



We should always remember Mountain Meadows in a way that will impel us toward the path of peace that Jesus is at the end of.

Discussing Difficult Topics: The Mountain Meadows Massacre

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Wayment: *Lead us up to Mountain Meadows, maybe not focusing as much on the event itself but on the forces that lead up to that. What was happening?*

Mason: The Mountain Meadows Massacre was the tragic culmination of several different historical forces in early Mormonism. I do not think you can dissociate what happened at Mountain Meadows from the experience of the Saints earlier, before they got to Utah. You have to understand it in the context of what happened to them, especially in Missouri and in Illinois. I teach courses on religion, violence, and peacebuilding, and we always try to understand what precipitated the violence. I think this is part of the act of the humanities scholar, but frankly, it is a deeply human act to try and empathize with another person even if we ultimately reject their actions or their worldview or some of the things they did. We have a responsibility to try and put ourselves in their shoes and empathize with them as much as possible, but that doesn't necessarily excuse some of their behavior.

So I believe that as we think about what precipitated Mountain Meadows, we should also consider the remarkable level of violence and persecution that the early Latter-day Saints sustained in Missouri, with Hawn's Mill and the expulsion there, and then in Illinois with the murder of the Prophet and being violently driven out, narrowly averting massive bloodshed. By the time the Latter-day Saints left Illinois and were crossing the plains, I really believe that they were a traumatized people.

I am not a psychologist; I don't want to psychoanalyze or put people on the couch from two hundred years ago, but to me, as I read scholarly studies about trauma—and especially about collective trauma—it seems pretty clear to me that the Latter-day Saints had experienced a deep and collective trauma. We know this from Brigham Young himself. One of the best insights from John Turner's biography of Brigham Young¹ is that he shows how Brigham Young's leadership style, and maybe even his character and worldview, changed in the period after the murder of Joseph Smith. Before that, when he was presiding over the mission of the Apostles in England, he was a consensus builder. He was quite generous and congenial, and he was beloved by the people. That helps explain why so many people followed him rather than some of the other claimants to Church leadership after Joseph Smith died. But Turner argues (and I buy this) that after Joseph Smith's death, something changed in Brigham Young. As much as he loved and admired Joseph Smith, he came to conclude that Joseph was a little too soft, that he was a little too generous toward his detractors—even toward his enemies—and look at what that generosity got him. Brigham Young essentially said, "That isn't going to happen to me, and it's not going to happen to us again. We have been driven from our homes time and time again." So I see a sense of trauma and persecution in the Mormon narrative, rooted in a reality that had shaped the experience of the Latter-day Saints.

At the same time, the Mormons' hands were not entirely clean; they themselves had resorted to violence in those cases I mentioned, especially in Missouri. Was it self-defensive violence? Sure, but they responded with the organization of the Danites, with the militias they formed to fight against the Missouri militias; they had resorted to arms to defend themselves. This is quite different from the earliest years of the movement. John Corrill—an early member of the Church who eventually left the Church then wrote one of the most important early histories—talked about the earliest years of the movement prior to 1833. He says that they were so committed to the Sermon

on the Mount, to “turn the other cheek,” that they wouldn’t even lift a finger in their own defense; they were so committed to the ethic of nonviolence and forgiveness and tolerance. That all changed in 1838, and they took with them to Utah this legacy of not just persecution and trauma, but also of resorting to violence, even lethal violence, to defend themselves.

