

**“I Will Shoot Him, or Cut His Throat, Spill His Blood on the Ground”:  
Mormon Blood Atonement and Utah Capital Punishment**

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**ABSTRACT:** Joseph Smith favored the death penalty by firing squad or by cutting the throat but he opposed hanging. He also taught there were some sins so grievous that they precluded forgiveness. Brigham Young introduced a new doctrine that provided a process through which these grievous sins could be forgiven, which required that sinners’ blood be shed. Later, leading Mormon apologists such as B.H. Roberts and Bruce McConkie defended this doctrine of “blood atonement” and the church’s support for capital punishment. Only recently, the LDS Church switched to a position that it “neither promotes nor opposes capital punishment,” which gives some hope to those who would like to see the death penalty abolished in Utah.

**KEYWORDS:** Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormon Church, Blood Atonement, Death Penalty in Utah, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young.

*1. Joseph Smith and Capital Punishment*

When Joseph Smith (1805–1844) organized the Church of Christ in 1830, the most common methods of capital punishment in the United States were hanging and firing squads. His attitudes concerning capital punishment were influenced by Old Testament injunctions, which provided that “whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6 KJV, and Genesis 9:12–3 in Smith’s own translation). In 1831, when Smith translated this Old Testament passage, he received a new revelation that commanded “thou shall not kill, but he that killeth shall die.”

Significantly, the same revelation revealed that “he that kills shall not have forgiveness in this world, nor in the world to come” (*Doctrine and Covenants*

42:18–9 [February 9, 1831]). In addition, Smith received revelations that identified other sins that precluded forgiveness including denying the Holy Ghost (*Doctrine and Covenants* 76:34 [February 16, 1832]), breaking oaths and covenants of the priesthood (*Doctrine and Covenants* (4:41 [September 22 and 23, 1832]), and breaking the new and everlasting covenant (*Doctrine and Covenants* 132:27 [July 12, 1843]). These were similar to what some New Testament writers maintained were unforgivable sins including murder and blasphemy against the Holy Ghost (1 John 3:15; John 5:16; Matthew 12:32; Mark 3: 28–9; Hebrews 6:4–6; Hebrews 10: 26–9).

In 1833, Smith distinguished between hanging, “the popular method of execution among the gentiles [i.e., the non-Mormons] in all countries professing Christianity” and “blood for blood according to the law of heaven” (*Documentary History of the Church* 1909–12, I, 435 [November 5, 1833]). Smith’s characterization of hanging as the gentile form of punishment demonstrates he was aware that it was the most common form of capital punishment.

On March 4, 1843, Smith reconfirmed the distinction between hanging and blood shedding during a meeting of the Nauvoo City Council. Willard Richards (1804–1854) recorded that during the meeting Smith read a letter from James Arlington Bennett (1788–1863), in which he stated that Captain Alexander Slidell Mackenzie (1803–1848) of the US naval brig Somers committed murder when he hanged three mutineers instead of imprisoning them. Richards recorded that Smith agreed with Bennett’s conclusion and that George A. Smith (1817–1875) responded that “imprisonment was better than hanging.”

Joseph then opined that “I am opposed to hanging, even if a man kills another, I will shoot him, or cut his throat, spill his blood on the ground.” Smith also told the Council that “If I ever have the privilege of making a law on the point I will have it so” (Smith 2011, 295 [March 4, 1843]). Joseph also predicted that the captain of the Somers would either be hung or imprisoned, presumably because he had not received such confirmation. Nevertheless, Captain Mackenzie was eventually cleared, and his decision was confirmed.

Smith’s comments concerning capital punishment were consistent with his 1831 revelation, which provided that those who kill

shall be delivered up and dealt with according to the laws of the land; for remember that he hath no forgiveness; and it shall be proved according to the laws of the land (*Doctrine and Covenants* 42:79 [February 23, 1831]).

Smith's perspective concerning shedding of blood may have been influenced by penalties in Masonic rituals. Although these penalties did not specifically relate to the execution of murderers, Masons believed that shedding of blood was an appropriate form of punishment for those who violated oaths of secrecy and were disloyal to the Craft. When Masons took these oaths, they were informed that the penalties included having their throat cut, their breast torn open, and their body severed in two (Grunder 2018, 109, 1004, 1146, 1691, and 1713).

