

Profiles of the Prophets:

Ezra Taft Benson

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The last few years of President Spencer W. Kimball's life were fraught with poor health and diminished strength. When Ezra Taft Benson received the phone call announcing the death of the venerable old prophet, he was stricken with grief and reverence for the heavy task that now fell on him. On the Sunday following President Kimball's death, November 10, 1985, the Quorum of the Twelve met in the Salt Lake Temple at three in the afternoon. During this most solemn of assemblies, President Benson asked Gordon B. Hinckley and Thomas S. Monson to serve as his counselors. President Howard W. Hunter, next in seniority, set apart Ezra Taft Benson as President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That evening the Bensons attended the previously scheduled Young Women fireside, broadcast by satellite from the Tabernacle on Temple Square. The next morning, the



Fig. 1. Elder and Sister Benson pause for a photograph when he was a new Apostle.

Courtesy of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU

traditional news conference announcing a new Church President was held in the foyer of the Church Administration Building.

President Benson was the great-grandson of Ezra T. Benson, who was ordained an Apostle at Council Bluffs in 1846 during the exodus of the Latter-day Saints from Nauvoo. Ezra T. moved to Nauvoo in 1841 and filled responsible Church positions there. When the Saints began their westward trek, Ezra received a letter from President Brigham Young, who was out ahead on the trail, asking that he fill the position in the Quorum of the Twelve vacated by John E. Page. He traveled westward and was ordained an Apostle on July 16, 1846, at Council Bluffs, Iowa.¹

He and his growing family were also assigned by President Brigham Young to preside over the Church in Cache Valley in northern Utah. The Benson family resided here for several generations. Ezra's oldest son, George Taft Benson (who had been born in Garden Grove, Iowa, during the flight from Nauvoo), grew up in Logan and later married Louisa Ballif on December 20, 1867, in Salt Lake City. Together, they had thirteen children. Louisa served for several years as the president of the far-flung Oneida Stake Relief Society. George was bishop of the Whitney Ward for twenty years.



Fig. 2. Elder Benson and family pose in 1955, in the midst of his days in the Eisenhower administration, just prior to Barbara's (center, back) marriage.

Courtesy of Barbara Benson Walker



Fig. 3. Ezra Taft Benson is sworn in as U.S. secretary of agriculture as President Dwight D. Eisenhower looks on.

Courtesy of Church Archives

Running the Farm

The second son (and fourth child) of George and Louisa Benson was born June 24, 1875, and named after his father. George T. Benson Jr. loved the gospel and was always active in the Church. He married Sarah Dunkley on October 19, 1898, in the Logan Temple. The oldest of their eleven children was named after George's grandfather Ezra Taft Benson. George was an excellent farmer and passed the love of the land on to his oldest son, Ezra Taft, who became known to friends and family simply as "T."

Due to his father's call as a missionary when Ezra was only twelve years old, he became intimately acquainted with farm operations. While much of the farm was rented out during George T. Benson's 1912–14 northern states mission, Ezra took care of the dairy herd and managed the pasture and hay fields that were not rented out.

His father was pleased with the way his son attended to farm duties, and affairs were managed so well that upon his return from missionary labors, George was able to expand his farming operations. Several years later, Ezra and his brother Orval purchased their father's farm in Whitney for seventeen thousand dollars. On this land they tried some of



Fig. 4. The Benson family visits with President Eisenhower.

Courtesy of Church Archives

the methods they learned while studying agriculture at Utah State and Brigham Young University.

Ezra attended Oneida Academy, a Church school, in Preston, Idaho, before entering Utah Agricultural College (now Utah State University) in Logan, Utah. He saw his future wife, Flora Smith Amussen, drive by in a red Ford convertible during a campus visit before his mission.² She was a popular coed, serving in student leadership, playing tennis, and performing in college dramas. He told a cousin standing by him on the corner that he would date her when he came back to attend school.

