, declared that "it is most rationally concluded that intelligent beings in great multitudes inhabit [the Moon's] lucid regions, being far better and happier than ourselves."<sup>21</sup>

Belief in intelligent moon life continued for many years.<sup>22</sup> According to Moore, the last great advocate of intelligent life on the moon was W.H. Pickering, who authored a 1904 photographic atlas and wrote many papers about the moon.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the most valuable point in all this is that the credibility of figures of one generation cannot be judged fairly by the standards of a later generation. It may be that today a person's credibility should be questioned if he believes in a moon civilization in need of evangelizing. But that would not have been the case for someone professing such a view in the nineteenth century.

The other question still remains: Did Joseph Smith believe in an inhabited moon? From the historical evidence now available the answer must be: Not proven. But, all things considered, the possibility, or probability, that he did cannot reasonably be denied. For all others of that era the question seems quite insignificant, especially given contemporary beliefs. But in the case of Joseph Smith, he claimed to be a prophet. Some extremists contend that his claim demands that his knowledge in every area be superior to that of others in his era. If he believed any false notion of his day, so these critics say, his credibility must be doubted. Others, not so demanding of infallible insight in a prophet, would be more comfortable with a description of God's revelation which allowed for the human and the divine. As Rev. J.R.

Dummelow so aptly described the authors of the Bible in his *One Volume Bible Commentary*, so might one say of Joseph Smith:

Though purified and ennobled by the influence of His Holy Spirit; men each with his own peculiarities of manner and disposition—each with his own education or want of education—each with his own way of looking at things—each influenced differently from another by the different experiences and disciplines of his life. Their inspiration did not involve a suspension of their natural faculties; it did not even make them free from earthly passion; it did not make them into machines—it left them men.

Therefore we find their knowledge sometimes no higher than that of their contemporaries. . . .<sup>24</sup>

Dummelow's description of the author of Genesis is equally applicable:

His scientific knowledge may be bounded by the horizon of the age in which he lived, but the religious truths he teaches are irrefutable and eternal.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly some critics will persist in their belief that Oliver B. Huntington's 1892 article has devastated both Joseph Smith and Mormonism. Some determined Mormons will dogmatically deny to the end that Joseph Smith ever, for a moment, believed in moonmen. And I suspect that some ardent fundamentalists will yet testify fervently that when men really do travel around the moon they will be greeted by an elderly Quaker-like gentleman, proving empirically the divine inspiration of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

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#### Notes

1. *Young Woman's Journal* 3:263,264.
2. Jay Jacobson, "Three Reasons Not to Become a Mormon," p. 7.
3. Utah State Historical Society, typescript, p. 166.
4. *Ibid.* p. 160.
5. *Ibid.* p. 166.
6. *Ibid.* p. 161, 168.
7. *BYU Studies* 18:177.
8. *JD* 13:271.
9. *Young Woman's Journal* 5:346.
10. Patriarchal Blessings Books, 9:294, 295.
11. *Young Woman's Journal* 5:345, 346.
12. Patrick Moore, *New Guide to the Moon* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York: 1976), p. 128.
13. *Ibid.* p. 129.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Rev. Timothy Harley, *Moon Lore* (Swan Sonnenchein, London: 1885), pp. 241, 256.
16. Moore, p. 130-131; *Painesville Telegraph*, 11 September 1835.
17. Harley, p. 42.
18. Moore, p. 32.
19. *Ibid.* p. 132.
20. Harley, p. 43.
21. Timothy Dwight, *Theology*, p. 91.
22. Harley, p. 249-257.
23. Moore, p. 133.
24. J.R. Dummelow, *One Volume Bible Commentary*, p. cxxxv.
25. *Ibid.* p. xxx.