

The Mormon Trail: A Unique Phenomenon?

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Abstract

Contemporary scholars focusing on Mormonism continue to compare the Mormon Trail to the Israelite Exile, as well as emphasising that the trail was more of an anomaly compared to the Oregon and California trails. This notion is explored in this paper and aims to prove that Mormon tradition and collective memory has been changed to fit this comparison. As a result of focusing solely on the differences of the Mormon Trail between other trails, scholars have neglected to include it within the pattern of westward migrations during the 19th century. This paper aims to do the above, thereby situating The Mormon Trail within the context of the large migration patterns that occurred during the 19th century, as well as outlining aspects that make the trail distinct. While the Mormon trail indeed exhibited differences from the other trails, it must be mentioned that some commonalities can be found. The trail however, proves to be unique in the context of the Mormon faith and family organisation. Difficulties with travelling, responses to violence and the persecution of their faith, were some of the elements that set the Mormons apart from the other migration trails explored in this paper. The importance that the family played along the trek to Utah is also delved into. Children often assisted with various tasks on the journey. The role that diseases such as Scurvy and Cholera played in these westward migrations is also explored, which proves to be a linking factor between the Oregon, California and Mormon trails.

From Nauvoo, Illinois to present-day Salt Lake City Utah, The Mormon Trail forms a significant part of what it means to be Mormon. The story of the Mormons being driven out from Nauvoo and forced to emigrate elsewhere is compared by many contemporary Mormon scholars to the exile of the Israelites. This notion, coupled with the perception that The Mormon Trail was a unique migration, continues to be argued. While some aspects of the trail were unique, some scholars have failed to properly historicize The Mormon Trail, and to place it within its wider historical context. This paper aims to prove that the Mormon trail exhibits many commonalities with its other trail counterparts, such as the Oregon and California trails. It also aims to reveal that The Mormon trail is a unique phenomenon due to the unique faith and organisation of the Mormons on the trail. It places the Mormon trail in the appropriate historical context by revealing how it is also similar to other trails, as it is reflective of the wider westward migrations that characterised the 19th century which formed a common experience among pioneer Americans.

Many Mormon scholars have compared the journey on the trail to the Exodus of the Israelites. The promised land, or Zion as Mormons referred to it as, was the Salt Lake Valley. While this comparison of the Mormons to the Israelites indeed existed at the time of their journey, Mormon tradition and memory has been altered to fit a specific narrative that places the Mormons in the context that makes their journey appeal more to the Israelite narrative. Namely, the common belief of Mormon tradition is that the area of the Great Basin, The Plains and the Wasatch Oasis were cruel, treacherous and barren lands.⁴²⁶ However, personal accounts of people who had made the trek had different reactions. These personal accounts record the Great Basin as pleasant and picturesque.⁴²⁷ Popular memory and tradition appear to have been formed by the past being viewed as idyllic.⁴²⁸ In addition, Mormon tradition emphasises that Brigham Young was prompted to travel to the Great Basin for settlement by way of divine revelation.⁴²⁹ He supposedly had no outside influence on this decision apart from God revealing this to him. However, it is mentioned that Joseph Smith, who was the founder of Mormonism, and Young had surveyed and planned where they would settle the new Zion before they even left Illinois.⁴³⁰ This is apparent through the advertisements that were also put forth to inform the Mormons of how idyllic the land by the rocky mountains was.⁴³¹

As personal accounts by Mormons began to shift from the perception of the beautiful land to the barren desert, some Mormon apostles such as George A. Smith went as far as to state that the Mormon journey was not even comparable to the Israelites' Exodus.⁴³² Another comparison to the Israelites was made by a Mormon in 1852, stating that the crossing of the desert was the next best miracle since the parting of the Red Sea.⁴³³ Mormon leaders began to accept these falsehoods in their history as doctrine. Since their unique beliefs were persecuted, such as labelling the Great Basin as the desert, it boasts their claim that they are truly the Latter Day Israelites.⁴³⁴ Furthermore, these notions of altered tradition and unique doctrine place the journey of the Mormons on the trail as unique. However, the psyche of the American frontier that is present today continues to fuel this change in tradition.

