Joseph Smith or the Sword: The Missouri War of 1838 and the Mormon Cult of Personality

By the late winter of 1838, the Mormon Prophet, Joseph Smith, Jr. began encountering serious dissention within the ranks of his Church, based at the time in Kirkland, Ohio. With rumors of polygamous marriages involving the Prophet and his closest associates circulating through the community, Smith and other Church leaders hurriedly left Kirkland behind and relocated to Caldwell County, Missouri. In a letter to the Prophet dated 15 February 1838, a member of the Missouri congregation named Thomas Marsh made it clear to the Prophet that his Missouri followers held no such reservations about his righteousness, “Dear brother, we lament that such foul and false reports should be circulated in Kirtland concerning yourself and may our God speedily open the way for you to come among us. Your presence is absolutely necessary for the salvation of this Church.”¹

A number of factors contributed to the persecution and eventual expulsion of the Mormon community from Missouri. Communal economic practices, clannish social isolationism and the theological idea of “the gathering” all contributed to the overwhelming antagonism the citizens of Missouri felt toward their new Mormon neighbors. However, one factor seemed to overshadow the others. Land disputes could be settled, social differences overcome, but the one issue which most embittered the communities of western Missouri to the presence of the nascent

¹ Letter from Thomas B. Marsh to Joseph Smith, Jr. dated 15 February 1838. www.saintswithouthalos.com Marsh was later a key witness in the Prophet’s prosecution for treason in Missouri. He defected from the ranks of the Church soon after the Smith’s arrival in Missouri and swore a number of affidavits against his former Prophet.
LDS Church was also the most unique and defining feature of nineteenth century Mormonism: the Prophet Joseph Smith himself. The sheer magnitude of Joseph’s personality, in conjunction with a theological divisiveness unfamiliar to the Protestant Missouri settlers, led directly to the end of the Prophet’s Missouri experiment.

Historians have long argued that there exist any number of compromises that could have been reached between the Saints and their Gentile neighbors, but the evidence suggests otherwise. Distinguished scholars of Mormonism like Richard Bushman, D. Michael Quinn and Fawn Brodie disagree as to the level of Joseph Smith’s personal culpability in the Missouri persecutions. Bushman generally grants the Prophet the benefit of the doubt and takes his statements concerning his own responsibility at face value; Quinn and Brodie tend to judge the Prophet’s activities much more harshly, but all three recognize that Smith’s personal charisma and rhetoric contributed to the climate of anger and seething hatred among the Saints toward their Missouri oppressors. Whatever compromises could have been reached would certainly not have included Joseph Smith, and the Saints, with few notable exceptions, were unwilling to abandon the man in whom they had invested so much. In short, Mormonism as we know it in the twentieth century can be viewed as both a product of the Joseph Smith’s unique charisma, and of the Mormon persecution complex which derives a great deal of legitimacy from his death. As a significant body of scholarship pertaining to the way the Prophet was seen by his followers, and his own perceptions of himself, already exists, this treatment will focus on the perceptions of

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dissenters and non-Mormon Missouri settlers, including the Missouri political establishment, toward the self-proclaimed Prophet of God.

As it developed, aspects of the unique religiosity of Mormonism so isolated the nascent faith and its followers that they would eventually be forced to move west, into the uninhabited basin of the Great Salt Lake, to seek the one ingredient that they had lacked up to that point: privacy. Mormonism evolved in such a way that it was impossible, after the Prophet’s murder in Carthage jail in 1844, for them to coexist with eastern communities while maintaining their communal and theological uniqueness. The only direction for the Saints to move was West.

Smith arrived in Missouri in March 1838 to find little persecution of his people. Though the Mormons were pressured in the several years leading up to 1838 to move from the counties of Carroll and Jackson and relocate in the sparsely populated areas of Caldwell and Daviess counties to the north, relations between Mormons and their non-Mormon neighbors had started to normalize. As Mormon John Corrill regarding LDS and Gentile relations at the time, “Friendship began to be restored…. Old prejudices were fast dying away.” Regardless of the peace that his followers had established with their neighbors prior to his arrival in March, by the Fall of 1838 Joseph Smith, through his single-minded pursuit of power and influence for his young Church, had managed to make enemies of the non-Mormon settlers in western Missouri. In Smith’s mind, his actions were justified by revelation, and no temporal authority would interfere with his vision of Zion.