These penalties were interpreted in a larger religious context by many Masons. Critics noted that Freemasonry provided the initiate "with his religion, with his politics" and "defend[s] him against the claims of every other power [...] and holds his soul and body in pledge as a security" (Grunder 2018, 1146). As such, "it substitutes itself in the place of all religion" (Grunder 2018, 109) and "pretends to save men, to conduct them to heaven, and bestow on them the rewards of a blessed immortality" (Grunder 2018, 1713). Some Masons therefore believed they were duty bound to carry out these penalties, as they allegedly did in the case of William Morgan (1774–1826?) because he betrayed the Craft (Grunder 2018, 1000 and 1716–17).

In Nauvoo, Smith incorporated some of these Masonic penalties into his new temple ritual. They were considered viable when an initiate broke an oath of secrecy. These penalties consisted of having "throats cut from ear to ear and our tongues torn out by their roots," "our breasts cut open and our hearts and vitals torn from our bodies," and "our bodies be cut asunder in the midst and all our bowels gust out" (Paden 1931, 20; Anderson 2011).

## 2. *Brigham Young and Blood Atonement*

Smith was murdered before he had the opportunity to make a capital punishment law. Brigham Young (1801–1877), who was sustained as Smith's successor, confirmed his predecessor's position concerning capital punishment. But more significantly, Young also gradually introduced a new doctrine associated with capital punishment that became known as blood atonement. Young based the new doctrine on Smith's teaching that some sins are so

horrendous that those who commit them cannot be forgiven by Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Young taught that those who committed these types of sins could be forgiven by having their own blood shed.

On March 22, 1845, Young announced during a meeting of the Council of Fifty in Nauvoo, “a plan whereby Missouri might be saved.” He was referring to those who persecuted Mormons in Missouri and the resulting bloodshed. He stated that if the Missouri mob

would come to Nauvoo cast themselves at our feet, and say they had sinned a sin unto death, and they are willing to submit to the law, let their heads be severed from their bodies, and let their hearts blood run and drench the earth, and then the Almighty would say they should finally be saved in some inferior kingdom. [...] [W]hen a man comes here who is guilty of murder—we would cut off his head, it would be a million times better for him, than it would to let him live (Smith 2016, 351 [(March 22, 1845)]).

During the same year, William Smith (1811–1893), Joseph Smith’s brother, published a proclamation in the *Warsaw Signal*, in which he claimed Young had acknowledged he knew about a murder and that

it was far better for [the victim] to die, than to live any longer in sin, for that he might now possibly be redeemed in the eternal world. That his murderers had done even a deed of charity for that such a man deserved to die (Smith 1845, 1).

William later signed an affidavit that Young introduced “blood atonement” following the death of his brother and that “it had never been taught in the old church.” He claimed that

if a man disobeyed the propositions of that council, meaning the remaining Twelve, he had to pay for it by the forfeiture of his life and atone for the sin by the shedding of his own blood, or allowing it to be shed by others (*Abstract of Evidence: Temple Lot Case* 1893, 93–4 [Affidavit of William Smith]).

He also asserted he left Nauvoo

because of my objections and protests against the doctrine of blood atonement and other new doctrines that were brought into the church (*Abstract of Evidence: Temple Lot Case* 1893, 98 [Cross-examination of William Smith]).

From December 1845 to February 1846, Young introduced the temple ritual previously reserved for church leaders and their wives to the general church membership. He modified the ritual to include a new oath “to avenge the death of Joseph Smith, the martyr, together with that of his brother, Hyrum [Smith (1800–1844)], on this American nation” (Buerger 1987, 103).

Temple exposés claimed there was a penalty attached to the oath “to have our throats cut, and our hearts and bowels torn out” (G.B.R. 1879: *Deseret Weekly* 1889).

In December 1846, after the Mormons abandoned Nauvoo, Thomas Bullock (1816–1885) recorded that Young informed the High Council in Winter Quarters, Iowa that “[w]hen a man is found to be a thief, he will be a thief no longer, cut his throat, & thro’ him in the River” (Bullock 1843–49, December 13, 1846). During the same month, Willard Richards recorded that Young announced he would not travel with wicked men “who continued to lie & steal & swear & commit iniquity & follow the camp” and that he “would have their heads cut off—for that is the law of God & it shall be executed & I swear that I will not live amongst [them]” (Richards 1821–54, 17, December 20, 1846).

After the Saints arrived in Salt Lake, Young focused again on the Missouri mobs and continued to emphasize beheading as his preferred method of punishment over Smith’s “cutting the throat.” He told an assembly in Salt Lake that

all the leaders of the mob could have been saved in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ would have been to come forward voluntarily & let their heads been cut off & let their blood run upon the ground & gone up as a A smokeing incens before the heavens as an atonement but now they will be eternally damned (Woodruff 1983, III, 240 [July 28, 1847]).

