

"On to Carthage to Die"

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LeGrand Baker

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**[Editor's note:] In commemoration: One hundred twenty-five years ago, on a hot, muggy afternoon of June 27, 1844, a mob of self-styled vigilantes, motivated by hate and adventure, descended upon the dusty streets of a small Midwestern town, Carthage, Illinois. There they immortalized the jail of the same name by murdering two brothers, who were known as the Prophet and the Patriarch by those who had cast their lot with them through as many as 24 years of ostracism in New York, Ohio, Missouri, and now Illinois. Martyrs the brothers became, symbols of truth they remain: Joseph and Hyrum Smith.**

A year and a half before his death, Joseph Smith gave a public address in which he said:

"I know what I say; I understand my mission and business. God Almighty is my shield; and what can man do if God is my friend? I shall not be sacrificed until my time comes; then I shall be offered freely."<sup>1</sup>

A few months later he said it even more clearly: ". . . I prophesy they never will have power to *kill me* till my work is accomplished, *and I am ready to die.*"<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to say just when Joseph Smith learned that he would culminate his mission by sealing his testimony with his own blood, but he may have known -- and agreed -- before he completed the translation of the Book of Mormon. (D&C 5:22.) His account of Moroni's first visit does not say whether he was told the full implications of his name's being known for good *and evil*, nor does his journal indicate that he stopped and pondered when he translated that part of the Book of Mormon in which he is prophetically called by name: ". . . and they that seek to destroy him shall be confounded." (2 Ne. 3:15.)

There certainly could have been no question in his mind that some would "seek to destroy him." His mother's history tells of many who sought his life, and his journal is replete with narratives of murderous attempts upon him.

On one of those occasions, at night, in the dead of winter, Joseph secured a wagon and fled from Kirtland. He and those with him were pursued by a mob that was determined to kill him.

"The weather was extremely cold, we were obliged to secrete ourselves in our wagons, sometimes, to elude the grasp of our pursuers, who continued their pursuit of us more than two hundred miles from Kirtland, armed with pistols and guns, seeking our lives.

They frequently crossed our track, twice they were in the houses where we stopped, once we tarried all night in the same house with them, with only a partition between us and them: and heard their oaths and imprecations, and threats concerning us, if they could catch us; and late in the evening they came in to our room and examined us, but decided we were not the men. At other times we passed them in the streets, and gazed upon them, and they on us, but they knew us not."4

At length the mob lost hope of finding the Prophet and returned to Kirtland. Joseph went to Missouri.

Less than a year later the Prophet was confronted with another mob, having been treacherously betrayed into their hands. The "moblitia" held an illegal courtmartial and sentenced him to be shot the next morning. When the appointed time came, the execution was postponed. The Prophet and his friends did not go before the firing squad. The mob spared their lives but reserved to themselves the sport of carting the Mormons about from jail to jail, where the prisoners could be mocked, displayed, and spat upon. Joseph and his friends were compelled to endure this dreary nightmare of Liberty Jail for the duration of the winter before they were permitted to escape.5

The attempts against his life continued, some of them even motivated by members and former members of the Church who had grown bitter.

The impression of what was to come pressed upon the Prophet's mind, and he began to take explicit action in preparation for it. One of the most important questions he had to settle was that of leadership: Who would have the responsibility of directing the Church after the Prophet was dead? It was Hyrum Smith's right, as he was assistant president of the Church. In this position (which had originally been Oliver Cowdery's) he held jointly with his brother Joseph all the keys and powers of the presidency.8 In accordance with that right, the Prophet had "ordained" Hyrum Smith to succeed him as President of the Church.7 Thereafter the Prophet requested Hyrum to take his (Hyrum's) family and leave Nauvoo until after the danger had passed.8 However, the assistant president was aware that part of his responsibility was to seal his testimony --jointly -- with the Prophet's. Apparently, he could choose: either he could succeed his brother as President of the Church, or he could go to Carthage and thereby make his testimony as binding upon the world as the Prophet's, by sealing that testimony with his own blood. 9 He chose to go to Carthage. The Council of the Twelve Apostles was the natural successor.

"For months before his death" Joseph had been "fully aware" that the Twelve would take the leadership of the Church. In order to prepare them for this duty he had "stood before the twelve from day to day, clothed with the spirit and power of God, and instructed them in the oracles of God, in the pattern of heavenly things, in the keys of the kingdom, the power of the priesthood, and in the knowledge of the last dispensation in the fulness of times." 10

Not only were the Twelve in need of his tutoring, but the Church as a whole also needed considerable instruction before the keys could be transferred from Joseph to the apostles. For example, months before his death, the Prophet apparently realized that the Church would go to the West. The Prophet wanted the Church membership to understand that this projected move

westward was a part of the plan and was not some inconsistent innovation originating with Brigham Young and his associates.

