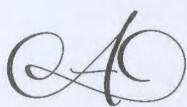


# MEXICAN EXODUSES: THE MORMON STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM, IDENTITY, AND COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO, 1823-1917

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and we did take our tents and whatsoever things were possible for us, and did journey in the wilderness for the space of many days.<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830, and during the two decades that followed, Mormons moved westward across the American frontier searching for a place to settle and practice their new religion. The members of the fledgling church sought refuge in Salt Lake Valley after the death of their founder in what was then Mexican territory. Their journeys and settlements cannot be considered part of the great push westward that happened with Manifest Destiny. Rather, the Mormons chose to settle outside the United States to ensure their religious freedom and find sanctuary from persecution. Their goals did not coincide with notions of Manifest Destiny or the American government's policies regarding territory. Though the Salt Lake Valley and surrounding areas later became U.S. territories and eventually the state of Utah, the Mormon *colonias* founded in Mexico proper have very different histories. The American exceptionalism inherent in the Mormon faith, and the failure of the Mormons to assimilate into Mexican society eventually led to the failure of nearly all the Mormon *colonias* located south of the U.S./Mexican border.

## II. Joseph Smith's Revelations

Joseph Smith received prophetic revelations over the course of a decade before he began proselytizing.<sup>2</sup> He wrote of his early visions which were experienced during a period of introspection and reflection upon his faith, recording that "[he] was enraptured in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other" and that "they told [him] that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged by God as his church and kingdom."<sup>3</sup> These beings, which Smith identified as being God and Jesus Christ, promised further revelation that would include the totality of the gospel.<sup>4</sup> Smith a poor, uneducated printer's apprentice, now bearing the mantle of

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1 2 Ne 5:7, *The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1927).

2 Joseph Smith, *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*: <http://academic.ub.com.proxy.sbn.uts.in.edu/EBchecked/topic/549791/Joseph-Smith>.

3 Joseph Smith, "Joseph Smith Explains How an Angel Guided Him to Found the Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 1842," in *Major Problems in American Religious History*, ed. Patrick Allitt, 2nd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 136.

4 *Ibid.*

prophethood, proclaimed he was again visited in a vision and given the task of translating the promised gospels with the aid of the angel Moroni.<sup>5</sup>

The revealed texts, according to Smith, were "engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long and not quite so thick as common tin" and contained within "the history of ancient America."<sup>6</sup> These records and a long-forgotten set of seer stones are part of what create the distinct and undeniable Americanness of the faith. The revealed history of pre-Columbian America is decidedly biblical, with the continent being peopled by refugees from Babel and Israelites from Jerusalem who were subsequently visited by Christ after his resurrection.<sup>7</sup> Warfare between the descendants of these peoples ended the practice of the Abrahamic traditions in America, but according to Smith, the inscribed plates he translated were the records of Christ's revelations to the peoples of North America and they were to "be united with the bible for the accomplishment of the purposes of God in the last days."<sup>8</sup> By placing Christ in pre-Columbian America and determining that the indigenous peoples were the descendants of groups of biblical significance, Smith branded his restorationist Christian sect with a distinctly American identity. Armed with a new scriptural message and imbued with a sense of urgency by the millenarian ideals, Smith began to proselytize.

### III. Conversion, Controversy, and the Semi-Occult Origins of Mormonism

The atmosphere in New York was a hotbed of religious revivalism in the first half of the 19th century, and its "burned-over district" was the place from whence Mormonism and several other enthusiastic sects and denominations sprang.<sup>9</sup> According to Mormon historian Stephen C. LeSueur, many of the early converts were rural New Englanders who were neither wealthy nor well-educated, though he notes that "among these converts were men of exceptional talent and intelligence, including the brothers Parley P. and Orson Pratt, ... and Joseph Smith's eventual successor, Brigham Young."<sup>10</sup> Though the fledgling church was able to garner converts, acceptance of Smith's teachings was far from universal.

Smith met both resistance and acceptance from those whom he sought to convert. The presence of other new and developing religious sects and traditions did little to increase the acceptance of Smith's revelations, many of which were controversial in substance or in origin. Historian Jon Butler argues that Smith's divine revelations were neither unheard of nor wholly unbelievable and that some of the resistance was due to semi-occult natures of the seer stones, Smith's past "treasure-hunts," and the charismatic nature of some early practices, including healing and other miracles.<sup>11</sup> Butler writes that Smith was an unsuccessful treasure hunter and that he used occult means, including seer stones, in his searches.<sup>12</sup> The seer stones, according to historian Anne F. Hyde, were "crystals used in all kinds of American folk practices" and

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5 Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations and Families* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 359.

