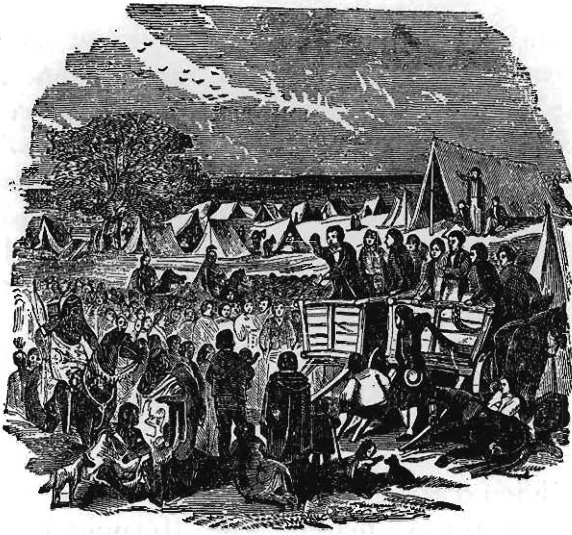


P.A.M. Taylor, "The Life of Brigham Young: A Biography Which Will Not Be Written."
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BRIGHAM YOUNG PREACHING IN THE WILDERNESS.

THE LIFE OF BRIGHAM YOUNG

A BIOGRAPHY
WHICH WILL
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WRITTEN

by P.A.M. Taylor

On Sunday morning, October 5, 1856, Brigham Young stood before thousands of Mormons in Salt Lake City, to open the semi-annual conference of the Church. During the morning he spoke twice. His very first words were these:

I will now give this people the subject and text for the Elders who may speak today and during the conference. It is this. Many of our brethren and sisters are on the plains, with handcarts, and probably many are now seven hundred miles from this place, and they must be brought here, we must send assistance to them. The text will be "To get them here." I want the brethren who may speak to understand that their text is the people on the plains. And the subject matter for this community is to send for them and bring them in before winter sets in. That is my religion; that is the dictation of the Holy Spirit that I possess. It is to save the people. This is the salvation I am now seeking for.

He called on the bishops to find sixty teams, twelve or fifteen wagons, forty teamsters, and twelve tons of flour. "They are in this Territory, and we must have them." He then repeated the demand, prefacing the list by saying, "This is dividing my text into heads." Later in the morning Young appealed to women to bring clothing, shoes, and blankets. He called for names, at once, of people ready to start the next day. On Monday Young reopened the business. Not only were names received of people willing to go or to contribute supplies and equipment, but Heber C. Kimball, First Counselor to the President, called out all blacksmiths from the assembly to work on the horses and wagons of the first relief party.¹

Twenty-seven young men, with sixteen four-mule teams, set out on the morning of the seventh. By the end of the month, some 250 teams were on the trail. No doubt some early supplies could come from the Salt Lake City Tithing Office. Very soon, however, smaller communities joined in, and voluntary contributions were made. Provo raised its first quota, of a ton of flour and two mule teams, in contributions from forty-eight people. Three weeks later, when called on again, ninety-six people volunteered — one a horse, one a wagon, some no more than small quantities of produce.² Teams went more than a hundred miles east of South Pass, where they rescued hundreds of immigrants of the last two handcart companies.

The episode tells us much about Brigham Young and much about the Mormon Church. The President was accustomed to act decisively. He gave his religion a strongly practical tone. He translated principles rapidly into precise detail. The Mormon people responded, for the most part, with obedience and loyalty; again and again they abandoned comfort and security when counselled that their church required it of them.

Although many other episodes might have been chosen, to throw yet more light on Brigham Young, it must be admitted that we know far too little about him. On Joseph Smith we possess, recently reprinted, Mrs. Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, which, however distasteful to some Mormons, is a work of serious scholarship, accurate in its research, skilful in its organization, and, to readers outside the Church, giving an impression of considerable sympathy towards Smith. Against this can be set nothing better than Preston Nibley's full and attractive, but wholly uncritical, biography of thirty years ago and Morris Werner's popular, somewhat hostile, and badly balanced account of ten years earlier still. For anything more, we have to search monographs and records; and when we have done so, we shall remain dissatisfied.

The events of Brigham Young's early life, it is true, are easy to discover. Born in 1801 in Vermont, migrating with his parents to western New York, a building-worker by trade and a dissatisfied Methodist by religion, he became a Mormon in 1832, two years after the Church's foundation and almost as long after he had first heard its message. He was a member of Zion's Camp, the abortive expedition launched in 1834 to succor the Saints in Missouri; and,

¹ LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion, 1856-1860* (Glendale, Calif., 1960), pp. 120-3, based on contemporary accounts in the *Deseret News*.

