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Eighth Annual

Alice Louise Reynolds
Lecture

Presented by

Susan Easton Black

Professor

Church History and Doctrine

Brigham Young University

March 28, 2001

Friends of the Harold B. Lee Library

Provo, Utah

2001



Susan Easton Black

1997

Susan Easton Black

Susan Easton Black joined the faculty of Brigham Young University in 1978 after receiving a bachelor's degree from BYU in political science, a master's degree from the California State College in counseling, and a doctorate degree from BYU in educational psychology.

She is current a professor of Church History and Doctrine and a former Associate Dean of General Education and Honors and Director of Church History in the Religious Studies Center. Dr. Black has been recognized for her teaching and writing over the past twenty years. She was the recipient of the Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Faculty Lecturer Award in 2000. She has authored, edited and compiled over 80 books and as many articles. Her work on the Saints that Joseph knew and loved will be the topic of her lecture.

She is married to Harvey B. Black, and they are the parents of eight children. She is currently serving as a Curriculum Writer for the Church.

The Alice Louise Reynolds Lecture
THE SAINTS JOSEPH SMITH KNEW AND LOVED

Susan Easton Black

Brigham Young University, 28 March 2001

In speaking of himself and his followers Joseph Smith prophesied, "Our name will be handed down to future ages; our children will rise up and call us blessed; and generations yet unborn will dwell with peculiar delight upon the scenes that we have passed through, the privations that we have endured; the untiring zeal that we have manifested; the all but insurmountable difficulties that we have overcome in laying the foundation of a work that brought about the glory and blessing which they will realize." As one who was then in a generation yet unborn and who has had "peculiar delight upon the scene" that the early Saints "passed through . . . in laying the foundation of a work that brought about the glory and blessing" which are mine to enjoy as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 21st century, I speak today of the Saints Joseph Smith knew and loved.

My fascination with their lives did not begin in a classroom or in a library. "Tell me a story," I asked of my grandmother as a child. My grandmother Lindsay responded by speaking of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the early Saints, though I wanted to hear the stories of Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty. As I listened to the Saints' narrow escapes from the malice of Missourians and their struggles to build a city on the swampland of Illinois, their lives, their story, seemed unparalleled to anything I could

imagine in the fairy tales. In my childish mind, the Latter-day Saints of the nineteenth century became heroes of yesteryear.

At the death of my grandmother, I felt the sorrow that all feel at the passing of a loved one, but also the inescapable reality that with her passing the stories of my childhood heroes would fade. It was not until I enrolled at Brigham Young University in a Church history course taught by Dr. Milton V. Backman, Jr. that I realized the stories would be mine forever. Now I don't believe in reincarnation, but he told the same stories with the same passion I had heard in my grandmother's voice, and to my joy, he pointed me in the direction of the library to learn more.

Since that first day in the stacks of the university's collection and archival repositories elsewhere, I have passed seemingly endless hours with a book in hand. I echo the words of Parley P. Pratt, "I [have] always loved a book. If I worked hard, a book was in my hand in the morning. . . . A book at evening; . . . a book at every leisure moment of my life." To read the words of the early Saint, Patty Sessions, "I desire to do right and live my religion that I may enjoy the light to see as I am seen and know as I am known. O my Father, help me to live my religion, this is my greatest desire" still inspires me. Her optimism amid life's trials has become a beacon for me to pursue. "I have been in the cold and in the mud. There is no food for our teams," Patty wrote. "I never have felt so bad as now, but I am not discouraged yet." Later she penned, "My health is poor, my mind weighed down," she concludes the entry, "but my heart is in God." I can not help but like her. I must confess that I have missed sunrises and sunsets, lunch, and even a good movie to read her words and those of her contemporaries. It has been worth it, for within their words I have found a great truth that has given direction and a deeper meaning to my life. It is that truth I wish to share today.

First and foremost I have learned that the Saints who followed Joseph Smith differed in their Gospel commitment. Some may say, "That is not a new discovery or even revelatory. After all, merely by looking at any two individuals in the Church, the difference is obvious." But for me, these Saints were my heroes. They had walked and talked with the Prophet of the Restoration. For me, to think I could follow in their footsteps was to think the unthinkable. I had assumed that all were stalwart path setters for they had helped lay the foundation the legacy of our Church heritage. But it was not so.

