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"A MORE VIRTUOUS MAN NEVER EXISTED ON THE FOOTSTOOL OF THE GREAT JEHOVAH": GEORGE MILLER ON JOSEPH SMITH

Lyndon W. Cook

Almost immediately after his conversion to Mormonism, George Miller was taken into Joseph Smith's confidence and was

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"Heber J. Grant Diary, 1 October 1890, Church Archives.

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placed in prominent leadership positions in the Church.1 When he found the gospel, George Miller was a fairly well-to-do farmer residing near Macomb, McDonough County, Illinois. His compassion stirred by the sight of exiled Mormons from western Missouri, he opened both his heart and home to the destitute Saints. Soon convinced of the truth of their doctrine, George Miller joined the Church in June 1839, and by January 1841 he was called as a presiding Church Bishop. George Miller fully focused his energies on the growth of the Kingdom, preaching the gospel and serving in various Church callings. He was chosen as president of the high priests quorum, was named a member of the Nauvoo House Association, and was commissioned as captain, later colonel, and finally brigadier-general in the Nauvoo Legion. He spent untold hours in procuring timber from Wisconsin for the construction of the Nauvoo House and the Temple, and in campaigning for Joseph Smith as President of the United States. He was appointed trustee-in-trust for the Church after Joseph Smith’s death. George Miller’s Church prominence is further attested to by his selection as one of the first group in this dispensation to receive the endowment (4 May 1842) and to receive the fulness of the priesthood in 1844. Although Bishop Miller later separated himself from the leadership of the Twelve Apostles in 1847, his importance as a Church leader, both before and after the Prophet’s death, cannot be minimized.

In 1842 George Miller wrote a letter regarding an order of extradition from the State of Missouri. Smarting over his recent exposure of immorality, John C. Bennett began a crusade in 1842 to destroy Joseph Smith’s character and the credibility of the Mormon people. Bennett’s allegations and public accusations that Joseph Smith not only prophesied Boggs’ death but even sent Porter

1George Miller (1794–1856), son of John Miller and Margaret Pfeiffer, was born 25 November 1794, near Stanardville, Virginia. After the family’s move to Kentucky in 1806, George Miller was employed as an apprentice joiner. He was initiated into Masonry about 1819. Soon thereafter, he was married to Mary Catharine Fry. By 1834, the Millers had moved to Illinois where George was baptized by John Taylor (about 29 June 1839). Appointed a presiding Church Bishop on 19 January 1841, George Miller occupied numerous positions of trust in the Church, being an intimate friend of Joseph Smith. Bishop Miller refused to be governed by Brigham Young in 1847 and joined Lyman Wight in Texas. But, by 1849, George Miller became convinced that James J. Strang was Joseph Smith’s lawful successor and joined the Strangites at Beaver Island in late 1850. After the Strang shooting in June 1856, George Miller decided to locate in California but died en route at Meringo, Illinois. (See Joseph Smith, Jr., History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1932–1951], 4:274–86 [hereinafter cited as HC]; H. W. Mills, “De Tal Palo Tal Astilla,” Annual Publications of the Historical Society of Southern California, 10 [1917]:86–172). Record of Sealings, 13 January 1846, p. 9, Church Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah [hereafter referred to as Church Archives].}
Rockwell to perpetrate the deed caused fears among Church leaders of another Missouri attempt to extradite the Prophet. George Miller's assignment in this matter was to inform Governor Reynolds of Bennett's true character and of Joseph Smith's innocence. Although George Miller did write to Governor Reynolds in late June 1842, and was later "delegated to go to Missouri and see Governor Reynolds in person," a second demand for the Prophet's arrest and delivery by the State of Missouri was issued in July 1842. The letter produced below was written in September 1842 (after the second requisition had been issued). It explains Joseph Smith's release on a writ of habeas corpus, witnesses to the Prophet's integrity, and requests Governor Reynolds to exert an influence to avert the growing prejudice against the Saints.

St Louis Mo. Sept 4th 1842

To His Excellency Tho Reynolds

Dr Sir

I hope you will not think it a presumption, my writing you on the subject of the late requisition by yourself, on the Executive of Illinois (upon the affi-

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1See George Miller to the Northern Islander, 26 June 1855, in Mills, "De Tal Palo Tal Astilla," 10:120.

