

Israel Barlow and the Founding of Nauvoo

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Often we may recognize direct divine guidance and intervention in our lives as a result of such things as prayer, fasting, and priesthood blessings. At other times in our lives, however, we may be directed by the Lord and not be aware of it. Such was likely the case with Israel Barlow, an early convert to the Church, during a critical time in his life and in Church history.

Israel Barlow was born on September 13, 1806, to Jonathon and Annis Barlow in Granville, Hampton County, Massachusetts. His father, Jonathon, passed away in 1820, when Israel was fourteen years old. With his mother, brothers, and sisters, he moved to western New York in the fall of 1822, and around 1824, the family eventually settled in Mendon, just fifteen miles southwest of Palmyra. After the gospel was restored and the Church organized in 1830, two missionaries of the Church brought the gospel message to Mendon, where many, including Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball, eventually joined the Church.¹

At age twenty-four, Israel was authorized to preach for the Methodist Reformed Church. However, after hearing the gospel, he desired to meet the Prophet Joseph Smith. Late in 1831 or early 1832, Israel traveled two hundred miles to Hiram, Ohio, to meet him. “After he had talked with him two or three hours he said he knew he [Joseph] was a Prophet of God.”² Israel, at age twenty-six, returned to Mendon and was baptized by his boyhood friend and recent convert, Brigham Young, on May 16, 1832. At age fifty-one, Annis Barlow, Israel’s

mother, and six of her other children were also baptized members of the Church in Mendon within the same year. Family members included Jonathon Watson at age twenty-four, Annis at age eighteen, Truman at age fourteen, and Rhoda at age twelve. Also baptized were George and Julia Ann, two children by George Lockwood, to whom Israel's mother was married in Massachusetts from 1821 to 1823. Another sister, Margaret Marie, who was married at the time to Charles Bunnell, later joined the Church.³

Israel and his mother, brothers, and sisters moved from New York to Ohio late in 1832 or early 1833 to join with other Latter-day Saints gathering in the Kirtland area. Soon after in 1834, Israel was one of the 205 men who answered the call to join Zion's Camp and made the seven-hundred-mile march to Missouri to confront those opposed to the Church in that area. Israel returned to Ohio and was in Kirtland with family members when the temple was dedicated on March 27, 1836. The Barlows moved again in late 1837 to Far West, Missouri, where Joseph Smith and many of the Saints had settled.⁴

Several confrontations occurred between local citizens and members of the Church in Missouri in 1838. On October 25, 1838, there was a military encounter between Mormon men and a Missouri military unit in what has become known as the Battle of Crooked River near Far West. There were about sixty to seventy men on both sides, and Israel was present at the battle. Three members of the Mormon military unit were killed or mortally wounded, including David W. Patten, a military leader and an Apostle. Israel was one of the stretcher bearers who took Elder Patten back to Far West, where he died that night.⁵

Two days later, on October 27, Governor Lilburn W. Boggs issued the infamous extermination order stating, among other things, that "the Mormons must be treated as enemies and *must be exterminated* or driven from the state, if necessary for the public good."⁶ On October 30, 1838, a mob of 240 men attacked a small settlement at Haun's Mill, killing seventeen Saints, including fifteen men and two young boys, ages nine and ten. Several others, including women and children, were severely wounded.⁷ A combined mob and military unit of two thousand Missouri men arrived at Far West that same day to drive out the Mormons. The following day, October 31, the Prophet Joseph Smith and other Church leaders were taken prisoners and remained in jail for the next six months.⁸

At this time he was among several thousand Saints who began the forced exodus from Far West and surrounding areas in Missouri and started the one-hundred-fifty-mile journey eastward toward Illinois.

Some went to other nearby geographical areas. It was unclear to both the exiled Saints and their leaders where they should go. There are no indications that a central place of gathering had been chosen as they began their flight from Missouri. Perhaps some wanted to return to their original homes in Ohio, New York, and Canada. Regardless of their destinations, their circumstances were dire. Many wondered if they would ever be able to live together again as a community of Saints.⁹

As late as March 25, 1839, while he was still imprisoned, Joseph Smith had no definite plan to suggest a destination for the Saints fleeing Missouri. On that date he wrote, "Now, brethren, concerning the places for the location of the Saints, we cannot counsel you as we could if we were present with you."¹⁰ He also wrote that same day, "I would suggest . . . that our brethren scattered abroad, who understand the spirit of gathering, that they fall into the places of refuge of safety that God shall open unto them, between Kirtland and Far West. Those from the east and from the west, and from far countries, let them fall in somewhere between those two boundaries, in the most safe and quiet places they can find; and let this be the present understanding, until God shall open a more effectual door for us for further consideration."¹¹