6 Smith, "Joseph Smith Explains How an Angel Guided Him," 136-137.

7 *Ibid.*, 137.

8 *Ibid.*

9 John Heeren, Donald B. Lindsey, and Marylee Mason, "The Mormon Concept of Mother in Heaven: A Sociological Account of Its Origins and Development," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23 (1984): 396-411.

10 Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War In Missouri* (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 1987), 11.

11 Jon Butler, "Awash in a Sea of Faith," in *Major Problems in American Religious History*, 152-153.

12 *Ibid.*, 152.



that they were instruments Smith claimed allowed him to translate the *Book of Mormon*.<sup>13</sup> This taken alone, might not be controversial if it was fairly common folk practice, however, the secrecy and the validity of statements made by individuals who claimed to see the golden plates and seer stones is what doubters questioned. Smith's translations were done in secret, with the aid of the stones and the angel Moroni, and Hyde writes that,

Joseph Smith understood the incredible qualities of his story and arranged for a series of witnesses to look at the plates before he reburied them, as instructed by Moroni. These witnesses, all close family friends, did little to convince skeptics. The story the book told, no matter how it was produced, got strong reactions. It either compelled or horrified its early readers. It instructed people to build a strict new Israel on the American continent and to reform the world from there. The *Book of Mormon* proposed a new purpose for America: to become "a realm of righteousness rather than an empire of liberty."<sup>14</sup>

The question of whether or not Smith fabricated his revelations seems to be more substantive than the methods used to produce them in written form.

#### IV. Conflict, the Exodus Westward, and an Unexpected Reunification

Smith's religious doctrines were divisive and not well received by non-Mormons. Hyde attributes much of the violence and intolerance that plagued Mormons to doctrines including polygamy and cooperative economic practices that engendered a series of violent, armed conflicts fought between Mormon militias and non-Mormons along the frontier as they searched for a place to settle.<sup>15</sup> This runs counter to what Joseph Smith claimed, attributing some of the violence not to intolerance or fear, but to lawless men living on the frontier with no respect for laws, property, or society.<sup>16</sup> Smith believed Mormons blameless, particularly during the 1838 conflicts in Missouri:

In the last named state [Missouri] a considerable settlement was formed in Jackson co.; numbers joined the church and we were increasing rapidly; we made large purchases of land, our farms teemed with plenty, and peace and happiness was enjoyed in our domestic circle and throughout our neighborhood; but as we could not associate with our neighbors who were many of them the basest men and had fled from the face of civilized society... they commenced at first to ridicule, then to persecute, and finally an organized mob assembled and burned our houses, tarred, feathered, and whipped many of our brethren and finally drove them from their habitations.<sup>17</sup>

Smith's account captures the Mormon desire to practice their faith unmolested, and he was not alone in his protestations of innocence. Parley P. Pratt, an early Mormon convert who became an important member of the church's hierarchy, wrote this of the incidents in Missouri:

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13 Hyde, *Empires, Nations and Families*, 359.

14 *Ibid.*, 360.

15 *Ibid.*, 361.

16 Smith, "Joseph Smith Explains How an Angel Guided Him," 138.

17 *Ibid.*

We spent most of our time in preaching and conversation, explanatory of our doctrines and practice, which removed mountains of prejudice, and enlisted the populace in our favor, notwithstanding their old hatred and wickedness toward our Society ...

With [a guard or keeper] we walked out of town and visited the desolate lands that belonged to our Society, and the place which, seven years before, we had dedicated and consecrated ... When we saw it last it was a wilderness, but now our enemies had robbed it of every stick of timber.<sup>18</sup>

Pratt and Smith's experiences are not to be dismissed, and can be heralded as examples of the persecution and intolerance that the Mormons faced. Modern histories, however, offer a more compelling reason for the conflicts in Missouri.