2The letter, located at the State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, is published by permission.

3Thomas Reynolds (1796-1844) was born 12 March 1796, in Bracken County, Kentucky. He was chief justice of the Supreme Court in Illinois, 1822-1825, and a Democratic representative in the General Assembly, 1826-1828. He removed to Fayette County, Missouri, in 1828. A member of the Missouri Legislature and a circuit court judge, he became sixth governor of Missouri, 1840-1844. Governor Reynolds committed suicide 9 February 1844, in his executive office at Jefferson City, Missouri. (See Governors' Letter-Books. 1840-1853, Executive Series, Vol. II, Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library, Vol. VII, ed. Evarts Boutell Greene and Charles Manfred Thompson [Springfield, Ill.: Illinois State Historical Library, 1911], p. 65.) With respect to Governor Reynolds' suicide, Joseph Smith stated: "The Lord once told me that what I asked for I should have, I have been afraid to ask God to kill my enemies lest some of them should peradventure repent I asked a short time since for the charge to deliver me out of the hands of the Governor of Missouri & if it must needs be to accomplish it to take him away, & the next news that came from [Missouri] was that Governor Reynolds had shot himself." (As reported in Wilford Woodruff Journal, 10 March 1844, Church Archives.)

4The first attempt to extradite Joseph Smith from Illinois to stand trial for alleged crimes against the people of the State of Missouri took place in the summer of 1841, when the Prophet was arrested on a charge of treason on a requisition from Missouri governor, Thomas Reynolds. The Prophet was immediately freed on a writ of habeas corpus, and a hearing was set for the first week in June in Monmouth, Illinois. After pleadings on both sides, Judge Stephen A. Douglas delivered his opinion on 10 June 1841. Without considering the validity of the charge against Joseph Smith, Judge Douglas dismissed the case on procedural grounds. He ruled that the indictment against the Prophet was invalid since it had been returned to the governor once without being served. (See HC, 4:364-71.)
davit of Ex Gov L W Boggs⁶ against O. P. Rockwell⁷ as principal, & Joseph Smith as accessory before the fact for an attempt to commit murder upon the body of said Boggs in the county of Jackson State of Missouri)

First I will briefly state the circumstances of the arrest⁸ of said Smith & Rockwell by the officers Mr King⁹ & Pitman¹⁰ of Adams County IIs We had heard a rumor that a writ had been issued upon your demand for Rockwell & Smith, as fugitives having fled the justice of your State and taken shelter in Illinois, but did not believe it, it being a notorious fact that said Smith has not been in Mo. within the last three and a half years past. Therefore could not have been guilty of the charges alleged, and further, on the day the deed was committed he attended an officer drill, and the day after reviewed the Militia in the City of Nauvoo.¹¹ Now that he could have fled the justice of your State is a matter impossible, the distance being about 300 miles, and with these facts before him he sued out a writ

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⁶Lilburn W. Boggs (1798-1861) was born 14 January 1798 at Lexington, Kentucky. He served in the War of 1812. He located in St. Louis about 1816. After the death of his first wife, Lilburn Boggs married Panthea Boone, granddaughter of the famed Daniel Boone. He was first elected to the state legislature in 1826, and he served as lieutenant governor of Missouri, 1832-1836. He was elected fifth governor of Missouri, serving from 1836–1840. Governor Boggs is particularly remembered by Mormons for his order of Mormon extermination from Missouri on 27 October 1838. After his term as governor, he was elected to the state senate. He left for California in 1846, where he settled in Napa Valley. He died there 19 March 1861. (See Lyman L. Palmer, History of Napa and Lake Counties [San Francisco: Slocum, Bowen, 1881], pp. 373–86.) The attempt on Governor Boggs' life was made on the evening of 6 May 1842, at the ex-governor's residence in Independence, Missouri.