In 1849, John D. Lee (1812–1877) recorded that during a meeting of the Council of Fifty a comment was made concerning “infernals, thieves, Murderers, Whoremongers & every other wicked curst.” The speaker, who was not identified (but Brigham Young was present), said their “Blood ought to fflow [sic] to atone for their crimes” and that “their cursed heads [needed] to be cut off that they may atone for their Sins, that mercy may have her claims upon them in the day of redemption” (Lee 1955, 97–8).

### 3. *Capital Punishment in Utah*

The Mormons initially organized a theocratic form of government before creating a provisional State of Deseret, which included executive, legislative, and judicial branches with Brigham Young as Governor, Daniel H. Wells (1814–1891) as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Heber C. Kimball (1801–1868) as Assembly President, and William W. Phelps (1792–1872) as Speaker of the

House. In 1850, George A. Smith wrote a criminal code that was enacted by Deseret’s legislature (*Journal History of the Church*, January 23, 1850). The clear intention was to include the methods of capital punishment Joseph Smith told the Nauvoo City Council he would adopt if he had “the privilege of making a law on the point.” He had identified these methods as “cutting the throat” or shooting the murderer.

But the statute reflected Young’s preference for beheading over cutting the throat:

when any person shall be found guilty of murder and sented (sic) to die, he, she or they shall suffer death by being shot, hung or beheaded (*Laws and Ordinances of the State of Deseret (Utah)* 1919, 27).

George A. Smith was present when Joseph Smith mentioned “cutting the throat” which was recorded by Willard Richards. When Richards’ notes were published in the *Deseret News* in 1856 (six years after the first capital punishment statute was passed), Smith was quoted as saying “I will [...] cut off his head” (*Deseret News* 1856, 1) while his words in 1853 had been “cut his throat” (Smith 2011, 295; *Documentary History of the Church* 1909–12, V, 296 [March 4, 1853]).

Young’s preference for beheading may have been influenced by the penalty in the Order of Knight Templars ritual, which was beheading (Richardson 1860, 120–21; *A Ritual and Illustrations of Freemasonry* n.d. [1848], 206–7; the first book included an illustration of the due-guard that “alludes to the penalty of the obligation, impaling the head on the highest spire in Christendom,” while *A Ritual* had an illustration of a decapitated Knight Templar). David Bernard’s (1798–1876) *Light on Masonry*, published in 1829, which relied on Thomas S. Webb’s (1771–1819) *The Freemasons Monitor* (Webb 1802), included an illustration of the beheading of Akirop that took place as an act of vengeance in the degree of Knights of the Ninth Arch, which is described in the book (Bernard 1829, 382–87). Joseph Smith dictated passages of the *Book of Mormon* in June 1829 that included a beheading reminiscent of Bernard’s illustration.

Smith had also identified hanging as “the popular method of execution among the gentiles.” Mormon apostle Jediah Grant (1816–1856) was even more dismissive of hanging, referring to it as “getting a rope round his neck, and having him hung up like a dead dog” (Grant 1854, 2). Nevertheless, hanging was included as a capital punishment option to allow convicted murders to select the

most common form of death penalty in the United States. But most of those who were executed in Utah chose the firing squad rather than hanging, and no one chose beheading even though it was apparently Young's favorite option.

Although the Mormon leadership originally sought territorial status, they soon determined it was preferable to become a state since they could elect their own officials. Thereafter they modified their petition to the United States Congress but were disappointed when it passed an Organic Act, creating Utah Territory. But in consolation President Millard Fillmore (1800–1874) appointed Brigham Young as Governor, who quickly took a census and organized the election of the Utah legislature. In October 1851, the Utah legislature adopted a joint resolution legalizing the laws of the provisional state of Deseret and appointed a committee “to revise and classify the laws of the State of Deseret” (*Acts, Resolutions and Memorials, Passed by the First Annual and Special Sessions, of the Legislative Assembly 1852*, 205 and 215).

In March 1852, the legislature adopted “An Act in Relation to Crimes and Punishments” that included the same forms of capital punishment previously enacted by the State of Deseret. The ordinance provided that murderers

sentenced to die ... shall suffer death by being shot, hung or beheaded as the court may direct, or the person so condemned shall have his option as to the manner of his execution (*Acts, Resolutions and Memorials, Passed by the First Annual and Special Sessions, of the Legislative Assembly 1852*, 142–43).

The statute provided two methods (firing squad and beheading) that complied with God's laws and ensured the convicted murderers future salvation, and a third (hanging) that retained the gentile method.

