The Making of a Mormon Myth: The 1844 Transfiguration of Brigham Young

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Mormonism, America's unique religious manifestation, has a remarkable past. Nourished on the spectacular, the faith can count heroic martyrs, epic treks, and seemingly supernatural manifestations. Deep in the Mormon psyche is an attraction to prophetic posturing and swagger. Joseph Smith, Jr., and Brigham Young, in particular, are icons who have come to dominate the Mormon world like mythical colossuses.

After Smith's untimely 1844 murder, Brigham Young and an ailing Sidney Rigdon, the only surviving member of the First Presidency, became entangled in an ecclesiastical dogfight for primacy. Young, a masterful strategist with a political adroitness and physical vitality Rigdon lacked, easily won the mantle. But as time passed the rather prosaic events surrounding this tussle for church leadership metamorphosed into a mythical marvel. The legend is now unsurpassed in Mormon lore, second only to Joseph Smith's own account of angelic ministrations and his "first vision."

While the veracity of angelic visitations, apparitions, and miracles is typically difficult to authenticate due to a lack of corroborative evidence, the averred "Transfiguration of Brigham Young" can be scrutinized in detail in newspaper accounts, diaries, official proclamations, retrospective observations, and other exemplification.

The official account of post-martyrdom Mormonism was written after-the-fact by members of the Quorum of the Twelve or their advocates. These men, under Brigham Young's direction, zealously projected their role in history in the most favorable light. Overshadowed by editorial censorship, hundreds of deletions, additions, and alterations were made when the History of Joseph Smith as it was originally called, was serialized in the Deseret News in the late 1850s. Not only does this history place polygamy and Brigham Young's ecclesiastical significance in the rosy glow of political acceptability, it does a monumental disservice to Sidney Rigdon and others who challenged the Twelve's ascent to power.

More than a dozen references to Brigham Young's involvement in transposing the written history may be found in the post-martyrdom record first published in book form in 1902 as History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For example, an 1 April 1845 citation records Young saying: "I commenced revising the History of Joseph Smith at Brother Richard's office: Elder Heber C. Kimball and George A. Smith were with me."
prophet Joseph for at least three reasons. The first was political. U.S. presidential candidate Joseph Smith had declared Illinois residency. Rigdon, his vice presidential running mate, was required by law to establish residency elsewhere. Second, at an earlier time when Rigdon and Smith were living in Kirtland, Ohio, the prophet, as recorded by Book of Mormon witness David Whitmer, prophesied that “my servant Sydney must go sooner or later to Pittsburg.” Thus the move to Pennsylvania was intended to fulfill revelation as well as political expediency. In addition, the prophet, fearing for Rigdon’s life in the aftermath of the destruction of the Nauvoo Expositor, wanted his counselor to survive. Smith’s personal diary entry for 22 June 1844 makes that clear. “I have sent Br. Rigdon away,” the prophet wrote, “[and] I want to send Hiram away to save him [too], to avenge my Blood.”

By official design Rigdon was not in Illinois at the time of the infamous homicides at Carthage Jail. On 18 June, nine days before the martyrdom of the Smith brothers, the Rigdon family departed on the steamer Osprey for Pittsburgh. According to Rigdon’s son Wickliffe, Joseph Smith and “many of the prominent members of the church came to the boat to bid them goodbye[s].” Ebenezer Robinson, sent with Rigdon to establish a Mormon newspaper in Pittsburgh, recalled that prior to embarking Smith took him aside and admonished him to stand by Rigdon “under all circumstances, and uphold his hands on all occasions, and never forsake him ... for he is a good man and I love him better than I ever loved him in all my life, for my heart is entwined around his with chords [sic] that can never be broken.”

Arriving in Pittsburgh on 27 June, the Rigdons, unaware of Joseph’s and Hyrum’s deaths, visited family members the following days. Next they located a rental house on 1 July. Five days later Sidney received the first news of the tragic deaths from a Nauvoo Neighbor brought to town by Jedediah Grant on his way to Philadelphia. Rigdon told Grant that he felt prepared to claim “the Prophetic mantle” and that he would “now take his place, at the head of the church, in spite of men or devils, at the risk of his life.” Knowing that Grant planned to leave the following day for Philadelphia, Rigdon requested him to relay word to any of the Twelve he might meet, that it “was his wish and desire that they should come to Pittsburgh before going to Nauvoo, and hold a council.” Sidney also sent a letter to Brigham Young in care of The Prophet, a Mormon newspaper in the East, suggesting a date to confer in Pittsburgh.

