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A Minor Prophet in Iowa

In 1839, Joseph Smith and his Mormon followers, casting about for a spot where they might live free from the violence that had been their lot, came upon the deserted village of Commerce in Illinois. There they decided to establish the seat of their faith. In April, 1840, the name of the village was changed to Nauvoo, a word alleged to be of Hebraic origin which was interpreted to mean "a beautiful place".

For some time this Mormon settlement was unmolested and the community flourished. By 1842, the town had perhaps ten thousand inhabitants, and three years later had become the largest city in Illinois. It was a restless, fluxive population, however, with new faces and families coming up the river to replace the flow of disappointed members who dropped away.

Peace and success were short-lived and by 1846, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were dead — lynched by a mob at Carthage, Illinois. There was schism within the church and threatening hatred from without. Again the Mormons, under their new leader, Brigham Young, were casting about for a haven of safety.

Abandoning their homes and hard-earned possessions, two or three thousand of these Mormons crossed into Iowa early in the spring of 1846 and

made their way across the southern part of the State. Probably twelve thousand more followed the trail-makers during the course of the summer. Travelling the spring and summer through, they gathered at last, weary and sore, at a camp in Pottawattamie County where they wintered, while Brigham Young dreamed of a kingdom in the desert and planned the steps of the great overland trek that was to carry them across the plains to the fastnesses of their new home.

At this time there seems to have been some thought of a permanent settlement in western Iowa. Evidence of this is seen in a letter written in 1848 by one of the Mormon leaders to some of his brethren in Europe, encouraging emigration to America. "A great extensive, and rich tract of country has also been, by the providence of God, put in the possession of the Saints in the western borders of Iowa", he wrote. On account of the Mormon settlement the legislature of Iowa organized Pottawattamie County, but the colony was not permanent and by 1853 most of the emigrants from Nauvoo had passed on to Utah.

Though the main body of the Mormons moved westward to the land of promise, little groups broke away from the caravans here and there and remained to mark the trail. Scattered through Iowa along the lines of march are evidences of the passing of the Mormons and incidents long forgotten may be found in local histories and official records. Such

an incident revolves around the strange case of Charles B. Thompson, who appears to have been one of the number that for one reason or another broke away from the main group of the faithful.

In the year 1853, a Mormon leader, Charles B. Thompson by name, came to Iowa and settled on Soldier Creek in what is now Monona County. A little later he was followed by about fifty Mormon families. Good land was preëmpted by this group, and in 1854 Thompson laid out a town about fifteen miles southeast of Onawa. This town was called Preparation, in view of the fact that it was to be but a brief biding place in which his followers were to so school and discipline themselves as to be fit partakers in that larger life that was to be the lot of these Latter Day Saints when their earthly careers were done.

In the same year a county government was organized and officers chosen to transact the business of the county. Thompson was content to be the county judge while Hugh Lytle was made the treasurer and recorder. Andrew Hall as clerk and J. F. Lane as sheriff completed the list. The first business was transacted at Preparation. In the fall of 1854, however, the county seat was definitely located at Ashton.

In a short time the newcomers became very active. Thompson started two papers: one, a weekly called *The Messenger*, and the other, a monthly called *Zion's Herald*. They were both published at

Preparation. He also assumed the whole responsibility of organizing and directing the life of his followers in their new homes. This was three years before the Mormon Land Company laid out the town of Onawa.

In organizing and directing the life of his community, Thompson's methods were unique if not altogether successful. "The word of the Lord" came to him from time to time in the midst of his labors, and in compliance with divine counsel he set up "Schools of Faith" and "Schools of Work" in the community, which he called "Jehovah's Presbytery of Zion". To be eligible for admission into the schools, it was revealed to him, the neophyte must enter into certain covenants. For example: "In consideration of the instruction received in the school of Jehovah's Presbytery of Zion, I now give, bequeath and consecrate, and promise to pay to Charles B. Thompson, chief steward of the House of Jehovah, and chief teacher of the Order of Elias the Prophet, in Jehovah's Presbytery of Zion, for the *service thereof*, the value of one-tenth of my real and personal estate, including cash on hand and money due, and one-tenth of the increase of the remainder forever; also one-tenth of my time and services. And I solemnly covenant never to require any remuneration for the same, other than the instruction received."

