The Banishment of the Mormon People

Josiah E. Hickman

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol11/iss3/10
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(Editor's Note: In the last edition of "The Historians Corner," we published excerpts from the diary of Josiah E. Hickman, who became a prominent LDS educator in the early part of this century. These excerpts told of an impressive oration given by Hickman while he was attending the University of Michigan in 1894. It was felt that readers of BYU Studies might be interested in reading the oration. We reproduce it here for that reason, and also as an example of the kind of speech intelligent young Mormons might prepare in the 1890s.

Josiah Hickman's oration was sent to the Deseret News and published on April 15, 1895. According to the News, he did not expect to win the oratorical contest, but declared
"If I can only get into University Hall with my speech and vindicate my people from the wrongs which have been heaped upon them, I shall be satisfied." It is clear that Hickman had studied all the important writings of Mormon history, and his historical understanding reflects the best information available to him at the time. More significant here, however, is the fact that a young student made this his way of presenting the Mormon story in his academic environment. The pathos and emotion which fills every paragraph undoubtedly reflects quite accurately his deep empathy for his Mormon forebears. With this emotional involvement in his subject, plus long hours of training and practice in the art of delivery, Josiah Hickman's appearance in University Hall must have been impressive indeed.

My subject is a most unpopular one. It was chosen not to herald an unpopular faith, but to defend the cause of civil and religious liberty against unwarranted prejudice; not to advocate the tenets of any religion; but defend the cause of virtue and order against the enemies of all divine and human laws. I keenly realize the disadvantage at which I am placed in defending this much misunderstood people. And I am not ignorant of the prejudice existing upon this subject. Therefore, I ask you do not judge until their history is held up to the light of reason.

Though this people originated in New York, I will not speak of their history until we find them in the western part of Missouri, where they had gone and built themselves comfortable homes with the view of worshipping God according to the dictates of their conscience. But as their religion was different from the accepted belief of the day, they soon began to be ridiculed, then to be persecuted; finally organized mobs assembled, and burning their homes, tarred, feathered and whipped many of their people. In their extreme suffering, they applied for protection to judge, priest, and governor, but received none. They even petitioned President Van Buren, who replied: "Your cause is just, but I can do nothing for you." Bancroft, the great American historian, says that banded mobs went from settlement to settlement of the Mormons, burning their homes, killing or driving the unoffending inhabitants into exile. In one place, they murdered every man, woman and child. And among the number killed was an old Revolutionary war veteran, who had fought for our independence. Says the historian: "Never in savage or other warfare was there an act more dastardly or brutal." The Missourians in order that they might have a mantle to cover their cruelty, drew up resolutions. They said that the Mormons
believed in prophets, etc., in revelations, and that they were superstitious; that, being mostly from the New England States, they believed in freeing the slaves; and finally, they were poor.

Poverty, superstition, unpopular doctrines—these were the crimes. For such crimes, fourteen thousand inhabitants were driven from their homes in mid-winter. In the Middle Ages? No; in the nineteenth century. In Russia? No; in America, fourteen thousand inhabitants driven from their homes in the dead of winter! The sick were torn from their beds and thrust out into the midnight air, and compelled to seek safety in some bleak forest. There were shivering little children, there were infants, homeless but for a mother’s arms, couchless but for a mother’s breast. In such distress, pursued by merciless oppressors, they left the tracks of their bleeding feet upon the snows of their pathway. Homeless, shivering, heartbroken and plundered, they sought shelter in the uninhabited plains of Illinois.

In this bleak wilderness, far from the inhumanity of man, the fugitives did for a time find peace and rest. During the six years which they were permitted to remain in Illinois they built several villages, besides Nauvoo, a city of twenty thousand inhabitants. They established schools, founded a university and built a magnificent temple. “It must be admitted,” says Bancroft, “that the Mormons in Missouri and Illinois were more honest, temperate, hard-working, self-denying and thrifty people than those by whom they were surrounded.” Whatever was the cause that led to their expulsion from Illinois, it was not due to any crimes of theirs, unless it was an offense to profess a different creed and worship at a different shrine. But Governor Ford said that all manner of trumped up charges were brought against them; and those charges were without foundation, for the Mormons had committed no such offenses. On a pretended charge Joseph Smith and others were arrested and taken to Carthage under the sworn protection of the Governor. It is said that Joseph Smith had a premonition of his terrible fate and said: “I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am as calm as a summer morning. I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I shall die innocent, and it yet will be said of me, ‘He was murdered in cold blood.’”

The next day after this prediction he and his brother were killed in Carthage Jail. Again mob law reigned and men lost their reason. The Mormons were ordered from the state; their homes were robbed and laid in ashes. The scenes of Missouri were being repeated. Scarce had the lights of their burning homes died out, when with scanty hoard, they crossed the Mississippi. On the first night of their exodus, February 4th, 1844, nine wives became mothers. How those innocent
babes, sick and delicate mothers, were cared for under such conditions is left to the imagination of the sensitive hearer. Was it in Russia, Tartary or Hindoostan that people had to flee for opinion's sake? As those exiles departed, at the top of every hill they could be seen looking back like banished Moors on their abandoned homes, and their distant temple with its glittering spires.