Israel and thirty-two others left Far West late in 1838, "being counseled to do so by President Brigham Young," and started their journey of exile, "searching for a suitable place to locate the persecuted, expelled 12,000 saints."¹² It is not presently known exactly when the rest of Israel's family (mother, brothers, and sisters) left Far West, but they probably left in early 1839. They could have been with Brigham Young and his group, who left Far West on February 14, 1839.¹³ There is evidence that the Barlow family had recently arrived in Quincy, Illinois, just before April 14, 1839.¹⁴

There are at least two theories of how Israel eventually arrived in Commerce, Illinois. The first and often-quoted theory is the "lost refugee" theory. After they started their journey, Israel supposedly became separated from his group and started going in a northeastern direction.¹⁵ He was ill clad and cold; often his only source of food was parched corn.¹⁶ Early Church documents record, "When Elder Israel Barlow left Missouri in the fall of 1838, either by missing his way, or some other cause, he struck the Des Moines river some distance above its mouth. He was in a destitute situation."¹⁷

The "lost refugee" theory suggests that in late 1838 Israel "wandered to" or arrived in Montrose, Iowa, twelve miles up the river from Keokuk where the Des Moines and Mississippi rivers come together. While in Montrose, Israel learned of the nearby abandoned barracks of Old Fort

Des Moines and that the property there was owned by Dr. Isaac Galland, who resided in Commerce, east across the Mississippi River.¹⁸

Israel would then have crossed the river and sought out the property holder. After they met, Dr. Galland indicated that he owned not only the property at Old Fort Des Moines in Iowa but also the property in the immediate vicinity of Commerce where he was residing. He offered property in both areas for sale to Israel Barlow as a place for the scattered members of the Church to gather.¹⁹ Evidently, property owned by other individuals in Commerce was also available.

There is a second theory, however, regarding how Israel arrived in Commerce, and that is the Kimball connection theory. When Israel and others left Far West in October 1838, they were “searching for a suitable place to locate the persecuted, expelled 12,000 saints.”²⁰ Robert B. Flanders wrote about the founding of Nauvoo in his book *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi*.²¹ He noted that Heber C. Kimball had three cousins: Hiram Kimball, Ethan Kimball and Phineas Kimball Jr., who were land agents for their father, Phineas Kimball Sr., from West Fairlee, Orange County, Vermont. He owned vast amounts of property in the Illinois Military District. During the 1830s the three sons of Phineas Kimball moved from Vermont and settled in Commerce, where they also had property for sale. None of the three brothers were Latter-day Saints at the time, but Hiram later joined the Church and moved to Utah.

Flanders states in the Kimball connection theory that before the Saints left Far West, Missouri, Heber C. Kimball may have suggested to Brigham Young, Edward Partridge, Israel Barlow, and others to contact his cousins—Hiram, Ethan, and Phineas Kimball in Commerce—and investigate the properties in Iowa and Illinois for future gathering places.

We know that the Kimball brothers were active property agents in Commerce. When Heber C. Kimball eventually moved there, his three cousins sold him the five acres of land on which he built his house. The Kimball brothers also entertained the Twelve Apostles at a Christmas party in Nauvoo in 1841 with attempts to sell property to them and other Church members.²² Flanders suggests in the Kimball connection theory that it may have been Hiram, Ethan, and Phineas who eventually introduced Israel to Dr. Galland.

This second theory seems possible because:

1. It seems highly unlikely that Israel, an adult, would become lost by himself and wander forty to fifty miles off the trail from Far West to Quincy.

2. Israel was baptized in Mendon, New York, in 1832 by another recent convert, Brigham Young. Heber C. Kimball had also joined the Church in Mendon, and the three new converts were good friends.

3. Israel left Far West in October 1838 in a group of thirty-two, which included Edward Partridge (Presiding Bishop of the Church), Hosea Stout, and others. It is recorded in family notes that Israel left with this group in late 1838 and started their journey of exile, “searching for a suitable place to locate the persecuted, expelled 12,000 saints.”²³ In other words, this group of men had the objective to find a new place of gathering *before* the Saints left Far West. Another family member noted that Israel “went with Bishop Partridge to find location for saints from Far West.”²⁴ In addition, on November 14, 1883, two weeks after Israel’s death (November 1, 1883), the *Deseret Evening News* contained a synopsis of Israel’s life. Among other things it noted his calling with Bishop Partridge to “find a resting place for the Church when they were driven from Far West.”²⁵

4. Israel would have been an appropriate Latter-day Saint exile to travel to Montrose, Iowa, and eventually to Commerce, Illinois, since he was thirty-two years old and still single. Other brethren traveling in the group likely had wives and children during the exile, which would have made it more difficult for them to leave the group and investigate property in Illinois and Iowa.

