

**Election and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows**

Seth R. Payne

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## Introduction

Joseph Smith and early members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) conceived of themselves literally as gathered Israel or the chosen and elect of God. This unique self-conception provided the early church with a deep sense of divine purpose and calling. Immediately after organizing the church in 1830, Smith sent out missionaries to spread his divine message and “gather the elect” to the “only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth.”<sup>1</sup> Reaction to the newly formed sect was immediate and varied. On the one hand, hundreds and eventually thousands of new converts began flowing to church-appointed gathering places in Kirtland, Ohio and Independence, Missouri. On the other hand, the church’s “non-elect” neighbors grew increasingly suspicious not only of the church’s many new and strange doctrines, but also of its ever-growing political presence and influence. Consequently, from Mormonism’s earliest days, there was tension between the Latter-day Saint Kingdom of God and its surrounding environment.

This unique combination of divine election and environmental tension created within the church a perspective wherein all successes, persecutions (both real and imagined), and even the mundane happenings of etching out a community on the American frontier, were seen as part of a larger cosmic drama with eternal consequences. Naturally, this led to a palpable “us versus them” attitude which can be seen clearly in both the rhetoric and actions of early Mormons. The eventual expulsion of the Mormons from both Missouri and Illinois only served to reinforce this attitude as the Saints<sup>2</sup> moved west to find isolation, solitude, and an opportunity to establish the Kingdom of God unmolested.

The Saints did exist in relative isolation for a period of about ten years as they settled the Utah territory and expanded into parts of Nevada and Arizona. The early tensions and especially the persecutions suffered in Missouri and Illinois never left their collective memory

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<sup>1</sup> D&C 1:30

<sup>2</sup> Mormons often refer to themselves as Saints. Not in an effort to appear holy or divine but rather to self-identify themselves as members of Christ’s church.

however, and as Gentiles (non-Mormons) from the United States became increasingly involved in Utah affairs, old tensions began to surface and memories of past injustices became fresh and present in the minds of the Latter-day Saints.

Eventually, these tensions led to what has become known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre; an event wherein 120 unarmed members of a wagon train passing through southern Utah were murdered by a group of zealous Latter-day Saints and local Indians. The Mountain Meadows Massacre cannot be seen as an isolated and singular event. It is inexorably linked to the Latter-day Saint self-conception of election and the cultural impact this conception had on the formation of the early LDS community ethos. This paper will explore the development of this ethos using the Mountain Meadows Massacre both as a point of reference and as a point of culmination. The culture of justified violence which developed during the church's formative years will be examined as will the impact of Joseph Smith's use of, and sense of connection with, the patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible in the formation of what Michael Quinn has called Smith's "theocratic ethics."<sup>3</sup>

Nothing can morally justify the Mountain Meadows Massacre or the attempts after-the-fact to conceal it. However, the Massacre can be more fully understood in its proper historical and cultural context. Additionally, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and the culture which produced it, can serve as a lesson to any who consider themselves called, chosen, or elected by God. A zealous self-conception of chosennes which is untempered by the humility election requires, often leads to violent, immoral, and unjust acts. The Mountain Meadows Massacre is an example of such an act.

### **Patriarchal Influence**

Joseph Smith was perhaps most influenced by the Patriarchs of Genesis. Smith's first prophetic or charismatic act was to translate the Book of Mormon; a history (according to Smith) of some of the ancient inhabitants of the American continent. The Book of Mormon

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<sup>3</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books and Smith Research Associates, 1994).

contains a clear evangelical Christian message and is a call for all to repent and accept a very Pauline version of Christ and Christianity. However, Joseph Smith's later, and arguably most influential, doctrinal innovations came directly as a result of his encounter with the biblical Patriarchs and flow from conceptions of their lineage. In 1830, Joseph Smith received a revelation wherein he was commanded to "translate" the Bible in order to restore truths and concepts which had been lost due to centuries of translation and other errors.<sup>4</sup> The most elaborate and lengthiest of Smith's modifications occur in the book of Genesis and it likely that during this process of translation, Joseph Smith began to identify with and conceive of himself and the newly formed Church as heirs to the patriarchal covenants.

