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Mormon Persecutions in Missouri, 1833

RICHARD L. BUSHMAN

The Mormon war in Missouri began in 1833 when the residents of Jackson County drove out the Mormons at gun point. Peace officers, militia leaders, ministers, and merchants joined the mobs. They broke into homes, whipped men and threatened women, destroyed the Mormon press, and tarred and feathered Latter-day Saint leaders. The Saints fled in all directions, most of them crossing the Missouri River into Clay County.

The Missourians were voluble about the causes of their enmity. Declarations adopted by mass meetings in Jackson County and articles by individual apologists described the sources of resentment: interference with Negroes, collusion with Indians, threatened armed aggression, the offensive religion of the Mormons, and their growing political power.¹

To explain the settlers' hatred of the Mormons, some historians have simply repeated this list, safe in the assumption that some or all contributed to the outburst of violence.² But this conservative procedure leaves the episode in partial obscurity. A bare summary of causes gives no clear idea of the

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¹Four documents describe mob feelings: Two manifestoes published by the mob in July 1833 before the expulsion, "The Manifesto of the Mob," and "Mormonism," are found in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Salt Lake City, 1902, I, 374-6 and 395-9. "Mormonism," was published in the *Western Monitor*, Fayette, Mo., August 2, 1833. Isaac McCoy, a Jackson County minister, published an apologetic narration following the expulsion entitled, "The Disturbances in Jackson County." It appeared in the *Missouri Republican*, St. Louis, December 20, 1833, reprinted from the *Western Monitor*. Dale Morgan copied the *Missouri Republican* article into his "Transcripts of Articles on Mormonism and the Far West," a typescript in the Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City. Samuel D. Lucas, Jackson County merchant and later a militia general active in expelling the Saints from the State, wrote an article on "Jackson County" for the *Gazeteer of the State of Missouri*, compiled by Alphonse Wetmore, St. Louis, 1837, 92ff. Most of the article was given to describing the fantastic doctrines and moral depravity of the Mormons.

²For example, John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith, an American Prophet*, New York, 1946, 105.

temper of the people who so readily took to arms to achieve their ends, nor of the relative importance of the forces acting on the Missourians.

Other historians in an attempt to evaluate the elements of controversy have selected the Negro issue as most fundamental. From a post-Civil War perspective, it has appeared credible that southern settlers would rise against a group of northerners accused of interfering with slaves. "Missouri's anti-Mormon outrages," writes one expert, "were the counterpart of the anti-abolition violence breaking out all over the country."³

This analysis makes the Jackson County persecutions intelligible; but such a reading of the evidence is questionable. A re-examination of the documents in an effort to sort and weigh the issues dividing Saint and gentile leads to another conclusion about the sources of conflict. Negroes indeed played a part, but it was not central. The Jackson County hatred for the Mormons was not peculiarly southern; it was rather of a piece with the forces that pursued the Saints to the end of the century.

I

In their manifestoes, the Jackson County citizens laid stress on Mormon subversion of slaves and the attempt to import free Negroes. But in fact the Mormons did not tamper with slaves and forcefully denied any intention of introducing free Negroes. Only one supposed incident backed up the complaint about subverting slaves. A Presbyterian minister, it was rumored, had said a Mormon encouraged a Negro to rebel, but when the Mormons interviewed the pastor, he denied the alleged accusation.⁴

The Mormons' enemies also pointed to an article on Negroes printed in the Latter-day Saints' newspaper, the *Evening and Morning Star*. In the summer of 1833 the *Star* had published the state laws restricting the entry of free Negroes, obviously with the purpose of discouraging the importation of colored people. "Slaves are real estate in this and other states,"

³William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen (eds.) *Among the Mormons, Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers*, New York, 1958, 77; cf. Ray Benedict West, *Kingdom of the Saints; the Story of Brigham Young and the Mormons*, New York, 1957, 45-6.

⁴*Evening and Morning Star*, Kirtland, Ohio, January, 1834, 243.

the article said, "and wisdom would dictate great care among the branches of the Church of Christ on this subject. . . . Shun every appearance of evil."⁵ But for all its plainness, the article was interpreted by non-Mormon readers as an invitation to bring in free Negroes.