After their initial meeting, regardless of how they met, Israel left Dr. Galland at Commerce and headed for Quincy, fifty-three miles downriver, where many of the Saints had gathered. Soon after Israel arrived in Quincy, Dr. Galland wrote him a letter in early January 1839 and once again offered his properties near Montrose, Iowa, and Commerce, Illinois, for sale.²⁶ Israel conveyed these offers to the local leaders of the Church.

On January 20, 1839, David Rogers and Israel returned upriver for nine days and visited sites in both Commerce and Old Fort Des Moines, near Montrose. They also met with Dr. Galland once again. On February 1, 1839, David Rogers wrote: “[Israel] Barlow and myself went on and were nine days in our exploration and found in the Towns of uper [upper] and lower Commerce about forty emty [empty] dwellings for which we made conditional arrangements.”²⁷ The two men then crossed the Mississippi River and visited the abandoned barracks at Old Fort Des Moines. Rogers also wrote, “And after obtaining this information . . . and documents for showing what we had and could be done in that direction we returned to Quincy. And a Conference or meeting was called and we made our report.”²⁸

On February 26, 1839, Dr. Galland wrote to David Rogers with the same offer of his property in Iowa and Illinois that he had made a month earlier to him and Israel.²⁹ It was decided at a subsequent conference that the documents derived on the nine-day trip and the two letters from Dr. Galland to Israel and David would be taken to the Prophet Joseph Smith and other Church leaders still imprisoned in Liberty Jail. Consequently, David delivered the documents to the Brethren in Missouri on March 17.³⁰

After receiving the papers, Joseph Smith apparently gave much thought to the property, particularly at Commerce, Illinois, and called for an immediate option on the land. On March 22, 1839, he wrote a letter from Liberty Jail to Dr. Galland and stated, "If Bishop Partridge, or if the church have not made a purchase of your land and if there is not anyone who feels a particular interest in making a purchase you will hold it in reserve for us; we will purchase it of you at the proposals that you made to Mr. Barlow. We think the church would be wise in making the contract, therefore, if it is not made before we are liberated [from jail] we will take it."³¹ Dr. Galland accepted the offer.

On April 16, 1839, Joseph Smith and his fellow prisoners escaped (or were allowed to escape) from their imprisonment and immediately started for Quincy. After a difficult journey, they arrived on April 22 and three days later convened a conference regarding their future place of residence.

At the conference on April 25, it was resolved that the Prophet Joseph Smith and several of the Brethren, including Israel, immediately visit Commerce, Illinois, and the area near Montrose, Iowa, and locate property where the Saints could gather.³² Joseph Smith and the committee members left Quincy soon after and successfully purchased the property that had been offered. Joseph wrote on May 1, 1839, "I this day purchased, in connection with others of the committee, a farm [in Commerce] of Hugh White, consisting of one hundred and thirty-five acres, for the sum of five thousand dollars; also a farm of Dr. Isaac Galland, lying west of the White purchase, for the sum of nine thousand dollars."³³

The terms offered by Dr. Galland were generous, at a reasonable rate, and on long-term credit so the Saints would not be distressed in paying immediately for the new property. Additional properties were also purchased in Iowa and other areas in Illinois where stakes of the Church were later organized. But it was Commerce that became the central gathering place of the Saints.³⁴

On May 10, 1839, Joseph Smith moved his family to a small log cabin in Commerce.³⁵ The area, however, was not immediately inviting or impressive. A month later, on June 11, 1839, Joseph Smith recorded:

About this time Elder Theodore Turley raised the first house built by the Saints in this place [Commerce]; . . . When I made the purchase of White and Galland, there were one stone house, three frame houses, and two block houses, which constituted the whole city of Commerce. . . . The place was literally a wilderness. The land was mostly covered with trees and bushes, and much of it so wet that it was with the utmost difficulty a footman could get through, and totally impossible for teams. Commerce was so unhealthful, very few could live there; but believing that it might become a healthful place by the blessing of heaven to the Saints, and no more eligible place presenting itself, I considered it wisdom to make an attempt to build up a city.³⁶

Even though the property purchased in Commerce initially had little appeal, as the Prophet noted, it was located in beautiful geographical surroundings. It was built on a picturesque bend on the Mississippi River, which surrounded half the community. From the river's edge there was a gradual rise of the property for at least a mile where it reached the common level of a prairie, once covered by luxuriant growth of natural grasses, wild flowers, and patches of timber. Directly opposite of Commerce, on the west bank of the Mississippi River in Iowa, were bluffs that rose almost from the water's edge and were covered with a fine growth of timber. Nestled at the foot of one of the highest bluffs was the little village of Montrose, where Israel had previously visited. At the back of these bluffs were both woodland and prairie. Between Commerce and Montrose, in the middle of the Mississippi River, there was also an island about a mile long and fifty to one hundred yards in width, stretching north and south.³⁷

Perhaps for these and other reasons, the following year in April 1840, Joseph Smith changed the name of the community from Commerce to Nauvoo, a Hebrew word meaning "a beautiful location . . . and the idea of rest."³⁸ He undoubtedly had the prophetic capacity to view both property and people for their potential rather than their present condition.