Missouri in 1838 was host to what Hyde calls "a virtual civil war" that ensued from "Mormon militancy combined with fear and intolerance on the part of other Missouri settlers."<sup>19</sup> It was not, as Smith recounted, without Mormon instigation. Sensationalized newspaper reporting played both sides against each other and led the Missourians to believe the anti-slavery Mormons were aiming to free slaves, while the Mormons felt their leadership and lands were in jeopardy.<sup>20</sup> These threats, whether real or imagined, led to violence perpetrated by both Mormons and Gentiles, causing Missouri's governor to stage a military intervention that forced the Mormons out of Missouri and into Illinois.<sup>21</sup> Whether the nature of the revelations, the man who made them, or unpopular and controversial doctrines were the driving forces behind the intolerance that Mormons faced, violence toward Smith and his followers continued after they settled in Nauvoo. On June 27, 1844, a mob shot and killed Smith and his brother Hyrum.

Smith's death left the Mormons with no prophet and an untried leader, Brigham Young, who assured Thomas Ford, the Illinois governor, that the Mormons would leave the state as soon as preparations could be made, and they had considered a suitable site for settlement. In the spring, 1847, their westward migration began.<sup>22</sup> The violence, intolerance, and laws banning polygamy, now an acknowledged tenet of the Mormon faith, made settling beyond the borders of the United States a necessity. Though they left American soil behind them, Hyde notes, "they had been formed out of it and spent their lives measuring themselves against it [and thus] the Mormons never managed to leave the United States or its mission behind them" which caused them to "remain enmeshed in U.S political and economic cultures."<sup>23</sup>

The Mormons were unable to escape for long. The lands they claimed in the Salt Lake Valley became the property of the United States after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed with Mexico in 1848.<sup>24</sup> This treaty heralded the end of the United States' war with Mexico and the beginning of the end of Mormon autonomy in their newly settled home. Though conflict

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18 Parley P. Pratt, *History of the Late Persecution Inflicted by the State of Missouri upon the Mormons* (Mexico, NY: 1840), 24. <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/13776>

19 Hyde, *Empires, Nations and Families*, 361.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*, 361-362.

22 *Ibid.*, 366.

23 *Ibid.*, 369.

24 "Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo," *Britannica Academic*, <http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/247592/Treaty-of-Guadalupe-Hidalgo>.



was not immediate, in 1857 tensions would again erupt between the Mormons and the U.S. government, but during the near-decade of relative peace, the Mormons began to flourish in their newly settled home.

## V. Millenarianism and First Missionary Efforts in Mexico

Though settled in what would soon become Utah Territory, the millenarian nature of the Mormon faith would not allow them to remain isolated or idle when the return of Christ and the salvation of mankind needed to be accomplished. Millenarianism refers to the Second Coming of Christ, Judgment Day, and the kingdom that Christ would create upon his return.<sup>25</sup> Early Mormon theology vacillated between pre and postmillenarianism, unsure of whether Christ's return would herald the beginning of the millennium or whether it would occur at the end. Mormon historian Grant Underwood argues that though this appears to be a problematic theological issue, it didn't necessarily hamper or prevent the Mormons from actively preparing, particularly through missionary efforts, for the eventual return of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

According to historian F. Lamond Tullis, Parley P. Pratt, an early Mormon leader and first-wave settler of Salt Lake City, was "scarcely settled in Salt Lake City [when he] had already begun to prepare for a mission to South America" in part by learning Spanish.<sup>27</sup> Pratt's missions, undertaken from 1849-1851, were largely unsuccessful, but they marked one of the earliest Mormon forays into Mexico. If Pratt's zeal to proselytize to the peoples considered the descendants of biblical settlers in America is indicative of Mormon sentiment, it is not surprising that Mexico was the eventual choice to escape federal regulations and laws forbidding polygamy within the United States. Though proselytizing and seeking refuge are different endeavors, the desire to rekindle what the Mormons thought was a forgotten faith amongst the indigenous peoples of the Americas left an indelible mark upon the collective psyche of the faithful.

The earliest Mormon designs on Mexico were radically different than what motivated the massive migration at the end of the 19th century. The Mormons saw very little real persecution or abridgement of religious freedom in the 1850s, and that was reflected in their proselytization efforts and gradual settlement outside of the Salt Lake Valley. Tullis ascribes simple and straightforward motives for these earliest moves into Mexico, and the former Mexican territory south of Utah, to the twin desires of exploration for eventual settlement and proselytization or conversion efforts.<sup>28</sup> Events at the end of the 1850s and beginning of the 1860s, however, acted as impetuses for change in the Mormon community.