Wayment: *So I want to pull a few threads you’re dealing with. You have seen a growing response to the violence against Latter-day Saints, so they are carrying with them—if you will—trauma; maybe their retaliation is some part of the equation, and they come to Utah (it’s now been some time), and Brigham Young, as you mentioned, is emerging as a very unequivocal leader, very clear in his direction, and then Mountain Meadows happens. I want you to shift gears for a moment and look at it from the perspective of the Latter-day Saints. Is this hurting people? Is this retaliation? Is this something else? Because they react strongly to John D. Lee in this.*

Mason: Certainly. Everything I talked about before was a deep context for Mountain Meadows. But you’re right. They come to Utah in 1847, and Mountain Meadows is ten years later. There was a lot that happened in that intervening decade from when they arrived until Mountain Meadows came. A few of those things are important to note. One of those is escalating tension with the federal government. The Saints brought with them on the one hand a deep-seated loyalty and patriotism; they really believed in the Constitution. Most of them were from the United States, and even those who were immigrants came to embrace freedom, democracy, and First Amendment protections. They really believed that the First Amendment would protect them and their freedom to worship, and so they believed in patriotism and loyalty to the nation.

But, on the other hand, they had been stung by what they saw as the failure of the government to protect them. So when the federal government refused to grant their claim to become a state and instead made them a territory and kept sending territorial federal officials from back East who didn’t know anything about the Mormons and were oftentimes antagonistic toward them, there was essentially a decade of conflicts, some quite severe, between the Latter-day Saints and federal officials. Brigham Young is involved in all of these conflicts. Mormons are feeling continued tension, and then this tension culminates when President Buchanan decides—based on reports he is getting from some of these federal officials—to send the troops. At the time, this was

the largest peacetime military action in US history, organized to march across the plains to quell the supposed rebellion in Utah.

So when they celebrated Pioneer Day in 1857, they gave the report that the troops were marching. It's like, here we go again; we are right back in Missouri. And now we are not just talking about the Missouri militia; we are talking about the US Army. Meanwhile, you had immigrants, or "Gentiles," that were coming through because Utah was the last waystation before they crossed those deserts if they were going to either Oregon or California. Mormons had done quite well trading with these wagon trains, which were a really important part of the early economy for the Saints. But when the Saints went into war mode, they began painting things in white and black. This speaks to an early Mormon worldview, a kind of dualistic worldview of the righteous and the wicked, the saved and the damned, Israel and Gentiles. You can call this a kind of millenarian or apocalyptic worldview. So, in that moment, they came to see everybody who wasn't Mormon as an enemy—or at least a potential enemy. The Saints wanted to save their food and their ammunition, because they did not know what would happen when the army came.

The other thing to recognize is that the decade from 1847 to 1857 hadn't been a peaceful decade in Utah; it had actually been kind of a violent decade, beginning with the violence against Native Americans at almost every point in the Saints' settlement, especially in Utah Valley but in many other places as well. There were plenty of friendly relations between Mormons and American Indians as well, and we remember Brigham Young's later policies that tended to try to pacify the American Indians and get along with them. But in those early years, violence was as much the norm as not. Recent research demonstrates, or at least argues, that Mormons in fact weren't that much different than any other white settlers in the West in their relations with American Indians. So they had spent those ten years in a kind of antagonistic relationship with the Gentiles, with the federal government, and with Native Americans, using violence to secure their claim to their new home.

Wayment: I want to push you a little bit into the story. In 1857 Mountain Meadows happens. It is reported that during the event, the men dress up as Native Americans, and so we have a grieving people who, for various reasons, attack a wagon train from Arkansas, and it is obviously very tragic. Why are they hiding their actions? It demonstrates the violence they are feeling; the trauma that is

percolating to the surface, but they are also trying to disguise it and force it into a western kind of a political environment. What do you see in that?

Mason: I see that, at the core of their moral beings, they were ashamed of what they were doing. Mountain Meadows was planned—the initial attack on the wagon train and the subsequent attacks that then sort of went south. The initial attack on the wagon train and the later decision to kill them all were calculated, not spontaneous. Those deliberations among local leaders was done in counsel together—sometimes in broader council, sometimes by two or three men who made these decisions and then gave orders to the troops. People made decisions all along the way. These men were deliberating in secret, hiding this from certain Church leaders and not telling the whole story, even to people on the ground. They dressed up as Indians to try and conceal their identities.

