

Church Leaders in Liberty Jail

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Leonard J. Arrington

The Experience

When war between the Latter-day Saints and “the Missouri mob” seemed inevitable in October 1838, five Church officials approached the camp of General Samuel D. Lucas, commander of the Missouri Militia, under a flag of truce to negotiate a settlement. The five were Joseph Smith, President of the Church; Sidney Rigdon, member of the First Presidency; Parley P. Pratt, member of the Council of Twelve Apostles; and George W. Robinson, general Church recorder and clerk to the First Presidency. General Lucas, instead of discussing the conflict, took the occasion to place the five leaders in jail.¹ The next morning Hyrum Smith, brother of the Prophet, and Amasa Lyman, a member of the Council of Twelve, were imprisoned with them. The seven men were then sentenced by a secret court to death by a firing squad, but Alexander Doniphan, the militia officer charged with executing them, refused to do so and the prisoners were taken to Jackson County, Missouri, to await further orders. After four days in Independence the prisoners were then conducted to Richmond, Missouri, to await trial.

At the end of the Court of Inquiry in Richmond in late November of 1838, Joseph Smith and five others were sent to the jail at Liberty, Missouri, to await further trial. The five with the Prophet were Sidney Rigdon; Lyman Wight; Hyrum Smith; Alexander McRae, a large thirty-one-year-old captain of the Missouri Militia who had been active in the defense of the Saints; and Caleb Baldwin, a veteran of the War of 1812, who at forty-seven was the oldest of the prisoners.

The jail in which the group was imprisoned on 1 December 1838 was a twenty-two-foot square structure facing east. A small door led into the prison which was divided on the inside into an upper room and a lower room or “dungeon” which was lighted by two small windows grated with heavy iron bars. Each floor was about six feet high. The building was constructed of limestone rock. Inside the outer wall was another wall of hewn oak logs separated from the limestone by a twelve-inch space filled with loose rock. Thus, the two walls made a formidable structure with walls four feet thick.

The Prophet and his companions were incarcerated in this building for four-and-a-half months, during which time they were permitted visits by members of their families and friends and had the opportunity of writing and receiving letters. On two occasions the prisoners made an effort to

escape. The first attempt, on 8 February 1839, was aborted when the planned seizure of the guard who brought the evening meal was complicated by the simultaneous arrival of six Latter-day Saint men intent upon visiting the prisoners. The second attempt, on 3 March, involved boring through the jail wall by means of augers. The necessity of applying for the outside help of a friend at the last minute led to suspicions, investigations, and ultimately to discovery.

The prison fare was described in letters of the prisoners as being “so filthy we could not eat it until we were driven to it by hunger.” Yet, in this cell the Prophet wrote some of his most eloquent letters. And he and Sidney Rigdon received a revelation which is one of the most sublime in Mormon literature.

Early in April the Judge, fearing their escape, ordered their removal to Daviess County, Missouri, for trial. Prior to their departure Joseph wrote his wife Emma:

It is I believe now about five months and six days since I have been under the grimace of a guard night and day, and within the walls, grates, and screaming iron doors of a lonesome, dark, dirty prison. . . . This night we expect is the last night we shall try our weary joints and bones on our dirty straw couches in these walls. We lean on the arm of Jehovah and none else for our deliverance. . . . Thank God we shall never cast a lingering wish after liberty in Clay County, Missouri. We have enough of it to last forever.

I think of you and the children continually. . . . I want to see little Frederick, Joseph, Julia, and Alexander, Joanna and old Major [their horse]. . . . I want you should not let those little fellows forget me. Tell them Father loves them with a perfect love and he is doing all he can to get away from the mob to come to them. Do teach them all you can, that they may have good minds. Be tender and kind to them. Don't be fractious to them, but listen to their wants. Tell them Father says they must be good children and mind their mother. My dear Emma there is great responsibility resting upon you in preserving yourself in honor and sobriety before them and teaching them right things to form their young and tender minds, that they begin in right paths and not get contaminated when young by seeing ungodly examples.²

The prisoners stepped out of Liberty Jail on 6 April 1839 and arrived two days later at Gallatin, where their trail commenced. On 9 April the jury brought in a bill for “murder, treason, burglary, arson, larceny, theft, and stealing,” but the prisoners secured a change of venue. As they were traveling to the new location at Boone County, they were invited by the sheriff to escape while the judge and guards slept. This the prisoners did, and after “much fatigue and hunger” they reached their friends and well-wishers in Quinsy, Illinois, on 22 April 1839.

Significance of the Experience

The Missouri imprisonment of Joseph Smith and his associates, unjust and insufferable as it was, is particularly important for the Church because

of the opportunity it offered the Prophet for personal evaluation and organizational planning. The staunch loyalty and close personal attachment of his followers insured that the jail experience did not remove the Prophet from the active direction of the Church. There was no tendency to forget him or go on without him.

