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Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows Will Bagley

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The massacre at Mountain Meadows remains one of the most heinous and least understood crimes in the history of the American West. How a militia unit of “God-fearing Christians” could have murdered more than 120 people in cold blood seems beyond comprehension. In a previous book, I attempted to understand the massacre by comparing it to “the massacres of Christian Armenians by Moslem Turks, of Jews by Christian Germans, and of Moslem Bosnians by Christian Serbs.”¹ I did not say, as Bagley flippantly claims I did, “the Indians made them do it”(367). On reflection, the massacre should reveal to each of us our vulnerability and our potential—however well hidden—for acts of unspeakable atrocity.

Thanks to the work of Juanita Brooks, we have known both the context and the story of the Mountain Meadows Massacre for more than fifty years.² The context includes the abuse and murder of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the American Midwest and South; the establishment of towns, farms, and churches by Mormon settlers in Utah; the Mormon Reformation of 1856–57; charges of murder, illegal acts under color of law, malicious mischief, and treason leveled against the citizens of Utah by federal appointees; the murder of Parley P. Pratt in Arkansas; the removal of Brigham Young as Utah territorial governor by President James Buchanan; the appointment of a new governor and judges; the march toward Utah of an army of about 2,500 men; the passage through the territory of a party of Arkansas emigrants; and the lives and activities of southern Paiutes.

Beyond the context, the story of the massacre is composed of other elements: the functioning of the Church; the operation of the territorial government; the relationship of the people in the Arkansas party to one another; the preparations by the Utahns for a possible conflict or siege by the army; the efforts of the Utahns to recruit the Paiutes, Goshutes, Utes, and Shoshones as allies against the invading army; the relationship of the

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Arkansans to the Utah settlers; the events and deliberations in Cedar City; the dispatch of a messenger to ask the advice of Brigham Young; the mustering of the Iron County militia; the attacks on the emigrants; the murder of the Arkansans; the sparing and disposition of young children; the treatment of the corpses; the disposal of the Arkansans’ property; the spreading of the story of the massacre; the efforts to suppress the information; the investigations of the massacre; the attempts to arrest the perpetrators; and the capture, trials, and execution of John D. Lee.

Just as significant to our understanding have been the subsequent treatments of the massacre. The various articles and books about the massacre (some well intentioned, others less so) have struggled to assign responsibility. Some have used information about the massacre for anti-Mormon propaganda. Many have raised questions about the involvement of Brigham Young and the Apostles.

Will Bagley’s Blood of the Prophets is the most recent book-length study that tries to cover the ground and provide an interpretation of the context, the story, and the events following the massacre. The major virtue of Bagley’s book is that he has done more research on the topic than anyone else to date.

My understanding of the story and its relationship to the context as a historian who has worked in Utah, considered the story, and written about territorial events for more than forty years is as follows: After Young learned of the advance of the army toward Utah, he took steps to protect the people. The Mormons had experienced the wrath of state militia units and the unwillingness of the state and federal governments to protect them in Missouri and Illinois. Mindful of their previous experiences and fearful of the possible consequences of an invasion of Utah, Young prepared for war. Declaring martial law, he instructed Daniel H. Wells, commanding general of the Nauvoo Legion (the legal name of the Utah Territorial Militia) to mobilize the troops throughout the territory. Wells sent militia units to harass the troops by burning their supply trains and by fortifying Echo Canyon. Wells and Young sent George A. Smith, an officer in the legion and member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles who had supervised the early settlement of southern Utah, to urge the people of southern Utah to prepare for possible conflict. Young also instructed the people to abandon Salt Lake City and relocate to Provo and points south. Young deputized Dimick Huntington, an Indian agent, to negotiate with Shoshones and Goshutes to the north and west of Salt Lake City. Huntington sought their support by authorizing them to steal cattle from emigrant parties on the northern overland trail and store these to prepare for a siege. He had Jacob Hamblin, also an Indian agent, bring southern Paiute and northern Ute leaders to
Salt Lake City, where Huntington authorized them to steal cattle on the southern overland route.

Unfortunately, the first emigrant party to pass along the southern route after the declaration of martial law ran into difficulty. Passing through Salt Lake City and leaving the city on about August 5, 1857, the party of emigrants from Arkansas was led by Alexander Fancher and John T. “Jack” Baker and consisted of about 140 women, children, and men. They also drove a herd of cattle estimated at “more than” 400 head (171).

Conflicting accounts of the discord between Utah settlers and the Fancher-Baker party make the story of their passage almost impenetrably murky. We can, however, with some authority affirm that the settlers declined to help resupply the emigrants and struggled to keep the large herd of Arkansans’ cattle from the public grazing areas. Juanita Brooks raises a number of questions but believes that there may be some substance to stories of the conflicts between the Fancher-Baker party and settlers from at least Holden (about ten miles north of Fillmore) south and that there is a possibility the Arkansans may have poisoned cattle or a spring. Bagley disputes the stories, calling the accounts of the poisoning, which were alleged to have killed some of the Utes or Paiutes, “fabricated propaganda” (380). Bagley concedes, however, that conflicts developed over the grazing of cattle. Donald Moorman argues that other conflicts occurred, including some rather violent confrontations in Cedar City, but Bagley dismisses these accounts as post hoc rationalizations (380).

