

From Sherlock Holmes to Godzilla

THE MORMON IMAGE IN COMICS

By Michael W. Homer

MORMON COMIC BOOK CREATORS HAVE brought forth their own representations of the Book of Mormon and of some important episodes in Church history. These works are similar to those of Christian artists who have depicted the Bible and Christian history. Perhaps the most familiar recent religious comic series is the adaptation of the evangelical Christian bestseller *Left Behind*, but there are many other examples as referenced in the *Guide to Christian Comics* and on various websites. Even indie comic artist Robert Crumb has recently released a graphic novel of the Book of Genesis.

Although LDS comic book creators have produced this type of material, the most recognizable comic book depictions of Mormonism are produced by non-LDS artists who usually depict Mormons in a nineteenth-century Utah Territory setting. Some depictions are positive, but many stories use their Mormon characters as exotic villains or at least suspicious outsiders. Although, like Christianity, Mormonism as a religion has been targeted in the comic book format, these types of attacks are surprisingly rare.

The first Mormon comic creation was published in 1947 by Herald Publishing House (owned by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now Community of Christ): Henry Anderson's *The First Americans*, subtitled "A Pictorial Version of the Book of Mormon." It was the first comic book version of the Book of Mormon and focused on the connection between the people described in that book and the Native Americans. Sporting a full-color cover, the book consisted of forty-eight two-color pages (green and white, red and white, blue and white) telling a very condensed version of the Book of Mormon. The volume begins with the story of Lehi's family's immigration to the American continent shortly before the destruction of Solomon's Temple (c. 586 BCE.) and ends with

Moroni's burial of gold plates in the Hill Cumorah (c. 400 CE). It also includes a short history of the Jaredites, who immigrated to the American continent as part of the dispersion following the building of the Tower of Babel (c. 2100 BCE.)

Other Mormon creators have published comic book adaptations of Mormon history and the Book of Mormon. In 1948, Deseret Book Company published *Blazing the Pioneer Trail*, a stand-alone comicbooklet written by Floyd Larson and illustrated by Forrest Hill, presenting a faith-promoting account of the Mormon migration to the Great Basin in 1846–47. Deseret Book also published Eileen Chabot Wendel's *Stories from the Golden Records* series, which included *The Jaredites* and *Nephi the Valiant*. They contained comic book-style episodes adapted from the Book of Mormon.¹

But Ricardo Leon "Ric" Estrada (1928–2009) was the first Mormon comic book artist who produced Mormon-themed material for a major comic book publisher. Often dubbed the "father of Mormon comics" for many years Estrada worked for DC Comics illustrating war and romance comics. In 1972, he wrote and illustrated "The Mormon Battalion," in No. 135 of *Our Fighting Forces*. This story emphasized the loyalty of Mormons who volunteered for military service during the Mexican War even after they had been driven from their settlements in Illinois. Two years later, Estrada provided a fill-in story in No. 169 of DC's *GI Combat* with "Peace with Honor," depicting Shiz and Coriantumr battling to the death, which he credited as "adapted from the Book of Mormon." Thereafter, the LDS Church retained Estrada to illustrate *New Testament Stories* (1980). Other well-known Mormon comic artists, such as Brad Teare, who has illustrated the graphic novel *Cypher*, and Sal Velluto, who has worked for Marvel, DC, and many other comic book companies, have also been retained by the LDS Church. Velluto is an illustrator and Teare an art director for *The Friend* magazine.

During the same period Estrada was working, LDS artist Richard Comely created Captain Canuck. Although the Captain was not specifically identified as Mormon, he occasionally prayed for strength, causing some readers to assume that he was a member of Comely's church.²

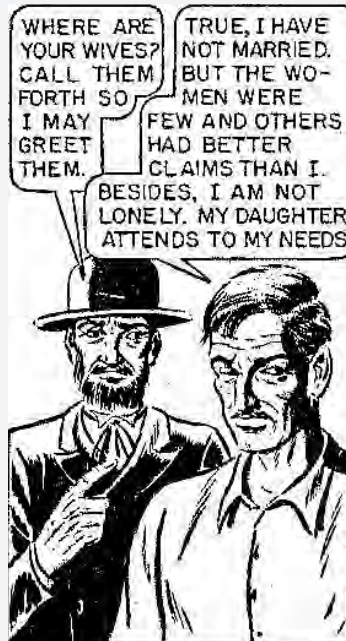


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BRIGHAM'S MANY FACES



Een Studie in Rood (P&T Productions, 1995)



