

# *The Church Moves Outside the United States: Some Observations From Latin America*

LAMOND TULLIS

MORMONS OF THE PRESENT generation, with their legacy of tenacity and perseverance as both a guide and a challenge, are attempting to offer "every nation, kindred, tongue, and people" an opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. The scale of this endeavor is new to us, for never before has the Church attempted to take the gospel message across so many boundaries of ancestral customs, languages, nationalities and races. The magnitude of such an attempt—and the drama that it represents—have presented new problems. For one, the diversity of membership we are experiencing in the Church is both blessing and challenging the collective spirit of Mormonism. Change is upon us. We must try to understand it and deal with it in both spirit and mind.

Certainly Latin America deserves our attention. There are now 600 thousand members in eighteen of the twenty-three independent Latin American republics and Puerto Rico. Currently the region is experiencing the highest rate of membership growth in the Church. In 1975 Mexico alone accounted for over twenty-two percent of the baptisms in the Church. That was with 21 thousand converts. In 1976 Mexico had 40 thousand converts. Other Latin American countries, a little less dramatic, are not far behind. In Latin America

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LAMOND TULLIS is chairman of the Department of Government at Brigham Young University. This article is drawn from a lecture given at the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University.

indigenous roots have now taken hold—some of them deeply—and Mormonism more and more is becoming recognized as a national asset.

In 1960 all Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking members of the Church in Latin America accounted for only one and one half percent of the total membership. Yet that total had risen to seven percent by 1971, over nine percent by 1975 and over twelve percent by early 1979. In 1990 one out of every five members of the Mormon faith may speak Spanish or Portuguese as his or her mother tongue. Inasmuch as the Church's membership is growing rapidly among many language groups throughout much of the world, this progressive Latin American gain is quite remarkable, exceeding by far the best projections of only a few years ago. (See Figure 1)

This increase is striking, but more so is the story of the actual propagation of the faith. Herein lies the drama of men's and women's hearts and minds as they struggle with commitment and change, triumph and misfortune. Let us start at the beginning. In 1851, only four years after the arrival of the Saints in the Great Salt Lake Valley, Parley P. Pratt, his wife Phoebe Soper and Rufus Allen set sail for Chile to open the South American mission of the Church. Pratt had long dreamed of such an undertaking and had invested prodigious energies in it. But the first missionary effort in Chile lasted only a few months. A quarter of a century passed before Mormons once again seriously thought about preaching the gospel in Spanish, and nearly three-quarters of a century passed before the Church reopened a mission in the southern half of the Western Hemisphere (in 1925 in Buenos Aires, Argentina).

Preparations for cautious exploratory thrusts into Mexico, however, were begun in 1874, with more extensive activities underway by 1879. While five converts were baptized in Hermosillo, Sonora in 1878, it was in Mexico City and environs that the first branches of the Church were organized. Missionary work continued in central Mexico up through 1889.

In the period between 1885–1900, Mormonism went to Mexico literally *en masse*. Then hundreds of North American Mormons settled in Mexico's northern states of Chihuahua and Sonora after yet another mass exodus in pursuit of the religious freedom they thought the American Constitution should provide but obviously was not guaranteeing them. Fleeing United States marshals over their marriage customs, they hoped for a more tolerant political spirit in a Mexican homeland. They found it. Their settlements grew and flourished.

These English-speaking Mormon colonists in northern Mexico ultimately provided the Church with the expertise it needed to cross the Spanish language barrier. Having resettled in order to practice their faith in safety and peace, they also found it both convenient and necessary to learn Spanish in order to conduct business and relate generally to the Mexican political and economic environment. Some of the colonists thus learned Spanish; many of their children learned it very well.

In 1901 the colonists again began to send out missionaries to the Mexican nationals in whose country they lived. Indeed, in the early years the colonists and their children provided nearly all the leadership and missionary service

