

# **Early Mormon Exploration and Missionary Activities in Mexico**



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In 1875, a few days before the first missionaries to Mexico were to depart, Brigham Young changed his mind: rather than have them travel to California where they would take a steamer down the coast and then go by foot or horseback inland to Mexico City, Brigham asked if they would mind making the trip by horseback, going neither to California nor Mexico City, but through Arizona to the northern Mexican state of Sonora—a round trip of 3,000 miles! He instructed them to look along the way for places to settle and to determine whether the Lamanites were ready to receive the gospel.

But Brigham Young had other things in mind: the Saints might need another place of refuge, and advanced exploration was a logical course to pursue, should that need ever arise. The most promising site for such a refuge lay to the south, perhaps Mexico. Orson Pratt seemed to be aware of this possibility when he set apart the missionaries for their new labors: “I wish you to look out for places,” he told them, “where our brethren could go and be safe from harm in the event that persecution should make it necessary for them to get out of the way for a season.”<sup>1</sup>

Daniel W. Jones led the group, which included his teenage son, Wiley, Anthony W. Ivins, James Z. Stewart, and Helaman Pratt.<sup>2</sup> For ten months, the missionaries traveled on foot and on horseback, exploring the area and preaching the gospel to the Lamanites and all others along the way who would listen. The missionaries were received both with kindness and hostility. Through it all they made copious notes for Brigham Young on possible colonization sites. The most promising, they concluded, was the area around Casas Grandes in the Mexican state of Chihuahua.

Brigham was sufficiently pleased with the report from Elder Jones and his companions that within a month of their return, he called Jones to go back to the Casas Grandes region of Mexico with a colonizing company to found a settlement. When asked who should be called to accompany him, Daniel W. Jones said, “Give me men with large families and small means, so that when we get there they will be too poor to come back, and we will have to stay.”<sup>3</sup> When the arrangements were completed, Brigham’s instructions were to go to the “Southern Country” and settle “where we felt impressed to stop.”<sup>4</sup> The group decided to make their first settlement in the Salt River Valley of southern Arizona, an area Jones had explored the year

before as he and his missionary companions were on route to Mexico. Although they stopped short of Mexico, the new colonists clearly intended to push on later.

Along the Salt River, at a place the settlers designated Camp Utah, they built their cabins and attempted to set up a mission among the Maricopa Indians. In due time, some of the Indians, heeding Jones's missionary overtures, asked to live among the colonists in their settlements. However, the thought of cross-cultural contact was too shocking for some of the white families, Book of Mormon prophecies notwithstanding. Apparently only Jones could tolerate close proximity to the Indians. The colony split up over the issue before it could generate enough strength to push on into Mexico. Indeed, one faction actually petitioned the territorial authorities to drive the Indians out of the area. "It was not long until it became manifest," Jones said, "that I would have to either give up the Indians or lose my standing with the white brethren. I chose the natives."<sup>5</sup>

Despite the failures and inherent difficulties in the southern expansion, Brigham continued to call other colonists to settle in Arizona.<sup>6</sup> Yet simultaneously with the southern colonizing, he continued to send missionaries/explorers into Mexico. For although he had been pleased with Jones's 1876 report, Brigham Young apparently still felt a need for more extensive information, especially about Sonora. Because of the Yaqui wars, the first missionaries to Mexico had not been able to enter Sonora, so they had moved eastward to the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Yet only in the western Chihuahua mountains bordering the state of Sonora had the missionaries been received with open arms by the Indians who predominated in the area. But because there were also large numbers of Indians in most of Sonora, another excursion into Mexico would have to be made before Brigham could settle his mind about the country and the nature of Indians within it. In addition, Sonora had been on Brigham's mind for some time as a possible colonizing site from which missionary labors among the Indians could go forth. Lingering reports filtering down from members of the Mormon battalion who had been in Sonora during the 1846–48 Mexican-American War<sup>7</sup> apparently continued to intrigue him. And, in 1872, when Colonel Thomas L. Kane again visited Utah, he and Brigham discussed Sonora once more as an area for missionary and colonization activity,<sup>8</sup> with later correspondence emphasizing colonization.<sup>9</sup>

For several years President Young's "southern thrust" had given rise to speculation in the local and eastern press as to Mormon designs on Mexico. Indeed, virtually on the heels of Jones's 1874 call to Mexico, rumors began flying.<sup>10</sup> The gentiles in Utah Territory continued to badger the Saints on the matter. On one occasion, in a vibrant sermon at a general conference of the Church held in St. George, Utah, on 6 April 1877, an exasperated Brigham responded:

It has been the cry of late, through the columns of the newspapers, that the "Mormons" are going to Mexico! That is quite right, we calculate to go there. Are we going back to Jackson County? Yes. When? As soon as the way opens up. . . . We intend to hold our own here and also penetrate the north and the south, the east and the west . . . and to raise the ensign of truth. This is the work of God, who saw it in its incipency, as a stone cut out of the mountains without hands, but which rolled and gathered strength and magnitude until it filled the whole earth. We will continue to grow, to increase and spread abroad, and the powers of earth and hell combined cannot hinder it.<sup>11</sup>