Flora lived in Logan with her widowed mother, Barbara Smith Amussen. Her father, Carl Christian Amussen, had died when she was a baby. Carl was a wealthy jeweler and a dentist who had been born and raised in Denmark and had traveled and worked in Russia, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. His family name was Asmussen, but he dropped the first "s" after arriving in Utah. He had found a copy of Parley P. Pratt's *Voice of Warning* pamphlet on a street in New Zealand and was so moved that he traveled and sought out the Church in Liverpool, England, at the address given on the back of the pamphlet.

Because he had accumulated significant assets as a jeweler, Carl was able to gather with the Saints in the Salt Lake Valley, establishing a business with hired hands and goods he had brought with him. He sought the business counsel of President Brigham Young upon his arrival in Utah and was surprised to be invited to consider plural

marriage as one who could well afford the expenses of more than one family. He married Barbara Smith as his third wife in 1885. She was over forty years his junior, and together they had eight children. Flora was their youngest.

Flora was living alone with her mother when “T” came to call on her in early 1921. He was touched by Flora’s close and kindly relationship with her mother.

Ezra served a mission to Great Britain beginning in July 1921 through 1923 and returned to discover that Flora wished to serve a mission also. She was called to Hawaii and loved it. She was delighted to serve her final six months as a companion to her mother, who came to Hawaii to serve a short-term mission. She and Ezra wrote through her mission, and both were anxious to meet again when she returned.

Flora and Ezra were married in the Salt Lake Temple on September 10, 1926, by Orson F. Whitney, Ezra’s first mission president. (David O. McKay was his second.) Following a wedding breakfast, they left immediately for Iowa State University, camping out along the way. While Flora was serving her mission, Ezra had completed his bachelor’s degree in agriculture. Together, they determined he should go on to graduate school, and he finished his master’s degree in agriculture with honors in just one year. He was a hardworking student, turning down an offer to stay at Iowa State and teach. Returning to Whitney, Idaho, he farmed with his brother Orval until Orval went on a mission. Then Ezra farmed until offered a job as the extension agricultural agent for Franklin County in March of 1929. His two sons, Reed and Mark, were born exactly sixteen months apart during this time. Most of the Benson children were given the middle name Amussen in honor of Flora’s father, Carl Christian Amussen. A year and a half later, Ezra was appointed agricultural economist with the University of Idaho Extension Division in Boise. It was during this time that their daughters Barbara and Beverly were born.

Called to Serve

Ezra was called as president of the Boise Idaho Stake in November of 1938. This proved to be a short assignment since almost immediately his name was put forward as candidate for the appointment of executive secretary to the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives. This meant a move to Washington DC where, on March 30, 1940, daughter Bonnie was born.

Church leaders approved of the move from Boise to Washington DC and on June 30, 1940, Ezra was sustained as president of the

newly organized Washington DC Stake. His tireless efforts on behalf of American farmers, as well as his strong personal leadership of the Washington DC Stake, did not go unnoticed. In July 1943, Ezra Taft Benson was called as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The call came as a complete surprise to him. He was in Salt Lake City following a business trip through citrus farms in California. He had taken his oldest son, Reed, on this trip, and they stopped to visit with his second mission president, David O. McKay. Following the visit, they made a short trip to Whitney, where friends and relatives were delighted to see them. On returning to Salt Lake City on July 26, 1953, he discovered President McKay's office staff had been trying to locate him. They indicated President Heber J. Grant wished to see him at his cabin at the mouth of Emigration Canyon. Worried about catching his train on time, Ezra quickly sped to the cabin to be invited directly into the Church President's bedroom where he was resting. President Grant took his right hand and lovingly issued the call to serve as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. Ezra was flabbergasted and completely humbled at the invitation to join this group of men he had honored and revered his entire life.



Fig. 5. The Benson family often enjoyed going to J. Willard Marriott's ranch for recreation.

Courtesy of Church Archives

The following October, Ezra came to general conference, where he was officially sustained as the sixty-third Apostle called since the Restoration of The Church of Jesus Christ. His resignation from the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives brought congratulations from men who had little understanding of the nature of his new appointment. But great friendships had been made that would ultimately influence



Fig. 6. President Benson waves as the First Presidency prepares for general conference.
Courtesy of Church Archives

the future course of his apostleship and his public service. A short time after their move to Utah, the Bensons' youngest daughter, Flora Beth Benson, was born in Salt Lake City.

