

Family Scriptures

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For a book of remembrance we have written among us,
according to the pattern given by the finger of God;
and it is given in our own language (Moses 6:46).

SOMETIME IN MY JOURNEY THROUGH MIA I managed to start a picture pedigree chart with postage-stamp-sized portraits of my Thatcher progenitors. However, my own sense of my family's past did not come from such exercises. My grandfather, Nathan Davis Thatcher, was my Book of Remembrance. The pedigree he passed on to me would never have fit in a pale blue binder. He gave me such a vivid sense of my ancestors, especially the male ones, that I am sure when I get to the other side I will be able to recognize them, not because they will look like the stiff-bearded patriarchs glued in my book but because they will be gathered around a table somewhere in impassioned discourse, eyes alight, arms flailing the air, voices raised in what anybody but a Thatcher would call anger.

It was many years before I realized that the Thatcher progenitors I came to know at my Grandpa's knee were all in some sense rebels. There was Hezekiah, the founder of the clan, who disagreed with one of the regulations imposed during the crossing to the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 and decided to move on to California. Hezekiah got to Sacramento just in time to get rich merchandising supplies for forty-niners. He came back to Zion bringing gold for the tithing storehouse and a future presiding bishop for the Church, his son-in-law William B. Preston. I don't recall hearing Grandpa say anything about repentance or submissiveness as he told that story. The moral of that story, though Grandpa never put it directly, was that rebellion pays.

The most famous rebel in the family was Moses Thatcher, Hezekiah's son, but there were others, including my grandfather himself. Looking back, what surprises me is how casually, even innocently, he told these stories.

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My favorite spot in my grandparents' brick bungalow on Fifth East in Salt Lake City was a worn leather hassock by Grandpa's wing chair. Into his nineties, Grandpa tuned in to every regularly scheduled news program during the day, ear cupped close to the speaker, the other hand on the dial so he could shift from station to station during commercials to catch every nuance of the day's events. I knew enough to wait for an interval between news broadcasts before interrupting.

"Tell me a story," I would say, begging him to take me along the beam of his voice into a world that seemed more brightly colored and richly textured than the rose-carpeted room in which we sat, a world where three-year-old boys wore dresses and sunbonnets and could drown in the mill race leading a willow horse to drink, a world where angels came in dreams to lead a sick child out of a narrow log cabin into a beautiful meadow where he could recover the will to live, a world in which fathers overpowered bears but were helpless to save a mother crushed under the snow-heavy roof of a kitchen lean-to, a world where trout could be pulled out of Idaho streams by the sackful if one were smart enough to use squirrel tails for bait, a world of danger and beauty.

Grandpa never showed much interest in genealogy. In fact I remember him saying once, when some member of the family was earnestly matching names and dates and filling in group sheets, "It's so full of mistakes we'll have to do it all over again anyway in the millennium." He didn't know his great-grandfather's birthdate or even his name, but he knew exactly what the kingdom would be like where they would meet some day.

Grandpa loved to quote scriptures, especially from the Old Testament prophets and the Book of Revelation. Heaven, Grandpa said, would be this world made transparent, an earth spun into glass. I looked at the globe sitting on the floor between the bookcases and his chair and protested. "It sounds terrible; I wouldn't want to live on a glass earth."

"It will be wonderful," he would say. "We will pick our nourishment out of the air." I looked at the blue veins along the backs of his hands — he used to let me trace them with my finger and watch them flatten and fill — and wondered what Grandpa would find to do in such a place. Every afternoon, leaning on his cane, he still walked the railroad tracks beside the family chemical plant next door, noting signs of expansion or waste.

But I knew when he got started on the Bible or the Doctrine and Covenants, I was lost. I could only smile and listen, hoping he would go back to his own history when the sermon was over. Grandpa intertwined our family history with the scriptures; I learned them together.

As I recall, there were only two women in Grandpa's stories — the old lady who rolled him over a barrel and rubbed his limbs with whiskey the time he almost drowned, and his mother. Grandpa was fifteen when his mother was killed. He was with her at the time. He often told me about that hard first winter in Gentile Valley and the difficulty they had in getting his mother's body across the mountains to Logan for burial. She had just sent him into the other part of the cabin to change his socks when the roof of the lean-to where she was washing collapsed.