In terms of its differences between other trails of its time such as the Oregon and California trails, the Mormon Trail exhibits unique characteristics such as the role of religion in their migration. However, a

⁴²⁶ R. H, Jackson, "The Mormon Experience: The Plains as Sinai, the Great Salt Lake as the Dead Sea, and the Great Basin as Desert-Cum-Promised Land," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18, no.1 (1992): 41.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*

⁴³² George A. Smith, "Prosperity of Zion," Etc, *Journal of Discourses* 9, no.14.

⁴³³ Jackson, "The Mormon Experience" 49.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

significant amount of similarities can be traced between all three trails. One of the main commonalities between the three trails is the fact that the trails are part of a pattern of westward migration in 19th century America. Scholar William E. Hill claims that the Mormon trail experience was unique when compared to other trail experiences.⁴³⁵ Hill states that the combination of religion, demographics of travellers, transportation and wagon companies were what made the Mormon trek distinct.⁴³⁶ He also offers a great deal of analysis regarding the specifics of the Mormon Trail organisation and how religion was the main factor in their migration.⁴³⁷ While religion did play a significant role in the migration, as evident from their unique doctrine and experiences of persecution, it still does not change the fact that the Mormons are essentially like the other American pioneers who headed West to places like Oregon, California and Washington. The Mormons can essentially be placed within the context of the 19th-century migration patterns. The Mormons went from an old life in Illinois, to a new life in the Salt Lake Valley, and this directly coincides with the American pioneer notion. While Hill recognizes the unique aspects of the Mormon trail experience, he fails to place the migration into the wider context of 19th-century migration patterns, which is vital in order to understand the Mormons and their trail.

Regarding the organisation on the trail, Mormons were increasingly more systematic and organised than the other trails. Namely, wagon companies, which carried Mormons along the trail had systems in place that other wagon companies for the Oregon Trail did not.⁴³⁸ People travelling with these Mormon wagon companies were each given assigned tasks, with daily schedules and Sunday as a day of rest.⁴³⁹ Every person was obligated to fulfil their duty, and most people followed through with these obligations. Due to Mormon leaders being appointed instead of elected, Mormons believed that their leaders were prophets in whom God spoke through.⁴⁴⁰ Therefore, people would not speak out against these leaders, which explains the successful organisation of the travellers. The animals used in Mormon travel also contributed to their successful organisation. Oxen were often used instead of mules or horses due to the inexpensive cost.⁴⁴¹ Oxen were generally stronger and had the ability to consume different foods in the wild that other animals such as horses, were unable to.⁴⁴² The system of handcarts were also generally only used by the Mormons and were a cheaper alternative to the Conestoga wagon in terms of manufacturing, which was used in other trails.⁴⁴³ While the handcarts were potentially back-breaking for the Mormons due to them often having to push it themselves, they were ultimately able to move faster across the plains.⁴⁴⁴ The Mormon church also assisted with financing the manufacturing of these carts which aided European converts wanting to journey to Utah.⁴⁴⁵ Ferries were also assembled to assist emigrants with getting across rivers and ensuring their safety.⁴⁴⁶ Along with the financing of the handcarts, the church began to increase funds for Mormons that wanted to go to Utah.⁴⁴⁷ The first fund was the Perpetual Emigration Fund System that assisted Mormons who could not afford to transport themselves.⁴⁴⁸ If an emigrant benefited from these funds, it was necessary for them to pay the system back.⁴⁴⁹ These donations and giving back to the community was ensured by the highly organised nature of the church. Church members were organised into wards, and then put into a larger group called stakes in

⁴³⁵ William E. Hill, *The Mormon Trail: Yesterday and Today*, (Utah State University Press 1996), 1.

⁴³⁶ Hill, *The Mormon Trail*, 1.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

order to divide members geographically.⁴⁵⁰ Roughly ten wards formed a stake. Each ward was tasked with providing products to assist future emigrants, which made it easier for them since purchasing supplies was unnecessary.⁴⁵¹ Mormons' desire to make travelling along the trail simpler, more organised, and more efficient for future travellers is one of the ways that the Mormon Trail was distinguished from the systems of the Oregon and California trails.

Concerning the organisation of companies, the Oregon and California trails were very different. The companies and ships that took passengers to San Francisco were often one way;⁴⁵² they did not return passengers like the Mormon trail wagon companies did.⁴⁵³ While the Mormons assisted future emigrants by making the trail easier, California wagon companies often attempted to make the trail significantly worse in order to slow migrants down.⁴⁵⁴ By slowing them down, they would not get to the gold in time. There also were no funds put in place to assist travellers, unlike with the Mormon church.