But the Twelve, with succession aspirations of their own, disregarded Rigdon’s wishes. Wilford Woodruff wrote from Boston to Brigham Young on 16 July urging quorum members in the East to meet in Massachusetts, suggesting they exclude Rigdon. The Twelve then had Orson Hyde write to Rigdon, informing him that they “thought it safer for them to return” through Buffalo and Chicago, requesting him to “meet them in Nauvoo, where they would council together.” Initially Rigdon had not planned to return to Illinois. According to his account, however, he heard the spectral voice of Joseph Smith directing him, “You must not stay, you must go.”

Despite frequent kidnapping and assassination attempts, Joseph Smith established no firm policies regarding presidential succession in the event of his death. The resulting confusion threw the prophetic transition into turmoil. He simply had not expected to die at thirty-eight. Never given to full disclosure to any man or woman, the prophet’s public and private statements between 1834-44 suggested at least eight different methods for succession, each pointing to different successors with some claims to validity.

Consequently, Rigdon found the Saints in a leadership quandary when he arrived in Nauvoo on Saturday, 3 August. A postscript Parley P. Pratt, Willard Richards, and George A. Smith invited him to meet with them at 8:00 a.m. the following day at John Taylor’s home. The men waited an hour. Pratt, sent to find Rigdon, found him engaged with a lawyer, and by then it was too late for him to meet with the apostles as he had a speaking engagement at worship services. Taking as his text the scriptural concept “For my thoughts are not as your thoughts,” President Rigdon related to the audience a vision he claimed to have received recently in Pittsburgh.

Declaring his manifestation as a “continuation of the same vision that he and Joseph had in Kirtland ... concerning the different glories or mansions in the Father’s House,” Rigdon testified that the prophet “had ascended to heaven, and that he stood on the right hand of the Son of God, and that he had seen him there, clothed with all the power, glory, might, majesty, and dominion of the celestial kingdoms.” He added that Joseph still held “the keys of the kingdom ... would continue to hold them to all eternity ... and that no man could ever take his place, neither have power to build up the kingdom to any other creature or being but to Joseph Smith.”

Emphasizing his longtime role as “Spokesman to the Lord,” which had been pronounced by Smith in both revelation and a special blessing, Rigdon reported the Lord’s wish that “there must be a guardian appointed to build the Church up to Joseph.” He then explained that “he was the identical man that the ancient prophets had sung about, wrote and rejoiced over; and that he was sent to do the identical work that had been the theme of all the prophets in every proceeding generation.” Declaring that the Lord’s ways are not as our ways, he veered into prophecy. The Prophet’s newspaper in Pittsburgh, recalled that prior to embarking Smith took him aside and admonished him to stand by Rigdon “under all circumstances, and uphold his hands on all occasions, and never forsake him ... for he is a good man and I love him better than I ever loved him in all my life, for my heart is entwined around his with chords [sic] that can never be broken.”

I am going to fight a real bloody battle with sword and with gun. ... I will fight the battles of the Lord. I will also cross the Atlantic, encounter the queen’s forces, and overcome them—plant the American standard on English ground, and then march to the palace of her majesty, and demand a portion of her riches and dominions, which if she refuse, I will take the little madam by the nose and lead her out, and she shall have no power to help herself. If I do not do this, the Lord never spake by mortal.

During the afternoon meeting, while Charles C. Rich was speaking, Nauvoo Stake president William Marks, at Rigdon’s request, interrupted and gave public notice of a Thursday, 8 August, special assembly to choose a guardian of the church. Some suggested waiting until the full Quorum of the Twelve returned. But Rigdon said he was “some distance from his family” and wanted to “know if this people had any thing for him to do.” If not, then he wanted to be on his way “for there was a people 1000’s & 10,000’s who he wanted to told they must go out to visit other branches around [but Nauvoo] first.”

