

The Holding Forth of Jeddy Grant

GENE A. SESSIONS

AS THE STORY GOES, and as countless Mormon preachers and teachers have told it, embellished it and retold it for generations, it was a classic confrontation between a conspiracy of falsehood and the heroism of truth, between learned folly and divine wisdom. The scene is Jeffersonville, the seat of Tazewell County, Virginia, sometime in the late 1830s. A large congregation of lawyers and ministers has assembled in the courthouse for an unusual sermon to be delivered by a brash young Mormonite missionary from Ohio. The tall lad, apparently uneducated and a bit foolish, has agreed to a challenge whereby he will give a sermon from a text prepared by his adversaries and delivered to him just before the speech. Among those present is John B. Floyd, who will later serve as Secretary of War during the Johnston's Army episode of the late 1850s. The courthouse is packed and buzzing as lanky Jedediah Morgan Grant, gaunt, and threadbare, strides to the stand. A clerk, appointed for the occasion, steps up and hands Jeddy a folded piece of paper on which is written the text for his sermon. The audience titters as the green preacher opens the paper—only to find it blank!

Without pausing or showing concern, the Mormonite circuit rider begins to speak:

My friends, I am here today according to agreement, to preach from such a text as these gentlemen might select for me. I have it here in my hand. I don't wish you to become offended at me, for I am under promise to preach from the text selected; and if any one is to blame, you must blame those who selected it. I knew nothing of what text

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they would choose, but of all texts this is my favorite one. You see the paper is blank. . . . You sectarians down there believe that out of nothing God created all things, and now you wish me to create a sermon out of nothing, for this paper is blank. Now, you sectarians believe in a God that has neither body, parts nor passions. Such a God I conceive to be a perfect blank, just as you find my text is. You believe in a church without Prophets, Apostles, Evangelists, etc. Such a church would be a perfect blank, as compared with the Church of Christ, and this agrees with my text. You have located your heaven beyond the bounds of time and space. It exists nowhere, and consequently your heaven is blank, like unto my text.¹

The sermon continues, holding its listeners in awe, until Mr. Floyd jumps up shouting, "Mr. Grant, if you are not a lawyer, you ought to be one." Turning to the people, he asks for a collection to buy the noble Mormon orator a new suit of clothes. Ultimately symbolic of the young missionary's triumph is the action of an unhappy Methodist-Episcopal minister who is forced by the crowd to take up the change in his own hat. When the money is counted, there is enough for a horse, saddle and bridle, as well as for new clothes.

As a faith promoter, the story packs an undeniable wallop, but the truth of it is a different matter. Some corroborative evidence of the tale's basic validity exists outside of Mormon mythology, but more important is the image it presents of this early traveling disciple of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Notwithstanding the well-documented and oft-repeated accounts of the missionary experiences of such as Brigham Young, Heber Kimball and Wilford Woodruff, students of Mormonism have given little attention to the common proselytizer of the early period who went through his own process of conversion while producing life-sustaining converts to the nascent religion, and in so doing grew into a way of life and a set of socioreligious attitudes that would have profound effects upon the future course of the Latter-day Saint movement. The hero of the blank-text legend stands as an intriguing example of this simple thesis. Descending perpetually deeper into his commitment as an enthusiastic preacher, he was a missionary who never returned.²

Born in 1816 to a New England shinglemaker and his wife, Jed Grant was the seventh of twelve children. While living in northwestern Pennsylvania in the spring of 1833, the Grant family joined the Mormon Church, moving shortly thereafter to Kirtland, where Jeddy's next older sibling, Caroline, met and married the Prophet Joseph's brother, William Smith. This familial tie with the Smiths understandably heightened the dedication of the Grants to their new faith. In his eighteenth year, Jedediah seemed especially anxious to become involved in the Prophet's cause, so much so that the following spring he eagerly enlisted in Zion's Camp. For many who went with Joseph to "redeem Zion" from the hostile Missourians, the ensuing experience went beyond the bounds of their faith. Not only did the small army fail to accomplish its supposed mission, but the hardships and trials of the journey forced some to reevaluate their commitment to the Restoration and its youthful leader. For others, however, their experiences in Zion's Camp increased faith

and ratified the contract with God and his prophet. Into this group fell young Grant, who returned to Ohio with renewed loyalty to the cause of Mormonism.³

In February 1835 Grant found himself among those called to a special series of meetings in Kirtland at which the Prophet literally reorganized the Church of the Latter-day Saints upon the steadfast remnants of Zion's Camp. The nineteen-year-old boy saw the Twelve Apostles—Brigham Young, Heber Kimball, and the rest—chosen and ordained and was then himself selected as one of the First Quorum of Seventy. Joseph ordained his young follower himself, charging him with the duties of a traveling emissary of the Kingdom.

