

## Historic Notes on Gathering to Zion

(Adapted from: Madsen, Carol Cornwall, *Journey to Zion*, Pp. xi-xiv and 3-12)

For more than a century, historians of the American West have lauded Brigham Young's accomplishments in leading the Latter-day Saints to the Salt Lake Valley and in expanding Mormon settlement across a broad western landscape. From the perspective of western settlement history, two observations commonly emerge in telling the story of the westward trek and subsequent colonization of the Intermountain West. First, historians note that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints succeeded in moving tens of thousands of emigrants west during a twenty-year pioneering period because of the organizing skills of President Young. Second, they note the importance of the unity of the Saints—their commitment to a common purpose and their willingness to sacrifice personal needs for the greater good.

Both of these characteristics were evident in the Church long before the Saints sold their farms and homes in the Nauvoo area and elsewhere and fitted out for a journey into the wilderness beyond United States boundaries. Brigham Young and others had experienced the benefits of traveling in well-organized migrant companies. They had marched under military style in Zion's Camp from Kirtland, Ohio, to Clay County, Missouri, under the leadership of the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1834. Many of the Saints migrated to Missouri in organized companies. Members of the Quorum of the Twelve helped organize the removal of the Saints from Missouri to a new place of refuge in the Nauvoo area. They did so by creating a committee to manage resources and people. In addition, during their mission in England, the Twelve structured the Saints into branches and districts with spiritual overseers and regular procedures for reporting.

These experiences taught the Twelve that, like the biblical children of Israel, the Lord's modern people were willing to follow their leaders because of testimonies that bound them to a common objective. The Saints who gathered to the designated Zion across the Rocky Mountains during the last half of the nineteenth century believed that the Lord had picked that place for refuge. In every step they took, the Saints moved westward with faith. They longed to gather with other believers, and they looked forward to the opportunity to build a temple to replace the Houses of the Lord left behind in Kirtland and Nauvoo.

The word and will of the Lord to Brigham Young, given in Iowa in January 1847, confirmed the use of principles tried and tested over a dozen years by faithful members. The Saints understood and accepted the organizational pattern set forth by the Lord, "Let the companies be organized with captains of hundreds, captains of fifties, and captains of tens, with a president and his two counselors at their head, under the direction of the Twelve Apostles" (D&C 136:3). The carefully structured emigrant camps offered inexperienced travelers the safety that comes from sharing talents and resources. It allowed the Saints to cooperate in establishing Zion and fulfilling its purposes of gathering believers to temple cities, offering them saving ordinances, and performing those same ordinances by proxy for deceased ancestors.

Brigham Young's inspired guidelines for the westward trek emphasized that organization, orderliness, cooperation, and discipline on the trail encompassed spiritual as well as temporal principles. Latter-day Saint emigrants were "organized into companies, with a covenant and promise to keep all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" and to "walk in all the

ordinances of the Lord." If the Saints would share their goods with the poor, the widows, and the fatherless "with a pure heart, in all faithfulness," the Lord promised to bless them in their journey to a land of peace (D&C 136:2, 4, 8, 11, 16).

Here, then, is the key to understanding the individual experiences of pioneering. Each diary kept, letter written, and reminiscence penned carries within it the seeds of faith. The westering Saints were preparing a people to receive the risen Lord when he returned to claim his people. They emulated in their lives the Christian principles of faith, charity, and hope. They sought the blessings of eternal life in temples, and they wanted their ancestors and their children to enjoy the same blessings. The organized migration was a means to a faith-filled objective.

. . . The generation that pioneered a western headquarters for the Church through their personal sacrifices preserved a message for later generations. As a worldwide church remembers their faith in a time of commemoration, that message of faith carries new meaning. Those early Saints accepted the Lord's reminder "My people must be tried in all things, that they may be prepared to receive the glory that I have for them, even the glory of Zion; and he that will not bear chastisement is not worthy of my kingdom." That promised glory would be theirs, the Lord explained—in words just as true today—"if ye are faithful in keeping all my words that I have given you, from the days of Adam to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Jesus and his apostles, and from Jesus and his apostles to Joseph Smith, whom I did call upon by mine angels, my ministering servants, and by mine own voice out of the heavens, to bring forth my work; which foundation he did lay, and was faithful" (D&C 136:31, 37 - 38).