I think there is a political quality to their actions as well. Remember, the army was marching. They didn't want to be caught, and they knew that it was going to be bad if they got caught, having killed all those people. So they either wanted to blame the Indians or kill everybody so that nobody survived to tell the tale. Afterward, they covered it up. With everything that happened, either they did not talk about it or they buried it (quite literally)—burying those bodies and burying the story. These actions suggest that these were not people who were proud of what they did. Even if they couldn't quite process it or admit it, their actions not only went against a sense of law and order, but it went against deep moral and ethical principles. They knew this went against the gospel of Jesus Christ, against human decency—we don't kill people. So all of those things that you point to suggests to me that these were men who got caught up in a moment in the most tragic way possible. But even at that moment, they knew that what they were doing was deeply, deeply wrong.

Wayment: *Let's talk about the Mormon response. I am no expert here, but eventually John Lee is convicted and put to death. The other perpetrators are not caught. Is that correct?*

Mason: Yes, that is correct. He was the only one who was convicted or even held accountable. There were indictments against others who disappeared and so forth, but he was the only one held truly culpable for his actions.

Wayment: *How do we as Latter-day Saints understand official Church involvement? I know this is a murky area, but what do we understand from that?*

Mason: Yes, one of the hardest things about Mountain Meadows is that a few points of historical evidence are not as clear as we would like them to be. That is almost always the case with history; there are gaps and silences. Historians have done a lot of work on this. Mountain Meadows has been combed over pretty thoroughly, and there are real debates. The biggest debate is whether Brigham Young knew about the massacre ahead of time. He certainly knew about it afterward, but did he know about it ahead of time? Did he order it? Is he responsible for it in some way? There is some conflicting evidence. You can point to some evidence that suggests that Brigham Young had his hand behind this, that he was kind of an invisible hand guiding this.

There is no doubt that Brigham Young contributed to a climate of fear though his violent rhetoric toward the government, toward emigrants, toward the Gentiles, toward dissenters. This rhetoric was in the context of the Mormon Reformation, when he and other Mormon leaders were traveling around Utah, using violent rhetoric to get people to repent. There is no doubt in my mind that Brigham Young was culpable in that way. But I strongly believe in and agree with the interpretation of most historians, who say Brigham Young was not directly responsible for the massacre and would have stopped it if he could have. There are some historians who disagree with that, but I for one think the evidence clearly lands on the former side. That still doesn't change the fact that local church leaders were involved. Stake presidents, a bishop, and others who were the local church leaders in Cedar City were not just aware of this, but they were the ones driving it. Nor does it change the fact that Brigham Young, after the fact, was responsible for the cover-up and helped obscure the facts and helped divert justice officials from finding the perpetrators and arresting them. I think he was trying to protect his people. Again, we have to understand the twenty-year context behind this situation.

So what do we do with this? I think we have to realize that our Church leaders, local and general, are people too. They are called of the Lord, and they are inspired of the Lord, but the Lord never takes away their agency; they too can make choices which divert them, sometimes horribly and tragically, from the true teachings of the gospel. We saw that with Isaac Haight and William Dame and John Lee and the other people who coordinated the massacre on the ground. We know that Brigham Young sanctioned violence in the 1850s against Native Americans, dissenters, and others, so even if he was not directly responsible for Mountain Meadows, his hands were not clean

concerning the violence of the 1850s. So we have to recognize that our leaders, just like us, operate in history. They are part of a culture; they are not perfect. God is still working with them and is working with the Church to purify it and sanctify it. I don't think we can excuse our Church leaders for whatever degree of responsibility they carry, nor do we have to pin everything on them. Not everything that happened in Utah Territory can be blamed on Brigham Young. He wasn't involved in everything, despite what people sometimes say, so I think we need to be careful historians.

There is an ethical part of us that should say we are not going to pin blame where it doesn't belong, nor are we going to excuse people of things they are actually responsible for. And in this process, we will be motivated by charity and humility and empathy but also by a desire to tell the truth. As Latter-day Saints, we are not afraid of the truth. We are not afraid of facts, because ultimately we are not here to vindicate the character of Brigham Young. The truth of Mormonism doesn't rest on that. We embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, which involves the redemption of the Church and its leaders as well as us, and that's the story we tell—not whether Brigham Young, or any other leader of the Church, was morally perfect or not.