This conception becomes explicit in the Doctrine & Covenants, a collection of Joseph Smith's revelations and still today part of the LDS Church's open canon. In 1832, Smith received a revelation on the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods which states that those who receive this priesthood (worthy male members of the church) "become the sons of Moses and of Aaron and the *seed of Abraham*, and the church and the kingdom, and the *elect of God*." (emphasis added)<sup>5</sup> A year prior, Smith had received a revelation instructing him to establish the city of Zion as a gathering place for the Saints at Independence, Missouri. Therefore, Smith sent missionaries and converts to what was then the American frontier to build a city and prepare it for the gathering. Unfortunately, a combination of circumstances led to extreme difficulties for the Saints at Independence. First, many incoming Saints were not shy about proclaiming their chosen status and how God had designated their new city as a holy gathering place. This upset many of their Missouri neighbors. Compounding this was the fact that most immigrants to

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Smith did not produce a translation in the traditional sense by examining source documents and manuscripts. Rather, Smith reviewed the King James Version of the Bible and inserted or revised text based on a personal revelation. Thus, Smith's translation of the Bible is often referred to as the "Inspired Version." Few Latter-day Saints today would maintain that the Inspired Version represents an authentic re-creation of the original text. Rather, the Inspired Version reflects what Smith felt the text *should* have said. The Inspired Version is functionally used as a reference for the official canon which includes the King James Version.

<sup>5</sup> D&C 84:34

Zion were non-Southerners and opposed to slavery.<sup>6</sup> Missouri residents feared that this massive influx of Latter-day Saints was a threat not only to their pro-slavery views, but also their political sovereignty as the Saints tended to vote as a block.

Violence soon erupted and many Mormon homes and farms were burned and destroyed by Missouri mobs. At first, the Mormons took a passive stance and attempted to resolve their problems politically. However, in 1833 Joseph Smith received a revelation that justified (although actually discouraged) a violent response from the Saints in Missouri.<sup>7</sup> The Saints were told that “thine enemy is in thine hands; and if thou rewardest him according to his works thou art justified; if he has sought thy life, and thy life is endangered by him, thine enemy is in thine hands and thou art justified.” In 1834, it was revealed to Smith that “ye are the Children of Israel and of the seed of Abraham, and ye must needs be led out of bondage by power, and with a stretched-out arm.”<sup>8</sup>

This conception of the Saints as Israel acted both as an explanation of the persecutions in Missouri and also as justification for the violent response. Just as ancient Israel has been led to violence to secure their promised land; so also were the Mormons led to fight for their promised land. Violence was met with violence as the Mormons were forced from one settlement to another within Missouri. Eventually, the tension became so severe that Lilburn Boggs, then governor of Missouri, issued an infamous “extermination order” in which he stated that the Mormons “must be exterminated or driven from the state.”

This extermination order led to a massacre at Haun’s Mill where 18 Mormon men, women and children were brutally killed by Missouri troops.<sup>9</sup> This incident became part of the cultural and societal consciousness of the Latter-day Saints and to an extent, remains so even today. To the Saints, those in Missouri who had driven them from their homes and killed their

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<sup>6</sup> Armand L. Mauss, "The Fading of the Pharaoh's Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood's Ban against Blacks," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (1981).

<sup>7</sup> D&C 98:31

<sup>8</sup> D&C 103:17

<sup>9</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling, a Cultural Biography of Joseph Smith* (New York: Alfred Knopf Press, 2005), 365-66.

fellow Mormons, were not considered non-elect, but actually anti-elect<sup>10</sup>; a fact which played a significant role in the eventual Massacre at Mountain Meadows.

Eventually, the Mormons were successfully driven from Missouri and found temporary refuge in Illinois. The Mormons were granted a charter by the Illinois legislature to build the city of Nauvoo as a near city-state with its own unique laws and military force. It was during this Nauvoo period that Joseph Smith's self-conception and connection with the Patriarchs was more fully developed. In 1841, Smith received a revelation wherein God states: "As I said to unto Abraham concerning the kindreds of the earth, even so I say unto my servant Joseph: In thee and in thy seed shall the kindred of the earth be blessed."<sup>11</sup> Smith had been practicing plural marriage since as early as 1836 and saw this practice as a restoration of the patriarchal covenant. According to some, Smith received a revelation on plural marriage as early as 1831 but did not write it down until 1842. In this revelation, Smith was told that Abraham was commanded to take Hagar as a wife in order to fulfill the covenant God had made with him. Smith is then instructed: "Go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham; enter into my law and ye shall be saved."<sup>12</sup>

Of course, in order to practice plural marriage, Smith was forced to conceal it. In fact, Smith's first wife Emma was unaware of his plural marriages until perhaps as late as 1842. Smith publicly denied the practice and forcibly denounced it on several occasions. In this dishonesty, Smith felt justified because he was serving the greater good and doing his part to fulfill a covenant with God. Just as Abraham was justified<sup>13</sup> in lying in order to serve the purposes of God, so also Joseph Smith felt justified in concealing the practice of plural marriage, as well as other controversial doctrines, in order to fulfill his divine obligations.

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<sup>10</sup> This is a term actually coined by Joel Kaminsky see: Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> D&C 124:58

<sup>12</sup> D&C 132:29

<sup>13</sup> There are several examples of Abraham being dishonest in his pursuit of doing the divine will. For example, Abraham's dealings with Isaac and his servants (Gen 22:5); and identifying Sarai as his sister (Gen 12) are both examples of this type of behavior.

As the practice of plural marriage was introduced and practiced within Smith's inner circle, it became more difficult to conceal and caused significant tensions not only with outsiders, but also with some members of the Church who objected to its practice. Eventually, yet indirectly, it was plural marriage which led to the murder of Joseph Smith in 1844. A year later, the Saints were once again violently ejected from their home, Illinois, this time forced to emigrate to the Great Salt Lake Valley.

The key point to remember here is that Joseph Smith, and by extension early Mormonism generally, adopted not only a sense of chosenness and election from the patriarchs of Genesis (particularly Abraham), but also a sense of ethics. Any action is justified if it is done to fulfill the commandments of God.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the Saints adopted an expectation of vengeance. God had destroyed the enemies of ancient Israel and the Mormons expected Him to do the same to their enemies.

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<sup>14</sup> This violent period produced a vengeance-oriented group known as the Danites who were responsible for the murder of many in Missouri. A member of this secretive organization, Porter Rockwell, even attempted to assassinate Governor Boggs. Whether Joseph Smith had direct knowledge of the Danites activities is unclear. However, the activities of the Danites are an example of the theological ethics adopted by the most zealous Mormons due to the persecution in Missouri and Illinois.

## Early Utah

The extreme level of anger and desire for vengeance amongst the Saints during the period cannot be overstated. For over a decade they had been driven from place to place, denied their civil rights, and subjected to humiliating and degrading treatment by their enemies. Granted, not all of this treatment came unprovoked but even the most ardent anti-Mormon today must admit that the treatment of the Saints in Missouri and Illinois was unusually cruel and severe.

Once in Utah however, the Saints were able to establish the “Kingdom of God” in relative peace. Converts to Mormonism from throughout the world constituted a continual stream of immigrants throughout much of the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eventually, Utah became a territory of the United States and polygamy became officially practiced and known. Once again, the Saints found themselves in tension with “Gentile” outsiders.<sup>15</sup>

Reports of insurrection (both real and perceived, but mostly only perceived) made their way to federal officials in Washington, DC. In 1857, President Buchanan decided to send 2,500 troops to the Utah territory to bring it back under federal control. Brigham Young announced the impending arrival of troops to the Saints on July, 24 1857 – ten years to the day that the original pioneers had arrived in the Salt Lake Valley.

The period just prior to the deployment of troops is known as the “Mormon Reformation” wherein there was a widespread recommitment to the ideals, culture, and practices of Mormonism. The reformation swept through the territory and many “lukewarm” Saints once again became extremely committed to the Church and the idea that they represented restored Israel. Consequently, there were unusually high levels of religious zeal throughout the Utah territory. This zeal was especially prevalent in southern Utah where many

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, a cursory overview of the use of the word “Gentile” in the early Church illustrates an evolution from being a relative positive term to having extremely negative connotations in the Utah years. The Utah period represents the peak of an “us vs. them” attitude within the Church. In the modern Church, the term “Gentile” and all other racist terms have fallen out of favor. See: Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children, Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 31-36.

of those who had suffered through the difficulties in both Missouri and Illinois had permanently settled. Once Mormon leaders learned of the impending arrival of troops they began to use extremely strong anti-Gentile rhetoric in order to stir up war fever and prepare the Saints for a possible lengthy conflict. Instructions were sent out to store food and ammunition and to not sell provisions to Gentile wagon trains passing through the territory. George A. Smith, a high-ranking Mormon leader under Brigham Young was sent to the southern Utah settlements to prepare the Saints and deliver anti-Gentile sermons. This rhetoric, combined with the already-present zeal of the southern Saints created a near-frenzy. All throughout the Utah territory, the Saints were determined not to be driven from their homes again and those in the south who had experienced the invasion of troops once before, were especially determined to fend off any attack.