The emphasis on missionary and colonizing activity in the South continued. Jones's colonization company had just left. Others would follow, as would additional companies of missionaries/explorers. Indeed, by September 1876, Brigham had another group of missionaries ready for the exploration of Mexico.<sup>12</sup> The new party, which included two members of the original missionaries to Chihuahua, waited until after the October general conference of the Church to begin the long journey. From the original Chihuahua missionaries were James Z. Stewart and his companion Helaman Pratt. Accompanying them were Stewart's brother Isaac, George Terry, Louis Graff, and Melitón G. Trejo (Trejo having translated selected portions of the Book of Mormon for the first missionaries to take to Mexico in 1876). After reaching Tucson, they split into two groups, Elders Pratt and Trejo proceeding south to Hermosillo, the capital of Sonora, where they proselyted for a time and baptized the first five members of the Church in Mexico. Apparently Brigham was now interested in proselyting as well as making friendly contacts and getting information. Elders Pratt and Trejo thereafter returned to their homes.

For their part, the Stewart brothers and Elders Terry and Graff entered the mountains of Sonora and attempted to proselyte the Yaqui Indians. Success among the clannish Yaquis could perhaps open the door to other Lamanites in Sonora. Proud, stalwart, and indomitable in defense of their families and territory, the Yaquis had never been conquered by the Spaniards, the French, or the Mexicans. They had permanent homes, lived in cities, and worked a rich placer gold mine, the product of which they traded for guns at Douglas, Arizona, to fight the Mexicans.<sup>13</sup> The missionary party entered Sonora with full knowledge that Yaqui guns were again engaged in war. But the missionaries' commitment to spreading the gospel among the Indians overcame their anxieties of the potential dangers. Surely, they reasoned, the Lord would extend his protecting hand.

The Yaquis detained and bound the missionaries and were about to kill them when their chief intervened. He told the elders he would spare their lives but they should leave Yaqui territory at once and not return. From the Yaqui perspective all the aliens had ever done for more than a century was despoil their women, kill and enslave their men, and leave their children

homeless and parentless, while all the time robbing Yaquis everywhere of their property. No amount of talk about Book of Mormon prophecies or the redemption of the Lamanites could break through such barriers.

The missionaries were fortunate to exit Yaqui country alive. Yet the experience demonstrates the Church's enormous commitment to take the gospel to the Indians, a commitment which constituted one of the principal reasons for the southern expansion.

With immediate dangers indelibly in mind, James Z. Stewart and his company left Yaqui country and quickly returned to the United States, moving along the border from the Tucson area to El Paso del Norte, where Stewart had been the year before with Jones.

When they got to El Paso they contacted a Mr. J. W. Campbell, who was a miller and owned a store at San Elizario, which is down the Rio Grande from El Paso a little ways. They had apparently met him the year before. Campbell was interested both in Mormonism and in colonization in Mexico. He proposed at this point, 1877, to buy a large tract of land in the eastern part of the state of Coahuila, somewhere near the Texas border. So Stewart wrote to Brigham Young making this proposition to him, but Brigham wrote back that he would prefer a site somewhat closer to the already established settlements in Arizona. Brigham died shortly thereafter, Stewart and company returned to Utah, and the matter was dropped, leaving the initiative for Mexican colonization with the Jones settlement back in Arizona.<sup>14</sup>

### **The 1879 Expedition to Mexico City**

While all these "thrusts" into northern Mexico were occurring, news of the restored gospel was creating commentary in Mexico City. Two of the Book of Mormon pamphlets the Jones party had mailed in 1876 when they were in Chihuahua fell into the hands of influential people in Mexico City who were sufficiently provoked to respond. One was the Master of Letters of nineteenth-century Mexico, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano. An Indian who had learned Spanish at age sixteen and thereafter mastered it, he was highly receptive not only to the rhetoric of the Liberals regarding the place of the Indian in Mexico's future but was also highly impressed with the Mormons' interpretation of the Indians' place in Mexico's past. Mormon eschatology regarding the future of the Indian did not go unnoticed either. Altamirano wrote a letter to Salt Lake City thanking the authorities for the book and indicating his desire to know more about the Mormon message.<sup>15</sup>

Later, whether following up Altamirano's letter or operating independently, Dr. Plotino Rhodakanaty (considered by some Mexicans to be a father of their country's socialist ideas and its agrarian and syndicalist movements as well as the generator of ideas on freedom and liberty that were direct intellectual precursors to the Mexican revolution of 1910) also began a correspondence with Mormons. Rhodakanaty, too, had received

one of the Book of Mormon pamphlets. Somehow he learned of Melitón Trejo, who at the time was living in Tres Alamos in southeastern Arizona with some of the dissident settlers from Camp Utah who had moved on when they could not accept Jones's decisions on how and where to include the Indians in their original Salt River Valley settlement. Early in 1878, while at Tres Alamos, Melitón Trejo received letters from Rhodakanaty from Mexico City<sup>16</sup> saying Rhodakanaty wanted to learn more about the Church. For a time he engaged Trejo in a series of letters over the matter. Finally, Trejo wrote to President John Taylor, who had succeeded to the Presidency of the Church after Brigham Young's death in 1877, and included some of Rhodakanaty's letters written in Spanish.<sup>17</sup>

John Taylor corresponded with Rhodakanaty and as early as autumn of 1878 sent him several publications.<sup>18</sup> Soon the authorities in Salt Lake became aware that their Mexican correspondent had gained the interest of a number of his fellow citizens regarding Mormonism. He said that between fifteen and twenty had come to believe the truths of the gospel. Rhodakanaty first requested, then virtually demanded, that he and his friends be included in the Kingdom. "We've found the gospel," he said, "and we want you to give us the Aaronic priesthood so we can begin proselyting in Mexico."<sup>19</sup> (See the letter to President John Taylor and other Church leaders from Rhodakanaty, 15 December 1878, on pp. 307–10.) A return letter from Salt Lake City informed him that such could occur only if missionaries were sent to Mexico City. Thereafter, in 1879, Rhodakanaty sent a lengthy series of letters asking for missionaries and promising a great response when they were sent.

Sending missionaries to Mexico City—an idea Brigham Young had first entertained when he called the original missionaries to Mexico—now seemed a proper response to the events of the time. Thinking highly of James Z. Stewart, who by then was a veteran in the Mexican connection and who had learned Spanish well, President Taylor called him to head south and asked Melitón Trejo to accompany him.

Whether Trejo was pleased with this new call we do not know, but his long delay in getting from southern Arizona to Salt Lake City and President Taylor's withdrawing from the scene at the time to go underground to avoid the federal marshals gave the governing Quorum of Twelve Apostles ample opportunity to rethink the matter of a new mission to Mexico. Such an important mission as this, they concluded, given the dramatic interest demonstrated in Mexico City, needed higher authority than either Stewart or Trejo held. Indeed, perhaps now the Church was on the brink of making a major breakthrough in Mexico.

Accordingly, the Quorum decided to send newly called Apostle Moses Thatcher to preside over this proselyting venture. In company with James Z.

Stewart, who joined him at Chicago, and Melitón Trejo, who joined him at New Orleans, Elder Thatcher took a steamer, crossed the Gulf of Mexico, and reached Vera Cruz on 14 November 1879. Two days later they arrived in Mexico City and, being complete strangers, lodged in the principal hotel, the Iturbide. Thereafter, not only would the missionaries meet with Rhodakanaty, baptize numerous Mexicans, and begin a branch of the Church in Mexico City, but they would also make important contacts with Mexican officials. In the troublesome years ahead, several of these would help protect the Saints in Mexico.

It took the missionaries only four days to become convinced Rhodakanaty and one of his friends should be baptized. Accordingly, on 20 November 1879 Elder Moses Thatcher baptized and confirmed Plotino C. Rhodakanaty and Silviano Arteaga members of the Church. Three days later, Elder Trejo baptized six others, and the elders confirmed them members of the Church. Four local brethren were given the priesthood, three being made elders. A branch of the Church was organized and Rhodakanaty was called to preside over it, with Silviano Arteaga and Jose Ybarola as his counselors.

At the meeting in which these ordinances were performed, Elder Thatcher earnestly invoked blessings upon Porfirio Díaz (who had taken over the presidency of Mexico as the era of *La Reforma* came to a close in 1876), upon all the legislative, judicial, and administrative personnel of the government, and upon all the inhabitants of the land that the gospel might flourish among the honest in heart throughout Mexico, Central America, and South America.

The missionaries intensified their efforts in Mexico City. By the end of 1879 they had baptized sixteen persons. Elders Trejo and Stewart made further translations of Mormon literature. Then, during January of 1880, they completed the Spanish translation of Parley P. Pratt's *A Voice of Warning* and readied it for the printer. They also wrote numerous articles for the local newspapers.

The eastern press in the United States continued its interest in the southern movements of the Mormons, speculating about the Church's ultimate intentions in Mexico. Thus the New York City *Sun* published an article about this mission to Mexico. Numerous papers in Mexico City excerpted portions from that article and made comments regarding it, most of them quite favorable. But the newspaper *Two Republics*, under the headlines "Yankee Diplomacy," "Filibusterism," and "The Spread of Mormonism," vigorously attacked the Mormon people in general and specifically the new implant in Mexico City. Through *El Tribuna*, Elder Thatcher attempted to refute the slanderous accusations made in the *Two Republics*.

The exchange through the newspapers created some interest among upper-class Mexicans and foreigners residing in Mexico City as to the



mission's intent and opened doors for further interviews between Moses Thatcher and higher Mexican authorities. As a direct consequence, interviews were secured with Foreign Minister Zarate, Minister of Public Works and Colonization Fernandez Leal, and Minister of War Carlos Pacheco. They all had been either casually or intimately acquainted with some aspect of Mormonism and cordially encouraged Elder Thatcher to bring his people to Mexico to settle. Leal, who had been a visitor to Utah and greatly admired the ingenuity of the Mormons and their prosperous communities, said Mexico would gladly welcome those choosing to make homes in the Republic.<sup>20</sup>

Because of the many interviews resulting principally from newspaper exchanges, Elder Thatcher and his companions were introduced to Emelio Biebuyck, an influential Belgian in Mexico who had been in Utah Territory three times. Personally acquainted with Brigham Young, he had enjoyed several interviews with the Church leader. Furthermore, Biebuyck had a colonization contract with the Mexican government in which the government conceded free public lands for colonization in any Mexican state. Elder Thatcher, still interested in the colonization question, soon made friends with Biebuyck, who became a warm advocate of Mormon colonization in Mexico.

Biebuyck told Thatcher that "with the Mormons in Mexico will come stable government and consequent peace and prosperity and, therefore, success to my business, and that is all I ask."<sup>21</sup> The offer seemed exciting enough. Biebuyck's colonization contract with the Mexican government not only included the concession of free public lands but also an \$80 subsidy for adults, \$40 each for children, twenty years' exemption from military duty and taxation, and free entry from tariff duty on teams, wagons, agricultural implements, building materials and provisions pending the establishment of the colony, as well as numerous other privileges.

While these stimulating conversations about colonization were occurring, the missionary efforts in Mexico City were deteriorating. Among other things, the elders were becoming disillusioned with Rhodakanaty, who was attempting to incorporate Mormons in Mexico into his brand of communal living. Before long Elder Thatcher began to agree with Daniel W. Jones's earlier conclusions that the success of missionary efforts in Mexico would ultimately depend on Mormon colonization there and the careful and judicious gathering into the colonies of native Saints for care and instruction. Quite understandably, Biebuyck's colonization offer was therefore too appealing to lose. Accordingly, scarcely two months since organizing the first branch in Mexico, Moses Thatcher determined to lay the whole matter regarding this exciting proposition before President Taylor and the Council of the Twelve Apostles and then abide by their decision.

Leaving Elder Stewart in charge, Moses Thatcher departed for Salt Lake City on 4 February 1880, arriving on 22 February. Ten days later Biebuyck, as agreed, arrived; and he and Elder Thatcher detailed to the authorities the nature and advantage of the concessions embodied in Biebuyck's contract with the Mexican government. After a lengthy discussion and with due respect to the enormous efforts expended by both Biebuyck and Apostle Thatcher to bring the matter to the attention of the Council of the Twelve, the Council nevertheless rejected Biebuyck's offer. Perhaps they remembered the cautionary note Governor Ochoa had given the Jones party four years earlier: "Be careful about offers for public lands."

Although the idea of refuge had been on many people's minds, it seems that even in 1880 the principal idea associated with colonizing in Mexico and sending out missionaries to that land was to preach the gospel to the Lamanites. Colonization was a mere vehicle to that end. Elder Thatcher wanted to create a Church environment for Mexican Saints, thereby aiding the Lord's plan. Nevertheless, President Taylor departed somewhat from the earlier considerations advanced by Brigham Young, considering colonization in Mexico for this purpose premature.

Perhaps by then the plan was of little moment in contrast to the greater anxieties confronting the Saints in Zion. The anti-polygamy crusade threatened homes and entire communities. Many Saints were fleeing to obscure retreats in Montana, Colorado, Nevada, and Arizona. While a "place of refuge" more than crossed the mind of Brigham in earlier years, that thought apparently did not occur to his successors. With pressures building up everywhere, it seemed the idea of colonization in Mexico would have to wait for a resolution of the crisis at home.<sup>22</sup> The crisis was severe: George Q. Cannon, Utah's territorial delegate to Washington, was quoted in an interview with the New York City *Sun* as saying that Mormons "cannot move to any part of the territory of the United States, and they may be compelled either to abandon one feature of their religion or to fight."<sup>23</sup>

While Moses Thatcher was in Salt Lake City presenting a case with firm offers of land for colonization in Mexico, Elders Trejo and Stewart remained in Mexico City and continued their missionary labors. They completed a more extensive translation of the Book of Mormon and also began to move their proselyting activities to the villages surrounding Mexico City. In particular they focused their attention on Ozumba, where they met with some success in their missionary endeavors. Nevertheless, the results in general were very discouraging. Perhaps it was for this reason that Melitón Trejo departed from Mexico City in May of 1880 for his home in Arizona, leaving Elder Stewart as the sole missionary from the Mormon settlements in Utah and Arizona. His plan rejected by the Council of the

Twelve, Moses Thatcher returned to his labors in Mexico in December 1880, accompanied by Feramorz L. Young.

If the idea of colonization for spreading the gospel were not to be implemented, then other means would have to be employed. Yet there was no hiding the fact that Moses Thatcher was pessimistic about the prospects. No doubt one reason for his pessimism was that Rhodakanaty, having been educated in the philosophy of nineteenth-century Utopian socialists, was intent on setting up a Mormon "united order." Indeed, communitarianism was one aspect of Mormonism that had so attracted him to the Church.<sup>24</sup> In Rhodakanaty's mind it seemed apparent that the gospel was to serve communitarianism, not communitarianism the ends of the gospel. When he could not persuade Elder Thatcher to his point of view, Rhodakanaty dropped out of the Church. For the same reasons, most of the converts the elders had already baptized dropped out. But Moses Thatcher would not be swayed, and by 1881 Rhodakanaty was writing articles in socialist newspapers in Mexico City against the Church.<sup>25</sup>

Seeing their original flock dwindle away over the issue of communitarianism, Elders Thatcher, Stewart, and Young turned their attention to proselyting other Mexicans. But the era of *La Reforma* had ended and with it the period of turmoil during the closing months of 1876, which had been rather advantageous for the missionaries. The entrance of the rebel army of Porfirio Díaz into Mexico City had established order, albeit order by the gun and the sword, but the kind of order that encouraged a revival of tradition in Mexico. Thus the Catholic church, in the large cities at least, began to enjoy an ascendancy.

In 1880 Moses Thatcher became increasingly convinced the city people of Mexico were so firmly in the grasp of socio-religious aspects of traditional Mexico that it would be virtually useless for the elders to attempt to make headway among them. The people, he concluded, were certainly held if not in the grip of the Catholic church, then in the web of the culture's social relations associated with Catholic tradition. Only the Protestant missionaries seemed to have any success,<sup>26</sup> and that only because they were buying their converts with perquisites and stipends. The Mormon missionaries were not about to do that. Also, the Protestant missionaries even gave their tracts away. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Mormon elders could hardly sell their translated literature for enough to cover publishing costs, although in some way they did distribute thousands of copies.<sup>27</sup> Responding to a complaint on this matter, President Taylor wrote to the missionaries instructing them to keep trying to sell their literature for whatever few pennies they might bring in.

Faced with such discouraging events, the elders more and more began to think about the "Indians" and peasants in the small villages surrounding

Mexico City. Elder Jones and his companions had found the honest in heart in Guerrero and environs, not in Chihuahua City or El Paso del Norte. The Protestant missionaries seemed to have concluded as much, for they had moved into the outskirts of Mexico City. So the elders renewed their efforts in nearby quiet agricultural villages such as Ozumba. In Ozumba, members of lasting significance to the Church were converted (for example, the Páez family). But Elder Thatcher continued to be somewhat pessimistic about the whole enterprise. More and more he became convinced that Daniel W. Jones must have been correct—that the only hope for a mission in Mexico lay in having a group of Anglo-Saxon Saints nearby to help uplift the Mexicans.<sup>28</sup>

Mormons, frantically almost, had pursued the expansion of their faith into the Indian lands of the southern territories and Mexico. But their cross-cultural contacts seemed to be mostly negative. Frustration and anxiety resulted. The Church and its missionaries carried an enormous commitment to the Lamanites. However, everywhere the missionaries met with failure. Daniel W. Jones, somewhat self-righteously, would later remind the Church that it could have sent missionaries back to Guerrero, a place where scores of Mexicans had waited in vain for baptism.<sup>29</sup>

Four months following Elder Thatcher's return to Mexico, the missionaries and a handful of Saints (some of whom had survived the falling away of the original Rhodakanaty group) left Mexico City in April of 1881 to ascend the great volcano Popocatepetl, which lies about fifty miles southeast of the city. Because of the volcano's poetic and historical significance in the lives of the most numerous of Mexico's Indian peoples, the ascent to the summit of Popocatepetl to hold a conference and dedicate the land for preaching the gospel held enormous symbolic significance. There was no question in the missionaries' minds as to whom the gospel message was to be taken. In attendance at this first conference of the Church held in Mexico were the missionaries from Salt Lake City (Moses Thatcher, Feramorz Young, and James Z. Stewart) and several members from Mexico (Silviano Arteaga, Fernando A. Lara, Ventura Páez, Lino Zarate, and two other Mexican brothers whose names were not recorded).<sup>30</sup> On 6 April 1881, just fifty-one years after the Church had been organized, the group raised prayers to God and invoked his blessings on the Mexican mission.

Slowly all these efforts bore additional results. Other Saints arrived from Zion. August H. F. Wilcken, a European immigrant schooled in the Spanish language, helped translate additional tracts and then went to Ozumba with Fernando A. Lara to proselyte there and in surrounding villages. In quick succession other changes in personnel occurred. In June, Elder Stewart was released, returning home to Utah; in August, Elder Thatcher was released and Elder Wilcken replaced him; and Feramorz L. Young

(who would die of typhoid fever within days) and Fernando A. Lara left for Utah with Moses Thatcher. Lara had been one of the most dedicated and successful missionaries of the Mexican converts. Going to Zion was his reward. But sixty-one other Mexican members remained, enough to organize the second formal branch of the Church in Mexico at the base of Popocatepetl in Ozumba. There Elders Wilcken, Arteaga, Páez, Zarate, and a few others carried on the work.

Within a few months, however, the Saints in Mexico were pleased to receive word of the imminent arrival of new missionaries from Zion. Anthony W. Ivins, who had been with the Jones missionary contingent that had explored Chihuahua in 1876, was accompanied by Nielson R. Pratt, one more in the long line of Pratt family descendants who have served the Church in Mexico. Both Mexican and American missionaries, in the coming months, added fifty-one new members to Church records.

In due time, when August Wilcken left for home, Anthony W. Ivins was made president of the mission. Rey Pratt, a later missionary to Mexico, says that during Ivins's administration "quite a number of native elders were pressed into service and the work of preaching the gospel and spreading the truth was vigorously pushed."<sup>31</sup> Among those missionaries were Lino Zarate, Julián Rojas, and an Elder Candanosa. Additional members joined.

The work extended into numerous small villages in the central Mexican plateau—Toluca, Ixtacalco, Tecaloe, and Chimal, all in Mexico; Cuautla and San Andrés de la Cal, in Morelos; and Napola, in Hidalgo. In this endeavor, Isaac J. Stewart, who had accompanied his brother on the ill-fated visit to the Yaquis several years before, soon joined the group. So also did Helaman Pratt, another of the original missionaries to Mexico.

It was clear that interest and a few skills in the Spanish language were giving some of the brethren double-duty in the work of the Kingdom. But so it had to be. If the Church authorities in Salt Lake City would not approve colonization as a means of spreading the gospel, then other, more conventional, means would of necessity have to be employed.

Soon Helaman Pratt was heading the mission (March 1884). He extended the work to San Marcos, Hidalgo, a community that later would figure prominently in the expansion of the faith in Mexico. Little by little the work did expand. But soon Elder Pratt came to the same conclusion reached by Jones and Thatcher before him: the Saints joining the fold in Mexico needed *their* Zion if they were to flourish—a place of retreat into the solidarity of a closely-knit Mormon community until they could gain sufficient strength to stand alone in a hostile environment. Just as the first Mormons had organized themselves into corporate communities to help institutionalize the faith, so also should the Mexican members. That the Anglo-American observers may have been less charitable in their

observations of the Mexican social and cultural environment than with their own does not depreciate their insights into the community needs of new faith. Indeed, it suggests an ability to see beyond cultural barriers in striving to best accommodate the needs of the members.

Therefore Helaman Pratt, scarcely in the mission a few months, raised a question on the colonization issue that would have to be considered. If Mormons from Utah could not come to Mexico to colonize, why then not send Mormons from Mexico into Arizona where Mormon colonies already existed so that the new Mormons could also enjoy the homogenizing effect of a Mormon cultural environment? Elder Pratt proposed that one hundred to one hundred and fifty Mexican converts (virtually the entire Church in Mexico City and environs at the time) gather either in the Arizona settlements or in some new ones in northern Mexico where they would have close contact with the social, cultural, and economic aspects of Mormon community living. But President John Taylor thought that so many converts could not be handled in Arizona and suggested sending perhaps ten families. When Elder Pratt relayed the President's response to the Mexican members, they chose to wait for an opportunity to all go together when a settlement could be established in northern Mexico. That opportunity would come three years later in consequence of a massive colonizing effort by Anglo-Americans into northern Mexico.

In the meantime, between bouts with federal marshals, Mormon interest in taking the gospel to the Indians remained at an all-time high. Numerous spectacular heavenly visitations to the Indians had been reported,<sup>32</sup> and many of the brethren considered these visitations sure evidence of the imminence of the Second Coming.<sup>33</sup> In 1881 Wilford Woodruff had reported, "We as the Quorum of the Twelve have been commanded of the Lord to now turn our attention to the Lamanites and preach the gospel to them, which we are now endeavoring to do."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, that was one of the reasons a high-level delegation headed by Apostle Thatcher had been sent to Mexico in the first place to examine the Rhodakanaty matter. But nearly simultaneously, Apostles Brigham Young, Jr., and Heber J. Grant had been sent to Arizona and New Mexico to delve further into the Indian question; Apostle George Teasdale was making rounds in Indian Territory; Apostle Francis M. Lyman was traveling the Uinta Reservation to the east; and Apostles Lorenzo Snow and Franklin D. Richards were attending to the northern tribes.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, in 1885 all the excitement and anticipation regarding the Lamanites would fade into insignificance as the Saints struggled to resist the onslaught of the U.S. federal marshals. Some Anglo-American Mormons would flee to Mexico for safety. From their colonies in Chihuahua, the gospel message would eventually spread to all of Latin America.

## Appendix

*Following is a translation of the 15 December 1878 letter from Dr. Plotino Rhodakanaty and others to LDS church leaders urging missionaries be sent to Mexico. The translator, Eduardo Balderas, is a translator for the Translation Division of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.*

Most illustrious and revered President and Apostles of “the Christian Church of the Latter-day Saints”

Most respected Brethren in our Lord Jesus Christ:

We the undersigned, residents of the capital of Mexico, before the most worthy Theocratical Government of that Holy Church and with the deepest respect declare:

That having been convoked to a private meeting in the home belonging to Dr. Plotino Constantino Rhodakanaty, managing promoter of the same Church, for the purpose of organizing a small circle or congregation of religious and social persuasion in this capital city, said gentleman read to us for such purpose a work entitled Choice Selections from the Book of Mormon, translated into Spanish by the reverend Elder Melitón G. Trejo and Daniel W. Jones, the mystical and highly transcendent meaning of which was later elucidated to us by the same Doctor, who proved unto us and fully convinced us of the evidence of the divine origin of such a precious book, and of the lofty mission that its doctrine has to accomplish in the world, causing through its entirely providential and divine influence a complete humanitarian palingenesis or transformation in the religious as well as in the moral, social, and political orders.

Such a beautiful perspective of a radical reform in our beloved country (to whom that Holy Church is issuing a direct invitation to adopt the true belief that it professes), as well as the one that its moral influence will perform, can do no less than captivate the minds and soften the hearts of those of us who dream of the beautiful ideal of a patriarchal life, those of us who thirst for charity and justice, and at the same time for that happiness which, without doubt, resides only in the bosom of that holy and mysterious Institution, the absolute depositary and legitimate successor of that primitive Church of Jerusalem which is the most beautiful and sublime paradigm of charity, of love, and of universal fraternity.

Therefore, these and various other considerations which we have deeply meditated in our souls have impelled us, through divine inspiration, not only to embrace that doctrine theoretically but also to practice it, and even more importantly, to turn ourselves, in spite of our humble social standing, into honest and laborious workers, into worthy Ministers or Pastors of

your Holy Religion, for which purpose we today respectfully desire to contact that holy and wise Apostleship of the Church to urgently request our ordination to the *lesser priesthood*, which we have no doubt will be conferred upon us not through wisdom or instruction of worldly knowledge that we lack, but through our faith which we possess, and our intense desires to fulfill our mission as providential instruments of the Divine Will for the salvation of so many poor souls that today in this country are the victims of error and of the impositions of the false and pretended churches that claim to be Christians, and which unfortunately sprout among us deviating consciences, tearing apart the social unity, and lacerating sensitive hearts with their selfishness and continual offenses which they commit against charity, thus denying the Holy Ghost, which is the Spirit of all truth, and the most solid foundation of all solidarity, both in heaven and on earth.

Persevering in our good purpose to constitute ourselves into champions of religious truth, our only object being to attack error to its last entrenchments and to punish the rebellious nations for their iniquity, perfidies and selfishness with which they extort and kill the poor and the chosen of the Lord, we today humbly approach the worthy Apostleship of that Holy Church, officially requesting, by means of the eminent and indefatigable promoter of the faith, our respected and beloved Brother Melitón G. Trejo, Elder of the Church, that promptly and efficaciously, dispensing with procedures, the lesser priesthood be conferred upon us, priesthood to which we have a right, if not by birth, as happily declared by our teacher and initiator in the new faith, Dr. Rhodakanaty, then by vocation for the performance and practice of such a sacred ministry to obtain the competent authorization to preach in our nation the fulness of the Gospel and the continuation of divine revelation in order to accomplish the radical reformation and salvation not only of our own country, but of the entire world—our country because we are cosmopolitans according to the Spirit of Christ, our Lord and our God.

Will you please, our most worthy Brethren, accede to our just and humble request, through which the entire universe will receive one more proof that our Holy Religion is true because it does not reject the pleadings of its fervent proselytes, imparting thus the charity in the grace that it grants to its servants in the faith.

Mexico City, December 15, 1878

As Managing Promoter of the Church

Dr. Plotino C. Rhodakanaty



Domingo Mejía

Darío F. Fernández

Miguel Enríquez

José Cleofas G. y Sánchez

Félix Rodríguez y Luís

Luis G. Rabíe

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1. "Mexican Mission," pp. 1–2 [report by James Z. Stewart], Manuscript History of the Mexican Mission, Library-Archives of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as Church Archives.

2. Robert H. Smith and Ammon M. Tenney associated themselves with the affair until the travelers reached El Paso del Norte (Ciudad Juárez), where their difficulties with Daniel W. Jones occasioned their leaving the group and returning home.