The first generation of Latter-day Saints set in motion the Lord's work of bringing his church out of obscurity (see D&C 1:30). When Mary Fielding Smith, the wife of Hyrum Smith, left her husband incarcerated at Liberty Jail in 1838 and set out from Far West, Missouri, to find a new place of refuge in Illinois, she understood these same principles. To her brother in England, she wrote, "I feel but little concerned about where I am, if I can but keep my mind staid upon God; for, you know in this there is perfect peace (Millennial Star 2 [June 1840]: 41).

History remembers Brigham Young as the charismatic leader and skillful organizer of the Mormon westward migration, settling a significant portion of the Rocky Mountain region and establishing a permanent presence in the West. But Brigham Young thought of himself as a parent in that great undertaking, calling his children to "come home." "I feel like a father with a great family of children around me in a winter storm, " he wrote to his friend Jesse Little in February 1847, "and I am looking with calmness, confidence and patience for the clouds to break and the sun to shine so that I can run out and plant and sow and gather in the corn and wheat and say, Children, come home, winter is approaching again. . . . I am ready to kill the fatted calf and make a joyful feast to all who will come and partake."

To the thousands of Saints waiting at the Missouri River, throughout the states, and in countries abroad, Brigham Young was indeed the father of the Gathering. Though not yet sustained as the prophet when he wrote this letter, as president of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles he carried the burden of fulfilling Joseph Smith's vision of establishing a permanent home for the Church. Within the next two decades, he would shepherd seventy thousand Saints to the Salt Lake Valley

in as ordered and safe a manner as possible. Even the ten experimental handcart companies, with misfortune befalling only two of them, brought nearly three thousand Saints to Utah.

The "peculiar" and "distinguishing" doctrine of the Gathering spurred the faithful westward, tested their commitment to the work of the restoration, and strengthened both the temporal and spiritual foundations of the Church. More important, it created a nucleus of Saints to whom the Lord could reveal the saving ordinances of the Gospel, which, in Nauvoo, had blessed the Church with "privileges and power she otherwise could not have had," explained Thomas Ward, editor of the *Millennial Star*, to the waiting converts in Great Britain.

Many new members responded to their own inward call to gather, touched individually by "the spirit of gathering." But whatever its source, the call to come home reordered the lives of thousands of people, conjoining them in one of the great epics of western American history and at a pivotal point in the history of the Church.

Ironically, when Brigham Young wrote his letter to James Little, he had not yet been to the "home" to which he was calling the Saints. Its specific western location, however, really made little difference. *It was not as much where it was to be as what it was to be* that interested Brigham Young and his followers. Of importance to them was that it would be a place of God's choosing, not theirs, and that their prophet would know it when he saw it. In the early 1830s Joseph Smith had talked of the far west as the "region blessed by the Lord as the land of Zion," and in 1842 he had prophesied that the Church would eventually move there. When the Saints left Nauvoo, recalled apostle Erastus Snow in 1873, all they knew about their destination was that they "were seeking a country which had been pointed out by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the midst of the Rocky Mountains in the interior of the great North American continent." Thus, while the starkness of the Salt Lake Valley caused the settlers some dismay, the knowledge that the Lord had designated it as the new Zion reassured them. There, the Lord had said, they would find a haven, a refuge, a place "in which [He] designed to hide His people." There they would be safe from the destruction of the wicked, the persecutions of their enemies, and the temptations of Babylon. A decade after settling there, Brigham Young confirmed it as "a good place to make Saints" and "a good place for Saints to live; it is the place the Lord has appointed, and we shall stay here until He tells us to go somewhere else." He was not apologetic in saying, "I want hard times so that every person that does not wish to stay, for the sake of his religion, will leave." And hard times they had.