Even though all, at one point, accepted Joseph Smith as a prophet of God and the Book of Mormon as God's word, not all were true to their baptismal covenants. Some failed to echo Joseph's words, "I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God" (JS-History 1:25). Take convert William W. Phelps, for example. He wrote, "By that book [of Mormon] I learned the right way to God; by that book I received the fulness of the everlasting gospel; . . . and I was made glad," yet where was his allegiance in 1838? In contrast to Phelps was convert George Cannon, who after reading in the Book of Mormon exclaimed, "No wicked man could write such a book as this; and no good man would write it, unless it were true and he were commanded of God to do so." His initial conclusion that Joseph was commanded of God to bring forth the Book of Mormon stayed with him throughout his life.

Although the dissidents and disbelievers shunned the commitment of faithful followers like Cannon, and even rallied in angry mobs to overthrow what they perceived as the evil encroachment of Mormonism upon contemporary Christianity, the faithful were immovable. Not with the same literary skill, but in their own way, their lives mirrored the revelatory words, "Hell may pour forth its rage like the burning lava

of Mount Vesuvius, or of Etna, yet shall 'Mormonism' stand. . . . Truth is 'Mormonism.' God is the author of it."

Among their number was Joseph Smith, Sr. When Father Smith was told to "burn up those Books of Mormon . . . then I will forgive thee the whole debt" of a small delinquent note, Father Smith refused, knowing that his refusal would mean his imprisonment. "I was not the first man who had been imprisoned for the truth's sake," he thought, "and when I should meet Paul in the Paradise of God, I could tell him that I, too, had been in bonds for the Gospel which he had preached."

When Mother Smith was accosted by a Presbyterian pastor who sarcastically said, "And you are the mother of that poor, foolish, silly boy, Joe Smith, who pretended to translate the Book of Mormon," Lucy was unruffled. "Why do you apply to him such epithets as those?" she asked. The reverend scoffed, "Because he should imagine he was going to break down all other churches with that simple 'Mormon' book." Lucy countered, "Let me tell you boldly, that that book contains the everlasting gospel . . . mark my words as true as God lives, before three years [Mormonism] will have more than one-third of your church." The minister's hearty laugh diminished when Elder Jared Carter baptized a third of his Presbyterian congregation.

Joseph's brother Hyrum Smith was not one whit behind his parents in defending his testimony: "I had been abused and thrust into a dungeon, and confined for months on account of my faith, and the testimony of Jesus Christ. However I thank God that I felt a determination to die, rather than deny the things which my eyes had seen, which my hands had handled, and which I had borne testimony to."

This unswerving conviction fascinates me for it is found not only in the Smith family and their near acquaintances, but in those whose names are almost forgotten. For example, which of us knows much of the life of English convert Jane Robinson, who

recorded, "It was a severe trial to me, in my feelings to leave my native land and the pleasing associations that I had formed there; but my heart was fixed. I knew in whom I had trusted and with the fire of Israel's God burning in my bosom, I forsook my home?" Or how few of us recall the heroism of Afro-American convert Jane Manning and her family, who "walked until our shoes were worn out, and our feet became sore and cracked open and bled until you could see the whole print of our feet with blood on the ground" to reach Nauvoo and meet a prophet of God?

Finding their entries is not like looking for a needle in a haystack. Journals, diaries and reflections fill shelves in archival collections. In fact, Joseph Smith greeted and fed so many whose testimonies were true that one seeking to stop the flow of those who gathered at the Prophet's table suggested to Emma Smith, "You must do as [Napoleon] Bonaparte did have a little table, just large enough for the victuals you want yourself." Emma replied, "Mr. Smith is a bigger man than Bonaparte: he can never eat without his friends."

Who were those friends the noble and great of yesteryear? Few men of the nineteenth century matched the caliber and dogged determination of Brigham Young. From humble beginnings in an obscure village in Vermont he rose to the applause of thinking men, but more importantly, he grew in favor with God.

After meeting Joseph Smith he penned, "[I received] the sure testimony, by the spirit of prophecy, that he was all that any man could believe him to be as a true Prophet." When he heard a man loudly rail against the Lord's Anointed in Kirtland, "Woe! woe! unto the inhabitants of this place," Brigham reacted:

... put my pants and shoes on, took my cowhide, went out, and laying hold on him, jerked him round, and assured him that if he did not stop his noise and let the people enjoy their sleep without interruption, I would cow-hide him on the spot, for we

had the Lord's Prophet right here, and we did not want the Devil's prophet yelling round the streets.

