

Notes and Comments

Edited by Joseph H. Jeppson

Our first note is an address delivered to the General Authorities of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints by Professor Robert Flanders of the same church as the second in a series of "Joint Council Seminars." Most of our L.D.S. history crowd know Bob because he visits with us from time to time, and belongs to our history club. Anyway, here is Bob, telling the R.L.D.S. Council of Presidency, Twelve, and Presiding Bishopric that the history lessons which that church has been teaching need some revision. For instance, he points out, temples were important in the Church before Joseph Smith died, and did not originate in Utah; Professor Flanders's giving of this speech indicates not only that he is courageous, but also that the Authorities to whom he spoke were remarkably open-minded.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE KINGDOM AND THE GATHERING IN EARLY MORMON HISTORY

Robert Flanders

Joseph Smith conceived the social and economic plans for the society of Gathered Saints in the "communitarian" terms common in America in his generation. The extent to which Smith and other Mormons may have been specifically influenced by any particular social philosophy — Owenism, Fourierism, Shakerism, the German Pietist communities — is uncertain. The answer may result from careful studies — yet to be made — of the morphology of Mormon thought. Certainly Smith need not have read tracts or listened to lectures of the great propagandists of Christian associationism or communism to know about them. Communitarianism was in the air, a part of the culture of the time and place, exciting causes among a people excited by causes. Smith's central vision seems, originally at least — and perhaps always — essentially spiritual rather than narrowly social and institutional: religiously oriented rather than community or church oriented. It is easy for us to forget

what we might like to forget — that the *temple* was the most important building in Nauvoo, as it was in Kirtland, and was to have been in Independence, Far West, and other proposed centers. To say this is to say that a specific “plan” for Mormon communities — so dear to the hearts of Saints then and still — was secondary in the beginning and thereafter subject to shifting circumstances. When compared with the plans for an Owenite community or a Fourierist Phalanx, for example, the plan for Zion seems general and flexible indeed. But for Latter-day Saints who tend to see the movement as following the plan of God and obeying the words of God quite literally, this has been and still is difficult to understand. (Leonard Arrington’s *Great Basin Kingdom*, which describes so well and so sympathetically the pragmatism, the trials and errors, of kingdom building in the West, is, a decade after its publication, still unknown and perhaps unknowable to the vast majority of Mormons.)

On the basis of very general observation, it may be concluded that while Mormon kingdom building in the 1830’s and ’40’s shared much in common with other communitarian ventures, it also was distinctive — even unique — as a social movement. The extent to which Mormonism was unique as a *religion* is a related but separate question, outside the purview of my discussion.

The purposes of the Gathering of the Saints were to achieve certain spiritual and fraternal benefits, to work out one’s salvation, so to speak, in this life. That Smith saw the Gathering as the fulfillment of the divine will upon a specific stage of time and place in history, should not imply, however, that he intended the Gathering as the achievement of a preconceived and fixed pattern of social, political, or economic organization. Reading the documents of early Mormon history on the face of it suggests exactly the contrary. God had a pattern, God revealed the pattern through the words of the Prophet’s revelations and *ex cathedra* leadership, the Saints built upon the pattern, and when something went wrong — as much did — it was evidence of failure to be faithful to the pattern. As one elder put it after the terrible Far West persecutions, “It might be in consequence of not building according to the pattern, that we had been thus scattered” (Flanders, *Nauvoo*, p. 25).

This tendency of the Saints apparently to seek plans to follow rather than purposes to pursue reflected their theological poverty, the overawing charisma of the Prophet, and their scripture literalism. Both Smith and Young struggled desultorily with the problems created by the trap of revealed leadership doctrine. When a “Thus saith the Lord,” as Smith himself termed his *ex cathedra* pronouncements, got the Saints into trouble, or was forcibly resisted by the brethren, what then? The revealed leadership doctrine is an important subject for Mormon religious history, one facet of which De Pillis has explored in his article (*Dialogue*, Spring, 1966). But the point here is that, although most of the Saints could not reconcile the dilemma in their own minds and hearts, an immutable *doctrine* or *dogma* for social organization simply did not exist. There were many plans, but no one “Plan.”

The doctrine of the Gathering and of the Kingdom were religious principles and imperatives for personal and group salvation, both in this life and

the life to come. They were specifics of the new canon law and prophetic fulfillment of the canon law. In practice, however, due to the burgeoning number of converts, these doctrines resulted in unforeseen and critical demands upon the church institution that strained and even distorted the original conceptions which had been at best simplistic and generalized. (This is one reason for many of the "apostasies" by the literal minded, to whom any adjustments to meet new situations simply meant changing the doctrine, and that implied a fallen prophet).

The actual socio-politico-economic processes that resulted when thousands were gathered suddenly to the new settlements at Kirtland, Independence, Far West, Nauvoo, and finally the Great Basin settlements evidenced a highly pragmatic response on the part of church leaders to a set of rapidly changing situations. Joseph Smith may not have been as pragmatic, say, as John Humphrey Noyes in analogous situations; but then Noyes had neither the advantages nor the disadvantages of being a prophet. Not only was it difficult for the leadership to control and satisfactorily mold the dynamics of the new Mormon group life itself, it was more difficult to counter the persecutions from outside that ripped at the fabric of group life. But Smith (and to a lesser extent Young after him) could not admit that he was experimenting, improvising, learning from experience. The certainty of the Saints that the Prophet not only knew what he was doing, but was implementing the Divine Plan, was at once perhaps the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of the movement. Seen within this frame of reference, the successive crises in Mormon history offer important insights into the unfolding phenomenon of Mormon communitarianism. Independence led to Far West; Far West led to Nauvoo; and Nauvoo led to a great many surprising things.

