

The Historians Corner

Edited by James B. Allen

Some fascinating sidelights to Mormon history are often revealed in correspondence between Latter-day Saint leaders and prominent non-Mormons. In this issue of "The Historians Corner" we present two such sets of correspondence. The first, edited by Dr. Ronald G. Watt of the Church Historical Department, concerns Lyman Wight, a former apostle who led a colony to Texas after the death of Joseph Smith.¹ Here we see Wight's attitude toward the Utah Church (perhaps gaining some insight into reasons for it), as well as Wilford Woodruff's very powerful defense of the Church.

While preparing a history of Mormon-Indian relations, Dr. Larry C. Coates of Ricks College discovered some interesting correspondence between Brigham Young and the famous American artist, George Catlin. Catlin is especially well known for his sympathetic and accurate treatment of American Indian culture, and his unusual proposal to Brigham Young reflects his deep concern for the future of the Indian people. It also reflects at least one very interesting public image the Mormons had achieved.

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN WILFORD WOODRUFF AND LYMAN WIGHT

Ronald G. Watt

On 1 July 1857 Wilford Woodruff, apostle and assistant Church historian wrote to Lyman Wight, a former apostle who had gone to Texas shortly after Joseph Smith was killed, taking with him about 150 Mormons who had been working in the timber country of Wisconsin. This letter started a fascinating exchange between Wight and Woodruff.

¹For a fine treatment of the Wight colony, see Davis Bitton, "Mormons in Texas: The Ill-fated Lyman Wight Colony, 1844-1858," *Arizona and the West* 2 (Spring 1969):5-26.

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Woodruff was writing the history of the Twelve Apostles and found he did not have enough material on Wight "to do justice to it without your assistance." He informed Wight that he and his family were all well, and that it was generally a time of peace for the Mormons. He also informed him that Parley P. Pratt had been killed in Arkansas, and that Thomas B. Marsh, another former apostle, was returning to the Church.

I wish Brother Wight you could come and pay us a visit. We will all be glad to see you. We have built up a beautiful City in the valley of the Mountains. Our census makes us about 80,000 Souls and increasing fast—Mormonism is as great a trouble to the world as ever. All the Twelve are now in this country except O. Pratt, E. T. Benson, Erastus Snow and John Taylor who are abroad. Amasa Lyman and C. C. Rich arrived a short time ago from San Bernardino, and Geo. A. Smith from Washington.

He also reminisced: "Mormonism is as good to me to day as it was when I was with you in the old log cabin in Clay County, and milking the cows for Sister Wight and making brick for Col. Arthur's house."¹

Wight received the letter about a month and a half later. He sent Woodruff a history of his life and also raised the question as to why the apostles had cut him off from the Church:

I received your favor on the 12th inst dated July 1st, 1857. You may be assured it was well received it being the first I have received from any of the twelve for the last 12 years. I had come to the conclusion that they had become so far advanced in the order of the kingdom and become so popular in temperal things that they had entirely forgotten that such an uncouth old plough goger [gouger or codger?] as Lyman Wight had an existance on the face of the earth, but I yet live and am bold to say that of the doctrine of Joseph Smith the Angel of the seventh dispensation there is not a firmer believer or defender on the face of the earth and hold every ordination given me as sacred as I did the day they ware given, and if the death of Br Joseph gave one of the twelve a supremacy over the others I have it yet to learn, did Brigham Young have any authority at Joseph death more than he received from Br Joseph. If you answer no I ask whe[n]ce did he receive authority to disanul revelations given by Br Joseph? See Book of Doctrine & Covenants p 396 par 7th concerning building the Nauvoo house and by careful examination you will find that I have a revelation given to me which is not to end while I live on the earth, and no man on the earth has a right to take that mission from me being given of God the highest of all.

¹Wilford Woodruff to Lyman Wight, 1 July 1857, Historical Department Letterbooks, Church Archives.