### **The Mountain Meadows Massacre**

In August of 1857 a wagon train of immigrants from Arkansas and Missouri known as the Fancher Party began to take the trail through Utah on their way to California. Due to the war preparations in the Utah territory they were unable to purchase many of the provisions they needed and had planned to buy in Salt Lake City. Out of frustration, this train began to lash out at the Saints threatening to take news of the insurrection to California and bring back troops. Additionally, some of the immigrants began to boast that they had participated in the Missouri persecutions (including Haun's Mill) and some sources indicate that one immigrant claimed to be carrying the gun that killed Joseph Smith.<sup>16</sup> As the train moved through Salt Lake City and on to the southern settlements, some immigrants began to steal provisions that they were unable to buy out of sheer desperation. The Fancher party's frustration combined with the anger, paranoia and thirst for vengeance by the southern Saints created an environment ripe

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<sup>16</sup> It is extremely unlikely that this company included direct participants in the atrocities of Missouri and Illinois. These statements and boastings were likely made to irritate and agitate the Saints. Unfortunately, the members of the Fancher party did not realize how deep emotions ran in the Utah territory and how dangerous their situation was.

for violence. In speaking of the actions of some of the southern Saints when they became aware of the Fancher party, its claims and activities; Juanita Brooks explains:

Immediately following the regular church service, a special meeting was called of the Stake High Council. Isaac C. Haight, as the highest in religious authority and the one in command of the military organization in the town, was in charge of this indignation meeting. The local officers wanted the help of the militia to enforce the law, and various members expressed themselves freely as to what should be done with regard to the emigrant company. Some felt that the travelers should not be allowed to get away with such defiance.

A resolution was presented and passed to the effect that “we will deal with this situation now, so that our hands will be free to meet the army when it comes.” After it was passed, Laban Morrill and others began to ask questions. What, specifically, did the brethren mean by dealing with the situation now? Arrest and punish the offenders? Some felt that this would do no good; it would only mean men to guard them and food to feed them, and no one any better off.

So, it was suggested that they be “done away with.” *Ever since the days of Missouri and Nauvoo, ever since the martyrdom of their prophet, the Saints had been taught that they should never cease to importune the Lord to avenge the blood of the prophets. Now, here were the men who had boasted openly and defiantly that they had helped to kill Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum. One had displayed the pistol which fired the fatal shot. All had laughed to scorn the attempts of the local officers to arrest them. Should they forget the oaths of vengeance which they had taken and sit back weakly while such as these taunted them?* (emphasis added)<sup>17</sup>

Entire books have been written in an attempt to explain the events of September 11, 1857.<sup>18</sup> For sake of brevity, I will offer only the essential details. A group of Indians<sup>19</sup> and zealous Mormons led by Issac Haight and John D. Lee (both leaders of the Church in southern Utah) attacked the Fancher party at Mountain Meadows on or about September 7<sup>th</sup>. Apparently, the Fancher party was better-armed than had been expected and withstood the initial assault. The fighting went on for several days but on September 11, a group of Mormon men approached the party under the pretense of peace offering to escort the group safely to the next settlement on the condition that the immigrants disarm and walk away protected by the company of Mormons. The Fancher party agreed to the request and was marched about one-

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<sup>17</sup> Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 53.

<sup>18</sup> The first and perhaps best of these is *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Mormons believe that Indians are the direct descendants of Joseph (as described in the Book of Mormon) and thus, are literally part of the house of Israel. Thus, they did not view Indians as outsiders and commonly formed alliances with Utah tribes.

half mile from their wagons when a signal was given by Mormon leaders and all members of the immigrant party, with the exception of those children who were not yet old enough to speak, were summarily shot and killed.

In the minds of those Mormon leaders who had planned and executed this massacre, this mass execution was God's justice for the atrocities suffered in Missouri and Illinois. These men viewed themselves as God's new Israel and felt justified in being the instrument of God's vengeance against the anti-elect. In the minds of these men, the Fancher party (and possibly by extension, the entire Gentile United States) had committed offenses not just against the Mormon people, but against God.