## VI. The Mountain Meadows Massacre and Renewed Persecution 1857-1862

The Salt Lake Valley settlements were theocratic, with Young acting as both the religious and political leader, but Americans continued to distrust and dislike Mormons.<sup>29</sup> In 1857, "US troops threatened to replace Mormon theocracy with a more conventional territorial government," writes historian Daniel Herman, "[causing] church leaders--especially Brigham

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25 Grant Underwood, "Early Mormon Millenarianism: Another Look," *Church History*, 54 (1985): 218. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3167237>.

26 *Ibid.*

27 F. Lamond Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1987), 6-7.

28 *Ibid.*, 13.

29 Daniel Herman, "Calls to War, Calls to Peace," in *Just South of Zion*, ed. Jason H. Dormady and Jared M. Tamez (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 131.

Young--[to vent] inflammatory rhetoric intended to rouse Mormons to resist."<sup>30</sup> This prompted Young to issue a proclamation forbidding the entry of US troops and settlers, declaring martial law, and addressing numerous grievances against the United States.<sup>31</sup> It is a topic of scholarly debate whether Young's proclamation precipitated the slaughter at Mountain Meadows, a month after it was issued. Hyde alleges that Mormon historians and official histories from the Church of Latter-day Saints either fail to assign blame to the Mormons or emphasize Mormon persecution.<sup>32</sup> She assigns blame to the federal government for sending troops and causing Mormons to again feel threatened, but holds Mormons accountable for the 121 deaths of the Fancher Party at Mountain Meadows in September, 1857.<sup>33</sup> Hyde believes Young was fully cognizant of the massacre and chose to assist in the cover-up, blaming Native Americans as well as warning President James Buchanan that more attacks would follow.<sup>34</sup>

The Mountain Meadows Massacre increased tensions between the United States and the Mormons living in Utah Territory. Dormant for nearly a decade, conflict between Mormons and the United States was reawakened and intensified by the actions of both parties. The Mormons showed reluctance to accept any federal authority, especially if seemed weak or hostile. In 1862, after consulting the *Book of Mormon*, the Constitution, and accounts from Mormon and non-Mormons about the nature of polygamy, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act into law.<sup>35</sup> This law became the foundation for later legislation against polygamy, and in some ways, it hastened the Mormon move to Mexico.

## VII. Looking Southward, 1870-1880

By 1870, the Mormons had spread to the southernmost borders of Utah. Political stability in Mexico and defeat of the Navajo by U.S. forces made moving southward both possible and desirable.<sup>36</sup> Young had the *Book of Mormon* translated into Spanish, and early exploratory missions were conducted to locate arable land and assess the possibility of attaining converts.<sup>37</sup> Young and other Mormon leaders felt strongly about extending the faith because, according to historian Jason H. Dormady, "the people of Mexico, with their mixed racial heritage, represented the descendants of the people who appear in the *book of Mormon*."<sup>38</sup> This desire to restore what the Mormons considered the ancestral faith of the people of Mexico, as revealed to Joseph Smith by the angel Moroni, motivated Young and other Mormons to increase colonization efforts through the 1870s.

The atmosphere in Mexico also was more welcoming and hospitable for colonization than it had been years earlier. The Mexican liberal parties had created *La Reforma* that succeeded in ousting the old president and breaking the hold of the Catholic Church. With these reforms, Young looked to Mexico as a place to settle and spread their faith.<sup>39</sup> Social change made the

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30 *Ibid.*

31 Brigham Young, *The Diary of Brigham Young 1857*, ed. Everett L. Cooley (Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, 1980), 83.

32 Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families*, 484.

33 *Ibid.*, 485.

34 *Ibid.*, 487.

35 Gary Vitale, "Abraham Lincoln and the Mormons: Another Legacy of Limited Freedom," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 101 (Fall-Winter 2008): 267-68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40204739>

36 Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico*, 14.

37 Jason H. Dormady, Introduction to *Just South of Zion: The Mormons in Mexico and its Borderlands*, ed. Jason H. Dormady and Jared M. Tamez (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 4-5.

38 *Ibid.*, 4.

