

## The Personal Cost of the 1838 Mormon War in Missouri: One Mormon's Plea for Forgiveness

Gary James Bergera

In mid-October 1838, Orson Hyde, thirty-three-year-old founding member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, voluntarily withdrew from active participation in the Church.<sup>1</sup> The previous summer some zealous Saints in Missouri had begun organizing themselves into vigilante bands, called Danites, as both a defensive measure and in retribution for persecutions suffered at the hands of their non-Mormon neighbors.<sup>2</sup> Together with another disillusioned Mormon, Thomas B. Marsh, president of the Twelve Apostles, Hyde signed an affidavit on 24 October denouncing what he saw as Mormon-related excesses and blaming Church authorities for them.<sup>3</sup> Pained over his brethren's acts, Hyde wrote a day later: "I have left the Church called Latter Day Saints for conscience sake, fully believing that God is not with them, and is not the mover of their schemes and projects."<sup>4</sup> Missouri officials used Hyde's and Marsh's document the next month in charging Joseph Smith and other LDS Church leaders with treason and in jailing them.

The following 16 January 1839, the three members of the Church's governing First Presidency, at the time incarcerated in Liberty Jail, Missouri, instructed senior Apostles Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball to fill the vacancies in the Quorum of the Twelve occasioned by the departures of Hyde and Marsh.<sup>5</sup> Two months later, Church officials formally expelled a number of "apostates," including Marsh, but Hyde was not among them.<sup>6</sup> Lonesome and repentant, he had already contacted Kimball and one or two other Church leaders about returning.<sup>7</sup> When Joseph Smith subsequently

---

GARY JAMES BERGERA is the managing director of the Smith-Pettit Foundation, Salt Lake City, Utah, and the author of *Conflict in the Quorum: Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002).



Orson Hyde  
 Courtesy Church Archives, Church of  
 Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

suggested ejecting Hyde in early May, Hyde's supporters, including Kimball and Smith's older brother, Hyrum, intervened, and Smith instead suspended Hyde pending a satisfactory explanation of his behavior, a move sanctioned by the general membership of the Church.<sup>8</sup> Seven weeks later, Hyde appeared before the Twelve Apostles to confess his sins and ask forgiveness. Despite the reservations of Sidney Rigdon, first counselor the First Presidency, who feared that if Hyde returned he would desert the Church again at the next sign of hardship, the Twelve Apostles voted to reinstate Hyde as a member of their quorum.<sup>9</sup> Church members followed suit several months later with a vote of full confidence for Hyde.<sup>10</sup>

Although some writers have suggested that Hyde was expelled from the LDS Church at the time Young and Kimball were told to replace him,<sup>11</sup>

there is no evidence that Hyde was ever excommunicated. Rather, he physically separated himself from the main body of the Church and then returned before a permanent replacement for him had assumed office and before formal action against him had been taken. Still, at the time Hyde considered himself to have left the LDS Church, and his self-imposed suspension from office was never later challenged. On the basis of this eight-month absence from the Church, Hyde's seniority in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was readjusted thirty-six years later, on 10 April 1875, moving him from first to third in his quorum. As a consequence, he did not succeed Brigham Young as president of the LDS Church following Young's death in mid-1877.

Hyde composed the following letter to Young, who had replaced Marsh as *de facto* president of the Quorum of the Twelve, on 30 March 1839 as he was petitioning to return to the Church. Young copied Hyde's letter onto pages 103 through 110 of the second of his personal holographic diaries, which covers the dates 27 July 1837 through 1 April 1845.<sup>12</sup> It is this copy that follows. The location of the original of Hyde's letter, if it survived, is not known.

