

# *His Chastening Rod: Cholera Epidemics and the Mormons*

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IN THE SPRING OF 1826 cholera broke out in the delta area of the Ganges River in India and began to spread over the country. Within two years Asiatic Cholera ascended the river with its boatmen and passed over the northwest boundary of the Indian subcontinent. Within another year cholera crossed the deserts with the caravans and reached the Caspian Sea. By 1830 it stretched deep into Russia and the Near East.<sup>1</sup> While Joseph Smith and his followers were congregating in Kirtland, Ohio, some 50,000 Mohammedan pilgrims met at Mecca. Cholera was an uninvited guest and nearly half of the pilgrims fell victim to the disease. As they fled the holy city, the pilgrims carried the disease to their homelands around the Mediterranean Sea.

From the Caspian Sea the pestilence crossed by boat and caravan to the Black Sea where it ascended the Danube into southern and central Europe. Meanwhile, it spread through Russia along the rivers from the Black and Caspian Seas and traveled along roads and trails to the Baltic Sea. Cholera first appeared in England in October 1831 in the mining port town of Sunderland and then spread across England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. It reached Belfast and Dublin in time to catch the great wave of Irish emigrants to America in the spring of 1832.

While cholera swept the Old World, millennialists in America watched for harbingers of the awaited second advent of Jesus Christ. Cholera fit the description of one of the ominous pestilences of every kind that were to be

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poured out upon the whole world.<sup>2</sup> When reports of the spread of cholera in Europe and central Asia reached the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, they joined other millennialists in proclaiming the pestilence to be the wrath of God. The first issue of the Church's *Evening and Morning Star* (Independence, Missouri) in June 1832 devoted more than a third of a page to "The Cholera Morbus." Editor William W. Phelps wrote:

It is with no ordinary feelings that we select an item or two, in relation to the Cholera Morbus. Its ravages, for the past year, on the Eastern Continent, have been great, so that, if ever the pestilence walked in darkness, or destruction wasted at noon day, now is the time, but the Lord hath declared that it should be so before he came in his glory, and we have only to rely upon him for deliverance, when he sweeps the earth with the besom of destruction.<sup>3</sup>

The second issue of the *Star* reported the ruthless terror of God's wrath stating that "the Atlantic cities tremble at the distant destruction of this irreconcilable foe to health and happiness, but the only alternative is, Trust in God."<sup>4</sup> The article "Horrors of the Cholera Morbus" demonstrated that God was not a respecter of persons in punishing the wicked:

We have witnessed in our days the birth of a new pestilence, which, in the short space of fourteen years, has desolated the fairest portion of the globe, and swept off at least fifty millions of our race. It has mastered every variety of climate, surmounted every natural barrier, conquered every people. It has not, like the simoon blasted life, and then passed away; the cholera, like small-pox or plague, takes root in the soil which it has once possessed. The circumstances under which the individual is attacked are no less appalling than the history of the progress and mortality of the disease. In one man says an eye witness, the prostration of strength was so great that he could hardly move a limb, through he had been but fifteen minuits before in perfect health, and actively employed in his business of a gardener. A Lascar in the service of an officer was seized in the act of picking up his rice, previous to going out to cut grass close to his master's feet, and being unable to call for assistance, he was observed by an other person at a distance from him, picking up small stones and pitching them towards him, for the purpose of attracting his notice. This man died in an hour. It is no wonder that the approach of such a pestilence has struck the deepest terror into ever community.<sup>5</sup>

Phelps was undoubtedly unaware that cholera had already reached North America. Even before ice was cleared from the St. Lawrence River in the spring of 1832, immigrant-laden ships arrived at Gross Isle, the seaport for Quebec and Montreal. Within three months after the 1 May opening for navigation, the St. Lawrence River brought nearly 45,000 persons to Gross Isle and Quebec. The first known cholera victim arrived in Canada in June, but there were undoubtedly many undetected cases before then.<sup>6</sup>

By mid-June cholera appeared at Plattsburg, New York and at nearly every town on the waterway from the St. Lawrence to Albany, New York. The disease quickly spread along the waterways to New York City—though

it may have been there sooner because of incoming ocean shipping—and traveled westward on the Erie Canal to Buffalo.