39 Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico*, 14-15.



atmosphere more welcoming, but equally important, the Mexican treasury faced bankruptcy so the government "encouraged the settlement and redistribution of unoccupied public lands by giving one-third of a tract of land to any individual or colonization company that would survey it properly."<sup>40</sup>

The Mormons made no secret of their desires to colonize areas in Mexico, "sensationalism sold papers, and Mormonism--with its aura of religious eccentricity, history of violent clashes, rumors of sexual impropriety, and setting in the American West--became a frequently and vigorously debated topic in the press."<sup>41</sup> In 1873, *The New York Times* reported that "there [was] a well-founded rumor that Mormon agents [were] negotiating for large tracts of land in Mexico."<sup>42</sup> Two years later, the Times ran a scathing rebuke of the Mormons and their search for lands beyond Utah: "for the one-hundredth time, more or less, the Mormons of Utah [have announced] their determination to seek some foreign clime."<sup>43</sup> The article also contained fanciful depictions of Mormons retreating to storybook islands and sensationalist descriptions of Young's seventeen wives. These descriptions likely sold papers and were not out-of-line with the prejudices Mormons faced:

And now it is said that the Mormons propose to flee to Sonora, Mexico, in order to avoid the persecution of the Gentiles and the contamination of the common schools, an aversion for which latter institution they share with the Roman Catholics of the older states.

They will not go. Forty or fifty thousand people, however determined and angry, are not moved in a hurry. To hope that the Mormons, with their multifarious wives and unnumbered offspring, will drift from Salt Lake to Mexico, is to expect too much.<sup>44</sup>

The Mormons did seek to flee persecution, notably the legal restrictions placed on polygamy by the government, and Mexico seemed a likely haven.

Tensions with the U.S. government and the territorial governors sent to Utah, along with the prejudice and intolerance of non-Mormon Americans, marred the religious utopia that the Mormons sought to create. The Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862, which criminalized polygamy, struck directly at Mormons and motivated their interest in Mexico. These exploratory missions in the 1870s found acceptable lands for colonization, and a small cadre of faithful were sent to begin settling and proselytizing. Prominent Mormon Thomas Cottam Romney wrote in his memoirs about attempts made in 1881 to acquire lands, and the warm welcome given to Elder Moses Thatcher:

In October, 1880, Elder Thatcher accompanied by a talented young man by the name of Feramorz Young returned to Mexico City. Soon after his arrival, through the courtesy of General Greenwood, formerly of Roanoke, VA, the Apostle [Thatcher] was accorded an interview with several of the Cabinet officials of the country, among them

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40 *Ibid.*, 16-17.

41 Matthew J. Grow, "The Suffering Saints: Thomas L. Kane, Democratic Reform, and the Mormon Question in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 29 (Winter 2009): 687, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40541901>.

42 "Mormon Movements - Negotiations for Land in Mexico," *The New York Times*, February 13, 1873.

43 "A Threat from Mormondom," *The New York Times*, June 22, 1875.

44 *Ibid.*

being Senor Zarate, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fernandez Leal, Minister of Fomento (public works and colonization) and Carlos Pacheco, Minister of War.<sup>45</sup>

Romney continues the account of the meeting between Thatcher and President Porfirio Diaz's cabinet noting that,

Leal [who] had previously visited Utah and greatly admired the pluck of her enterprising and prosperous communities whom he regarded as the best colonizers in the world. To such people he said he would extend the hand of fellowship and hoped many of them would come to Mexico to make their homes. The one-legged hero of Puebla, General Pacheco, and the most powerful man in Mexico next to President Diaz, granted audience to Mr. Thatcher while scores of army soldiers waited without, waiting to be heard. The General was Courtesy itself and without solicitation presented Mr. Thatcher with letters of introduction and recommendation to the chief executives of the various states of the Mexican union.<sup>46</sup>

The Mexican government's desire to attract colonists was clear, and Mormons were willing to accept these overtures.

