

## Mountain Meadows Massacre (by Special Request)

[Corporate PR vs. Moral Obligations of a Church](#)

[What is the Mountain Meadows Massacre?](#) Ep. 77

(6:17)

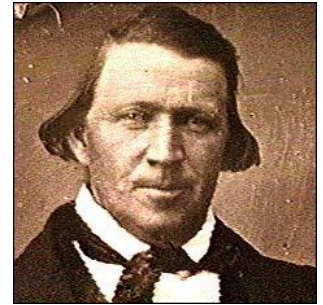
[Was Brigham Young involved in the Mountain Meadows Massacre?](#) Ep. 78

(6:08)

[The Excommunication Weapon](#) Silencing Dissent in the Name of God! An Ex-Mormon Informant. (12:49)

Outside of the Oklahoma City bombing, the greatest terrorist act of American against American was planned and directed by the highest Mormon Church officers of Southern Utah in 1857 in which fifty-five loyal Mormons, and Indians organized by them, slaughtered 120 men, women, and children, the only ones spared being the youngest children. “Mountain Meadows could only be understood by realizing that it was the culmination of an attitude that had sponsored many lesser events of violence.<sup>1</sup> The horror of the massacre effectively stopped further practice of ‘blood atonement’.”<sup>2</sup>

While they admit his part in the affair, family members of John D. Lee resent that he bore alone the shame that should be shared by others, and that Mormon history named him as the only one responsible. The Stake Presidency and High Council at Cedar City were not prosecuted. John D. Lee was executed at the tragic site twenty years later in 1877. “Seven years after the execution of Lee ... Charles W. Penrose wrote the account which came to be the accepted story of the church, his whole purpose being to clear the name of Brigham Young from any implications of guilt.”<sup>3</sup> However, Brigham Young and [Apostle] George A. Smith were the church authorities chiefly responsible for preaching the sermons and setting up the social conditions which made it possible. It is



Brigham Young

unknown whether Brigham Young ordered the massacre given the extent of Mormon prevarication. John D Lee thought Young had ordered it when he acted. However, it is well known Brigham Young was accessory after the fact, he knew what had happened, and how it happened. “Evidence of this is abundant and unmistakable, and from the most impeccable Mormon sources. ... Church leaders decided to sacrifice Lee only when they could see that it would be impossible to acquit him without assuming part of the responsibility themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

“Since that time a number of reputable Mormon scholars have begun research on the subject, only to be turned away from it ... Two of these men have said that they discontinued because they were ‘counseled’ with such vigor to leave it alone that they felt sure that to continue would cost them not only their positions in church schools, but their membership in the church itself. As late as 1929 ... another Utah writer introduced the subject of the massacre by paraphrasing the comment of B. H. Roberts that members of the church ‘have been slow to admit all the facts of the case and unwilling to fix the responsibility for the crime upon those individuals of their own faith who shared in the participation of the tragedy,’ ...”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Historian Barbara Brown Jones [interview](#) [△](#) by John Dehlin. She cowrote "[Vengeance is Mine](#)" with Richard Turley. Barbara puts down rumors about the Mountain Meadows Massacre and why it started and discusses who was to blame for it and who was not.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel W. Taylor, [Rocky Mountain Empire](#), 1978, 27

<sup>3</sup> Juanita Brooks, [The Mountain Meadows Massacre](#), New Edition 1962, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, ISBN: 0-8061-0549-6, 216 -7