When the editor learned in early July how the mob leaders distorted his meaning, he rushed an extra into print. His intention, he said, "was not only to stop free people of color from emigrating to this state, but to prevent them from being admitted as members of the Church."⁶ Though the Church did not oppose admission of Negroes, the editor in his anxiety to allay resentment, made the policy on the spot to quiet the settlers' suspicions. Despite his protestations, however, the Jackson citizens repeated their charges and a few days later destroyed the press.

Rumor alone could not have produced the violence. In this very decade, German immigrants were pouring into Missouri fresh from struggles for political liberty in Europe. They explicitly opposed slavery and actively sought to sway public opinion in this direction. They were far more likely objects of suspicion than the Latter-day Saints and yet suffered no physical persecutions. Like the Germans, the Saints were never guilty of tampering with slaves or importing free Negroes. But unlike the Germans, the Mormons expressly repudiated all abolitionist sentiments. If mere suspicion of interference with Negroes aroused Missourians to violence, the Germans should have been driven from the state before the Mormons.⁷

Though not the basic source of hatred, the Negro issue was played up in the manifestoes as a means of persuading the rest of the state that illegal violence was justified. The settlers needed public approval, to prevent intervention. If public opinion turned against Jackson County, the government could order in troops to restore the Mormons to their lands.

The manifestoes were self-conscious attempts to convince outsiders that the Mormons deserved eviction. One of them pre-

⁵"Free People of Color," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 378.

⁶*Evening and Morning Star* "Extra," July 18, 1833, in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 379.

⁷Albert Bernhardt Faust, *The German Element in the United States*, Boston, 1909, I, 439-49.

tentiously declared that the move to rid the county of the Mormons "is justified as well by the law of nature, as by the law of self-preservation."⁸ Not satisfied with a single statement, the mob leaders prepared an even lengthier, more formal "address to the public." It was proper, the citizens thought, "to lay before the public an expose [sic]" of their situation.

Professing to act "not from the excitement of the moment," but in "cool deliberation," they tried to explain why the Mormons deserved to be evicted.⁹ The report shrewdly struck a note which would be sure to arouse anger throughout the state. The Mormons, it said, interfered with slaves and urged the immigration of free Negroes. Buttressed by these indictments, war with the Saints was made reasonable to the rest of the state.

II

These accusations heated tempers and added to anti-Mormon sentiment; but a more fundamental conflict raised the settlers' wrath to the point where unfounded accusations were accepted as fact: Jackson County gentiles feared the Mormons would soon dominate their society and government. The settlers believed, the Rev. Isaac McCoy reported, that the Mormons were unscrupulous in their determination "of getting entire possession of the county."¹⁰ Jackson County drove out the Saints, another apologist said, in "self-defense."¹¹ This theme runs through both of the citizens' declarations in 1833. The Mormons were resolved, one of the statements said, to evict the old settlers by any means possible.¹²

There was real substance in the settlers' fears of Mormon domination. The Latter-day Saints themselves believed Mormon and gentile societies were incompatible. The revelations to Joseph Smith identified Jackson as Zion, and Zion was to be the abode of the righteous only.¹³ If the gentiles did not leave, the Saints believed, the Lord would destroy them. When a cholera

⁸"The Manifesto of the Mob," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 374.

⁹"Mormonism," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 395-6.

¹⁰"Disturbances in Jackson County," in *Missouri Republican*, December 20, 1833.

¹¹Lucas, "Jackson County," in Wetmore, *Gazeteer of Missouri*, 92ff.

¹²"Mormonism," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 396.

¹³Joseph Smith, *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Salt Lake City, 1951, 46:67; 52:42.

epidemic threatened the county, one Latter-day Saint told McCoy that "this plague was for the destruction of the wicked, whilst. . . the righteous would escape."¹⁴

Similar predictions were often heard among the Saints. McCoy estimated the Mormons had declared "perhaps hundreds of times, that this county was theirs, the Almighty had given it to them, and that they would surely have entire possession of it in a few years."¹⁵ "We are daily told," the settlers complained, "that we, (the Gentiles), of this county are to be cut off, and our lands appropriated by them for inheritances."¹⁶ The Mormons declare openly, the "Manifesto of the Mob" said, "that their God hath given them this county of land, and that sooner or later they must and will have possession of our lands for an inheritance."¹⁷

No one seriously believed the Saints intended to gain power by force. The revelations specifically forbade them to shed blood to obtain Zion. The use of violence, they were warned, would bring the Lord's curse upon them.¹⁸ Moreover, if the Saints were to raise their guns against the gentiles, obviously the county militia and all the forces of the state would mobilize at once for Jackson's defense. The gentiles could have lightly passed off Mormon threats and prophecies if armed aggression was the Saints' only means of evicting the old settlers.