Three months later, Grant left Kirtland on his first mission for the Church. Teamed with twenty-five-year-old Harvey Stanley, he cautiously proselytized through former home areas in New York. Traveling to Buffalo from Fairport on the steamer *General Porter*, the two then walked into the hinterland of New York, carefully and often painfully trying their hand at the business of itinerant preaching. For five months they declared the gospel in Wyoming and Genesee Counties and then through Livingston County on a rough line between Buffalo and the former Grant home at Naples, Ontario County. When they returned to Kirtland in October, they had baptized thirteen relatives and friends.⁴

Through the winter of 1835–36, Jeddy worked alongside his father and brother on the temple and witnessed its dedication in March of 1836, but he was soon ready for another mission. Two weeks after the temple ceremonies, he departed again for New York, this time by himself.⁵ He would visit home only briefly during the next six years—years that would mold his character and determine his outlook. In his case, they would also be years that would have a considerable impact upon hosts of people far beyond the temporal and geographic bounds of his fields of missionary endeavor.

As he traveled through New York the second time, he returned to the same areas he had visited with Stanley the season before. Alone part of the time, he teamed up on occasion with such other Mormonite preachers as his brother Joshua Grant, Don Carlos Smith and Samuel W. Denton. By the end of August, the others had left for Kirtland, but Jedediah remained through the winter, finally going home in March 1837. Three months later, he was off again, working through the summer with Joshua and their childhood friend, Benjamin Winchester. The three worked their way eastward across New York and then southward through New York City into New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania. When Winchester chose to remain at Philadelphia, the two brothers decided to carry their efforts into the Piedmont region of Virginia and North Carolina. Arriving there in September 1837, Joshua Grant suddenly changed his mind and left for Ohio. Jeddy remained alone. Working through the rural counties of western Carolina and southwestern Virginia, he built up churches and serviced their spiritual needs in a wide-ranging circuit for the next year. Having heard of the Missouri troubles in which his own family was suffering, Grant left his flocks in the South and made his way to

Far West, arriving there in November 1838, just in time to help his father's family remove to Illinois during the exodus of that winter. He stayed at Commerce through the spring of 1839 but quickly became bored with events there and presented Mormon leaders with a letter from North Carolina requesting his return. Leaving again for the South on 1 June 1839, Jeddy would not return to the center of Mormon activity until the fall of 1842, three and a half years later.⁶

Extant documents covering the long and nearly continuous missions of almost seven years portray much the same Elder Grant as the mythmakers created in the blank-text legend and in a second story of the same genre in which the valiant Jedediah confronts a self-serving Baptist minister who challenges him to a debate. Umpires are selected, and the house is densely crowded. Grant begins by asking the preacher, "Who stands at the head of your church in southwest Virginia?" The reverend takes the bait: "I do, sir, I do, and who, Mr. Grant, stands at the head of your church in southwest Virginia?" Grant rises, bows his head, and says, "Jesus Christ, sir, Jesus Christ." This, of course, ends the debate.⁷

The sectarian ministers Jedediah encountered may not have always come off from debates as badly as this one supposedly did, and there were certainly few who ended up with their hats in their hands taking collections for the triumphant Mormonite, but they were ever-present (according to Grant's own account), working evil behind the scenes and trying to dissuade his listeners from the truth. Indeed, the young elder seemed more concerned over what the preachers were doing when he was not present than over the occasional face-to-face confrontations. A healthy touch of fear of these potent adversaries caused Grant to wonder how the preachers were interpreting his words after he was no longer there to defend himself and his radical religion. At one place, he held a series of meetings in a schoolhouse in which the people were so attentive and believing that the building was soon too small to hold them all. But, worried Jeddy, "thair priests were vary much sturd or aroused up," and although they attended the meetings and although Grant gave them opportunities to raise objections, he "codn't git a word out of their heads, but as soon as I wold git 3 or 4 miles off they wold begin to go round from house to house and warn the people against goewing to hear me preach." He comforted himself with the belief that most of his congregation "was determined to hear the truth and obay it in spite of men or Satan, but O how the priests cride false prophets, Jo Smith, Gold Bible."⁸ Concomitantly frustrating to the Mormon elder were the clandestine efforts of the sectarian ministers to influence the press against him.⁹