#### *4. Justifiable Killing*

The “Act in Relation to Crimes and Punishments,” also included provisions which defined “justifiable killing.” One of the provisions stated that a person was justified committing homicide when he

shall kill another in his own defense [...] or in sudden heat of passion caused by the attempt of any such offender to commit a rape upon his wife, daughter, sister, mother or other female relation or dependent (*Acts, Resolutions and Memorials, Passed by the First Annual and Special Sessions, of the Legislative Assembly 1852*, 140).

This statute (like the capital punishment law) was consistent with church teachings that fornicators and adulterers were required to pay the penalty of blood atonement.

The statute was enacted after several men were tried for killing men who had seduced their wives (Cannon 1985). The first case involved Madison D. Hambleton (1811–1870) who killed John Vaughn (?–1851) in February 1851 after he “was detected in open delict” with Hambleton’s wife Chelnecha (née Smith, 1818–1880). Hambleton “was the more incensed at finding the intimacy of the parties had been long standing.” He warned Vaughn to desist but “his evil habits were too strong for him.” Hambleton therefore took vengeance “upon the man who had fouled the milk of his children’s milk” by walking up to Vaughn following a church service and “there blew his brains out” (Grant 1852, 42–3).

Hambleton was tried by the Supreme Court of the State of Deseret, which was presided over by Heber C. Kimball. Although there is no official record of the proceedings, Hosea Stout (1810–1889), who was the prosecutor, recorded in his journal that Brigham Young spoke on behalf of Hambleton and stated he was justified. He was acquitted by the court “and also by the Voice of the people present” (Stout 1964, II, 396). Following the trial Mrs. Hambleton, who apparently was a willing participant in the tryst, was excommunicated by her local congregation for adultery (Madsen 1981, 108–9).

The second case was the trial of Howard Egan (1815–1878). He had killed James Madison Monroe (1823–1851), who had a tryst with Egan’s first wife Tamson Parshley (1824–1905), which resulted in the birth of a son (William Moburn Egan, 1851–1929). Although Brigham Young apparently encouraged Egan to seek revenge, he was still indicted in October 1851. He was tried before Zerubbabel Snow (1809–1888), the only Mormon federal judge in the territory, under both the common law and federal statutes. Mormon apostle George A. Smith represented Egan, and made several arguments in favor of his client’s innocence including precedents from other states.

But Smith’s main contention was that a man who seduces his neighbor’s wife must die based on a principle that “beats and throbs through the heart of the entire inhabitants of the Territory.” He argued that “we are sovereign people, and to seduce the wife of a citizen is death by the common law.” He noted that “in this territory it is a principle of mountain common law, that no man can seduce the wife of another *without endangering his own life*.” This was “the established



principle of justice known in these mountains” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, I, 95–100 [October 1851, Plea of George A. Smith, Esq., on the Trial of Howard Egan for the Murder of James Monroe]).

When Snow instructed the jury, he did not agree with Smith’s application of mountain common law, which he characterized as an argument that Egan killed Monroe “in the name of the Lord.” He noted that this approach “does not change the law of the case” because a “man may violate a law of the land, and be guilty, and yet, so far as he is concerned, do it in the name of the Lord.” Instead, Snow instructed the jury that the federal law at issue was inapplicable because Congress did not have “the sole and exclusive jurisdiction within the limits of the existing territories.” For that reason, he instructed the jury that if it found Egan killed Monroe in Utah Territory he “is entitled to a verdict of not guilty” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, I, 100–3 [October 1851, Charge of Hon. Z. Snow, Judge of the First Judicial District Court of the United States for the Territory of Utah, to the Jury, on the Trial of Howard Egan for the Murder of James Monroe]). Not surprisingly the jury returned a verdict of not guilty within fifteen minutes (Cannon 1985, 314).

Jedediah Grant began sending letters, which may have been authored by Thomas L. Kane (1822–1883), to the *New York Herald* within days after the Utah Legislature approved the statute that a husband could justifiably kill his wife’s seducer (Grant 1852, 42–3). In his third letter (written on April 25, 1852), Grant mentioned the Hambleton and Egan trials, and advanced some of the same arguments George A. Smith made during the Egan trial (Grant 1852, 46–8; see also Stenhouse 1873; Roberts 1930, III, 528, note 18; Arrington 1974, 140–53; Sessions 1982, 100 and 264–65). He then announced that the legislature had passed legislation “making Death the punishment of Adultery” and that it would “be up before Congress for its approval or rescission.” But he warned if “our Laws do not offer an *honorable* redress to the American citizen, he’ll have it outside the law” (Grant 1852, 48).