² Provo Historical Record, Minutes of General Meetings (in the Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City), October 6, 29, 1856. See also, in the same archives, Journal History of the Church, October 4, 7, 9, and November 9, 1856.

like others of its leading members, he was named in 1835 to the new, and highest, quorum, the Twelve. With Smith, he left Ohio in 1837. By the time the Mormons left Missouri for Nauvoo, Illinois, in the winter of 1838-1839, he was President of the Twelve. In 1840 and 1841 he was a missionary in Britain, and on his return journey he presided over one of the first emigrant companies of British converts. When Smith was murdered in 1844, Young and a majority of the Twelve established their control over the Church, led its members across Iowa a year and a half later, and planned the move to the Great Basin. In the spring of 1847, Young led the pioneer group which founded Salt Lake City in July. Returning to the Missouri River, he was recognized in Winter Quarters, at Christmas, as President and Prophet. He led one of the companies of the 1848 migration, then remained in Utah until his death in 1877.

Something of his appearance, manner, and tastes can be found in photographs and in words. Reading Sir Richard Burton's and other visitors' descriptions, we see a sober, tough, shrewd man. He dressed often in homespun. He had no wide literary culture; when he went to the theatre, he liked such plays "as will make the spectators feel well" rather than the melodramas which would cause "the child to carry home with it the fear of the faggot, the sword, the pistol, or the dagger, and suffer in the night from frightful dreams." On all the affairs with which he had to deal, however, he was well briefed.⁸

We can readily discover what he taught. From the time when he became President of the Church, Young issued not a single printed revelation to supplement the more than 130 of Smith's. The implication is, and was doubtless meant to be, that he accepted the entire body of doctrine as it stood in 1844 and added nothing. In a formal intellectual sense, this is true. As his hundreds of sermons show, Young was sure that the Mormon Church was the restored Church of the Apostles; that its Priesthood and ordinances were valid; that its duty was to preach throughout the world and to bring converts to Utah, where they would be guided by the Church's leaders towards building the Kingdom of God. He was sure that the perfect society which he and his associates were building would become the headquarters of the millennial order. That being so, all work done, great or small, was of value as contributing to the Kingdom. Equally, with that goal in view, all motives of personal gain or family convenience had to be subordinated to the higher purpose. The Church,

⁸ Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints* (London, 1861), esp. pp. 291-2; see also William H. Dixon, *New America* (2 vols., London, 1867), I, 205. *Journal of Discourses* (26 vols., Liverpool, 1854-86), IX, 245.

too, had a duty towards people already dead. By identifying them and performing the correct ordinances on their behalf, all or almost all of them could be saved. Brigham Young preached all this, together with the associated features of tithing, patriarchal marriage, and the need for training and discipline.

Not only did he preach the characteristic Mormon doctrines, again and again he stressed his devotion to Joseph Smith. He rejoiced in his own entry into the Church. He ascribed to Smith all the fundamental thinking in Mormonism. He defined Smith's place as holder of the keys of salvation and as a strenuous worker, since his death, in the world of spirits.⁴

President Young's circumstances, however, were different from Smith's. The Mormons, indeed, were the same people, or their children, or foreigners they had converted. But the mountains and deserts of Utah, even the narrow strip of irrigable farm land, were very different from the Missouri prairies or the banks of America's greatest river. Then the Church had been at close quarters with its persecutors. Now the same persecutors, or others yet more powerful, were hundreds of miles distant. Although isolation imposed problems and hardships of its own, it gave quite new opportunities for building a united society under Church control.

Young, too, was a different man. His mind found congenial the massive practical tasks of a growing community in the arid West and of a widespread immigration and colonization system. While, from time to time, he talked of worlds to come, of the sacred ordinances, and of the nature of God, he was most at ease when expounding the doctrines of the Kingdom and of mission, not with any definitions theologically original, but with a new emphasis. In a sermon preached near the end of his life, he said:

I have looked upon the community of the Latter-day Saints in vision and beheld them organized as one great family of heaven, each person performing his several duties in his line of industry, working for the good of the whole more than for individual aggrandisement; and in this I beheld the most beautiful order that the mind of man can contemplate, and the greatest results for the upbuilding of the kingdom of God and the spread of righteousness upon the earth.⁵

Not surprisingly, while accepting all the other-worldly doctrines of Mormonism, Young attacked those who emphasized them unduly:

Elders may preach long discourses concerning what took place in the days of Adam, what occurred before the creation, or what will take place thousands of years from now, talking of things . . . of which

⁴ *Journal of Discourses*, III, 51, 266, 308-9, 320, 371-2; IV, 285.