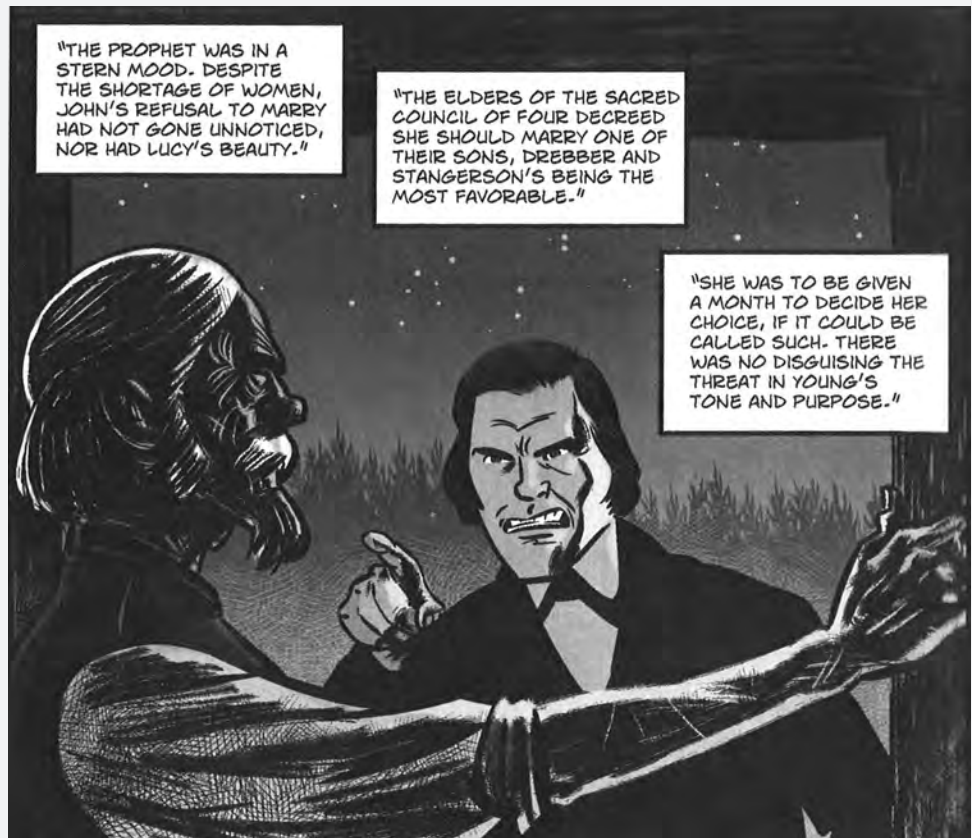
Classics Illustrated #110, "A Study in Scarlet" (1953)



Illustrerade Klassiker, "A Study in Scarlet" (1974)



Brigham meets Tex (Sal Velluto)



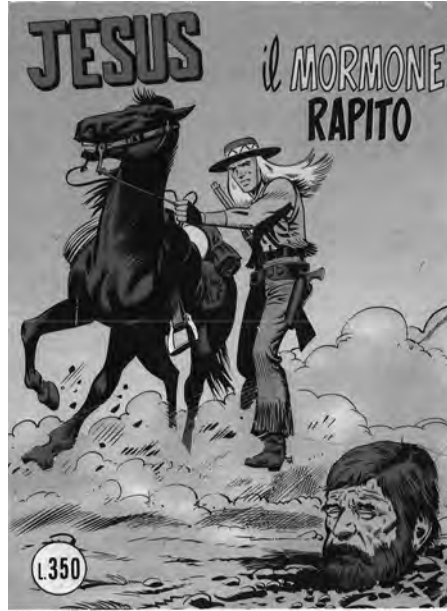
A Study in Scarlet (SelfMadeHero, 2010)



La Grande Missione (1955)



Tex #277 (1983) “Il Vendicatore Mascherato” in which Tex foils a plot by a Mountain Meadows Massacre survivor to destroy the Mormons.



Jesus #3 (1976) “Il Mormone Rapito,” in which Jesus rescues a Mormon bishop from men who had robbed a bank with the bishop years before.