Grant did not acknowledge the practice of polygamy in his letters since it had not been officially announced. But he did emphasize that the church’s position on adultery was consistent with Christian moral teachings. When Orson Pratt (1811–1881) announced the practice of polygamy, he contrasted it with the corrupt and debased laws of the gentiles, which recognized the common law and winked at adultery (*Deseret News-Extra* 1852, 19; Roberts 1930, IV, 56).

Young later complained that those who disliked Mormonism were not focused on polygamy

but they hate this people because they strive to be pure, and will not believe in whoredom and adultery, but declare death to the man who is found guilty of those crimes (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, VII, 146 [May 22, 1869]).

### *5. Formal Announcement of Blood Atonement*

In 1852, Brigham Young felt increasingly confident in both his prophetic calling and his position as Governor to reveal to the general church membership some new controversial doctrines, including blood atonement. In January, Young explained the reason African American men were excluded from the priesthood, and in February he announced the doctrine of blood atonement. In April, he explained that Adam was actually God, and then in August both Young and Orson Pratt announced the doctrine of plural marriage.

When Young explained blood atonement, he did so in the context of those who entered into forbidden interracial relationships and particularly those who had sexual intercourse that resulted in the birth of mixed-race children. On February 2, he told legislators that when a man entered into conjugal relations with “the seed of Cain,” the only way to repent of the sin would be to “walk up and say cut off my head, and kill man woman and child.”

He assured them that by doing so “it would do a great deal towards atoning for the sin” and that “it would be a blessing to them—it would do them good that they might be saved with their [brethren]” and that “it is one of the greatest blessings to some to kill them, although the true principles of it are not understood” (Young 1852; Woodruff 1983, IV, 97–8 [January 4, 1852]). Young never wavered in his teaching of blood atonement in the context of interracial relations. In 1863, he repeated that

If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain, the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, X, 110 [March 8, 1863]).

Jedediah Grant became an extreme advocate of the doctrine of blood atonement as it was expanded to include other sins. On March 12, 1854, less than a month before Young called him to become his second counselor in the First Presidency,

he preached that it is “their right to kill a sinner to save him, when he commits those crimes that can only be atoned for by shedding his blood” (Grant 1854, 2).

Then in 1856, Young explained blood atonement in a broader context during a period of church history known as the Mormon Reformation. He expanded the crimes that should be punished by blood atonement to include not only murder but also adultery, miscegenation, and apostasy. And significantly he taught that those who had committed those sins could not receive forgiveness without having their own blood shed.

On September 21, he taught in a meeting in the Bowery that

[t]here are sins that men commit for which they cannot receive forgiveness in this world, or in that which is to come, and if they had their eyes open to see their true condition, they would be perfectly willing to have their blood spilt upon the ground. [...] I have had men come to me and offer their lives to atone for their sins. It is true that the blood of the Son of God was shed for sins through the fall and those committed by men, yet men can commit sins which it can never remit (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 53–4 [September 21, 1856]).

During the same meeting, Grant claimed that the doctrine of blood atonement was initially revealed by the Apostle Paul (ca. 5–65 CE), and then encouraged members of the congregation who had committed the most serious sins

to go to the President immediately, and ask him to appoint a committee to attend to their case; and then let a place be selected, and let that committee shed their blood (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 49–50 [September 21, 1856]).

Young’s other counselor, Heber Kimball, also became an enthusiastic proponent of blood atonement. He taught that “when it is necessary that blood should be shed, we should be ready to do that as to eat an apple” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, VI, 34–5 [November 8, 1857]). He completely supported Young’s teaching that

those that sin against the Holy Ghost, or shed innocent blood, or consent thereto [...] will have to pay the atonement, or he never can atone for his sin (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, VII, 236 [August 28, 1859]).

## 6. *Extra-legal Blood Atonement*

Some critics suggested that church officials believed they could carry out blood atonement outside of the law. They pointed to statements made by church

authorities concerning adulterers and traitors as well as some horrific murders that took place in the territory. With respect to adultery, Apostle Orson Pratt wrote in *The Seer*, a newspaper he published in Washington D. C., that if citizens “have any connection out of the marriage covenant they not only forfeit their lives by the law of God, but they forfeit their salvation also” (Pratt 1853, 42).

Young went further, and preached that if a man

found your brother in bed with your wife, and put a javelin through both of them, you would be justified, and they would atone for their sins (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, III, 247 [March 16, 1856]).

Heber Kimball added that adulterers “cannot whore it here” and that “we will slay both men and women” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, 6: 8 [November 8, 1857]). He also said that adulterers “are worthy of death, and they will get it” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 174 [January 11, 1857]), and even requested “when I am guilty of seducing any man’s wife, or any woman in God’s world, I say, sever my head from my body” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, VII, 20 [July 16, 1854]).

