RAINING PITCHFORKS

BRIGHAM YOUNG AS PREACHER

IN 1861 Hiram S. Rumfield, assistant treasurer of the Overland Mail Company, took a seat near the main entrance to the Mormons’ Old Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. The box-like building, he thought, lacked artistic distinction—a reflection on the men and women who filled the building’s closely crowded seats. The congregation, Rumfield believed, “exhibited a picture, . . . which no generous soul could contemplate except with feelings of mingled sorrow and disgust.” In turn, President Brigham Young seemed no more impressive. He spoke a rambling homily on practical duty, ending with a severe denunciation of hypocrites and apostates that the Tiffin, Ohio, native found “filthy” and “profane.” All in all, Rumfield was left incredulous. Mormonism “claims the power of working miracles,” he concluded laconically. If Brigham can elevate “the descendants of his people to the high standards of moral, mental, and physical development which he says they are destined to attain, his posterity may justly associate his name with the most stupendous miracle the world has ever witnessed.”

Like many nineteenth century visitors, Rumfield overstated things. Yet Brigham himself would not have greatly argued with his conclusions. The Mormon net had gathered a rough-and-ready harvest that required strong preaching, a task that President Young did not shy away from. During his thirty-three year leadership, President Young delivered thousands of sermons. Of these, the texts of over eight hundred remain, nearly half printed in the early LDS series, The Journal of Discourses. Along with the letters and diaries of his followers and the travel accounts of Easterners visiting Utah, they leave a full picture of Young’s teaching ministry. Here was a man who, while often mis-understood by his enemies, thought seriously about the preacher’s art, knew the power of motivating words, and sought to use them to improve his people.

When Young first joined Mormonism in the spring of 1832, no one could have forecast his coming fame for acid-tongued oratory. He was then almost thirty-one, a son of Vermont’s austere soil and his parents’ flint-hard religious enthusiasm. There was little chance for book learning. “In my youthful days,” he later explained, “instead of going to school, I had to chop logs, to plow in the midst of roots barefooted, and if I had on a pair of pants that would cover me I did pretty well. Seeing that this was the way I was brought up they cannot expect from me the same etiquette and ceremony as if I had been brought up at the feet of Gamaliel.”

Before his religious conversion, Young did little to distinguish himself beyond his local upstate New York neighborhood. There he was recognized as a hard-working and skilled artisan but hardly as a community leader. Part of the problem lay in his self-image. He was often unsure of himself, diffident to others, and inward to the point of being morose. No doubt, his psychology reflected the poverty of both his origins and his opportunities.

However, Mormonism challenged and excited him, provided a cause that made him reach beyond himself. It also gave him a chance to preach. “I wanted to thunder and roar out the Gospel to the nations,” he recalled his excitement after being baptized. “I had to go out and preach, lest my bones should consume within me.” His first sermon lasted over an hour, with apparently no premeditation whatsoever. “I opened my mouth,” he remembered, “and the Lord filled it.”

This and subsequent attempts came at great personal trial. “When I began to speak in public,” he admitted, “I was about as destitute of language as a man could well be. . . . How I have had the headache, when I had ideas to lay before the people, and not words to express them; but I was so gritty that I always tried my best.”

During the next dozen years as he served as a missionary and Apostle, Young set the pattern for his later and more famous preaching. From the first, his pulpit presence must have been commanding. By all accounts his physique was magnificent. Somewhat over five feet eight inches tall (above average for the time), he carried himself with conscious presence. A light complexion and blue eyes set off his sandy, almost auburn, hair. Then there was his mouth. “His lips came together like the jaws of a bear trap,” remembered an acquaintance. They seemed to convey “great mental energy and indomitable pluck.” When speaking his words “slipped by the teeth, and [were] finally squeezed through the left half of the almost locked-up” mouth. All in all, as a California “Forty-Niner” later said: “He was . . . a very good looking fellow” who “looked every inch a
Despite his outward presence, he had to fight a deep-seated shyness when standing before an audience. "Although I have been a public speaker for thirty-seven years," he acknowledged later in his career, "it is seldom that I rise before a congregation without feeling a child-like timidity; if I live to the age of Methusaleh I do not know that I shall outgrow it." His faith, however, sustained him. "Had it not been that I clearly saw and understood that the Lord Almighty would take the weak things of this world to confound the mighty, the wise, and the talented, there was nothing that could have induced me to have ever become a public speaker."