New Franklin<sup>13</sup> [Missouri] March 30. 1839

Dear Sir [Brigham Young]<sup>14</sup>

I now attempt to write you a few lines to express, in short, the feelings and desires of my heart. I saw Brother [Heber C.] Kimball<sup>15</sup> at Far west [Missouri]<sup>16</sup> soon after you left that place, and he invited me very strongley to come back and go with him to England. I asked him if he could forgive me, and he said yes. I asked him if the church would for give me, and he said yes. and I told him I would come and go with him. and so I will (if the Lord permit).

When I see you and the church I will give you a full history of my course, ~~and~~ and the reasonings of my mind; and freely confess all my sins; and as to the terms upon which I can be rec[e]ived back into my place I shall not be pockticular; for to live in this way I cannot; and to join any ~~of~~ other society, I have no more disposition then to eat when I am full.

I talked of writing [visiting?] to England, but have not don[e] it. I saw I was pl[a]ced in a situation that I could do no good, and felt disposed to do as little harm as possible. Sometimes, during the past winter, my mind had be[e]n so exercised that I could ne[i]ther work nor sleep, and would frequently find myself weeping before I was a ware of it; and asking myself this qu[e]sti[o]n why in Gods name is it so, what have I don[e] that I am left in this situation, or rather than I have be[e]n suffered to fall into this dilemma. when I returned from England, my spirit was pure and my soul loved virtue. I was unco[n]scious of guilt. When I law Sick at Farwest I thought if I could but depart. I should be at rest. I felt like taking no part what ever in the Danite movements.<sup>17</sup>

the convictions of my own mind ware, that it was not a good and virtuous institution, and these conv[i]ctions ware strengthened by the tales of some who had been inititated into the mysteries ~~&c &c~~ &c &c.

But these things do not rest upon my mind with that weight which they did at that time, I may say, they are no more in my mind now then a feather in the wind. I had engaged a school which would have been worth three hundred dollars a year or more before I Started for Far West. I however, would not bind my self for only a Quarter at a time. When in the upper Country I intended to have gone to Liberty to see the prisoners, But their had be[e]n an attempt made to rescue them a few days before, and for this reason they would admit no one into the prison; therefore I did not go.

I spoke with Parley [P. Pratt]<sup>18</sup> through the Cracks and thought If I had be[e]n a Sampson. the prisoners should go free.

Bro[ther]. [Heber C.] Kimball told me I had better get clear of my school if I Could. I have done so since I returned, and expect Bro[ther]. Oliver Olney<sup>19</sup> to send a team here for my family in the course of two or three weeks. He will take them to the Iowa Territory, there is a fine chance for me in a wholesale Grocery here, can get good wages and am now in the owners employ until the team com[e]s. Had I better remain here a time in order to fit myself for a mission or a campagne, or had I better leave as soon as the team Com[e]s for my family, and if I leave here where shall I find the authorities of the church; the chastening hand of the Lord has don[e] for me that which nothing else would, I think, if the church will accept me as a minister, or a sol[d]ier, or a door-keeper, they can have me. I need not write to you that I have literally died and be[e]n ra[is]ed from the dead since I was last at Far West, But I will tell you more about it when I see you face to face. Keep this part to yourself, if you please—

Brigham, will you forgive me: will ~~you~~ the church forgive me[?] If so, God will forgive me.

Please write me immeditty [immediately] on rct [receipt] of this and tell me all you think to be for my good[.]

Direct to New Franklin. Howard County MO

Whatever the church may Decide upon respecting my case, they may rest assured that the ~~feelings of~~ following are the real wishes of my h[e]art.

I truly wish mount zion well what ~~fore~~ ere becom[e]s of me.

With a fresh remembrance of formar times, and formar times scearis [scenes] with feelings of [the] tenderest kind towards you, and alk all with whome you ~~and~~ are conneceted, I Subscribe myself your Younger Brother in a distant land feeding swine.

Brigham Young

Orson Hyde

## Notes

1. The standard biography of Orson Hyde is Myrtle Stevens Hyde, *Orson Hyde: The Olive Branch of Israel* (Salt Lake City: Agreka Books, 2000).