Special Post-WWII Assignment

The armistice signed at the end of World War II brought welcome peace to Europeans, who had endured over five years of danger and strife. Included among them were destitute and hungry Latter-day Saints from several missions. Church leaders felt that a coordinated effort to bring relief was necessary, and the First Presidency designated the youngest Apostle, Ezra Taft Benson, to spearhead the effort as president of the European Mission. This would allow him to work with several mission presidents, some of whom were indigenous acting mission presidents, quickly assigned when war broke out and their American Church leaders were called home. The assignment would,



Fig. 7. President and Sister Benson steal a kiss at the wedding breakfast of his granddaughter Holly Walker's marriage to Karl Tilleman.

Courtesy of Ferrel A. Massey

however, mean that President Benson would go into Europe alone, without the presence of Flora and the children. Ezra stayed there for almost a year, traveling throughout Europe and the British Isles, organizing relief efforts and arranging for food, clothing, and other supplies to be shipped from Welfare Square at Church headquarters. His heart was deeply touched as he encountered many members who had lost everything but seemed revitalized by the presence of an Apostle. Time after time, travel arrangements that had seemed impossible due to inherent military restrictions were made possible at the last moment. At other times, trips were begun without guaranteed arrangements along the way.

President Benson and his traveling associates pushed on and brought comfort and assurance to thousands of Latter-day Saints affected by the war. The depth of the suffering of the Saints caught in the war deeply touched the young Apostle. In July 1946, the First Presidency called Elder Alma Sonne, an Assistant to the Twelve, to replace President Benson in this assignment.

Back Home Again

His arrival home following a transatlantic flight was sweet after an eleven-month absence. Flora and the children were very excited to have “Daddy” return home. They had bravely carried on as normally as possible while he was gone, but doctors had told Flora she needed an operation as a result of complications from childbirth. Shortly after arriving home, she went into the hospital and endured the successful medical procedure. Elder Benson was greatly relieved and felt that prayers had been answered.

What followed were several years of intense and busy apostolic and civic activities that included heading the Church’s Melchizedek Priesthood Committee, being the senior adviser to the YMMIA and YWMIA programs, serving on the Boy Scouts of America National Executive Board, and speaking at major Church, university, and farming events. Republican presidential candidate Thomas Dewey even approached him about a cabinet position should he be elected. Sons Reed and Mark served missions, and the girls grew into beautiful young women. Constant stake conference visits and mission tours were mingled with family vacations, but growing Church responsibilities kept Elder Benson away from home and family more than he wanted to be.

Secretary of Agriculture

On November 20, 1952, a phone call from Utah Senator Arthur V. Watkins came as a bombshell. Ezra was informed that president-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower was considering him for the cabinet post of secretary of agriculture. Consulting with President McKay, Ezra was told to accept the post if it came in the right spirit.³ The following Monday he flew to New York, where President Eisenhower asked him to accept the position. Ezra laid all his reservations on the table. He raised concerns about his political leanings as well as his Church leadership role. But Eisenhower was unmoved by any of them. Ezra accepted. Within minutes the appointment was announced to the press. He would become the fifteenth secretary of agriculture and the first member of the Church to hold such an executive office in the federal government.

His would be a principle-based administration. Alarmed at the level of subsidies farmers were receiving at the time, Ezra often spoke about the free market system and farmers’ desire to be independent. The Department of Agriculture had previously amassed vast storage of excess food supplies that threatened to play havoc with world markets

if dumped cheaply. He wrestled with how to deal with such a situation. Ezra frequently visited with leaders of farm organizations and traveled the nation to talk to farmers themselves about these issues. As he presented his views on the principles of good agricultural economics, farmers listened, but the media mocked and politicians howled. Over time, however, his views gained favor with a majority of farmers and respect for the secretary grew. People felt Ezra was honest and that he said what needed to be said as plainly as he knew how. Political strategists winced, but Elder Benson did not flinch.