His un schooled New England upbringing must have been obvious in his early efforts. Judging from his phonetically spelled notebooks and diaries, Yankee dialect and solecisms abounded in his preaching. Even in later years, Utah observers found him saying im-P£ET-us for impetus, and such provincialisms as "leetle," "beyend," "disremember," "ain't you," and "they was." Moreover, perhaps as compensation for his feelings of inadequacy, he felt compelled to use his resonant, bass voice to the fullest. "[During my first preaching], I could not satisfy my own feelings without talking with a loud voice," he recalled. Indeed, he believed that there was "thunder" in his early delivery.

Young did not remain an awkward, backcountry speaker, though many of his first public speaking traits persisted. Upon assuming the Latter-day Saint presidency in 1844, he was already a veteran preacher of remarkable energy. "'As a minute man' and claimed seldom to take forethought about what he might do or say at even the most important meetings. "I can truly say," he once asserted, "that I have fulfilled one of the sayings of the Savior tolerably well—to take no thought what ye shall say, for in the very hour or moment when you need it, it shall be given to you." However, there was an occasional exception. When the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Schuyler Colfax, visited Utah at the end of the Civil War, Young took special care in preparing his Sunday discourse. The result was viewed by many Saints with humor. It was, they believed, "the worst sermon he had ever preached"—the price for putting on airs.

By all accounts President Young had about him an easy, informal air. Once while speaking in the Bowery—a makeshift, open air meeting area on Temple Square—he briefly abandoned the rostrum to discipline several refractory children who had the misfortune to be playing too near the Prophet. On another occasion, he tried to stop a follower's harangue in midcourse with a hardy "Amen!" Failing to get his will, Young pulled the coat-tails of his recalcitrant disciple and assumed the pulpit himself.

Nothing fostered informality more than President Young's impromptu manner. He called himself a "minute man" and claimed seldom to take forethought about what he might do or say at even the most important meetings. "I can truly say," he once asserted, "that I have fulfilled one of the sayings of the Savior tolerably well—to take no thought what ye shall say, for in the very hour or moment when you need it, it shall be given to you." However, there was an occasional exception. When the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Schuyler Colfax, visited Utah at the end of the Civil War, Young took special care in preparing his Sunday discourse. The result was viewed by many Saints with humor. It was, they believed, "the worst sermon he had ever preached"—the price for putting on airs.

There grew between the Mormon leader and his congregation a bond that permitted such irreverence. Brigham cast himself as the Saints' gruff but loving father, alternately scolding and befriending his flock. As lawgiver, he felt he should preach without compromise.
"I will tell you what this people need, with regard to preaching," he said. "You need, figuratively, to have it rain pitchforks, tines downwards. . . . Instead of the smooth, beautiful, sweet, still, silk-velvet-lipped preaching, you should have sermons like peals of thunder."18

True to his word, Brigham gave saints and sinners pitchforks aplenty. The latter might be especially hard hit if guilty of malicious anti-Mormonism. For instance, at Winter Quarters following the Mormons' expulsion from Nauvoo, he was apoplectic. "Brigham arose and [made] some pointed and appropriate remarks," a diary of the period records.

He called upon the Lord to bless this place for the good of the saints and curse every Gentile who should attempt to settle here with sickness, roteness, and death. . . . that their flesh might consume away on their bones and their blood be turned into Maggots.19

He could be equally severe with the Saints. During the Mormon Reformation of 1856 he delivered what was described as "one of the strongest addresses that was ever delivered to this Church & Kingdom." Young denounced the Saints "[for lying[,] stealing, swaring, committing adultery, quarelling, with Husbands wives & Children and many other evils.] He spoke in the power of God & the demonstration of the Holy Ghost & his voice & words were like the Thunderers of Mount Sina."20

Over the years doctors, merchants, and lawyers especially drew his ire. The former appeared to him to be money-grubbers whose primary usefulness lay outside their profession—in raising grain or doing mechanical work. "I would rather have the sisters wait upon me in sickness," he claimed, "than many of those who profess to be physicians." Lacking licensing standards and such primary knowledge as germ theory and antiseptics, the Utah medical profession of the era probably deserved his scorn.21