<sup>4</sup> Brooks, [Mountain](#), 216, 19

<sup>5</sup> Brooks, [Mountain](#), 216

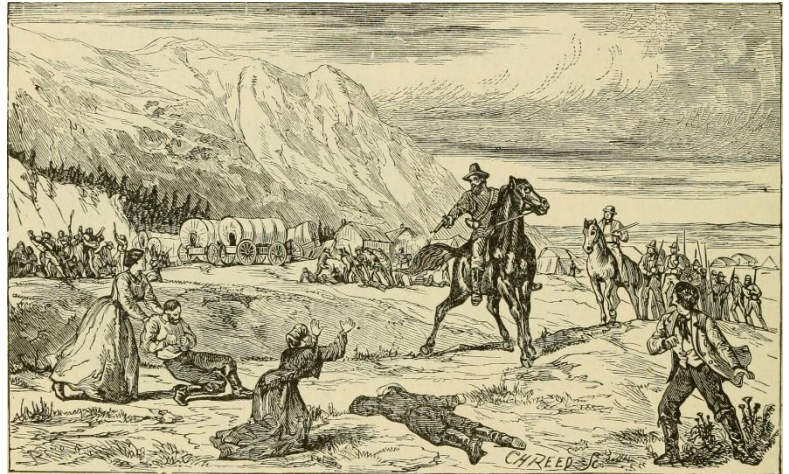


Joseph Fielding Smith

The story that I was taught in the 1950's and then myself taught as a missionary in the 1960's is presented in *Essentials in Church History*, by Joseph Fielding Smith. "In the 1945 edition, Smith devotes one chapter to the massacre, in which, without mentioning names, he can hardly find language strong enough or words vigorous enough to condemn the participants. ... it was the crime of an individual, the crime of a fanatic of the worst stamp. Yet in the collections of the historian's office of the Latter-day Saints church, records of which he is the custodian, there is ample evidence that this was definitely *not* the crime of a single individual, nor the responsibility of only one man. Even the most superficial research would show the utter ridiculousness of such a statement."<sup>6</sup>

*The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1992, continues the deception by omission, "pertinent information that could be embarrassing to the church is carefully omitted - as, for instance, ... local Southern Utah officials' involvement in planning the Mountain Meadows Massacre, ..."<sup>7</sup>

The deceit continued in ceremonies at Mountain Meadows on Sept 11, 1999 attended by descendants both of the slain emigrants and of local Mormons who did the killings. Church President Hinckley specified "No one can explain what happened in these meadows 142 years ago"



and "That which we have done here [dedicating the rebuilt monument] must never be construed as an acknowledgement ... of any complicity in the occurrences of that fateful and tragic day."<sup>8</sup> Whom should history hold responsible? "Well I would place blame on the local people," said Hinckley in a subsequent interview to the Salt Lake Tribune, Feb 23.

<sup>9</sup> In his speech the church leader did not explain the power of promised celestial rewards for obedience to the covenants and oaths of the Temple, particularly, the Law of Obedience and at that time, the covenant to *avenge the blood of the prophets* (Joseph Smith's). Given that the covenant of vengeance is no longer sacred by way of its removal from the Temple ceremony, the president needs no longer honor its accompanying oath of secrecy, thereby, removing his embarrassing necessity to feign prophetic ignorance about the power Temple covenants give church leaders.



Gordon B. Hinckley

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, *Mountain*, 217

<sup>7</sup> Sterling M. McMurrin, "Toward Intellectual Anarchy", *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 26 No 2, Summer 1993, 209 - 10

<sup>8</sup> John L. Hart, "Let the Book of the Past Be Closed," *Church News*, 18 Sept. 1999, 3,8

as Quoted in "By Common Consent", [News Letter of the Mormon Alliance, Vol. 5, No. 4, September 1999](#)

<sup>9</sup> Writings of John D. Lee: Including His Autobiography, Eyewitness Accounts of That Important Event in Mormon History, the Mountain Meadows Mass Hardcover – Illustrated, 1 Jan. 2002, by Samuel Nyal Henrie (Editor)

Temple covenants empowered church leaders to command Obedience when guiding Priesthood holders into murdering 120 men, women, and children, unchecked by individual conscience.<sup>10</sup>

Hinckley's silence put responsibility on church members alone (and Indians who the Church falsely blamed) without the Church leadership accepting responsibility for its teachings, for the authoritarian rule of Brigham Young, for the mind-numbing emphasis on obedience. I think President Hinckley is loath to search for explanation because that search inevitably leads to a revolutionary criticism of

Mormon authoritarian power, to which his predecessors, Church Educational System (CES) employees at BYU, and the Quorum of Twelve advising his presidency are committed to preserving.