But turning back was far from Thomas Bullock's mind in July 1847 when he first gazed on the shimmering salt sea and empty sweep of land edging it. "Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah," he was moved to exclaim, "there's my home at last." Neither the reassuring familiarity or material comforts generally associated with home provoked his cry of thanksgiving. Nor did Patty Sessions see anything familiar or comforting—or even beautiful—when she saw the Valley a few months later. Yet she also viewed the scene as a joyful homecoming "My heart flows with gratitude to God that we have got home all safe, lost nothing, have been blessed in life and health. I rejoice all the time." Ann Agatha Pratt was another. She wrote, "My soul was filled with thankfulness to God for bringing us to a place of rest and safety—home."

While the Saints did not ignore their desires for comfortable shelter and adequate food, productive work, and at least some of the amenities of life, the image of home that drew them west was spiritual, not temporal. The personal stories of the pioneers attest to that reality. They show the eager response of the Saints to answer the call to come home, and they reveal the steadfast faith that enabled them to do it. For if conversion changed the worship of these early Saints, it also altered their pattern of life, especially evident on the trail. Mormonism was nourished by a principle that persistently privileged the general welfare and community goals over individual gain and personal ambition. The millennial hope was to establish Zion and build a spiritual kingdom on earth worthy to receive its heavenly ruler. Recognizing the depth of their devotion to this collective mission is the key to understanding the Saints' willingness to undergo the personal suffering and sacrifice it entailed. Nancy Tracy articulated this commitment. An early convert, she wrote at the end of a long life that took her from New York to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and finally Utah to follow the Church, "My life, ever since I became a Mormon, has been made up of moving about, of persecutions, sacrifices, poverty, sickness, and death. Through all my sufferings I never doubted but felt to cling to the gospel."

The Mormon hegira was an epoch in LDS history. It underscored Mormonism's collective purpose and gave the pioneers a religious and historical identity that distinguished them from other western travelers.

Moreover, the trek west was not only a geographic bridge between the City of Joseph and the city built by Brigham; it was also a psychic bridge, a defining and coalescing period for the Church and its members. It marked a transition from the esoteric, charismatic leadership of the revelator Joseph Smith to the pragmatic, administrative leadership of implementor Brigham Young. It served as a significant institutional rite of passage as well as a personal pilgrim's progress.

Time has tended to telescope the trail accounts into a single story, a monolithic tale beginning with the exodus from Nauvoo and proceeding, after a brief interlude at Winter Quarters, on to the Salt Lake Valley. The voices we hear tell a much more complex and far more dramatic tale. The 1846 crossing of Iowa offered challenges different from those experienced by the handcart pioneers who crossed Iowa a decade later, and the journey beyond the Missouri little resembled the Iowa segment for many of the Saints. Though more than three times farther, it was better organized and equipped, and for many veterans of the Iowa trail, much easier. Those who went west in the 1860s found that the railroad, reaching ever farther westward, cut wagon travel by hundreds of miles. Moreover, the European emigrants added thousands of nautical miles to their journey west and tell another story altogether.

The Nauvoo exiles were distinctive in their own way. They were true refugees, forced to leave their homes, too many of them unprepared. With their destination still vague, they were wanderers, scarred by what lay behind and apprehensive of what lay before. But their primary difference was that they were the only ones of the seventy thousand Zion-bound Saints during the pioneer period who had received the blessings of the temple. The fifty-six hundred endowed men and women, led by the nine apostles who held all the keys of the priesthood, left Nauvoo as a "kingdom of priests, and an holy nation," the Lord's covenant people (Exodus 19:6). As covenanters, they knew at the outset that their true destination was spiritual, not geographic, and

they would go where the Lord led through his prophets. Their endowment was as assuring to them of God's presence and purpose in their lives as was the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night to the ancient Israelites.