Therefore, the Prophet took every opportunity to prepare the members for that move.<sup>11</sup> He organized an exploring expedition to go west and find a place where the Saints could settle. However, rather than sending the expedition members out, he had them remain in Nauvoo, meet regularly, and make a thorough study of the things already known about the Rocky Mountain area.<sup>12</sup> He also drew a map of the route the Saints might wish to follow on their westward journey. Copies of this map were reportedly used by both Brigham Young and the members of the Mormon Battalion.

The Prophet also organized the political system by which the members of the Church could be governed in the West. At that time the Great Basin area was claimed by Mexico and so was not within the political jurisdiction of the United States. The organization he established, of which the Council of the Twelve was a part, was called the Council of Fifty, which served as the governmental agency that directed the westward migration and settlement of the members of the Church.<sup>13</sup>

After Joseph Smith organized the Church so that it could function properly without either himself or Hyrum Smith at the helm, he called the leaders together to give them final instructions. Wilford Woodruff and Benjamin F. Johnson described that meeting in this way:

"The last speech that Joseph Smith ever made to the quorum of the Apostles was in a building in Nauvoo, and it was such a speech as I never heard from mortal man before or since. He was clothed upon with the Spirit and power of God. His face was clear as amber. The room was filled as with consuming fire. He stood three hours upon his feet. Said he: 'You Apostles of the Lamb of God have been chosen to carry out the purposes of the Lord on the earth. Now, I have received, as the Prophet, seer and revelator, standing at the head of this dispensation, every key, every ordinance, every principle and every Priesthood that belongs to the last dispensation and fulness of times. And I have sealed all these things upon your heads.'" <sup>14</sup>

"And in the name of the Lord, I now shake from my shoulders the responsibility of bearing off the Kingdom of God to all the world, and here and now I place that responsibility, with all the keys, powers and privileges pertaining thereto, upon the shoulders of you the Twelve Apostles...." <sup>15</sup>

Now, so far as the restoration of the gospel and the establishment of the Church were concerned, the Prophet had apparently completed all he was required to do, except seal his testimony-and he was ready to do that.

It is difficult to know how Joseph Smith felt then. He knew and later said "that he had to die."<sup>16</sup> He wished to stay with his friends, yet he longed for a rest. Benjamin F. Johnson reported that not long before the Prophet died, he came to Brother Johnson's home and "with a deep drawn breath, as a sigh of weariness, he sank down heavily in his chair, and said, 'O! I do get tired and weary, that at times I almost yearn for my rest,' and then proceeded to briefly recount to us some of the most stirring events of his life's labors, sufferings and sacrifices, and then he said,

'I am getting tired and would like to go to my rest.' His words and tone thrilled and shocked me, and like an arrow pierced my hopes that he would long remain with us, and I said, as with a heart full of tears, 'O! Joseph, what could we, as a people, do without you and what would become of the great Latter-day work, if you should leave us?' He saw and was touched by my emotions, and in reply he said, 'Benjamin, I would not be far away from you, and if on the other side of the veil I would still be working with you, and with a power greatly increased, to roll on this kingdom.'" 17

In the meantime, a conspiracy on the Prophet's life had matured. About two hundred of the Prophet's enemies were organized into a secret band that had sworn an oath that they would dedicate their life, liberty, influence, and their all "for the destruction of Joseph Smith and his party."18

The Prophet was kept abreast of this conspiracy by his friends, but he apparently knew before they acted what his enemies would do. To augment their purposes, the faction established a newspaper, the *Nauvoo Expositor*. In its first issue, which sought to "expose" the Prophet, the conspirators combined garbled parts of some of the revelations with fabricated stories of incredible filth and obscenity. The city council, under Mayor Joseph Smith, declared the paper a public nuisance and had its press destroyed. The conspirators then charged that their constitutional right of freedom of the press had been violated. They alerted the people of the state and its governor to Joseph Smith's crimes, and a mob, under the guise of the state militia, began to gather, prepared to attack the city of Nauvoo.