Wayment: *This moment has to be horrific in the Mormon collective memory. You have a people who are traumatized, who lash out in ways that push them beyond social boundaries, beyond what they believe, and you now have Mormons putting to death a fellow Mormon. Does this end the violence? Does it solve the trauma? Does it slake their thirst? Or is it so horrific that it changes the trajectory of early Mormon violence?*

Mason: That's a great question. I deeply believe, and there's a lot of scholarly literature that bears this out, what Martin Luther King Jr. used to essentially say: violence can't solve violence, and hate can't solve hate. He believed that violence actually has a cyclical quality to it, because if I were to exact violence against you, you would want to retaliate. Even if I kill you, then the community or your family or friends want to retaliate. So violence has a cyclical quality to it, and it doesn't end until somebody stops it, until somebody steps in and makes a proactive move. And this is what the justice system is meant to do. If there is violence, we step in, we incarcerate the person, we otherwise discipline him or her, and society steps in and stops the violence so we don't have recriminations. In some ways that's what John D. Lee's conviction was meant to do, the way the justice system always works. It's meant to point to the guilty party and say, "It ends here; it stops here."

But, of course, everybody knew. Certainly, the Latter-day Saints who were perpetrators knew it wasn't just John D. Lee; he didn't kill all 120 of those people by himself. He didn't act on his own. He was deeply implicated. John D. Lee was as guilty as sin, but there were others that were as well. The Mormons knew that, and the non-Mormons knew that, too. But, essentially, that was the deal that they struck, that Lee would be the scapegoat for the massacre. But it didn't end the conflict, because even to this day many of the descendants of the victims of Mountain Meadows are understandably still bitter and angry. Fortunately, in recent years, there have been efforts toward reconciliation. The Church has done better at reaching out. The Church has never formally apologized or taken full responsibility; I think there's a sense of "How do I take responsibility for something that other people did almost 150 years ago?" That's an interesting question. But the conflict never quite ended.

What I will say is Mountain Meadows was singular. Mormons weren't going around killing 120 people every other week; it was the only time that that happened. There were a lot Native Americans that were killed, but never in that kind of single massacre, 120 people killed in cold blood. There was violence against dissenters and others, but never on that kind of mass scale. The 1850s were a very violent decade in Utah, and Mormons were responsible for much of it. But what we see over time is that the violence in Utah ebbs over the nineteenth century, and I think a couple of things are responsible for that. One is simply the institution of law and order. So rather than having a kind of frontier justice, vigilante, Wild West mentality—which is sort of the way it was in the 1850s—they created legal and political institutions that were meant to contain violence, and those worked. This is the way many frontier societies worked; they were very unsettled at the beginning, but then as they created these institutions, they became more stable. But I also think that that is not who Latter-day Saints are, and that is not what the gospel of Jesus Christ is. They knew this, and by the 1880s, for instance, you have statements from the First Presidency rejecting blood atonement or anything like that. There began to be a sense that that was never really who we were, that's not what the gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to do. So, because of the legal and political institutions and then, frankly, because they let the gospel of Jesus Christ work upon their hearts and souls and upon the people collectively, that kind of violence didn't become the norm but rather the exception that hopefully remains in our past.

Wayment: *Seeing Mountain Meadows as an anomaly kind of insulates the modern conscience from really feeling this, so it is anomalous. Are we insulated today? What I see in what you said is there are trends that are building that contradict other inherent trends, such as belief and church and theology. At one point the hatred, the trauma, or the revenge overwhelms the other, and that isn't anomalous. So I am wondering what you see today. Are there similar conflicts today either among Latter-day Saints or within our broader society? But I think we have learned something from Mountain Meadows.*

Mason: That is a terrific question. I think there is a little bit of all of what you just mentioned. There are external restraints on human violence. This is what society is. This is what civilization is. Maybe I'm not optimistic enough, but I am not sure that decency is enough. Let's go to the Holocaust—it's always the most extreme example, but it's one that people know. Most of the German people were decent. They were church-attending, law-abiding folk, and in their society, six million Jews were rounded up and exterminated. And that happened in a decent, civilized society.