Many thought that Rigdon was pushing his claims too fast. On Monday morning, 5 August, Parley P. Pratt, Willard Richards, John Taylor, George A. Smith, Amasa Lyman, and Bishop Newel K. Whitney called on Sidney to ask what his hurry was. He denied that he expected the people to choose a guardian on Thursday, saying that he wished just a “prayer meeting, and interchange of thought and
Later that evening five more members of the Twelve arrived in Nauvoo, bringing the number to nine. The next day a combined meeting of the Twelve, the Nauvoo High Council, and the High Priest’s Quorum was held in the second story of the new Seventies Hall. Brigham Young, who scheduled the meeting, called on Rigdon to make a statement to the church concerning his Pittsburgh revelation. Rigdon explained that the manifestation, while not an open vision, was presented on his own volition. He was shown that the prophet sustained the same relationship to the church in death that he had in life. No man could be Joseph’s successor, Rigdon said. The Kingdom must be “built up to Christ” through the dead prophet. Revelation was still required, and since Rigdon had been ordained as Smith’s spokesman he was to continue to speak for him on this side of the veil “until Joseph Smith himself shall descend as a mighty angel, lay his hand on [my] head & ordain [me] & say, ‘Come up & act for me.’” Concluding, he appended “I have discharged my duty, & done what God commanded me... . The people could please themselves whether they accepted [me] or not.” Young then responded that he wished to hear the voice of the entire church in conference before a decision was made. He wryly commented that “he did not care who led the Church of God if God said so even if it was old ‘Ann Lee’ but he must know that God said so.” Young added that he had “the keys and the means of knowing the mind of God on this subject.”

By rights of his 1841 ordination as “Prophet, Seer, and Revelator,” Rigdon was entitled to visionary experiences. Yet Wilford Woodruff called Sidney’s disclosure “a kind of second [c]lass vision.” Young, inclined to sarcastic ridicule, called Sidney a fool to his face. The “Lion of the Lord” did not suffer fools easily. Rigdon underestimated Young, who soon would become one of the most powerful Americans of his generation. Rigdon, when in good health, was without question Brigham’s oratorical superior, but Young, never a passive observer, was more clever, ambitious, and politically astute. Not content to let the mantle of leadership pass him by, he simply wrestled it away from Rigdon.

Young, like Rigdon, stunned by the news of Joseph Smith’s murder, seems not to have concluded immediately that the prophet’s death placed the crown of leadership on the heads of the Twelve or on him. In fact, Young initially wondered if the prophet had taken the keys of authority with him. “I had no more idea of [the mantle] falling upon me than of the most unlikely thing in the world,” he later told family members. Young became convinced, however, that the seal was joined, and he wrote to Nauvoo from Boston “by the visions of the Spirit,” as he later told colleagues, that the Twelve constituted an interim church presidency from which a First Presidency eventually would arise. Yet Young told no one of his intuition on this matter for three years. “I knew then what I now know concerning the organization of the church,” he retrospectively proclaimed, but “I revealed it to no living being, until the pioneers to this valley were returning to Winter Quarters. Brother Wilford Woodruff was the first man I ever spoke to about it.”

By 8 August 1844 the stage was set for a Rigdon-versus-Young morality play, an ecclesiastical contest in which the winner could claim the primary position of Mormon power. Although these happenings constitute one of Mormonism’s most pivotal shifts of leadership, considerable confusion surrounds the day’s events. Much of the retrospective disarray arises from the fact that two public gatherings were held that day. Many commentators have either assumed that the alleged “transfiguration of Brigham Young” occurred in the afternoon meeting or have combined both meetings into a single narrative.

Several sets of minutes of the afternoon meeting, each in the hand of a different scribe, make it clear that they saw no mystical occurrence during that gathering. Furthermore, virtually all retrospective accounts mention that Young was “transfigured” when he began to speak after Rigdon had spoken. Rigdon only addressed the congregation in the morning session, he did not speak in the afternoon. While minutes of the morning gathering do exist, in stenographer Thomas Bullock’s shorthand, they have never been transcribed. By order of the current LDS Quorum of the Twelve Apostles they remain unavailable “for public scrutiny.” Nevertheless, several other accounts of the morning’s events survive.

By 10:00 a.m. more than 5,000 Saints had gathered at the grove east of the temple in response to William Marks’s announcement. As Rigdon began speaking, a strong headwind muted his voice, so he relocated to the leeward side and climbed on top of a wagon box. From that spot he addressed the Saints until 11:30 a.m. While some have painted Rigdon’s discourse as uninspired, others, including Orson Hyde, a longtime Rigdon critic, said he presented “his claims with all the eloquence and power that he was master of.”

