

THE · SOVEREIGNTY · OF · GOD · IN JOHN · CALVIN AND BRIGHAM · YOUNG

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John Calvin, the great Protestant reformer of the sixteenth century, and Brigham Young, Mormonism's second president and great American colonizer, are far removed from one another geographically, chronologically, and with respect to the universe of thought in which they lived. Calvin's education was so beautifully intensive yet varied, establishing a tripod base in scholasticism, humanism, and law, that some of his followers saw it as providential. Young had virtually no formal education. Calvin was a Christian scholar who only reluctantly allowed himself to be drawn into the political and ecclesiastical leadership role that was his for the last twenty-five years of his life. Young was a practical man, a carpenter, a missionary, a businessman, and a colonizer par excellence who always felt uneasy in the presence of men of words. To establish any influence of Calvin on Young seems unlikely if not inconceivable. If the Mormon leader retained any of his early Protestantism, it was Methodism. Presbyterianism, "puritanism" in the narrow sense, had negative connotations for him. Hellfire, predestination, and the depravity of man were ideas Young mentioned only to reject and scorn them. Yet at the heart of Calvin's theology was his conviction of the sovereignty of God. And in Brigham Young too the sovereignty of God was a recurrent theme. If the two great religious leaders drew different implications from the concept, that fact too helps to illuminate their systems of thought.

Of the centrality of God in the scheme of things there was no question in Calvin's mind. The maker of heaven and earth, God ruled so as to accomplish his purposes: "Herein lies the unfathomable greatness of God: not only did He once create heaven and earth but He also guides the whole process according to His will. Thus he who confesses God as Creator while supposing that He remains tranquilly in heaven without caring for the world, outrageously deprives God of all effective power."¹ This providential care is not readily perceived, certainly not by the unaided natural man. It is the eye of faith that sees. To such an eye it becomes obvious that there is nothing in the world that is not directly under the control of God and subject to His will.

For Calvin, God was not only Creator—a Deist's God who started the world in motion and left it to run on its own—but its protective, ongoing Providence. The "carnal mind," said Calvin, "is satisfied to recognize the Creator; we might say that in such cases there is a verbal, even intellectual, assent, but that it stops there, recognizing no continuous presence in our lives. The man of faith must recognize not only that there is a Creator but also 'a Governor and Preserver.' Easy theoretical acceptance of the idea has little real impact when it is not ac-

companied by a 'relish for that special care in which alone the paternal favour of God is discerned.'"²

Now how far would Calvin carry this idea? To what degree are the events of the world interesting to God, let alone caused by Him? Seldom in our day is God adduced as the cause of events. It is not an explanatory principle that gets us anywhere, for something that explains everything ends up by explaining nothing. It can be effectively argued, I think, that science was defined in a way enabling it to accomplish its potential only when God was set aside, so to speak, in order to concentrate on proximate causes that could be measured and compared. The same is true of history as we have come to know it. How satisfied would we be if in a discussion of the origins of World War II a modern historian declared that it was the result of God's hand in human affairs?

Even in Calvin's time it was easy, indeed common, to forget God. "By an erroneous opinion prevailing in all ages, an opinion almost universally prevailing in our own day—viz. that all things happen fortuitously—the true doctrine of Providence has not only been obscured, but almost buried."³ In opposition to this idea that things just happen, or by fortune, Calvin argued that "all events whatsoever are governed by the secret counsel of God." Even inanimate objects "exert their force only in so far as directed by the immediate hand of God."

Of course everyone was willing to recognize the "omnipotence" of God, this being a stock attribute that is found in all the creeds. But Calvin was not satisfied with such an easy term; he wanted to make sure that it was understood not as "the vain, indolent, slumbering omnipotence which sophists feign, but vigilant, efficacious, energetic, and ever active—not an omnipotence which may only act as a general principle of confused motion, as in ordering a stream to keep within the channel once prescribed to it, but one which is intent on individual and special movements."⁴

Expressed eloquently in the great closing chapters of Book One of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the providence of God did not mean that man must be a mere instrument, totally inactive in the process. He did not like the easy compromise of saying that man was a partner with God. God was "omnipotent," he says, "not because he can act though he may cease or be idle, or because by a general instinct, he continues the order of nature previously appointed; but because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so overrules all things that nothing happens without his counsel."⁵

Notice the word "overrule." It is an important word in Calvin's formulation; it finds its application with reference to those human affairs which appear on the surface less than consistent with divine objectives. Calvin envi-

sions a Deity who does not sit idly by but who "holds the helm, and overrules all events."⁶ "Overruling" is the process by which God brings "perplexed and dubious matters to a happy result."