Wayment: *Which is my worry today.*

Mason: Exactly. So I don't think we can just say decency is enough. I don't think we can say just going to church is enough or that we will rely on the good graces of the political leaders, and that that is enough. We believe that even with our very optimistic view of the soul, of where we come from as children of God, because of the Fall, there is an evil in the human heart that is born of sin. Violence is a very natural and perhaps universal temptation. I don't think all people are sociopaths at heart, but there is something in us that allows us to dehumanize other people until we do not treat them as children of God and might even get to the point of using violence against them. We are no more immune to this today than we were in 1857 in Utah or in 1942 in Germany or in 1994 in Rwanda. This is part of the human condition that we simply have to grapple with and never lose sight of. We create these legal and judicial and political systems which are meant to restrain and contain our violence, but then we have to be aware of this on a personal level and as churches and as believers.

We have to look hard at our own tradition, our own beliefs, and say, "What are the stories, narratives, or theologies that can be used to promote violence? Are those the stories, narratives, and theologies that we are going to embrace and perpetuate? Or are we going to look to the stories and theologies that promote peace?" My dissertation adviser was a scholar named

Scott Appleby. He wrote a book called *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* about religion, violence, and peace. And what he said is that in every religious tradition, there are resources for both violence and for peace. Look at the Bible. Look at the Book of Mormon. Look at the Qur'an. Look at any scripture or any religious tradition; there are places where you can go, scriptures you can point to, statements by leaders that you can retrieve in an authentic way that would point you to violence toward other people. But there are other sources and scriptures and statements that you can retrieve that would lead you to reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace.

Now, I think that the overwhelming weight in all of these traditions—certainly in our own, in Mormonism—is toward reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace. But those resources for violence are out there. They are still there in our traditions and in our scriptures. We haven't expunged them, and I don't think we should. But the question is, what are we going to do with that? Do we give them an equal weight? Or do we essentially find a way for the peaceful part of the tradition to win out? And is that what we are teaching in church? Is that what we are teaching in seminary? We should say, "Under no conditions, even if our people were under deep threat, as they were in 1857, can we create a theology in which we go back to 11 September 1857 and the slaughter of 120 people in cold blood." I think if we can't do that, we have a problem as a tradition. We have to develop the moral, theological, and ethical resources to say, "We will never again do something like that again under any circumstances."

Wayment: I am going to push back a little bit. I agree completely with what you said, but isn't there a strong apocalyptic justification for violence? The apocalyptic view almost encourages violence, and it promises future violence, and we are not always clear about what our role will be. How do we handle an apocalypse when we have now come to expect it soon? Is this a kind of a reckoning day that we are seeing?

Mason: Yes, that is a great question. Certainly, one of the things that has oftentimes fueled religious violence, whether Mormon or otherwise, is the sense of apocalypticism or millenarianism. There are passages and narratives about divine violence, such as in the Book of Mormon before Jesus comes—the cataclysms that kill so many people in the new world. We can point to lots of instances in scripture where God seems to condone or have a hand in violence or even directly does it himself. Or, as you said, there is the prophesied divine violence that we see in the book of Revelation and in other apocalyptic

texts. I strongly believe that none of those give license to human violence. They do not—especially in any particular contemporary setting—call for or demand my violence against another child of God.

There are places in scripture that lay out the principles by which violence may be justified. I am thinking especially of Doctrine and Covenants 98. That is a section that we haven't really taken as seriously as we should or studied as deeply as we should, and we have certainly not applied the principles in section 98 like they are meant to be. This is one of the laws that the Lord gave to the Church that I think we, for the most part, have ignored. But he lays out quite clearly what the rules for justified violence are.