Meanwhile, war broke out with the Indians. Warring tribes met troops from the east who had moved through New York City and Albany and were loaded on boats at Buffalo. After much sickness and death among its passengers, the transport *Henry Clay* made an emergency stop at Cleveland. Six of her crew had cholera and one of them died.<sup>7</sup> The sick were left behind to unknowingly infect Cleveland while the boat returned to Buffalo for a thorough cleaning. From Cleveland cholera followed the waterways and portages across Ohio to Cincinnati and then traveled up and down the Ohio River. Another troop transport docked at Chicago with sick and dying soldiers on board. After what was thought to be an adequate quarantine period, the troops left for Fort Armstrong on Rock Island in the Mississippi River. On 26 August, without warning, the scourge violently broke out at the fort. While escorting captured warrior chiefs to St. Louis, nine Fort Armstrong guards died of cholera.<sup>8</sup>

The front page of the *August Star* featured a brief article announcing cholera's forays into North America:

This desolating sickness is spreading over the United States. The account of its ravages, in many places, we cannot give: The whole number of cases in New York, to July 31, is—3731. Deaths—1520.

No man can stop the work of the Lord, for God rules the pestilence, and the pestilence rules man. Oceans, sentinels, and forts, may hinder man, or money may bribe, but when the pestilence rides on the wings of the wind, the ocean is not barrier; the sentinel has no power; the fort is no obstacle, and money has no value; the destroying angel goes, waving the banner of death over all; and who shall escape his pointed arrow? Not he that could brave death at the cannon's mouth, but shrink at the sound of the cholera; not he that worshipped his god in some stately chapel, every sabbath till the cholera comes, and then flees for his life; no; none but him that trusts in God, shall be able to stand when a thousand shall fall at his side, and ten thousand at his right hand, by the noisome pestilence.<sup>9</sup>

The front page of the next issue continued the same theme:

Not since the flood, if we think right, has the Lord sent the same pestilence, or destruction, over the whole earth at once: But the Cholera, which has swept its thousands in Asia, Africa, Europe and America, gives a solemn token to a wondering world, that it will do so. Let the reader remember that all flesh is grass, but, that amidst all the judgments of the Lord, the righteous have never been forsaken. The spread of the Cholera, may be likened unto the ripple or wave, formed by casting a stone into a pond of water: ring follows ring till they meet the shore: It is said to be in nearly all the eastern cities. Well has Iah said, When the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.—From the time that it goeth forth it shall take you: for morning by morning shall it pass over, by day and by night: it shall be a vexation only to understand the report.<sup>10</sup>

Latter-day Saints subscribed to the popular belief that plagues, especially cholera, were a consequence of sin. Phelps quoted the *Baltimore Gazette*: "The prevalence of plague . . . has always been marked by licentiousness and depravity." Men had infringed upon the laws of God, and cholera was an inevitable and inescapable judgment.<sup>11</sup> Even the governor of New York proclaimed that "an infinitely wise and just God has seen fit to employ pestilence as one means of scourging the human race for their sins, and it seems an appropriate one for the sins of uncleanness and intemperance. . . ."<sup>12</sup> The Lord even punished those who refused baptism. Brother Algernon Sidney Gilbert, keeper of the Lord's store in Independence, received word that his brother died of cholera in St. Louis. He had refused to join the Church. Whenever a God-fearing stalwart died, it caused consternation among the faithful, a consternation invariably allayed by reports that this usually praiseworthy man either harbored some secret vice or had indulged in some unwonted excess. To die of cholera was to die in suspicious circumstances.

Besides demonstrating the power of the Lord and the futility of earthly values, cholera was widely held to have another function—to promote the cause of righteousness by sweeping away the "obdurate and incorrigible" and "to drain off the filth and scum which contaminate and defile human society."<sup>13</sup> The Latter-day Saints fervently agreed. This was truly a "sign of the times" heralding the last days.

Cholera was terrifyingly unpredictable. It ravaged some towns in a progressive sweep yet entirely skipped or inflicted only a few in others. Health authorities tried to quarantine cholera cases but the vagaries of its epidemic pattern eluded attempts to arrest its spread. Apparently no one thought to boil water to kill the disease. Instead, doctors theorized that cholera was spread by the *miasmas* of bad air and prescribed higher altitudes with plenty of cross breezes. But cholera struck there too.

The cause of Asiatic Cholera was totally unknown. Nor was it known that cholera was caused by accidental ingestion of bacteria spread by hands contaminated by feces, diarrheal "rice water," vomitus, or by contamination of drinking water. The bacteria itself is surprisingly benign, requiring massive ingestion to cause illness. Some individuals do not get the disease because of high stomach acid concentration which kills the bacteria. In the first pandemic the vast majority of the victims of the disease did not even realize they had it; most had only mild diarrhea. They were the unknowing carriers who infected others and contaminated water supplies. The diagnosed cholera victims were but a small fraction of the number who actually had cholera.