Apostle Parley P. Pratt (1807–1857) also claimed that Apostle Paul taught that fornicators deserve this punishment (Pratt 1856, 357).

Young and other leaders suggested that church members could request blood atonement and claimed to know

transgressors who, if they knew themselves, and the only condition upon which they can obtain forgiveness, would beg of their brethren to shed their blood (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 53 [September 21, 1856]).

In 1856, Young revealed “I have had men come to me and offer their lives to atone for their sins” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 54 [September 21, 1856]). He expanded this theme the following year concerning a discourse about adultery. He said,

one of the laws of that kingdom where our Father dwells, that if a man was found guilty of adultery, he must have his blood shed (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 219 [February 8, 1857]).

He therefore asked the audience that if they knew someone who had committed a sin that required blood atonement whether “you love that man or woman well enough to shed their blood?” Young explained that if one knows that if salvation will be withheld, “is there a man or woman in this house but what should say,

‘shed my blood that I may be saved and exalted with the Gods?’” According to Young “[t]hat would be loving themselves, even unto an eternal exaltation. Will you love your brothers and sisters likewise?” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 219–20 [February 8, 1857]).

In 1856, a church member made such an inquiry. Bishop Isaac Haight (1813–1886) sent a letter to Brigham Young concerning a man who had conjugal relations with a woman before they were married. The man felt guilty and confessed to Haight and even indicated “if the Law of God requires his Blood to be spilled he will most willingly comply with Anything required that he may be saved.” But given these circumstances Young advised Haight to “Tell the young man to go and sin no more repent of all his sins and be baptized for the same” (Haight 1856).

Young noted (perhaps alluding to the case Haight referred to him) that,

But now I say, in the name of the Lord, that if this people will sin no more, but faithfully live their religion, their sins will be forgiven them without taking life (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 219–20 [February 8, 1857]).

The following month, he corresponded again with Bishop Haight and reconfirmed “in the name of the Lord, [that] remission and pardon: even of adultery are promised to all that truly repent, confess, forsake their sins, and make restitution” (Young 1857).

Some church officials also suggested that traitors were subject to blood atonement. Jedediah Grant complained that in the United States traitors do not “forfeit their lives” but that Mormon apostates should be under the law of blood atonement. “Putting to death transgressors would exhibit the law of God, no difference by whom it was done; that is my opinion” (Grant 1854, 2). Heber C. Kimball taught that when men

turn traitors to God and His servants, their blood will surely be shed, or else they will be damned, and that too according to their covenants (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 375 [August 16, 1857]).

Kimball said that those who had received their endowments and “made certain covenants” were the “most worthy to be slain” (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, 6:38 [November 8, 1857]). This suggests that the traitors were church members who had received their temple endowments, taken oaths, and had agreed to have their own lives taken if they revealed any secrets from the temple. He claimed that

after Jesus’s crucifixion the apostles kicked Judas until his bowels came out and that

when men will forfeit their and turn against us and against the covenants they have made, and they will be destroyed as was Judas (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, VI, 125–6 [December 13, 1857]).

Kimball’s story was an elaboration of Reed Peck’s (1814–1894) memory that Joseph Smith claimed Peter killed Judas by hanging him but incorporated a sanguinary method (“Minutes and Testimonies, 12–29 November 1838, Copy [*State of Missouri v. Gates et al. for Treason*]” 1838, 45).

Nevertheless, some church apologists have claimed that “Young’s listeners probably understood this rhetoric as hyperbole” (Smith 2016, 351, note 521). They have cited Young’s 1848 statement that “I have feelings,” and even though he would “often say cut his infernal throat. Still I do not mean any such thing” (Historian’s Office 1848; see also Young 2007, 279–80; Woodruff 1983, III, 330–33 [March 17, 1848]). But it is just as likely that Young knew his listeners were terrified by such comments. Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898) observed that when Young preached that “for some sins no blood would be acceptable except the life & blood of the individual,” “he made the hearts of many tremble” (Woodruff 1983, IV, 451 [September 21, 1856]).

There is some evidence that Young’s loose talk may have encouraged some church members to conduct blood atonement outside the civil law. This impression was seemingly confirmed following the Mountain Meadows Massacre on September 11, 1857, when Mormons slaughtered 120 members of a wagon train that originated from Arkansas and traveled through Utah bound for California. There were also other suspicious deaths in the territory that reinforced this impression.