La Grande Missione (1958) consists of frames taken from the film Brigham Young (1940, released in Italy 1955).

In 1992, Mike Allred—who has worked for Marvel, DC, Tundra, Image and other comic book companies—created the critically acclaimed *Madman*, in which one of the Three Nephites (who are mentioned in the Book of Mormon and eventually became the subjects of Mormon folklore) plays a pivotal role.³ In 2004–2005 Allred also wrote, illustrated, and self-published a comic book adaptation of the Book of Mormon in three full-color volumes (64 pages per volume). The adaptation was entitled *The Golden Plates* and subtitled “The Book of Mormon in Pictures and Word.”

Beginning with the story of Nephi, *The Golden Plates* fo-

cuses on the first two hundred years of the Book of Mormon story. The third volume contains a short summary of the prophet Mormon’s preparation of the plates for future generations and ends with the promise: “To be continued.” However, no other volumes have since been released. A hard-cover collection, published in 2005, which combines the three volumes, notes that it contains “the First Book of Nephi through the Words of Mormon.” Because Allred included his testimony on the inside of the front and back wrapper of each issue, he clearly intended *The Golden Plates* to be used as a kind of proselytizing tract.



Skorpio #44 (1979), “Raggio di Luna” in which a Mormon boy betrays the Native American girl he had secretly married.

NON-MORMON CREATORS HAVE also produced comics with Mormon characters and historical themes which are better known than the aforementioned Mormon-created work. For example, many comic book adaptations exist of Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet*, perhaps the most famous anti-Mormon melodrama ever published. In this, his first appearance in literature, Holmes solves two London murders by investigating events that had occurred in the Utah Territory several decades earlier. The plot revolves around Brigham Young’s attempt to coerce John Ferrier’s daughter into marriage against her will. “*A Study in Scarlet* includes not only graphic descriptions of polygamy but also chilling tales of clerical abuse and murder.”⁴

The first comic book adaptation of *A Study in Scarlet* was drawn by Louis Zansky and appeared in No. 33 of *Classic Comics* in 1947, together with *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Curiously, this seventeen-page adaptation of *A Study in Scarlet* was not included in subsequent printings of this particular volume (in *Classics Illustrated*) even though the

cover retained an illustration from that story: an index finger drenched in blood with the word “RACHE” (*revenge* in German) written on a wall. The Mormon subplot, however, was not prominent in this adaptation. But in 1953, Seymour Moskowitz illustrated a new thirty-page version of the story that delved more deeply into the Mormon subplot.⁵

This *Classics Illustrated* story included some very sinister images of Brigham Young and other Mormon characters. At one point, Young confronts John Ferrier and asks him “Where are your wives? Call them forth so I may greet them.” Ferrier responds: “True, I have not married. But the women were few and others had better claims than I. Besides, I am not lonely. My daughter attends to my needs.” Young then strikes: “It is of that daughter I wish to speak to you. Elder Drebber and Elder Stangerson each has a son. She must choose one of these two men within a month! It is the order of the Council of the Four! Wo [sic] to him who disobeys their command!”⁶

In 1976, Bill Barry adapted *A Study in Scarlet* for his syndicated Sherlock Holmes comic strips (the strips were collected into a volume in 1987), but Brigham Young and Doyle’s Mormon subplot device were not included in the story. A subsequent three-part adaptation, written by Jim Stenstrum and illustrated by Noly Panaligan, does not mention Brigham Young but Lucy does tell Jefferson Hope that “her Mormon faith would not allow her to marry outsiders.” Thereafter Hope, Lucy, and her father “conspired to flee the Utah Territory.” During the escape, the Mormons kill John Ferrier, abduct Lucy, and carry her back to Salt Lake City, where she dies of a broken heart.⁷

Two other comic book versions of the story, published in 1995 and 2010, capture Doyle’s Mormon subplot and depict Brigham Young very ominously. John Ferrier and Lucy are brought before the Mormon prophet, who demands that “they become believers in the Mormon creed.” He later tells Ferrier that “the elders of the sacred council of four decreed that [Lucy] should marry one of their sons, Drebber’s and Stangerson’s being the most favorable.”⁸

The American West setting of nineteenth-century Mormonism was captured not only by Arthur Conan Doyle but also by European storytellers such as Balduin Möllhausen, Karl May, and Emilio Salgari.⁹ Thus, it is not surprising that European comic book creators place Mormons in this same setting. In Italy, for example, the pop-



Tex #149 (1968) “La Banda dei Mormoni,” in which Tex tracks down bandits who dress as Mormon missionaries.