The secretary would often stop and talk to farmers, whether on the street or in the field. Some previously opposed to his agriculture programs were convinced otherwise once they had met and visited with him. He was down-to-earth and honest with everyone.

Sister Benson and the children similarly put off ostentatious behavior. On one occasion, the wives of cabinet members were invited to the Benson home, where homemade dishes graced the menu and were served by the Benson daughters.⁴ This was in stark contrast to the elaborate, catered dinners that were the norm at such functions.

His popularity rose and fell with regularity. Sometimes praised and sometimes roasted, the secretary became used to having his policies praised and panned. He even offered to step down on one occasion, but President Eisenhower insisted he stay to "the bitter end."⁵ They then joked about whether the end would be bitter or not. The two grew closer over time as bills passed by a Democratic congress would be vetoed by the president with the strong encouragement of the secretary of agriculture.

President Eisenhower suggested that Elder Benson travel abroad from time to time. These diplomatic efforts put him in contact with many world leaders. His international reputation later did much good for the Church and the country. In later years, dignitaries were often invited to Church meetings and special events when Elder Benson visited nations while on Church business.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev visited the United States in 1959. During his visit, Ezra hosted the Russian leader through a tour of several farms. The Soviets returned the favor and invited Elder Benson to Moscow. There, he became painfully aware of the inefficiencies of the Soviet system and the restrictions placed on the Russian people. At the end of his tour, the American entourage visited the Central Baptist Church in Moscow. Filled mostly with elderly people whose faith predated the communist takeover, the congregation warmly received the group. Elder Benson spoke to the group and tenderly testified

of Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and the power of love, peace, and prayer. The deeply felt response of the people caused virtually everyone in the American entourage to weep over the experience. Media members would later comment about the spirituality of the event and the powerful feeling they experienced in the old church that day. It was clear that Elder Benson had a deep testimony of the Savior and wore his religion comfortably and sincerely and that he was unafraid to open his heart when occasion permitted.

Back to the Quorum

At the end of Elder Benson's two terms as secretary of agriculture, President McKay once again called Ezra to assume the presidency of the European Mission, which now included four stakes and twelve missions. His notoriety as former secretary of agriculture meant that the press followed his arrival and subsequent activities with significant interest. Elder Benson used this opportunity to create a public relations organization in the mission that would enhance the visibility of the Church in Europe for the twenty-one months of his presidency. He also continued to speak on themes related to freedom. Some listeners equated his talks on freedom as being overdone, prompting Elder Benson to counsel with President McKay. President McKay only encouraged him to continue to speak his mind.

Some Americans wished he would run for president of the United States. In the mid-1960s a committee was formed to encourage his candidacy. President McKay suggested that he neither encourage nor discourage such a movement and, over time, the interest dwindled.

When President McKay died on January 18, 1970, Ezra lost his beloved friend. They had remained close throughout their lives, and he was asked to offer the benediction at the funeral. On Friday, January 23, 1970, ninety-three-year-old Joseph Fielding Smith became the President of the Church. Two and a half years later, his death resulted in Ezra's high-school friend, Harold B. Lee, becoming President. Church members were shocked when President Lee soon died. This resulted in Ezra's thirty-year colleague in the Quorum of the Twelve, Spencer W. Kimball, becoming President of the Church. At that time Ezra became the President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

President of the Quorum

President Benson had felt for some time that it would be best if the Twelve could be relieved of their many administrative duties in order

to focus on the spiritual affairs of the kingdom. He began by streamlining assignments within the Quorum. He also made sure meetings started and ended on time. Quorum members always felt they could speak freely about important items, but he was very effective in turning open discussions into united decisions—in the right way, at the right time, with the right feeling. His humility and openness impressed each Quorum member to speak his mind without regard to seniority.⁶

His diplomatic status as a former secretary of agriculture, combined with his affable manner in greeting and meeting with government officials, opened many doors for the Church and its missionaries throughout the world. Given President Kimball's prophetic and electrifying spread of missionary work throughout the world, it was an advantage to have someone with President Benson's experience with diplomacy and government serving as President of the Quorum of the Twelve.