The friendly reception and availability of land made Mexico an enticing destination for Mormon colonies, and the continued support of Pacheco and Diaz during early colonial endeavors helped the ventures succeed. After the Mormons settled in Northern Mexico, the local governments attempted to expel them and prompted Moses Thatcher to "hurr[y] to Mexico City to talk with federal officials, hoping to have the order rescinded."<sup>47</sup> Thatcher and those who accompanied him pled the Mormon's case and mentioned that some of those who wanted to settle in Mexico were polygamous. Subsequently, in an attempt to further Diaz's desire to attract foreign colonists, Pacheco "rescinded the order of expulsion, and according to [one of the Mormon representative's diaries] told the Mormon leaders that if they would colonize in peace and practice their marriage customs quietly, Latter-Day Saints were welcome."<sup>48</sup> Pacheco's decision to allow the Mormons to remain and not enforce any Mexican anti-bigamy laws was undoubtedly approved by Diaz, and it sent a clear message that Mormons, their customs, and their settlements were welcome in Mexico.

### VIII. The Edmunds Acts of 1882 and 1887 and the Flight South

Attacks on polygamy, codified in the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862 and the Edmunds Act in 1882, spurred the Mormon quest for sanctuary in Mexico. Proselytization, exploration, and missionary work seemed less important than preserving polygamous marriage and a way of life practiced by many Mormons. The Edmunds Act criminalized the practice of polygamy and, more importantly, the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 "shattered the Mormon Church's temporal foundation, abolishing every important LDS institution from the church's governing bodies to its schools."<sup>49</sup> *The New York Times* reported in January, 1885, that between the passage of these two bills many high-ranking Mormons had undertaken a journey to Mexico:

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45 Thomas Cottam Romney, *The Mormon Colonies in Mexico* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2005), 45.

46 *Ibid.*

47 Barbara Jones Brown, "The 1910 Mexican Revolution and Mormon Polygamy," in *Just South of Zion*, 24.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico*, 53.



It is known that they are en route to Mexico, and it is believed that they have gone to the capitol to treat with the Mexican Government, for lands and a charter like the Nauvoo Charter, and that the plan is to make a rendezvous for Mormons liable to prosecution under the Edmunds law, and also to form a nucleus for a future empire.<sup>50</sup>

This marks a decided change from the earlier church-led efforts of proselytization, and the millenarian goal of preparing the world for the Second Coming. Instead, they sought more visceral and tangible goals--avoiding prosecution, preserving the religion, and preserving their way of life. John Taylor and George Q. Cannon felt this pressure:

A general attack is being made upon our liberties throughout all the territories where our people reside. It is said that prosecuting officers in making this raid are acting under instructions from the department at Washington [D.C.]. Whether this be true or not, there can be no question that there is apparently a concert of action on their part to push our people to the wall and to destroy our religious liberty and with it our religion itself. Even the Utah Commissioners [federal appointees governing/overseeing Utah] in making their report to the government recommend measures not to punish polygamy alone but to destroy our religion.<sup>51</sup>

Though the Mormons had begun to determine a move was necessary and made preparations, it was not immediately apparent to the rest of the United States that such an endeavor would occur.

A few weeks later, after confirmation of the colony reached *The New York Times*, they praised the "vitality and energy of the Mormon church" while simultaneously asserting that it "not believe that it foreshadow any exodus of the polygamists" and the Mormons were not significantly afraid enough to wholly leave their homes in Utah.<sup>52</sup> This was partially correct. Some Mormons remained in Utah, and the church continued to have its headquarters there. However, the Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act and the Edmunds-Tucker Acts marked the beginning of what would become a sincere and large-scale migration of Mormons into the country of Mexico.

Though President Diaz and many of his advisors, notably General Pacheco, were friendly to the Mormons, others were not. The expulsion order that Pacheco rescinded on behalf of Moses Thatcher and the other Mormons living in northern Mexico was far from the only incident that plagued the Mormons in their new home. *The New York Times* reported in 1885 that the Catholic Church made an appeal to President Diaz to remove the Mormons, rescind the lands they were given, and "demand[ed] that the laws shall be enforced against the Mormons, as in America."<sup>53</sup> The articles added that the Catholic priests' complaints "operat[ed] against the plural wife keepers now in the republic, and [that] they w[ould] have to reform or go," and that the Mexican government would likely side with the priests to avoid social unrest and worsening relations with the U.S.<sup>54</sup> Another article from *The New York Times* reported that Mormons were unpopular and that they had "openly adopted the practice of polygamy in violation of the terms under which their concession was obtained," causing local merchants to

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50 "Mormon Designs in Mexico," *The New York Times*, January 12, 1885.

51 John Taylor and George Q. Cannon, in Romney, *The Mormon Colonies in Mexico*, 51-52.

52 "Mormons in Mexico," *The New York Times*, February 3, 1885.