The actual basis of the settlers' fears was neither Negroes nor Mormon violence but the Mormons' growing political influence. Since the arrival of the first small band of Saints, a steady influx had swelled Mormon numbers to 1200, one third of the county's population.¹⁹ And the end was not in sight. Through reading the *Star*, the citizens knew that the Church was actively proselyting through the north and east, recruiting more and more migrants to Missouri.²⁰ In a few years they would control schools, government and the courts.

The day is not far distant [complained one declara-

¹⁴McCoy, "Disturbances in Jackson County," in *Missouri Republican*, December 20, 1833.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, December 20, 1833.

¹⁶"Mormonism," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 396.

¹⁷"Manifesto of the Mob," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 376.

¹⁸Smith, *Doctrine and Covenants*, 63:29-31.

¹⁹*Evening and Morning Star*, July, 1833.

²⁰"Mormonism," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 397.

tion] when the civil government of the county will be in their hands; when the sheriff, the justices, and the county judges will be Mormons, or persons wishing to court their favor²¹

It was the prospect of Mormon political supremacy which promised eventual dominance to the Saints and frightened the citizens into believing every rumor about Mormon audacity.

III

Many historians have recognized the threat to the settlers of Mormon political power, but they have not pointed out the implication of this fear. Why should the prevalence of Latter-day Saints in Jackson County so repel the citizens that they should offer to sell all their property rather than live under Mormon dominance? The Presbyterians and Methodists did not object to the predominance of Baptists, nor shrink at the prospect of Baptists governing them. No one cared if Episcopalians or Congregationalists migrated to Missouri and took office. In a land of religious tolerance, the faith of public officials supposedly mattered not at all. If the citizens of Jackson County had accepted the Saints as other denominations were accepted, no expulsion would have occurred. But the Mormons were different. The extraordinary character of Latter-day Saint doctrine distinguished the Mormons as outsiders who could not be trusted with political office.

Many people in the state sensed at once that the Mormons were driven out of Jackson County on account of their religion.²² But the county could not justify its violence on these grounds. Religious toleration was too closely identified with the American constitution to be contradicted directly. McCoy did his best to counteract the impression of religious persecution, but it is evident in all the Jackson County statements.

The first charge of the "Manifesto of the Mob" was aimed at the Saints' religion. Mormons were "fanatics, or knaves," claiming to converse with God, heal the sick, and perform apostolic miracles. They blaspheme God, the "Manifesto" said, "and cast contempt on His holy religion" by their pretense to

²¹*Ibid.*, I, 397.

²²McCoy, "Disturbances in Jackson County," in *Missouri Republican*, December 20, 1833.

direct inspiration, tongues, and by "the utter subversion of human reason."²³

The second declaration of the mob tried lamely to disguise their hatred for the Mormon religion.

Of their pretended revelations from heaven—their personal intercourse with God and His angels—the maladies they pretend to heal by the laying on of hands—and the contemptible gibberish with which they habitually profane the Sabbath, and which they dignify with the appellation of unknown tongues, we have nothing to say²⁴

One of the county's apologists could not resist relating a scornful history of Mormon frauds, though he declined to descend to minutiae, "which would be as fatiguing as the detailed events of a wolf-hunt (including a biography of all the dogs). . . ."²⁵

The Mormon threat was all the greater because the Saints could not be assimilated. The religious practices of the Mormons made them socially impenetrable. The settlers soon realized that Mormon clannishness would not diminish and that the Saints would never compromise their eccentric religious beliefs.

We believed them deluded fanatics [the Mob Manifesto said], or weak and designing knaves, and that they and their pretensions would soon pass away; but in this we were deceived. The arts of a few designing leaders amongst them have thus far succeeded in holding them together as a society.²⁶

The settlers felt the presence of this people characterized by "the profoundest ignorance," and "the grossest superstition" was not only a bane to society but destructive of sane government. Non-Mormons believed that men who thought God spoke with them might disregard all the standards of human decency: "The operation of fanatic zeal upon the human mind," Lucas declared, "will account for the seeming improbability and the audacity of the outrages contemplated . . . by this people."²⁷

²³"Manifesto of the Mob," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 375-6.

²⁴"Mormonism," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 397-8.

