

JOHN FARNHAM BOYNTON

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“Joseph Smith, a fallen Prophet” was the boisterous cry of many disillusioned Mormons, among whom were those who once purported to be tried and true believers of the new faith. The shock wave of their shrill accusations and derision shook the core structure of Mormon society in Kirtland, Ohio. As community and church leader Parley P. Pratt penned, “I also was overcome by the same spirit in a great measure, and it seemed as if the very powers of darkness which war against the Saints were let loose upon me.”¹ Joseph Smith, seeing the spirit of apostasy afflict even the “elect,” wondered whom he could still trust. To returning missionary Wilford Woodruff he lamented, “Brother Woodruff, I am glad to see you. I hardly know when I meet those who have been my brethren in the Lord, who of them are my friends. They have become so scarce.”² As the once faithful turned their heels and willfully rebelled against teachings they had once embraced, some of the youngest--but surely the brightest--succumbed.

Of those who fell, few had excelled in educational attainment or religious zeal as John Farnham Boynton.³ This native son of Massachusetts had been schooled at Columbia in New York City in his teens. He had entered medical school in St. Louis by the age of twenty. His scholastic achievements far surpassed his contemporaries, who knew little of letters and even less of the rudiments of an elementary equivalent. His humble acceptance of baptism by the Prophet Joseph Smith clashed with conventional norms as modern revelation pierced the crust of scholastic propensity.

By age twenty-one Boynton had been ordained an elder by the authority given to Sidney Rigdon and was serving his first missionary journey in the eastern states and Canada. Few surpassed his ardent zeal for religious truths as Boynton shared the Gospel with kindred and new-found friends. Writing on 20 January 1834 from Saco, Maine, he enthusiastically reported, “I have baptized about forty in

this section, and there are more convinced of the truth, but are still lingering on the threshold of the church . . . Brethren, pray for me, that I may have words of wisdom.” These prayers were answered as John, “with the stick of Joseph [the Book of Mormon] in one hand, and the stick of Judah [the Bible] in the other, labor[ed] diligently in this world” to bring the message of the Restoration to the inhabitants of New England.⁴

Perhaps it was of no surprise that John Farnham Boynton, of all the faithful elders in the Church in 1835, should be the eighth man selected by the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon to be ordained to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, even



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though he was only twenty-three years old and a most eligible bachelor. He had been “actively engaged in the ministry” from his first introduction to Mormonism.⁵ He willingly accepted the “Oath and Covenant of the Apostleship,” to take upon himself the name of Christ “with full purpose of heart” and “to go into all the world to preach” the everlasting gospel. When Oliver Cowdery grasped his hand and asked, “[Will] you with full purpose of heart take part in this ministry, to proclaim the Gospel with all diligence, with these your brethren, according to the tenor and intent of the charge you have received?”⁶ Boynton responded in the affirmative.

His enthusiasm for the work soared as he labored with his brethren on a missionary assignment in the eastern

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states. His labors were noteworthy and his conviction true and his converts, like Lorenzo Snow, attested to the power of his testimony. By 1836 Boynton was a recognized chosen vessel of the Lord, worthy of the ennobled title of Saint. The Prophet Joseph showed his love for this youthful apostle by officiating at his marriage to Susan Lowell on 20 January 1836 before a "respectable company assembled" at the home of Father Johnson.⁷ For all intrinsic purposes it could be concluded that Boynton had charted his course and was equal to the responsibilities of family and Church service.

However, by 1837, as financial speculation engulfed the Kirtland society, Boynton became embroiled in an enticing scheme of trafficking merchandise for quick wealth. In so doing he failed to heed Oliver Cowdery's earlier warning to avoid "worldly objects."⁸ Heber C. Kimball reported, "Trade and traffic seemed to engross the time and attention of the Saints. . . . two of the Twelve, Lyman E. Johnson and John F. Boynton, went to New York and purchased the amount of \$20,000 worth of goods, and entered into the mercantile business, borrowing considerable money . . . which they have never repaid."⁹