The other thing that we should keep in mind here is that, in that section and elsewhere, God talks about ways violence can be justified, but we know theologically there is a difference between justification and sanctification. For something to be justified means that it was sinful to begin with, that it was wrong to begin with. I don't have to be justified before God or justified by Christ because I am perfect; quite the opposite. So when the Lord gives us commandments and tells us under very strict conditions that our violence might need to be justified, he is not saying that it is right, that it is holy or good, or that it is sanctifying. All of this deserves more discussion but I don't see any cases of divine violence, whether historical or prophesied, that compel anyone in a contemporary setting to use violence against another human being.

***Wayment:** Thanks. That's a great thought. I want to conclude by kind of bringing it back to a different situation. So the historical moment is important, and there is this historical interest in the event, but I want you for a moment to speak to a classroom setting. So you have young Latter-day Saints, either postmission or prior to the mission, that have become disturbed by this violent moment in Mormon history. How do you speak to them? What are the takeaways for them? How could you help? We can't solve a historical problem that contains very complex issues, but we can say, "Okay, we have learned from this." What would you say there?*

Mason: I hope we are having this conversation in the classroom. The first thing I would say is, "Are you disturbed by this? Good, you should be, and I am too." If we are not disturbed by what happened at Mountain Meadows,

that is a condemnation on our ethical sensibilities. No person—especially no believer in Jesus Christ, someone who says they follow the Prince of Peace—should look at Mountain Meadows and say, “You know what? On any given day, I could see how that could play out. Maybe not me, but I could see how somebody could do that.” Even when we undertake the exercise of explaining Mountain Meadows, understanding the historical setting for it, and trying to put ourselves in the minds of those early Latter-day Saint settlers in Utah (which I think we have to do and we’re compelled to do because of our empathy and charity for other human beings, even for perpetrators of violence), that exercise should *never* lead us to normalize or be numbed to the horror of what happened. We should be disturbed by it, but then I don’t think we end there.

There are horrors in the world; just pick up the newspaper any day of the week. We live in a world of violence. In many of our Latter-day Saint communities—especially in the United States but even around the world—we are generally more affluent and are oftentimes more educated. We are insulated from the violence of the world, but the world is a violent place. I think Mountain Meadows calls us to remember that; it calls us to remember the way that we are implicated.

I would want to turn the conversation to thinking about what the gospel of Christ teaches us. Who is Jesus? We proclaim him as the Prince of Peace. Turn to the Sermon on the Mount. What does he teach in that sermon? Blessed are the peacemakers. He calls on us to turn the other cheek, to pray for those who persecute us, to bless our enemies. Other theologians call those the hard sayings because they are hard. It is really hard to pray for our enemies. It is really hard to turn the other cheek. And I don’t think that means that Jesus is calling on us to be wimps or to be persecuted all the time, but there is a recognition that what Jesus calls us to might be something different than violent retaliation and that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of peace, that our Messiah chose to die on the cross rather than inflict violence on others, that he calls on us to love, to reconcile, and to forgive. So when we look back on Mountain Meadows, I think it will always stand as a testament to us of what happens if we have not fully drunk of the waters of life.

At the end of his ministry, Moses was preaching, and in Deuteronomy 30:19, the Lord speaks through him and says, “I have set before you life and death; . . . : therefore choose life.” Mountain Meadows helps us remember that we have this choice before us at any moment. “I have set before you life

and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.” I think that is what we are called to do as Christians; I think that is what we are called to do as Latter-day Saints. Section 98 is very clear: “Renounce war and proclaim peace” (v. 16). Mountain Meadows is the exact opposite of that. We should always remember Mountain Meadows because it will remind us of the paths we do not want to go down. Hopefully it will instead impel us toward the path we do want to go down, which is the path of peace that Jesus is at the end of. And that is the road we want to walk. **RE**

Note

1. John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).