⁵ *Journal of Discourses*, XII, 153.

they are ignorant, feeding the people on wind; but that is not my method of teaching. My desire is to teach the people what they should do now, and let the Millennium take care of itself.⁶

His emphasis was all upon the Kingdom and its tasks, upon the life-long mission in which all the faithful were engaged. That mission might involve preaching overseas, leading a company of emigrants, founding a settlement, building an industry, helping the poor, or bringing up children. Each task had value; each task must be done under counsel; each enterprise must have its president; and every task must be done with a sense of subordination to God's will as expounded by His Church:

We are not our own, we are bought with a price, we are the Lord's; our time, our talents, our gold and silver, our wheat and fine flour, our wine and our oil, and all that there is on the earth that we have in our possession is the Lord's.⁷

We know Young's achievement in the Far West: the exploration of the habitable areas of Utah which he directed; the skilful use of the economic opportunities created by gold rushes; the warding-off of gentile threats in 1857-1858; the absorption of tens of thousands of British, Scandinavian, and other immigrants; and the founding of more than three hundred settlements. We know where he failed, as in the development of industry in Utah, or the complete containing of the economic and social effects of the end of isolation, which resulted from the coming of the railroad. We shall probably be willing to admit that, given all the circumstances, his successes far outweighed his failures.

Finally, we know a great deal about the style of Brigham Young's leadership. Although, in a community with so small a population, he could know personally most officers of the Church, he made great efforts, also, to gain close contact with the rank-and-file. Amid the hardships of life in the Great Basin and the sacrifices so often demanded by the Church, loyalty needed stimulation, even though Young was commanding volunteers, many of whom had already survived many temptations to desert. The printing of those leaders' diaries demonstrated that even the greatest Mormons had had their trials. Exchange of news between Utah and the missions showed how, in their several duties, the Saints throughout the world stood as one. Each July Pioneer Day celebrations were held at Salt Lake City and in many smaller places. By speeches, toasts, processions, and the use of simple symbols, they recalled the founding of Utah,

⁶ *Journal of Discourses*, XII, 228.

⁷ *Journal of Discourses*, XIV, 88.

persecutions suffered, and blessings received. Twice a year thousands came to Salt Lake City for the Church's conferences, at which Young and his associates expounded doctrine, laid down policy, called for volunteers, dealt out criticism, but also received approval, fostered loyalty, and impressed themselves upon their audience. Frequently the President toured the settlements, giving, in one and the same sermon, theological teaching and detailed advice on practical affairs. In his later years, wintering in the south of Utah, he was able to visit, every year, a long line of villages.⁸

One further incentive to loyalty lay near the heart of his practice as leader. Smith had taught that the Church was destined to survive the destruction of all the kingdoms of this world. In the short run, however, the Church was assailed by enemies, from the mobs which tarred and feathered Mormons in Missouri in 1833, or murdered and raped there five years later, to the soldiers sent to Utah by the Federal government in 1857 or the 1860's. Consciousness of this persecution was fostered with the most elaborate care. Records of the early days were printed in Church periodicals. Sermons reiterated the theme. In their own homes, parents told children the sufferings of the past. The wrongs of former days, however, the present contrast between Zion and Babylon, and the expectation of future conflict did not make up the whole of Mormon teaching. The assurance of triumph was also preached: God, who had already done so much for His Saints by removing them to the valleys of Utah, would in the end crown their labours and bring their enemies under their feet.⁹

It is with all this in mind that we should approach the ugly strain of violence in early Mormon history. Because their Church was held to possess full apostolic authority, reinforced by continuous revelation, the Saints were always likely to be intolerant towards dissent. Because their Prophet had been murdered, they were exceptionally sensitive to all threats of outside attack. Again and again they spoke of revenge, whether to be meted out by the Lord or executed by

⁸ Further detail may be found in my article, "Early Mormon Loyalty and the Leadership of Brigham Young," *Historical Quarterly*, XXX (1962), 103-132.