## Biblical Justification

Armed with the self-conception as God's new Israel, these southern Mormons likely felt justified in their actions for two reasons. First, in the revelation given to Joseph Smith regarding committing violence against their enemies, the Lord specifies that such vengeance and violence is justified through four generations.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the sins of the father's could be paid for by their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. As mentioned above, the anger from their mistreatment and especially the murder of their prophet Joseph Smith, had never subsided and in can be argued that some Saints were looking for an opportunity to strike back at those who had harmed them. The Fancher party was perceived as such an opportunity.

The idea of inflicting divine punishment on those who may not have directly participated in an offense can be found in the Hebrew Bible and did, at least partially, inform the theological ethics of the southern Mormons who murdered the Fancher party. Perhaps the most poignant example is that of how ancient Israel was commanded to deal with the Amalekites.<sup>21</sup> In 1 Samuel 15:2-3 we read: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child, and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

There are several key points to draw out here. First, the Amalekites at this time are apparently guilty for an offense committed against Israel by their ancestors (Exodus 17). Second, the command includes a directive to destroy absolutely and without mercy. Such a directive is indicative of a holy war wherein the victims are offered as a type of sacrifice to the Lord and was common not just in Israel, but throughout the ancient Near East.<sup>22</sup> John Collins indicates that in such a war "the enemy is deemed worthy of being offered to God" and that

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<sup>20</sup> D&C 98:29

<sup>21</sup> Other examples may include Israel's conflict with the Midianites and the general anti-Canaanite polemic found in Joshua. See: Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 112-13.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce C. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 1087.

“rather than respect for human life, the practice bespeaks a totalistic attitude, which is common in armies and warfare, wherein the individual is completely subordinate to the interests of the group.”<sup>23</sup> Collins admits however that “all of this helps put the practice in context in the ancient world but increases rather than lessens its problematic nature from an ethical point of view.”

Part of the problem here is that these zealous Mormons were reading and being inspired by ancient texts in a modern context and likely did not appreciate the overstatement common in the Hebrew Bible in reference to Israel’s conquests in Canaan and elsewhere. Collins observes that “the biblical texts are not historically reliable accounts of early Israelite history but ideological fictions from a much later time.”<sup>24</sup> Narratives, especially those of the occupation of Canaan, often initially overstate success or conquest only to later acknowledge that conquest and success may not have been absolute. In the case of the Amalekites, Saul spares king Agag and is punished for doing so (1 Samuel 15:10). Additionally, it is apparent that Saul was not successful in completing the destruction of the Amalekites as David is forced to deal with them later on in the narrative (1 Samuel 27:8, 30:1-31, 2 Samuel 8:12). The narratives found in much of the Hebrew Bible are idealized history with the express intent of illustrating Israel’s election in a larger drama. I would argue that they are not intended as morality tales or offered as stories of behavior to emulate. Rather, they illustrate the self-perception of a particular people at a particular time and place.

An important consideration here is that of marginalization. As the Utah Saints became more marginalized by the culture and policies of the United States, their rhetoric became increasingly violent as did their actions. The “us vs. them” attitude became more pronounced and it became much easier for the southern Mormons to see the Fancher party purely as “the other.” I would contend that during the time in which these biblical texts were formed (DH and the redaction of the Torah), Israel found itself in a similar situation – marginalized, threatened, and vulnerable. Of course, the biblical historians were writing

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<sup>23</sup> John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

idealized history in part, as an expression of their marginalization. Unfortunately, these zealous southern Saints acted out of a misreading of mythic history written more as an aid in comfort, than instruction.

Reading these texts in isolation is also problematic. Yes, Israel is commanded to mete out the complete and unmerciful destruction of certain peoples (although the actual historical likelihood of this having actually occurred is virtually zero). However, the covenant made with Abraham indicates a type of priestly role for the people of Israel. According to Joel Kaminsky: "Abram's family will be a conduit through which blessing will pass to the other nations of the world" and that "at least one part of Abraham's and his descendant's duty is to call God to account if he is acting unjustly."<sup>25</sup> Further, Kaminsky argues that "God conceives of Israel as a priestly people, a concept that entails her functioning as a mediator of the divine to the world as a whole."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, to read Israel's election solely as justification for divine violent acts is to ignore an entire aspect of her calling. Israel's priestly or pastoral role is emphasized throughout much of the prophetic literature.<sup>27</sup> Kaminsky rightly argues that concepts of election are not inherently faulty, but rather, that some portions of election theology are problematic, worthy of critique, and can produce bad results when misapplied.