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5 Ibid, 145.
In addition to the Book of Mormon, the King James Bible and the Pearl of Great Price, the LDS Church recognizes a fourth text as divinely inspired. Known as *Doctrine and Covenants*, this fourth leg of the Mormon holy canon is a collection of revelations to Joseph Smith and other Church leaders, used to guide the Church in its day-to-day activities. One *Doctrine and Covenants* revelation in particular, relating specifically to Jackson County, drove the Prophet in his drive for land and political influence in northwestern Missouri.

Recorded as revelation in 1831, *Doctrine and Covenants* 1:30, God makes his intentions for the Saints perfectly clear: “And also those to whom these commandments were given, might have power to lay the foundation of this church, and to bring it fourth out of obscurity and out of darkness, the only true and living church upon the face of the whole Earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased, speaking unto the church collectively and not individually.” This idea, that the Mormon Church represented the only true Christian faith on Earth, is a powerful stimulant, to conversion and also to hatred. In his revelation to Joseph Smith (if one accepts the truth of the Prophet’s claims), God names the actual location the Saints were to construct their Zion. *Doctrine and Covenants* 52: 42-44 set the stage for an inevitable showdown between Mormon and non-Mormon in western Missouri: “And thus, even as I have said, if ye are faithful ye shall assemble yourselves together to rejoice upon the land of Missouri, which is the land of your inheritance, which is now the land of your enemies.” Not surprisingly, the earlier Missouri settlers disagreed. Recorded for posterity in June 1831, seven years before the Prophet would

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7 Ibid, 208-209.
settle in his Promised Land, this revelation, more than any other, justified the Prophet in his own mind concerning his actions in Missouri.

Today, though Mormonism has spread to every corner of the world, Utah remains the nerve center of the LDS experience. There has always been much more to being Mormon than shared theological ideas. Being a Latter-day Saint is about support and community, and centralized control by the Church and its leaders, particularly during the nineteenth century. Though the notion of a “gathering” of Saints to one location has been largely abandoned due to the international character of twentieth century Mormonism, this idea is still very much alive in the Mormon cultural region, often described as Utah, southern Idaho, western Colorado and northern Arizona. It is not enough to believe the same things; Latter-Day Saints desire to live together, work together, and to a large extent do business together. The fundamental distrust of non-Mormons, which by 1838 had already taken hold of the new Missouri settlers, served to antagonize persons living amongst the Saints who held different notions of religion, leadership, and personal interaction. It is no surprise that this sort of behavior isolated the Saints so much: That, after all, is the idea. Unfortunately, their notion of community was antithetical to the environment in which they lived. The Mormons were, quite understandably, unwilling to assimilate and abandon their uniqueness, and as a result, were forced to look beyond the borders of the United States, into the great western desert, for their continued existence. The isolation they so coveted was indeed a necessary factor in their continued cohesion and growth as a community, and the martyrdom of Joseph Smith in 1844 provided ironclad justification for their exodus. To this day, the Mormon Church is characterized by significant suspicion of outside influences, and their nineteenth century persecution complex, though faded, is still very much a part of the LDS worldview.
The Mormon faith has, since its inception, held the doctrine of “the gathering” as one of its foundational principles. Mormons saw themselves (and continue to see themselves) as “the inheritors of God’s covenant with Abraham, the signature of the ‘new and everlasting covenant’ that the Lord had made with his elect in the last revealed of all gospel dispensations.”

This ideal, which had motivated the Mormon Church in all of their previous diasporas (including the journey that brought them to Missouri), was an important factor in the deterioration of relations with their fellow Missouri settlers. After the arrival of their charismatic leader, the Mormons, with few exceptions, threw in their lot with the Prophet. They worried less about relations with their neighbors and more about what they could do as believers to assist the Joseph Smith in implementing the gathering, as it was prophesized. This ideal, setting up as it did two opposing camps, Mormons and non-Mormons, set the Saints on a collision course with the native Missouri community.

Before Joseph Smith arrived in Missouri, the Saints had proposed that all Mormon settlements move into what became Caldwell County, named and incorporated specifically for the purpose of Mormon settlement, and the government agents negotiating with the Mormons agreed, hoping to seal off the problem. This policy worked well, for a time, but as thousands of new Mormon immigrants made their way toward the Promised Land, the Prophet began implementing plans to expand the Saint’s territory into the upper counties of Missouri.