A key piece of undisclosed information is that at the time of the Francker Arkansas Wagon Train departure going South from SLC to California, the body of murdered Apostle (killed in Arkansas) arrived in SLC. This **unrelated coincidence appears to be a terrible misfortune** for the Francker wagon train. Here is the timeline:

### 1. Parley P. Pratt's Murder (Arkansas, May 13, 1857)

- Pratt, an LDS apostle, was killed in Arkansas by Hector McLean, the estranged husband of a woman Pratt had married polygamously.
- His killing was widely publicized in Mormon settlements, and leaders framed it as the martyrdom of an apostle at the hands of violent outsiders.
- Sermons in Utah that summer linked Pratt's death to ongoing anti-Mormon persecution, and some invoked the *Oath of Vengeance*, temple language promising to pray and work for the avenging of the blood of the prophets (Joseph, Hyrum, and now Parley).

### 2. Timing of the Francker Party's Arrival in Utah

- The Francker–Baker train entered Utah Territory in August 1857, traveling south toward California.
- Around the same time, **Pratt's body arrived in Salt Lake City for burial**, where it was met with large crowds, solemn ceremony, and fiery rhetoric about avenging the prophet's blood.
- Turley, Bagley, Denton, and Brooks all note that Pratt's killing became a potent rallying symbol during the **Mormon Reformation**, when leaders were preaching obedience, loyalty, and vengeance in unusually stark terms.

### 3. Perception of the Francker Party

- Though the emigrants were not from Arkansas exclusively, word spread, likely from rumor and suspicion, that some in the train might be connected to Pratt's killers or were "Missourians" responsible for earlier Mormon persecution.
- In Cedar City, these rumors merged with existing political tension (Utah War, fear of invasion by Johnston's Army) and religious fervor, making the Francker train a symbolically charged "enemy" in the minds of some local leaders.

John Doyle Lee lived a life of heroic proportions. He was a leader of uncommon energy and courage in a movement that helped shape the western United States. Brigham Young is reported to have said that Lee was the most competent frontiersman and settler that he had ever known. On a human scale, Lee was considered by most of those who knew him to be an intelligent, kind and even tender-hearted man who shared his food, shelter, knowledge and respect with everyone who needed it. He was a friend and teacher to the Indian tribes. He was a polygamist who married nineteen wives and fathered sixty-five children. But Lee's life ended in tragedy, as he took the blame for one of the most infamous atrocities of frontier history, the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857. Hounded into exile in the remote Grand Canyon and Navajo Country, he built and operated Lee's Ferry and Lee's Lonely Dell, now an historic monument. Eventually, he was arrested, imprisoned and brought to trial in federal courts twice, convicted, and executed by firing squad on the very site of the Massacre, on March 23, 1877.

---

<sup>10</sup> Richard E Turley, sanitized the psychological and religious landscape in which the massacre occurred. In his two books about the Massacre. He [omitted the influence](#) of the Temple Oath of Vengeance, the Temple Law of Obedience, and the legacy of the Danites (who operated under oaths of secrecy and violent loyalty). Turley did so despite the fact that many massacre participants were endowed members, and John D. Lee himself was a known Danite

- As Juanita Brooks noted, it was a “perfect storm” of timing, rhetoric, and rumor, not a rational military or political threat.

#### 4. Why This Was Likely a “Terrible Misfortune” for the Fancher Train

- Pratt’s martyrdom had been freshly memorialized.
- Local militia and church leaders had been preaching retribution and loyalty in a climate of siege mentality.
- The arrival of a southern-bound emigrant train, rumored to include Arkansas or Missouri persecutors, became a lightning rod for vengeance rhetoric.
- Under the temple Law of Obedience and (then-active) Oath of Vengeance, some leaders likely saw violence against the emigrants as righteous retaliation, even though the actual travelers had no role in Pratt’s murder.

Church historians know that between John D. Lee’s conviction and his execution, Lee’s defense attorney, W.W. Bishop, persuaded Lee to give an account in his own words. Mr. Bishop took the confession out of Utah to be published in a book and “Entered according to act of Congress, in the year 1877, by Bryan, Brand & Co., in the office of the Librarian of Congress, at Washington.”<sup>11</sup> Lee’s confession revealed that he was acting under the direction of the Stake President and High Council at Cedar City, Utah, near Mountain Meadows. Lee believed the Stake President and High Council acted at the direction of Brigham Young. No one above Lee was prosecuted.



