

The Flag of the Kingdom of God

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D. Michael Quinn

The “Kingdom of God” in Mormon thought and practice during the nineteenth century exceeded the confines of religion alone.¹ The Kingdom of God was regarded by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor, presidents of the Church, as more than the ecclesiastical church. The Kingdom of God was at once millenarian and contemporary, spiritual and temporal. One characteristic which has been overlooked in scholarly analyses of the Council of Fifty and Mormon Kingdom of God is the existence of an external symbol of that political kingdom—a banner or flag.

Joseph Smith suggested the possibility of creating an ensign for the Kingdom of God as early as 22 June 1844: “I also gave orders that a standard be prepared for the nations.”² According to LDS Church Historian George A. Smith, Joseph Smith’s concept for an ensign was amplified in a vision Brigham Young had after the Prophet’s death.

While they were fasting and praying daily on the subject [the migration west] President Young had a vision of Joseph Smith, who showed him the mountain that we now call Ensign Peak, immediately north of Salt Lake City, and *there was an ensign fell upon that peak*, and Joseph said, “Build under the point *where the colors fall* and you will prosper and have peace.”³

Although George A. Smith’s account was separated from the occurrence by more than twenty years, John D. Lee recorded in his diary a sermon given by Brigham Young on 13 January 1846, in which there are more details about this flag:

Pres B Young said that the saying of the Prophets would never be verified unless the House of the Lord be reared in the Tops of the Mountains & the Proud Banner of Liberty wave over the valleys that are within the Mountains & I know where the spot is & I know how to make this Flag. Jos sent the colors and Said where the colors settled there would be the spot.⁴

Therefore, even prior to the departure of the Saints from Nauvoo, Illinois, Brigham Young completed making a special flag for the mountain haven of the Saints.

By the time Brigham Young led the first pioneer company toward the Great Basin in the Spring of 1847, he had aligned this flag with the political Kingdom of God. On 29 May 1847, President Young preached a sermon on this subject to the pioneer company.

President Young then spoke of those who was not in the Church—as there were some present—that they would be protected in their rights but

they must not introduce wicked men in the camp for it would not be suffered. He then spoke of the standard and ensign that would be reared in Zion to govern the Kingdom of God and the nations of the earth. For every nation would bow the knee and every tongue confess that JESUS was the Christ and this will be the standard: The Kingdom of God and his Laws and Judgment in _____ [a shorthand entry which completes the full name of the Council of Fifty: The Kingdom of God and His Laws with the Keys and Powers thereof and Judgment in the Hands of His Servants]. And on the standard would be a flag of every nation under heaven.⁵

In response to this allusion to a flag of the kingdom, Wilford Woodruff drew a sketch of a flag in the margin of his journal (Fig. 1).

The flag Wilford Woodruff drew was not the one suggested by Brigham Young's words, i.e., a simple composite of the flags of the nations of the earth. The flag he sketched in his journal was distinctively Mormon in several characteristics: the emblems of the sun, moon, and star (which had already been used as motifs in the Nauvoo Temple), the twelve scallops along the edges of the flag's extremity (perhaps symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel or the twelve apostles), and the three ascending lines in the lower left-hand corner of the flag (perhaps symbolizing the Godhead or the Presidency of the Church). The significance of other details of the sketch is obscure. The Flag may have been merely Wilford Woodruff's imaginative representation of what the flag of the Kingdom of God *might* look like. In May 1847, it appears that the flag of the Kingdom of God was still an indefinite visual concept in the minds of the leaders of that kingdom.

On 26 July 1847, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Wilford Woodruff, George A. Smith, Willard Richards, Ezra T. Benson, Albert Carrington, and William Clayton ascended a peak at the north end of the Salt Lake Valley which they named Ensign Peak. Many later commentators on this incident have asserted that these men raised the flag of the United States on the peak at this time. Historian Brigham H. Roberts dismissed that assertion as fiction in his official history of the LDS Church.⁶ However, a flag of the United States was actually raised in the Salt Lake Valley sometime in 1847, but not on Ensign Peak. Erastus Snow clarified the matter by stating, "In 1847 the standard of the American nation was planted *on this Temple block*. I assisted in planting it. . . ."⁷ Despite authoritative denials of the Ensign Peak story, the tradition of the American flag on Ensign Peak persisted, and on 26 July 1934, a monument was erected there commemorating the alleged raising of Old Glory.

Debunking the myth of the flag on Ensign Peak leaves us with a question concerning the naming of the peak. If no U.S. flag was raised, could a flag of the Kingdom of God (or anything representing it) have been raised on that prominence on the day it was named by Brigham Young and the exploring party? The earlier vision of Brigham Young concerning the peak

included a flag of some kind, and B. H. Roberts indicated that the significance of Ensign Peak concerned the political Kingdom of God, rather than loyalty to the United States.

