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

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Reviewed by Paul H. Peterson

No other circumstance in the history of the Latter-day Saints in Utah has undermined their Christian self-esteem with such force as the Mountain Meadows massacre,” wrote prominent Mormon writer Levi Peterson in 1988. And so it is. Even today, informed Church members wonder how a generation claiming to be a restoration of New Testament Christianity could participate in an event so utterly ghastly as the killing of over one hundred Arkansas emigrants in fall 1857, emigrants who were passing through Utah Territory on their way to California to establish new homes.

Just over half a century ago, famed Utah historian Juanita Brooks attempted to unravel the mystery of how a good people could commit such a crime. Her book *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* has long been regarded by knowledgeable historians as the definitive treatment of and perhaps even the final word on this terrible event. But according to historian and columnist Will Bagley, the availability of a plethora of documents unavailable to Brooks justifies a fresh interpretation of the event. An indefatigable researcher who has immersed himself in nineteenth-century western and Mormon history and a talented and colorful writer, Bagley has spent years combing archives to produce what in many respects is the most comprehensive and complete examination of the massacre. Certainly, at the very least, Bagley has significantly increased our knowledge of the three principal groups involved: the Mormons, the emigrants, and the Native Americans. He has also provided a good deal of information about what might be called a fourth group: Mormon dissenters who by both spoken word and written text were openly critical of Church involvement in the massacre. And finally, Bagley has summarized recent events surrounding Mountain Meadows—the attempts to bring about some degree of reconciliation and the efforts to place a fitting monument on the site. All of this
new information is couched in an attractive volume with maps and photographs, some of which are original.

Bagley readily admits that his book will arouse controversy but hopes that in the ensuing years, ostensibly when frayed emotions give way to reasoned thinking, it “will emulate the fate of Juanita Brooks’s *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* and that the book will come to be appreciated as a service to my people [presumably Mormons] and to history” (xix). Given the fact that, for the most part, Bagley depicts the Latter-day Saints and especially their leaders as a single-minded people with a proclivity for fanaticism and violence, this may not happen.

Indeed, Bagley makes it clear that “believers looking for an inspirational recounting of LDS history will need to look elsewhere” (xiv). Bagley’s version is a story of power gone awry. The massacre, he tells us, was the logical climax of a twisted theology that required expiation and atonement for past depredations, crimes, and sins, perceived or real, committed against Latter-day Saints. More to the point, Bagley notes that Church leaders taught (and lay Church members believed) that the persecutions of Mormons in Missouri and Nauvoo—and especially the murders of Church leaders Joseph and Hyrum Smith and the murder of Apostle Parley P. Pratt earlier that year in Arkansas—cried out for vengeance. “Early Mormonism’s peculiar obsession with blood and vengeance,” Bagley notes in his concluding chapter, “created the society that made the massacre possible if not inevitable” (379).

Bagley’s boldest and most controversial conclusion is his assertion that Brigham Young orchestrated the event. Bagley bases this assertion on what he claims is a large body of circumstantial evidence and especially on one revealing (and, for Bagley, clinching) entry in the journal of Mormon Indian interpreter Dimick Huntington. Huntington wrote of a meeting between Brigham Young and Indian leaders on September 1, 1857, at which Brigham supposedly gave permission and even encouragement to Paiutes to steal emigrant cattle. As recorded by Bagley, the entry reads:

I gave them all the cattle that had gone to Cal the south rout it made them open their eyes they sayed that you have told us not to steal so I have but now they have come to fight us & you for when they kill us they will kill you they sayd the[y] was afraid to fight the americans & so would raise [allies] and we might fight. (114)

Careful readers will likely point out that much about this loosely worded entry is unclear or even debatable. In terms of Bagley’s argument, there are glaring omissions. Among other things, there is no specific instruction to the Indians to massacre the emigrants, and there is no indication of premeditated Mormon complicity. But Bagley claims there was a
tacit understanding (seemingly, almost a winking of the eyes) between Brigham Young and Indian leaders as to the real stakes at hand. When encouraging tribal leaders to steal the cattle of the emigrants, Bagley maintains, Brigham Young “was fully aware that Indians would kill innocent people” (380). Furthermore, Bagley insists, Brigham would have been satisfied with the terrible results (at least until his plans went awry) because he was acting “with the certainty that he was the instrument of God’s will” (380).

Bagley maintains that his book is merely an extension rather than a revision of Brooks’s volume, and he strongly implies that were Brooks alive today (and therefore privy to the new evidence, including the Huntington journal entry), she would likely agree with his conclusions. These are bold claims, and I question whether Bagley’s evidence supports such temerity. Let us examine each claim.

