

Father Brigham in His Western Canaan

John K. Carmack

If you were to paint a word picture of Brigham Young by comparing him to an earlier spiritual leader, to whom would you compare him? Maybe the most dramatic comparison comes from that pivotal moment when he spoke to nearly five thousand Saints gathered in Nauvoo to select those who would take the reins of leadership in the restored Church. To many, including my own forbears, as he delivered his address he looked and sounded like Joseph Smith.¹ Or perhaps, as Leonard Arrington did, you would compare him to Moses leading the children of Israel on a long and perilous exodus to a promised land.²

Despite those compelling candidates, the image I see is that of Father Abraham. Yes, the exodus from Nauvoo to the Great Salt Lake was vital and exciting and the comparison with Moses apt. We look back on that great event with pride much as the Jews have viewed the exodus of Israel from Egypt. But the portrait of President Young (fig. 1) that strikes me as being the fullest and most memorable is that of a great patriarch, a father like Abraham, presiding and directing the work of establishing a people, safe and free to follow their Prophet and gospel doctrines in the mountains and valleys that became their Western Canaan.

As great as was the achievement in transporting such a numerous people to these valleys, the successful establishment of a unique religious society in the desert seems even greater. President Young himself pointed out the Abrahamic nature of their quest and achievements:

We printed the first papers, except about two, set out the first orchards, raised the first wheat, kept almost the first schools, and made the first improvements in our pioneering, in a great measure, from the Mississippi river to the Pacific Ocean; and here we got at last, so as to be out of the way of everybody, if possible. We thought we would get as far as we could from the face of man; we wanted to get to a strange land, *like Abraham*, that we might be where we should not be continually wrong with somebody or other.³

In a stirring tribute, the Twelve who were serving with Brigham Young at the time of his death captured a compelling portrait of his leadership in this summary:

During the thirty three years that he has presided over the Church, since the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph, his knees have never trembled, his hands have never shook; he has never faltered or quailed. However threatening the surroundings or prospects may have been, he has never been dismayed; but

at those times he has exhibited such serene confidence and faith, and uttered such words of encouragement, as to comfort and sustain all the people, and to call forth their love and admiration. The Lord, however, not only blessed him with valor, but He endowed him with great wisdom. His counsels, when obeyed, have been attended with salvation, and as an organizer and administrator he has no superior. . . .

His labors the Lord has crowned with most remarkable success, his words he has honored and fulfilled, and those who have obeyed his counsel he has blessed and upheld. The time will yet come when his presidency over the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will be pointed to as an epoch of wonderful events.⁴

In this portrait, we see more than a man guiding a people through the wilderness; we see him in his Canaan exercising leadership, courage, wisdom, and counsel. We see a prophet organizing and administering a unique society. The father image seems to stand out.

Similarities between Abraham and Brigham Young

Let's look at Abraham more closely to see if the comparison holds up under scrutiny. We first discover the scriptural Abraham in peril, in Ur of the Chaldees. In the midst of idolatry, apostasy, and unbelief, his life was in danger. In those circumstances, Abraham said in simplicity, "It was needful for me to obtain another place of residence" (Abr. 1:1). Jehovah spoke to him and thereafter guided him to safety. Abraham took his family, their goods, and the souls he had won to the gospel and departed his beloved homeland, traveling under Jehovah's protecting hand. The Lord showed him the land of his inheritance and gave it to him and his people. There, the Lord told him, he was to be "a minister to bear my name" (Abr. 2:6).

The comparisons here between President Young and Abraham are obvious. President Young and the Saints found themselves in peril in Illinois. Having been driven from Kirtland, Missouri, and now Illinois, it was needful for them to find another place of residence. The Lord Jehovah, having delivered them from their enemies (see D&C 136:40), guided them to a place far away from the nation that had rejected them and whose mobs, unchecked by rule of law or Constitution, threatened their destruction. Even the valley of the Great Salt Lake must surely have been reminiscent of Canaan with its salt sea. President Young described the spirit of revelation and vision that came over him as he entered the valley: "The spirit of light rested upon me and hovered over the valley, and I felt that there the Saints would find protection and safety."⁵ They had found their Canaan! California, touted by Samuel Brannan, beckoned with its rich resources and fertile valleys, but California was not destined to be their Canaan. Brigham saw clearly that "this is a good place to make Saints."⁶ Here he would minister as the Lord's prophet for another thirty years.