President Benson was intimately involved in several momentous events as Quorum President. In 1976 the First Quorum of the Seventy was organized as a body of General Authorities. A year later, the Assistants to the Quorum of the Twelve were all added to that Quorum. Later, in June of 1978, the revelation on priesthood extended the priesthood to all worthy males.

A personal challenge arose a month later when President Benson was knocked down by a horse that reared unexpectedly, and he broke his hip. The recuperation time was slow, but by September he was able to attend his Quorum meetings and take care of regular Church business.

President of the Church

After President Kimball's death, President Benson vowed to continue the threefold mission emphasis (proclaim the gospel, perfect the Saints, and redeem the dead) of the Church as outlined by President Kimball. Several developments occurred under the new First Presidency. For instance, they announced that faithful members married to nonmembers could be endowed in the temple. Another action was to reach out in their Christmas message to alienated members and invite them to return to Church activity. A new set of missionary discussions was released in July of 1986. They were designed to allow missionaries to teach more in their own words than the previous discussions allowed.

Church growth featured the first stake organized in West Africa as well as the legal recognition of the Church in Hungary.⁷ In November

1988 an agreement with the DDR (German Democratic Republic) allowed missionaries to serve there.⁸ Young men were also allowed to serve missions throughout the world from that country. These negotiations foretold the impending collapse of the Soviet Union.

Missionary work everywhere continued to flourish. Twenty-nine new missions were created in 1990 alone, and the equalization of mission costs for U.S. and Canadian missionaries, which made all monthly payments by parents the same for all missions, blessed the expansion of missionary work across the globe. In fact, over three hundred stakes were organized during President Benson's presidency. The Church grew from almost six million to almost nine million members under his leadership. Eight new temples were dedicated, and three were rededicated after being refurbished. The BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies was also completed and dedicated on May 16, 1989, by then Quorum of the Twelve President, Howard W. Hunter. A decision was made to close the old Hotel Utah in Salt Lake City. It was completely renovated to later reappear as the Joseph Smith Memorial Building.

New technological advances made possible *FamilySearch* (a suite of computer programs designed to enhance and simplify family history work) and *TempleReady* (a software program that streamlined the clearance of names for temple work).

Perhaps it was only fitting that the Berlin Wall came down during President Benson's administration. No one better understood the importance of this symbolic fall of the Iron Curtain installed by the old Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Communist nations in Europe were transformed during his service as Church President. His strong admonitions on the evils of communism and the importance of freedom for Americans and all mankind seemed to be vindicated by these major world events.

Members grew to love President Benson. One thing the President did that endeared him to many, especially to children and their parents, was to sing the old children's song "I Am a Mormon Boy" a cappella in some regional conferences. Sister Benson also delighted audiences from time to time by reciting from memory the lengthy Edgar A. Guest poem "Home." As long as they could, President and Sister Benson attended the temple every Friday morning. Temple patrons were delighted to find themselves in an endowment session with the President of the Church and his wife. It elevated the importance of temple attendance in the eyes of many.

As President Benson aged, like President Kimball, he faced health concerns related to old age. At age eighty-nine he had a mild heart attack that somewhat slowed him. Over time, he needed help getting around, and he began to attend general conference in a wheelchair. Then, on August 14, 1992, his beloved wife, Flora, died. They had been married for sixty-six years, and Ezra was now alone. His health continued to decline until May 30, 1994—Memorial Day—when Ezra Taft Benson died of heart failure at age ninety-four. **RE**

Notes

1. John E. Page was disfellowshipped on January 9, 1846, at a council meeting held in Nauvoo, Illinois. Ezra T. Benson was ordained to take his place in the Quorum on July 16, 1846, at Council Bluffs, Iowa.

2. From a 1988 conversation with Flora Walker Spackman, granddaughter of President Ezra Taft Benson. Flora's husband, Larry, wanted to buy her a red convertible so she could drive around town like her grandmother!

3. Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 254.

4. Interview with Barbara Benson Walker, January 16, 2004.

5. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 321.

6. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 429–430.

7. *Deseret News 1999–2000 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1998), 333.

8. *Deseret News 1999–2000 Church Almanac*, 323–25.