He also thought merchants were generally of "extremely small calibre." Their trouble lay in their greed to maximize profits at the expense of the people. If "they had a chance to buy a widow's cow for ten cents on the dollar of her real value in cash, [they] would make the purchase and then thank the Lord that he had so blessed them."22

Lawyers, however, were a greater bane. Instead of allowing civil disputes to be settled amicably by local LDS bishops, the adversary system of law made "white black, and black white." "I feel about . . . [lawyers] as Peter of Russia is said to have felt when he was in England," he quipped. "He saw and heard the lawyers pleading at a great trial there, and he was asked his opinion concerning them. He replied that he had two lawyers in his empire, and when he got home he intended to hang one of them."23

Even the most lofty of the Saints had to be prepared to receive his bars. When a member of Mormonism's Quorum of Twelve supplemented his income by working for a virulently anti-Mormon judge, Young declared that he should be cut off from both the Twelve and the Church. "He is no more fit to stand at the Head of the Quorum of the Twelve than a dog. . . . He is a stink in my nostrils."24

But his outbursts were the exception rather than the rule, and even when thundering he often softened his blows with humor. For example, he used both brimstone and mirth in his frequent damnations of "the ding-dong" of women's fashions. "The present custom of many," he held,

is such that I would as soon see a squaw go through the streets with a very little on, as to see clothing piled up until it reaches, perhaps, the top of the hedge or fence its wearer is passing. . . . In my feelings they are positively ridiculous, they are so useless and unbecoming. Do you recollect a fashion there was a few years ago, . . . when a woman could not walk through the streets without holding her clothes two feet in front of her if her arm was long enough? . . . Now it is on the other side, and I do not know but they will get two humps on their backs, they have one now, and if they get to be dromedaries it will be no wonder.

He conjectured that some women's dresses might conceal a six-horse team, with "a dozen dogs under the wagon."25

Young's denunciation of Almerin Grow remains one of his most classic combinations of wrath and wit. Grow, whose perjury had heavily injured the Saints during one of their struggles with the national government, wanted rebaptism. "He has been baptised into this church from twenty to fifty times," read the unlaunchezd report of Young's remarks.

and has been cut off from five to ten times. But I tell you that I can have no fellowship for any person that will take him into the waters of baptism . . . unless he does it as the Catholic priest did to the Jew that got into an ice hole and cried for help. The Catholic priest passing by at the time, hastened to his assistance. He asked the Jew if he believed in Jesus Christ. The Jew . . . not coming to the priestly terms was dipped under the ice for a while, and then permitted to come to terms again. After successive dipping, the Jew finally said that he believed, when the priest thanked God for another convert and there and then drowned him while he was in the faith. If you should take Almerin Grow to [the] Jordan [River, for baptism], save him while he is in the faith.26

Perhaps no one could have gotten away with such preaching but Brigham himself. Far from rankling under his thrusts, the Mormon membership came to tolerate, expect, and even enjoy the show. Wilford Woodruff's reaction to an 1851 sermon was probably a common and frequent sentiment. "Attended meeting, Heard Brigham Young speak. Could have listened to him all day."27

One did not have to go far to find the keys to his speaking popularity. For one thing, his audience sensed that behind his strong words lay a genuine concern. "My heart yearns over [the Saints] . . . with all the emotions of tenderness, so that I could weep like a child," he said, "but I am careful to keep my tears to myself." He assured his people that he never intended malice. "There is not a soul I chasten but what I feel as though I could take them and put them in my bosom and carry them with me day by day."28

Brigham believed that his strong words had not separated him from his flock. "Although I may get up here and cuss . . . [the people] about, chastising them for their forgetfulness, their weakness and follies, yet I have not seen a moment when they did not love me. The
reason is, because I love them so well."29 He had rebuked with caution, he thought, employing a primary rule: "When you have the chastening rod in your hands, ask God to give you wisdom to use it, that you may not use it to the destruction of an individual, but to his salvation."30

Moreover, the Saints who listened to him Sunday after Sunday knew what the occasional visitors at the Tabernacle did not: Young's preachings were often upbeat and liberal. Doctrines of depravity and damnation had no appeal for him. Humankind, he believed, was good.31 He rejected out of hand the idea that his church monopolized good intentions or righteousness. At times, he praised the virtues of Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and even what his century called "benighted aborigines."32 While Mormonism had higher truths, he concluded "there has been more or less virtue and righteousness upon the earth at all times, from the days of Adam until now."