⁹ The themes of persecution and vengeance are important enough to warrant separate documentation. See, therefore, the speech of Sidney Rigdon at Nauvoo, in the *Times and Seasons*, II (April 15, 1841), 382; speeches at the ceremony of laying the Salt Lake Temple cornerstone in 1853, *Journal of Discourses*, II, 29-31; the speech of George A. Smith reported in Robert G. Cleland and Juanita Brooks, eds., *A Mormon Chronicle: The Diaries of John D. Lee, 1848-1876* (2 vols., San Marino, Calif., 1955), I, 264; family scenes in the *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (1950 edition, Salt Lake City), p. 362, and *A Mormon Chronicle*, I, 239; the remarks of Joseph A. Stout, quoted in Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (1962 edition, Norman, Okla.), p. 55 note; and the words of a patriarchal blessing in "Journal of Leonard E. Harrington," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, VIII (1940), 23.

themselves. Brigham Young and his associates molded these feelings to their own purposes, though certainly they did not need to create them. In private, wrongdoers were threatened with dire punishment. In public, the leaders freely cursed their enemies. Again and again, Young himself spoke of justice being laid to the line and righteousness to the plummet, or of sending enemies to hell across lots. On such occasions, the words were addressed as much to the entire Mormon people as to particular offenders. As was shown, for example, in 1853, when a huge audience yelled approval of his denunciation of the Gladdenites, Young was using violent words both to demonstrate his own decisiveness and to win a popular response.¹⁰

Violent deeds, of course, did occur in Utah, whether against schismatic Morrisites or the outsiders at Mountain Meadows. Beyond these open events lie sinister hints of violence on a smaller scale. John D. Lee records in his diary for 1849 a discussion in the Council of Fifty. It was agreed that a certain Ira E. West deserved execution. "But to dispose of him privately would be most practicable, and would result in the greatest good. The people would know that he was gone, in some strange manner, and . . . fear would take hold of them and they would tremble for fear it would be their time next."¹¹ Actually, of course, nothing of the kind happened to West. And it is clear that, considering his opportunities and his power, Brigham Young resorted to force less often, not more often, than one might expect. Looking at the scanty and mysterious evidence, however, I cannot resist the conclusion that, in promoting the solidarity of the Saints, the President, with his usual shrewdness, saw, and valued, the marginal effectiveness of his reputation as a dispenser of summary justice.

There is much, however, about Brigham Young that we do not know, and much that we may never know.

He appears before us always as a public man. Very little of his inner personality can be seen. We can only guess that by temperament he was unreflective, that he was satisfied with his official role. We know far more about such a lesser Mormon as John D. Lee, with his strange and convenient dreams, his obstinacy and quarrelling, his toughness and loyalty, his bitterness when abandoned by the Church to which he had given so much of his life. Lee we know from a voluminous diary, Young only from official pronouncements;

¹⁰ *Journal of Discourses*, I, 83; III, 226 is an example of an address delivered during the "Reformation" of 1856.

¹¹ *A Mormon Chronicle*, I, 98-9 (I have corrected the spelling); the previous entry, p. 98, has a more general definition of the justice to be meted out to sinners.

such of his early journal as is printed, in serial form during the 1860's in the British Mission's *Millennial Star*, is purely factual.

Even as President of the Church, moreover, much about Young is hidden from us. We know how decisions were announced, in print or verbally at conferences; how they were elaborated in successive sermons; how they were ratified by the raised hands of the congregation. We know how they were translated into working detail, downward through the Church, as when, in the 1860's, the year's quota for Church teams to help the migration was handed down from Presiding Bishop to Stake Presidency, from Stake Presidency to Bishop, to be made up, at the ward level, by a mixture of volunteering and social pressure among the Saints.¹² We know very little of how the original decisions were taken. In principle, the ruling groups had to be unanimous, but how was such unanimity achieved, and what did unanimity mean when there was present so forceful a leader as Brigham Young? Glimpses, but no more, may be found in Lee's diaries; and perhaps I should understand somewhat more if I had read the diaries of Hosea Stout and Wilford Woodruff. I am sure, however, that the problem goes far beyond the simple failure of one scholar to read the right records at the right time.

In searching for Brigham Young, we have at our disposal his collected addresses, printed as *Journal of Discourses*; the reports of early events in Utah, in the pages of *Deseret News*; and files of Church periodicals, the thoroughness of whose detail may be gauged from the fact that, in many years, the *Millennial Star* ran to more than 800 pages, double column, of small print. These are of great value. Anyone who can visit Salt Lake City finds further resources. For the Church as a whole, for each Stake in Utah, and for each Mission, there have been built up, since the late nineteenth century, collections of typed transcripts of documents, supplemented by newspaper cuttings. In these big volumes, for example, one can read the journals of emigrant companies or the records of the founding of new settlements or new economic enterprises. Yet, for two reasons, these resources are less valuable than they seem.