The failure of the Kirtland Safety Society bank became the scapegoat for Boynton's neglect to repay his debts. Clinging to his personal gains, he feigned losses in the speculative venture. Aroet Hale, a young contemporary, wrote, "The Prophet Joseph Smith called on him [Boynton] for money. He had the money but refused. This was a turning point in his life."¹⁰

Unwilling to acknowledge personal blame for his business fiasco, John pointed a guilt-ridden finger at the church's leader. "Joseph Smith a fallen Prophet!" he shouted. As the disenchanted and wayward listened and then embraced his lies, the faithful like Heber C. Kimball noted his new stance. "John F. Boynton said to me," Heber recorded, "if I was such a damned fool as to go at the call of the fallen Prophet, Joseph Smith, [to England] he would not help me a dime."¹¹

But to himself John Boynton was liberal with his means and his own self-appraisal. Dubbing himself a "reformer," like the reformers of yesteryear (Luther, Calvin and Wesley), he joined with other apostates in seeking to demean the Prophet in the eyes of the Saints, establish a new religion, and seize possession of the dedicated Kirtland Temple. Before a morning service in the temple he entered armed with a pistol and a bowie-knife and sat in the Aaronic Priesthood pulpit. Soon after the service commenced, he

rallied other dissidents and rushed into the congregation claiming control of the holy edifice. He threatened to "blow out the brains of the first man who dared to lay hands on him" to stop the melee.¹² Summoned local officials had to forcibly remove John from the temple.

Mother Smith related a similar disruption in the temple. As her husband, the Patriarch Joseph Smith, Sr., was publicly denouncing the dissident Warren Parrish, the angry agitator attempted to drag Father Smith from the pulpit. William Smith, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, grabbed Parrish, and "at this John Boynton stepped forward, and drawing a sword from his cane, presented it to William's breast, and said, 'if you advance one step further, I will run you through.'"¹³

This type of unrestrained, violent reaction to the problems in Kirtland and his continual assertion of the fallen state of Joseph Smith led to formal accusations that the apostleship of John Farnham Boynton be revoked. On 3 September 1837 he "endeavored to confess," before a Church court, "justifying himself in his former conduct by reason of the failure of the bank." John claimed that he, ". . . understood the bank was instituted by the will of God, and he had been told that it should never fail, let men do what they would."¹⁴ He was dismissed from the Twelve.

Knowing his claim was unfounded, however, one week later Boynton admitted his failings and was reinstated in the Twelve. Oh, that his repentance had been like that of Parley P. Pratt, who noted, "I went to brother Joseph Smith in tears, and, with a broken heart and contrite spirit, confessed wherein I had erred in spirit, murmured or done or said amiss."¹⁵ Unfortunately Boynton's repentance was short-lived. The same quarrelsome spirit and rebellious nature led to his being dropped again from the quorum in December 1837 and excommunicated from the Church on 12 April 1838.

Five years from the date of the first court proceedings, John Boynton surprised the Prophet by a visit to Nauvoo. No record was left of their discussion, but it did not result in Boynton's reuniting with the Saints. In 1872 he travelled to the Salt Lake Valley to visit Brigham Young and the Mormon pioneers. As he mingled with his former friends he was warmly greeted and referred to as "Brother John." Erastus Snow, who had been ordained a teacher in the Aaronic Priesthood by Boynton, recalled telling him that he had taught the Gospel ever since his ordination. Boynton replied, "Stick to it, for it is good."¹⁶ Nevertheless, for him

Mormonism and religion in general no longer held any appeal.

What happened to the apostle whose chameleon-like character was so transparent during his youthful years? Maturity may account for the relative calming of his personality, but nothing abated his enthusiasm to discover the unknown. Moving from a focus on religion, with its more subjective areas of inspiration and revelation, he turned to the concrete to satisfy his yearnings. He advertised himself as a scientific lecturer and travelled throughout the United States, becoming known as a pioneer in the field of popular science. In his lecture on "Geology and the National History of Creation," he denounced the "Cardiff Giant" and graphically illustrated that the alleged prehistoric man was a fake.

In the late 1840s Boynton settled his family, consisting of his wife and four children, in Syracuse, New York, while he joined the thousands who answered the call to go west in search of gold. Like many frustrated miners of the California Gold Rush he failed to make his fortune in mining. However, his fame as a scientist had spread and he was commissioned to raise a government ship that had sunk off the San Francisco port.