Winnowed to its kernel, Bagley’s argument rests on the proposition that Mormon Utah was a society of officially sanctioned and publicly practiced violence. He sifts out this argument from a full bag of rhetoric published by such leaders as Brigham Young, Jedediah M. Grant, and George A. Smith and by citing examples of violence. Bagley devotes three pages (50–52) to setting the stage for the massacre by arguing that the Mormons believed in and practiced blood atonement, which he argues consisted in taking the life of anyone who had committed “an unpardonable sin” (51). Even assuming that Bagley is right and that Brigham Young and others believed in blood atonement as something more than a rhetorical device, the doctrine would have called for the death of only those very few individuals whose calling and election had been made sure by being sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise and who afterward committed murder. This meaning is clear in the scripture that Bagley cites, Doctrine and Covenants 132:26–27, which itself never mentions atonement. Ignoring his source, however, in a rhetorical flourish he argues, “Whatever the doctrine’s precise practice, the sermons of Brigham Young and Jedediah Grant helped to inspire their followers to acts of irrational violence” (52).
In fact, however, if we go beyond Young’s and even Bagley’s rhetoric, we find the actual situation to have been quite different. Statistics of murders for the nineteenth century are difficult to come by, as I learned with the help of Kathryn Daynes and Craig Foster. The available evidence shows, however, that beyond a few well-publicized murders, we have every right to believe that compared with surrounding territories, Utah was a relatively murder- and violence-free community. Historians regularly cite such murders as the Potter-Parrish homicides of 1857 and the killing of J. King Robinson and S. Newton Brassfield in 1866 as evidence of Utah’s violent character. Instead of making generalizations from juicy anecdotes, historians ought to use statistical and comparative methodology to interpret these events.

Although we do not have good statistics on murders for the nineteenth century, we do have statistics on lynchings. Unfortunately, the series begins in 1882 rather than in 1847. Lynching is defined as the taking of life by mob action without legal sanction. It does not include such things as murders committed in robberies or other such violent acts, but it would include murders perpetrated for such reasons as blood atonement. These statistics reveal that during the late nineteenth century Utah was one of the least violent of the American West’s nineteen states and territories. With 7 lynchings—one of an African American—between 1882 and 1903, Utah had a better record than all the other jurisdictions except Minnesota (6) and Nevada (5). Montana (85), Colorado (65), New Mexico (34), Arizona (28), and even Iowa (16) exhibited a great deal more violence.  

Moreover, Bagley attempts to show that Utah was an essentially violent society by misusing and ignoring evidence from Mormon sources. He calls Bruce R. McConkie’s Mormon Doctrine, which affirms the belief in blood atonement, an “official LDS commentary” (397 n. 63). Although many people rely on McConkie’s work for their understanding of the doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the book represents his own views and is by no means “official.” It does not carry the Church’s imprimatur.

In 1889, however, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles did issue an official statement that repudiated the doctrine of blood atonement. They wrote:

That this Church views the shedding of human blood with the utmost abhorrence. That we regard the killing of a human being, except in conformity with the civil law, as a capital crime which should be punished by shedding the blood of the criminal, after a public trial before a legally constituted court of the land.
Notwithstanding all the stories told about the killing of apostates, no case of this kind has ever occurred, and of course has never been established against the Church we represent. . . .

We denounce as entirely untrue the allegation which has been made, that our Church favors or believes in the killing of persons who leave the Church or apostatize from its doctrines.

The statement further insists that "offenders against life and property shall be delivered up to and tried by the laws of the land." Some may question the statement’s apparent support for capital punishment, but any fair-minded reader must note that the statement requires that such punishments be carried out under the provisions of law, which leaves open the possibility that the people may decide to abolish such a penalty.

Although we lack a thorough comparative study of murders in Utah and other western areas, the available statistical information contradicts Bagley’s impression of Utah society. The best evidence we have at this time is that Bagley is wrong when he insists that “what made Utah’s violence unique in the West was that it occurred in a settled, well-organized community whose leaders publicly sanctioned doctrines of vengeance and ritual murder” (42). In fact, barring further evidence to the contrary, the best evidence we have at this point is that Utah was one of the least violent jurisdictions in the western United States.

Since Bagley’s case rests on the assumption that the Mormon leaders and people were essentially violent people, we do well to examine his use of evidence on this problem. Here his research proves deficient. For instance, he cites Howard A. Christy’s 1978 article on Mormon-Indian relations, which properly makes the case for anti-Indian violence during the earliest years of Utah settlement. Bagley ignores, however, Christy’s 1979 article on the Walker War and its aftermath, which shows that by 1853 Brigham Young and the Nauvoo Legion leadership favored defense and conciliation rather than violence.