While the preacher from the West did not record such exciting events as the blank-text legend among his encounters with the "Rev. D.D.s," his journal and letters do maintain that the sectarians always suffered defeat at the hands of Mormon truth. In New York, an Elder Parsons stood in one of Grant's meetings and, with his voice trembling, said that the Book of Mormon contradicted itself and the Bible. The Mormon responded by offering the minister both the pulpit and time to bring forth the contradictions, all of

which called the bluff of the preacher, who then left in shame.¹⁰ Another New York parson challenged the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, only to have Grant badger him into admitting that his only objection was Joseph Smith's having a copyright on a supposedly translated and sacred book. "The poore man," said Jeddy, "semed to be vary soraful to think that he had not enny more grounds to work upon."¹¹ While the future Mormon leader reported that he often had "3 calls whare I am not able to fill one," he also had constant persecution, traceable to "the priests, both Methodist and Baptist . . ."¹² Nevertheless, all of his disputes with them "resulted in faver of the Truth, and in the Glory of God our Heavenly Father."¹³

In a letter to the *Times and Seasons* written from North Carolina late in 1840, Elder Grant summarized (with the editor's help) the processes and tactics the sectarians had adopted in their fight to counter his inroads against their flocks:

The priests have contended in public against the impenetrable law of God written to Ephraim, until they have become disheartened and have left the field of public investigation clear and undisturbed; they now use a private influence, threatening their members with excommunication if they listen to the doctrine of the saints. I shall not attempt to describe the course, or conduct of the priests,—a whole Encyclopedia of wit, argument, and abuse would not more than do the subject justice. It sufficeth to say, that all their public exertions have proved abortive and insufficient to prejudice the public mind, and their private influence is not sufficient to keep the honest in heart from hearing the fulness of the gospel as taught in the last days by the servants of the Lord, who are unfurling the bloodstained banner among the nations of the earth.¹⁴

And there seemed to be plenty of the "honest in heart" around. Although difficult to quantify, the successes of Jedediah Grant's early missions seem to be rather remarkable. When he worked through New York, most of the converts appeared to be family members and old friends. Indeed, young Jeddy baptized nearly all of his older siblings and their families into the Church during his two journeys across the state in the mid-1830s. In his earliest outings, before his commitment to the preacher's life had deepened considerably, the pattern was one of travel between the homes of brothers and sisters and uncles; the decision to go southward in 1836 was then a difficult and very significant one, for it involved for the first time unknown quantities of strange places and faces. Although a New Englander, Grant fearlessly applied his necessary modicum of charisma to attract a large following of friends and converts in Carolina and Virginia, quickly establishing branches of the Church that were still functioning and providing bases for missionary activity fifty years later.¹⁵

After establishing his circuits, Grant apparently had little difficulty providing himself with the necessities of life. There were always converts and sympathizers—"Sister Blackmonds" and "Sister Biglers"—with food and warm fires to welcome the tall preacher as he came around each time. By the time of his second mission to the South, Jeddy had become essentially a

professional minister, comparable to any Methodist circuit rider, feeding his scattered flock, holding camp meetings and converting sinners. The only significant difference was that he was converting them to Mormonism and a golden dream of gathering to the West. When unable to hold a meeting or preach a sermon, he would go house to house, obtaining subscriptions to church periodicals—the *Times and Seasons* or the *Messenger and Advocate*—or like other preachers he would read and write, stocking his repertoire of sermons and debates with well-bred phrases. This must have paid off, for some of his efforts were so successful that he would baptize two dozen converts at a meeting and leave “them all overwhelmed in tears.”¹⁶ He was good at what he was doing, and there was little in the entire process to discourage him from continuing. It had become his chosen profession, one he could never leave behind.

Even though Grant and others like him were often far from the central gathering places of the Church and therefore removed from the centers of the religion’s activity, they were still deeply stirred by the turmoils of the late thirties in Kirtland and in Missouri and in a very different way than were those near the scenes of the troubles. Jedediah Grant, did not own property until he was thirty-one years old and living in Salt Lake City. For him, the “persecutions” of Ohio and Missouri were pure ideology—good against evil, God versus Satan. And this concept is what men like him taught subsequent generations as they explained the Saints’ apparent inability to live with their former neighbors.