Despite assurances that the convocation was nothing more than a prayer meeting, Rigdon labored to gain a show of support from the throng of LDS faithful. Hyde reported that Rigdon was just “about to ask an expression of the people by vote; when lo! to his grief and mortification, [Brigham Young] stepped upon the stand ... and with a word stayed all the proceedings of Mr. Rigdon.” Young, recalling the event in 1860, stated: “when I went to meet Sidney Rigdon on the meeting ground I went alone, and was ready alone to face and drive the dogs from the flock.”

Jacob Hamblin’s recollection of the morning of 8 August indicates that Young’s booming voice and stunning display of brimmanship caused the audience to turn in their seats and face his commanding presence on the stand. “I will manage this voting for Elder Rigdon,” he bellowed. “He does not preside here. This child [meaning himself] will manage this flock for a season.” Tactically, he then dismissed the meeting, allowing time for Rigdon’s rhetoric to dissipate, and announced a special assembly for 2:00 p.m. Wilford Woodruff’s diary records, under the same date: “There was a meeting appointed at the grove for the Church to come together for Prayers. But in consequence of some excitement among the People and a dispositions by some spirits to try to divide the Church, it was thought best to attend to the business of the Church in the afternoon that was to be attended to on Tuesday.”

The afternoon meeting was organized like a solemn assembly with various leaders appropriately ordering their quorums. After prayer, Brigham Young stood before the people. It was a momentous occasion. For the first and only time in Mormon history church leadership was about to be determined by the will of the people. Brother Brigham, who possessed a mean-weather-eye for prevailing winds from the mists, catered to the majority who had grown accustomed to being told what to do. While Rigdon had been spouting wild Armageddon rhetoric during the previous week, Young perceived that the Saints “like children without a father, and sheep without a shepherd,” mostly wanted comfort.
and working-class British immigrants, converted by Young and his fellow apostles. These new arrivals, conditioned from their earliest years, were used to working under the direct guidance of a master’s hand in their homeland. Young saw their dependency, their inability to provide for their own emotional and economic sustenance. Accustomed to following directions from Joseph Smith, and scarcely familiar with Rigdon who had been ill for years, being instructed what to do by Brigham Young was a relief.

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Fully confident, ticking off platitudes and pronouncements, Young’s afternoon address on 8 August was a remarkable assertion of the Twelve’s right to govern as well as his personal claim to be shepherd of the Mormon flock. “For the first time since [I] became a member of the church,” Young began, “the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb, chosen by revelation, in this last dispensation of the gospel for the winding up scene, present themselves before the saints, to stand in their lot according to appointment.” After explaining “matters so satisfactorily that every saint could see that Elijah’s mantle had truly fallen upon the ‘Twelve,’” wrote a reporter in the 2 September 1844 Times and Seasons, Young, ever the strategist, then asked, “I now want to ask each of you to tell me if you want to choose a guardian, a Prophet, evangelist or something else as your head to lead you. All that are in favor of it make it manifest by raising the right hand.” No one did.

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Assuming the authoritarian Mormon father role he filled so well, Young then responded, “I know your feelings—do you want me to tell your feelings?” Responding to murmurs and assenting nods of the compliant flock he continued:

[H]ere are the 12 an independent body—who have the Keys of the Kingdom to all the whole world so help me God, and they are, as the 1st presidency of the church. ... [Y]ou can’t call a Prophet you can’t call Elder Rigdon or Amasa Lyman they must be ordained by the 12. ... God will have nothing to do with you—[you can’t] put any one at the head of the 12.

“Perhaps some think that our beloved brother Rigdon would not be honored, would not be looked at as a friend, but if he does right, and remains faithful, he will not act against our counsel, nor we against his, but act together, and we shall be as one.”

“Do you want a spokesman?” Young then asked. “Do you want the church properly organized, or do you want a spokesman to be chief cook and bottle washer?”

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Discussing Rigdon’s calling as spokesman to the prophet, Young agreed. “Very well, he was,” but he added, “If he wants now to be a spokesman to the Prophet he must go to the other side of the veil for the Prophet is there, but Elder Rigdon is here. Why will Elder Rigdon be a fool? Who knows anything of the [fulness of the] priesthood, or of the organization of the kingdom of God? [the Council of Fifty]. I am plain.” As the meeting progressed the sentiment which had so recently changed in favor of the Twelve became palpable. When Amasa Lyman took the stand to speak, he placed himself in Young’s amen corner.