Young actually removed Col. Peter Conover from command in central Utah because Conover refused to follow the conciliatory strategy that the governor dictated. Moreover, Young appointed in Conover’s stead Col. George A. Smith, who promoted defense and conciliation. We have ample evidence that Smith followed Young’s conciliatory policy. In Bagley’s treatment, however, Smith becomes—without direct evidence—Brigham Young’s agent, “to arrange their [the Fancher-Baker party’s] destruction at a remote and lonely spot” (381).

Conover’s actions show that Utahns did not (contrary to general belief) comply with all directives given by Brigham Young and other
Church leaders in the 1850s. Such evidences are not hard to find: for example, most Saints did not send cattle to Salt Lake City during the 1853–54 Walker War as they were instructed, and settlers in some places never built the forts Brigham ordered.

Bagley tries to support his fictional tale of a violent society by crediting the report of Judge William W. Drummond on murders committed by the Mormons. In a report that Norman Furniss and other authorities believe probably tipped the balance in favor of sending the army to Utah, Drummond charged that the Mormons engineered the murders of territorial delegate Almon Babbitt, Capt. John Gunnison, and Judge Leonidas Shaver. In spite of its flaws and prejudice, Bagley cites Drummond’s report approvingly (77). In fact, Cheyennes killed Babbitt on the high plains, Gunnison died at the hands of Pahvant Utes, and Shaver died a natural death.

After arguing for the idea of Utah as an institutionally violent society, in what seems a non sequitur, Bagley refuses to believe that any of the stories of conflicts between the Mormon settlers and the Fancher-Baker migrants, except those over herd grounds, have any value. He acknowledges that both Alexander Fancher, who served as a private in a “borderland vendetta” (58) and John “Jack” Baker who “apparently did kill a few of his neighbors” (63) had violent backgrounds. Nevertheless, he whitewashes those admissions with the rhetorical device of inserting a chapter of idyllic prose on the families of the Arkansas emigrants. He provides no similar idyllic treatment of Mormon family life.

Most significantly, he declines to credit Mormon accounts, especially reminiscent accounts. In fact, he frequently denigrates accounts because they come from Mormon sources. The major exception is John D. Lee’s Mormonism Unveiled, which he cites approvingly in a number of places. Historians understand that Lee’s reminiscences must be used with care because the original manuscript for the book does not exist, and it was edited by his attorney W. W. Bishop after Lee’s death and before its publication.

On the other hand, Bagley shows no similar reservation about citing reminiscent accounts by those critical of the Mormons. Most significantly, he fails to identify the religious persuasion of other writers, apparently believing that such information is irrelevant. This is a serious mistake. Recent studies, specifically the work of Sarah Barringer Gordon, show that other Americans, especially Evangelical Protestants and their political supporters, carried on a sustained and deceitful anti-Mormon campaign throughout the nineteenth century.

Bagley should at least have gotten a clue to this pervasive anti-Mormonism from the comments of Maj. James H. Carlton, whom he cites
approvingly. In addition to focusing on the perpetrators of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, in words reminiscent of Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs's extermination order, Carlton urged the banishment or execution of all Mormons, not just the perpetrators of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Carlton writes, "'Give them one year, no more; and if after that they pollute our soil by their presence, make literally Children of the Mist of them'" (230).

Instead, Bagley makes heroes of the anti-Mormons and denigrates the work of those who attempted to promote peaceful relations between Utahns and others. Bagley's treatment, then, of Gov. Alfred Cumming, Col. Thomas L. Kane, Kanosh, and with some exceptions Indian Superintendent Jacob Forney is generally negative. His heroes are Carlton, Judge John Cradlebaugh, Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston, and Marshal Peter Dotson.

Significantly, in contrast to his denigration of the work of other Mormon historians, Bagley is extremely deferential in writing about Juanita Brooks. Brooks, who remained a faithful Latter-day Saint her entire life, deserves our respect. She was, after all, the first to break through the myths of Mountain Meadows and lay the blame where it ought to have been laid—with the leaders and people of southern Utah. Nevertheless, Bagley's evenhandedness with Brooks seems exceedingly ironic since Brooks believes that conflicts between the Mormons and the Arkansans probably occurred, and she disagrees with the essence of Bagley's interpretation that Brigham Young planned the massacre, George A. Smith ordered it, and the southern Utah militiamen followed those orders.

One area in which Bagley has difficulty reconciling his interpretation with the evidence is in the letter Young sent with James Haslam telling the people of southern Utah to leave the emigrants alone. Since he believes that Young had already ordered the massacre, he must invent a change of policy or a secret code to fit the best direct evidence that Young opposed, rather than ordered, the massacre. In what seems clearly flawed logic, Bagley argues: "Whatever the letter's intent, it carried a hidden but clear message for Isaac Haight: make sure the Mormons could blame whatever happened on the Paiutes" (137).

The evidence that Bagley has assembled makes it clear that we need a thoroughly new study of the Mountain Meadows massacre. That study, however, should not allow speculation, rhetoric, and flawed logic to replace clear evidence. While Bagley does present new evidence, his interpretation is essentially the same as the nineteenth-century anti-Mormon argument. In this sense his study does not provide anything new.
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