Both in the Church Historian's Office and in the London headquarters, the student finds a large measure of cooperation. Not only was I allowed, in London, to consult any item on the shelves, I often had a whole room placed at my disposal, while on one occasion five

¹² On this see my *Expectations Westward: The Mormons and the Emigration of their British Converts in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1965), pp. 140-2, which gives full references.

stalwart young missionaries manhandled bookcases to afford me access to their contents. In the Church Historian's Office, much the same freedom of reading was given me. There, however, a subtle change of atmosphere could be detected. A senior official insisted on checking all transcripts. From time to time, I was requested to omit a proper name from my notes. Working as I was on immigration and colonization, I found these very small annoyances when set against the magnitude of the help I received. Yet they were symptoms of an attitude which needs to be defined and criticized. Another symptom is the lamentable proposal, of which I heard three years ago, to transfer to Utah the immensely valuable library in the London office, which contains, among many other items, the only complete files in Britain of the *Millennial Star* and the *Times and Seasons*. This Mormon attitude, I presume, is that the documents record the Lord's dealings with His Church; they are not raw material for independent research into mundane phenomena. The records, therefore, are not so much to be used as preserved.

The second impediment is more important though less obvious. The Journal History of the Church, and the equivalent compilations on stakes and missions, form, as it were, a screen erected in front of the original documents. In my own subject, whenever I have been able to compare this material with non-Mormon records, or against private diaries of Mormons outside the Church archives, I have been impressed by its accuracy. No one, however, can be sure that everything has been transcribed. What is hidden may do no more than corroborate what is on the shelves. It may, however, contain such items as full records of the proceedings of the Council of Fifty, most important and most mysterious of Mormon institutions. John D. Lee tells us, in an entry for February, 1849, that a group of Mormons asked permission to go to California to earn money at the mines. Brigham Young expressed himself freely on the project. "Gold was the root of all evil." Robert Crow, who presented the petition, was being led by his family, whom Young described as "rebellious, wicked, stubborn." He went on: "If they want to go to the gold mines, let them go, and he shall have fourfold and as many children as Job and as handsome ones. . . . Nine-tenths of those that went off for gold would go down to hell, and by and by those very characters would lead mobs . . . as some did in Missouri." Lee's report concludes: "The spirit of God bore record to the things spoken. Robert Crow wept like a child and said that he would obey council, and retired."¹⁸

¹⁸ *A Mormon Chronicle*, I, 95 (spelling again corrected).

How valuable would be the complete records, for the light they would shed on Mormon decisions and Mormon attitudes! As things are, no one can be sure what has been concealed, nor for what reasons. Harmless in the research upon which I was engaged in the early 1950's, this would be a crippling handicap to anyone engaged in an attempt to understand how the highest decisions were taken, or the part played in the Church's government by Brigham Young.

People in closer touch with the Mormon Church than I have suggested to me that policy may be relaxed, at any rate as soon as a new generation replaces the present venerable high command. I doubt this, for in the Church Historian's Office are shelves full of hostile literature, which few Mormons read but of whose existence they are conscious and which they expect to be added to in the future. They are bound to feel, therefore, that no undue encouragement should be given to scholars whose motives must be suspect. Yet I hope that I am wrong. I am sure that secrecy does more harm to the Church's reputation than could result from any disclosures from the archives; and this is no mere generalization about human nature. Mormon history has already been largely re-written in my lifetime. Scholars are no longer obsessed by the question of the validity of Mormon theology or the authenticity of Joseph Smith's claims. They are far more willing than half a century ago to accept Mormonism as one historical faith among others and to study its effects. They can give full value to the Mormon achievement in the West. They can feel sympathy for the Saints' hardships, perhaps even for their endless rehearsing of them.¹⁴ The Church, therefore, has little to fear from a change of policy, from a freeing of the archives which might result in the exposure of a few discreditable episodes which occurred in a context a century old. What institution, after all, can claim innocence for every detail of its past record? Even the British government has announced that its documents will henceforth be closed to scholars only for the past thirty, and not, as previously, the past fifty years.

A liberal policy, if it is ever adopted, will benefit others, not myself, for I have already written my book about the Mormons. If the unlikely event of freer access to important documents leads to the writing of a satisfactory life of Brigham Young, I shall not have written it.

¹⁴ For a full treatment of these changes of approach, I refer readers to my article, "Recent Writing on Utah and the Mormons," *Arizona and the West*, IV (1962), 249-60, which is reprinted from the *Bulletin* of the British Association for American Studies, November 1959.