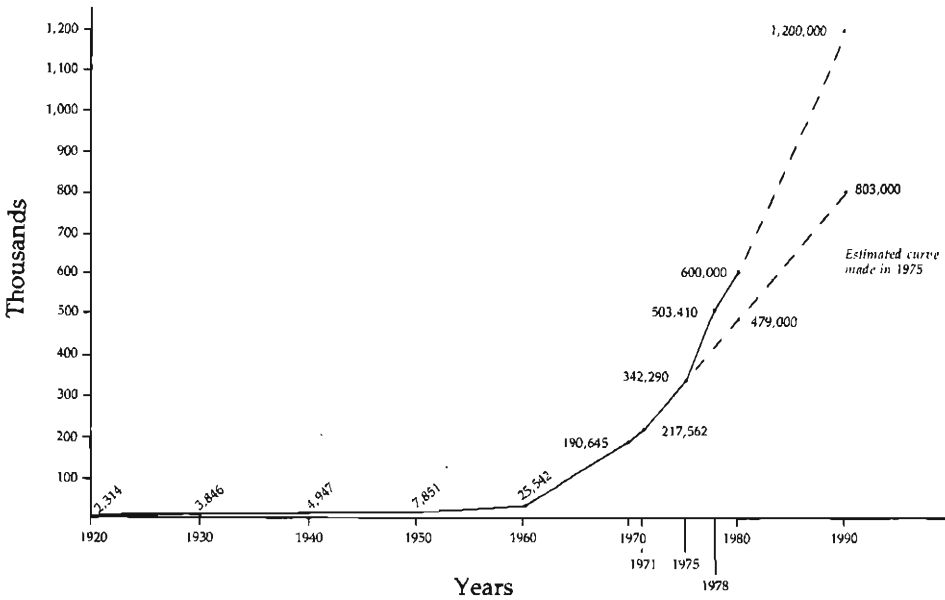


Figure 1. Membership growth of the Mormon Church in Latin America, 1920–80, showing also estimated membership curves made in 1975 as compared to updated curves made in 1979.

for the Church's operations in Mexico. So it was also in South America after the mission was reopened there in 1925. Rey L. Pratt, a grandson of Parley P. Pratt, and himself a colonies Mormon, was the first Spanish-speaking missionary to return to the South American continent that his grandfather had abandoned three-quarters of a century before. Like Rey Pratt, a long succession of mission presidents and missionaries who have served in Mexico and in Central and South America learned their Spanish in the schools, playgrounds and orchards of the Mormon colonies in Chihuahua and Sonora, Mexico. The colonies thus proved to be the wedge for the permanent establishment of the gospel in Mexico and, for that matter, in all of Latin America.

When Rey L. Pratt took leave as president of the Mexican mission to help Apostle Melvin J. Ballard reopen the South American mission in 1925, he went not to Chile, where his grandfather had landed seventy-three years before, but to Argentina. Ironically, it was thought that Pratt's eloquent Spanish-language skills were required more for dealing with government politicians and bureaucrats in Argentina than for preaching the gospel. The actual missionary work was to be pursued not among the Spanish-speaking residents, but among the hordes of German-speaking immigrants. For this purpose German-speaking Elder Rulon S. Wells was included in the missionary party.

With only marginal success among the German immigrants, however, the missionaries soon embraced wholeheartedly other nationalities in Argentina—Italians, Spaniards and, of course, the old Argentinian stock itself.

Thus the national population, as well as many immigrant nationalities, have contributed strong and faithful members to the Church.

Within ten years after the Ballard-Pratt-Wells party had landed in Argentina, the gospel had taken root in Brazil. As in Argentina, it had gone first to the Germans, then to many other immigrant nationalities and old-line population stocks. The harvest has been particularly striking in Portuguese-speaking Brazil.

Latin Americans in Mexico, Central America and South America have embraced the gospel. So have Latin Americans who live in the United States of America. In the United States live some twelve million people whose ancestral customs, mother tongue and race are partly rooted in the soil that was once Mexico's and in the heartbeat of Latin American lands. Mexican Americans, Chicanos, Hispanos—the names vary; yet whatever they choose to call themselves, they are part of the fourth largest Latin American community in the world, preceded only by the countries of Brazil, Argentina and Mexico. They have produced generations of Mormons whose strength and fidelity are seen in the records and whose sons and daughters are now represented throughout much of the Church.

Whether in Mexico, Central America, South America, or the United States, the accomplishments of the Latin American Saints have been significant. But they have not been achieved without problems, misunderstandings, or heartaches. Indeed, now we see that the Church's contemporary growth increasingly obliges us to take note of the paradoxical sentiments of hope and despair, motivation and frustration, and love and distrust that accompany the expansion of the gospel message today. That is part of the challenge our people face as we approach the twenty-first century.