But that was not all. Father Ephraim, as he called himself, had almost complete control over his

disciples. His wish was law, for was he not the "chief steward of the Lord, and the first-born of the kingdom in these last days". They rendered obedience to him cheerfully, confidingly, in "body, mind, and estate". So there was no murmur or protest when in a short time Thompson required gift oblations and sacrifices as well as tithings. On the fifteenth day of April, the twenty-ninth day of August, and the twenty-seventh day of December in each year the faithful were to make their gift oblations. Every three years came the "Fast of Tithings" at which time tithings were required. Then, with the passing of every seven years, came the "Fast of Sacrifices" when sacrifices had to be made.

At all times Father Ephraim was in direct communication with the forces of the Spirit World and these requirements and commands were transmitted to him in special revelations. That he had no choice in the matter is shown in the record of the following revelation which came to him. "And now behold, I appoint unto you my servant, Charles B. Thompson, whom I have made chief steward of my house; for behold, I have prized him as I did Abraham of old, and he has kept my covenant. And behold, he is the first-born of my kingdom in these last days; therefore have I made him chief steward of my house, and have qualified and appointed him to *receive, hold, manage and direct*, all of the sacred treasures of my house, the oblations, gifts, tithings, and sacrifices of my people."

In 1854 the voice was heard again and this time the law of sacrifices was revealed. In consequence the members of the society were required to sacrifice all their earthly possessions to Thompson, for the use of Jehovah's Presbytery of Zion. "To enrich the treasury of the Lord", the members of the society, at the command of Thompson, bound themselves and their children "to labor faithfully for and under the direction of Charles B. Thompson for two years". In consideration of this he agreed to furnish board, lodging, and clothing.

The law of sacrifices as revealed to him was specific and phrased in precise legal terms. It required that his followers execute to him bills of sale of all their personal property and deeds of all their real property. But they did not murmur, for they were giving, paying, and sacrificing to the Lord, for was not this "the word of the Lord, by the voice of Banemey, coming unto Charles B. Thompson, chief steward of the Lord's House", requiring of them that they do these things.

But the Gentiles in the adjoining counties were not of the same mind. Some of them, it seems, were prone to entertain the notion that Thompson was not in truth the "chief steward of the Lord's House". To remove all such dark doubtings and especially to dispel rumors that he was oppressing and maltreating his people, Thompson issued in 1855 "An Appeal" to his people. This was in the nature of a reply to "our enemies" in which he de-

scribed fully the history and nature of the society called "Jehovah's Presbytery of Zion".

It was during this same year that Thompson incorporated what he called the "House of Ephraim" for which shares of stock were issued representing the property of the corporation. It was not strange that most of these shares were assigned to Thompson. But the domination of the chief steward was nearing an end. The seeds of doubt that had been sown were flourishing and the harvest of revolt would soon be ripe. The year was not finished before some men began suit against the prophet to recover their property. He was compelled to compromise, and from then until 1866, when the State Supreme Court finally disposed of his claims altogether, Thompson was in constant difficulty.

His zero hour came in 1858 when he refused to divide the property or settle with the members of the society. Thereupon his people turned against him in such great anger that he was compelled to flee precipitantly from the settlement. In the words of a county chronicler, "the fellow was hunted with great pertinacity by his victims, but he escaped with his life and lived long enough to realize absolute destitution."

At the time of his embarrassment, Thompson conveyed to one, Guy C. Barnum, who was "an assistant steward in the Lord's House", a large portion of the lands belonging to the society of the Presbytery of Zion. His wife and his brother, Daniel S.

Thompson, also received part of the land, which amounted to nearly three thousand acres. These lands, obtained and conveyed in a fraudulent manner, were the subject of long litigation that terminated finally in 1866.

During all this time the land, though fraudulently obtained and fraudulently conveyed by Thompson, was actually in the continuous possession of the disciples and this disposition was made permanent by the decision of the Supreme Court of Iowa which declared that the land held in trust by Thompson and conveyed by him to his wife, brother, and Barnum should be divided among the disciples equitably, if that were their wish.

“Jehovah’s Presbytery of Zion” near Preparation soon became only a memory. Its founder and leader, who had remained discreetly absent from his settlement since his precipitous departure in 1858, was left to his own devices. His “voice” still followed him and he attempted to found other churches, but with no success. Thus passed from the scene one of the “minor prophets” of early Iowa.

F. R. AUMANN