Yet I did consider it my duty to counsel with the twelve, and the fifties [Council of Fifty] had not circumstances ordered it otherwise the mission I am now on Br Willford I received of the prophet of God, and it was well known by the twelve at that time that Joseph was striving very hard to come to this very place with 250,000 men he therefore requested me to come and establish a church in this region and such mission was even talked of while in jail where I had the advantage of six months teaching and received many things that is yet unknown to the church, never having refused to obey the prophet I started in all good faith, had but just got out of hearing before I was accused from the stand by who would be big of begging the mission of Br Joseph who to passify me gave his consent and that I run away from Nauvoo to get rid of fighting and that he could chase me all over Nauvoo with a plug of tobacco, I acknowledge I am afraid of tobacco but should have no fear of the person for I believe he was too lazy to have chased me all over Nauvoo, he pitched into me largely on many occasions but I care very little about the whole. I did not so much wonder at this having been with him for four weeks after the death of Br Joseph and I do not recollect of hearing him use the pronoun we when speaking of the twelve for the first time but got the pronoun I so completely to perfection that I considered myself out all together, I soon learnt that I was cut off from the church but never learnt what it was for, after learning this I found I had no where to go but to my beloved Br Joseph and to the Saviour with the former I have had many communications face to face without a dimming veil between, and received many good instructions this has been to me fully satisfactory, and as I am a little timid about meeting men with such dangerous weapons I have kept one steady course doing what I considered my duty according to my ordinations.

After this Wight wrote his life history, returning in a post-script to his original argument:

One or two questions more and I am done, was it necessary that Br Joseph should be of the lineage of Joseph who was sold into Egypt in order to receive the Melchizedek priesthood, and rule over the church? It is necessary that the same Priesthood should be handed by lineage from father to son? Can the priesthood be transferred to the lineage of Judah? Is it necessary that the lineage of that priesthood should be kept up through all ages of the world to carry out the purposes of God? Can you tell me why I was cut off from the church and such men as Orson Hide, W. W. Phelps; T. B. Marsh received in, have they ever asked Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon or myself to forgive them for writing letters to the Governor and swearing agains us with a view of swearing away our lives? W. W. Phelps said under oath that he was baptized to save his property. One of Joseph's prophesies in jail was, if he was taken away Brigham Young, [Reynolds] Cahoon and, others would cut me

off from the church whether they had any accusation against me or not which I have lived to see fulfilled.²

Although Wight's letter was dated 24 August 1857, it did not reach Elder Woodruff until June of the following year, having been delayed by the approach of Johnston's Army and Woodruff's subsequent move to Provo. Following is Woodruff's eloquent and convincing reply to Wight's charges against the authority of the Twelve:

Provo, Utah Co. Utah Territory
June 30 1858

Brother Lyman Wight

Your letter dated Mountain Valley Aug. 4 57 has just arrived, it has been detained from us by the Army of the United States, and it has very fortunately survived the almost universal destruction of all our Mail matter, we regret that we could not have received your history in season for publication; a sketch which had been prepared you will see in the Deseret News, which is now published at Fillmore, 100 miles from this City.

The brief sketch of the History of the Twelve, had been forwarded to the Printers, they are only intended as a synopsis, leaving each of them the opportunity to publish the same in full, at their leisure.

Your letter has been read to George A. Smith, Amasa Lyman, Charles C. Rich, and your two nephews Stephen and Ephraim Wight, who are all present while I am writing this.

We have ever entertained the warmest feelings for you personally, and regret exceedingly that your course has led you from our midst; instead of building up ourselves, we have labored as one man to build up the Kingdom of God; you complain that Pres. Young used the pronoun I too much to suit you. He was the President of the Twelve, and the quorum backed him up and sustained him, you claiming more authority than the Eleven, went your own way, we regret the result exceedingly; it was your duty not only to council with the Twelve, but to take their counsel.

You refer to the revelation which says "it is my will that my servant Lyman Wight shall continue in preaching for Zion, in the spirit of meekness" &c. the spirit of meekness was the condition of the promise "I will receive him unto myself" which appears to us to be evidently wanting, when you declared in Nauvoo that you would not turn your hand over to be one of the Twelve, and it seems to us impossible that you should forget the caution of the Lord in the Book of Covenants in June 1831 "let my servant Lyman Wight beware for Satan desireth to sift him as shaft." Brother Lyman we ask you to think for a moment of the great promises made to men in the Revelation of Jan 1841 who have fallen, or who have apostatized and re-

²Wight to Woodruff, 24 August 1857, Woodruff Collection, Church Archives.

member that all those promises are upon conditions. We will name Bennet, the Lord promised to crown him with glory if he continued; also George Miller is declared without guile, did he continue? William Law you remember had great blessings in the same revelation, and the conditions, of them all, that he continue to observe the Counsels of the Presidency. When Joseph was taken away, the Priesthood continued with the quorum of the Twelve, with the fulness of the authority of the Priesthood, and when you turned your heels against it, Satan had you in his sieve, and like chaff you were blown away. Come back again brother Lyman and dwell in Zion, and resume your duty enjoined upon you by the Lord, and preach for Zion in meekness, and listen to the Councils of the Presidency, the Church, and cease to arrogate to yourself authority over your brethren. Brigham Young ordained you to the apostleship. He was the President of the quorum, and every member of that quorum whom Satan did not blow away as chaff, have stood with and by him, and faced every storm with him, as you would have done, if the light of the Spirit had been with you, "but he that gathereth not with us, scattereth abroad."