I developed the usual reverence for pioneer hardship from that story, but I didn't get any real sense of my great-grandmother's personality. It was the men in the stories who had the kind of idiosyncracies that made them memorable. Hezekiah Thatcher, for all his wealth, always refused to pray or speak in public. Not until many years later did I discover that he had a wife to match him. According to a story passed down in another branch of the family, Alley Kitchen Thatcher was not only wise, self-reliant, and devoted to the Church, but independent enough to smoke her West Virginia clay pipe in Logan.

People used to ask me if I were related to Moses Thatcher, the apostle. Moses and my great-grandfather, John B. Thatcher, were brothers, sons of Hezekiah and Alley. I don't recall ever being embarrassed by the relationship. All I knew was that Moses Thatcher had been dropped from the Quorum of the Twelve because he refused to obey what he considered an unjust request. Grandpa always spoke of "Uncle Mose" with affection. I am sure he told me the whole story of Moses' troubles but I could never remember the details; they didn't seem to matter. I didn't discover until many years later that his conflict with the brethren had been over politics. I might have known. The Thatchers, except my father, were ardent Democrats. "Rabid," my Republican mother used to say. My great-grandfather, John B., was eventually elected to the Idaho legislature. When my father ran for the same office many years later, my Grandmother said, with great passion, "I never thought I would live to see the day when a son of mine would run for office in the Republican party."

As a child I loved to tell my friends that my great-grandfather, John B. Thatcher, had given his name to a town. It didn't matter much that the town was pretty little and so far off our usual route to Salt Lake City that we never went there. It was a town nonetheless. Thatcher, Idaho, was just over the mountains from Logan in Gentile Valley, a place with a right to its name. I loved to hear Grandpa tell about the time he outran the U.S. marshal on the train between Blackfoot and Pocatello. The Idaho Test Oath of 1884, as Grandpa explained it, "made it impossible to vote and still be a Mormon." He was right. The Idaho law went beyond the Edmunds-Tucker Act, which disfranchised polygamists, to bar all Mormons, even unmarried men like Grandpa, from voting. A prospective voter not only had to swear that he was not a bigamist or polygamist but also that he was not a member of any organization "which practices bigamy or polygamy or plural or celestial marriage, as a doctrinal rite."

The Idaho Republicans had jailed or driven into hiding most polygamist Mormon leaders by 1886. Then they went after the remaining Mormons in places like Gentile Valley. Grandpa turned twenty-one that year and was determined to vote, so he and several other young men in Thatcher decided to temporarily "resign" from the Church and sign the oath. When Uncle Mose, who was still in good standing in the Twelve, heard what they had done, he chastised them for taking their covenants so lightly. But by then, it didn't much matter. Grandpa had already registered and voted, though it hadn't been easy.

A few days before the election, the U.S. marshal, who didn't believe Grandpa was any less a Mormon for his "resignation," had found him in the

field and “arrested him.” At least, that’s the way Grandpa put it. Maybe he simply issued a summons because he told Grandpa to appear the next day at the court house in Blackfoot. When Grandpa got there, the courtroom and the jail were overflowing with Mormons. He decided he wouldn’t be missed. Hiding out in an abandoned railroad car with another fugitive Mormon, he waited until dark, then hopped the first train south. Everything had worked out just fine, but somewhere between Blackfoot and Pocatello, the U.S. marshal unexpectedly walked into the front of the car where Grandpa and his friend were sitting. They outran him to the last car, dropping off into the night. Grandpa walked home across the sage-covered hills, half-carrying his friend who had used the trip to Blackfoot to buy whiskey. “And that’s how I cast my first vote,” Grandpa would say. Of all his stories, this was the best. I loved to think of gnarled, scripture-quoting Grandpa as an outlaw.

The story that came to mean the most to me as a mature woman, however, was not one Grandpa told me himself, though it was about him. Dad used to tell it, emphasizing the pungent punchline, whenever we got our feelings hurt or said anything critical about the Church. When he was twelve years old, his father had been the bishop of the Thatcher ward. One day the two of them were out together either looking for animals or fixing fence, I can’t remember which, when they discovered that the stake president’s son had fenced off a piece of land the family had long claimed as their own. The stake president’s name was Lewis Pond. If any of his descendants are reading this, I hope they will know I bear them no malice nor do I mean to cast reflections on the good character of their ancestor. It is just that the name is part of the punch line, and I can’t leave it out. Anyway, Dad never tried to cover up his own father’s weaknesses.

