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Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism

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Parley P. Pratt

*The Apostle Paul
of Mormonism*



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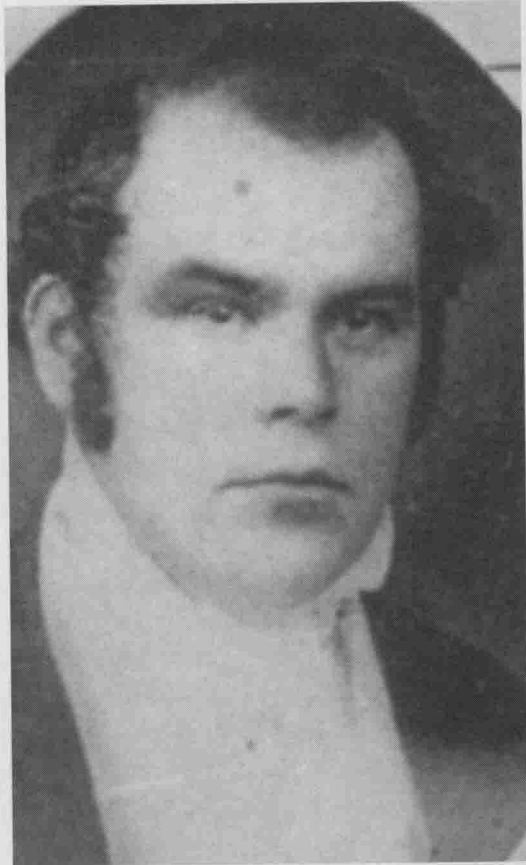


FIGURE I.1 Early undated photograph of Parley P. Pratt. Courtesy Utah State Historical Society.

Introduction

Earth ought to be full of prophets and heaven and earth
full of angels.

—PARLEY P. PRATT, *sermon, 10 July 1853*

ON A SPRING day in 1853, a forty-six-year-old Mormon apostle sat in his modest home just outside Temple Square in Salt Lake City to respond to a request from a long-lost friend from his youth for a sketch of his life. Reflecting upon his experiences, Parley P. Pratt mused that “such a history would overload the mail” and would appear “far more strange to you than the thousand volumes of Modern Fiction.” Against the background of their shared boyhood in the backwoods of New York, Pratt’s subsequent life appeared improbable, even fantastic. Since that time, he had traveled widely throughout the United States and Canada, led Mormon pioneer companies past the “moving masses of wild Buffalo on the boundless, treeless plains” to Utah, preached in San Francisco during the Gold Rush, crossed the Atlantic Ocean six times, and eaten “figs from the tree” in Chile. His life had been one of extremes, of “poverty and riches, peace and war,” sublime joys and devastating sorrows.

Controversy had perennially stalked him, Pratt continued, as he had “been received almost as an Angel by thousands and counted an Imposter by tens of thousands.” Fifteen years previously in Missouri, he had “lain months in gloomy dungeons, and been loaded with chains,” though he had “been visited there by visions of Angels and Spirits, and been delivered by miracles.” As a defender of Mormonism, Pratt had publicly debated “priests, learned men and Infidels,” “stood before senators and Governors,” and had “edited periodicals and written and published books.” In his private life, Pratt would marry a dozen times and father thirty children. “In short,” he wrote, “I have been a farmer, a servant, a fisher, a digger, a beggar, a preacher, an author, an editor, a senator, a traveler, a merchant, an elder and an Apostle of Jesus Christ.” Pratt exclaimed, “Is not truth stranger than fiction!!!”¹

Pratt’s well-honed literary instincts were correct; the narrative of his life could have formed the basis of a page-turning novel. By 1853, he had already

become, after Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, the most influential figure in shaping early Mormon history, culture, and theology. Pratt exerted that influence across an astounding spectrum, excelling as a missionary, explorer, hymnist, pamphleteer, autobiographer, historian, and theologian. The final four years of his life only solidified his place as one of the most engaging, colorful, and powerful figures in early Mormonism. In 1857, to the unrestrained cheers of the national media and the laments of the Latter-day Saints, Pratt was murdered in Arkansas by the estranged husband of his twelfth wife.