⁷Orrin Porter Rockwell (1813–1878) was born in Belcher, Massachusetts, on 28 June 1813. An intimate friend of the Prophet, Porter Rockwell was baptized in 1830, shortly after the organization of the Church. Charged by Missourians with assault with intent to kill ex-Governor Lilburn W. Boggs in 1842, Porter Rockwell was arrested twice and finally taken into custody on 4 March 1843. Unable to convict him, the State of Missouri finally released him 13 December 1843. A colorful Mormon personality, Porter Rockwell played an important role in the Mormon exodus to the Great Salt Lake Valley. He died 9 June 1878, in Salt Lake City. (See Harold Schindler, Orrin Porter Rockwell, Man of God, Son of Thunder [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1966], pp. 15, 18, 88, 106, and 35.)

²The arrest alluded to here occurred on 8 August 1842, in Nauvoo. The requisition, dated 22 July 1842, stated that the Prophet was a "fugitive from justice" and charged him with being an accessory before the fact to an assault with intent to kill ex-Governor Boggs. Included with the requisition was an affidavit of the ex-governor, dated 20 July 1842, which asserted Lilburn W. Boggs' belief that Joseph Smith was the instigator of the murder attempt. On 2 August 1842, Governor Thomas Carlin of Illinois signed an order for Joseph Smith's arrest and surrender to a Missouri agent. Arrested on 8 August 1842, the Prophet and Porter Rockwell were taken before the Nauvoo Municipal Court and released on a writ of habeas corpus. (See HC, 5:234–35.)

⁹Thomas C. King was sheriff of Adams County, Illinois.

¹⁰James M. Pitman was deputy sheriff of Adams County, Illinois.

¹¹The officers' drill, held on 6 May 1842, was that of the Nauvoo Legion. Festivities the following day included a dinner at the Mansion House, a parade and review of the Nauvoo Legion, and a sham battle. Stephen A. Douglas, as well as other dignitaries, attended the events of the day. (See HC, 5:3–4.)

405
of Habeas Corpus, under a provision of the City Charter, and an ordinance growing out of the same, passed by the City Counsel. The officers that apprehended them (Smith & Rockwell) premittedly refused to acknowledge the validity of any city ordinance in the case— but however left the prisoners in charge of the City Marshall until they could return to Quincy for legal advice—The Marshall having no authority to hold the prisoners let them go. And having learned that Gov. Carlin was determined to have them delivered to your agents, regardless of habeas corpus. The counsel for the prisoners advised them not to be found on the return of the officers from Quincy (which they observed) believing the prisoners would fall victims to the fury of the populace of Illinois or Missouri, and that the arm of the Law would not be able to protect them, or could they get an impartial trial by due course of Law. prejudice running so high, on account of our peculiar religious tenets, which my dear Sir you are very well aware of.— The above is an unvarnished account of the facts in the case. It is now rumoured that the agents you sent to receive Smith & Rockwell have again returned to

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12The provision of the Nauvoo Charter in question here gave the Nauvoo Municipal Court "power to grant writs of habeas corpus in all cases arising under the ordinances of the city council." A broad interpretation of this provision would have given the court power to investigate any confinement, state or federal, within the city of Nauvoo "that was in violation of the terms of a valid ordinance of the city of Nauvoo." The ordinance referred to by George Miller in the text was passed on 8 August 1842 (the same date as the arrest) and provided that whenever any person should be "arrested or under arrest" in Nauvoo, he could be brought before the Nauvoo Municipal Court by a writ of habeas corpus. (See HC, 5:87-88 and Dallin H. Oaks, "The Suppression of the Nauvoo Expositor," Utah Law Review [Winter 1965], pp. 878 and 880.)

13The arresting officers objected to the Nauvoo Municipal Court's use of the writ of habeas corpus to release prisoners in the custody of state or federal authorities. While this action by a municipal court today would be illegal, this was "not an unusual phenomenon in pre-Civil War" times. (See Oaks, "The Suppression of the Nauvoo Expositor," p. 878.)

14The marshal, Henry G. Sherwood, was also a member of the Nauvoo High Council.