2. See Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987). Other introductions to Mormon/non-Mormon conflict in Missouri include Leland Homer Gentry, *A History of the Latter-day Saints in Northern Missouri from 1836 to 1839*, in the series *Dissertations in Latter-day Saint History* (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History and BYU Studies, 2000); and especially Alexander L. Baugh, *A Call to Arms: The 1838 Mormon*

*Defense of Northern Missouri*, in the same series.

3. See LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War*, 134–37; and Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 3:167 note (hereafter *History of the Church*). For more on Marsh, see Lyndon W. Cook, “‘I Have Sinned Against Heaven, and Am Unworthy of Your Confidence, But I Cannot Live without a Reconciliation’: Thomas B. Marsh Returns to the Church,” in *BYU Studies* 20, no.3 (spring 1980): 389–400.

4. Appended to Thomas B. Marsh to Lewis and Ann Abbott, 25 October 1838, in Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. Ann Abbott was Marsh's sister; Lewis Abbott was his brother-in-law.

5. Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith, and Hyrum Smith to Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young, 16 January 1839, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives.

6. See “Extract of the Minutes of Conferences,” *Times and Seasons* (Commerce, Illinois), 1, no. 1 (November 1839): 15.

7. See Heber C. Kimball, *President Heber C. Kimball's Journal, Seventh Book of the Faith-Promoting Series* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 69.

8. *History of the Church*, 3:345.

9. Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 237. Lyman Sherman, Hyde's replacement as Apostle, had died in late January 1839 without having been ordained to office.

10. See Minutes of Meeting, 5 October 1839, Joseph Smith Papers.

11. See, for example, Howard H. Barron, *Orson Hyde* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1977), 105–7.

12. The originals of Young's diaries are in the LDS Archives.

13. New Franklin, Missouri, is located in Howard County, just over a hundred miles east of Kansas City and thirty miles west of Columbia.

14. Brigham Young was born 1 June 1801, in Whittingham, Vermont. He joined the LDS Church in April 1832. He served proselyting missions to Canada and then moved to Ohio in 1833. He was ordained a member of first Quorum of Twelve Apostles on 14 February 1835. He relocated to Missouri in 1838 and was called on a mission to England in 1839–41. Following the death of Joseph Smith, he and the Quorum of the Twelve were sustained as the leadership of the Church in August 1844 and directed the Church's relocation to the Great Salt Lake Valley in 1846–47. He died in Salt Lake City on 29 August 1877.

15. Heber C. Kimball was born 14 June 1801 in Sheldon, Vermont. He joined the LDS Church in April 1832 and was ordained a member of first Quorum of Twelve Apostles on 14 February 1835. He moved to Kirtland, Ohio; to Far West, Missouri; and to Nauvoo, Illinois and served proselyting missions to England in 1837–38 and 1839–41. He migrated to Utah and arrived on 24 July 1847 and was named first counselor to Church President Brigham Young on 27 December 1847. He died in Salt Lake City on 22 June 1868.

16. Far West, Missouri, is some thirty-five miles north-northwest of Richmond.

17. For more on the nature and activities of the Danites, see LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri*, 40–47; and Baugh, *A Call to Arms*, 33–46.

18. Parley P. Pratt was born 12 April 1807 in Burlington, New York. He joined the LDS Church in September 1830 and moved to Ohio. He was ordained a member of the first Quorum of Twelve Apostles on 21 February 1835 and served proselyting missions to England 1839–40/40–43. He migrated to the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, traveled to the

Pacific Islands and South America in 1851–52, and served another mission to California in 1854–55. He was killed on 13 May 1857 near Van Buren, Arkansas. Hyde is referring to Pratt's incarceration in Liberty Jail for treason.

19. Olney was married to Hyde's wife's sister. Following his wife's death in 1841, Olney was excommunicated from the LDS Church for apostasy because of claims that he had been appointed a prophet called to inaugurate a new gospel dispensation.