Born to a hardscrabble family in New York in 1807, Pratt struck out in the late 1820s for the frontier of northern Ohio, where he converted to the religious message of the Campbellites, modeled on the primitive Christian Church of the New Testament. Inspired by his newfound faith, Pratt became a freelance minister during the chaotic years of the Second Great Awakening, but an encounter with the Book of Mormon in the fall of 1830 changed his trajectory. By converting to Mormonism, Pratt added doctrines of priesthood authority to the primitivism and millennialism of the Campbellites. The Book of Mormon fired his religious imagination, both as a harbinger of millennial events and for proclaiming American Indians to be the descendants in part of an Israelite civilization. He joined the infant Mormon movement in September 1830, six months after its formal founding. Soon after his baptism, Joseph Smith, the youthful Mormon prophet, appointed him as one of four missionaries to the "Lamanites," the Book of Mormon people whose descendants early Mormons viewed as contemporary American Indians, in Missouri. Pratt's decision to take his fellow missionaries to visit his former religious mentor, Campbellite Sidney Rigdon, in Kirtland, Ohio, altered Mormon history, as hundreds of conversions followed and shifted the Mormon center of gravity from New York to Ohio. Soon Smith announced a revelation proclaiming a gathering of his followers in that area.

Pratt spent relatively little time in Kirtland in the early 1830s, opting instead to live in Missouri, which Smith's revelations proclaimed the site of a New Jerusalem. Driven from home there, as were other Saints in late 1833 in the first of a five-year-long series of increasingly violent clashes between Missourians and Mormons, Pratt served a pivotal role in the Zion's Camp expedition, which sought to restore the expelled Mormons to their homes and lands. In 1835, Smith called twenty-seven-year-old Pratt (along with his twenty-three-year-old brother, Orson) as a member of the newly formed Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Pratt's apostolic position vaulted him into the forefront of Mormonism for the remainder of his life.

Our subtitle dubs Pratt the Apostle Paul of Mormonism. Certainly, key differences exist between Paul and Parley—between a first-century educated scion of the Jewish diaspora and a nineteenth-century self-taught backwoodsman; between a reputed champion of celibacy and a promulgator of polygamy. Nevertheless, both men possessed a deep sense of the divine importance of their apostolic calling and a bold, blunt, outspoken style that led to frequent controversies. Just as Paul clashed with Peter, Pratt dissented at times from both Smith and Young, making clear that his commitment to Mormonism rested not on devotion to a charismatic leader but spiritual and intellectual assent to the religion's doctrines. Religiously devout even before their conversions to Christianity and Mormonism, Paul and Pratt passionately devoted their lives to advancing their new causes, driven by a belief in an oncoming millennium.² Pratt's millennial urgency stands out even from his peers among Latter-day Saints and other religious enthusiasts of the era; he titled his first extensive printed work, Mormonism's first book of poetry, *Millennium*.

We make the comparison between these religious figures for three key reasons that transcend the stylistic similarities between Paul and Pratt. First, in early Christianity, Paul's writings (or at least those attributed to him)—including thirteen of the twenty-seven canonical New Testament books—systematized and popularized Jesus's teachings. Pratt's extensive writings served the same function in early Mormonism. His newspaper articles, pamphlets, and books explored the implications of Smith's revelations and the Book of Mormon, clarifying and expanding Latter-day Saint doctrines, including key theological points such as the physicality of God, the domesticity of heaven, the possibilities of theosis (human divinization), and the religious rationale for plural marriage.