His bold reaction on that occasion and others caused President Abraham Lincoln to avoid an entanglement with him: "You tell Brigham Young if he will leave me alone, I'll leave him alone," said Lincoln.

Another, true to the faith, was John Murdock. He wrote that at age 23 "a vision passed before my mind. . . . [and a] question put to me was if I had commemorated the death and sufferings of the Savior, by obeying the ordinances." John's search to answer this question led him to the Lutheran Dutch Church, and from there to the Presbyterian Cedar Church, then the Baptists, and by 1827 the Campbellites. For three years he faithfully attended Campbellite meetings, but as the ministers denied the "gift and power of the Holy Ghost," John lost interest and concluded "all the sects were out of the way."

Then in the winter of 1830 he heard that "four men had arrived in Kirtland from the state of New York, who were preaching, baptizing, and building up the church after the ancient order." He journeyed 20 miles to see the new preachers. He arrived in Kirtland about dusk and was introduced to the four men and presented a copy of the Book of Mormon. As he read the new scripture, "the spirit of the Lord rested on me," he wrote, "witnessing to me of the truth of the work. . . . About ten o'clock [the next] morning, being November 5th, 1830, I told the servants of the Lord that I was ready to walk with them into the water of baptism." He was baptized on that day in the Chagrin River by Parley P. Pratt. "This was the third time I had been immersed, but I never before felt the authority of the ordinance, but I felt it this time and felt as though my

sins were forgiven," wrote John. He never again looked for another Church John had found truth.

It was the same for Ezra T. Benson, who wrote, "The first Elder I heard preach was Sylvester B. Stoddard. He concluded, "I thought the Mormons were a very peculiar people." Nevertheless, he sought an answer as to the truth of Mormonism in prayer. While praying in the wintry wilderness, he heard the crust of the snow beginning to break as "though some one was walking on the frozen snow." He arose to his feet and looked in the direction of the sound "but did not see anything or anyone." The sound was repeated three times. He said aloud, "'Mr. Devil, you may break snow crust, but, I will pray!' After that, he heard nothing more." Ezra and his wife were baptized on Sunday, 19 July 1840 in the Mississippi River in the presence of "some three hundred curious onlookers. When the ordinances were completed a shout went up, "The Mormons have got them!" And so they had for the remainder of their lives.

Leave the Church but Later Return

Contrast these faithful examples with a remark Joseph made to returning missionary Wilford Woodruff in 1837, "Brother Woodruff, I am glad to see you. I hardly know when I meet those who have been my brethren in the Lord, who of them are my friends. They have become so scarce."

Where had they gone? Some like the Savior's parable of the lost sheep had wandered off and lost their way. But fortunately, through the outstretched arm of a friend and the whisperings of the spirit, they had returned. Most renown of the returning sheep was Oliver Cowdery. Wilford Woodruff wrote before Cowdery's apostasy, "I have seen Oliver Cowdery when it seemed as though the earth trembled under his feet. I never heard a man bear a stronger testimony than he did when under the influence of the Spirit."

Yet, he did not withstand the storms that beat against that testimony. He struggled and then defied prophetic counsel and announced his withdrawal from the Church in this manner, "Give me my freedom or take my life! I shall no longer be bound by the chains of hell." Oliver was excommunicated on 12 April 1838 in Far West, Missouri.

During his years of absence from Church fellowship, the Prophet reached out to his lost friend, "Write to Oliver Cowdery and ask him if he has not eaten husks long enough?," he stated to members of the Quorum of the Twelve. Brigham Young wrote to Oliver on 22 November 1847:

. . . return to our father's house, from whence thou hast wandered, and partake of the fatted calf and sup and be filled, . . . renew thy testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon with a loud voice, and faithful heart and you will soon feel the Holy Ghost burning your bones like fire in the dry stubble . . . and the Saints, His sons and daughters will with open arms hail thee as their long lost brother.

After an eleven year absence, Oliver returned. At a conference held on 24 October 1848 in Kanesville, Iowa, he stated:

Friends and Brethren: My name is Cowdery Oliver Cowdery. . . . I wrote with my own pen the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, . . . That book is true, . . . Brethren, for a number of years, I have been separated from you. I now desire to come back. . . . I seek no station. I only wish to be identified with you.