53 "Mexico Will Not Have Mormons," *New York Times*, September 27, 1885.

54 *Ibid.*

boycott them and refuse sales which in turn led to hardships.<sup>55</sup> Pacheco and Diaz likely never made public statements that the Mormons were welcome to practice polygamy despite private assurances that they were welcome to keep their customs.

## IX. The Colonias

For many Mormons, the decision to relocate to Mexico was not a sudden one despite the growing climate of unease and persecution in the United States. Mexico, though not a perfect destination, had proven to be relatively safe and possessed a government friendly, if not sympathetic, to Mormons. Estelle Webb Thomas was just a girl when her large, polygamous family left for Mexico to escape persecution. "For months before we were to start," she remembered, "we had been planning and preparing."<sup>56</sup> Her father's desire to move to Mexico "was not wholly [due] the fact of his three wives and the Edmunds Law (which made living with them a crime)," but that it had as much to do with his desire to "live in [that] glamorous, distant country" described by Mormon veterans of the Mexican-American War.<sup>57</sup> The Webb family seems to have been introduced to Mexico in a different manner than many other Mormons, though it doesn't seem to have affected the appeal or the pressing motives of escaping persecution. Webb's account illustrates the human factors beyond the restorationist aims of returning the indigenous peoples to the ancestral faith that Mormonism claimed they had lost.

The earliest colonies in Mexico were in Sonora, although additional settlements were founded as the numbers of Mormons seeking refuge grew in the latter portion of the 1880s and through the 1890s. The Mormon Church officially ended the practice of polygamy without dissolving existing marriages in 1890. The decision to outlaw polygamy led to large migrations out of Utah with some news reports noting as many as 5,000 immigrants arriving in the Mexican Mormon colonies over a two month period in 1900.<sup>58</sup> Though the Mormons were allowed to continue their practice of polygamy without persecution, life was not easy. Mormons were faced with poverty, disease, a lack of provisions, and nothing to fashion and mend clothing.<sup>59</sup> But after initial hardships, the colonies began to prosper and their endeavors "soon provided returns from a market which extended well beyond the society of the eight small colonies" and that they became hubs of trade.<sup>60</sup> Estelle Webb Thomas recounted that *Colonia Morelos*, where she lived, "had good stores, and burro trains brought fruit, tobacco, green coffee, and other native produce" and that any goods they lacked or were unable to trade for were purchased when traders made trips back to the United States.<sup>61</sup>

The Mormon *colonias* existed as cultural enclaves, albeit with significant contact and trade with the outlying Mexican communities, yet racism, ethnocentrism and Mormon racial theology impeded assimilation.<sup>62</sup> There are two passages of note in the *Book of Mormon* that explain

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55 "Mormon Colonists Unpopular," *The New York Times*, January 21, 1893.

56 Estelle Webb Thomas, *Uncertain Sanctuary* (Salt Lake City, UT: Westwater Press, Inc., 1980), 9.

57 *Ibid.*, 16.

58 "Mexican Mormon Colonies Grow," *The New York Times*, March 26, 1900.

59 B. Carmon Hardy, "Cultural 'Encystment' as a Cause of the Mormon Exodus from Mexico in 1912," *Pacific Historical Review*, 34 (1965): 444-45.

60 *Ibid.*, 445.

61 Thomas, *Uncertain Sanctuary*, 70.

62 Hardy, "Cultural 'Encystment' as a Cause of the Mormon Exodus," 446-47.



racial theology: I Nephi 12:23 and II Nephi 5:21.<sup>63</sup> These passages refer to the native peoples of pre-Columbian America, the very individuals that the Mormons lived amongst and had sought to convert. They demonized them as a lesser, cursed, people displeasing to God. Such ethnocentrism and racism make it easy to see how Mormons, in general, failed to assimilate. Estelle Webb Thomas remembered that her family had Mexican friends and employees, and that her parents took in a teenaged Mexican boy, called Amador, who had been orphaned and was incapable of caring for himself.<sup>64</sup> Her parents' actions showed kindness and perhaps a desire to convert as well as help.