Grandpa was a tiny man, red-headed and hot tempered. As an argument broke out, Dad was sure it was going to come to blows. “I wondered if I was big enough to separate them,” he said. Fortunately Grandpa and his antagonist backed off, but the bitterness remained. As Dad remembered it, Grandpa sued the Ponds and won title to the land, whereupon President Pond released him as bishop of Thatcher Ward.

According to family tradition, when the congregation refused to sustain the stake president in his action, he persisted, arguing that he had the authority to change bishops with or without their approval and that a member’s vote was not really a vote at all but an opportunity to express harmony with a decision. That could have been the beginning of a bitter estrangement from the Church for my grandfather and his family, but it wasn’t.

My dad, hurt and loyal to his father, said, “Well, if that’s the way they’re going to do things, I’m not going to Church any more.”

Then Grandpa took Dad by the shoulders, looked him square in the face and said, “Now listen here, this isn’t Lew Pond’s church; this is the Lord’s church, and don’t you ever forget it.”

As Dad told the story, emphasizing the last phrase, we could feel Grandpa’s fire. The lesson was clear — do not hinge your faith on the behavior of other people. A church member might hurt your feelings, a leader be unkind, or a

meeting boring — but this is still the Lord's church. As a child I found that lesson an easy and comfortable one. I didn't know Lew Pond and I had never lived in Thatcher, but Dad stood before me, strong in the faith.

I don't know how important that story has been to my brothers and sister, but as I have grown older and have accumulated more experience — and perhaps a few scars — it has become increasingly significant to me. When Dad told me the story once more a few months before his death, he emphasized the dismay and fear he had felt, giving the story a complexity and a poignancy it had not had for me before. In a curious way, the story teaches allegiance to the Church by acknowledging the fallibility of its leaders. To some Mormons that probably seems like a contradiction. Over and over we are told to "follow the Prophet" and, by extension, any of those who stand in a line of authority between us and him. I learned that doctrine in Sunday School and in Primary and in my own home, and I respect it; but I also learned in my own home that it is sometimes necessary to separate the Lord's voice from that of his servants. "This isn't Lew Pond's church; this is the Lord's church." That phrase is embedded in my mind as firmly as any of the MIA themes I memorized and recited as a teenager. "Choose ye this day, whom ye will serve," said Joshua, "but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord." Yes, my Grandpa Thatcher added, but we may choose not to serve Lew Pond.

Only recently have I connected all these Thatcher stories and discovered the underlying pattern. First Hezekiah, then Moses, then Nathan — in each generation, some Thatcher resisted the constituted authority of the Church. The circle widened when I discovered the Woolley side of my Thatcher pedigree. I am quite sure Moses Thatcher's example affected my grandfather, but I wonder if Grandpa also knew his mother's uncle, Edwin Woolley, whose independence was legendary. According to one account, Brigham Young once asked Bishop Woolley, after they had had a disagreement, if he was going to "go off and apostatize." To which Edwin answered, "If this were your church, President Young, I would be tempted to do so. But this is just as much my church as it is yours, and why should I apostatize from my own church?"

The sense that this is "my church" as well as "the Lord's church" permeates my family scriptures, and I think it has had a lot to do with my own commitment to the institution even when I have been most aware of the problems in it. When my husband was released from a bishopric a few years ago for disagreeing with his stake president,* Grandpa's story came back to me with renewed power. Its mythical clarity was comforting; I found it easy to substitute the name of one stake president for another.

As I was working through this experience, a marvelous thing happened — a friend with whom I had shared the story sent me a transcription of the early minutes of Thatcher Ward and Bannock Stake. Opening that packet was a curious experience, sort of like touching the Isaiah scroll from Qumran. Here from some dark cave in the Church Archives was concrete evidence capable of confirming — or shattering — my faith in the family scriptures. I was almost

* Gael D. Ulrich, "Speaking Up: Two-Way Communication in the Church," *DIALOGUE* 17 (Fall 1984): 134-43.

afraid to start reading. Grandpa's stories, softened and shaped by memory, belonged to the magical world of my childhood. Did I really want to turn my historian's flashlight on them?

My reticence was soon overwhelmed by the delight of recognition. Here in this hastily transcribed record were my ancestors, popping up on every other page with their strong opinions — preaching, teaching, and disagreeing. In the earliest section, I found my great-grandpa, John B. Thatcher, voting “no” to the boundary lines originally proposed for the division of “Mormon Ward” in February 1891. His voice prevailed; the boundaries were changed; and in the next item of business, “President Parkinson moved that the north half of Mormon ward be known as Thatcher.” The first bishop of the new ward was Lewis Pond.