The Saints also understood that there was little bite to his celebrated bark. Young admitted as much. "I have had some people ask me how I manage and control the people," he once remarked. "I do it by telling them the truth and letting them do just as they have a mind to."34 Accordingly, he claimed that his "best method of preaching" came not from the whip but from example. "I expect that if I should see a wagon in the mud, my shoulder would be first to the wheel to lift it out."35 Such an informal policy extended even to enemies. "One of the nicest things in the world," he believed, "is to let an enemy alone entirely, . . . it mortifies him to death."36

Brigham's pulpit appeal involved more than his broad-gauged views and a general even-handed policy. Even more important, he understood public speaking's most basic rule—know your audience and speak to their level. Certainly, he had no illusions about the Saints' sophistication. "We have mostly come from the plough and the furrow," he admitted, "from the mechanic shops and the loom, from the spinning-jenny, the kitchen, and wash-room." These he realized were his gallery, and he called them "the poor and the ignorant from the dens and caves of the earth."37

Wilford H. Munro, a visitor who judged Brigham by the era's prevailing Victorianism, nevertheless understood how ably Young measured his followers and spoke to their understanding. "Often [Young] was ungrammatical, occasionally he was witty, sometimes he was slangy and profane, sometimes he was obscene." Munro observed. But "his sermons were always to the point. He had a message to put forth, and his language could always be understood by his people. He knew his audience."38

Jules Remy, an equally shrewd observer, noted that behind Young's strong words, humor, and unusual audience rapport lay a compelling message. The Prophet might employ "puns, jokes, [and] buffooneries," Remy noted. Or he might use ridicule with point and readiness; he abounds in personalities, and with allusions which the public easily seize, inasmuch as he possesses remarkable talent as a mimic, and does not hesitate to imitate the gestures, voice, and language of those whom he desires to put upon the stage. But this is again another element of success with a popular audience. Besides, under forms that are frequently grotesque, there lies a thoughtful, practical truth, which every man may turn to his profit. The comedian is, in fact, the auxiliary of the pontiff and the moralist.39

Thus, Young's words and platform manner were often calculated for effect. For a typical Tabernacle congregation, he thought normal and respectable words were like "wind," going "into the ear and . . . [soon] forgotten."40 Therefore, he used stronger measures. "When you wish the people to feel what you say," he once said revealingly, "you have got to use language that they will remember, or else the ideas are lost to them. Consequently, in many instances we use language that we would rather not use."41

Of course, his rhetoric was not always conscious and deliberate. His celebrated temper also played a role. Once when incapacitated by a painful backache, he had a chair positioned in front of the Bowery, from whence he spoke to the men of the priesthood. Becoming aroused by his own remarks, he stood and began to "roar out his feelings." He walked back and forth across the platform, vigorously gesturing with walking stick, his illness completely forgotten.42 At the St. George Temple dedication, his temper and cane were once more manifested. So lame that three men carried him into the building on a chair, Brigham assumed the pulpit for thirty minutes, punctuating his last sentence by striking his hickory cane on the lower stand with such power that one observer claimed the indentation would last "for a generation."43

Usually, he was more composed. The Eastern travelers who visited him at his office often contrasted pulpit behavior with his plain and steady private manner (many said he bore the aspect of a New England farmer or London alderman).44 The Saints themselves knew first hand the contrast between the public and private Brigham—the pulpit lawgiver, on the one hand, and the more genial, tolerant, human man they might meet on the street. It was, however, a difference that most Eastern newspapermen, hot after good copy, failed to report. As a result, they helped mold Brigham's rustic and iron-fisted image that persists to this day.

While paying a heavy cost in personal image and public relations, Young nevertheless was probably satisfied by his speaking efforts. From the moment he awkwardly assumed his first pulpit, he wanted to lift the Saints and transform them into an ideal society. Such talk was very much in the nineteenth century air, with over one hundred such schemes in America alone.45 In part due to Brigham's ability to communicate and motivate, his Zion probably excelled any of them, especially when judged by the scale of its operation and by its success in transforming the lives of its people. Today's well-dressed, healthy, contented, middle-class Tabernacle congregation, so far from the rough folk that Hiram Rumfield saw, strongly argues the case.