The Liberty Jail experience also gave the Prophet time for prayer and contemplation. A perusal of Joseph's journal suggests how very busy he must have been—traveling from one appointment to another, meeting innumerable converts, spending time with curious visitors, counseling members, organizing branches, and directing the affairs of the Church. The Prophet enjoyed people and was always with them whether at home, at his office, or traveling. Add to this the vexatious lawsuits, the treachery and disloyalty of trusted associates, and the frequent forced removals, and it becomes evident that the Prophet seldom found time for relaxation and study. Biblical prophets were wont to go into the wilderness for periods of meditation and communion. Whenever possible, Joseph took advantage of moments of solitude to meditate and reflect in whatever "wilderness" was available to him. For example, in 1832, when the buggy in which they were riding rolled over, breaking the leg of Joseph's companion, Newel K. Whitney, the Prophet was forced to stay in Greenville, Illinois, several weeks. At that time he confided to his wife, "I have visited a grove which is just back of the town almost every day where I can be secluded from the eyes of any mortal and there give vent to all the feelings of my heart in meditation and prayer."³

Do we dare regard Liberty Jail as another "wilderness" for the Prophet—a haven for contemplation and reflection? With few visitors, and with drab and depressing surroundings, the principal escape for Joseph and his companions during their confinement was into their own minds and hearts. Here the Prophet had uninterrupted time to think out the wider implications of the Latter-day movement. The Liberty Jail experience gave him time to ponder his course, to synthesize ideas, to formulate goals, and to communicate in an unhurried manner with the Lord. The literature which comes out of the Missouri imprisonment—the revelations, letters, diary entries—is magnificent, exalting, and eloquent. Here is found sublime poetry and evidence of that mystical communion which made Joseph Smith a Prophet.

The prison experience of these men had a profound effect on their subsequent lives. Consider the following examples: The writings of Parley P. Pratt during his confinement include a history of his life and imprisonment and many items of poetry. Sidney Rigdon's defense in his own trial before Judge Austin King in January 1839 was so eloquent that an estimated one hundred "Mormon eaters" who had gathered to do him injury "were moved to tears." Upon the conclusion of his defense, the crowd

spontaneously raised \$100 for his benefit.⁴ Lyman Wight, speaking in justification of his colonization efforts in Texas, wrote to Wilford Woodruff in 1857 that “the mission I am now on . . . I received of the prophet of God, and . . . such a mission was even talked of while in jail where I had the advantage of six months teaching and received many things . . . yet unknown to the church. . . . Joseph blessed me many times while in jail and prophesied much on my head and gave me much good instruction which is long to be remembered.”⁵ While visiting the Prophet in Liberty Jail, George A Smith, a cousin, received his call to the apostleship, and Brigham Young and others received instructions preparatory to organizing the exodus of Saints from Missouri to Illinois.

The Missouri prison experience opens a window into the personality and character of Joseph Smith that is not readily observed from most writings attributed to him. Joseph has been variously portrayed as a deceiver, religious fanatic, businessman, politician, military leader, empire builder, and theologian. The Missouri jail experiences underline his spirituality and tend to substantiate the religious claims of his early years.

Unquestionably, the quality that most of his followers saw in him was his acute sensitivity to the Divine and his tender and affectionate sympathies toward people. His mother said that Joseph was “far more given to meditation and deep study” than others of his age.⁶ In a blessing bestowed upon him by his father, Joseph was told that “the Lord thy God has called thee by name out of the heavens: thou hast heard his voice from on high from time to time, even in thy youth . . . thou hast sought to know his ways and from thy childhood thou hast meditated much upon the great things of his law.”⁷ Joseph Lee Robinson observed of the Prophet that there was “a power and majesty that attends his words and preaching that we never beheld in any man before for he is a mighty prophet, a holy man of God.”⁸ John Bernhisel, who lived in Joseph’s home, noted that he was possessed of “a mind of a contemplative and reflective character . . . and as free from dissimulation as any man to be found. But it is in the gentle charities of domestic life, as the tender and affectionate husband and parent, the warm and sympathising friend, that the prominent traits of his character are revealed, and his heart is felt to be keenly alive to the kindest and softest emotions of which human nature is susceptible.”⁹

The writings produced by Joseph Smith during his Missouri confinement contain unforgettable literary images and furnish dramatic evidence of the sensitive personality—the innate spirituality—of Joseph Smith. They include four letters written in his own hand to his wife, Emma, and a long letter to the Church of 20 March to 25 March 1839, part of which is published as Sections 121, 122, and 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

Section 121 begins as a prayer in which the Lord is petitioned to take need of the oppressions and sufferings of his people and to avenge them of their wrongs. Joseph is told to endure patiently—"thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment" (verse 7). The letter also contains the lofty principle that the "rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and . . . the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only [except] upon the principles of righteousness" (verse 36).

Section 122 contains consoling words in an hour of despair:

If thou art called to pass through tribulation; if thou art in perils among false brethren; if thou art in perils among robbers; if thou art in perils by land or sea; . . . And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and . . . if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. The Son of Man hath descended below them all" (verses 5, 7-8).

The Liberty Jail imprisonment was a time of testing for Joseph Smith and for the Church. We do well to remember it on this auspicious occasion.

Much of this report is based upon an article by Dean Jessee, "Experiences of Mormon Leaders in the Jails of Missouri, 1838-1839," forthcoming in *The Missouri Historical Review*.

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1. Note the status of judicial rights in the 1830's. Little attention was paid to the rights of the accused, and there was seldom opportunity for habeas corpus proceedings. If one was regarded as a troublemaker, officers simply threw him behind bars. Few officers would have given any thought to prompting a prisoner on his constitutional rights.

2. Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 4 April 1839, Yale University. (Punctuation supplied and spelling corrected.)

3. Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 6 June 1832, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois. The complete letter is reproduced in *BYU Studies* 11 (Summer 1971): 517-23.

4. See F. Mark McKiernan, *The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness: Sidney Rigdon, Religious Reformer* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1971), pp. 98-99.

5. Lyman Wight to Wilford Woodruff, 24 August 1857, Historical Department of the Church, Salt Lake City. (Hereafter designated as HDC.)

6. "The History of Lucy Smith, Mother of the Prophet," HDC, pp. 86-87.

7. "The Book of Patriarchal Blessings, 1834," HDC, p. 3.

8. Joseph Lee Robinson, "Reminiscence and Diary," HDC, p. 22.

9. John M. Bernhisel to Thomas Ford, 14 June 1844, HDC.