After two years of grappling with miners in northern California he returned to Syracuse and reunited with his family. It was in Syracuse that he became known as a gentleman farmer and a renowned scientist. Of the many patents credited to him, the most famous was his invention of a fluid and light apparatus for the rapid generation of carbonic acid gas that could be carried by one man to extinguish small fires. He sold the patent of his extinguisher invention for \$15,000.¹⁷

Boynton also invented a soda fountain, a vacuum process method for extracting gold from ore, small electrical appliances, the process for converting cast iron into malleable steel, and a method for coloring buttons and glassware. Three partnerships were formed to promote his products--the manufacturing of coarse salt, tar roofing, and wall plaster.

His creativity in the scientific field was noted by the newspaper industry. In 1880 he "furnished the press with daily bulletins" of the condition of Dr. Henry S. Tanner and his 'famous fast.' Boynton chose to fast for 20 days to better describe the issues faced by the doctor for the news media.¹⁸ Intrigued by the power of the press to further the cause of

science, Boynton was persuaded to become president of the *Father Columbus* newspaper in New York City from 1882-85. Through this newspaper he brought to the attention of the American public the Tewsbury Almshouse Horror of 1883, exposing the atrocity that human skin was being tanned into hide. Furthering his notoriety was a newspaper article detailing his second marriage, performed in a balloon over New York City.¹⁹

As Boynton neared the end of his life he returned to Syracuse, where his interest turned to collecting and compiling historic records of the Boynton family. Although a novice genealogist he became President of the Boynton Association with over 600 members organized for the purpose of gathering, collecting and preserving family history. Yet, as death approached, his scientific curiosity again took precedence. After a brief illness, which he diagnosed as a burst blood vessel in his chest causing internal hemorrhage and interference with breathing and heart action, Boynton died at his home on 20 October 1890 at the age of seventy-nine. Those at his bedside said he was "not depressed at the thought of death and with his characteristic zeal in the cause of science he expressed a willingness to have his body examined before the students of the Medical college to determine the cause of death." A tribute from his obituary reads, "In his death the city of Syracuse lost, not only one of its oldest residents, but one of the most remarkable men who ever lived in it."²⁰

Remarkable it is true. A life to be remembered for his achievements--truly one of the brightest who succumbed.

NOTES

1. Parley P. Pratt, ed., *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980, 168.

2. Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff, History of His Life and Labors*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1964, 68.

3. Son of Eliphalet Boynton and Susannah Nichols, was born on 20 September 1811 at Bradford, Essex County, Massachusetts.

4. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. 7 vols. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976, 2:40 (hereafter cited as HC).

5. John Whitmer, *An Early Latter Day Saint History: The Book of John Whitmer*. F. Mark McKiernan and Roger D. Launius, eds. Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1980, 142.

6. HC 2:198.

7. HC2:377. They became the parents of four children.

8. HC 2:195.

9. Heber Kimball Autobiography, journal excerpts, 99.

10. Journal of Aroet Lucious Hale, typescript, BYU-S, 3.

11. Heber Kimball Journal, *Millennial Star* 26 (1864), 585.

12. Eliza R. Snow, *Biography of Lorenzo Snow*, as cited in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. 6 vols. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1965, 1:406.

13. Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by his Mother*. Preston Nibley, ed. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1958, 241

14. HC2:509-10.

15. Pratt 168.

16. Forace Green, comp., *Testimonies of Our Leaders*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1958, 120.

17. "John Farnham Boynton, Death of This Brilliant and Versatile Man," *The Evening Herald*. Vol. 14. No. 4226. (20 October 1890) Syracuse, NY:2. 2.

18. "Dr. John Farnham Boynton, Death of an Old and Remarkable Resident of Syracuse" *The Syracuse Standard*. 21 October 1890, 2.

19. John Boynton's first wife, Susan Lowell, died in Syracuse, New York on August 7, 1859.

20. "John Farnham Boynton: Death of This Brilliant and Versatile Man," 1-2.