Because ward clerks a hundred years ago did more than fill in blanks, I could hear my ancestors talking in these old records. John B. Thatcher's favorite topic was the Word of Wisdom. In priesthood meeting on 2 January 1895 he taught the brethren that “all hot drinks were injurious as being contrary to nature. Hot Baths were not good. Neather Hot applications to bruises and wounds,” and then he added that “all transgressions would have to be paid for by those who Transgress.” I thought of my father eating his vegetable soup close to the boiling point, proclaiming with Paul, “Be ye either hot or cold or I will spew ye out of my mouth.” Now I knew at least one of the topics the Thatchers would be arguing about somewhere in the eternities.

I read through the minutes with increasing excitement. By the time I reached the fateful year, 1912, I was deep in Gentile Valley. Piece by piece, from the rich tangle of ward and stake minutes, I unknotted Grandpa's story. It was all there. Lew Pond. The quarrel. The defiant yet faithful words Grandpa had passed on to his son. But there was more. Traced through the old records, the narrative lost its linear clarity and acquired the scraggy complications of history.

There were actually two “President Ponds” in 1912, Lewis and his counselor Joseph T. Pond. That explains why one version of Grandpa's story refers to “Joe Pond's church.” No doubt both President Ponds were fine men and faithful Saints, but they were obviously as opinionated — and as prolific — as the Thatchers. They may also have been more strait-laced. At a Parents' Convention in 1909, President Joseph Pond objected to a proposal for a holiday, saying he had “too much to do to spare his boys and does not believe a holiday or playing ball is of any particular good to anyone.” Reading that reminded me of Dad's stories about going with his family up into the mountains above Thatcher on the Fourth of July, building swings in the trees, and making ice cream from snow.

Yes, there was evidence even in the official stake minutes to suggest that President Pond was a hard man to follow. Grandpa was not the only bishop in trouble in 1912. Bishop A. E. Hubbard was called into high council meeting on 4 May to explain why he hadn't abided by the decision of a court of arbitration “between him and Pres. Lewis S. Pond.” Hubbard said that “he would never feel right toward Pres. Pond.” A month later, two high councilors re-

ported visiting Bishop William M. Harris, who “said he does not remember that he had said anything against President Pond” though he admitted there had been some trouble between him and Brother Mendenhall. “Harmony” was the favorite topic in Bannock Stake in 1912, but the more the presidency talked about it the more remote it seemed.

In fact, what is striking about Grandpa’s term of bishop was that it lasted five years. His immediate successor lasted only two years, two previous bishops less than one. I am perhaps reading into the record my own affection, but Nathan Thatcher comes across to me as a loving and effective leader in an extremely difficult situation. Early in his administration he called all the men in the ward together “to see what the reason was that the Priesthood did not support him.” The responses ranged from President Pond’s enthusiastic resolve to help make this ward “an Ideal ward” to Brother B. J. Folkman’s simple refusal “to express himself.” Most of the responses were wonderfully candid. Brother Brown said “he could see he was not living up to the gospel and hadn’t been since his mission. But had made up his mind to do better.” Brother M. Robbins said that “if he always felt like he did now he would support [the] Bishop but [he] would not pledge himself.”

Reading this account reminded me of another of my dad’s comments. He once told me that when his father was a young man “he got into the habit of using tobacco and didn’t go to church.” Many times, Dad said, his mother would pile all the children into the “white-topped buggy” and take them to meeting alone. Now as bishop, Grandpa was in the position of trying to activate shepherders and farmers who were encountering the same temptations, the same slackening of spirit that he had himself experienced. He closed the meeting by saying that “he felt to rejoice in [the] Resolutions of the brothers and felt as a father of the Ward that it would be more good.”

What the record shows, however, is five long years of struggle — struggle to get the brethren to come to priesthood meeting, struggle to conform to a new church schedule, struggle to initiate Parents Meetings, to get teachers to attend Sunday School Union Meeting, to keep the building clean, and to put kindling in the wood box. In ward conference on 18 December 1910, Bishop Thatcher “reported the Bishopric united and most of the people are trying to do their duty. The priesthood meetings are good but more should attend.” Finally on 2 June 1912 in fast meeting, he stood up and “thanked the people for the support given him as Bishop and asked them to support his successor. He testified to the gospel and stated that he has passed through great difficulties and sacrifices, but hopes to prove faithful to the end.”