If we can talk about our church from the vantage of both faith and enlightened observation, we may do so as if by telescope. From the large end we see the grand sweep of events that transforms nations and peoples, knowing in advance that the outcome—the triumph of the Kingdom—is never in doubt. But we can also turn the telescope around and see smaller parts of the Mormon reality, thereby holding them up for closer inspection. The events of this hour, this day, set the scene for magnification—the happiness, the heartache, the dilemma. Only a moment's time at the small end of the telescope impresses us that each person's crucial role in the chain that links individual lives and feelings with the destiny of the gospel obliges us to bring all our faculties of mind and spirit to bear on the events of the latter days.

In the macro view we find agreement and harmony in Mormonism today: The gospel will prevail—the Lord's plan will not be thwarted; the earth will ultimately be renewed to receive its paradisiacal glory. Yet from the other end of the telescope—from the micro view where a close focus may be had on the sentiments and values of individuals and groups—differences of opinion exist about the *meaning* of what is seen, or even about *what* is seen. Consider two issues from the small end of the telescope as they relate to Mormons in Latin America: nationalism, and authority and leadership. (I might have selected others: schools and education, applying the saving principles and

ordinances to Latin American cultures, literature of the Church in translation, impact of secular laws, missionary activities, evidences of divine intervention, institutionalization of the Church and the growth of stakes, bureaucracy, the building program, temporal and ecclesiastical mobility, gaps between old and new members, cultural activities, status and social class among Mormons, political interface of Church and state, apostate groups, the fall-out phenomenon, and so forth.)

### NATIONALISM AND THE CHURCH

Recently, as I visited with a stake president in Mexico City, the subject of Arnold Friberg's paintings of Book of Mormon characters came up. (Reproductions of the paintings are bound in some editions of the Book of Mormon.) Growing agitated he said, "These paintings are not paintings we can show to an educated Mexican. They're well done, but they show such an enormous ignorance of culture that they are offensive." He even referred to them as "imperialism" in art.

His response to this offense was to advise Mexican Latter-day Saint youth to create their own gospel culture, to bring the gospel into every aspect of their lives—music, art, drama, thought, writing. There must be Mexican Saints who write plays and stories with the gospel at their hearts. There must be actors, singers and dancers among the Mexican Saints. Being Mormon makes them different from other Mexicans, he tells them, but being Mexican makes them different from Saints in other lands. They have something unique and valuable to create and share with all Saints and with all Mexicans. With specific reference to the Friberg paintings, he is having Mormon students of art look at Book of Mormon motifs and learn how to be culturally faithful as well as artistically proficient. I have seen some of the paintings. The personages do not look like the Anglo-Americans in Friberg's work. They are decidedly Mexican.

Several years ago, the speaker at one of Brigham Young University's all-stake firesides declared that "the flag of the United States is the flag of God." One can speculate about the assumptions underlying that statement: America is a land of freedom—the only country in the world that would have permitted the gospel to be restored. Through the vitality of America's economic system (capable of generating an economic surplus), the expansion of the gospel was made possible. At the same time the Church's heartland was generally protected from political raids and the corrupting influence of state bureaucrats.

For two weeks after that speech, however, there came through my office a veritable parade of outraged Latin American students. The statement about the flag, whispered far and wide, has now become a subject of conversation across the entire face of Latin America wherever Mormons live. So what is the problem? About the "flag of the United States being the flag of God," said a stake president in Latin America, "that was so until about 1865–70. But with President Monroe came the spirit of something else, certainly not that of God. Nationalism was converted to paternalism, conquest and imperialism."

