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# Brigham Young, Pioneer Prophet

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John G. Turner. *Brigham Young, Pioneer Prophet*.  
Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.

*Reviewed by Thomas G. Alexander*

John G. Turner, an assistant professor of religious studies at George Mason University, used a novelist's convention by beginning his scholarly biography of Brigham Young near the end of the story. The opening paragraphs take the reader to St. George in 1877 and the dedication of Utah's first temple with the author summarizing Young's sermon.

From the St. George Temple dedication, the author essays on the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The summary includes Joseph Smith's discovery of the gold plates, their translation, and the controversy generated by his ministry.

Turner then lays the groundwork for the remainder of the text by reviewing Brigham's career. He points out that Young led the Mormon people to Utah, supervised the settlement of a sixth of the western United States, and governed the Mormons during the beginnings of their conflicts with the United States over theocratic leadership and plural marriage. Turner points out that Young became "the greatest colonizer in American history" (3) and insists in contradiction with some "contemporaries and early biographers [that] Young was sincere in his faith" (5).

The remainder is essentially a chronological treatment of Young's life. Turner writes on the hardscrabble background of Brigham's family. He writes of the migration of the family to western New York, and he tells of Young's conversion to Reformed Methodism.

The central message of the text, however, is Young's conversion to Mormonism and his life in the Church. After joining, Young became a stalwart supporter of Joseph Smith. Others wavered in their allegiance to the young prophet, but Young did not. His conversion took him to Kirtland, to northwestern Missouri, and to Nauvoo. He participated in the effort of Zion's Camp to redeem the Missouri Saints. He served as a central figure in the 1840 mission of the Twelve in the British Isles, and he was campaigning for Joseph Smith's candidacy for U.S. president when he learned of the Prophet's murder.

Thereafter, as president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, he led the pioneer company of Saints to Utah. Returning to Winter Quarters, he secured the approval of the Twelve and the Church membership of his call as Church President. He presided over the Church until his death in August 1877. During this time, he served not only as Church President but also as the first governor (1850–1858) of Utah Territory, which Congress organized in 1850.

As a whole, this biography both complements and contradicts the previous standard biography of Brigham Young, Leonard J. Arrington's *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985). Like Arrington's biography, Turner's rests on the vast documentary resources of the LDS Church Archives. Unlike Arrington, however, Turner downplays the generous aspects of Young's character. Nevertheless, both biographies, from a historical standpoint, surpass previous writings such as Morris R. Werner's early work, *Brigham Young* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925), the poorly researched Stanley P. Hirshson's *The Lion of the Lord: A Biography of Brigham Young* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1969), and eulogistic works like Preston Nibley's *Brigham Young: The Man and His Work* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1936) and Francis M. Gibbons's *Brigham Young: Modern Moses, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981).

Turner includes significant information, especially on Young's spiritual and family life, not found in Arrington's excellent biography. We learn, for instance, of Young's early commitment to Pentecostal glossolalia. We have known before about his speaking in tongues on his first meeting with Joseph Smith, but we have not generally understood his continued practice that stretched into his British mission.

Turner writes of some of the internal conflicts and dissatisfactions that one would expect in a large family with multiple wives. He points out that Young favored some wives over others, something that Young's daughter Susa Young Gates understood. Favorites included Emmeline Free and Amelia Folsom. He constructed the magnificent Second Empire Gardo House on South Temple for Amelia.

Because of his extensive research in Young's papers and collateral sources, Turner confirms Arrington's conclusion and the conclusion arrived at more than a half century ago by Juanita Brooks, that Young did not order the Mountain Meadows Massacre. His culpability extends to his violent rhetoric and to sending George A. Smith to warn the settlers south of Salt Lake County to prepare for the approach of a hostile army.

Turner faults Young for failing to work assiduously to bring the perpetrators to justice. He argues that "in his desire to protect the church and himself, Young decided that the risks of full disclosure outweighed those

of inaction” (309). It seems, however, that Turner does not give enough weight to the problems that Young faced in bringing them to justice and to his actual efforts to do so. Young had to cope with the misguided crusades of Judges Delana Eckels, John Cradlebaugh, and Charles Sinclair, and Acting U.S. Attorney Robert Baskin, all of whom sought to prove that Young ordered the massacre.

After 1858, Young, as a private citizen, offered on a number of occasions to assist the federal officers in investigating and trying the massacre participants. They refused to accept Young’s help or the help offered by other Mormon officials, most likely because some of them believed, erroneously, that Young had ordered the massacre.<sup>1</sup>

Turner also gives some credence to John D. Lee’s insistence that he had told Young the whole story during a visit to Salt Lake City shortly after the massacre. Contrary to Lee’s assertion, we have a full account in Wilford Woodruff’s journal of Lee’s lies to Young, a point that Turner notes. Lee blamed the massacre on the Paiutes.

The large collection of documents in the Church History Library on the massacre, which Turner should have mined more thoroughly, provides additional evidence of the misinformation Young received. Ute chief Arapeen told Young the Paiutes had perpetrated the massacre. Indian Agent George W. Armstrong said it was a Paiute massacre, though we are unsure of his source. Young’s clerk, Leo Hawkins, noted various reports that Paiutes had perpetrated the massacre.<sup>2</sup> As Turner points out, Young learned from George A. Smith that Lee and other whites participated in the massacre. It is nevertheless unclear just when Young understood that the Mormon militiamen rather than Paiutes bore the principal responsibility.

Turner faults Young for allowing massacre participants to go so long without Church sanctions. Contrary to his assertion, in 1859 Apostles, working on Young’s instructions, released the major participants from their positions in the Church and told them to prepare for trials. The Apostles replaced them with nonparticipants. Some of them prepared by engaging legal counsel. Significantly, in May 1863, Young denounced Lee in the presence of a number of Church leaders, telling him that he would never see the presence of God or Christ. Lee reportedly considered himself excommunicated at that date.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Turner contradicts the oft-told tale that Young ordered the destruction of the monument at Mountain Meadows erected by Major James Carlton. Relying on evidence from non-Mormon sources, Turner shows that the monument still stood after Young had left the meadows. Turner argues that a “massive flood the following winter might have been responsible for the monument’s [later] destruction” (310).

I recommend this book for all readers, scholars, Church members, and the lay public. It is well written and, most importantly, reveals much about Brigham Young's spiritual and marital life that has not been well known.

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1. Thomas G. Alexander, *Brigham Young, the Quorum of the Twelve, and the Latter-day Saint Investigation of the Mountain Meadows Massacre*, Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture Series, No. 12 (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2007), 20–25, 29–31, and passim. <sup>^</sup>
2. Alexander, *Brigham Young, the Quorum of the Twelve, and the Latter-day Saint Investigation*, 5–7, 24, and passim. <sup>^</sup>
3. Alexander, *Brigham Young, the Quorum of the Twelve, and the Latter-day Saint Investigation*, 24–25, 29–31, and passim. <sup>^</sup>