The last photo of John D. Lee (64) here pictured at left sitting on his coffin as his firing squad assembles; 3/23/1877. Lee reportedly called the photographer over and asked him to be sure and send a couple prints to his “two favorite wives.” Of his 19 wives, only Caroline, Emma and Rachel stayed with him to the end. Lee fathered 56 Children.

Below is a Comparative Brief of Turley to other historians showing how each treats Brigham Young’s role, blood atonement, temple oaths, and the “obedience gone wrong” thesis. This contrast should make clear why Bagley and others engages directly with theological causation while Turley avoids it.

Lee’s autobiography *Mormonism Unveiled* clearly indicates that Lee believed Brigham Young was involved. That Brigham Young sent General George A. Smith with instructions tied to the massacre.

Juanita Brooks *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (1950; revised 1962) concluded that Brigham Young did not directly order the massacre, but his rhetoric, policies, and chain of command created the climate that enabled it. She points out that Brigham Young’s militant sermons during the Mormon Reformation, and his instructions to southern leaders to “**let none go to California**” **without permission**, were susceptible to interpretation by local leaders, Isaac C. Haight and William H. Dame that they acted according to what they believed Young’s policy allowed.

Will Bagley in *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (2002) argues more forcefully that Young’s rhetoric and policies functioned as indirect orders and that the massacre was “a tragedy set in motion by Brigham Young himself. Bagley’s Evidence is Young’s August 1857 meeting with George A. Smith before Smith’s southern Utah tour and George A. Smith’s conversations with militia leaders, warning of imminent war and instructing them to stockpile grain and **prevent emigration to California**. Bagley treats

<sup>11</sup> [Mormonism Unveiled: Or the Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop, John D. Lee](#), St. Louis: Bryan, Brand & Company, New York: W. H. Stelle & Co., 1877

**Lee's claims** about Young sending Smith with instructions as **credible and consistent** with other circumstantial evidence.

Sally Denton in *American Massacre* (2003) is strongly critical of LDS leadership, arguing that Young was morally and politically responsible. She accepts Lee's account in *Mormonism Unveiled* as consistent with the context of the Mormon Reformation and with Brigham Young's known political aims. She sees the massacre as a product of **"obedience to theocratic authority"** and **temple oaths (including the Oath of Vengeance)**.

However, as a Temple Endowed Church member, Richard E. Turley has Covenanted not to discuss outside the Temple what goes on inside it which includes the ongoing Law of Obedience. This means he cannot both keep his Covenants and perform in his role objectively as a historian because the Covenant of Obedience to which he has secretly sworn allegiance, and has not renounced, is at issue.

### 1. Turley's Position as a Temple-Endowed, Covenant-Bound Member

The Law of Obedience is still present in the LDS temple endowment and requires loyalty to "the Lord, through His servants," in practice, interpreted as obedience to Church leadership.

For an endowed member, especially one who has not renounced or broken that covenant, this creates a binding moral, spiritual, and social commitment to avoid public criticism of Church leaders (past and present) or disclosure of temple content.

Turley's long service as a senior Church employee, in the Church History Department, as Assistant Church Historian, and later in Public Affairs, adds an institutional loyalty component to the religious one.

### 2. Conflict With the Role of an Objective Historian

The central historical question I am posing, how could the conscience of a religious people be given over to "obedience gone wrong," directly implicates the Law of Obedience, the Oath of Vengeance (in force in 1857), and Brigham Young's blood atonement rhetoric.

If Turley believes he is bound by his temple covenants, he will have strong personal and religious reasons to avoid probing these doctrines in a way that might appear disloyal or disclose secret Temple content.