In terms of the demographics of the Mormon, Oregon and California trails, there were more differences than similarities. For example, the Mormons travelled on the trail in families and the family unit itself was crucial to the journey. Along with families relying on companies for support, parents and children often had to rely on each other.⁴⁵⁵ Responsibilities were often given to children, such as cooking or assisting with travelling.⁴⁵⁶ The centrality of the family in the Mormon faith is what made the trek to Utah possible.⁴⁵⁷ The Oregon wagon companies were more similar to the Mormon companies since they were also mainly composed of families.⁴⁵⁸ However, what sets the Mormons apart from the Oregon migrants is the fact that the Oregon families were in search of a new and hopefully prosperous life, as well as fertile ground to cultivate crops.⁴⁵⁹ This not only sets the Mormons apart from these Oregon migrants, but it also places the Mormons in the same category as the Oregon migrants in terms of the overall large scale migration to the American west. The biggest difference in demographics lies between the Mormons and the migrants of the California trail. The migrants were mainly miners in search of gold who travelled to California strictly for economic purposes.⁴⁶⁰ Once they earned enough money, their goal was to go back East to their families.⁴⁶¹ In addition, farmers and traders often headed along the California trail in order to sell their products.⁴⁶² They were primarily the ones who became rich. As a result, the California trail was motivated more by economic gains than the Mormon Trail, which made them distinctive from the Mormons in this respect.⁴⁶³

Regarding violence present on the Mormon, California and Oregon trails, a variety of similarities and differences can be found. What distinguishes the Mormon Trail from the other two trails mainly pertains to its organisation. Disruptive behaviour was generally present on all three trails, even when rules and regulations were implemented.⁴⁶⁴ Everyday experiences such as tiredness, lack of supplies, and an immense amount of uncertainty regarding travel logistics and circumstances ahead were common across all trail migrations during the 19th century.⁴⁶⁵ It is obvious that the usual stress and uncertainty associated

⁴⁵⁰ Hill, *The Mormon Trail*, 12.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ David L. Clark, "Violence and Disruptive Behavior on the Difficult Trail to Utah, 1847-1868," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53 no.4 (2014): 106.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁵⁵ Jill Jacobsen Andros, "Children on the Mormon Trail," (MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 1997), 81.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 16, 81.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁵⁸ Clark, "Violence and Disruptive Behavior on the Difficult Trail to Utah, 1847-1868," 106.

⁴⁵⁹ Hill, *The Mormon Trail*, 2.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 3.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Clark, "Violence and Disruptive Behavior on the Difficult Trail to Utah, 1847-1868," 88.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 88.

with migration across the plains in a wagon would have most likely induced some violent behaviour, and would have been common across the Oregon, California and Mormon trails.⁴⁶⁶ However, the Oregon and California trail companies experienced violence at a greater magnitude than those on the Mormon Trail.⁴⁶⁷ The leading cause of murders along the Oregon and California trails were usually a result of disputes that led to fighting.⁴⁶⁸ Various other methods aside from direct bodily harm were also utilised, such as abandoning people on the trails.⁴⁶⁹ Due to more passengers travelling as individuals without families on the California and Oregon trails, violence was more likely to occur.⁴⁷⁰ As with the Mormons, since they travelled in families and had a company authority present, fights were less likely to arise.⁴⁷¹ People had to rely on the company for their basic needs and spiritual guidance.⁴⁷² When issues did arise, the companies would do their best to remedy the situation. In contrast, even though families mostly made up the migrants, as mentioned, the Oregon companies did not have any authority in place to answer to, therefore more often resulting in fights.⁴⁷³ There have been virtually no recorded deaths on the Mormon Trail that relate to violence;⁴⁷⁴ violence did occur, but the Mormons on the trail were more united due to their one common goal of reaching Zion and their theology of being the Latter Day Saints.⁴⁷⁵ Furthermore, while travel stresses were the same on all three trails, the reactions to the stress were different. The notion of violence on the Mormon trail reveals that the Mormons did indeed have very similar experiences to the migrants on the Oregon and California trails, but the unique travel and doctrinal circumstances of the Mormons are ultimately what made them distinct.