#### X. The Mexican Revolution and the Aftermath 1912-1917

Though the heavy migration may have increased the population of the colonies, by 1917 most of the Mormon colonies had been abandoned because of the Mormon Church's 1904 prohibition on performing plural marriages and the Mexican Revolution that overthrew Diaz's government.<sup>65</sup> "Of course we knew there was a revolution in progress," recounted Estelle Webb Thomas, "but Mexico, like the South and Central American countries, had many popular insurrections, feeble protests that passed without making any appreciable change in the condition of the peons. There was a great deal of talk about the revolution, but the idea that it might affect us seriously was unthinkable."<sup>66</sup> The significance of Diaz's ouster became readily apparent to the Mormon settlers. "The names of once unknown army officers and bandits were now on everyone's tongue," wrote Webb, "and who knew (or cared) to which side they belonged? So far as the colonists were concerned, after the fall of Diaz, the *federales* were no more friendly than the rebels. That we had lost our great friend and sponsor, we would soon realize all too well."<sup>67</sup>

From that point onward, the attitudes of the Mexican people toward them had soured and tragedies continued to befall them—the kidnapping of her brother by Pancho Villa and the eventual flight back to the United States. Webb's account shows that despite living in Mexico for many years, there was a general Mormon sentiment of "Americanness" that defined their attitudes.

The unspoken neutrality of Webb and her family was not an isolated case. Anthropologist Carolyn O'Bagy Davis notes that even prominent Mormons tried to stay neutral:

In 1910, in the early years of the unrest, Bowen [the Bishop of one of the Mormon Colonies] was called into the chief politico's office in Casas Grandes and was told that he would be required to turn in a list with the names of all the naturalized Mormons. As Mexican citizens, they would be required to fight against the rebels. Bowen was alarmed and immediately went to Colonia Juarez to confer with Junius Romney, president of the stake... [who] advised him to leave the country.<sup>68</sup>

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63 I Nephi 12:23- "And it came to pass that I beheld, after they had dwindled in unbelief they became a dark and loathsome, and a filthy people, full of idleness and all manner of abominations. II Nephi 5:21- "And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. (Both Passages taken from the *Book of Mormon*)

64 Thomas, *Uncertain Sanctuary*, 91.

65 Brown "The 1910 Mexican Revolution and Mormon Polygamy," 27.

66 Thomas, *Uncertain Sanctuary*, 104.

67 *Ibid.*, 106.

68 Carolyn O'Bagy Davis, *The Fourth Wife: Polygamy, Love, & Revolution*, (Tucson: Rio Nuevo Publishers, 2011), 39.

Mormons had lived in Mexico for nearly thirty years, and some might have been citizens, yet their unwillingness to defend the government alienated Díaz and his supporters, and the decision played a significant role in why Mormons left Mexico. For Mormon leaders, a return to the U.S. seemed preferable, a sentiment shared by settlers in the *colonias*. By choosing neither side, Mormons became vulnerable. Some "four thousand members [of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints] [had] been expelled from their lands and homes," Tullis says, "lives had been lost, and millions of dollars in real and personal property had been destroyed."<sup>69</sup> Some Mormons elected to stay, but they represented less than twenty-five percent of the colonists, and of the five *colonias* they reinhabited, only two remained after 1920.<sup>70</sup> With polygamy officially forbidden and an entire generation grown up after it disavowed by the church, there was no strong motivation for new settlers to repopulate the colonies.

## XI. Conclusion

Like many other sects that grew out of the Second Great Awakening, the Mormon Church stands out as being one of the most controversial. Its adherents were persecuted as they sought to establish a community for the faithful in Missouri, and their prophet was murdered by a mob in Illinois. Polygamy, one of the tenets of their faith, was so controversial that it prompted federal legislation and served as sensational newspaper fodder. Brigham Young thought that by seeking refuge in Mexico's northern lands, a place unclaimed by the United States that he and his flock would be safe from persecution. And they were, for a time. When their new home became U.S. territory after the Mexican-American War, Mormons, once again, were prompted to seek land in Mexico. They were welcomed until the Mexican Revolution and their failure to assimilate into Mexican society forced most of them back to the United States. For three decades the *colonias* were the last small bastion of Joseph Smith's utopia, but when adversity and revolution that cost them their homes, the settlers returned to the country that they, at least in spirit, never completely abandoned.

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69 Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico*, 102.

70 John B. Wright, "Mormon Colonias of Chihuahua," *Geographical Review*, 91 (2001): 586-96.