In his letter to his boyhood friend, Pratt emphasized the drama of his life, while only mentioning in passing his literary and intellectual contributions to the development of Mormon thought. In many respects, though, Pratt exerted his influence most powerfully through his writing. Early Mormonism achieved its reach through both ambitious evangelizing and an extensive print culture based in newspapers, pamphlets, and early theological treatises. Heavily involved in all of these media, Pratt ranged across many genres: poetry, hymns, short stories, satire, apologetics, history, and theology. He lived in an era when print culture was rapidly democratizing, and like other religious and reform leaders, Pratt took advantage of inexpensive pamphlets and the popular press to spread his message. He pioneered Mormon print culture, writing the first handbill, first book of poetry, first work of fiction,

first apologetic pamphlet, and first successful missionary book. The father of Mormon pamphleteering, Pratt wrote more than two dozen tracts to spread the Latter-day Saint message, combat its detractors, and explore its theology. In 1840, he served as the founding editor for the *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, the church's influential British periodical, and he later edited a New York newspaper called *The Prophet*. Two of his books—one written near the beginning of his writing career and one near the end—attained near-canonical status, remained among the most widely read Mormon works for several decades after his death, and continue to shape the contours of Mormon theology. His millennial *Voice of Warning* (1837), which clarified Latter-day Saint doctrines for both outsiders and church members, proved exceptionally effective as a missionary tool. In *Key to the Science of Theology* (1855), Pratt ambitiously reached beyond first principles to attempt a comprehensive cosmology and ontology. While still recognized for his *Voice of Warning* and *Key to the Science of Theology*, Pratt made many of his most profound theological contributions to early Mormonism in long-forgotten but once-influential short pamphlets.

Pratt's writings, which deeply influenced other Mormon authors, particularly his equally prolific younger brother, Orson, not only helped convert thousands to Mormonism but also shaped the Mormon theological system. In 1870, Mormon dissident Edward Tullidge commented on the influence of the Pratt brothers: "Ask the people what brought them into the church, and you would hear from every direction Parley Pratt's 'Voice of Warning' or 'Orson Pratt's Tracts,' until it would almost seem to you that the Pratts created the church. Indeed the best part of Mormon theology has been derived to a great extent from them, and so it may be said that they also, to a great extent, originated Mormonism." While the first half of Tullidge's statement would have gratified Pratt, he likely would have objected to the claim that he had "created" or "originated" Mormonism. Though combative, Pratt consistently demonstrated his commitment to the revelations and teachings of Joseph Smith, whom he revered as a prophet and restorer of ancient truths. Only once, in a personal dispute over a failed business transaction in 1837, did he clash openly with Smith, and even then he reiterated his devotion to Mormonism's scriptural canon. Pratt saw his role not as innovator, but as systematizer and popularizer.

Nevertheless, his speculative writings also pushed Mormon thought in new directions. Many modern Mormons imagine a relatively linear process of doctrinal development in the church's early years, with Smith revealing each new doctrine to the church in orderly sequence. Smith, however, viewed

himself as both revelator and inspired eclecticist, pulling truths not only from heaven, but also from his culture and his contemporaries. Pratt's writings and interactions with Smith suggest a more nuanced and messier process of doctrinal development; with some issues, he took germs of ideas from Smith's revelations and explored their implications, thereby extending the boundaries of Mormon thought and suggesting doctrines that later received Smith's imprimatur. Pratt's extensive writings, which systematized, expanded, and made accessible Smith's teachings, illustrate a crucial stage of any new religious movement: the creation, explication, and popularization of a theological system.