This should not suggest, however, that Jeddy was ignorant of events at “home.” Correspondence, though meager, combined with accounts of visiting companions and rare trips west, gave him the flavor of happenings in Zion. Indeed, he displayed a general hunger for information, asking one friend to “write all the news you can think of about Kirtland and Missouri and the affairs in that country,”¹⁷ and another to send news of Joseph and what he was saying on such issues as slavery.¹⁸ But much of what he heard about happenings among the Saints in the West came to him through the rumor mill. “During the last two years,” he recorded in 1840, “the western breezes from Ephraim’s lovely plains, have been frequently impregnated with scurilous reports, and base epithets of the foulest kind against the saints of the Most High.”¹⁹ The South was particularly susceptible to fearful rumors during those years, and this only helped to magnify the anti-Mormon slander in rural Carolina and Virginia while Grant was there. A northerner himself, he carefully noted how the ministers of Protestantism played a heavy role in “vamping over” reports from the North to suit their purposes. Mormonism, like New England reformism, was suffering in the process.²⁰ Unfortunately, and probably unknown to him in most cases, some of the stories about the Saints were true.

Despite some comprehension of difficulties at home, Jeddy could never understand why all of his successes in the South seldom persuaded other missionaries to join him “on the happy plaines of North Carolina” or Virginia.²¹ Only his brother Joshua and occasionally Don Carlos Smith would come to assist him, no matter how glowing his reports of a ripe field for the

harvest of souls. At one point, this frustration brought him face-to-face with his own doubt in a confrontation with his ever-deepening commitment to the cause. To Grant, however, the experience represented only an encounter with the same force that tempted Jesus upon the mount.

Alas ses the tempter your alone in a distante land without monney or clothes. Now said he I shoe you a butiful plan that will rase you to emanunce direcly. Now ses he you had better leave NC and goe direcly to the Illinois and thare goe to studing law or goe to worke on a farm. By eather of these means said he you can acquare welth and honor but if you stay here you are deprived of the society of your friends relations. You will receive nothing bu pursecution for all the time you spend in the vineyard. Not onley this said he I intend to sowe the seed of discord in Kirtland and else whare. This said he will disharten menny of your colleges [colleagues] and tha will forsake the vinyard and you will be left alone.²²

Jeddy's tempter spoke to the young man's frailty, but Grant's faith and dedication by this time was equal to the blast and would quickly put worries of home and discord in the Church out of his mind.

After beholding the cloven foot of the Tempter I arose from my seate and like a hungry lion in [the] forist in pursute of his pray I went to the grove with grate relosity and uncovered my head and prostrated myself upon the ground and poured out my soul to the God of Israel and the cloud was rent asunder. The tempttasion was gone and the Spirit of the Lord spake peace to my sold saing ferenot I am with thee. Then did I discover that I was not alone for the Lord was with me. I then arose rejoicing and commenced proclaiming the Gospel the truth of the Son of God.²³

Experiences like this created within Jedediah Grant a strong self-image and a sense of purpose about the Restoration that never left him. Though he would live for only fourteen more years after bidding his southern flocks farewell for the last time, Jeddy's missions would continue to affect him and thousands of Saints more profoundly than the relative few who assembled at Burkes Garden, in Tazewell County, Virginia, in September of 1842 for a final conference to honor Jedediah Grant and his brother Joshua before their departure for Nauvoo. Although total attendance at that meeting is not known, sixty persons were there from the Burkes Garden Branch alone. Evidently an impressive affair, the conference was supposed to last three days, but instead, continued four days—from September 11 to September 14. Jedediah prayed and preached at every session. At the key meeting on the twelfth, Grant took for his text II Corinthians 4: 17: "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."²⁴

Shortly thereafter, Jedediah Grant was on his way west to weigh out his won measure of glory. Affliction, that delicious food of the zealous, had sustained him in a strange way through his entire young manhood, much as it had the Prophet Joseph's new religion during its own youth. The tempter

was always present, siphoning off those for whom simple life came to mean more than the constant and unnatural struggle of building a kingdom unto the Prophet and his ever-demanding God. But for Jeddy Grant, the means of building that kingdom had become the end itself. There was for him no limit to sacrifice, little room for sedentary comfort and complete intolerance for anything short of perfect dedication and loyalty. This attitude, built into him during these formative years, became the guiding attribute of his future leadership in the Church. It was bred, however, not in the persecutions of Kirtland and Missouri, but during his strident preaching of the gospel among the misled sectarians of the east.