Not that Calvin thought man was in a position to discern God's will and purposes. In relation to our capacity of discernment, things appeared fortuitous, contingent. But "what seems to us contingency, faith will recognize as the secret impulse of God," even if "the reason is not always equally apparent."⁷ Sometimes, to be sure, all of this is "conspicuous," but at other times the role of providence was anything but obvious. In "overruling all things"—again that important concept—God works "at one time with means, at another time without means, and at another against means." Brave indeed would be the human being who could pretend to see through such complexities. Calvin understands that "occasionally as the causes of events are concealed, the thought is apt to rise, that human affairs are whirled about by the blind impulse of Fortune, or our carnal nature inclines us to speak as if God were amusing himself by tossing men up and down like balls."⁸ But the man of faith must accept that behind all such appearances is the mind and hand of God and that in time his purposes will be made manifest.

In Chapter 17 of Book One, entitled "Use to be Made of the Doctrine of Providence," Calvin offers an interesting statement, recognizing on the one hand that man does not understand what is in the mind of God, but on the other hand that there is purpose and meaning in events even if we do not understand them:

It is true, indeed, that if with sedate and quiet minds we were disposed to learn, the issue would at length make it manifest that the counsel of God was in accordance with the highest reason, that his purpose was either to train his people to patience, correct their depraved affections, tame their wantonness, inure them to self-denial, and arouse them from torpor; or, on the other hand, to cast down the proud, defeat the craftiness of the ungodly, and frustrate all their schemes.⁹

This categorizing of possible explanations is, to my mind, virtually an airtight rationale for the doctrine of divine providence. Every contingency is provided with a possible explanation.

The doctrine enabled Calvin and his followers to deal with specific events. Persecution of the believers in France; the complicated course of international affairs; the relations between the different reformers; the rise of schism and heresy within the ranks of believers; even specific events like plagues and economic misfortune—all of these could be "taken in stride" with the confident recognition that God would overrule events for his purposes. More specifically, with the confidence that they were the elect of God, the Calvinists could offer tentative, plausible explanations for these specific events. An example is provided in a remarkable letter from Calvin to a Catholic priest who had pointed to a recent epidemic in Geneva as evidence of God's displeasure.¹⁰ In many incidents Calvin and his followers were able to find Biblical parallels; there were modern Herods, modern Gideons, modern Red Seas, and modern miracles paralleling those of the sacred record.

One way of conceptualizing this problem is in terms of standard syllogisms. The most important elements are contained in the givens, the assumptions, the premises;

once they are accepted, the rest follows inevitably. For Calvin, certain faith-premises were controlling. These included:

God exists.

The faithful will be (or are) saved.

Human history is subordinate to God's ultimate purpose.

When such basic positions are accepted, all one has to do when attempting to understand specific events is to "plug them in." A plague infests Geneva. Since this can scarcely be conceived of as a reward and since it cannot be thought of as contrary to the divine will, it must be intended to remind us of our dependence, to chasten those who had been tending to forget God, to punish the ungodly, or, since such "natural" disasters show little discrimination in choosing victims, to accomplish all of these purposes simultaneously. Examples could be multiplied, but in every instance the providential interpretation of the event is really implicit in a prior major premise. I do not think this would trouble Calvin, for he would see such premises as of the essence of faith.