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Shaken by the effect of Young’s words upon the audience, the usually loquacious Rigdon declined to speak when afforded rebuttal opportunities. Considering Rigdon’s rhetorical proclivities, his decision seems tantamount to conceding defeat. His face buried in his hands, the infirm Rigdon requested an old Missouri nemesis, W. W. Phelps, to champion his cause. The cagey editor, realizing that Rigdon’s cause was lost, delivered an ardent affirmation of Shaken by the effect of Young’s words upon the audience, the usually loquacious Rigdon declined to speak when afforded rebuttal opportunities. Considering Rigdon’s rhetorical proclivities, his decision seems tantamount to conceding defeat. His face buried in his hands, the infirm Rigdon requested an old Missouri nemesis, W. W. Phelps, to champion his cause. The cagey editor, realizing that Rigdon’s cause was lost, delivered an ardent affirmation of Shaken by the effect of Young’s words upon the audience, the usually loquacious Rigdon declined to speak when afforded rebuttal opportunities. Considering Rigdon’s rhetorical proclivities, his decision seems tantamount to conceding defeat. His face buried in his hands, the infirm Rigdon requested an old Missouri nemesis, W. W. Phelps, to champion his cause. The cagey editor, realizing that Rigdon’s cause was lost, delivered an ardent affirmation of Shaken by the effect of Young’s words upon the audience, the usually loquacious Rigdon declined to speak when afforded rebuttal opportunities. Considering Rigdon’s rhetorical proclivities, his decision seems tantamount to conceding defeat. His face buried in his hands, the infirm Rigdon requested an old Missouri nemesis, W. W. Phelps, to champion his cause. The cagey editor, realizing that Rigdon’s cause was lost, delivered an ardent affirmation of Shaken by the effect of Young’s words upon the audience, the usually loquacious Rigdon declined to speak when afforded rebuttal opportunities. Considering Rigdon’s rhetorical proclivities, his decision seems tantamount to conceding defeat. His face buried in his hands, the infirm Rigdon requested an old Missouri nemesis, W. W. Phelps, to champion his cause. The cagey editor, realizing that Rigdon’s cause was lost, delivered an ardent affirmation of Shaken by the effect of Young’s words upon the audience, the usually loquacious Rigdon declined to speak when afforded rebuttal opportunities. Considering Rigdon’s rhetorical proclivities, his decision seems tantamount to conceding defeat. His face buried in his hands, the infirm Rigdon requested an old Missouri nemesis, W. W. Phelps, to champion his cause. The cagey editor, realizing that Rigdon’s cause was lost, delivered an ardent affirmation of

people[?] [H]ere are the Apostles, the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the doctrine and covenants is here [and] here [head & heart] it is written on the tablet of my heart... [I]f the Church wants the 12 to walk in them all[en]tly if this is your mind, signify it by the uplifted hand.

The vote, according to Young, was unanimous, which he announced “supersedes the other question.” Young then announced that “Rigdon] is ... one with us—we want such men as Bro[ther] Rig[don] he has been sent away to build a Kingdom let him keep the instruction [and] let him raise a Kingdom in Pittsburgh [and] we will lift up his hand. I guess we’ll have a printing office [and] gathering there.” Wishing to support Rigdon in his calling as counselor, Young continued, “I feel to bring up Bro[ther] Rig[don] we are of one mind ... will this congregation uphold him in the place [and] let him be one with us [and] we with him.” The voting was unanimous.

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The leadership claim of the Twelve was beyond their February 1835 apostolic ordination, the March 1835 revelation that gave them authority equal to the First Presidency, and the July 1837 revelation that the Twelve shared the keys of the kingdom with the First Presidency. Their assertion to “stand in their lot according to appointment,” as Brigham had declared on 8 August, was based entirely on Joseph Smith’s commission to them and others of the keys of the kingdom during a spring 1844 meeting of the Council of Fifty, the organization Young referred to on 8 August saying “if you let the 12 retain the keys of the Kingdom are in the hands of the organization you have that you have not seen.”

