

Joseph Smith and the West

by Hyrum L. Andrus

BYU Studies, Vols 1-2 (1959-1960) pgs 129-147
All rights reserved

"I did not devise the great scheme of the Lord's opening the way to send this people to these mountains. Joseph Smith contemplated the move for years before it took place, but he could not get here."¹ So spoke Brigham Young of the Prophet Joseph Smith's vision of the West, a vision that occupied the Mormon leader's mind as early as 1830. Before Joseph Smith moved Church headquarters from New York to Ohio, he declared that the Saints would colonize the West as part of the work of building up the New Jerusalem.

The Mormon view of colonizing the West was directly correlated with the effort the Saints made to build their New Jerusalem. While the *Book of Mormon* revealed that the city of Zion was to be established upon the western hemisphere,² the precise location of the New Jerusalem was not immediately made known. In September, 1830, a Revelation declared that it would "be on the border by the Lamanites"--the western border of the United States, near Indian Territory.³ That same Revelation spoke of certain brethren going on a mission among the Indians, or Lamanites. When this mission--consisting of Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Peter Whitmer, Jr., and Richard Ziba Peterson--started westward from Fayette, New York, the following month, they went to preach the Gospel and to "rear up a pillar as a witness where the temple of God shall be built, in the glorious New Jerusalem."⁴

The Lamanite Mission had more success among certain sympathetic sectarians in Ohio than among the Indians, and several people in the vicinity of Kirtland were converted. Among them was

Sidney Rigdon, who, after his conversion, went to see Joseph Smith, in New York. Upon Rigdon's arrival with the details of the conversion that had occurred, the Prophet sent John Whitmer to preside over the new churches in Ohio. In a letter of introduction, Sidney Rigdon also wrote to his fellow converts of the extensive area the Saints would occupy when the New Jerusalem was established; and at the same time, he turned their thoughts toward the West when he said, "The Lord has made known unto us some of the great things which he has laid up for those that love him, among which the fact, a glory of wonders it is, that you are living on the land of promise and that there (at Kirtland) is the place of gathering *and from that place to the Pacific Ocean he has given it to us and our children.*"⁵

The *Painesville Telegraph*, Painesville, Ohio, January 18, 1831, gave an early commentary on the Prophet's vision of the West, as it reported John Whitmer's arrival in that area, stating, "The more important part of the mission was to inform the brethren that the boundaries of the promised land, or the New Jerusalem, had just been made known to Smith from God--the township of Kirtland, a few miles west of this is the eastern line *and the Pacific Ocean is the western line*; if the north and south lines have been described, we have not learned them."⁶ A Revelation in March, 1831, also expressed Mormonism's westward view when it declared:

Before the great day of the Lord shall come, Jacob [i.e. latter-day Israel, including the Latter-day Saints] shall flourish *in the wilderness* [i.e. in barren places] and the Lamanites shall blossom as the rose. *Zion shall flourish upon the hills and rejoice upon the mountain*, and shall be assembled together unto the place which I have appointed.⁷

In January, 1831, another Revelation likewise declared that Zion was to "rejoice upon the hills and flourish";⁸ and yet another stated: "I, the Lord, have made my church in these last days like a judge sitting on a hill, or in a high place, to judge the nations."⁹ According to Wilford Woodruff, the Prophet made his own commentary on the eventual colonization of the Rocky Mountain area by the Saints, April 26, 1834, when he declared to a group in Kirtland, Ohio:

I want to say to you before the Lord, that you know no more concerning the destinies of this Church and Kingdom than a babe upon its mother's lap. You don't comprehend it. It is only a little handful of Priesthood you see here tonight, but this Church will fill North and South America--it will fill the world. It will fill the Rocky Mountains. There will be tens of thousands of Latter-day Saints who will be gathered in the Rocky Mountains and there they will open the door for the establishing of the Gospel among the Lamanites. . . This people will go into the Rocky Mountains; they will there build temples to the Most High. They will raise up a posterity there, and the Latter-day Saints who dwell in these mountains will stand in the flesh until the coming of the Son of Man. The Son of Man will come to them while in the Rocky Mountains.¹⁰

The vision of the West continued to fill the mind of the Prophet and his associates. In April, 1836, Erastus Snow was given a blessing "predicting that he should yet be employed in the ministry west of the Rocky Mountains, and should there perform a good work in teaching and leading the Lamanites west of the Rocky Mountains."¹¹ Lorenzo Dow Young also received a blessing that same year under the hands of Hyrum Smith and others, of which he said:

Brother Hyrum Smith led, The Spirit rested mightily upon, him and he was full of blessing and prophecy. He said that I should regain my health, live to go with the Saints into the bosom of the Rocky Mountains to build up a place there.¹²

From the time the Saints were driven from Missouri, Joseph Smith began laying plans for a great Exodus to the Rocky Mountains. This fact is evident from a statement made by Luman Shurtliff, as he entered the Great Basin in 1851:

We got into the Salt Lake Valley, September 23, 1851, thankful to the God of Heaven that I and my family were in the valley of the Rocky Mountains--here where the Prophet Joseph Smith had said thirteen years before

[in 1838] that the Saints would go if the government did not put a stop to the mobbing and the persecuting of them.¹³

In a public meeting, April 26, 1846, as the Exodus got underway, Orson Pratt referred to the Prophet's early plans to organize a pioneer company to explore the West and find a location for the Saints: