

California: What Went Right and What Went Wrong

Elder John K. Carmack

Two key figures in a drama with far-reaching consequences met 30 June 1847 on the banks of the Green River in what today is Wyoming. Brigham Young was leading the vanguard company steadily toward the Salt Lake Valley. Samuel Brannan, a new and mostly untried Church leader, was certain the Saints would prosper in beautiful and temperate California—a land with great promise to which Brannan had led something over 230 Church members on the ship *Brooklyn*. Brigham Young had other ideas. He told Brannan: “Let us go to California, and we cannot stay there over five years; but let us stay in the mountains, and we can raise our own potatoes and eat them; and I calculate to stay here.”¹ Thus did the attempt to persuade Brigham Young die on the plains of Wyoming. And thus did leaders of two major western migrations meet briefly, with historic consequences.

Disappointed by his inability to persuade his leader, Brannan followed the self-centered instincts that ultimately brought him down as a Church leader and got the California colony off to a bad start. He stayed a few days with the Church party on the Green River and then accepted an assignment to escort a group from Pueblo, Colorado, to join the main body of the Saints in the Valley, arriving just five days after Brigham Young and the first company. There he learned, to his disappointment, that Brigham had already been to Ensign Peak, had designated a spot for the temple, and was busily planning a city large enough to accommodate all the Saints who were on the trail. Reports that Brigham Young had received spiritual promptings about “The Place” probably mattered little to Brannan.

Brannan left on 9 August to return to California bearing a significant letter

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addressed to the California Saints. In the letter, Brigham Young told them of the good land and water in Salt Lake Valley and gave the Saints a choice of remaining in California or coming to Salt Lake Valley. He explained that he did not “wish to depopulate California of all the saints, but that we wish to make this [Salt Lake Valley] a stronghold, a rallying point, a more immediate gathering place than any other; and from hence let the work go out, and in process of time the shores of the Pacific may be overlooked from the temple of the Lord.”²

Brannan had led that group of Saints from New York to Yerba Buena (now San Francisco) on the ship *Brooklyn*, traveling around Cape Horn to California after resting in Hawaii on the way. They anchored in a beautiful bay that is now San Francisco Bay, near a small Mexican community called Yerba Buena. Brannan and his brave band of Saints didn’t know if they were in Mexico or the United States until they saw the United States flag on the mast of a warship and on a distant building on shore. The U.S. ship *Portsmouth* sent a rowboat with sailors who boarded the *Brooklyn*. They heard an officer of the boarding crew speak the words “Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honor to inform you that you are in the United States.”³

The debarking *Brooklyn* passengers more than doubled the population of Yerba Buena. As we look back on that charming scene, we think of what might have been had their leader been a stalwart Church leader, seasoned and ready to establish the Church. On the other hand, perhaps it was not the Church’s time in California. Whatever the reason, the Church did not prosper in Yerba Buena, a fact that can be explained in part by the nature of the colony’s leader as compared and contrasted to the qualities of Brigham Young, the leader of the Church and the company that entered the Salt Lake Valley. Let’s take a moment and paint that contrast.

Brannan was ambitious, capable, and energetic. His spirituality and leadership talent, however, were shallow. His mind was not on establishing the Church or doing missionary work. Rather, he quickly turned his interest and energy toward business and was shortly thereafter swept up in the rush to profit by the gold stampede that brought people from all over the world to California. He was worldly and neglectful of his Church responsibilities, he set a poor example, and many felt he preached false doctrine. Either he didn’t understand the gospel or didn’t want to be bound by it.

For example, little in his work and actions suggested he had the zeal for sharing the gospel we find in committed Latter-day Saints, especially in those early years. Brannan wanted none of that. His heart was on worldly interchange with new friends and on establishing commerce in this new world abounding with such opportunities.

His understanding of tithing was also flawed and self-serving. Tithing was and remains the Lord’s way of financing the building up of God’s kingdom, but though he was the First Elder of his branch of Latter-day Saints, Brannan saw



Samuel Brannan
courtesy of LDS Historical Dept., Archives

tithing as a way to further his personal and business ambitions. He liked his title, “First Elder,” but that was all it was—a title. That title did not seem to instill him with the spirit of service, duty, or stewardship. That this was apparent to others can be seen in Addison Pratt’s observations. Pratt landed at San Francisco Bay on his way home from the mission Joseph Smith had called him to fill in 1843. Looking over conditions in Yerba Buena, Pratt saw that the forces of the fast-moving world were affecting the spirituality of the little branch of San Francisco Saints. Pratt stayed on, trying to instill faith and spirituality among the people. He faced, however, not only declining spirituality but also dissension and neglect.

The First Elder not only neglected his duties but was disloyal to counsel from Brigham Young, who was trying to establish a new gathering place in the Salt Lake Valley. Among the Saints alighting in Yerba Buena from the *Brooklyn*, most of those who resonated to the Spirit eventually joined the Saints in Utah. They “gathered” with the bulk of the Saints. Those remaining dissembled and scattered for the most part, going the way of the world and following the natural path of least resistance. The branch of the Church in San Francisco, like a candle, flickered and eventually died. Pratt closed it down in 1848, took those who wanted to join him, and departed for Utah. The candle was relit several times but never burned too brightly in those early years.

When the race for gold rushed in, Brannan gathered tithing from among the willing members caught up in the rush; but, in general, the tithing was not used to help the Saints or build the Church.

Pondering these early California events, one thinks of the Zenos allegory quoted by Jacob in the Book of Mormon.⁴ Zenos shared an elaborate allegory of the tame and wild olive trees, representing the conditions in Israel. Some of the tame olive trees, representing faithful Israel, became wild, meaning they did not bear good fruit. Grafting in new branches and husbanding the trees did little to reverse the disappointing change in the trees. The California branch of the Church, like the wild branches described in Jacob, soon overcame the tame branches on the tree the master of the vineyard had planted with so much promise.

Like the master’s servants in the allegory, a succession of Church leaders tried and tried to reclaim the wild olive trees. Brigham Young sent Amasa Lyman of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to northern California to direct missionary work and reclaim the wild tree. Charles C. Rich spent time there. Parley P. Pratt came and labored with his usual enthusiasm and talent. No matter who went, he was ultimately unsuccessful in establishing a permanent branch of the Church. At the conclusion of his mission in October of 1850, Apostle Lyman was pessimistic about the survival of the Church in northern California, although he still held out some hope for southern California.

When Parley P. Pratt arrived on 1 July 1851, he did what was long over-

due—he disfellowshipped Samuel Brannan. He also made a few converts and did his best to establish the Church. He remained until 1852 when he was replaced by George Q. Cannon, who directed the Church, grafted in tame branches, established a Church newspaper (*The Western Standard*), and did his best to save the California tree.

Suddenly, in September 1857, Brigham Young ordered the Saints home to Salt Lake Valley. Albert Sidney Johnston and the United States Army were on their way to Utah to quash the reported rebellion of the Saints. This ended, for most purposes, the abortive attempt to establish the Church in California.

In stark contrast to Brannan's activities in California, we find Brigham Young tirelessly and effectively leading the Church in the Great Salt Lake Valley. If Brannan was inexperienced and ineffective, Brigham Young was highly experienced and had been tested as if by fire. Brigham Young himself was summarized by Leonard Arrington as having said in a talk on 8 August 1844 in Nauvoo, "Here is Brigham—have his knees ever faltered? Have his lips ever quivered? Did he ever flinch before the bullets in Missouri?"⁵ When Joseph was languishing in that Missouri hole known to us as Liberty Jail, Brigham Young led the Saints out of the jaws of their persecutors to Quincy, Illinois, and safety. Later, when Joseph and Hyrum were murdered, Brigham Young didn't see his duty as that of a "guardian" as Sidney Rigdon had. Rather, Brigham took charge and began making decisions that were needed if the Church were to survive.

His spirituality was so palpable that many, including some of our ancestors, saw him transfigured into the image of Joseph the Prophet as he addressed the Saints in Nauvoo. That widely reported experience together with his position as senior apostle caused the majority of the Saints to follow Brigham despite hardship and potential death. He was truly an outstanding leader.

While the trial of Joseph's accused assassins moved toward its unsatisfactory conclusion, Brigham Young kept one eye on the proceedings but put his heart and the Saints' work into completing the Nauvoo Temple and getting the people endowed with the power and protection of temple ordinances and covenants. In his view, they would need all the spiritual armor they could put on for the dangerous, challenging, and exciting days ahead. His was the responsibility of getting the people to safety in fulfillment of Joseph's prophecy that the Saints would continue to suffer persecution and would eventually be driven to find safety in the Rocky Mountains where they would become a mighty people. Young's focus was constant and powerful.

Whereas Brannan saw himself as a successful and rich entrepreneur—he became California's first millionaire, the founder of communities, newspapers, schools, sawmills, commercial establishments, and farms—Young saw his duty as that of finding a place God had prepared, far away in the West, where none could hurt or make afraid. He saw that if he was successful, the Saints would there be blessed. They could and would build a temple and reestablish their

covenants with the Lord. Missionary work, temple service, and community building were the brick and mortar of his labors.

As to colonizing California, to Brigham Young that would come but was secondary in importance to establishing the Saints in the mountains. He was not averse to claiming California as a part of Zion, but he was wary of it because of the glitter and worldly draw it represented. Nor did he want to dilute the main colonizing effort in the mountains. Even when he sent what he hoped would be a small group of pioneers to colonize San Bernardino, he hoped it would not number more than twenty or so. When 437 men, women, and children volunteered, he said: "I was sick at the sight of so many of the Saints running to California."⁶ He felt they were motivated to volunteer more by things of the world than things of the Lord. He discouraged any mass movement of members from going to California after gold, even though several members of the Mormon Battalion helped in its discovery after being mustered out of the Army.

Here we remember Lehi's dream in which those who grasped the iron rod that led to the tree with delicious and sweet fruit were contrasted with those who wandered on strange paths and were lost. We also remember the great and spacious building full of people with fine clothing, jewelry, and an attitude of mocking the humble followers of righteousness. During those crucial pioneering years, on the one hand, were those Saints who followed the counsel of their prophet, pursuing agricultural labors and building temples. In contrast, on the other hand, were those Saints whose motivation was skewed slightly toward the world. Many of those who did ignore counsel and go after gold were lost to the Church.

The Saints who went to San Bernardino in such numbers accomplished many laudable things. They laid out the city after the pattern used at Salt Lake City. They established a stake of Zion in San Bernardino, the first in California. A new county was carved out of eastern Los Angeles County. They established schools and pioneered irrigation techniques. They accomplished a good many things in San Bernardino and are mostly held in honorable memory today.

But some among them set their eyes on things of the world. Their efforts were marred by financial problems, dissension, factionalism, and disunity. In 1857, the Saints in that colony were recalled to Salt Lake Valley to meet the Johnston Army challenge. Not all came, but basically the task of establishing the Church in San Bernardino came to an end until a new era arrived decades later.

It wasn't the gold and easier life of California that brought the early Church settlements down, but it was more the unclear signal of leaders like Brannan that caused so many to wander in strange paths. In the Valley, the brilliant and spiritual focus of Brigham Young and other great leaders made the difference. In the old Salt Lake Bowery, Young taught the Saints a key lesson. "The time has not come for the Saints to dig gold. It is our duty first to develop the agricultural

resources of this country. . . . The worst fear that I have about this people is that they will get rich . . . forget God, . . . wax fat, kick themselves out of the Church and go to hell. This people will stand mobbing, robbing, poverty, and all manner of persecution, and be true. But my greater fear for them is that they cannot stand wealth.”⁷ Young’s focus was solid and sound.

And yet it wasn’t gold per se that Brigham Young worried about. He even sent some gold missionaries to bring back needed capital to the Valley. The First Presidency sent an epistle to the Saints in California stating that most of those who went to California had followed their own counsel. They added: “Gold is good in its place—it is good in the hands of a good man to do good with, but in the hands of a wicked man it often proves a curse instead of a blessing. Gold is a good servant, but a miserable, blind, and helpless god, and at last will have to be purified by fire, with all its followers.”⁸

A goodly amount of gold found its way to Salt Lake Valley, perhaps as much as \$100,000 worth. This gold helped establish communities, build buildings, and finance good projects in a capital-starved community. It wasn’t the gold that mattered. What did matter were the reasons for seeking gold and its use. Going after some gold to build the kingdom was an entirely different matter than seeking gold for personal power and wealth.

As Brigham Young had surmised, if the Saints settled in California, they might have been overwhelmed and blended among the multitude of California people who hurried there in search of gold and jobs. The Saints who stayed there were simply absorbed into the growing community that became a state on 9 September 1850.

Brigham Young could see a future day, like today, when the Church would have over eight hundred thousand members in California and make a great contribution to all aspects of the state’s vast activities. He said in a letter to Elder Lyman that “we expect to inhabit that country [meaning California] as well as this [meaning Deseret or Utah].”⁹ Patience and timing were important, but the right motivation in going to California was also crucial.

In contrast to Samuel Brannan’s worldly approach to his labors, Brigham Young’s sound and spiritual approach made all the difference in what happened in Utah versus what happened in California. What went right in Utah was the result of leadership—the prophetic leadership of a practical and inspired man. He was a Moses with a focus on building temples and making sacred covenants in the process of establishing a stake in Zion that would eventually divide into many stakes for a refuge from the storms that threatened to blow the Saints down. The Saints needed a place to be left alone for a season so they would have time to gather and strengthen their families, communities, and priesthood organization. They needed time to let the restoration of all things ripen into a workable society embodying the principles revealed in that restoration. They needed unity under their prophet, and they needed a prophet with unshakable faith,

focus, and vision. In Salt Lake Valley, they had such a prophet. He was, to them, their George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Moses. He was their own type of Christ who could not be corrupted by the world. His tools were those of character and leadership skills, all employed to build Zion.

The Saints planted the tame olive tree in Utah. It grew slowly but surely into a fruitful tree. Many decades later, laborers would go back to California. When they returned, they went with ordinary motivations to seek work and opportunities to grow, raise families, and build a solid Church. They started in earnest under the direction of twenty-five-year-old Henry Tanner, one of the earliest California mission presidents. The few branches he found soon flourished, and the modern California Latter-day Saint community that grew from that beginning produced the temples, stakes, and prosperous, contributing citizens Brigham Young had seen with his prophetic eyes. A tame branch was grafted into the wild olive tree, and soon the good roots of California bore fruit as Brigham seemed to know they would.

In addition to the main migration across the plains and the *Brooklyn* voyage around the tip of South America to California, the third of the great Church migrations to western America was that of the Mormon Battalion. Many still look at that migration, or long infantry march, as an imposition on the beleaguered and persecuted Saints. It began on the plains of Iowa and ended in San Diego and Los Angeles, California. In reality, the decision that led to recruiting and mustering in the Mormon Battalion was the culmination of lobbying efforts by Church friends such as Colonel Thomas Kane. Captain James Allen arrived in the Latter-day Saint settlement of Mount Pisgah, Iowa, on 26 June 1846 with orders to raise a battalion of five hundred men to assist in the war with Mexico. President Polk had run for the presidency on a platform of annexing Texas to the United States and settling outstanding problems with Great Britain over the ownership of the Pacific Northwest. He doubtless had an eye toward staking claim to the Southwest as well.

The Saints, having been driven from their homes with little or no money to show for their lost property, needed money desperately, especially to help the poor among them trying to outfit themselves for the western migration. From what source would it come? Brigham Young had suggested the government hire the Saints to build stockades along the trail. That offer was not politically feasible for the president to accept; but he did need an army, and the army would give \$42 to each recruit for clothing. Most of that welcome initial cash went to help the poor among the Saints.

Again, we must admire the vision and leadership of Brigham Young and the motivation of those brave men and their families who made the sacrifice of service to their country for the good of building Zion and helping their families get where they needed to be. It **was** a great imposition on the Saints, especially on the families of the men, to let them go; but it was a welcome and needed assist

to them despite the imposition. These recruits were unique. They sought, not military careers and honors, as many soldiers did, but rather service to God, country, and family. Unlike the usual recruits, most of them could read and write. So it was that they were successful in their long march; and, in making their march, they became an integral part of California history. Their character and devotion to principles and their motivation are what led to that success. What were the principles that guided them?

Brigham Young advised the officers appointed to lead the battalion to be fathers to their soldiers. He told them to be prayerful, kind, courteous, respectful, obedient, and trustworthy. He asked them to avoid profanity (who among you have been in the military?) and base language. He counseled them to be clean in thought and true to their ideals. He promised that if they would do their part, not one of them “would fall by the hands of the nation’s foe.”¹⁰ Their worst battle was a fight with a herd of bulls.

For the most part, they lived up to President Young’s counsel. In doing so, they built important roads over untracked wilderness, blazed new trails, endured hardship and partial rations, established Los Angeles as a United States community, and won the respect of their officers. The small Mexican community of Los Angeles became the place at which they built a military fort—Fort Moore—on a commanding hill overlooking the small Mexican community. It was named for a United States Army Captain who had recently died. They completed the fort on 1 July 1847 before Brigham Young and the first company entered the Salt Lake Valley. On 4 July, they dedicated it, placing the United States flag on a pole made from the tallest tree they could find in the forest near San Bernardino. They called it the “Liberty Pole.” Nine cheers arose for the stars and stripes.

At the end of their long march, the Mormon Battalion reached San Diego where they are still honored and remembered, but they also traveled through a number of other places before and after they were discharged at the completion of their services. For example, they set foot in the community of Santa Barbara, my old hometown. They accomplished great things and brought luster to the United States and to the Church they represented. Some of them were on their way home to the Salt Lake Valley when they stopped at Sutter’s Mill. About half of them pushed on to Utah, while about half wintered in northern California. Thus, some were there to participate in the discovery of gold and further enter into the annals of history in California. This discovery benefited the Salt Lake colony of Saints struggling to make a go of it in harsh conditions.

Gold also brought needed goods to the Salt Lake Valley because large numbers of people came through the Valley with goods to trade or sell. This helped fulfill Heber C. Kimball’s seemingly rash prophecy that goods would soon be sold on the streets of Salt Lake City at prices below those prices paid for the same goods in the East.

Some members of the Mormon Battalion arrived in Salt Lake Valley only

to find their families were still on the plains. They rushed to meet and assist them. The legacy of the Battalion is part of what went right as the Church touched California in its formative years. Two of the three great migrations President Gordon B. Hinckley mentioned at the dedication of the Ensign Peak Park, then, were the migrations that ended on the coasts of California. Much went well in those migrations to offset the parts that went wrong.

As one who has lived most of his life in California and loves its history and spirit and as one who has in a small way participated in the modern miracle of the rise of the Church in California to a position of prominence, contribution, and respect, I seek to understand the contributions made by those early pioneers to California and the Church. Although we have only touched superficially on those early events, I draw these conclusions and make these observations:

First, the leader is vital to the success of an organization. Above all, that leader must have integrity. In other words, his inner beliefs and motivations must and ultimately will drive his leadership contribution. He must be committed to the basic principles of the organization. In the case of Church leaders, that commitment must be to the goals of the Restored Church. Integrity and commitment far outweigh talent and intelligence. Particularly harmful to the aims of the organization is a leader who, as Brannan did, insists on doing it “my way.” Thank the Lord for Brigham Young and his faithful associates. Thank the Lord for an equally great leader today—President Gordon B. Hinckley.

Second, the core beliefs of the participants in an enterprise matter deeply and have far-reaching consequences. If the values are to obtain wealth and power and if those values outweigh the participants’ desire to live God’s laws and establish the Kingdom of God, in the long run, those core beliefs will control the results of their efforts. If, for example, discipline, spirituality, and sacrifice for the goals of Zion are the core beliefs of the people and if the gospel-centered community goals transcend those finer beliefs, then the gospel goals are moved to the outer edge and the achievements become at best fragmented. As Shakespeare observed, “And appetite, a universal wolf, so doubly seconded with will and power, must make perforce a universal prey, and last eat up himself.”¹¹

Third, gold, money, and property are all useful in the hands of good people for reaching goals that are consistent with righteous principles. In the hands of self-centered, egotistical people, gold, money, and property assist in the inevitable corruption of their enterprise. One of Brigham Young’s great strengths is that he understood this principle and followed it in his leadership of the Saints.

Fourth, diversity in talents and abilities serves an organization well—indeed is essential to its health, as Paul taught the Corinthians. But, in using and applying that diversity, the body of Christ should be one in purpose and unity. When the purpose and unity are fragmented and the leadership lacks vision and focus, the purposes of the organization are subverted and the result is chaos, fragmentation, and wandering on several divergent paths.

Fifth, the work of Brannan and some of the other Latter-day Saint pioneers in California provided many benefits to California. Their activities helped establish viable communities for the state, even if the Church did not flourish in those early years for the reasons mentioned. Brannan and many others helped establish great cities such as San Francisco and Sacramento; commenced California's second newspaper that became a respected major news source; established the first California schools after the United States annexation, even building the first school house; contributed in a major way to the commercial and agricultural life of the state; announced the discovery of gold to the world in that the *New York Herald Tribune's* announcement of the discovery of gold quoted Brannan's newspaper; and helped claim important parts of California for the United States, largely through the efforts of the Mormon Battalion that left a good name and a legacy of faith that persist to this day. Although these achievements are peripheral to the establishment of Latter-day Saint communities and stakes and although they are secondary to gospel aims, they are substantial achievements that we acknowledge and appreciate.

Finally, for the major conclusion, we pay tribute to the power of ideas that motivate people. President Boyd K. Packer often talks of the power of teaching doctrines of the gospel and getting them inside our hearts. Had Brannan's understanding and commitment to the gospel been greater than his competing desires, the early results of colonizing efforts in California may have been different. As T. S. Eliot said so well, "The last temptation is the greatest reason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason."¹² Being motivated by worldly rather than gospel principles and goals leads to wandering and fragmentation. Keeping totally focused, even through tremendous diversity, was the strength of Brigham Young and so many others of our early leaders. King Benjamin wisely observed that "if ye do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words . . . and continue in the faith . . . ye must perish. (Mosiah 4:30) In the same vein, Richard Weaver observed that relativism and fragmentation in ideas lead to disintegration and that what man needs is a "a return to center." He strongly insisted that "There is a center of things."¹³ The writer of Proverbs likewise insisted that "Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Proverbs 29:18)

In all of our historical recounting of the **what**, we must never forget the **why**. Why each did what he did explains much about early California history. It explains the success of Brigham Young in Utah, and it explains the fragmentation of Samuel Brannan's efforts in California. This exercise can help all of us strengthen our core beliefs, which will inevitably determine what we do.

Notes

1. Preston Nibley, *Brigham Young: The Man and His Work* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 97.

2. Journal History, 7 August 1847, LDS Church Archives.

3. Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge & Crandall, 1877), 446.
4. See the allegory in Book of Mormon, Book of Jacob, Chapter 5.
5. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 113.
6. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 2:349.
7. James S. Brown, *Life of a Pioneer* (Salt Lake City: Geo. Q. Cannon & Sons Co., 1900), 122-23.
8. James R. Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1833-1964* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 46.
9. *Journal History*, 6 September 1849, LDS Church Archives, 5.
10. Daniel Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War 1846-1847* (Glorieta, New Mexico: The Rio Grande Press, 1969, reprint of 1881 publication), 118.
11. William Shakespeare, *The Phoenix and the Turtle—Troilus and Cressida*, Act I, sc. iii, 119.
12. T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 1935, part 1.
13. See Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52.