Pres Young by his persevering industry, untiring energy, and unexampled faithfulness, has been enabled to gather the Saints into the mountains, to the very place that Joseph had organized a company to explore; sent the Elders to almost every nation; translated the book of Mormon, and the revelations into many languages, and published them to the four quarters of the earth; and been enabled to defend the Saints from the unconstitutional aggressions of our Chief Magistrate. The God of Heaven hath done this that his servant Brigham, and his faithful brethren who have stood by him while those who led away factions, have wasted & are forgotten; many from your State and even one of your own posterity have found their way to Zion.

You complain that Orson Hyde, W. W. Phelps, and T. B. Marsh have been received into the Church: Hyde and Phelps were received and endowed by Joseph Smith, and we have yet to learn that even you objected to it in his life time. Marsh lived upon husks for more [than] a score of years, and finally wandered a miserable object of pity, poor, naked, destitute and disconsolate, and appeared before a congregation of 8000 Saints, and humbly asked them to forgive him, and let him at least dwell in our midst; they did forgive him, and permitted him to be baptized, and he remains a member, a living, palsied, limping spectacle of the fruits of apostacy, had you have been in the midst of Zion, he would have asked you, as he did all the Saints, to forgive him.

You remind us that in Jackson Co., in Zion's camp, and in Caldwell, you were called upon to lead the Armies of Israel, when they were surrounded by their enemies, the hosts of hell; the reason you was called upon was, you was at your post, *then*, you was *there* in the midst of Israel, valiant in the testimony of Jesus and the defence of Israel; but when the tremendous power of one great man

James Buchanan goaded on by the clamor of the people, was hurling his legions upon the Children of Zion, to crush from the Earth, the Priesthood; and when the nerve of every faint hearted member trembled to the Center, and the bloody war cry was reiterated from every corner of Christendom "wipe out Mormonism", where was its old defender? was he in the midst of the trouble; was he the foremost to defend the innocent; to lift the Standard of Zion; to face the monster; fearless, and determined to encourage the Saints in the dread encounter? or was he reclining at his ease in the sunny plains of the far famed Elysium of bliss, Texas, writing to me and my brethren the Twelve, as if in bitter irony "I thought you was too popular to think of an old codger like me."

You was cut off from the Church in the latter part of 1848, the subject was brought up on the receipt of a pamphlet which you published against the Authorities of the Church.

Brother Lyman come home to Zion, mingle in our midst, confess and forsake your sins, and do right, as we all men have to do, in order to enjoy the favor of God, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, and have fellowship with the Saints, then, and not till then, will your path be lit up so that you can walk in safety, and be filled with the power of God, and the fire of Zion burn in your bosom, until that time you will not be in a situation to build up Zion or defend her interests. We all feel interested in your welfare; you have no enemies here; the longer you stay away from us, the more alienated your feelings become, the Lord dwells in Zion; His Spirit and power is in our midst; He had delivered us and given us the victory up to the present day and we acknowledge his hand in all these things.

Brothers Geo. Smith, Amasa Lyman, C. C. Rich, and your nephews Ephraim and Stephen Wight all wish to be remembered to you with the best of feelings. We all respect you for your gallant course in defending your brethren against their persecutors in times past, and trust that the day is not far distant when we may again see you a humble man, with your brethren in Zion building up the Kingdom of God.

We shall be pleased to receive a letter from you at any time.

Yours truly
W. Woodruff³

Lyman Wight died on 31 March 1858 and never received Wilford Woodruff's letter. In September, O. L. Wight, Lyman Wight's son, wrote to Elder Woodruff informing him of the death of his father. Woodruff received the letter the following April.⁴

³Woodruff to Wight, 30 June 1858, Historical Department Letterbooks, Church Archives.

⁴Journal of Wilford Woodruff, 4 April 1859, Church Archives.