Tex #276 “La Grande Minaccia” (1983) in which Tex uncovers the story of the Mountain Meadows Massacre.



Tex #276 “La Grande Minaccia” in which John D. Lee is executed.

ular comic book series *Tex* included references to Mormons as early as 1955.¹⁰ Tex Willer is a Texas Ranger who marries the daughter of a Navajo chief. Tex becomes their new chief when his father-in-law dies, and he is often accompanied on his adventures by Kit Carson. Mormons are not always positively portrayed in these stories. The Danites are mentioned in at least one story¹¹ and the Mountain Meadows Massacre in another.¹² But Mormons are known as much for their independence as for any malevolence.¹³ These tales have been reprinted on numerous occasions.¹⁴



Members of the Church of Snazzy Dressers: *Jacob Raven*, LDS detective, plays a role in *Spider Man: The Lost Years*. *Mallory Book* is a tough-as-nails Mormon attorney in the *She-Hulk's* law office.



Putting the God in Zilla: Though the temple is shown falling over on the cover of *Godzilla #13*, it manages to stay upright through the end of the actual story. The Church Office Building, however, is not so lucky.

OTHER COMIC BOOK creators, usually motivated by sectarian differences, have been even less kind in their depictions of the LDS Church. Perhaps the most famous example of a sectarian attack is *The Visitors*, released in 1984 by Chick Publications. This twenty-two-page booklet (less than 5” by 3”) was published in black and white, with two panels per page. It contains the story of two Mormon elders who attempt to convince a golden contact to be baptized. When the elders arrive at the contact’s home, her niece is present, and she asks the elders about Mormonism’s more controversial teachings (e.g., God was once a man, God the Father has many wives, Satan and Jesus are spirit brothers, Jesus was a polygamist, and humans can eventually become gods). Finally, one of the elders becomes confused and admits that he would like to know the “real” Jesus. The older elder drags him from the home, asking, “How could you be so stupid?” and threatening to report



Certain that they are about to die, *Apollo* and *Serina* decide to marry in a ceremony that borrows some of its elements from creator *Glen Larsen's* Mormon background in *Battlestar Galactica No. 5* (July 1978).

him to the mission president. However, this pamphlet was a mere peashooter compared to the scathing, six-issue attack *Chick* mounted on the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁵

Other comic books that contain references to Utah and Mormons include *Godzilla*, who tromped over Salt Lake City;¹⁶ *Martin Mystère*, who visited the Family History Library;¹⁷ and *Archie* and his friends, who did some research in the Salt Lake City Public Library.¹⁸ Comic book artist *Will Shetterly* created a female Mormon superhero named *Dr. Deseret*, characterized by her willingness to stand up to polygamous patriarchs



Two LDS missionaries receive a thorough theological trouncing from a Godmakers-savvy Christian in *The Visitors*, a comic-style pamphlet released by Chick Publications.

and by her addiction to performance-enhancing drugs, who appeared briefly in *Captain Confederacy*, published by Epic Comics.¹⁹ Jacob Raven, a Latter-day Saint police detective, has appeared in *Spider-Man: The Lost Years* and in various other Spider-Man comic books published by Marvel,²⁰ while Latter-day Saint lawyer Mallory Book works in the same office as Jennifer Walters, alter ego of She-Hulk.²¹

Written by non-Mormons, these stories do not focus primarily on Mormonism, but they do contain images of Salt Lake City in its more modern setting and present Mormons in a more positive light. Likely these types of references to twenty-first-century Mormonism, together with the more classical nineteenth-century images, will continue to be created. Doubtless Mormon creators will continue to adapt scriptures (perhaps Mike Allred will resume *The Golden Plates*), explain Church history and teachings (as Sal Velluto is doing in “Lives of the Prophets” for *The Friend*) and include subtle Mormon markers in mainstream comic book stories.²²

NOTES

1. Eileen Chabot Wendel, *Stories from the Golden Records: Book 1, The Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960); Eileen Chabot Wendel, *Stories from the Golden Records: Book 2, Nephi the Valiant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960).