Since the cause was not known, doctors knew no effective treatment for cholera. Many of the doctors of the heroic school of practice adapted the apparently successful treatment of Dr. Benjamin Rush for yellow fever—after all, both diseases were caused by *miasmas*. The treatment called for cleaning out the body by doses of calomel (mercurous chloride). A tablespoon dose was administered each hour until the patient got well or died. Also, the pressures within the body were reduced by bleeding the patient

until he fainted. Needless to say, the mortality rate for cholera patients treated in this manner was extremely high.

The advocates of botanic medicine treated their cholera patients with a dose of lobelia and bayberry to induce vomiting. This was followed by an enema to clean out the bowels, and then the patient was alternately steamed and chilled. If there was no noticeable improvement within a day, a new round of the same treatment was given. We now know that cholera kills because the severe dehydration caused by diarrhea upsets the fluid balance of the body. The botanic treatment tended to stem this dehydration and to replace some lost fluid. These patients were more likely to survive cholera and treatment. But neither method of treatment was very satisfactory. Both merely allowed the disease to run its course.

The Mormon settlements near Kirtland seem to have been relatively free from cholera during the 1832 pandemic despite their proximity to the cholera-infested pesthole of Cleveland.<sup>14</sup> Latter-day Saints in other parts of the world were not immune to the disease, but as a people, the Mormons seemed to be protected by God's hand in being spared much of the affliction.

### ZION'S CAMP

The expulsion of approximately 1,200 Mormon residents from Jackson County, Missouri prompted Joseph Smith to assemble as many male members of the Church as possible to march to Zion "for the purpose of carrying some supplies to the afflicted and persecuted Saints in Missouri, and to reinforce and strengthen them; and, if possible, to influence the Governor of the State to call out sufficient additional force to cooperate in restoring them to their rights."<sup>15</sup> In May 1833 Zion's Camp moved west to Missouri in two contingents, one from Ohio led by Joseph Smith and the other from Michigan led by his brother, Hyrum. By early June both groups arrived at the farm of James Allred on the Salt River in eastern Missouri. The Ohio contingent had earlier crossed the Mississippi River and camped about a mile from the town of Louisiana in a beautiful oak grove on the banks of the river. They undoubtedly drank the water from the river not knowing it was polluted with choleraic bacteria.

The Michigan contingent had crossed the Mississippi at Quincy, Illinois and marched southward through Palmyra, Missouri, a town of 700 to 1,000 people before cholera struck earlier that year. More than a tenth of the population had died of cholera within two weeks. In accounting for the severe attack of cholera in Palmyra, it was explained that "rain followed by hot weather at a time when there was much new plowed soil gave rise to the pestiferous *miasmata* which resulted in congestive fever and cholera."<sup>16</sup> Cholera was undoubtedly still present in Palmyra when the Mormons passed through.

The reunited expedition of 205 men, 10 women, and several children reached Richmond, Missouri on 19 June. They stopped for breakfast on a hill near a farm house. The farm's owner furnished the camp with a large quantity of milk, another good carrier of choleraic bacteria. This was the camp's third exposure to cholera. That night Joseph Hancock was stricken with

cholera. Three days later Ezra Thayer and Thomas Hayes were also stricken.

Before crossing the Mississippi, Joseph Smith warned the camp about incurring the Lord's wrath:

I got up on a wagon wheel, called the people together, and said that I would deliver a prophecy. After giving the brethren much good advice, exhorting them to faithfulness and humility, I said the Lord had revealed to me that a scourge would come upon the camp in consequence of the fractious and unruly spirits that appeared among them, and they should die like sheep with the rot; still, if they would repent and humble themselves before the Lord, the scourge, in great measure, might be turned away; but, as the Lord lives, the members of this camp will suffer for giving way to their unruly temper.<sup>17</sup>

On the night of 24 June cholera "was manifested in its most virulent form." "Our ears were saluted with cries and moanings, and lamentations on every hand; even those on guard fell to the earth with their guns in their hands, so sudden and powerful was the attack of this terrible disease." Elder John S. Carter was the first man to step forward to rebuke the disease, but upon doing so was instantly seized by the disease and became the first victim in the camp.<sup>18</sup>

Finding himself powerless to stay the course of the disease, Joseph Smith turned to the theme cited so frequently by Phelps. The prophet recorded in his history,

At the commencement, I attempted to lay on hands for their recovery, but I quickly learned by painful experience, that when the great Jehovah decrees destruction upon any people, and makes known his determination, man must not attempt to stay his hand. The moment I attempted to rebuke the disease I was attacked, and had I not desisted in my attempt to save the life of a brother, I would have sacrificed my own. The disease seized upon me like the talons of a hawk, and I said to the brethren: 'If my work were done, you would have to put me in the ground without a coffin.'<sup>19</sup>

Since neither coffins nor lumber to make them could be obtained, the bodies of the dead were rolled in blankets and taken to the banks of a small stream that emptied into Rush Creek. The dead were buried at night in an attempt to keep secret the number of their losses and the fact that cholera was in their camp. By burying the bodies in the creek bank they unknowingly insured the contamination of the creek.