By the end of 1840, there were 250 houses built in Nauvoo by the Saints who fled from Missouri, and the Saints were still arriving in large numbers.³⁹ Two years later, in 1842, there were approximately six to eight thousand Saints in Nauvoo.⁴⁰ By 1846 Nauvoo would become a beautiful city with an estimated population of twelve to

fifteen thousand, one of the largest cities in Illinois and the center for gathering the Saints.⁴¹

On January 8, 1841, the First Presidency in Nauvoo wrote of Dr. Galland, “He is the honored instrument the Lord used to prepare a home for us, when we were driven from our inheritances, having given him control of vast bodies of land, and prepared his heart to make the use of it the Lord intended he should.”⁴²

From the manner in which the property of Nauvoo was located and eventually obtained, we can gain important insights for contemporary living: (1) we may not always be aware of the Lord’s involvement and direction in our lives; (2) we can be an instrument of the Lord in doing His work and not know it at the time; (3) the divine guidance and intervention we are often unaware of in our lives can occur during trials, tribulations, and times of discouragement; and finally, (4) we each may underestimate our own contributions to the building of the kingdom of God, however insignificant they may seem at the time.

When Israel first met Dr. Galland in late 1838, he had no way of knowing that his meeting with the property owner would be “a providential introduction of the Church to Commerce . . . and its vicinity.”⁴³ Perhaps we can remember that the city of Nauvoo was built on property owned by Dr. Galland, “the honored instrument of the Lord,” used to provide a gathering place for the scattered Saints, and that he was first met by Israel Barlow, a Mormon refugee, for the providential introduction. Of that meeting it has been written: “This great event is very important . . . in the life of Israel Barlow. Perhaps one can also safely say that the founding of Nauvoo did more than any other one action at the most propitious hour of the Saint’s suffering and persecutions in Missouri, to revive the whole pattern of gathering and let the Church, through that gathering, establish itself in strength in one place. It enabled the members to build another temple and show the world by deeds what they could do as a united people of God.”⁴⁴

Like many other individuals in the early days of the Church, Israel was an ordinary member the Lord used in an extraordinary way. For his involvement in locating the property on which the city of Nauvoo was eventually built, we, his descendants, are proud and grateful. **RE**



Israel Barlow Memorial in Nauvoo, Illinois

Courtesy of the Israel Barlow Family Association

Notes

1. The Israel Barlow Family Association currently estimates there are one hundred thousand descendants of Israel Barlow. Their Web site is www.israelbarlow.org. Ora H. Barlow, *The Israel Barlow Story and Mormon Mores* (Salt Lake City: The Israel Barlow Family Association, 1968), 70–94.

2. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 98.

3. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 16–17, 84, 102–4.

4. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 125–27.

5. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 130; see also Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1948), 3:169–71; B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 1:474–76.

6. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:175.

7. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:326.

8. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:188–90.

9. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 2:1.
10. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:295.
11. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:301.
12. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 127, 131.
13. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:261.
14. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:319; Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 153–54.
15. George and Sylva Givens, *Nauvoo Fact Book: Questions and Answers for Nauvoo Enthusiasts* (Lynchburg, VA: Parley Street Publishers, 2000), 98, which states that the area of Commerce, Illinois, was located by a “lost refugee,” Israel Barlow, who was fleeing from Missouri.
16. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 131.
17. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:265.
18. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 134.
19. Smith, *History of the Church* 3:265; see also Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 132.
20. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 131.
21. Robert B. Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 30–31; see also 23–56.
22. Flanders, *Nauvoo*, 30–31.
23. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 131.
24. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 131.
25. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 512.
26. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:265.
27. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 135.
28. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 135.
29. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:265–66.
30. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 133; Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:284.
31. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 133.
32. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:336; see also Ora Barlow, *Family Records of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Stanway Printing Company, 1965), 19.
33. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:342.
34. See Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 2:9–11.
35. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:349.
36. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:375; brackets in original.
37. See Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 2:10–12.
38. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 2:11.
39. George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 334.
40. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith*, 392.
41. R. Scott Lloyd, “Nauvoo: City on Banks of the Mississippi River Was Forged from Fire of Adversity,” *Church News*, May 20, 1989, 8. The article also notes: “Israel Barlow, an elder of the Church making his way from Missouri, ended up in Iowa near the mouth of the Des Moines River. The people there made him acquainted with Dr. Isaac Galland, who owned considerable property at Commerce, Illinois.”
42. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:270–71.
43. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:265.
44. Barlow, *Israel Barlow Story*, 132.