Second, like Paul, Pratt's extensive missionary travels helped put his movement on the path from small sect to worldwide religion. Paul primarily proselytized in Jewish quarters of cities in the northern Mediterranean. Similarly, while Pratt spent much time preaching in small towns, particularly in the early and mid 1830s, he concentrated his missionary labors in large cities, including Toronto; New York City; Manchester; Liverpool; San Francisco; and Valparaiso, Chile. His public proselytizing during the Second Great Awakening—first as an itinerant minister loosely affiliated with the Campbellites and subsequently as a Latter-day Saint missionary—demonstrates the rich public culture of religious debate and dissent. Like Paul, who “almost persuaded” Agrippa to be a Christian, Pratt was a tireless and persuasive preacher. The *Edinburgh Review* deemed him in 1854 as “chief of the Mormon missionaries.”⁴ His converts filled not only Mormonism's rank-and-file, but also included future leaders such as John Taylor, the church's third president.

Pratt contributed to the expansion and internationalization of early Mormonism by serving crucial missions in Canada (1836) and in England (1840–1842), when thousands joined Mormonism and immigrated to the United States. Following Joseph Smith's death in 1844, a vigorous battle occurred within Mormonism over who should succeed Smith as leader, with the claimants including Brigham Young and the Twelve Apostles, Pratt's former teacher Sidney Rigdon, and the charismatic James J. Strang. Pratt first helped Young and the apostles win over most Mormons in the Latter-day Saint headquarters of Nauvoo, Illinois. Then, during missions to the eastern states in 1844–1845 and to England in 1846–1847, Pratt's actions helped ensure that the majority of Mormons outside of Nauvoo, particularly the large numbers of British converts, remained loyal to apostolic authority. In the 1850s, Pratt's two missions to California and a mission to Chile (the first Mormon mission in Latin America) helped orient the church toward the

Pacific Rim and Latin America. Pratt's missionary work also serves as a window onto the finances and family life of early Mormon missionaries and of itinerants of the era more broadly.

Third, like Paul, Pratt reveled in opposition and persecution, and in his own eyes and the beliefs of the Latter-day Saints, met a martyr's death. Writing of the death of his five-year-old son, Nathan, in Nauvoo in 1843, Pratt stated, "He died an infant, but he can say with Paul, 'in prison oft, in stripes more abundant, in tribulations, in persecutions, in perils by the sea and land, in perils among robbers, and among false brethren, and in travels more abundant.'"⁵ Pratt viewed himself in the same way. Imprisoned for eight months in 1838–1839 as a consequence of his participation in a battle between Mormons and Missourians, and held longer than Joseph Smith and any other Latter-day Saint, Pratt compared his prison experience to Paul's in a letter to his wife.⁶ En route to a mission to California in 1851, reflecting on his "travels more abundant," Pratt wondered "how many of the days of our manhood, and of our strength and vigour are thrown away in apparent uselessness without enjoyment to ourselves or usefulness to our family or any boddy else. Some, on the sea, and Some on land and in the desarts or in Prisons." But, he reminded himself, "It was so with Paul, and with Peter and John, and others of old."⁷

Crucially, Pratt not only saw himself as the object of persecution; his writings shaped a Mormon memory and collective identity forged in persecution, particularly in the expulsions from Missouri. His *History of the Late Persecution* (1839) persuasively developed a narrative of persecution that shaped Mormon culture throughout the nineteenth century and, in some ways, to the present day. Pratt deeply believed that the Mormons' suffering revealed they were God's chosen people. Joseph Smith expressed this belief in 1842: "I feel, like Paul, to glory in tribulation."⁸ Pratt, likewise glorying in his persecution and proclaiming himself a martyr as he died in 1857, personified the early Mormon culture of persecution.

We are not the first to tell Pratt's story. He did so in a well-regarded autobiography, posthumously published in 1874, which remains widely read and is a classic statement of the nineteenth-century Mormon experience.⁹ Pratt wrote his autobiography in the mid-1850s, using a variety of already published materials and his own memory. In so doing, he established for posterity the legendary Parley P. Pratt, the trickster of bulldogs, the jailed apostle, the intrepid and indefatigable missionary, the fearless explorer. His autobiography is a crucial source for this book—particularly for information on his early years, for which other records are scarce.