He was baptized on 12 November 1848 in the Missouri River by Orson Hyde.

Like Cowdery, Thomas B. Marsh, the first President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, also faltered. In August 1838 the oft-quoted "cream strippings" incident occurred. This issue, although seemingly of no eternal consequence, was brought to the attention of a bishop and a Church court was held. The court concluded that the wife of Thomas had defrauded another by keeping the extra strippings. Thomas appealed the decision to the First Presidency, who also ruled against his wife. Angered by the decision, "[Thomas] declared that he would sustain the character of his wife, even if he had to go to hell for it." And it appears he headed on that course. Joseph wrote of Marsh, "He has fallen, lied and sworn falsely, and is ready to take the lives of his best friends." He was excommunicated on 17 March 1839 at Quincy, Illinois.

For eighteen years Thomas strayed from his baptismal covenants. But by 1857 he was heard to say, "I want to die in the Church. Oh, if I could see Joseph, and talk with him and acknowledge my faults to him, and get his forgiveness from him . . . then I would die happy." He journeyed to the Great Salt Lake Valley seeking a reconciliation between himself and the Church. At an assemblage of the Saints, he confessed, "I know that I was a very stiffnecked man. . . . I want your fellowship; I want your God to be my God. . . . I have learned to understand what David said when he exclaimed, 'I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.'"

At the conclusion of his remarks, Brigham Young stated, "Brother Marsh now wishes to be received into full fellowship, and to be again baptized here. . . . I shall call a vote." All hands raised in affirmation. Thomas remarked, "I thank God for it."

Leave the Church and Never Return

Not all of the lost sheep of the nineteenth century returned like Cowdery and Marsh. One such man was Jared Carter, one of the great missionaries of the early Church. George A. Smith in 1861, while speaking of Carter, said, "I remember, when in

Kirtland, having heard Jared Carter say that he had sacrificed everything that ever would be required of him. He said, I have sacrificed all my property once, but I will never do it again. Where is that man? He is numbered in the long catalogue of apostates."

Then there was the celebrated lawyer Almon W. Babbitt, a graduate of the University at Cincinnati and a licensed attorney in six states. The day before the martyrdom Uncle John Smith visited Babbitt, then a Branch President in Ramus, Illinois, with a message from the Prophet. "Tell Almon W. Babbitt I want him to come and assist me as an attorney at my expected trial," was the message from Joseph. Babbitt replied, "You are too late, I am already engaged on the other side." What will be his lot or that of Carter or that of Robert Foster, a former Regent of the University of Nauvoo, who conspired to kill Joseph Smith? Worried about his eternal fate, Foster confessed to Abraham C. Hodge in November 1845, "I am the most miserable wretch the sun shines upon. If I could recall eighteen months of my life I would be willing to sacrifice everything I have upon earth, my wife and child not excepted. I did love Joseph Smith more than any man that ever lived." Hodge queried, "Why did you do as you have done? You were accessory to his murder." Foster replied, "I know that, and I have not seen one moment's peace since that time. I know that Mormonism is true, and the thought of meeting (Joseph and Hyrum) at the bar of God is more awful to me than anything else."

Wondering about the fate of these men has given me much pause and concern for others. Take John F. Boynton, for example. Few excelled in educational attainment or religious zeal as this member of the Twelve Apostles. Yet in 1837 Boynton shouted, "Joseph Smith a fallen Prophet!" The disenchanted and wayward listened to his haranguing of the Prophet and then embraced his lies. Boynton joined with apostates in

seeking to demean the Prophet in the eyes of the Saints, establish a new religion, and take possession of the Kirtland Temple. Before a morning temple service, he entered armed with a pistol and a bowie knife and sat in the Aaronic Priesthood pulpit. After the service commenced, Boynton rallied other dissidents and rushed into the congregation threatening to "blow out the brains of the first man who dared to lay hands on him" to stop the melee. Summoned local officials forcibly removed John from the temple.