Though his facts are somewhat incorrect, his sentiments are nevertheless widespread among Latin American Mormons. They remember that in their school days their own nationalistic sentiments were stimulated by the selection of history their teachers gave them. They remember James Monroe and the Monroe Doctrine, all right, but only in light of the early twentieth century "Roosevelt Corollary" to the Doctrine. While Monroe had hoped to keep European interests from further intervening in the Western Hemisphere when he announced his Doctrine in 1823, Theodore Roosevelt later asserted that the Doctrine required the United States to prevent intervention by doing the intervening itself. Under his "big stick" policy, the United States sent armed forces into the Dominican Republic (in 1905), into Nicaragua (in 1912) and into Haiti (in 1915). The United States, directly or indirectly, served notice on every other Latin American country that the same could happen to it. So institutionalized became the intervention that American businessmen could hardly hide their disappointment when Woodrow Wilson refused to invoke Roosevelt's corollary during the Mexican civil war of 1910–17. They were outraged when Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to respond with force to the nationalization of the United States oil industry in Mexico in the 1930s. Those were exceptions, for by its traditional interventionist philosophy United States warplanes bombed Guatemala City in 1954; a United States equipped and trained invasion force tried to take Cuba in 1961; 22 thousand marines occupied the Dominican Republic in 1965; and the United States has sent military aid to every two-bit dictator who ever surfaced in Latin America—Trujillo, Batista, Somoza, Stroessner, *et al.*—all in the name of hemispheric security. In practice, this simply meant giving a few of the elite the means to continue to suppress the civilian population in their respective countries. Virtually the same intervention process subsequently transpired in favor of the military guardians who followed the old style dictators. The Carter administration has attempted to change some of these practices; to some extent it has been successful.

Certainly one sign of a bad policy is its failure. American intervention in Latin America to prevent change in the power structure of a country or to prevent the intervention of anyone else who might desire to change that power structure has failed, not because of the grand evil conspiracy—although there are enough of them around these days—but because we could not supply enough guns or buy enough loyalty from enough people to keep an increasingly mobilized population forever suppressed.

Thus in the minds of many Latin Americans—many Mormons included—the Monroe Doctrine's "big stick" has been followed by exploitive American business, by the Pentagon and by the CIA, all of which have combined to corrupt national self-determination and economic development in their respective homelands. We can therefore understand a Latin American Mormon leader's statement that "if someone came to my country saying that 'the flag of the United States is the flag of God,' well, that would be a virtual scandal here. It would be another indicator of U.S. imperialism, but of a religious nature." And as another added, "To speak of the Monroe Doctrine

[as it has been carried out in practice] as God's plan for the Americas is not only to court divisions within the Church, but to endanger the lives of missionaries and members in virtually every country."

Perhaps the magnitude of unawareness may be shown by a press release for Latin American newspapers from the office of a Utah Mormon scheduled to visit Latin America on behalf of the Church. One entry in his long list of impressive credentials included former work with the CIA. "The CIA and the Mormon Battalion will never get you anywhere in Latin America," an influential Latin American member said. "If it is true that as you write the Church history of this region, there are some things better left unsaid: You might start by never suggesting that any influential American member of the Church would ever admit to CIA ties or applaud the Mormon Battalion. The Mormon Battalion offends all of Latin America. Fortunately," he concluded, "the Battalion had no battles. Had it done so, the Church would never have been allowed to enter Mexico."

Nationalism—loyalty and devotion to a nation, especially in the sense of a national consciousness exalting one's own nation above all others and promoting its culture and interests above all others—may be one man's beauty but another's juggernaut. The historical facts of one become the historical lies of another. We select the history we wish to believe; we accept what we desire to know.

For a religion whose boundaries are coterminous with a nation state, all is well. For Mormonism, however, the "flag of God," the proper expression of art and culture, and a broadened sense of both our destiny and the microcosmic experiences that make it up will receive diverse expressions in the "multiple Zions," to use President Harold B. Lee's oft-cited phrase. Jingoism seems troubling wherever it is practiced in the Kingdom. Forsaking one's sins, political and otherwise, will require making a distinction between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the ideology of nationalism.

A sense of proportion amidst the rapidly escalating events of our time may have been captured by another Latin American Mormon. "The United States," he said, "should be applauded for its good organization, good methods, advanced and impressive technology and quality control of production of commercial goods that assure great satisfaction and worth to humanity. Beyond that, however, the United States should not be particularly applauded." We notice a salient omission in his statement. This Latin American Mormon has nothing to say about North American concepts of freedom and constitutionalism. Perhaps we can understand why by recognizing that the United States has done precious little to foster freedom or constitutionalism in his own homeland but actually has done much to prevent their development. This brother's sense of balance is captured poignantly when he says, "Errors of the government of the United States are not errors of the Church."

Generally speaking, therefore, the Saints in Latin America separate the Church from nationalism and their sentiments about the United States. They believe the Church to be an international church with a birthright and a

homeright as much in their own countries as anywhere else in the world, including the United States. The United States blessed the world with freedom for the restoration of the gospel but, aside from that, Latin Americans do not see the Church as being tied politically to the United States. Latin Americans in general and thousands of Latin American Mormons tend to love North Americans as individuals. But if nationalistic or jungoistic expressions from the "colossus of the north" surface among them, then America takes bottom position on a ranking of any number of nations, with the possible exception of Spain. Especially if you live in Mexico.