But regardless of whether some extra-legal executions were carried out, Young and other church officials acknowledged from the pulpit that although

[t]he wickedness and ignorance of the nations forbid this principle’s being in full force, but the time will come when the law of God will be in full force (*Journal of Discourses* 1854–86, IV, 219–20).

Even Grant complained that the territory could not enforce laws “justifiable before God, without any contaminating influences of Gentile amalgamation, laws,

and traditions,” and compared God’s laws to “the doings of different governments” (Grant 1854, 2).

Young repeated his belief in blood atonement during an interview with the *New York Herald* in May 1877, when he stated that “we believe execution should be done by the shedding of blood instead of by hanging.” But he also told the correspondent that since the church could not order executions, the doctrine of blood atonement was carried out through the civil law of “capital punishment for offenses deserving death, according to the laws of the land” (*New York Herald* 1877; *Deseret News* 1877a).

### 7. Apologetics

Following Young’s death, the *Deseret News* editorialized that “all the government of earth” should pronounce the death penalty on the murderer, and “let his blood be spilled upon the ground as an offering, instead of strangling him to death like a dog” (*Deseret News* 1877b; *Deseret Evening News* 1879). New prophets continued to support Young’s emphasis on capital punishment as the method of achieving blood atonement well into the twentieth century.

When Utah was admitted as a state in 1896, the legislature adopted the same capital punishment law previously passed by the State of Deseret and the Territory of Utah with the exception that it dropped the option of beheading. Thereafter church officials continued to confirm that Utah’s capital punishment law was enacted to grant

unto the condemned murderer the privilege of choosing for himself whether he die by hanging, or whether he be shot, and thus have his blood shed in harmony with the law of God, and this atone, so far as it is in his power to atone, for the death of his victim (Smith and Evans 1905, 15–6).

In 1930 Brigham H. Roberts (1857–1933) in his *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, published by the church, provided the first sophisticated apologetics for the doctrine of blood atonement. He maintained that Smith’s views on capital punishment were consistent with both Old and New Testament passages (Roberts 1930, IV, 129, note 41), then argued that when Young introduced blood atonement, he did not go beyond what the Apostle Paul taught as documented in the Bible (Roberts 1930, IV, 126–30).

Roberts also argued that Young did not institute a system of blood atonement outside of the secular system of justice (Roberts 1930, IV, 130–33). He did acknowledge, however, there had been “certain extreme and unqualified utterances of some of the leading elders of the church” (not including Young) that some interpreted as allowing that blood atonement could be carried out “by the legal authority vested in the church.” Nevertheless, Roberts wrote that “the suggestions seemingly made in the overzealous words of some of these leading elders were never acted upon” (Roberts 1930, IV, 126 and 130).

Following Roberts’ apologetics, the church’s position concerning blood atonement did not change. In 1958 Bruce R. McConkie (1915–1985) explained the doctrine in his magnum opus entitled *Mormon Doctrine*. He included an entry on blood atonement that explained

there are some serious sins for which the cleansing of Christ does not operate, and the law of God is that men must then have their own blood shed to atone for their sins (McConkie 1958, 87).

As such, McConkie wrote, “capital punishment is ordained of God” (McConkie 1958, 104). He also noted that the doctrine could not be practiced except through capital punishment laws, and that secular governments which have abolished such laws are examples of “the direful apostasy that prevails among the peoples who call themselves Christian” (McConkie 1958, 104). He further explained that “hanging or execution on gallows does not comply with the law of blood atonement, for the blood is not shed” (McConkie 1958, 314).

#### *8. Reversals and Modifications*

But when a second edition of *Mormon Doctrine* was published in 1966, the entries for both “capital punishment” and “hanging” were eliminated while the entry for “blood atonement” was retained (McConkie 1966). Then in 1978, McConkie provided a rationale for striking the entry on hanging. In correspondence he explained:

We do not believe that it is necessary for men in this day to shed their own blood to receive a remission of sins. This is said with a full awareness of what I and others have written and said on this subject in times past (McConkie 1978, 1).

Two years later, the Utah legislature eliminated hanging and substituted lethal injections but still retained firing squads as a method of execution.



Despite these revisions in McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* and his correspondence concerning hanging, the church made no official announcements concerning blood atonement. Then in 1987 the church privately modified its position when it recorded in its *Journal History of the Church* that "the Church neither promotes nor opposes capital punishment" (Special Affairs Committee 1987). This explains why McConkie's entry for "capital punishment" was eliminated. His charge that the elimination of the death penalty by secular governments was "further evidence of the direful apostasy" could no longer be maintained when the church no longer advocated that the death penalty was necessary to carry out the Lord's commandment concerning blood atonement.