It will be difficult to assess the degree to which Mormon communities succeeded in bringing to fruition the spiritual and fraternal goals which underlay their founding, because they did not survive their very beginnings, really. They fell before not only vicious persecution, but also internal social, economic, and religious problems.

Latter-day Saints have scarcely been willing to admit the evanescence of the early Zionite towns and the possibility that they really may have failed to achieve anything significant, if judged by their own criteria. To put it perhaps less harshly, was the achievement worth the costs? Non-Mormons have of course tended to ignore the early community experiences in favor of the more permanent and more dramatic Kingdom in the Far West. But De Pillis is right: the early experiences are central to understanding, and if the critical experiences of the founding were frustrations, defeats, disasters, reactions, apostasies — then these need to be analyzed. We assume that the connections between Mormonism as a religion and Mormonism as a social movement were important to each other and that each influenced the other. The social movement suffered disaster, but the religion lived on. Even in Utah this separation may be said to have come to pass. The question that I believe engages us and most Latter-day Saints who today concern themselves with the history of the Kingdom is: to what extent is it legitimate for us to allow the shadow of the

early communitarian experiences to fall across our religion today? Many thoughtful people in both Latter-day Saint churches suspect a time for a re-evaluation of the Kingdom is here. Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom* perhaps was the opening gun in the fight for major reappraisal, and its influence already is very great in the scholarly community. Arrington portrays a kingdom which reflected strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, but which was above all susceptible to the frailties of men and the normal processes of history. It was perhaps more human than divine, more historical than apocalyptic. Klaus Hansen, reviewing my book, reflected upon the changing meaning of the Kingdom for modern Utah Mormons (*Dialogue*, Summer, 1966).



The Reorganization was in great measure an association of Saints who objected to many of the results of "kingdom building" as expressed in Nauvoo and developed and enlarged upon in Utah. Obvious objections were to "Political Mormonism," confining the "Kingdom" and "Gathering" doctrines within narrowly communitarian terms, the centralization within Presidency, Twelve and High Councils of authority over the affairs of church, community, and individuals (especially in economic matters), the relation of "Kingdom Building" directly to Temple Building, and relating salvation to temple ordinances. The Reorganization was also an association of Saints with common religious convictions — on the subjects of priesthood succession and celestial marriage, for example. But my main interest here is the reaction against developments in "Kingdom Building." How could Brigham Young, closest man to the Prophet, President of the Twelve, the Lion of the Lord, and a particular hero to the Church, become anathema so quickly as he did after the death of Joseph Smith? How could men who had so recently been brothers see Young on the one hand as a devilish tyrant and on the other hand as a Saviour and the "true successor"? It is a question to ponder. Was Young a tyrant? It depends on one's attitude toward discipline in an emergency. If Young was a tyrant, so was Abraham Lincoln, though perhaps a more graceful one. It might be

argued that Young's discipline was scarcely strict enough to preserve corporate Mormonism from destruction. Young preserved and built — with questionable success to be sure — the corporate Mormonism founded by Joseph Smith. The point I am making is that it is hard to understand the hatred of Young in the Reorganized Church on the face of his record alone. I suggest that he was a kind of scapegoat upon whom was heaped the accumulated and long-held fear and apprehension, doubt, and alienation that were unleashed in the hearts of many Saints by the death of the Prophet. The dilemma of these Saints who gravitated into the Reorganization, with regard to the doctrine of the Kingdom, was how to reject the Kingdom as it had actually been without rejecting its author. The solution — not consciously arrived at I am sure — was to think of the Kingdom, now moved to Utah, as spurious, and evil, authored by Young the usurper, not a continuation of Kingdom Building as begun by Smith, but a distinct and essential break with the "early" church. It is against this background that we can understand the origins of that extraordinary myth of the Reorganization that temple work began in Utah — all the more extraordinary because so many Reorganites had been in Nauvoo and knew better. Thus was "Kingdom Building" essentially rejected, a rejection that Joseph Smith III gently but firmly perpetuated. The way was then open for a romanticizing of the early church — a removal of the subject from the realm of history to that of faith assumption. The portion of the four volume church history (Smith & Smith, *History of the Reorganized Church*) covering the period through 1846 uses selected material to support these intellectual and psychological arrangements.

After all this is said (and more could well be said) the dissension of those who would not follow Brigham Young seems perhaps to have been more than the apparent sum of its parts. It is difficult to ascertain precisely what was at the heart of the schism in Mormonism and the rebellion against the kingdom. The matter was complex; perhaps there was no heart of the matter. But perhaps it had to do with a fundamental loss of freedom that was intolerable to people who were nineteenth-century Americans as well as Latter-day Saints. The necessity to surrender much of one's personal freedom to the Church was implicit at least from Independence to Nauvoo, and became quite explicit in Utah. A revulsion against the demands that collective life makes upon the individual was always a basic dilemma of communitarian groups, and in Mormonism the demands were, for many reasons, very heavy indeed.

One more observation in conclusion: the Reorganized Church, in rejecting the Kingdom but keeping the faith, substituted a new dilemma for the old one. How can one have the gospel of Restoration without a doctrine of the Kingdom and the Gathering? It is a dilemma not yet solved. Mormonism had been torn in two, with the Prophet now on one side and the Kingdom on the other.