#### *AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP AND THE CHURCH*

On the office door of one of my history colleagues is posted the following phrase: "The Past is Prologue—Study History." I have always objected to the determinism implied in that statement. I have also marvelled that studying history seems somehow not to affect the future much. We have a hard time putting into practice any of the wisdom of the past. Each generation so thoroughly enjoys its own foibles that it is reluctant to put them into broad, historical context.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the authority and leadership practices among some Mormons in Latin America where the faith is young, strikingly parallel some of those in the early Church in Kirtland and Nauvoo. Now as then, the institutionalization of leadership well endowed with theory and praxis in stewardship and consent, patience and long suffering, love unfeigned and authority righteously exercised takes generations to produce.

Leadership and followership in the Lord's Kingdom are inexorably intertwined. When they work well together, it is not only because righteousness prevails, but because the norms of understanding and expectations about leadership and followership are widely shared and accepted. This understanding produces the coding system for communicating authority and eliciting the proper response from followers. That is the ideal, for even Mormons of the fifth and sixth generations have not "got it all together," although they have made giant strides since Nauvoo and Kirtland when internal bickering and quarreling, attacks and counterattacks created so much havoc.

Of the approximately 600 thousand Church members in Latin America, over 400 thousand date their baptisms to less than ten years ago; nearly half less than five years ago. There are only a handful of second generation Mormons. Third and fourth generation Mormons are a novelty, usually pointing to their ancestral homes in one of the small villages around Mexico City from where some members date their church lines back to the 1880s. Few priesthood holders have long experience. The first High Priests—precious few of them—for the first stake for Latin Americans (Mexico City) emerged as recently as 1961. Now there are over a hundred stakes in Latin America with hundreds of affiliated wards and branches, schools and seminaries. While



growth in leadership capabilities has been remarkable, leadership needs continue to border on desperation. Thus we read of 25-year-old stake presidents, 21-year-old bishops and counsellors and bishops appointed to office only three months after their baptisms. (Perhaps that is one reason the active youth in Latin America seem to take the Church so much more seriously than do their active North American counterparts: Weighty responsibilities are placed upon them at a tender age.)

Without models of Church leadership over several generations, Latin Americans frequently start their leadership experience from scratch. While it is remarkable to see how fast they mature and how many of them truly exceed the norm of leadership in the United States, it is to be expected that the style of many would be heavily contaminated by their secular culture. Much of this will work itself out in time. (Vigorous attempts are being made to accelerate the timetable through leadership training seminars. The recent upsurge in local missionaries who return home after their missions to bless the local wards and stakes is also beginning to have a positive impact—more so than in the United States).

Yet the exercise of authority in Latin America as it is traditionally done, and the exercise of priesthood authority as it should be done, are sometimes light years apart. Sometimes the fallout is of crisis proportions; sometimes the resulting frustrations are enough to sadden the heart of the most cynical among us.

*Authority:* the power to determine, adjudicate, or otherwise settle issues, or to have commanding influence over others, has traditionally meant in Latin America the right to control, command and determine the fate of other people. These rights traditionally were not so much attached to laws or general principles as they were to the *person* of the authority. Hence the phrase so often used in Latin America—“personal authority,” or *personalismo*.

Much of the traditional culture of authority is found in contemporary Latin America. In the family and between the sexes, for example, the father or other male dominates—a pattern popularly called *machismo*, a condition of extraordinary male self-esteem and self-assertion. Among employees, personal authority has been and frequently still is paternalistic, authoritarian and, at times, despotic. Among politicians and government bureaucrats, be they elected, appointed or civil servants, the exercise of personal authority is often excessively self-serving and arbitrary. As such, effective relationships are established by citizens who can most effectively and efficiently massage the personal needs and egos of the individuals in authority. Sometimes this is done with money (bribes), sometimes it is done with all the brow-scraping deference and pageantry of a medieval world with its lords and serfs.