Let me observe here that there were many honest souls in Missouri and Illinois who cried out against such injustices; but, as is too often the case, they were in the minority. After the death of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, by right and choice of the people, organized and led them into the wilds of America. And while Missouri was dividing the property of fourteen thousand inhabitants whom she had recently expelled, while Illinois was trying to cover up the blood of the murdered Prophets; while all the United States looked on with silent indifference, one of the most persecuted and down-trodden people that history records were marching westward beyond the pale of civilization.

And now comes an episode in the history of the Mormons which I should not dare to relate were it not part of the official records of the government. Otherwise it would be incredible. While in the wilderness on their westward march for the Rocky Mountains, war was declared between our government and Mexico. Strange as it may seem, the President sent a messenger to Brigham Young to ask for five hundred volunteers to enter the army and march against Mexico. Remember that two states of the nation had thrust this people from their borders, had permitted mobs to plunder them, rob them of their homes, murder their prophets, and drive them into exile. Remember that their appeals in their sore afflictions, though made to governors, judges, and to the President, were invariably ignored or denied. Remember finally that they were marching through a country unparalleled for dangers, that they were enduring hardships which, at times, threatened their very existence. Had they not sufficient cause for refusing to listen to the President's appeal? And yet it was their country calling—that country to which their pilgrim ancestors had fled; for which their patriot sires had fought and suffered; whose deeds of heroism were among their highest and noblest traditions. It was enough. Brigham Young said: "Colonel Allen, you shall have your men. If there are not enough young men, I will call upon the old men; and then, if not enough, I will call upon the women." When the call was made those sacrificing pilgrims forgot their wrongs, kissed the rod that smote them, and, with one accord, answered their country's call. Ransack the records of history, ancient and modern, and match if you can, this example of patriotism!
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Heroine mothers, while their husbands and sons were at the front, defending the country that had driven them into exile, drove their own teams twelve hundred miles over those trackless plains. Hundreds of them had neither wagons nor teams. Handcarts were made, and in them they placed their scanty hoard. Men and women pulled those carts across the desert wastes of America. Could not this destitute and exiled people receive aid? They were offered peace if they would relinquish their religion and all allegiance to their faith. But to relinquish their religion for peace, to them, it was treason. Such an act would have made a mockery of their high profession, which had been written in blood and tears. During that dreary march, hunger, sickness, and death followed in their wake. Many times death was a welcome visitor to those weary and foot-sore pilgrims. Many, lying down with their burdens for pillows, never woke, and tonight rest in unmarked graves.

From the lips of aged veterans, I have been told that when they were exhausted and could go no farther, bare-headed, bare-footed and in their tattered clothing, they knelt upon those trackless plains and importuned their Father, my God and your God, for strength. Upon arising their weariness was gone. You may not believe in miracles, but it is true that even, as with the ancient Israelites in the wilderness, the quails came by the thousands to feed those starving pilgrims. My own wife’s widowed mother, peace be to her memory, walked and carried her babe from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains. Picture, if you can, that banished people on those plains almost destitute of food and clothing; mothers stripping off their scanty clothing to protect their little ones from the cold winds that swept across the bleak prairies. In their extreme hunger, they were obliged to eat roots and thistles; yea, more, they were forced to cook and eat old rawhides. The history of the sufferings of that people, though often attempted, is yet unwritten.

As the pioneers reached the heights of the Rockies, for the first time they saw their destined home. And as Moses stood on Pisgah’s heights and viewed the promised land, so they, from those silent peaks, viewed their asylum of rest. Around them silence and desolation—a desolation of centuries. Rugged mountains with huge spurs decorated with towers and pinnacles, raising their towering summits into the domain of the clouds, rich with the aspiring forms of Gothic type. Far below they saw the blue waters of the Dead Sea of America, glittering in the summer sun light like a silver shield; and as far as the eye could reach stretched the arid desert, miles on miles of sagebrush and snow-white alkali. Eternal desolation! yet, to them, it was home, and at the sight of it their hearts were glad. They descended into the valley
to pitch their tents and rest in peace. There was now no fear of molestation from vandal hordes. How sweet must have been that sleep as upon the earth, parched and seared through untold centuries, they slumbered beneath the friendly skies amidst eternal solitude! Though that country to which they had gone was then under Mexican rule, they unfurled the stars and stripes on Ensign Peak. And, in solemn assembly, they voted to revere the Constitution and its principles as a divinely inspired document. They also decreed that this land should be a home for the oppressed; they forgave all men that had injured them, and lifted an ensign of peace to every nation under heaven.

My friends, I have couched in simple language the pathetic story of the exodus of this people. I have kept back striking events, pitiable sufferings, and terrible wrongs. The words that I should speak burn within me and tremble on my lips. But I shall not utter them. It is enough. I am willing to leave the judgment to future generations. When the clouds of hatred and mistrust which hang like a pall over the genius of that people are dispelled, the history of their living martyrdom will make the heart of the nation ache with pity and remorse.

Features in the SUMMER 1971 Issue:
The Impact of the First Preaching in Ohio
by Richard L. Anderson
Kirtland: A Perspective on Time and Place
by Robert L. Layton
Sources on the History of the Mormons in Ohio: 1830-38
by Stanley B. Kimball
The Historical Setting of the Ohio Revelations
by Earl E. Olson
And many more articles disclosing a year's research on the Church in Ohio.