Brooks concluded that the motivations of the participants were rooted in past persecutions in Missouri and Illinois, incendiary Reformation preaching (including firebrand sermons from Brigham Young and George A. Smith), war hysteria, and the sometimes abusive behavior of Arkansas emigrants. Brooks said that Native Americans were involved, and in her 1970 edition of *Mountain Meadows Massacre*, she claimed that Indians were more prominent than she had earlier assumed. Despite some involvement on the part of emigrants and Native Americans, however, Brooks made it clear that “the final responsibility must rest squarely upon the Mormons, William H. Dame as commander, and those under him who helped to form the policy and to carry out the orders.”² For Brooks the paramount cause was war hysteria. “This tragedy,” she wrote, “could only have happened in the emotional climate of war.”³ She claimed that John D. Lee was involved, but less so than others, and was therefore unfairly scapegoated. She also claimed that while Brigham Young “did not order the massacre, and would have prevented it if he could, [he] was accessory after the fact, in that he knew what had happened, and how and why it happened.”⁴ Brooks further charged Brigham Young with stonewalling the investigation and allowing Lee to shoulder the entire burden.

Bagley does not concur with many of these conclusions. While both Brooks and Bagley agree that the massacre was brought on by a combination of political and religious beliefs, the authors are poles apart in the importance they attach to each cause. I have already noted fundamental differences in how Brooks and Bagley deal with root causes and the extent of Brigham Young’s involvement, but Bagley notes additional points of departure in chapter nineteen. Bagley faults Brooks for her overly sympathetic treatment of Lee (most historians would agree that Brooks’s corrective
was in order), her shallow treatment of the background of the emigrants, and her acceptance of some of the slanderous tales implicating both the emigrants and the Paiutes. In Bagley’s view, the emigrants caused nary a problem, and the Paiutes were largely and unjustly duped by Mormons to help carry out their nefarious plot of avenging the blood of their prophets. In short, it seems to me that these differences are substantial enough that one could easily argue Bagley’s volume is a significant revision—not just an extension—of Brooks’s important work.

Bagley’s second claim—that Brooks would likely agree with his conclusions and that indeed, years before her death, she actually concluded that Brigham was responsible—is even more tenuous. After making the questionable (and puzzling) claim that “a historian’s professional and personal conclusions often differ” (365), Bagley notes that, in a private letter written in 1970, Brooks expressed the view that Brigham Young was directly responsible for the tragedy. Brooks’s biographer, Levi Peterson, dealt with this letter and Brooks’s comment in his award-winning biography of Brooks written in 1988. Significantly, Peterson noted Brooks’s observation about Brigham Young’s involvement without further commentary. When I first read Peterson’s account of this incident over a decade ago, I assumed it meant that, after some years, Brooks was simply reaffirming with additional emphasis her belief that Brigham Young could not escape responsibility for his role in the massacre, namely that he was an accessory after the fact (as she indicated in her book) and that as governor of Utah Territory he bore responsibility to protect the emigrants. I suspect that most readers, including Peterson, interpreted Brooks’s comment in her letter as I did. It is difficult to believe that the candid Brooks would not have accused Brigham Young of instigating the event had she actually believed that he had done so.

At least some of the differences between Brooks and Bagley, I would judge, have to do with the inherent attitudes and biases of each; historians are people, and all people have biases. Oftentimes, working from the same sources as Brooks, Bagley is inclined to believe the worst about the Latter-day Saints. For example, regarding the accusations that Mormons participated in rape at the massacre site, Brooks dismissed such notions, noting “how repeated suggestion and whisperings may grow into more and more impossible tales, which are then passed on as fact.” Bagley, on the other hand, after affirming that Brooks may be right on this point, concludes that “the persistence of the tales suggests they cannot be discounted entirely” (151).

Another example of Bagley’s upping the ante when it comes to Latter-day Saint misdeeds can be seen in his treatment of the Mormon Reformation. Like Brooks, Bagley notes the excesses and some of the unfortunate
results of overzealous Reformation preaching. But if blood occasionally drips through the pages of Brooks’s discussion of the Reformation, it drenches the pages of Bagley’s one-dimensional account (see 49–53).

In particular, Bagley, more than Brooks, views pioneer Saints as a people who, with relatively little compunction, could carry out acts of violence in the name of their religion. While Brooks was critical of the blood atonement sermons, the vengeance mentalities, and the sometimes distressing results of each, she did not regard them as the dominant religious motifs of the Latter-day Saints.

Since this penchant for violence among Mormons is central to Bagley’s thesis, it invites further comment. In his preface, Bagley states that Latter-day Saints have not given adequate attention to early Mormon religious violence. He is probably right on this point. Consistent with their Old Testament orientation of viewing themselves as a restoration of Israel, many Latter-day Saints seemed to envision a theocratic future when retributive punishment, including death, would be carried out for certain grievous sins or crimes. Sermons from Church leaders on blood atonement are a matter of record, as are remarks justifying the use of violence in dealing with apostates and antagonists of various kinds. In large part because they were the most persecuted and hounded religious group in nineteenth-century America, some pioneer Saints and their leaders also talked of avenging or righting the wrongs perpetrated upon them. While many Saints understood vengeance as a matter best left in God’s hand, some probably took matters into their own hands. As historian Thomas Alexander observed in his excellent centennial history of Utah, the Potter-Parrish murders in Springville in 1857 are likely examples of such retribution.8 That any such events occurred is, of course, tragic.