Belief in an everruling divine providence did not lead Calvin and his followers to the kind of fatalism that would sit back and do nothing; Calvin saw no inconsistency between "human deliberation" and divine providence. For it was the Creator who had given us intelligence and ability:

For he who has fixed the boundaries of our life, has at the same time intrusted us with the care of it, provided us with the means of preserving it, forewarned us of the dangers to which we are exposed, and supplied cautions and remedies, that we may not be overwhelmed unawares. Now, our duty is clear, namely, since the Lord has committed to us the defense of our life,—to defend it; since he offers assistance,—to use it; since he forewarns us of danger—not to rush on heedless; since he supplied remedies,—not to neglect them.¹¹

It was the Creator who "has furnished men with the arts of deliberation and caution, that they may employ them in subservience to his providence . . ." And he does not allow us to see into the future for the important reason "that we may prepare for them as doubtful . . ." How do we do this? We "cease not to apply the provided remedies until they have either been overcome, or have proved too much for all our care."

An important element of the whole doctrine was its reassuring of the individual believer. Instead of throwing up hands in despair, one can rest assured that all will be well. Things will work out in the long run. There are explanations even when they are not readily apparent. Specifically, says Calvin, the Christian "will have no doubt that a special providence is awake for his preservation, and will not suffer anything to happen that will not turn to his good and safety."¹² This should not only be thought of in general terms. Rather, "it is of the highest moment that we should specially recognize this care toward ourselves."¹³ "Ourselves" here refers specifically to Calvin's fellow believers in the church, whom God "gives singular manifestations of his paternal care."¹⁴ The whole doctrine was comforting, reassuring. The knowledge that God "overrules," says Calvin, "is necessarily followed by gratitude in prosperity, patience in adversity, and incredible security for the time to come."¹⁵

Anticipating Pascal's later commentary on the human

condition, Calvin notes the “innumerable” ills of human life, how close we are to death, how slight are the means that might end our life. “Walk along the streets, every tile on the roofs is a source of danger.”¹⁶ Without a belief in God we humans would be miserable indeed, living “exposed to every blind and random stroke of fortune.”¹⁷ Fortunately, faith brings relief and a marvelous peace of mind.

Some three centuries later Brigham Young, who became Mormonism’s second prophet-leader, came on the scene. Although not a theologian in the strict sense of the word, not a trained scholar, not aware of many of the complexities of the history of Christian thought, Young could not be content simply to serve as an administrator, although he did this with vigor and often with success. He also had to make sense out of the welter of events, fitting them into the religious framework he had accepted when he became a Mormon in 1832. And his thoughts were not kept to himself. He produced thousands of letters, many position papers, and at least several hundred sermons. It is in these sermons especially that we find the mind of Brigham Young. And in them, I would argue, there is nothing more basic than his firm faith in the sovereignty and providence of God.

Brigham believed that the Latter-day Saints should “acknowledge the hand of God in all things.” In an interesting anticipation of a later invention, Young said, “If I had the skill given me today to construct a machine by which we could pass from nation to nation in the atmosphere as they now do on terra firma on the railway, would there be any harm in acknowledging God in this? I should receive the knowledge from Him; it is not independent and of myself. I am dependent upon Him for every breath I draw and for every blessing I receive. If you, ye nations or wise men of the earth, are not dependent upon Him, we would like to see you act independently. Let a man who thinks he has power independent of God—if there be such a man—take a grain of wheat, rye, barley, or a kernel of corn from the element God has ordained and organized for its development, and see if he can make it grow.”¹⁸

Here is a typical statement about God as Brigham Young saw him:

He is our heavenly Father; he is also our God, and the Maker and upholder of all things in heaven and on earth. He sends forth his counsels and extends his providences to all living. He is the Supreme Controller of the universe. At his rebuke the sea is dried up, and the rivers become a wilderness. He measures the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meteth out heaven with a span, and comprehendeth the dust of the earth in a measure, and weigheth the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance; the nations to him are as a drop in a bucket, and he taketh up the isles as a very little thing; the hairs of our heads are numbered by him, and not a sparrow falleth to the ground without our Father; and he knoweth every thought and intent of the hearts of all living, for he is everywhere present by the power of his Spirit—his minister, the Holy Ghost. He is the Father of all, is above all, through all, and in you all; he knoweth all things pertaining to this earth, and he knows all things pertaining to millions of earths like this.¹⁹

Again:

Whether they make good or bad use of it, all power is ordained of God and is in his hand. He sets up a kingdom

here, and pulls down another there at his pleasure. He breaks the nations like a potter’s vessel; he forms a nucleus, and around it builds up a kingdom or nation, permitting the people to act upon their own agency, that they may do right, or corrupt themselves, as did the Children of Israel; and after they have become ripe for destruction, they will be scattered to the four winds.²⁰

