Junius And Joseph

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Chapter Fifteen

The Kingdom Delayed

*The council [of Fifty] consider it best for all the traveling elders to stop preaching politics—preach the gospel with double energy, and bring as many to the knowledge of the truth as possible. The great event of 1844, so long anticipated, has arrived, without a parallel since the birth of Adam.*

Willard Richards to Brigham Young, June 30, 1844

Nauvoo remained in mourning. Following the imagined and real burials of Joseph and Hyrum a young barrel maker named William Daniels, armed with letters of introduction to “the leading men of Nauvoo,” entered the Holy City. Daniels sought out Willard Richards, one of the two Carthage survivors. He told the Mormon elder he had experienced a vision and reported that three days after the murder of Joseph Smith the martyred prophet appeared to him in a dream and took him “up into a high mountain.” As Daniels slipped in the shifting soil, “Joseph would reach out his hand and lift [him] along.” At the summit Daniels was seated. Joseph gave him a “glass of clear cold water . . . placed his hands upon [his] head, prayed to the Lord, blessed [him] and departed.” Following this epiphany Daniels was determined to tell all he knew about the murders. He had been forced to join the Warsaw militia, he claimed, and was at the jail when the crime was committed. Embarrassed and ashamed by his involvement, Daniels sought redemption.

Richards wasn’t interested. Daniels’s knowledge “would be of no particular use” to the Mormons at that time, Richards told him. He should “wait for the proper officers of the State to move forward in the matter.”

Daniels stayed in Nauvoo for several days and swore out an affidavit before a justice of the peace on the Fourth of July. There was no Independence Day celebration in Nauvoo. “Instead of celebrating with splendor and joy,” William Clayton wrote in his journal, “we celebrate” the nation’s “down-fall with grief and mourn for the loss of our prophet & Patriarch & pray to God to avenge their blood speedily.”

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Days later William Daniels went to Quincy and met with Governor Ford, informing him what he knew of the affair. Ford told Daniels he would likely be one of the key witnesses for the prosecution in the case. Within a few weeks Daniels returned to Nauvoo and was baptized into the Mormon church. His conversion was opportunistic at best. He intended to publish his story as a book and hoped to make some money along the way. Lyman O. Littlefield, an apprentice in John Taylor’s printing establishment, helped the aspiring author with the necessary “filling” to make the story sell. An artistic rendering of the Carthage massacre was completed by a local sign painter. Visitors were charged to view the bloody scene, complete with a dramatic light from heaven, which, it was claimed, had frozen the gunmen in place after they shot the prophet.

Lucien Woodworth, the former Council of Fifty ambassador to the Republic of Texas, wrote to President Sam Houston in early July. Woodworth included copies of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and July 1 issue of *Times and Seasons*. In *Times and Seasons* Houston would find, Woodworth said, “correct statements concerning the murder of Generals Joseph and Hyrum Smith in Carthage jail on the 27th ult. by a mob of 150–200, painted and disguised men.” Woodworth explained that the names of the men involved “are well known, but the Governor Ford as yet has taken no action to bring them to justice.”

According to reports, some of the men engaged in the murder had “already started for Texas,” Woodworth noted. The prospect of having enemies as neighbors in their proposed Mormon kingdom within the Republic of Texas, however, did not “discourage the members in the least, but they feel more dispares then ever to carry out Gen Smiths views in all things.”

Woodworth reminded Houston of their earlier negotiations. “Recent occurrences has prevented my making the propositions desired. If you still consider the plan practicable, communicate and a reply shall be forthcoming.” He would never hear from the General. Texas had signed a secret treaty of annexation with the United States in April. With the Mormons no longer vital to the Texan strategy for survival, the much-anticipated political Kingdom of God would have to wait a while longer.

Newspapers throughout the U.S. brought forth more lurid details of the murders. It wasn’t until the middle of July, more than two weeks after the massacre, when the eastern Saints came to fully realize that the unthinkable had occurred. Joseph and Hyrum were no more. There would be no nominating convention in Baltimore presenting Joseph’s name to the nation. The hope for political salvation through a national government headed by a prophet of God was lost.

Political rallies continued on schedule throughout the eastern states until traveling electioneers received official word of Joseph’s death. Some gatherings erupted in violence. “According to what we hear in this country about the ‘Mormons’ in the

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west,” Brigham Young wrote to Willard Richards from Salem, Massachusetts, on July 8, “I should suppose that there is an election about to take place, or the Prophet had offered himself for some office in the United States: for of all the howlings of devils and devil’s whelps, this season cannot be beat . . . “ Brigham was optimistic. “The prevailing opinion is, that [Joseph Smith] is the smartest man in the Union, and the people are afraid of his smartness. Some will vote for him for the novelty of the thing, and some to see what a Prophet will do at the head of government . . . You might ask what we think about Brother Joseph’s getting the election this year? You know all about it. We shall do all we can and leave the event with God—the God of heaven will do just as he pleases about it.” Rumor of the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum reached him the next day. Confirmation came a week later, in a letter written from Boston by Wilford Woodruff, signed, “Yours in the kingdom of God.” Brigham would arrive back in Nauvoo on August 6, a day after the summer elections.6

Press reports of Joseph’s death soon reached Kentucky, where John D. Lee was preaching and electioneering. Could it be true? “A personage whose face shone as lightning stood before me and bid my fears depart,” Lee wrote in his journal in early July, recording an unusual vision he had experienced. The heavenly being told him his work in behalf of the Lord was accepted, just as were the labors of the “12 and 70 that were sent out by the Son of God,” Jesus Christ. “They supposed that their labors were lost when their leader was taken and crucified instead of being crowned King (temporal) of that nation as they fondly expected.” The heavenly messenger reassured him:

So it is with you—instead of electing your leader the chief magistrate of this nation they have martyred him in prison—which has hastened his exaltation to the executive chair over this generation—so now return home in peace and there wait your endowment from on high as did the disciples at Jerusalem, for this circumstance is parallel to that.7

Tear-stained letters from Nauvoo certified the horrible news. Public meetings in Philadelphia, Boston, and elsewhere attempted to comfort the bereaved Saints. Their jobs over, the once determined political missionaries began the long sorrowful trek back to Nauvoo. When John D. Lee received confirmation of the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum, he was overwhelmed. “[T]he feeling of grief and anguish operated so powerful upon my natural affections as to destroy the strength of mind and rendered it almost impossible for me to fill my appointments—some of which I disappointed.” Lee penned his final diary entry as he reached Nauvoo. He noted simply, “End of Mission.”8

Even with the majority of the Twelve Apostles and many of the Council of Fifty still in the east promoting Joseph’s presidential bid, the remaining Nauvoo leadership

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turned its attention to selecting Joseph Smith’s successor. “The greatest danger that now threatens us is dissensions and strifes amongst the Church,” William Clayton observed. Several claimants would eventually come forward. Chief among the possible successors to Joseph Smith was William Marks, the Nauvoo stake president. On the evening of July 4 a council met at Marks’s home. A number of the brethren agreed that “brother Marks’[s] place [was] to be appointed president & Trustee in Trust” of the church “and this accords with Emma’s feelings.”

Many in Nauvoo, however, wanted to wait until the traveling Quorum of the Twelve had returned home. Emma objected. Due to the pressing business arising out of the settling of Joseph Smith’s estate (his personal business transactions were hopelessly tangled with the affairs of the church), she felt a trustee should be appointed immediately. There was considerable concern over the possible appointment of Marks, however, who agreed “with [William] Law & Emma in opposition to Joseph & the quorum,” on the issue of polygamy. They feared that their “spiritual blessings be destroyed inasmuch as [Marks] is not favorable to the most important matter [i.e. plural marriage].” Marks would be removed as stake president in October and leave Nauvoo in the spring of 1845.

“The Trustee must of necessity be the first president of the Church,” others argued, and “Joseph has said that if he and Hyrum were taken away Samuel H. Smith would be his successor.” Following Samuel, the next logical choice to lead the church was Joseph’s other surviving brother, William. Neither man would ever get the chance. Samuel died at the end of July. William remained in the east and continued his work promoting Joseph’s political principles after taking over the editorship of The Prophet in late June.

Sidney Rigdon, Joseph’s vice presidential running mate and counselor in the First Presidency of the church, was also prepared to succeed the slain prophet. Rigdon returned to Nauvoo on August 3. His proposal to be made a “Trustee-in-trust” for the church, although supported by Emma and William Marks, met with considerable opposition.

Brigham Young returned to Nauvoo three days after Rigdon, had a larger following, and actively sought Sidney’s removal. Brigham’s authoritative position as president of the Quorum of the Twelve, together with his unwavering support of polygamy and his superb ability as an organizer, ensured his ultimate success. Rigdon was excommunicated in early September. He shortly afterwards left Nauvoo and returned to Pittsburgh, where he would establish his own church.

Following a long period of de facto rule as the head of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Brigham Young was sustained as president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in late 1847 at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, almost two years after departing Nauvoo. About half of the Nauvoo Saints followed Young to Utah, where his movement was fortified by a growing number of converts from the British Isles.

Emma Smith, Joseph Smith’s first wife, having rejected polygamy and Brigham Young’s leadership, remained in Nauvoo. Several splinter organizations were formed

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10. Ibid., [12 July 1844], in Clayton, Intimate Chronicle, 138, Clayton, Writings, 32.
11. Ibid.
Brigham Young at Nauvoo, ca. 1845. At the time he was president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Courtesy of the Church Archives, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
out of the communities of Saints left behind. One of the most successful was the True Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, formed by James J. Strang, an early claimant to succeed Joseph Smith. Strang gathered his followers in Voree, Wisconsin Territory. For a time, William Smith, Joseph’s only surviving brother, and Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Smith’s mother, advocated Strang’s claims as the prophet’s true successor. Strang also attracted such prominent Nauvoo Mormons as George Miller and William Marks. Dr. John C. Bennett joined the Strangite movement for a time, and suggested moving Joseph and Hyrum’s remains to Voree. After Strang’s assassination in 1856, several thousand of his followers formed the nucleus of The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Founded at Amboy, Illinois, in 1860, the Reorganized movement denounced polygamy as an innovation introduced by Brigham Young, and, during the second half of the nineteenth century, remained the Utah Mormons’ chief rival as the authentic successor to the church established by Joseph Smith. Today they are known as the Community of Christ rather than RLDS.

But even before the fragmentation of the Mormon movement in the months and years following the death of Joseph Smith, the most immediate problem was identifying and prosecuting the men engaged in the assault on Carthage jail, most of whom had returned to their normal lives as farmers, merchants, editors, and county officials.