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Apparently, Joseph Smith and the rest of the Mormon leadership recognized no such arrangement, as it had been reached without the Prophet’s consent.\footnote{Ibid, 25.}

By and large, the native Missouri settlers, particularly those in positions of authority, held less than favorable opinions about their new neighbors. They viewed the new Mormon arrivals as “Canadian Banditti”\footnote{Letter from General William P. Penniston, commander 60th Reg., 2nd Brig., 3rd Div., Missouri Militia to Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs, October 21, 1838. Original letter transcribed onto microfilm, Missouri State Archives. Cited from Marie Eccles-Caine Archive of Intermountain Americana registers: “Mormon affidavits and petitions relating to the Missouri Mormon War letters, written in 1838 by Missouri Militia officers and citizens.” Utah State University Libraries.<http://library.usu.edu/>} and complained that the new community was amassing far too much power. Joseph Smith was portrayed as a charlatan, and local politicians like William Penniston, a Missouri militia commander running for the office of Judge, used the Prophet’s claims of divine revelation to strengthen their own positions. Penniston so implored a crowd gathered for a local election at the nearby town of Gallatin on 6 August 1838 with the following words: “The Mormon leaders are a set of horse thieves, liars, counterfeiters, and you know they profess to heal the sick, and cast out devils, and you all know that is a lie.”\footnote{Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, \textit{History of the Church in the Fullness of Times} (Salt Lake City, UT.: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints): 194.} Indeed, Mormon dissenters who had defected from the Church did a great deal of damage to the Prophet’s reputation amongst Missourians. In a sworn affidavit delivered to a local Justice of the Peace in October, 1838, former Mormon Reed Peck accused Joseph of “a stated reverence for the U.S. Constitution and of the State of Missouri” but as for Missouri State Laws “he did not intend to regard them nor care anything about them, as they were made by lawyers and blacklegs.”\footnote{Sworn Affidavit of Reed Peck to an unnamed Justice of the Peace, October, 1838. Original letter housed in the Missouri State Archives, Mormon War Papers Collection. <www.sos.mo.gov.archives/>} No true Prophet

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\footnote{Ibid, 25.}
of God could allow himself to be beholden to the laws of men, and this observation drives to the heart of the Missouri settler’s distrust of Joseph Smith.

Some months before the rhetoric against Smith began in earnest, a speech was given before a large crowd of Mormons that seriously embittered the native Missourians to the LDS presence in their state. During the annual parade celebrating the Fourth of July, Sidney Rigdon, the fire-breathing former minister and Joseph Smith’s chief advisor, made a speech to the assembly of Saints which proved to be the first open provocation directed at the Missourians from the Mormon camp. In front of the crowd of several thousand Mormons, Rigdon thundered down about the injustices his people had been forced to suffer:

> We have proved the world with kindness, we have suffered their abuse without cause, with patience. But from this day and this hour, we will suffer it no more…And that the mob that comes to disturb us, it shall be between us and them a war of extermination, for we will follow them, ‘til the last drop of their blood is spilled, or else they will have to exterminate us; for we will carry the seat of war to their own houses, and their own families, and one party or the other shall be utterly destroyed.-Remember it then all Men!\(^\text{15}\)

While Rigdon’s impassioned speech surely struck the Saints as wholly appropriate considering their situation, it sounded to the Missourians like an open declaration of war. Though Smith himself did not deliver this rousing damnation of the native Missouri population, it was widely understood that he had approved of its contents. W.W. Phelps, a prominent Mormon who had been the editor of an LDS newspaper in Jackson County destroyed by a mob 1833, swore to

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the following in an affidavit delivered on 12 November 1838:16 “Jo Smith, Jr. followed Mr. Rigdon approving his sentiments and said that was what they intended to do. Both in their remarks observed that they meant to have the words of the First Presidency to be as good and as undisputed as the words of God. And that no one should speak against what they say.”17 Some of these statements were later criticized as the unreliable ramblings of bitter, apostatized Saints, but their contents are a testament to the information that many Missourians were using to form opinions about their Mormon neighbors. These testimonials speak not to the true nature of the Mormon community, most of whom were peaceful, industrious citizens, but to the nature of public perceptions of LDS leaders like Joseph Smith and Sidney Ridgon. Ultimately, those are the opinions that compelled Missouri governor Lilburn Boggs to issue an edict of “extermination” against the Saints, identifying them as enemies of Missouri who should be forcibly expelled.18 Even six years later, in the aftermath of Joseph Smith’s assassination, as Brigham Young and Sidney Rigdon jostled for control of the Church, Young publicly blamed Rigdon’s July 4th 1838 speech for the Mormon’s troubles in Missouri.19 On October 17th, exactly one week before Governor Boggs issued his infamous “extermination” order, Joseph Smith made a speech in Far West before a large gathering of embattled Mormon settlers. All of the pent up