Large-scale organization associated with economic development has been responsible for much change in Latin America, but nostalgia for and much of the practice of the past somehow live on. In unguarded moments that nostalgia can and does find expression in the authority relations between a few stake presidents and bishops and their flocks. Consider the following:

Several years ago when President Kimball told Church leaders everywhere that they were too lenient in dealing with transgressors, a few Latin American stake presidents considered this as authority to disfellowship and excommunicate members for almost anything. In these circumstances, even minor disagreements with the stake president about administrative procedures became sufficient grounds for a trial!

One young man, called to a Church court, was disfellowshipped because his bishop reported that he disagreed with the way the sacrament was being passed; another returned missionary was disfellowshipped when his stake president heard he had criticized his (the stake president's) conference speech. Another young man was called to court, told there was nothing "against" him but then was disfellowshipped because he was not humble enough towards his bishop. He appealed. His case went to the high council for a review. Ten high council members voted to reverse the case as did one counselor in the stake presidency. The stake president nevertheless upheld the disfellowshipment, for he had earlier agreed with the bishop to do so—as a *personal* favor. (One high council member left the Church over this issue.)

One stake president disfellowshipped a member because he would not eat meat. Another set up a plan to excommunicate or disfellowship members who took drugs, controlled or uncontrolled. An elder was excommunicated for failing to sustain a newly appointed bishop when his name was presented in sacrament meeting.

Cultural inclinations, reinforced with a private interpretation of President Kimball's counsel, have led to some ecclesiastical and leadership atrocities in Latin America. Happily they are not widespread, but where they exist there are, and have been, other implications of a less spectacular but nevertheless troubling nature. One is the retarding of needed leadership development in some stakes. As it is the most prepared and qualified people who tend to speak up against abuses of the kind described above, they find their own membership status placed in question. They are either cowed or driven underground. The Church is therefore not able to enjoy the benefit of its most able people because they are afraid to become involved. Such behavior turns counselors and advisors into "yes men" who refuse to voice a disagreement with their leader even in private council.

Another implication arises in the handling of individual cases of transgression, or "reported transgression." When a leader excessively contaminated with traditional authority culture—becoming what Latin Americans call a "religious *cacique*" (chief)—is personally offended by the sin, he not only comes down hard, but he uses the occasion to express his own "personal righteousness." As repentance is not encouraged by conditions that enhance resentment, people leave the Church and return to their sins, transgressions or disagreements. More than identifying and helping people with their problems, the religious *cacique* desires to find a scapegoat and make an example for others. This has the same function as "public hangings." Although this does sometimes elicit the desired behavior, it does not encourage respect for authority.

In most of the Latin American Church, there are stake presidents and bishops who are just as long-suffering and considerate of members as one finds anywhere, leaders who seek the will of the Lord in the exercise of their ecclesiastical and pastoral duties. They inevitably are in conflict with the religious *cacique*, however, and always will be. Alarming, there appears to be no way to work the problems out until the *cacique* is released from his position. While there are many casualties along the way, outside observers seem not to get the message. It is highly unlikely that a stake president's decisions will be countermanded. If his optimum leadership model is General Patton, as I heard one say, we get a feeling for the struggle yet ahead.

Aside from the general background on the expansion of the Church in Latin America, I have looked at two aspects of the reality of the Mormon experience there that are on the minds of all informed people. I have chided Anglo Americans on the issue of nationalism, and I have chided the Latin Americans on traditional leadership culture. As we look at nationalism, and leadership and authority from the large end of the telescope, we Mormons know that in the end the offenses will cease, that all of us will more closely approximate the Lord's culture rather than our own, and that time-bound concepts of authority, and politics and society will give way to a greater search for, and a more ample willingness to live the Lord's plan for his people. It is that hope that unites Latin American and North American members of the Church in an enterprise that will roll forth to consume the whole earth.

But looking from the small end of the telescope, we have long known that the impact of events on the lives of individuals can be exacerbated or mitigated by individual actions and decisions. We *can* learn from our experience. The past does not have to be prologue.

In the grand scheme what will *our individual* lot be? Although the future will not be painless, we Mormons may rise, more experienced and less parochial, to the challenges of the twenty-first century. We may yet live to see the "fellow-citizens with the saints" fulfill their prophetic destiny. Should that be our happy lot, we are certain to rejoice with the heavens in having learned at long last to comprehend the will of the Lord for his people, to comprehend reality and one another and to understand what may be if we can learn how to help make the prophetic utterances of the centuries come to pass in our own lifetime.