The experience of disease was common to all three trails and had very negative effects on a significant number of people. One of the diseases that saw a great loss of life was Scurvy.⁴⁷⁶ The Mormons in particular experienced a significant lack of nutrition on the Mormon trail. During the summer, the Mormons were able to feed off of grapes, berries and plums, but when the Fall arrived, these fruits were no longer in season, resulting in a severe lack of fruits and vegetables.⁴⁷⁷ Cornmeal, milk and meats primarily made up their diet.⁴⁷⁸ Scurvy had been noted to be the number one cause of death during this period of emigration towards Utah.⁴⁷⁹ Potatoes as a result became the antidote to the problem, as George A. Smith would go on to proclaim the healing properties of the potato.⁴⁸⁰ However, this discovery of the healing remedy of the potato would prove to be too late, since hundreds of Mormons had already passed.⁴⁸¹

Aside from Scurvy, Cholera proved to be another deadly disease on all three trails. It was also rampant on ships and in towns where people were crammed into tight places without sanitation.⁴⁸² The combination of poor sanitation and overall lack of cleanliness, including food being cooked over buffalo

⁴⁶⁶ Clark, "Violence and Disruptive Behavior on the Difficult Trail to Utah, 1847-1868," 88.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁶⁸ John Phillip Reid, *Policing the Elephant: Crime, Punishment, and Social Behavior on the Overland Trail*, (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1997), 76-77.

⁴⁶⁹ Clark, "Violence and Disruptive Behavior on the Difficult Trail to Utah, 1847-1868," 105.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶ Jeffrey S. Hampl, Carol S. Johnston, and Robert A. Mills, "Scourge of Black-leg (Scurvy) on the Mormon Trail," *Nutrition* 17, no.5 (2001): 417.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸² Patricia Rushton, "Cholera and Its Impact on Nineteenth-Century Mormon Migration," *Brigham Young University Studies* 44, no.2 (2005): 129.

excrement, exacerbated the situation.⁴⁸³ Hands were rarely washed, and if they were, it was in contaminated water.⁴⁸⁴ Water was often boiled, but not to get rid of Cholera bacteria rather, it was to remove the insects living in the water.⁴⁸⁵ Many migrants were plagued with a variety of different types of diarrhoea as they travelled and camped near contaminated water or freshly deceased carcasses which were often placed beside water sources.⁴⁸⁶ Many other factors also aided in the spread of Cholera such as population movement, weather, and flooding.⁴⁸⁷ The 19th century saw an increase in migrations that would contribute to Cholera outbreaks across the world.⁴⁸⁸ As people headed into rural areas, encounters with hidden diseases would have risen again and further spread amongst travellers.⁴⁸⁹ In the case of flooding, the nutrients in the soil would have been a breeding ground for bacteria.⁴⁹⁰ If the flood was bigger, the spread would have been greater due to more moisture being present.⁴⁹¹ Regarding the effects of weather on all the trails, the winter would have arrived and brought snow; Cholera bacteria would not live, and periods of respite would occur.⁴⁹² When summer arrived, Cholera would return. Therefore, through the exploration of diseases pertaining to the Mormon Trail, it is evident that common experiences of disease were also felt by migrants on the California and Oregon trails, and are not unique to the Mormon experience on the Mormon Trail.

It is clear that the Mormon Trail exhibits qualities that make the migration unique in comparison to other trails such as the Oregon and California trails. These unique aspects pertain to the organisation of the Mormons on the trail, the approach to travel stresses and reactions of violence, and namely, the unique faith and persecution that the Mormons faced that drove them out of Illinois. However, similarities can be found on all three trails such as the experience of disease and namely, the notion of starting a new life in the American West. While it is crucial to recognize the unique aspects of the Mormon migration, it is of utmost importance to recognize the framework that it falls under, and that is, that the Mormons are a part of the large migration patterns that swept across the 19th century.

⁴⁸³ Rushton, "Cholera and Its Impact," 129.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ Brian Altonen, Weblog entry on "Cholera on the Oregon Trail (thesis)," Brian Altonen mph, posted June 7, 2013, <https://brianaltonenmph.com/6-history-of-medicine-and-pharmacy/oregon-trail-1837-1857/cholera-on-the-oregon-trail-thesis/> (accessed 2022-02-25).

⁴⁸⁷ Rushton, "Cholera and Its Impact on Nineteenth-Century Mormon Migration," 129.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 131.

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