3. Daniel W. Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians: A True Yet Thrilling Narrative of the Author's Experience among the Natives* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1890), p. 304.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 308.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

6. Blaine C. Hardy, "The Mormon Colonies of Northern Mexico: A History, 1885–1912" (Ph.D. diss., Wayne State University, Detroit, 1963), pp. 32–34.

7. Sgt. Daniel Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War, 1846–48* (1881; reprint ed., Glorieta, N. Mex.: The Rio Grande Press, 1964).

8. Gordon Irving, "'An Opening Wedge': LDS Proselyting in Mexico 1870–1890," Andrew Jenson Lecture (4 June 1976), p. 3.

9. Irving, "Questions Needing Further Attention," addendum to above, point no. 2.

10. See, for example, "Mexico: Reported Intentions of Mormons to Migrate to Mexico," *New York Times*, 22 December 1874, p. 1. col. 5; "A Threat from Mormonism," *New York Times*, 22 June 1875, p. 6. col. 4.

11. Discourse by Brigham Young, 6 April 1877, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1885–1886), 18:355–56.

12. *Deseret Weekly*, 13 September 1876, p. 521.

13. Personal interview with W. Ernest Young, 22 February 1977, Provo, Utah.

14. Irving, "'An Opening Wedge,'" p. 8.

15. Personal interview with Agricol Lozano Herrera, 31 May 1975, Mexico City.

16. This information, which I have not come across elsewhere, is reported by Irving, "'An Opening Wedge,'" p. 10.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Co., 1901–36), 1:131.

19. Irving, "'An Opening Wedge,'" p. 10.

20. Jenson, *Biographical Encyclopedia*, 1:132–33.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

22. Blaine Carmon Hardy, "Cultural 'Encystment' as a Cause of the Mormon Exodus from Mexico in 1912," *Pacific Historical Review* 34 (November 1965): 441.

23. New York City *Sun*, 13 August 1879.

24. Irving, "An Opening Wedge," pp. 12–14.

25. *Ibid.*

26. The not-so-subtle feelings of superiority and the spirit of condescension that characterized Protestant North American missionaries of the nineteenth century were usually subdued, although almost always present, among Mormon North American missionaries. If the Protestant religions' self-proclaimed responsibility of a "white man's burden" was to take his civilization and faith to the rest of the world, the Mormons' burden was to bring to pass the fulfillment of scripture regarding their Lamanite brethren. Adoption of North American ways of living seemed inexorably intertwined with that redemption. Useful background materials from the vantage point of a Cuban theologian may be found in Justo E. Gonzalez, *Historia de las Misiones* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1970), chap. 9. A contemporary view of mainline Protestantism is the published doctoral dissertation of O. E. Costas, *Theology of the Crossroads in Contemporary Latin America* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1976).

27. Elders Stewart and Trejo had finished their translation of Parley P. Pratt's *The Voice of Warning* and had managed to circulate a large number of copies. They translated, published, and distributed 4,000 copies of John Nicholson's "Means of Escape." The missionaries also published several thousand copies of Elder Stewart's "Coming of the Messiah" and widely distributed them. Numerous other exchanges occurred through the newspapers and were later published in *The Contributor*. (See Jenson, *Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4:134.)

28. Hardy, "Cultural 'Encystment,'" pp. 440–41. Hardy cites vol. 3, pp. 43–44 of Thatcher's journals, which led him to conclude that motivation for colonization in Mexico was to give Mexican converts a new environment away from the distracting effects of Mexico's non-Mormon society. All these considerations had led Moses Thatcher to subscribe to the conclusion drawn by Daniel W. Jones before him, who had said, "We were united in one idea, and that war before any great work could be done in this country it would be necessary to colonize among the people" (Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians*, p. 283).

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 282–87.

30. Rey L. Pratt, "History of the Mexican Mission," *The Improvement Era* 15 (1911–12): 487.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 489.

32. There was general excitement among Mormon leaders and members alike between 1877 and 1892 with the reported visions of an Indian named Moroni and also the visions of Chief Shivitts, Wovoka, Sitting Bull, and others. From the tribes of the Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains, Indians began first to have an interest in Mormons and then to develop their own "Ghost Dance" (associated with their belief that a Messiah would soon return to the earth and save them from their plight by annihilating the whites and restoring the buffalo). This terrified many non-Mormon whites and alarmed the U.S. federal government, who combined to precipitate the now infamous 1890 massacre of Indians at Wounded Knee. (See Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971]; and James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, part two of the Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, 1892–93 [Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896].)

33. Mormons were reinforced in their eschatology and increased their missionary efforts among the Indians. They were convinced that Indian prophets had finally risen, that perhaps the Savior had actually visited them, or that one or more of the three Nephites was among them again. Surely the beginning of the end was at hand. Indeed, for this reason accusations were hurled that the Mormons were actually behind the Ghost Dance craze, using it as a device to rid their territory of gentile settlers.

34. Wilford Woodruff, letter to a "Brother Johnson" in the Salt River Valley, Arizona, 7 December 1882, p. 2, Church Archives.

35. Ibid.