On 25 June the camp separated into small bands and dispersed among the local Church members, spreading the disease among the members. The news of the Zion's Camp outbreak of cholera spread despite attempts to suppress it. Joseph Smith recorded an incident of a woman refusing to give him a drink of water because of her fear of acquiring cholera. But the woman and three others in the family died of cholera within a week.<sup>20</sup>

As the plague spread among the Mormons, new explanations were apparently felt necessary. Rather than plaguing only the wicked and unbaptized, cholera now struck Saints who were negligent in their Church respon-

sibilities. Joseph Smith had called Algernon Sidney Gilbert to preach the gospel, a task Gilbert greatly feared. Brother Gilbert allegedly had said he "would rather die than go forth to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles." He was granted his wish; he joined his brother shortly afterward as a victim of cholera.

In all, sixty-eight of Zion's Camp were stricken with cholera and thirteen died, including the prophet's cousin, Jesse J. Smith, and one woman, Betsy Parrish. Of the 205 men of the camp, 33% had recognizable cholera and 19% of those who had cholera died. Overall, Zion's Camp's death rate of just over 6% was low compared to mortality rates in other groups such as the residents of Palmyra, Missouri with a more than 10% mortality rate.<sup>21</sup>

### LATER PANDEMICS

The affliction of Zion's Camp came near the end of the 1832 cholera pandemic. By 1834 only isolated cases cropped up, but fifteen years later another pandemic crept up the Mississippi from New Orleans. In December 1848 emigrants from Germany, where cholera was raging, arrived in New Orleans. Within one month St. Louis suffered its first casualty. Of the 100 or more cholera victims in St. Louis in January, the majority were landed from river steamers from downstream.<sup>22</sup> By April 126 deaths were reported in St. Louis, including nine Mormons from Europe who were headed west on a river steamer.<sup>23</sup> Religionists were by now convinced that cholera was not necessarily a consequence of sin; the disease had demonstrated itself no respecter of persons. True, it was more prevalent among the lower socioeconomic class but by no means exclusively so.

By May St. Louis was in panic. On 9 June, 26 died; 37 died on the following day; and 402 deaths occurred in the week ending 17 June. The next week 636 died and 739 the following week; all this in a city of 63,471. At such a rate cholera would have killed every person in St. Louis within a few months, and this was a key city on the Mormon immigration route. By August the Mormon paper, the *Frontier Guardian* (Kanesville, Iowa), reported the welcomed decline in the St. Louis cholera death toll.

The *Guardian* recalled the attitude of the 1832 pandemic but with a subtle change:

Strange indeed is the course of Providence; yet it is all right. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without His notice. His chastening rod spreads terror and consternation wherever it falls; yet it is applied in mercy to the victims that fall under its strokes. The glorious end must be obtained though the means employed are sometimes severe.<sup>24</sup>

The *Guardian* of 1849 made no mention of cases in Kanesville; instead, it exulted, "We have great reason to be thankful that we have escaped here as well as we have."<sup>25</sup> However, many immigrating Saints died enroute up the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers to Kanesville (Council Bluffs) and in nearby communities. Still more died enroute across the plains.

In October 1849 the new apostle, Charles C. Rich, was sent to California with instructions to prepare an alternate route for immigrants via western California. In 1851 he purchased San Bernardino Ranch to provide a western base for the new route. A General Epistle of the Presidency announced this route that would "save three thousand miles of inland migration through a most sickly climate and country."<sup>26</sup> Shortly afterward, cholera appeared in the California port cities of San Francisco, San Pedro, and San Diego—cities on Apostle Rich's new route. The new route idea was abandoned.

Meanwhile the *Guardian* of 21 August 1850 commented:

There have been several cases of cholera in our town this season, but not enough to create the alarm which at present exists. There have been but twelve deaths since the commencement of the season.<sup>27</sup>

The article also condemned the "practice that is prevalent among the female portion of our community of going from one house to another mourning over the sick and diseased." The paper counseled, "If you feel like mourning, wait till the season is more healthy, and no cholera lurking in our midst." The angels of death did not need to be overburdened by unnecessary exposure of the good sisters.