This explains the consistent omission of theological causation from all three of his major MMM works:

- Encyclopedia of Mormonism entry (1992)
- Massacre at Mountain Meadows (2008)
- Vengeance Is Mine (2023)

### 3. Why the Omission Is Significant

Will Bagley, Sally Denton, and even Juanita Brooks acknowledge the role of temple oaths and blood atonement rhetoric in fostering the kind of obedience that enabled the massacre.

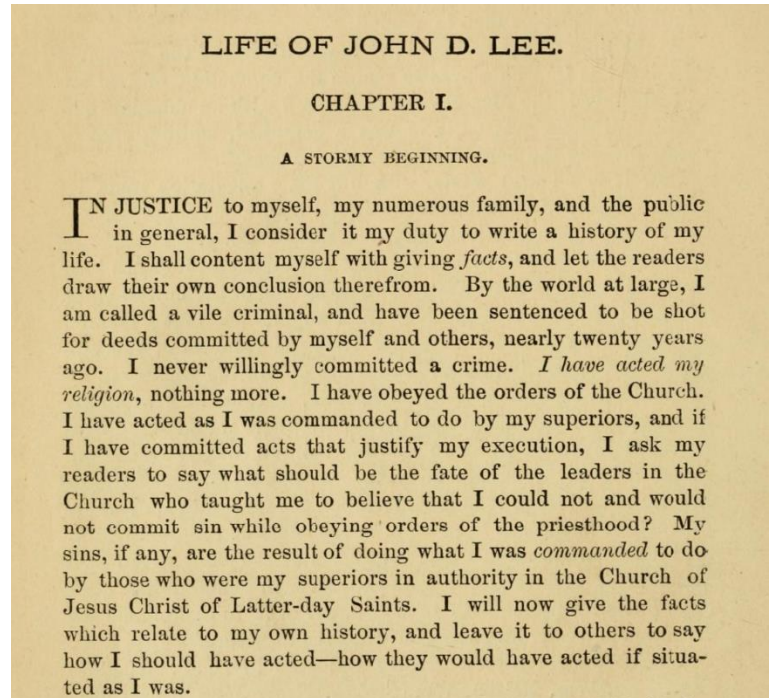
Turley's work instead frames the massacre within political, military, and local leadership contexts, leaving unexamined the doctrinal and ritual conditioning that my own experience and analysis identify as central.

In research ethics, this is a conflict of interest: when an investigator's professional, financial, or personal commitments could bias their interpretation or limit their scope of inquiry.

On the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary Sept 11, 2007 at the Mountain Meadows site, Church Apostle Henry Eyring acknowledged for the first time that local Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints *leaders*<sup>12</sup> directed the Massacre. He apologized to the Paiute Indian people whom the church has always blamed.

Most relevant today is to note that of fifty-five Mormons at the scene of the Massacre, only one reportedly had the strength of character to leave before the killing began<sup>13</sup>. John D. Lee's autobiographical account expresses his sense of conscience that preparations for the killing were dishonorable and wrong.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Lee did not act on that conscience. Like in today's church, the excesses of Brigham Young and the power of the priesthood chain of command cannot be publicly challenged as a matter of conscience without threat of excommunication (or worse in those days<sup>15</sup>). Only obedience is tolerated.

Church Temple Presidents and their superiors do not discuss publicly the former Temple covenant to avenge the blood of the prophets that existed at the time of the massacre. Neither do they discuss publicly the church Law of Obedience, both of which I think help to explain how the local Stake President, High Council, and Bishop (some holding concurrent militia and church offices) could organize fifty-five otherwise law-abiding church members to go against the Francher wagon train. Even the church history taught to me a hundred years afterward still reported the rumor of Missourians, murders, persecutors of the church<sup>16</sup> as among the emigrants. However, the "crime of Obedience" at Mountain Meadows illustrates by extension to the extreme, the moral emptiness inherent in the church Law of Obedience that is still promised in the Temple by devout Mormons.