### **Coming Full Circle**

Not surprisingly, those involved in the Mountain Meadows Massacre immediately regretted their actions and worked to distance themselves from the atrocity they had committed. There has been much debate as to whether Brigham Young ordered the Fancher party to be destroyed. I believe such an order is highly unlikely because above all and despite all of his extreme rhetoric, Brigham Young was a pragmatist who would have realized the extremely negative consequences such a massacre would produce for Utah and the Church. However, Young did work to minimize the Church's exposure (again, acting very much as a pragmatist) and eventually the entire event was blamed on John D. Lee. Lee was

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<sup>25</sup> Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 83.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>27</sup> See *Ibid.*, 137-58.

excommunicated from the Church and executed by federal authorities for his involvement. Most historians recognize that Lee served the role of scapegoat. It would be an overstatement to say that the Mountain Meadows Massacre occurred *entirely* because these zealous southern Saints conceived of themselves as elect and thus justified their violence. However, this self-conception of election undoubtedly played a role, not only in this horrific incident, but also in the general development of the Latter-day Saint community throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Mountain Meadows Massacre in many ways can be seen as the culmination of tension between the Mormon Church and the world at-large. Certainly tensions continued to mount throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century up until the institutional abandonment of polygamy. However, no other singular incident in the history of conflict between the Saints and the Gentiles can be said to be as violent or pregnant with the ideas of election and chosenness as can the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

Interestingly, Mormonism began with a conception of election which involved a pastoral or missionary calling to the wider world. The early church saw itself as an “ensign to the nations” (Isa 5:26) meant to herald the coming of Christ and the ushering in of a new age. However, as the church became more and more marginalized and experienced increased persecution and violence, it developed a more stark “us versus them” attitude which pitted the elect against the anti-elect who refused to acknowledge Israel’s God.<sup>28</sup> It was during this period when Mormonism felt most justified to defy authority and define its chosen and elect role in more apocalyptic terms. Mormonism felt invincible against the non-chosen who were fighting against the establishment of their new Zion. However, as time passed and congress continued to pass increasingly stifling anti-polygamy legislation, the Church was forced to succumb to federal pressure and eventually abandoned polygamy in 1890, although the practice proved

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<sup>28</sup> Parallels can be seen in Isaiah comparing the text concerning the non-elect found in chapters 40-55 (second Isaiah) with that found in chapter 65 (third Isaiah).

extremely difficult to eliminate<sup>29</sup> and has itself produced several violent and fundamentalist offshoots of mainline Mormonism.<sup>30</sup>

Following the end of polygamy however, the Church has continued to assimilate into western culture and in most cases is considered a beacon of democratic ideals and values. Additionally, the Church has returned to its original conception of election wherein it sees itself as a minister to the wider world, rather than as an enemy to it. In modern times, the Church has striven to maintain what sociologists might call an “optimal” level of tension between itself and the wider-world<sup>31</sup>, however in general the LDS Church has moved towards being more inclusive than exclusive; more “we” than “us.”<sup>32</sup> In September of 2007, the LDS Church offered an official apology for the events at Mountain Meadows and has employed one of its own quasi-official historians in writing an accurate and full account of this event.

### **Conclusion**

The Mountain Meadows Massacre is an example of a conception of divine election gone awry. It is also an example of the results of marginalization. The massacre can be understood but not justified; and while some level of sympathy can be maintained (or at least understood) for both victims and perpetrators, the actions of those southern Utah Saints who perpetrated this atrocity must be unequivocally condemned. The modern LDS Church has, through a long process of self-evaluation and societal assimilation, come to a point where come to a place where it can recognize the its own past missteps and offer a full accounting of its own role in the Mountain Meadows Massacre. While it cannot be reasonably argued that the Church, as an institution, authorized and perpetrated the events of September 11, 1857, it must be recognized

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<sup>29</sup> D. Michael Quinn, "Lds Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890-1904," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 1 (1985).

<sup>30</sup> Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Aukland: Doubleday, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive, the Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> Of course, the Church maintains very conservative political positions as part of what Mauss would call a “retrenchment motif.” This conservatism does create significant tension between itself and more liberal segments of society.

that the culture of divine election present within the Church at that time contributed to the violent acts of that infamous day.

While the modern LDS Church still maintains a theological position as the chosen and elect of God, it has chosen to engage the wider world with a sense of pastoral mission, rather than stark division between the elect and non-elect. It seems that modern Mormonism has learned from Mountain Meadows and now seeks to mediate between the divine will and the world at-large.

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