“The Ensign” that these Latter-day Saint Pioneers had in mind, and of which they had frequently spoke *en route* was something larger and greater than any national flag whatsoever; and what it was meant to represent was greater than any earthly kingdom’s interest, and I speak not slightly of earthly kingdoms either; but this “Ensign” in the minds of the “Mormon” Pioneers concerned not one nation, but all nations; not one epoch or age, but all epochs and all ages; not nationality but humanity, is its scope and concern. It was the sign and ensign of the *Empire of Christ*; it was a prophecy of the time to come when the kingdoms of this world would become “the Kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign forever and forever.”⁸

In 1910, William C. A. Smoot, one of the last survivors of the first pioneer company, gave his personal account of the flag raising on Ensign Peak:

Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball and his associates went up on the hill and toward Ensign Peak which was the name they gave it, as Kimball said: “We will someday hoist an ensign here.” . . . While they were up there looking around they went through some motions that we could not see from where we were, nor know what they meant. They formed a circle, seven or eight or ten of them. But I could not tell what they were doing. Finally they came down in the evening. . . . They hoisted a sort of flag on Ensign Peak. Not a flag, but a handkerchief belonging to Heber C. Kimball, one of those yellow bandana kind. This explained the actions of the party when they first went up on the peak and which we could not understand.⁹

Smoot’s account was viciously attacked in an editorial of the *Salt Lake Herald Republican* on 23 March 1910, to which Smoot subsequently replied:

And what I said about the appearance of the valley when we arrived here in July, 1847, and also about the hoisting of the bandana handkerchief on Ensign peak, is as true as that God Almighty lives. At the time I felt pride in the very thought of hoisting *an ensign to the world*, for such it was represented to be when they unfurled the handkerchief to the breeze at that time. I took it to be *emblematic of what should be done later*; and that it was a bandanna handkerchief, and not the Stars and Stripes, I know for a fact.¹⁰

Smoot’s account implies that the raising of the makeshift ensign on the peak was a spontaneous affair, which would account for the absence of reference to a flag raising in the diaries of the men involved. The naming of the peak and Smoot’s understanding of the handkerchief incident indicated that an official ensign might be hoisted on Ensign Peak at some future time.

The details of that occurrence are not presently extant, but it is very possible that after July 1847, a flag of the Kingdom of God was raised on Ensign Peak. This seems to be the implication of the familiar Mormon hymn, “High On the Mountain Top,” written on 19 February 1853, by Joel Hills Johnson.¹¹ Johnson’s reference to a flag of the Kingdom of God is

implied in the first lines of the hymn: “High on a mountain top a banner is unfurled. Ye nations now look up, it waves to all the world.” That a flag of the Kingdom of God had been raised in Salt Lake City by 1853 is also implied by Brigham Young’s comment during the same year about reports that the Saints “had hoisted the flag of our independence.”¹²

Although the raising of a theocratic flag on Ensign Peak can only be inferred, there is direct evidence that a flag of the Kingdom of God was subsequently designed and displayed. The Saints apparently gave public display to a flag of the Kingdom of God as early as 1859, even though the Utah expeditionary Force remained in Utah as an uncomfortable reminder of the “Utah War.” A non-Mormon emigrant to California, William Henry Knight, attended the July Fourth celebration in the Salt Lake Valley. In a letter to his mother on 7 July 1859, Knight wrote, “The Mormons were celebrating the day *with a flag of their own*, firing cannon and marching about to Yankee music.”¹³ Knight’s allusion seems to indicate that it was a flag other than Old Glory, but his lack of description leaves us uninformed as to the appearance of the Flag of the Kingdom.

Twenty years later, another non-Mormon, Don Maguire, observed the Flag of the Kingdom in public display during the funeral of Brigham Young in 1877. Maguire not only described the flag in his personal journal, but also associated this flag with Ensign Peak:

Kindly note, gentle reader, that Utah history states that the flag known as the Stars and Stripes was placed on Ensign Peak about the twenty-ninth [*sic*] day of July 1847. The so-called flag of the Stars and Stripes placed there on that occasion was a flag having in its upper left hand corner a blue field with a circle of twelve stars and in the center a large white star. The stripes on that flag, instead of being red and white stripes, were blue and white stripes, and it was to be the flag denoting Mormon sovereignty over an area that they had now taken possession of . . . for good and sufficient reasons the so-called flag of Stars and Stripes raised on Ensign Peak above Salt Lake City in July 1847 was never again seen in public until the day of Brigham Young’s funeral when it hung from a second story window of Heber C. Kimball’s residence. That flag was exposed to public view on that morning September 1877 and it may be supposed that between the hours of eleven o’clock and two o’clock of the same day it was carefully folded and laid away in the redwood casket containing the mortal remains of Brigham Young, there to rest with unto the morning of the first Resurrection.¹⁴