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Orson Hyde commented on this 26 March 1844 empowerment, commonly called Joseph Smith’s “last charge,” in an 1869 address:

In one particular place, in the presence of about sixty men, [Joseph Smith] said, “My work is about done. I am going to step aside awhile. I am going to rest from my labors; for I have borne the burden and heat of the day, and now I am going to step aside and rest a little. And I roll the burden off my shoulders on the shoulders of the Twelve Apostles. ‘Now,’ said he, ‘round up your shoulders and bear off this kingdom.’ Has he ever said this to any one else? I do not know; I do not care. It is enough
Wilford Woodruff’s account of this meeting quotes the prophet as saying: “I tell you the burden of this kingdom now rests upon your shoulders; you have got to bear it off in all the world, and if you don’t do it you will be damned.”50 The most explicit statement on the charge, however, came from Benjamin F. Johnson, the youngest council member. He wrote that the prophet

Stood before that association of his Select Friends including all the Twelve and with great Feeling & Animation he graphically reviewed the Life of Pers[iution Labor & Sacrifice] for the church & Kingdom of God--Both of Which--he [declared] were now organized upon the earth. The burden of which had become too great for him longer to carry. That he was weary & Tired with the weight he So long had bourn and he then Said with great Vehemence “And in the name of ... the Lord I now Shake from my Shoulders the Responsibilities of bearing off the Kingdom of God to all the world--and here & now place that Responsibility with all the Keys Powers & privilege pertaining there too upon the Shoulders of you the Twelve Apostles in Connection with this Council.51

The kingdom the prophet directed the Twelve to carry on their shoulders, however, was the political theocracy, the Kingdom of God, a shadow organization separate from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was this organization, best known as the Council of Fifty, not the Quorum of the Twelve, that the prophet intended to help relieve the responsibilities of administering the temporal and secular affairs of the church.

While the Mormon vote on 8 August 1844 called for stability and ecclesiastical continuity, some have interpreted the assembly’s actions as affirming Young’s role as Joseph Smith’s prophetic successor. That this was not intended is clarified in an epistle from the Twelve published in the 15 August 1844 Times and Seasons. The circular announced: “You are now without a prophet present with you in the flesh to guide you. ... Let no man presume for a moment that [Joseph Smith’s] place will be filled by another; for, remember he stands in his own place, and always will.”52

The 2 September Times and Seasons also editorialized: “Great excitement prevails throughout the world to know who shall be the successor of Joseph Smith.” The paper then admonished, “be patient, be patient a little, till the proper time comes, and we will tell you all. ‘Great wheels move slow.’ At present, we can say that a special conference of the church was held in Nauvoo on the 8th ult., and it was carried with a desire that the ‘Twelve’ should preside over the whole church, and when any alteration in the presidency shall be required, Seasonable notice will be given.”53

While no known contemporary record supports a supernatural occurrence on either the morning or afternoon of 8 August, over the years some have extemporized a surrealistic view of the day. In LDS phraseology the alleged transcendental morning experience is known as the “Transfiguration of Brigham Young” or the “Mantle of the Prophet Incident.”54 “When Brigham Young arose and addressed the people,” wrote future apostle George Q. Cannon two decades later:

If Joseph had risen from the dead and again spoken in their hearing, the effect could not have been more startling than it was to many present at that meeting, it was the voice of Joseph himself; and not only was it the voice of Joseph which was heard, but it seemed in the eyes of the people as if it were the very person of Joseph which stood before them. A more wonderful and miraculous event than was wrought that day in the presence of that congregation, we never heard of. The Lord gave His people a testimony that left no room for doubt as to who was the man chosen to lead them. They both saw and heard with their natural eyes and ears, and the words which were uttered came, accompanied by the convincing power of God, to their hearts, and they were filled with the Spirit and with great joy. There had been gloom, and in some hearts, probably, doubt and uncertainty, but now it was plain to all that here was the man upon whom the Lord had bestowed the necessary authority to act in their midst in Joseph’s stead. On that occasion Brigham Young seemed to be transformed, and a change such as that we read of in the scriptures as happening to the Prophet Elias, when Elijah was translated in his presence, seemed to have taken place with him. The mantle of the Prophet Joseph had been left for Brigham. ... The people said one to another: ‘The spirit of Joseph rests on Brigham’: they knew that he was the man chosen to lead them and they honored him accordingly.55

The earliest detailed accounts of a purported transfiguration did not begin to surface until long after the Saints were settled in the Great Basin. The fact that no account was included in “Joseph Smith’s History,” completed in August 1856, or in The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, completed before his 1857 death, suggests that the myth was not fully formulated by this time. The first public reference to a “transfiguration” of Brigham Young has been a 19 July 1857 statement by Albert Carrington before a huge gathering of Saints that “he could not tell [Brigham Young] from Joseph Smith” when Young “was speaking in the stand in Nauvoo” during the 8 August 1844 convocation. “Somebody came along and passed a finger over his eyes,” Brigham Young declared, “and he could not see any one but Joseph speaking, until I got through addressing the congregation.”56 Yet Young himself, while addressing the
assembled Saints on the afternoon of 8 August 1844, confirmed that no chimerical experience had occurred that day. “For the first in the kingdom of God in the 19th century,” he remarked, we are “without a Prophet at our head.” Henceforth, he added, we are “called to walk by faith, not by sight.”