For Brigham Young God was clearly sovereign, the ruler and maker of heaven and earth, the overruler of all things for his own purposes. “Wars, commotions, tumults, strife, nation contending against nation, and people against people,” said Young, “have all been governed and controlled by him whose right it is to control such matters. Among wicked nations, or among Saints, among the ancient Israelites, Philistines, and Romans, the hand of the Lord was felt; in short, all the powers that have been upon the earth, have been dictated, governed, controlled, and the final issue of their existence has been brought to pass, according to the wisdom of the Almighty.”²¹

Such statements can be multiplied. Brigham Young over and over again returned to the idea that God was running the show. In this there was little claim to originality. The principle becomes most interesting, it seems to me, when it is applied to specific circumstances. One of the finest statements I have yet come across is the following contained in a letter from Brigham Young to Orson Hyde, dated July 28, 1850:

... we feel no fear. We are in the hands of our Heavenly Father, the God of Abraham and Joseph, who guided us to this land, who fed the poor Saints on the Plains with Quails, who gave his people strength to labour without bread, who sent the gulls of the deep as Saviours to preserve (by devouring the crickets) the golden wheat for bread for his people, and who has preserved his Saints from the wrath of their enemies, delivering them from a bondage more cruel than that inflicted upon Israel in Egypt. He is our Father and our Protector. We live in his Light, are guided by his Wisdom, protected by his Shadow, upheld by his Strength...²²

This personal statement breathes faith and interprets a series of specific events in terms of divine providence.

One of the problems facing those who in general terms are willing to see the hand of God in various happenings on earth, obviously, is that of negative experiences—trials, tribulations, suffering, persecution. If you see yourself as belonging to the Chosen, the Saints, then there must be some way of accounting for such experiences. For Brigham Young this posed no real problem. Indeed, he saw a positive value in persecution, in opposition. “Let any people enjoy peace and quiet, unmolested, undisturbed—never be persecuted for their religion, and they are very likely to neglect their duty, to become cold and indifferent, and lose their faith.”²³ He was confident that the opposition to the Church could not triumph in the long run. “Every time you kick Mormonism you kick it upstairs; you never kick it downstairs. The Lord Almighty so orders it.”²⁴ Statements similar in tone came up frequently in Young’s preaching. “You may calculate, when this people are called to go through scenes of affliction and suffering, are driven from their homes, and cast down, and scattered, and smitten, and peeled, the Almighty is rolling on his work with greater rapidity.”²⁵ Again: “I sit and laugh, and rejoice exceedingly when I see persecution. I care no



Governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so overrules all things that nothing happens without his counsel.



more about it than I do about the whistling of the north wind, the croaking of the crane that flies over my head, or the crackling of the thorns under the pot. The Lord has all things in his hand; there let it come, for it will give me experience."²⁶

It is apparent that Young was attempting to "have it both ways" (as of course did Calvin). If something happened, it was consistent with the will of God. If it appeared negative, there must be some hidden good that would emerge. Sometimes this led to a certain awkwardness, as for example with the concept of "chastening":

When we look at the Latter-day Saints, we ask, is there any necessity of their being persecuted? Yes, if they are disobedient. Is there any necessity of chastening a son or daughter? Yes, if they are disobedient. But suppose they are perfectly obedient to every requirement of their parents, is there any necessity of chastening them then? If there is, I do not understand the principle of it. I have not yet been able to see the necessity of chastening an obedient child, neither have I been able to see the necessity of chastisement from the Lord upon a people who are perfectly obedient. Have this people been chastened? Yes, they have.²⁷

So far, so good. If persecution or other suffering comes upon the Latter-day Saints, they have deserved it, and it will help to turn them back to obedience.

Perhaps Brigham Young should have stopped there, for on the assumption that no one is ever perfect and that there will always be acts deserving of punishment in any group of people, there would be little room for complaint. But human nature is not so easily satisfied. At times the suffering seemed inconsistent with the behavior; there was no obvious way of understanding what was being punished.