On June 22, 1844, Joseph made the last entry in his journal:

"I told Stephen Markham that if I and Hyrum were ever taken again we should be massacred, or I was not a prophet of God. I want Hyrum to live to avenge my blood, but he is determined not to leave me." 19

The Prophet apparently knew that he would be "taken again," but apparently he also knew that he was somewhat in control of the situation, and that he, not the mob, would determine the occasion under which he would fall into their hands.20

He had already made many of the necessary arrangements prerequisite to his death. Two days prior to writing that final note in his journal, he had written to the Twelve Apostles, whom he had previously sent east on a political mission, and instructed them to return to Nauvoo immediately.21

Uppermost in the Prophet's mind was his desire to keep the mob out of Nauvoo. When news came that an army of the mob was approaching the city, the Prophet announced that he and his brother Hyrum would cross the Mississippi and head west. He assured his friends that when the mob discovered that he was not there, they would leave without harming the city.22 So Joseph and Hyrum crossed the river; and as had been promised, when the mob arrived in the city the next morning and discovered that the Prophet was gone, they left "immediately."

The two brothers were then both free. They were out of the grasp of their enemies and

could have gone west if they had chosen. But they chose instead to "see the thing out" (those were Hyrum's words, 24 but Joseph had also used the phrase once when referring to his coming martyrdom). 25 It was on the road to Carthage that the Prophet said:

"I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer's morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I SHALL DIE INNOCENT, AND IT SHALL YET BE SAID OF ME-HE WAS MURDERED IN COLD BLOOD." (D&C 135:4.)

A few days later, while in the Carthage Jail, he wrote his wife: ". . . I am very much resigned to my lot, knowing I am justified, and have done the best that could be done. Give my love to the children and all my friends...."26

When the final moment came while the mob battered at the doors of the jail and Hyrum lay dead on the floor-the Prophet "turned calmly from the door, dropped his pistol on the floor, and sprang into the window when two balls pierced him from the door, and one entered his right breast from without, and he fell outward into the hands of his murderers, exclaiming, 'O Lord, my God!'" 27

"The testators are now dead, and their testament is in force." (D&C 135:5.)

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* (hereafter referred to as *DHC*), (Salt Lake City, 1949), Vol.5, p.259.
2. *DHC*, Vol. 6, p. 58. (Italics added.)
3. Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, 1954), pp. 247-48, 254-55, 309-10.
4. *DHC*, Vol. 3, pp. 2-3.
- 5 B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church* (Salt Lake City, 1930), Vol. 1, pp.485-500.
6. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City, 1966), p. 55 (tinder "Assistant President of the Church").
7. *DHC*, Vol. 6, p. 546, footnote.
8. *Ibid.*, p.520.
9. There are two statements that indicate that Hyrum did not know he would be killed at Carthage. They are in *DHC*, Vol. 6, pp. 549-50 and p. 598. However, when taken in full context it becomes clear that these statements were made to spare others the agony of knowing how near death was for Joseph and Hyrum. Other statements, such as D&C 135:4-5; *DHC*, Vol. 6, pp. 545-46, 549-50; and Huntington, *Diary*, Vol. 2, pp. 408-9, clearly show that Hyrum understood the full implications of his decision to go to Carthage.
10. Wilford Woodruff, *Millennial Star*, Vol. 5, p. 136.
11. Anson Call in Edward W. Tullidge, *Tullidge's Histories of Utah*, Vol. 2, pp. 271-72; *DHC*, Vol. 5, p. 85; Wilford Woodruff, *Conference Report*, April 1898, p.57; O. B. Huntington, *Young Woman's Journal*, Vol. 2, pp. 314-15; Erastus Snow, *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 16, p. 207; *DHC*, Vol.6, p. 398; Eliza I. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City, 1884), p. 76.

12. *DHC*, Vol. 6, pp. 222, 224-27; Samuel W. Richards, "Origin of the Plan of the Exodus," *The Improvement Era*, Vol.7, pp.927-31.
13. Hyrum L. Andrus, *Joseph Smith and World Government* (Salt Lake City, 1958), pp.77-78.
14. Wilford Woodruff, *Conference Report*, April 1898, p. 89.
15. Benjamin F. Johnson, "An Interesting Letter to Elder George S. Gibbs" (typed copy in BYU library), p. 9.
16. *DHC*, Vol. 6, p. 601.
17. Johnson to Gibbs, p.8.
18. Horace Cummings, "Conspiracy of Nauvoo." *The Contributor*, Vol.5, p.255.
19. *DHC*, Vol.6, p.546.
20. *DHC*, Vol.5, p.259.
21. *DHC*, Vol.6, p.519.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 545-46; Preston D. Richards, "Willard Richards-the Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith." *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 10, pp. 566-67.
23. *DHC*, Vol.6, pp.548-49.
24. Richards, *op. cit.*
25. *DHC*, Vol.6, p.520.
26. *Ibid.* p. 605.
27. *Ibid.* p.618.