Hundreds of personal writings remain to tell the story. Company clerks and many company captains kept travel records. Others wrote for their own reasons, and while far more reminiscences than diaries have been preserved, many remembered accounts convey the same sense of immediacy as diaries. While the underlying motive for their being on the western trail suffuses the spirit of these accounts, their stories dwell on the particulars of their trail experience. Some historians have noted the similarity in men's and women's trail observations. Both, for instance, show the same concern for order in the companies and for environmental conditions. Both note the importance in selecting the right campsites, the availability of water, the difficulty of river crossings, the methods and amount of food distribution, the feed and condition of the oxen, the success of hunting trips, the nature of the terrain, and the spiritual interventions. Other historians have emphasized gendered perceptions, noting, for instance, the difference in men's and women's reaction to Indians, women's sensitivity to the personal needs of their traveling companions, women's emphasis on the web of friends and family and tasks within their company, and some women's conscious notation of the graves along the way.

Mormon journals confirm both findings. But even more than gender differences or similarities, the readers of these narratives may find that the personality of the writers, their level of literacy and writing skills, their individual interests, their motivations for writing, and even the year in which they traveled made the primary difference in their style or content. Moreover, the age of the writers played an important role in their perception of the experience. For men, the middle years were among their most active, and they carried the burden of the physical labor of trail travel. For women these were the childbearing years, a period of physical vulnerability. The travails of pregnancy and childbirth in a wilderness and the relentless watchcare of infants, toddlers, and adventurous teenagers, with sometimes the additional care of aged parents, engendered a far different trail experience from what single, childless young men and women or older dependent adults encountered.

It is the combination of these experiences that tells the full story of the Mormon trek. Each account brings its own individuality to bear and in so doing enlarges and refines the story for us. The personal experiences of the pioneers can show the value of such life writings to later generations. They are our heritage as Latter-day Saints.

The persistent and pervasive celebration of this epic event each July has tended to mythologize it, initiated by the pioneers themselves. For them the Nauvoo exodus found its prototype in the flight of ancient Israel. The fleeing Saints called themselves the Camp of Israel; their Sinai was Nauvoo; the freezing of the Mississippi, the parting of the Red Sea; their sacred books and records, the Ark of the Covenant; and the miracle of the quail among the poor camps, the appearance of the quail to the Israelites. They were the Lord's covenant people delivered from their enemies by a modern Moses and led to a promised land where they would build a temple to the God who had preserved them.

We miss the reality of the pioneers' lives, however, if we allow the mythic elements of the trail to cloak its human dimensions. Though they were of another century, facing circumstances unfamiliar to most people today, the pioneers were not of another species, their heroism understandable only because we think of them as different from us. Their words remind us that underneath their seeming stoicism, their tenacious faith, and their persistent courage lay their all-too-human fears and sorrows, their discouragement and annoyances. The frequency of accidents and disease, of harassment and persecution, of separation and loss did not inure them to pain and suffering. They were not less fearful than we are when hunger threatens and disease decimates, nor less awed by nature's power to harm as well as to please. Nor did they mourn less because death came more often.

In their lifetime as well as in ours, the pioneers were revered as a distinct generation, bonded by their shared experience. One company of ten made that connection permanent. Strangers at the outset, by journey's end they vowed to stay together. They built their homes and reared their families near each other, continuing the familial relationship they had developed on the trail. The faith they shared in traveling to Zion endured in their shared lives thereafter.

In answering the call to "come home," the pioneers wrote a moving and powerful chapter in Mormon history. Theirs is a sacred story. In their own words they have shown in the most vivid of terms the power of faith and the extraordinary dimensions of the human spirit.

To claim a pioneer in one's pedigree is tantamount to claiming a pilgrim father or Revolutionary War patriot in one's ancestry. The popularity of the complementary organizations, the Sons and Daughters of Utah Pioneers, attests to the enduring pride of noble descent. From such veneration has come a library of pioneer histories, well-preserved diaries, and multitudes of reminiscences written for proud children and grandchildren. This written legacy is beyond price.

But the majority of Church members today cannot trace their lineage to these pioneers. Can the story have meaning to them? Perhaps their own spiritual separation from Babylon and the blazing of their own religious trail, not to a Zion of place but to one of heart, connects these latter-day pioneers to their nineteenth century counterparts in ways that only those who have known this life-changing experience can truly share or understand.