We have been persecuted, driven, smitten, cast out, robbed and hated; and I may say it was for our coldness and neglect of duty; and if we did not exactly deserve it, there have been times when we did deserve it. If we did not deserve it at the time, it was good for and gave us an experience.²⁸

I wonder if Young would have been willing to carry his parallel of children and parents to this point. You get a spanking from your parent for no obvious reason and ask what it was for. Answer: "Well, if you did not do anything to deserve it this time, there have been other times when you did deserve it; and besides it will do you good."

It is interesting, I think, to hear a non-theologian of

the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne, discuss this same question. Here is the relevant passage in Montaigne's essay entitled "We should meddle soberly with judging divine ordinances":

It is enough for a Christian to believe that all things come from God, to receive them with acknowledgement of his divine and inscrutable wisdom, and therefore to take them in good part, in whatever aspect they may be sent to him. But I think that the practice I see is bad, of trying to strengthen and support our religion by the good fortune and prosperity of our enterprises. Our belief has enough other foundations; it does not need events to authorize it. For when the people are accustomed to these arguments, which are plausible and suited to their taste, there is a danger that when in turn contrary and disadvantageous events come, this will shake their faith. Thus, in the wars we are engaged in for the sake of religion, those who had the advantage in the encounter at La Rochelabeille make much ado about this incident and use their good fortune as a sure approbation of their party; but when they come later to excuse their misfortunes at Moncontour and Jarnac as being fatherly scourges and chastisements, unless they have their following completely at their mercy, they make the people sense readily enough that this is getting two grinding fees for one sack, and blowing hot and cold with the same mouth.²⁹

Montaigne would consider both Calvin and Brigham Young to be "getting two grinding fees for one sack."

But what was the alternative for these two religious leaders? Given their premises, what else could they say? In Brigham Young's case, certainly, it was unthinkable that the restoration of the Christian gospel by Joseph Smith could lead anywhere but to a triumphant conclusion. On this he had waged his life, his fortune, his sacred honor. Of this he was as sure as he was of anything in life. In a period of time when the wavering, the neurotic, are more fashionable and in some ways frankly more interesting, it is instructive to contemplate the rock-like confidence of the Lion of the Lord. He "knew" God would overrule earthly events so as to bring to pass the divine plan. In such a frame of reference, what could be more natural than to put events into two baskets: those that were experienced as positive, as forward-propelling, as gratifying, and those experienced as negative, frustrating, irritating, or downright unjust? And what could be more natural than to see the former as the reward of the righteous, the obvious working out of God's purposes, and the latter as temporary dissonances that would by no means win out in the long run and in the

short run served purposes, such as reminding the faithful of their dependence on the Lord, that could not be known with certainty but could often be guessed at or perceived through a glass darkly?

Brigham Young wanted the doctrine of divine providence to serve not only as a manifesto of confidence for the Church—the idea that whatever happens to us temporarily and individually, the movement of the restored gospel would triumph—but also as a reassurance to the individual. “Let the Lord be God,” he said on one occasion, quite unconscious of the place of that statement in the thought of Martin Luther, far removed from him in space and time, but anxious to convey to the Latter-day Saints that they should do what they could and then relax, leaving the outcome to the Lord.

Every heart that loves this religion, called “Mormonism,” exclaims, from the centre and circumference of his soul and feelings, “Let the Lord be God.” Without that, all will be worthless; with that is everything. Without that we are nothing; we cannot endure; and all our prospects are blasted and scattered to the four winds. In reality, we are nothing only what the Lord makes us. In a short time, if the Lord is for us, all will be right.³⁰

Over and over again statements like the following rang through Young’s sermons: All is right; God can carry on his own work; my heart is comforted; I feel first rate; I feel happy; and (to use a colloquial expression that must have communicated well his meaning) don’t fret your gizzard. “Our religion has been a continual feast to me,” he said. “With me it is Glory! Hallelujah! Praise God! instead of sorrow and grief.”³¹ Holding himself up as a model not of one who had achieved perfection but of one who had suffered much and whose attitude was still one of supreme confidence, Young repeatedly assured the Saints that they need not worry, for God would do his part.