2. Ron Leishman (w) and Richard Comely (a), *Captain Canuck* #3 (1975), Comely Comix.

3. Mike Allred, *Madman Adventures* #3 (1992), Tundra Publishing.

4. See Michael W. Homer, *Arthur Conan Doyle: “A Fine Spirit of Tolerance”* (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2006).

5. The story was published as No. 110 of *Classics Illustrated* and paired with “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” (with the famous “RACHE” tattooed on the cover).

6. An expanded version of the story has also been published in European

versions of *Classics Illustrated*. For example, in 1974, a thirty-two page version of this Holmes story was published in *Illustrerade Klassiker* in Swedish. This version contains similar dialogue and presents an ominous image of Young, who many readers worldwide can associate with Mormonism.

7. The story appeared in *The Rook* (February and April 1982) and *Eerie* (January 1983) and was reprinted in graphic novel format by both Innovation Books (1989) and Thorby Comics (1998).

8. See Ricard Longaron, *Une étude en rouge* (np: P&T Productions, 1995); Ricard Longaron, *Een studie in rood* (np: P&T Productions, 1995). Ian Edgington (w) and I.N.J. Culbard (a), *A Study in Scarlet* (London: SelfMadeHero, 2010); Ian Edgington (w) and N. J. Culbard (a), *A Study in Scarlet* (New York: Sterling, 2010). The quotations are from the most recent version of *A Study in Scarlet*, published in 2010.

9. See Michael W. Homer, *On the Way to Somewhere Else* (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2006).

10. “Tex Striscia,” *Serie Gialla* #5 (gennaio 1955).

11. “Tex Striscia,” *Serie Gialla* #12 (marzo 1955).

12. *Tex* #276 (ottobre 1983); *Tex* #277 (novembre 1983).

13. *Tex Raccoltina* #149 (giugno 1968); *Tex* #15c/16 (maggio 1961); *Tex* #22b/23 (aprile 1962); *Tex* #65/66 (marzo 1966).

14. Mormon characters have also been depicted in other popular Italian comics including, *La Grande Missione-fotoromanzo Completo* #10 (10 maggio 1955); *Captain Miki* #177 (14 novembre 1965); *Storia del West* #31 (dicembre 1969); “Il Mormone Rapito,” *Jesus* #3 (maggio 1976), GEIS Gruppo Editoriale; *Skorpio* (anno III No. 44, 8 novembre 1979); and *Lancio Story* (anno VI No. 45, 17 novembre 1980).

French language comic artists have also represented Mormons in their nineteenth-century western setting. Belgian artist Morris (Maurice de Bevère) drew an image of Brigham Young in “Le Fil Qui Chante,” *Lucky Luke* #46 (1977), based on a script by René Goscinny, and Italian artist Paolo Eleuteri-Serpieri drew “L’èpopée des Mormons,” *Histoire du Far-West* #26 (1980), based on a script by Frank Giroux.

15. See Massimo Introvigne, “Smash! Superman contro il Papa,” *30 Giorni VIII*: 12 (dicembre 1990), 28–31.

16. Doug Moench (w), Herb Trimpe (a), *Godzilla* #13 (August 1978), Marvel Comics.

17. Alfredo Castelli (w), *Martin Mystère Extra* #22 (luglio–dicembre 2001).

18. George Gladir (w) and Stan Goldberg (a), *Archie* No. 570 (December 2006), Archie Comic Publications, Inc.

19. Will Shetterly (w), Vince Stone (a), *Captain Confederacy* #1–4 (Nov. 1991–Feb. 1992), Epic Comics.

20. *Spider Man: The Lost Years*, #1, 2, 3, (1995) Marvel Comics.

21. *She-Hulk*, vol. 3, #1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12 (2004–2005), Marvel Comics.

22. See for example, *Battlestar Galactica*, #1–5, published by Marvel between 1978 to 1980, based on Mormon writer Glen Larsen’s television scripts; Mormon science fiction writer Orson Scott Card’s *Red Prophet, Tales of Alvin Maker* published by Marvel in 2007; and *Twilight: The Graphic Novel Volume 1*, published in 2010 and based on LDS writer Stephenie Meyer’s best-selling novel.



Archie and the gang visit the Salt Lake City Library where they meet real-life library director Nancy Tessman and Mimi Cruz of NightFlight Comics.