Writing about a subject who is a capable autobiographer both helps and complicates the biographer's task. Autobiographies are a window into an individual's motivations, actions, and thoughts. And yet they conceal as much as they reveal. Like all autobiographers, Pratt selectively fashioned his history. The problem is not factual accuracy. Indeed, Pratt's memory of names, places, and events is remarkably (though not completely) correct; most can be confirmed in other contemporary sources. The challenge, rather, is that Pratt constructed his autobiography to reveal how he became the apostle he was in midlife. He cast events to explain his crucial role in early Mormon development and omitted or underemphasized events and issues that did not fit within this central narrative.

Pratt's autobiography is uneven, with about a quarter of the published text devoted to his eight months of imprisonment in Missouri. In addition, the quality of the autobiography drops off noticeably after 1851, as the fluent narrative is replaced by episodic journals, letters, and newspaper articles. Like other early American autobiographers, such as Benjamin Franklin, Pratt largely omitted information on his family life. His private letters, by contrast, demonstrate great concern and longing for his family when absent, suggesting the abiding tension in Pratt's life between a religion that exalted family life (and Pratt's own writings were crucial in developing Mormon theology of family life, including the concept of a domestic heaven) and yet required his continual absence from it for short preaching tours and long missionary journeys. Pratt felt genuine joy in his family circle and strongly saw himself as a celestial patriarch-in-the-making, and yet his devotion to Mormonism required a kingdom-or-nothing-attitude that led to frequent absences even with family members ill, with babies about to be born, or with his family in deep poverty. Everything had to be subordinated to the needs of the kingdom and the oncoming millennial timetable. Pratt's family life, particularly after the onset of polygamy, dramatically reveals both the struggles and the joys of the new marital system. His letters, and the statements of his wives and children, serve as a window onto the daily reality of plural marriage. Our biography aims to restore Pratt's family life—from his monogamous marriage in 1829 with Thankful Halsey to his large polygamous family of the 1840s and 1850s—as central to his story.

In addition, while Pratt's autobiography mentions his other various writings, he did not generally elaborate or summarize them. Understanding Pratt's significance requires placing him within his intellectual and theological worlds, both within early Mormonism and beyond. Finally, Pratt underplayed controversial events in his autobiography. Strong-willed, he clashed with his

religious leaders and family members, including Joseph Smith; Brigham Young; his brother Orson; and his second wife, Mary Ann Frost. These confrontations reveal changing ideas of religious authority within the early Mormon movement as well as the domestic challenges occasioned by the transition from monogamy to polygamy.

Perhaps because of his perennially published and highly readable autobiography, Pratt has never received the scholarly biography that has long been overdue. In recent decades, a wonderful trove of primary sources has been amassed, primarily by descendant R. Steven Pratt, who graciously allowed us access to the materials. Archival repositories, particularly at the Church History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and at Brigham Young University, have preserved Pratt's insightful letters and journals, as well as minutes of meetings he attended and records of some members of his family (including several wives and his brother Orson). In addition, many of Pratt's associates left many records detailing Pratt's life.

In his letter to his boyhood friend in 1853, Pratt stated that he had written only the "thousandth part" of his own life. The conclusion of Pratt's letter to his friend nevertheless captures the core of his self-identity as a single-minded apostle preparing the world for the millennial reign of Jesus Christ. After providing a quick overview of his life, Pratt quickly pivoted to a "testimony in regard to our *religion*": "Angels have ministered to some of us in the present age and have ordained a new apostleship and renewed the commission to preach the Gospel and baptise all who turn to the Lord and believe our testimony. This new dispensation is a special message to all the world: in order to prepare the way for the second coming of Jesus Christ." He encouraged his friend to investigate the Latter-day Saint message, convert, move to Utah, and "renew the covenant of Eternal frindship which so early existed between us." Finally, he invited his friend to join in the central cause of Pratt's own life: "Yea come and help us to build up the kingdom of God."¹⁰