Returning to Nauvoo, Grant was almost immediately appointed to return east to shepherd the flocks his friend Benjamin Winchester had gathered at Philadelphia. He remained in that position until he joined the exodus into Iowa in 1846. Once in Utah, he quickly rose to high offices in both civil and ecclesiastical spheres—mayor of Great Salt Lake City, general in the Nauvoo Legion, speaker of the territorial house of representatives and (in 1854) second counselor in the First Presidency under Brigham Young. His prowess and predilection as an orator, honed to a fine edge during his missions, as well as a high measure of self-education acquired by reading widely, had brought him into the leading councils of the Church despite his youth and his long absences from the centers of Zion. But those early missions continued to sculpt his sensibilities. He never came to grips with comfort. As well could the Apostle Paul have settled into the calm existence of Salt Lake City in the early 1850s. Although Grant married six wives and in many other ways assumed the very roles his North Carolina tempter had cast in the way of his mission, he was always a preacher of uncompromising righteousness.

By the late summer of 1856, just nine years into the Utah period, Jeddy and another old-time missionary named Brigham Young had decided that the Saints were too well off, too unaccustomed to the necessary afflictions that qualify one for sainthood. The result was the Mormon Reformation of 1856–57. This was a seething revival after the order of the Great Awakening in which the entire population of Mormondom received the blisterings of hellfire, mostly from the mouth of Jeddy Grant, who literally preached and baptized himself into a frenzy that led him to his deathbed within a period of two months. When he died just a few weeks short of his forty-first birthday, Grant was in the prime of his chosen occupation, the only one he had really ever known. He had become a phenomenon that would disappear all too soon from the Mormon landscape—the old-fashioned preacher.

Perhaps the passing of Jed Grant and others like him had something to do with the change that occurred in Mormonism around the turn of the century when directed by Hyrum's son Joseph and Jeddy's son Heber, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints left the world of passionate preachers and radical ideology for the placid mainstream of American life.

NOTES

¹Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saints Biographical Encyclopedia* 4 vols. (1901; reprint ed., Salt Lake City: Western Epics, 1971), vol. 1, pp. 57–58, quoting Theodore B. Lewis.

²Silvan S. Tomkins, "The Psychology of Commitment: The Constructive Role of Violence and Suffering for the Individual and for Society," in Martin Duberman, ed., *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), has suggested six stages of gradually deepening commitment through which the dedicated adherents of a movement pass to a point of no return, when no other way of life seems possible or desirable. Although Grant does not fit as precisely into some of these stages as William Lloyd Garrison does in the Tomkins model, he nevertheless arrives at the final stage where he must continue in his commitment as a proselytizing preacher, even when he finds himself no longer among nonbelievers.

³Some details of Grant's life are available in Mary G. Judd, *Jedediah M. Grant, Pioneer-Statesman* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1959).

⁴Journal of Harvey Stanley, Ms., Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, hereafter Church Archives.

⁵Journal of Jedediah M. Grant, Ms., Church Archives.

⁶*ibid.*; Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *passim*.

⁷Jenson, *Biographical Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, p. 58, quoting Theodore B. Lewis.

⁸Journal of Jedediah M. Grant.

⁹*ibid.*; letter, Grant to editor, 15 December 1840, *Times and Seasons*, 15 March 1841, pp. 347-48.

¹⁰Journal of Jedediah M. Grant.

¹¹*ibid.*

¹²Letter, Grant to J. G. Bigler, Papers of Jedediah M. Grant, Ms., Church Archives.

¹³Journal of Jedediah M. Grant.

¹⁴*Times and Seasons*, 15 March 1841, p. 347.

¹⁵James H. Moyle, working in the Surry County area in the 1880s, discovered the base Grant had established so secure that two generations of missionaries had called it "the nest" and seldom ventured from it. Moyle, *Mormon Democrat: The Religious and Political Memoirs of James Henry Moyle*, ed. by Gene A. Sessions (Salt Lake City: James Moyle Genealogical and Historical Association, 1975), pp. 110-12.

¹⁶Journal of Jedediah M. Grant.

¹⁷Grant to Bigler.

¹⁸Letter, Grant to Moses Martin, 18 May 1838, *Elders Journal* 1 (August 1838): 51.

¹⁹*Times and Seasons*, 15 March 1841, p. 347.

²⁰*ibid.*

²¹Grant to Bigler.

²²*ibid.*

²³*ibid.*

²⁴Clerk John M. Tibbs reported the minutes of the conference at Burkes Garden in *Times and Seasons*, 2 January 1843, p. 63.