In America the cholera epidemic began to subside but never completely ceased before a new pandemic struck in 1853 and 1854. In 1853 some 800 to 850 persons died in St. Louis, and in 1854 the city had the highest cholera death toll of any American city with 3,547 deaths.<sup>28</sup> All of central Missouri along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers was hard hit by the pandemic. A Scandinavian contingent of immigrating Mormons was especially hard hit, losing 150 out of a company of 700. Cholera was prevalent in all companies of immigrating Mormons who came up the Mississippi River and crossed the plains.<sup>29</sup>

On 2 August 1854 Brigham Young wrote to Elder Franklin D. Richards, who was in England supervising the shipping of emigrants to America. President Young ordered Richards to discontinue shipping the Saints via New Orleans and to instead ship them to Philadelphia, Boston, or New York. Those who had to sail to New Orleans were instructed to do so in time that they might get off the rivers before warm weather and the cholera season set in. The change of route seemed to reduce the number of cases of cholera among the immigrants and cholera ceased to be a major affliction among the Mormons.<sup>30</sup> The *Deseret News* never published any reports about cholera.

In 1853 an English doctor, John Snow, delivered an address in London on epidemic diseases, including cholera, and their mode of communication, but the address's publication failed to gain much public attention. Nor had his 1849 pamphlet on cholera gained much attention, but his expanded version of *On the Mode of Communicating of Cholera* published in 1855 caught the public's attention. He proved that most cases of cholera were spread by contaminated water or physical contact with victims or their soiled belongings. Despite increased understanding about cholera, two more pandemics



struck America in 1863 during the Civil War and in 1873. They had relatively little impact upon the Church.

It was in 1883 at the beginning of yet another pandemic in Europe and Asia that Robert Koch, a German bacteriologist, discovered the comma bacillus which causes cholera. The discovery was publicly announced the next year and the concept of the supernatural cause of cholera was laid to rest. The first great pestilence of the last days could now be brought under control. Cholera is still endemic in parts of Asia and the Far East but its spread is largely controlled. New varieties, however, have been found within the last two decades, leaving the possibility that it may again become a latter-day pestilence.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>J. S. Chambers, *The Conquest of Cholera; America's Greatest Scourge* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), pp. 18-19.

<sup>2</sup>See Psalm 78:50; Luke 21:11; *D&C* 43:24-26.

<sup>3</sup>"The Cholera Morbus," *Evening and Morning Star*, June 1832. Hereafter *Star*.

<sup>4</sup>"Cholera Morbus," *Star*, July 1832.

<sup>5</sup>"Horrors of the Cholera Morbus," *Star*, July 1832.

<sup>6</sup>Chambers, *Conquest of Cholera*, pp. 27-29.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 86-89.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup>"The Cholera," *Star*, August 1832.

<sup>10</sup>"The Cholera," *Star*, September 1832.

<sup>11</sup>Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years; The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 40.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup>A biography of Frederick G. Williams, the most prominent botanic physician in Kirtland and, after January 1833, a counselor to Joseph Smith, states that he "successfully treated several epidemics of cholera." The biographer, Williams's second great grandson, does not specify whether the treatment was during the 1832 pandemic, in Kirtland, with Zion's Camp, or just where. See Frederick G. Williams, "Frederick Granger Williams of the First Presidency of the Church," *Brigham Young University Studies* 12 (1971-1972):243-61.

<sup>15</sup>Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1968), p. 114.

<sup>16</sup>Chambers, *Conquest of Cholera*, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup>*History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period I, History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet*, 2d ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1948)2:80. Hereafter *DHC*.

<sup>18</sup>Warren A. Jennings, "The Army of Israel Marches Into Missouri," *Missouri Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (January 1968): 133. Hereafter *MHQ*.

<sup>19</sup>*DHC* 2: 114.

<sup>20</sup>*DHC* 2: 115.

<sup>21</sup>Belatedly, camp members found that by immersing cholera victims in cold water, the purging, vomiting, and cramping were alleviated. The sick were also treated with whiskey thickened with flour. See Heber C. Kimball, "Journal of Heber C. Kimball," *Times and Seasons*, 15 March 1845.

<sup>22</sup>James T. Barrett, "Cholera in Missouri," *MHQ* 55, no. 4 (July 1961): 346–47.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*; Chambers, *Conquest of Cholera*, p. 235.

<sup>24</sup>"Cholera," *Frontier Guardian*, 25 July 1849. Hereafter *Guardian*.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century I* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930): 385. Hereafter *CHC*.

<sup>27</sup>"Cholera," *Guardian*, 21 August 1850.      <sup>28</sup>Barrett, "Cholera in Missouri," pp. 348–49.

<sup>29</sup>Roberts, *CHC* 4: 79.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.