²⁵Lucas, "Jackson County," in Wetmore, *Gazeteer of Missouri*, 92ff.

²⁶"Manifesto of the Mob," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 375.

²⁷Lucas, "Jackson County," in Wetmore, *Gazeteer of Missouri*, 92ff.

One of the mob declarations specified vividly the horrors a Mormon majority would impose.

What would be the fate of our lives and property, in the hands of jurors and witnesses, who do not blush to declare, and would not upon occasion hesitate to swear, that they have wrought miracles, . . . have conversed with God and His angels, and possess and exercise the gifts of divination and unknown tongues"²⁸

Ultimately, then, it was religious differences that drove the settlers to expel the Mormons. The Latter-day Saints' belief in revelation and miracles set them off from the gentiles and aroused their disgust. Even before the full proportions of Mormon political power were evident, settlers brick-batted Mormon houses. More cool-headed citizens prevented further outbreaks for a time, but when it appeared that these outrageous extremists would soon assume political control, the county united to expel them. "The vexation that would attend the civil rule of these fanatics" was beyond the limits of toleration of all the settlers.²⁹

Once disliked because of their religion and feared for their impending capture of political institutions, the Mormons could be believed capable of any atrocity. Mob leaders successfully propagated unfounded charges of tampering with slaves and planned armed aggression. These accusations added fuel to the fire first lighted by the religious differences between Mormon and gentile.

IV

Through all the persecutions from Jackson County to Utah, the conflict of Mormons and gentiles rested on an important assumption: the Latter-day Saints were an alien society. The mob declarations spoke of "their society" and "our society."³⁰ The Mormons were not simply deviants within the social group. They were outsiders whose actions did not follow the expected patterns of human behavior and who consequently could not be trusted.

²⁸"Mormonism," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 397-8.

²⁹*Ibid.*, I, 397.

³⁰"Manifesto of the Mob," in Smith, *History of the Church*, I, 375.

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The religion of the Saints, above all, defined their differences and estranged them from the gentiles. Clay County citizens frankly told the Mormons that their beliefs set them apart.

The religious tenets of this people are so different from the present churches of the age, that they always have, and always will, excite deep prejudices against them in any populous county where they may locate.³¹

Wherever they settled, the Saints formed an enclave of religious enthusiasts within an essentially conservative protestant society.

Accustomed as the twentieth century is to economic explanations of human motivation, it is difficult to conceive how religion could move men to violence. It is necessary to think of the anti-Catholic sentiments of the Ku Klux Klan and of the animosity toward a Roman Catholic presidential candidate to realize the power religion still exercises in American society, especially in the South.

In the nineteenth century religion was of far greater import in both north and south. Theological differences heated the tempers of common men, and religious non-conformists provoked violence. In 1834 in Charlestown, Massachusetts, rioters burnt a Catholic convent. Horror stories purportedly from former nuns circulated widely, evoking organized efforts to preserve the nation from Roman idolatry. In the Know-Nothing movement, the Catholic menace became a political slogan.³²

Rather than being the counterpart of anti-abolitionist uprisings, the persecutions of the Mormons were comparable to these religious antagonisms bursting forth in the 1830's. Both Catholics and Mormons departed radically from the normal pattern of Protestant belief. Both were suspected of plotting to usurp control of society.

The possibility of religious eccentrics dominating local government terrified each of the communities in which the Mormons lived. The basis of contention in 1838 was the entry of

³¹"Minutes of a Public Meeting at Liberty, Missouri," June 29, 1836, in Smith, *History of the Church*, II, 450-1.

³²Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860*, New York, 1938, 41-53; W. Darrell Overdyke, *The Know-Nothing Party in the South*, Louisiana State University Press, 1950, 211-39.

the Saints into politics. (By then the Indian and Negro issues, really peripheral considerations in the first place, were in the background and soon to disappear.) In Illinois, the Mormons in state politics and their domination of Nauvoo were the causes of persecution. Even when the Saints had moved beyond the Rockies, the nation dispatched an army to deprive them of political control.

The Saints' vision of an earthly kingdom compelled them to seek a measure of political power. After their expulsion from Jackson County, the Mormons knew they must find a sanctuary where they could build their holy city; and only the state could assure them asylum. But Americans could not tolerate social control in Mormon hands. From the beginning until the last decade of the century, the fear of religious aliens in power lay at the heart of gentile hatreds and fears.