It need not be added, perhaps, that Brigham Young did not see the overruling power of God as an excuse for inactivity or fatalism on the part of man. The belief in the free agency and responsibility of man was fundamental for Young. Blessings were conditional upon obedience. Men should “take hold and perform the labors devolving upon them.” Here is a good statement of Brigham’s basic position:

Have I any good reason to say to my Father in Heaven, ‘Fight my battles,’ when he has given me the sword to wield, the arm and the brain that I can fight for myself? Can I ask him to fight my battles and sit quietly down waiting for him to do so? I cannot. I can pray the people to hearken to wisdom, to listen to counsel; but to ask God to do for me that which I can do for myself is preposterous to my mind.³²

When in meeting he was told that a company of handcart pioneers was approaching the Salt Lake Valley in a pathetic condition of fatigue and weakness, he adjourned the meeting, instructing the congregation to go to the assistance of the new arrivals. “Prayer is good,” he said, “but when milk and potatoes are needed, prayer will not take their place.”³³

We have seen that both John Calvin and Brigham Young had a fundamental faith in the overruling power of God, who did not stand aloof from human history but saw to it that the divine purpose was fulfilled. Both leaders used this concept to explain specific events, both positive and negative, in the struggle of their respective movements. Both called upon this principle to serve as a

calming reassurance to the individual believer. And both interpreted the principle in such a way that men were not entitled to sit back and do nothing or to lapse into a mood of fatalism; rather they were to do their best, enjoy whatever blessings came their way, and endure trials and suffering patiently. Clearly this particular aspect of their respective theologies, however differently it might have been expressed, was functionally identical.

I do not want to be understood as saying that the theologies of the two leaders were the same in all respects. Although it is quite possible to find other elements of similarity, it should be noted that the differences were numerous and profound. Anthropology, theology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology—in all these traditional categories there were basic differences. In a word Calvin saw himself (and in important ways was) in the Pauline-Augustinian tradition, whereas Brigham Young was closer to a Jamesian-Pelagian position. Mormonism was in several respects the nineteenth-century equivalent of sixteenth-century Protestant radicalism, roundly repudiated by Calvin. Calvin would have been repelled by the most fundamental claims of Mormonism, and Brigham Young explicitly rejected most of the ideas we associate with Calvin.

Yet I wonder whether we are not too prone to focus on differences and to overlook that which the two great religious leaders had in common. Several years ago Ernst Troeltsch noted that the strident religious polemic of the sixteenth century—Protestant against Catholic, one brand of Protestant against another—had obscured the simple fact that all Europeans of that age still shared fundamental beliefs. For practical purposes all were theists; all accepted the historicity of the Bible; all were Christians. Not until the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment would these common assumptions begin to break down. In the same sense, I believe, John Calvin and Brigham Young shared some beliefs or assumptions that were as basic as those on which they differed. And not the least of these was their commitment to and ringing proclamation of the sovereignty and paternal providentiality of God.

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Notes

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1966), 1:171. Hereafter abbreviated *Institutes*.
2. *Institutes* 1:172.
3. *Institutes* 1:173.
4. *Institutes* 1:174.
5. *Institutes* 1:174.
6. *Institutes* 1:175.
7. *Institutes* 1:181.
8. *Institutes* 1:183.
9. *Institutes* 1:183.
10. J. Bonnet, comp; *Letters of John Calvin*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1855-57), Vol. 1, pp. 364-73.
11. *Institutes* 1:187.
12. *Institutes* 1:188.
13. *Institutes* 1:189.
14. *Institutes* 1:189.
15. *Institutes* 1:190.
16. *Institutes* 1:192.
17. *Institutes* 1:193.
18. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1855-86), 12:260. Hereafter abbreviated *JD*.
19. *JD* 11:41.
20. *JD* 7:148.
21. *JD* 1:163.
22. Brigham Young Letterbook 1, Reel 31, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah.
23. *JD* 7:42.
24. *JD* 7:145.
25. *JD* 2:7.
26. *JD* 2:8.
27. *JD* 12:308.
28. *JD* 14:97.
29. Michel de Montaigne, *Complete Works* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1948), p. 160.
30. *JD* 5:343.
31. *JD* 8:119.
32. *JD* 12:240-41.
33. Sermon of November 30, 1856, *Deseret News*, December 10, 1856.