15Thomas Carlin (1789-1852) was born 18 July 1789 in Fayette County, Kentucky. His family came to St. Louis County, Missouri, in 1803. He removed to Illinois in 1812 and enlisted in the United States Army as a private in the War of 1812. Thomas Carlin was a state senator, 1824-1832. He was a captain of spies in the Black Hawk War in 1832. A registrar of the land office at Quincy from 1834-1838, Thomas Carlin served as the governor of Illinois, 1838-1842. After being governor, he was a Democratic representative in the General Assembly, 1849-1851. He died at Carrollton, Illinois, 14 February 1852. (See Governors' Letter-Books, 1840-1853, p. 13.)

16After being freed on a writ of habeas corpus on 8 August 1842, both the Prophet and Porter Rockwell went into hiding. When Adams County sheriffs returned to Nauvoo on 10 August and found their prisoners gone, law enforcement officers, two governors and a large non-Mormon faction were infuriated. Rewards for the arrest or capture of Joseph Smith and Porter Rockwell were set at $300. Governor Carlin did not concur in the broad interpretation of the Nauvoo City Charter (as mentioned in the footnote 12), and he characterized the City Council's actions as "most absurd and ridiculous" and "a gross usurpation of power that cannot be tolerated." (HC, 5:154.) When, in the fall of 1842, United States district attorney, Justin Butterfield informed Joseph Smith that it was his opinion that the Missouri requisition was invalid, the Prophet sent messengers to newly elected Illinois governor, Thomas Ford, requesting rescission of the demand. While Ford refused to rescind his predecessor's official acts, he did recommend that Joseph Smith stand trial in Springfield and let the judges of the Supreme Court decide the matter. With the concurrence of Justin Butterfield in this recommendation, the Prophet traveled to Springfield in January 1843. Judge Pope's opinion, delivered 5 January 1843, was that Joseph Smith could not be a "fugitive from justice" on the assault with intent to kill Boggs and that Boggs' affidavit was imprecise and of questionable validity. The Prophet was discharged on 5 January 1843. (See HC, 5:223-31.)

406
Ill. having a new demand upon the executive of Ill. 17 The illegalities of the former being amended, whether it be true or not, I can not tell. I now beg the the [sic] patience of your Excellency whilst I indulge my feelings in stating things as they are, and I will do so more freely knowing who you are, and I feel assured you will believe me. I have known Joseph Smith intimately for near three & a half years, having been a great portion of that time in his society every day. There being an intimacy between us like that of Brothers, he having frequently unbosomed himself to me, and I unhesitatingly aver that in every sense of the terms, a more generous, liberal, honorable, high toned virtuous man, never existed on the footstool of the great Jehovah, than Joseph Smith— And why let me ask you, should innocence be hunted and sacrificed to the caprice of popular prejudice & whimzy, and we as a religious community denied the liberty of conscience and the common constitutional rights of citizens. I make this appeal to your Excellency, having learned from good sources, that you are a learned jurist, a good man, & honorable patriot, therefore I am the more free to speak my sentiments.— Now in regard to our peculiar religious tenets, we believe, and teach nothing other than the doctrine, the Prophets, Jesus Christ, and the Apostles taught, and should that, in the nineteenth century, be esteemed criminal. Surely your Excellency will say with me, it can not. But if those tenets be wrong, then we as religionists are guilty of error.— I do hope that your Excellency will not permit your mind to be prejudiced by the foul slander of those amongst us, as also those who are opposed to us, on account of our religious notions, but that you will rather exert an influence to avert the growing prejudice, and also the daily persecutions that are continually heaped upon our religious community,— I have seen forty nine winters, and have no recollection of any religious body in the United States having been so cruelly persecuted as we have been; and not a pen wielded in our behalf, nor an influence exerted. Should such a State of things be all [overlooked?]. 18 in a Government where the liberty of conscience is guaranteed to all its citizens and all religions said to be tolerated. It never the less is so, and will you, exert an influence against such a state of things. 19

In haste

Most Respectfully &c

George Miller

17 A third requisition for Joseph Smith was issued by Missouri governor, Thomas Reynolds, in the spring of 1843, but this extradition attempt was also foiled (HC, 5:461–65).

18 An ink smudge renders this word illegible.

19 Subsequent attempts by Thomas Reynolds to obtain custody of Joseph Smith clearly evidence that George Miller’s plea was in vain.