Perhaps if Rumfield could again return to Salt Lake City's Temple Square, he would admit the reality of his unexpected miracle. However, at least one man who lived to see the Mormons' vast social change sensed that Brigham, himself, was one reason for the wonder. Fifty years after Young's death, President Heber J. Grant was asked to describe his predecessor's greatest
contribution. Grant, who had been a youthful member of Young's congregation, was certain of the verdict. It was, he thought, "his wonderful capacity to hold his audience and to inspire those who heard him preach on the principles of life and salvation."46

Toward the end of his life, Brigham's zest for the pulpit seemed to fade. For him, sermonizing had been arduous work, taxing both nerves and body. His enunciation and powerful voice, his informal and sometimes vigorous gestures, his commanding presence—such speaking traits required much mental and physical energy. "I very frequently feel that my talk is almost finished," he once said. "It is pretty much gone out of me." But with only a year to live, his spirits seemed to revive. On second thought, the old forensic warrior concluded he had lungs enough "to serve [for] another hundred years."47

Notes
1. Hiram S. Rumfield to Frank ?, 26 Dec. 1861, Letters of an Overland Mail Agent in Utah, ed. Archer B. Hulbert (Worcester, Massachusetts: American Antiquarian Society, 1929), pp. 33-34, 41. For earlier discussions of Young's public speaking, see Chester J. Myers, "A Critical Analysis and Appraisal of the Work of Brigham Young as a Public Speaker," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Southern California, 1940). This paper was delivered as part of the Sons of the Utah Pioneers lecture series "The Legacy of Brigham Young" and will appear in a forthcoming volume by that name. The author is indebted to his colleagues, Leonard J. Arrington, Ronald K. Esplin, and Dean C. Jessop for their useful contributions and suggestions.


3. JD 14:103. Ten years before his death when addressing a Sunday School in Salt Lake City, Young lectured the youth "to use the pronunciation of words correctly" and avoid "all errors and defects," for their educational opportunities far exceeded his own. Salt Lake Stake, Thirteenth Ward Sunday School Minutes, 26 April 1868, Church Archives.

4. JD 1:313-14.
5. Ibid. 1:321.
6. Ibid. 5:97.
13. Reminiscence of William H. Knight, LeRoy R. Hafen Collection, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
17. Cornwall and Arrington, "Men and Women of Letters," see especially fn. number 81. Young's failure is recorded by Edward W. Tullidge, The History of Salt Lake City and Its Founders (Salt Lake City: By the Author, 1886), pp. 352-53.
18. JD 3:222-23.
19. Mary Haskin Parker Richards Journal, 14 May 1848, Church Archives.
20. Wilford Woodruff Diary, 14 September 1856.
23. Wilford Woodruff Diary, 19 October 1856, Church Archives.
24. Wilford Woodruff Diary, 19 October 1856, Church Archives.
26. Speech, nd, Miscellaneous Files, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives.
27. Wilford Woodruff Diary, 24 October 1851 and 12 June 1858, Church Archives.
29. Ibid., 1:33.
31. Ibid., 10:189.
33. Ibid., 6:170.
34. Ibid., 14:162-63.
35. Ibid., 11:130, 12:271, 16:113.
36. Ibid., 19:70.
37. Ibid., 6:70-71; 12:256-57; and 14:192.
40. JD 15:62.
41. Ibid., 12:298-99; also 14:193.
42. Heber C. Kimball to Joseph A. Young, 8 September 1855, Historian's Office Letterbook, 1:256.
43. Wilford Woodruff to Emma Smith Woodruff, 6 January 1877, Emma Smith Woodruff Papers, Church Archives.
44. For instance see William Chandless, A Visit to Salt Lake, Being a Journey Across the Plains and a Residence in the Mormon Settlements at Utah (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1857), p. 189.
47. Heber J. Grant to Susan Young Gates, 16 March 1927, Heber J. Grant Letterbook, 63:167-68, Heber J. Grant Papers, Church Archives.