The modifications concerning hanging specifically and capital punishment generally were in direct opposition to Joseph Smith's position that murderers should not only be executed but that the method of execution must result in shedding of blood. Nevertheless, these changes were not publicized and were relatively unknown. Even through one church spokesperson referred to them during a private meeting in 1989, it was noted in a press report that "no mention was made of an official church statement" (*Post Register* [Idaho Falls] 1989). Even the contributors to *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, which was published in 1992, were seemingly unaware of these developments since they only noted that "capital punishment is viewed in the doctrine of the Church to be an appropriate penalty for murder" ("Capital Punishment" 1992).

But two decades later in 2003, when the Utah Legislature debated proposed legislation that the firing squad be eliminated, the church's *Deseret News* reported that a church spokesperson confirmed the church "has no objection to the elimination of the firing squad in Utah" (Thomson 2003). One observer noted that absent this announcement "there probably would have been a question among some legislators and it may have not made it out of committee" (Thomson 2003). In 2004, the legislature passed a bill that abolished firing squads as a method of execution. The following year the church finally announced in the *Deseret News* its broader position that "We neither promote nor oppose capital punishment" (Clarke and Whitt 2005). This was followed in 2010 by a statement disavowing Blood Atonement:

The "so-called 'blood atonement' by which individuals would be required to shed their own blood to pay for their sins, is not the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We believe in and teach the infinite and all-encompassing atonement of

Jesus Christ, which makes forgiveness of sin and salvation possible for all people (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2010).

But in 2021 the legislature passed legislation that allowed firing squads to be used again under specific circumstances, which were primarily focused on whether execution by lethal injection was determined to be unconstitutional or if the state was unable to lawfully obtain the necessary substances to perform lethal injections. The following year, a bill was introduced to eliminate capital punishment.

The proponents of abolishing capital punishment elected not to emphasize the church’s position, other than to indicate it was neutral on the issue, even though most of the legislators were Mormons. Significantly, they did not emphasize that the church no longer taught that capital punishment is a God-sanctioned method to effectuate blood atonement in appropriate situations. During the debate in committee, the focus was on the length and costs of appeals. But one witness quoted the Old Testament command in Genesis 9:12–3, and another testified that capital punishment is a blessing to those convicted of capital crimes.

It is unclear whether Utah legislators understood the current church position, and this may account in part for the bill’s failure to survive a committee vote. The church has not provided any rationale for discarding Joseph Smith’s teaching concerning capital punishment, or Brigham Young’s more controversial pronouncements about blood atonement. The church does not justify modifications in doctrine or acknowledge that prior doctrines became anachronistic, and even more significantly were not inspired. Because of this, some members have continued for decades to repeat apologetics concerning the non-eligibility of Blacks to hold Mormon priesthood (Homer 2014, 391–92).

There is a similar gap between the apologetics advanced by B.H. Roberts and the church’s current neutral position concerning capital punishment and its apparent position that blood atonement is no longer viable even when the death penalty is imposed pursuant to secular laws. When lobbyists failed to present these implications of the church’s current position, it is likely that some legislators relied on Roberts’ apologetics in the *Comprehensive History of the Church*, which is still considered to be the official history of the church.

Nevertheless, the church is gradually supplanting Roberts’ official *Comprehensive History* with a new multi-volume treatise entitled *Saints*. While

only three of the projected four volumes of *Saints* have been published, it is clear that it is intended to replace Roberts' more sophisticated history. In the first volume, it was noted that the "global reach of the restored gospel" has increased so markedly that "it is time to update and include more Saints in the story" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2018, xvii–viii).

And yet the story as it relates to blood atonement is much shorter than Roberts' version. The second volume of *Saints* notes that Young and others

had even drawn on Old Testament scriptures to teach that certain grievous sins could be forgiven only through the shedding of the sinners' blood (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2020, 245).

It then related the story of Isaac Haight, and concluded that even though Young "sometimes let his fiery sermons go too far" he did "not intend for people to be put to death for their sins." Instead,

Brigham's forceful preaching and his counsel for mercy were intended to help Saints repent and draw closer to the Lord (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2020, 246).

Although the final volume of *Saints* (which will include the period from 1956 forward) has not been published yet, it is unlikely to include any in-depth explanation for the reversal of the church's position on capital punishment or blood atonement. Nevertheless, one could easily argue that the modifications of doctrines relating to both priesthood eligibility and capital punishment have brought the church in conformity with mainstream beliefs and practices, and have aligned it in a more favorable position for future growth and for "more Saints in the story."

Even such an explanation could foster a better understanding by Utah legislators when they again consider the abolition of capital punishment.

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