Why does this matter? If you're trying to understand why 55 otherwise ordinary Mormon men would commit one of the most horrifying massacres in American history — you'd want to understand the deep psychological and theological drivers behind their obedience and silence. However, all Mormon historians<sup>17</sup> have covenanted to Secrecy, including Richard E Turley who in his two (2) recent books, sanitized why the massacre occurred by failing to look within the religion itself, then and now, for how Obedience could go so wrong:

- Temple Covenants (Obedience, Sacrifice, Vengeance)
- Blood atonement.
- Parley P. Pratt's murder in Arkansas for stealing another man's wife.
- [Danite oaths](#)

<sup>12</sup> First Presidency's Mountain Meadows Massacre anniversary [statement](#), Salt Lake Tribune, Sept 11, 2007

<sup>13</sup> Brooks, [Mountain](#), 90

<sup>14</sup> John D. Lee, [Mormonism Unveiled; or the Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop John D. Lee](#), 1877, 228-9, 233-5

<sup>15</sup> J.H. Beadle, [Brigham's Destroying Angel: Life, Confession, and startling disclosures of the notorious Bill Hickman, the Danite Chief of Utah.](#), 1904

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, [Essentials in Church History](#), Deseret Book Co for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 19<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1964, 513

<sup>17</sup> 2025-04-06-Meetup - [The Full Invitation with extended comments](#) , The ad hominem fallacy

- Secretive religious discipline

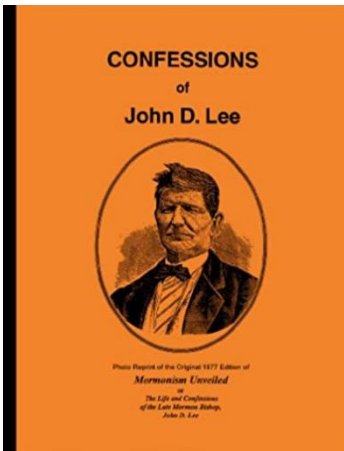
Notice in John D Lee's confession below, the absence of any reflection upon the immorality of the murder(s), which he replaces with the highest principles of the Temple, loyal Obedience and the Oath of Vengeance he was taught in the Temple and as a Danite:

“I have never willingly committed a crime. *I have acted my religion*, nothing more. I have obeyed the orders of the Church. I have acted as I was commanded to do by my superiors ... who taught me that I could not and would not commit sin while obeying the orders of the priesthood?”<sup>18</sup>

What are the implications about a religion that recommends distrusting one's own self or one's own conscience, but instead to trust and to rely solely on one's church and its leaders? This question has profound implications for any religious belief system.

If a religion teaches that you cannot trust your own conscience but must completely trust the Church or its Priesthood leadership, it sets up a circular logic:

- Your inner doubts are viewed as untrustworthy or even sinful.
- Your inner convictions are only valid if they align with church teachings.
- Therefore, the church becomes the only arbiter of truth, even over your own moral compass.



Slaves obey. It was Obedient church members, whose lives were conditioned by church teachings to follow their leaders, that disciplined fifty-five Mormon men to carry out the murder of men, women, and children at Mountain Meadows. “The real protection of members lies in their own sense of empowerment, in an individual sense of duty to God rather than to the institution, and in the primacy of individual conscience.”<sup>19</sup>

However, to the present ecclesiastical establishment, the above spiritual truth is a threatening transfer of power downward from church leadership to membership. Instead, the Church continues to pour energy into the current and quite successful efforts of indoctrinating the young with threatening messages to “Follow the Brethren”.

These calls to obedience and claims that “God will never permit him [the prophet] to lead us astray”<sup>20</sup> are similar to those in Brigham Young's time. Mountain Meadows is a horrific example of mistaken obedience to priesthood leaders. I believe instead that respect and deference to the individual conscience, above obedience to church authorities, is the lesson still omitted from the official church history of Mountain Meadows.

<sup>18</sup> Mormonism Unveiled: Or the Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop, John D. Lee. St. Louis: Bryan, Brand & Company. New York: W. H. Stelle & Co., 1877, Chapter 1, p 36

<sup>19</sup> Lavina Fielding Anderson, “The September Six”, Religion, Feminism, and Freedom of Conscience, 1994, 8

<sup>20</sup> Harold B. Lee, “The place of the Living Prophet,” P 16; Living prophets for a living Church, Published for the use of college students in the church educational system, P 33

