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ELDER EZRA TAFT BENSON'S INCREDIBLE EXPERIENCES IN POSTWAR EUROPE

Larry E. Morris

Review of Frederick Babbel. *On Wings of Faith: My Daily Walk with a Prophet*. Springville, UT: CFI, 1998. vii + 190 pp., with index. \$13.98.

CFI (Cedar Fort, Incorporated) has done a great service by reprinting this outstanding book, which was originally published by Bookcraft in 1972. The author, Frederick Babbel, accompanied Elder Ezra Taft Benson on a mission to war-ravaged Europe early in 1946, just months after the end of World War II. Drawing largely on his diary entries, Brother Babbel produced an inspiring and compelling book.

As Sheri Dew writes in her biography of President Benson,

Three days before Christmas 1945, President George Albert Smith convened a special meeting of the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve. With World War II over, it was necessary to reestablish contact with the Saints in Europe and distribute much-needed welfare supplies, he said, and the First Presidency had determined that a member of the Twelve should go to Europe for an undetermined length of time to supervise this delicate assignment.¹

1. Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 197. Ezra Taft Benson died in 1994 at age ninety-four; Frederick Babbel died in 2001 at age eighty-five. For a recent article on Elder Benson's experiences in Europe, see Gary James Bergera, "Ezra Taft Benson's 1946 Mission to Europe," *Journal of Mormon History* 34/2 (2008): 73–112.

Although forty-six-year-old Ezra Taft Benson had been an apostle for only two years and had the largest and youngest family of anyone in the Twelve, he received the call to preside over the European Mission. Frederick W. Babbel, a young married man who had served in the German-Austrian mission from 1936 to 1939, and who had then served in the U.S. armed forces, was called as secretary to President Benson.

“Before President Benson and I left for this mission in Europe,” Babbel writes, “we had been set apart and given special blessings by the First Presidency” (p. 15). In addition, the First Presidency—George Albert Smith and his counselors, J. Reuben Clark Jr. and David O. McKay—had promised President Benson in his letter of appointment that “your influence [will] be felt for good by all you come in contact with, and . . . you and they [will] be made to feel that there is a power and spirit accompanying you not of man” (p. 43). Throughout the book, the author offers moving descriptions of how this promise was fulfilled. Although he and President Benson faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles in attempting to visit the Saints so soon after the war, a special spirit accompanied them. As one Latter-day Saint chaplain noted, “President Benson, you have more influence, more power and authority with government officials, than any general in the United States Army!” Babbel adds that he “certainly felt to concur with this remark. With each passing day the evidence continued to mount and assure us that the Lord was truly with this dedicated servant and his watchcare was over us daily” (pp. 9–10).

President Benson and Brother Babbel’s experiences with two American army officers illustrated how blessed they were in their callings. In Paris they called on a colonel and explained that they wished to visit the Saints in Germany, reviewing with the colonel “our projected itinerary for traveling through all the four military zones in Germany and Austria as well as making a trip into Czechoslovakia.”

The colonel was astonished. “Mr. Benson, are you crazy?” he exclaimed. “Don’t you realize there has been a war here and that to date *no civilian travelers* have been permitted to enter these military areas to conduct the kind of work you suggest?” (p. 26, emphasis added). The colonel further announced that the military had no pro-

visions for taking care of visitors and that all food, accommodations, and travel facilities were restricted for military use.

In an attitude that was typical during his service in Europe, President Benson was neither deterred nor discouraged. He “quietly asked whether or not permission might be granted if we could purchase a car to make the trip.” The colonel replied that such a thing was simply not possible because of an acute shortage of automobiles. Furthermore, no gasoline was being made available to civilians in Germany.

“After the colonel had made several other incredulous outbursts, President Benson asked: ‘If I could arrange for transportation, food, and military permission, do you think we might make it?’”

The exasperated colonel could hardly contain himself. “If all those things could be arranged, you might get into the American Zone, but to arrange for these things is impossible!”

Thinking he had seen the last of Ezra Taft Benson, the colonel sent the men on their way. But in another response that also proved typical, President Benson said, “Let’s get busy!” (pp. 26–27). Get busy they did, and before the day even ended they had purchased an army truck from the Army Liquidation Commission. President Benson next attempted to obtain automobiles. After visiting thirty French government officials and industrial executives, he arranged to buy two new French Citroen cars. The French government also made a limited supply of gasoline available.

With this information in hand, President Benson and Brother Babel “approached a rather surprised colonel. There was something about President Benson’s humble, confident manner that struck a responsive chord this time, and within a few minutes the necessary military orders had been prepared for us to enter the American Zone of Germany and pass through the French Zone en route.”

The two men thus became the first Americans not on government assignment to enter these areas after the war. “What a glorious demonstration of the power of the Lord! A few days previously, all of these developments were considered to be impossibilities, humanly speaking. Today they had become realities” (p. 31).

And although the colonel was helpful, he was skeptical of how four-star general McNarney, stationed in Frankfurt and in command of all American forces in Europe, would respond to the situation. Still, President Benson and Brother Babel inched their way through war-torn Germany, confident they could accomplish their mission.

Finely crafted prose brings vivid images of what the two experienced: “The city of Freiburg in the French Zone of Germany presented a sickening sight of stunned, listless people shuffling among the blackened, twisted ruins of this once-beautiful city. It was in an almost complete state of ruin. . . . We were horrified by the wanton destruction that greeted us” (p. 33).

When President Benson and Brother Babel finally reached Frankfurt and managed to meet with General McNarney (despite the best efforts of one of the general’s aides to delay such a meeting), “it was evident that [the general] regarded the interview as strictly a perfunctory one which he was anxious to terminate as quickly as possible so that he might get on with more pressing matters.” But President Benson, with his unique combination of gentleness and power, warmly shook the general’s hand and stood there “looking squarely at him and talking very earnestly. This was a crucial moment. So much of our future success seemed to hang on the outcome of this interview.”

At first, the general was simply irritated, but when he heard that the two hoped to travel through all four military zones in Germany and Austria, as well as in Czechoslovakia, he was shocked they would even consider such a thing. President Benson, however, “continued to gaze intently into the general’s eyes as he talked with him, and he spoke with such feeling and conviction that the general’s eyes became moist with tears and his cold militaristic manner gave way to a warm, spirited expression of ‘Mr. Benson, there’s something about you that I like. I want to help you in every way that I can!’”

Although the military had previously processed all relief supplies, the general said the regulations could possibly be altered to accommodate relief from the church. He then suggested that President Benson begin gathering supplies. “When President Benson informed him that we had ninety large welfare storehouses bulging with food and cloth-

ing, which could be ready for shipment within twenty-four hours, one could fairly feel the general's astonishment. He then agreed to give us written authorization to make our own distribution through our own channels." In exchange, President Benson offered to give a good deal of food to an existing program for feeding needy children. After this, "General McNarney seemed willing to consider favorably our every request" (pp. 43–44).

In the months that followed, President Benson and Brother Babel journeyed throughout Europe, administering spiritual and material relief to the beleaguered Saints, many of whom were on the verge of starvation. "By the end of the first year we had received and, for the most part, distributed 92 railway carloads of welfare supplies (about 2,000 tons). These consisted of food, clothing, utensils, medical supplies, and a host of sundry items. . . . Welfare supplies and packages were shipped primarily from the United States and Canada. Distribution was made in Britain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Germany" (p. 164).

President Benson departed for the United States in December of 1946, and Brother Babel remained for a few months. In a ten-month period, they had traveled more than 60,000 miles, as one report said, "by plane, train, automobile, ship, jeep, truck, bus, and horse and buggy" (p. 178). Virtually all of this travel was made under difficult and uncomfortable circumstances. Going by air, for example, often meant surviving turbulence and frigid temperatures in the unheated cargo compartment of a military plane. Brother Babel recalled, "At seven thousand feet altitude it was so intensely cold that we had to resort to moving around in the plane to keep our blood circulating. Finally we were so thoroughly chilled that we were unable to move without extreme effort" (p. 21).

Through a highly readable narrative and an excellent eye for detail, the author tells a compelling story, one that deserves a wide readership. *On Wings of Faith* shows the power of faith and also shows just how inspired the First Presidency was when they called Ezra Taft Benson to this assignment. As Brother Babel concludes,

Miracles? . . . They just seemed to take place almost hourly. There's hardly a thing you can read about in the Old or New Testament but what I have been blessed to see or participate in a parallel experience. I have seen the blind healed, the lame made to walk, the barren blessed to have children. I have seen people at the point of death restored to life. I have seen the power of faith in the lives of men and women and children under some of the most difficult circumstances you can imagine, but the *power of God* was there. (p. 181, emphasis in original)