FIG. 1. Brigham Young, ca. 1867. Photographer Edward Martin.

Abraham, having found his Canaan, needed room for his growing family, fellow believers, flocks, and possessions. Because the land could not support all of them together, he implemented a plan for them to separate peacefully into differing areas. To build his great family, he followed Jehovah's direction by taking wives in addition to his beloved Sarah. "For I

know him,” the Lord said, “that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord” (Gen. 18:19).

Following the Abrahamic pattern, President Young settled his people all over the Intermountain West. For example, President Young sent my great-grandparents to the muddy Little Colorado River area, where they helped found Joseph City, Arizona. The great-grandparents of my wife, Shirley, were sent to Oakley, Idaho. In that formative era, President Young established over four hundred communities in the American West. He also followed the principle of plural marriage that had been restored by divine command through Joseph Smith. As did Abraham, he set the example by raising a large family under the patriarchal order (fig. 2). The practice of plural marriage continued until its purposes were fulfilled. The Church, following revelation given to President Wilford Woodruff, returned to the general rule of monogamous marriage.

Jehovah could ask nothing that Abraham would not do, even to being willing to sacrifice his heir and only son through Sarah. With similar obedience and faith, President Young single-mindedly pursued the Lord’s purposes:



FIG. 2. Brigham Young with some of his wives and children. In this engraving by J. S. Foy, Brigham Young is clearly perceived as a patriarch. The image was sold separately in Philadelphia and also printed in R. Guy McClellan, *The Golden State: A History of the Region West of the Rocky Mountains* (Philadelphia: William Flint, 1872), 525. Courtesy Gary L. and Carol B. Bunker.

I can say, truly and honestly, that the thought never came into my mind, in all my labors, what my reward will be, or whether my crown would be large or small, or any crown at all, a small possession, a large possession, or no possession. . . . All that I have had in my mind has been that it was my duty to do the will of God, and to labor to establish his Kingdom on the earth.⁷

As the society of Saints grew in the West, Brigham reestablished the Relief Society for women, organized the young women and young men for training and improvement, set up Sunday Schools, priesthood quorums, wards, and stakes. He sent people all over the world to preach the gospel and gave them minute instructions, conveying his fatherly concern. He confirmed the principle of tithing, set up special economic units called united orders, pounded away at Sabbath Day observance, required tremendous sacrifices of his people, and built a unified Abraham-like society.

To accomplish all he did, Abraham had to be down-to-earth and practical but also needed to have strong foundational values. When his nephew Lot and others were captured during a war, Abraham, in faith, took direct, practical action. He gathered his allies plus 318 of his own men to rescue the captives and regain the stolen goods. But in the context of the Lord witnessing his actions, he refused to retain for himself any of the spoils; he had foreseen what the results would be. Then he took the opportunity to offer tithes of all he had to Melchizedek, the keeper of the storehouse for the poor (Gen. 14; see also the JST version). Faith infused the realities of life.

President Young captured his own holistic, but practical, concept of religion in this familiar statement: “Our religion is simply the truth. It is all said in this one expression—it embraces all truth, wherever found, in all the works of God and man that are visible or invisible to mortal eye.”⁸ He expanded on this practical view with these words:

If I am in the line of my duty, I am doing the will of God, whether I am preaching; praying, laboring with my hands for an honorable support; whether I am in the field, mechanic’s shop, or following mercantile business, or wherever duty calls, I am serving God as much in one place as another; and so it is with all, each in his place, turn and time.⁹

Through revelation, Abraham taught that life on earth is a time when God “will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them; . . . and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever” (Abr. 3:25–26). In similar fashion, Brigham Young saw that life was a time to prepare for eternity and required constant improvement in the process:

The first great principle that ought to occupy the attention of mankind, that should be understood by the child and the adult, and which is the main spring of all action, whether people understand it or not, is the principle of improvement. The principle of increase, of exaltation, of adding to that we already possess, is the grand moving principle and cause of the actions of the

children of men. No matter what their pursuits are, in what nation they were born, with what people they have been associated, what religion they profess, or what politics they hold, this is the main spring of the actions of the people, embracing all the powers necessary in performing the duties of life.¹⁰

A Fatherly Style

From documents in the Church's archives, a contemporaneous picture emerges of Father Brigham at work in his Western Canaan. The man we see is a practical Abraham-like father, with his eye on the establishment of a thriving and healthy Zion people. No detail was too small for his personal attention. A typical letter is one dated April 9, 1861, written to Bishop Hoagland of the Fourteenth Ward in Salt Lake City:

Dear Brother:—

I am informed that a Sister Huey, a small, blackeyed, widow woman, with five children, lately from South Africa, is living in br. Beatie's house in your Ward, and is in need of house room, a little land, and some assistance to give her a start toward enabling her to make a living. At your earliest convenience, I wish you to call upon her and see what assistance she needs, and what aid can be rendered toward giving her a start to earn her own livelihood, and oblige.

Your Brother in the Gospel,
Brigham Young¹¹

The archives are full of letters and documents showing this same care and concern for his people. He had little formal education, but through reading, conversation, and careful observation, he developed a vast store of knowledge about practical things.

Such knowledge and fatherly care are hallmarks of his journeyings. His itinerary included regular visits to the communities of southern Utah and all the villages and settlements along the way (fig. 3). George A. Smith, Church Historian and counselor to President Young, often accompanied him on those visits and in a letter dated October 30, 1854, shared President Young's counsel to the Saints of Manti: "He. . . instructed them how to deal with the Indians, showing them in what respects they had erred in their intercourse with them heretofore. He advised them to finish their city wall to the height of 15 feet."¹² He sometimes met with Indian leaders on these trips, such as a meeting with Squash just north of Springville.

In 1860 in Provo, he "reproved the brethren for not making a proper improvement of the facilities which were at their command." In Salt Creek, he recommended that the Saints "pull down the present meeting house and build a larger one." While in Manti, he officiated as umpire in a foot race. He "reproved the brethren at San Pete for not fencing their gardens and improving the streets." At Fort Ephraim, he "applauded the brethren for having so comfortable a meeting house." Reaching Salt Lake City after

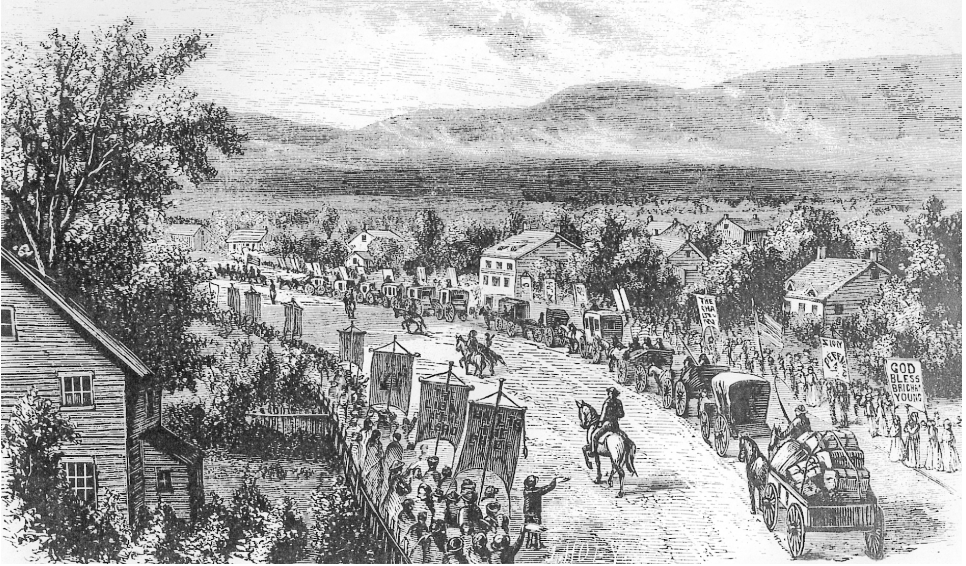


FIG. 3. Brigham Young on his travels in caravan style. Some of the welcoming signs read, “The Lion of the Lord” and “God bless Brigham Young.” From T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints: A Full and Complete History of the Mormons* (New York: D. Appleton, 1873), 647.

this 1860 trip, he had “travelled 280 miles, preached 20 times,” and “comforted the hearts of thousands of Saints who rejoiced to see him again.”¹³

The range and nature of Brigham’s instruction is detailed in an 1863 letter by George A. Smith:

The President’s sermons are complimented as eloquent, interesting, and instructive, and the congregations large; this is really true: the largest houses were insufficient to contain the people, the settlements turning out in mass and listened with eagerness, they were exhorted to live their religion, to humble themselves constantly before the Lord, pray in their families, to educate and instruct their children in the things of the Kingdom as well as in the common branches of education, to plant out grapes, figs, olives, and other fruits, and indigo, to make good gardens, imitating in that respect the garden of Eden, as near as they could.¹⁴

These little snapshots from President Young’s busy life paint a picture of him for us. The exodus was of crucial importance to Latter-day Saints, but the multitude of years in what I call the Western Canaan let us know Brigham’s Abrahamic focus. George A. Smith summed up the President’s loving labors on behalf of the people this way:

Cares multiply around him: he personally superintends every thing of a public nature, as far as possible: to conduct his private affairs would seem work

enough for anyone, his general appearance is careworn: he attends the balls every week, & is an accomplished dancer, . . . he personally superintends the theatre, visiting every portion of the house, almost every evening; he attends the Bishop's meetings; visits the endowment house on almost every occasion, . . . preserving in his communications with the brethren, the same simplicity of intercourse, and implicit dependence upon the Providence of God, as when he used to travel and preach without purse or scrip.¹⁵

Brigham Young's leadership style is most clearly seen in the Western Canaan years. Some think of Brigham as dictatorial and autocratic, but his was a fatherly or patriarchal style—an Abrahamic style—not a corporate one. As Leonard Arrington observed, "He was an extraordinary listener who gave those who spoke to him his total attention."¹⁶ Brother Arrington also noted that the President "always sought others' opinions and the minutes of meetings show that people weren't afraid to differ vigorously with him."¹⁷ He was common and direct in all he said and did but, like Abraham, wise and shrewd in his judgment of men and things.

Brigham Young and the Abrahamic Covenant

Abraham's covenant with Jehovah was breathtaking in its scope. The promises went far beyond the patriarchal society Abraham established in Canaan. Those promises continue in effect today. The Lord promised him that his seed would be numerous; all nations of the earth would be blessed by his seed; Canaan would remain his home for an everlasting possession; Jehovah would bless his people with revelation from God and salvation for mankind. His grandson Jacob promised his great-grandson Joseph that his seed would spread "unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills" (Gen. 49:26). Thus the descendants of Abraham would eventually spread to the far reaches of the earth. The promises of the Abrahamic covenant applied to Brigham Young as well (as they can to us all): "This promise is yours also, because ye are of Abraham, and the promise was made unto Abraham. . . . Go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham" (D&C 132:31–32).

In contemplating those who have played a prominent role in fulfilling the promises made to Abraham, we think immediately of Moses, Isaac, and Jacob. We are less likely to think of modern events as part of the Abrahamic covenant, but Joseph Smith and Brigham Young have shouldered the latter-day burden of establishing a branch of Abraham in the top of the mountains at the utmost boundaries of the earth from Canaan. "And this shall be our covenant," Jehovah revealed to President Young before the westering journey, "that we will walk in all the ordinances of the Lord" (D&C 136:4). Like a latter-day Abraham, President Young became a great father to his people, a patriarch who taught them by example and precept to "enter ye into my law and . . . be saved" (D&C 132:32).

As part of establishing a righteous people and fulfilling the promises made to Abraham, Brigham Young built on his beloved Joseph's work by expanding missionary work, speeding up the gathering process, and constructing permanent temples wherein eternal families could be organized.¹⁸ That he knew precisely what he was doing and building is evident in his words quoted here:

I have looked upon the community of the Latter-day Saints in vision, and beheld them organized as one great family of heaven; each person performing his several duties in his line of industry, working for the good of the whole more than for individual aggrandizement; and in this I have beheld the most beautiful order that the mind of man can contemplate, and the grandest results for the upbuilding of the kingdom of God and the spread of righteousness upon the earth.¹⁹

Surely President Young was in the Abrahamic pattern. The similarities in their roles are compelling. That is partly so because President Young was carrying on and fulfilling the promises made to our Father Abraham.

In the only revelation that came through Brigham Young and is included in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord made known to him and to the Saints what had happened to them and what their place in dispensational history was. Note the tie-in with earlier gospel dispensations, including that of Abraham:

Thy brethren have rejected you and your testimony, even the nation that has driven you out. . . . Therefore, marvel not at these things, for ye are not yet pure; ye can not yet bear my glory; but ye shall behold it if ye are faithful in keeping all my words that I have given you, from the days of Adam to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Jesus and his apostles, and from Jesus and his apostles to Joseph Smith, whom I did call . . . to bring forth my work; Which foundation he did lay, and was faithful; and I took him to myself. (D&C 136:34, 37, 38)

The Lord had placed his kingdom into Brigham's and the Saints' hands. The trust in President Young was not misplaced. He remained faithful and died with Joseph's name on his lips.²⁰

Conclusion

As Father Abraham had done, Father Brigham did a mighty work in removing his people from harm's way and establishing a firm, covenantal foundation for a growing Church that was destined to fill the earth. In many ways, he was a prophet like unto Moses who saved his people from a hostile community by leading them west to safety and security. But unlike Moses, Brigham was allowed to enter his Western Canaan, where this modern-day Abraham labored thirty years to put into practice the higher, revolutionary doctrines of salvation restored to the earth. Part of the

Abrahamic covenant to bless endlessly all kindreds on earth was fulfilled and expanded through President Young's leadership. The Church bears his stamp and has continued along the path he dug out of these mountains and valleys. As the Lord declared earlier to Abraham, "Through thy ministry my name shall be known in the earth forever" (Abr. 1:19). Like a latter-day Abraham, President Young became a great father to his people, a patriarch whose example and teachings will be remembered honorably as long as women and men exist.

Elder John K. Carmack is a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He received a B.A. from Brigham Young University and a J.D. from the University of California at Los Angeles.

1. Lynne Watkins Jorgenson and BYU Studies Staff, "The Mantle of the Prophet Joseph Passes to Brother Brigham: A Collective Spiritual Witness," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 4 (1996–97): 125–204.
2. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Knopf, 1985).
3. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998), 476; italics added.
4. "Epistle of the Twelve Apostles and Counselors, to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in All the World," *Messages of the First Presidency*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 2:298 (September–October 1877).
5. Brigham Young, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1846–1847*, ed. Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: By the editor, 1971), 564.
6. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F.D. Richards, 1855–56), 4:32, August 17, 1856.
7. Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 452.
8. Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 2.
9. Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 8.
10. Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 87.
11. Brigham Young to Abraham Hoagland, April 9, 1861, Brigham Young Letter Books, 5:752, Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Church Archives).
12. George A. Smith to Franklin D. Richards, October 30, 1854, Historian's Office Letter Books, 1:8, Church Archives.
13. George A. Smith to Amasa M. Lyman, November 8, 1860, Historian's Office Letter Books, 1:45–46, Church Archives.
14. George A. Smith to John L. Smith, May 22, 1863, Historian's Office Letter Books, vol. 2, Church Archives.
15. George A. Smith to George Q. Cannon, January 22, 1863, Historian's Office Letter Books, 2:190, Church Archives.
16. Quoted in Scott S. Smith, "Mormon Leader Brigham Young: How He Became the Greatest Colonizer of the American West," *Investor's Business Daily*, November 17, 1998.
17. Smith, "Mormon Leader Brigham Young."
18. See LDS Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Abraham, Covenant of," 602.
19. *Deseret News Semi-Weekly*, January 21, 1868, 2.
20. Arrington, *Brigham Young*, 399.