Regarding these sermons advocating physical violence, I have always believed that some of the rhetoric (but not all) could be attributed to Brigham Young’s occasional tendency to engage in hyperbole as a means of frightening the Saints into conformity. Bagley dismisses such a notion out of hand. “Like the faithful who sat through his fire-and-brimstone sermons,” Bagley writes, “I believe Brigham Young meant exactly what he said”9 (xv).

But aside from the hyperbole issue, I think Bagley gives readers the impression that “holy murder” was almost commonplace in Utah Territory. That impression is false. Certainly people were killed in Utah, and some of the killings were undoubtedly motivated by religious beliefs. But people were killed in Utah Territory (and elsewhere) for a variety of reasons. There was a good deal of violence in the nineteenth century, especially in the American West. Frontier justice and mountain common law were axioms that were sometimes acted upon in Western communities. Our limited
studies seem to indicate that there was no more—and perhaps even less—violence in pioneer Utah than in other Western regions. In view of such evidence, admittedly preliminary, this question arises: If Mormons were inclined to acts of mayhem or murder on a whim, and since Church members felt they were surrounded by so many scoundrels, why weren’t more people killed?

For me, undeniably a believing and practicing Latter-day Saint, the answer is that for Brigham Young and the overwhelming majority of Latter-day Saints, blood atonement and other related notions or doctrines were more often theoretical constructs than religious duties that were acted upon. As one (among many) who has spent some time reading the papers and correspondence Brigham Young wrote in the 1850s, I think it is a considerable stretch to suggest that avenging the blood of Mormon martyrs was a controlling religious conviction. In truth, the conclusion I have formed after reading Brigham Young’s papers is that he believed strongly in Christian civility and human decency.

A close reading of the Brigham Young papers could also persuade some readers that the Mormon President believed strongly in divine providence and, more particularly, that God would take care of his people (and by implication, deal with their enemies) if the Saints were steadfast and obedient. This theme appears over and over again in his sermons. If the Saints followed the promptings of the Spirit, Brigham Young observed in 1863, “the enemies of this kingdom [may] do what they please for . . . God will overrule all things for the special benefit of his people.”

In summation, despite the extensive new information about the massacre that Bagley provides in this volume, he has gone beyond his evidence in concluding that Brigham Young instigated this horrendous event. Brooks’s arguments regarding Brigham’s involvement remain the most historically responsible. I also continue to believe, as Brooks did, that the massacre cannot be completely understood unless viewed in the context of wartime conditions. I believe that, from the moment the emigrants entered Utah Territory, they entered a war zone and that both emigrants and Mormons talked and acted differently because of it. While allowing for a multiplicity of causative factors, if any sense can be made of this tragedy, understanding the massacre as the terrible result of war hysteria seems to make the most sense.

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Three Reviews of Blood of the Prophets


3. Brooks, Massacre, xvii. See also 218.


5. Bagley maintains that the only real controversy between the emigrants and the Mormons had to do with grazing rights but noted that such disputes were common to all emigrants trekking westward and that therefore nothing should be made of it. Given the realities that drought-like conditions had existed in Utah since 1855 and that grass was scarce, one wonders if dialogues over grazing rights became more than just spirited exchanges.

6. Peterson, Juanita Brooks, 338. See also Bagley, Blood of the Prophets, 363.


10. Historian Newell G. Bringham noted that Brigham Young did give sermons on blood atonement but that he also taught it could be averted through repentance. Bringham contended that “there was no rash of killings in Utah despite the forebodings of certain anti-Mormon detractors” and that overall “the level of violence in Mormonism’s frontier sanctuary was much lower than in other western regions.” See Brigham Young and the Expanding American Frontier (Boston: Little Brown, 1986), 130. Lawyer Kenneth L. Cannon concluded that extralegal violence was common in the nineteenth century, that it was supported by many Americans, including prominent ones, and that “it is from this perspective that the relatively few instances of extralegal violence in early Utah must be viewed.” See Kenneth L. Cannon II, “Mountain Common Law: The Extralegal Punishment of Seducers in Early Utah,” Utah Historical Quarterly (fall 1983): 327.
In *Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, 260–61, D. Michael Quinn allowed for more widespread Mormon violence than either Bringhurst or Cannon. Quinn claimed that Mormon theocracy spawned violence but that it is “impossible to determine how many violent deaths occurred for theocratic reasons and how many merely reflected the American West’s pattern of violence.” Quinn also concluded that “the historical evidence indicates that most early Mormons avoided violence and were saddened by the news of such incidents.” My own subjective assessment is that Bagley has gone beyond Quinn in his characterization of pioneer Latter-day Saints as a violence-prone people.