For ward members those “great difficulties” needed no elaboration. A month earlier, Grandpa had been “suspended” because of problems with the stake president. On 21 July he was officially released. While there is no direct corroboration for the family tradition that the ward initially refused to sustain the release, the minutes report that the presidency took great care in explaining their action. President Pond read the minutes from two hearings, and President Mendenhall explained “that there was some difficulty about land which had very little to do with the difficulty” and added that “the Presidency have

the right to suspend a Bishop who is out of harmony with them.” According to the official record, the motion to release Bishop Thatcher carried with “no votes in opposition.”

I wonder what minutes President Pond read in sacrament meeting. It is hard to imagine they were the same ones my friend found in the Church Archives. I bless the stake clerk who kept those minutes. Though the specific issues that divided Grandpa Thatcher and the Ponds remain obscure, the spirit of their encounter survives to instruct and chasten.

President Lewis Pond asked why Bishop Thatcher had neglected to attend meetings when specially notified. Grandpa answered that “he had not attended ward meetings for several weeks because his sheep needed his care,” adding that he would “do the same again . . . if he saw fit.” Then President Mendenhall asked if the Bishop felt he had the right to overturn instructions from the stake presidency and high council. According to the minutes, Grandpa answered that “if he does not think it is proper he would not follow the instructions” — and added that he would “oppose the whole church if he thought the church was in error.”

The line of questioning then shifted from obedience to harmony. When the presidency asked Grandpa about certain statements he had made about them, Grandpa answered that “the tongue is an unruly member and that he had a short time ago told Pres. Jos. T. Pond to his face that he was a damn liar and that later that Jos. T. Pond came to him and acknowledged that he was a damn liar.” Then he went on to say that he had not “repudiated any advice of the Presidency,” and that he was “in harmony” with them. Lewis Pond responded, “Bishop we certainly think you are out of harmony with us,” whereupon Grandpa “got up and said that he had nothing more to say and would not stay to listen any longer. But is glad this is not your church but God’s church.”

My mother and brother didn’t much like those minutes when I showed them my copy. “Why dredge up all that old bitterness?” Mother said. “Do you think Grandpa was a hothead?” my brother asked. Yes, there was bitterness. The “unrighteous dominion” of President Lewis Pond seems less clear in the stake minutes than in the family scriptures. And yes, Grandpa was recalcitrant. His words sound less elevated, less worthy of preservation, in the context of an angry confrontation in a church meeting. I felt genuine sorrow as I read those minutes. Grandpa Thatcher and the Ponds were committed and faithful leaders. With so much important work to do and so few leaders in Gentile Valley, why had they dissipated their strength (and denied the power of their priesthood) by quarreling?

Yet I wonder how our official scriptures would look if we had the ward records from Corinth or the minutes of First Presidency meetings under Peter. Scriptures clarify by sifting out eternal principles from the grainy confusion of ordinary life.

It would be easy, on the basis of the clerk’s minutes, to write one of those familiar lessons about obedience, to dismiss Grandpa Thatcher for his arrogance and inflexibility. I am grateful that a different lesson was preserved in the

family scriptures. The very words Grandpa flung in frustration and anger at the stake president became the testimony that healed and strengthened his son. For me, understanding something of the pain and confusion in Thatcher in 1912 deepens the meaning of Grandpa's words. "This isn't Lew Pond's — or Nathan Thatcher's — church. This is the Lord's church." Because God loved us enough to send his Son, Grandpa was redeemed in his own anger, uplifted in his own impatience, and sustained in his own weakness.

Although I am not much better at doing genealogy than my grandfather, I believe with Joseph Smith that "we cannot be saved without our dead." Certainly no fifth-generation Mormon can be saved without in some way coming to terms with the ancestors who passed on the faith. Like many descendants of the early Saints, I have often measured my own commitment against theirs. Could I have survived the burning of Nauvoo? Crossed the plains? Endured polygamy? Given birth in a log cabin? I can remember saying once, during a period of some alienation from what I considered the faith, "I am afraid the blood has run thin."

I don't feel that way anymore. The Thatcher blood, proud, willful, and cantankerous, runs thick. That it has fed and been fed by the Lord's church for six generations is a source of wonder and joy to me. I cherish the family scriptures that have helped me to understand myself as I have learned to recognize and love my ancestors, stubborn Hezekiah, pipe-smoking Alley, fallen Moses, and my own Grandpa Nate, red-headed and righteous in his rebellion.

Grandpa was right: heaven is this earth spun into glass.