Wilford Woodruff’s version of the Flag of the Kingdom may have been imaginative, but Maguire described a tangible reality. The colors of the Flag of the Kingdom were blue and white. These were the colors of the flags used in the Iowa settlements of the Saints to announce meetings: the white flag for the entire camp and the blue flag for captains of companies (most of whom were members of the Council of Fifty).¹⁵ The stars in the blue field suggest a symbolism consistent with the theory of the Kingdom of God: the

twelve tribes of Israel (or possibly the twelve apostles) surrounding Christ, as King of the Kingdom of God. Maguire did not indicate how many stripes were in the flag, but in view of the prominence of the number twelve in Mormonism, the artist's conception of the flag in this article (Fig. 2) shows only twelve stripes.¹⁶

Three years following the funeral of Brigham Young, a somewhat different flag of the Kingdom of God was publicly displayed in Salt Lake. On 6 April 1880, the LDS Church celebrated the Golden Jubilee of its organization. On that date John D. McAllister, president of the St. George Stake of the Church, described the flag as follows:

Fifty years today since the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was organized. Flags and Banners unfurled. On the Temple was a white one with Blue field, a circle of Twelve Stars and three in the Center, in the form of a triangle, all representing the First Presidency & the Twelve, Truth and peace, Fidelity.¹⁷

In this flag of the Kingdom of God (Fig. 3) there were no stripes, and in place of one larger star there was a triangle of three large stars surrounded by the twelve smaller stars. The symbolism in this flag seems to relate more directly to the organization of the Church, as was indicated in McAllister's interpretation. However the star motif and the colors of blue and white seem to be a direct derivation from the Flag of the Kingdom displayed in 1877.

Although the political Kingdom of God in Mormonism never attained its millenarian fulfillment, it was regarded as a precursor of things to come. The provisional ensigns of the nineteenth century indicate the seriousness with which the Latter-day Saints accepted the call to establish a literal Kingdom of God in the tops of the mountains.

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1. The best general studies of this question are James R. Clark, "The Kingdom of God, the Council of Fifty and the State of Deseret," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 26:131-148 (April 1958); Hyrum L. Andrus, *Joseph Smith and World Government* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1958); and Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967).

2. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1967), 6:528.

3. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, England: F. D. Richards, 1854-1886), 13:85 (discourse delivered 20 June 1896). Italics added. At the time of this discourse Elder Smith was First Counselor to President Brigham Young.

4. John D. Lee, Diary, 13 January 1846, typescript, Church Archives, Historical

Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. Hereinafter cited as Church Archives.

5. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 29 May 1847; holograph, Church Archives. Spelling and punctuation corrected.

6. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ, of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 3:371–374. Roberts had originally published this as “The Mormons’ and the United States Flag,” *Improvement Era*, 25:3–7 (November). In 1931 Andrew Jenson, Assistant Church Historian, reaffirmed Roberts’ view. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 1 August 1931.

7. *Journal of Discourses* 23:86 (discourse delivered 7 April 1882). Italics added.

8. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 3:275. Italics in the original.

9. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 18 March 1910, p. 2. William C. A. Smoot had been a bishop from 1866 to 1877 after which time he had become disaffected from the Church. His remarks quoted here were a part of a speech he gave at the annual banquet of the American Party in 1910.

10. *Ibid.*, 27 March 1910, p.12. Italics added.

11. Johnson was a brother of Benjamin F. Johnson, a member of the original Council of Fifty organized in March 1844, by Joseph Smith.

12. *Journal of Discourses* 1:188 (discourse delivered 9 June 1853).

13 Italics added. Quoted in Bertha Knight Power, *William Henry Knight, California Pioneer* (New York, 1932), p. 19.

14. Don Maguire Journal, Second Narrative (July 1877, 29 June 1878), p. 21, typescript Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah . Part of this account was published in Charles Kelly and Hoffman Birney, *Holy Murder the Story of Porter Rockwell* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1934), pp. 93–94.

15. Lee Diary, 18 February 1846.

16. A published version of this flag, showing thirteen stripes, is found in Norman C. Pierce, *The 3Å Years* (Salt Lake City: [n.p.] 1963), p. 211. As early as 1855 a variation of the American flag appeared in the Church publication, *The Mormon*, published in New York City by John Taylor between 1855 and 1857. The masthead of the publication showed two flags, each having the stars arranged in a circular fashion, though scattered. The flag on the right had the word “Utah” as the center for the star configuration. The flag on the left showed one large five-pointed star in the center of the field, with twenty-four stars surrounding it in a haphazard fashion. Since there were thirty-one states in the Union in 1855, the other seven stars were apparently concealed in the folds of the flag design, or were obscured by the wing of an eagle which partly covered the flag.

17. John D. T. McAllister, Diary, 6 April 1880; Church Archives Punctuation added.