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19 Open address to LDS faithful in Times and Seasons, vol. 5, no. 18, p.667, written by Brigham Young. First published: Nauvoo, Ill. 1 October 1844. Digital transcripts available: <http://www.centerplace.org/history/ts/v5n18.htm>, Site administered by the RLDS Church, Independence, Missouri.
anger and frustration the Prophet felt toward the enemies of the Church poured forth, and his words that day constituted the spark of rage that the Mormon people needed to lash out at their oppressors:

If the people will let us alone, we will preach the Gospel in peace. But if they come on to molest us, we will establish our religion by the sword. We will trample down our enemies and make it one gore of blood from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic Ocean. I will be to this generation a second Mohammed, whose motto in treating for peace was ‘Alcoran or the Sword.’ So shall it eventually be with us—‘Joseph Smith or the Sword!’

The following day, 18 October, freshly motivated by their leader’s speech, a group of approximately one hundred armed Saints rode hard toward Daviess County. When the Mormon mob finally withdrew to the perceived safety of Caldwell County and Far West, dozens of structures in the nearby villages of Gallatin and Millport lay in ashes. Instead of the intended effect of intimidating the hostile Missourians into peace through a show of force, the burnings of Gallatin and Millport further galvanized Missouri public opinion against the Saints and their continued presence in the state. Indeed, a number of affidavits sworn in the following days reinforced the Missourian’s contempt for the Mormon community, and even though the raid was carried out by a relatively small force of LDS faithful, it was perceived by the larger Missouri population, and the Governors office, as an act of war. When word of the burnings spread, the

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State of Missouri officially set out to crush what remained of the Mormon community, and held Joseph Smith personally responsible for the conflict.\textsuperscript{21}

Joseph Smith emerges from the historical record as a man whose fiery rhetoric and powerful ambitions did not always mesh with his understanding of politics and frontier justice. The facts suggest that while he was directly responsible for the speeches and defensive proclamations which so enflamed the Mormon community and led directly to the mob violence of Gallatin and Millport, it is presumptuous to entirely blame the Prophet for every action carried out by the more zealous members of his congregation. There is no evidence he was directly aware of his followers intentions for revenge, and it appears he was as surprised as anyone that Mormons had burned two villages nearly to the ground. The Prophet nonetheless shouldered the blame for everything, and the scapegoating of Joseph Smith for all the wrongs of his community proves that his personality, charisma, and most of all his religious highhandedness would forever be the target of persecution by those outside the Mormon community. He had set himself up as the supreme authority in the LDS community in all things temporal and spiritual, so the moment that fire was set to Millport and Gallatin, his fate was essentially sealed.

The first Mormon Prophet was a man of intense charisma, clear religious genius, and a personal magnetism that he used to single-handedly found the most enduring religious movement of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, the Smith’s ideas about communal structure, religious

\textsuperscript{21} For an overview of Missouri perspectives on the burnings of Gallatin and Millport, see Stephen J. LeSeuer, \textit{The Mormon War of 1838} (Columbia, MO.: University of Missouri Press, 1987). For detailed primary documentation of testimony and witness affidavits regarding Mormon involvement in the firings of Gallatin and Millport, see Missouri State Archives, Mormon War Paper Collection, <www.sos.mo.gov/archives/>
righteousness, and political sovereignty brought him into direct conflict with many of the frontier ideals of the era. In the middle of Andrew Jackson’s first term as U.S President, when the national rhetoric praised the common man and democracy, the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s earliest written revelations favored monarchy.\footnote{Quinn, \textit{The Mormon Hierarchy}: Origins of Power, 85.} Smith could not conceive why anyone would reject him as the true Prophet of God that he knew himself to be, and the Missourian’s dismissal of his message convinced him not that he should change his methods of control within the Mormon community, but that the government and people of Missouri were his enemies.

Joseph Smith set up a community that revolved around his personality, and imbued in that community a sense of entitlement, specific to northwestern Missouri, that all but guaranteed the conflict with the native settlers. The aspects of Mormonism that had so quickly managed to convert thousands of Americans were the very aspects that ensured their persecution. No other factor played as large a role in that persecution as Joseph Smith, Jr. and the new theological edifice he built around himself.