His violent reaction to problems in Kirtland and his continual assertion of the fallen state of Joseph Smith led to formal accusations that the apostleship of John Farnham Boynton be revoked. On 3 September 1837 he "endeavored to confess, justifying himself in his former conduct." He was dismissed from the Twelve. One week later John admitted his failings and was reinstated in the Quorum. Oh, that his repentance had been as Parley P. Pratt, who penned, "I went to brother Joseph Smith in tears, and, with a broken heart and contrite spirit, confessed wherein I had erred in spirit, murmured, or done or said amiss." Unfortunately John's repentance was short-lived. The same quarrel-some spirit and rebellious nature continued and led to his being dropped from the Quorum in December 1837, and to his excommunication on 12 April 1838.

And then we come to John C. Bennett, whom acclaimed historian Hubert Howe Bancroft noted, "has ability, has brains, but no soul." Although William Clayton compared his speaking ability to the Apostle Paul, and found Paul behind Bennett; not all agreed. By March 1841 the immoral trappings of Bennett's life became public. "He cried like a child, and . . . said that if he were exposed it would break his mother's heart that she was old, and if such things reached her ears it would bring her down with sorrow to the grave."

Yet, he did not take personal blame. Instead, Bennett left Nauvoo in mid-June 1842, and toured the country giving speeches against Mormonism in mushrooming communities. To counteract his false statements, nearly 300 Latter-day Saint volunteers hurried to the mission field to disabuse public opinion. Undaunted by the missionaries, in November 1842 John published *The History of the Saints; or, An Expose of Joe Smith and Mormonism*.

Even after his many affronts toward Joseph Smith, the Prophet said of Bennett:

I was his friend; I am yet his friend, as I feel myself bound to be friend to all the sons of Adam. Whether they are just or unjust, they have a degree of my compassion and sympathy. If he is my enemy, it is his own fault; and the responsibility rests upon his own head.

How Can That Be?

In this lies my dilemma. The early Saints made the same decision baptism. They each entered covenant waters, yet as life unfolded some clung tenaciously to their covenants, while others neglected, or discarded them. After decades of reading of their lives, I am still mystified as to why some of the youngest and brightest succumbed to a wayward path. The analogy of Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8), the Savior's teaching of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30), and even the salt that hath lost its savor (Matthew 5:13) has application. Yet, it is of a greater application I wish to speak.

Confident in knowing the strengths and weaknesses of thousands of early Latter-day Saints, I began to categorize their lives in the hereafter on a sliding scale that moved from exalted to scoundrels, backsliders, and even worse, villains. I felt sure of my appraisal. After all, I had produced a 50 volume biographical set on the Membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1830-1848, a six volume set on the Early Members of the Reorganized Church, monographs on pioneer companies, cemeteries,

ship lists, etc. The Saints of the nineteenth century were not just names on a family group sheet to me. I had studied their lives for decades and felt I knew them well. I had walked in the lands of their nativity, knew of their homesteads, visited their graves, knew of their economic holdings, and read their personal writings. In all honesty it could be said of my research efforts, "That which was worth doing was worth overdoing" and I had overdone my research task by extending my own impressions upon their eternal futures.

Would I change? It is hard to teach an old dog new tricks and I think, at least for this professor, an almost impossible task. But then it happened. My sliding scale of exaltation hit home. A family member made a wrong turn in the path. "Could I categorize a family member the same way I so easily did those who had lived in the nineteenth century? Could I judge one whom I had held in my arms, dried his tears, and watched grow to manhood? Could I label him as I had the Saints Joseph loved?" The answer came quick, "No," for I knew his heart. And then I realized that I knew the holographic and printed facts of the early Saints, but I did not know their hearts nor had I acknowledged the mercies of God in their lives.

Intellectually, I was familiar with Luke 6:37, "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven." I acknowledged the truth in 1 Samuel 16:7: "For the Lord seeth not as a man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). But it was not until I took these scriptural verses from rote memory into my heart that I was surprised by the added feelings of love I felt for my family member and the life of each early Saint. And more importantly, the realization of the love of God for those who walked and talked with the Prophet of the Restoration, whose lives knew much of persecution and privation, and who laid the foundation for God's kingdom in

the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times. Whether they were Saint or sinner, I no longer wish to say. But for the learning process that has taken me from the library to my knees to more fully understand life and mercy, I thank Professor Backman for pointing me to the library, my grandmother for sharing stories, and my loved one for turning my academic pursuits to grateful remembrances of one who has greater love than us all Jesus Christ.