Retrospective retellings of a “transfiguration,” in a variety of forms, can be found in dozens of sources, yet no two seem to agree on precise details. Eliza Haven Barlow, a cousin of Brigham Young, for example, wrote that her mother told her that “thousands in that assembly” saw Young “take on the form of Joseph Smith and heard his voice change to that of the Prophet’s.” Eliza Ann Perry Benson reminisced that the Saints arose “from their seats en masse” exclaiming “Joseph has come! He is here!” While Eliza Ann Haven Westover, writing in 1918, remembered that “hundreds witnessed the [transfiguration], but not all that were there had that privilege.”

John D. Lee, writing of 8 August 1844 events in his autobiography, said:

Sidney Rigdon was the first who appeared upon the stand. He had been considered rather in the back-ground for sometime previous to the death of the Prophet. He made but a weak claim. ... Just then Brigham Young arose and roared like a young lion, imitating the style and voice of the Joseph, the Prophet. Many of the brethren declared that they saw the mantle of Joseph fall upon him. I myself, at the time, imagined that I saw and heard a strong resemblance to the Prophet in him, and felt that he was the man to lead us until Joseph’s legal successor should grow up to manhood, when he should surrender the Presidency to the man who held the birthright.

Claim to the contrary, Lee could not have witnessed this. His personal diary makes it clear that he did not return to Nauvoo until 20 August, nearly two weeks later.

Apostle Orson Hyde, prone to exaggerate, particularly when attempting to undermine the succession claims of his archenemy Sidney Rigdon, did not arrive in Nauvoo until 13 August. Yet he left two elaborate personal reminiscences of a “transfiguration” he could not possibly have witnessed either. When Young began to speak that morning, Quorum of the Twelve president Hyde recalled in 1869, “his words went through me like electricity.” This is my testimony, Hyde added for special emphasis, “it was not only the voice of Joseph Smith but there were the features, the gestures and even the stature of Joseph before us in the person of Brigham.”

Eight years later Hyde declared in general conference that as soon as Young opened his mouth...

Wilford Woodruff, the foremost chronicler of early Mormon history, also left several first-hand accounts of a “transfiguration incident.” His 8 August 1844 diary, however, makes it clear that he did not attend the morning meeting when both Young and Rigdon addressed the crowd. “The Twelve spent their time in the fore part of the day at the office,” he wrote, and “in the afternoon met at the grove.” Although Woodruff’s recounting of the day consists of one of the longest, single-entry accounts in his voluminous diary, nearly 2,200 words, he makes no mention of anything miraculous.

One year later, in a letter to church members in Great Britain, Woodruff reported that during the 8 August 1844 special conference...

Yet by 1872 Woodruff, like many other Nauvoo Mormons, had begun to describe Brigham Young’s 8 August 1844 manly defeat of Sidney Rigdon as something more arcane than a mere strategic conquest. “Every man and every woman in that assembly, which perhaps might number thousands,” he declared, “could bear the same testimony. I was there, the Twelve were there, and a good many others, and all can bear the same testimony.” Continuing with his expansive explanation of that long ago day he asked the audience:

Why was the appearance of Joseph Smith given to Brigham Young? Because here was Sidney Rigdon and other men rising up and claiming to be the leaders of the Church, and men stood, as it were on a pivot, not knowing which way to turn. But just as quick as Brigham rose in that assembly, his face was that of Joseph Smith—the mantle of Joseph had fallen upon him, the power of God that was upon Joseph Smith was upon him, he had the voice of Joseph, and it was the voice of the shepherd. There was not a person in that assembly, Rigdon, himself, not excepted, but was satisfied in his own mind that Brigham was the proper leader of the people, for he [Rigdon] would not have his name presented, by his own consent, after that sermon was delivered. There was a reason for this in the mind of God; it convinced the people. They saw and heard for themselves, and it was by the power of God.

Twenty years later, while again discussing the 1844 war of words between Young and Rigdon, Woodruff was cited as saying:
While transfiguration anecdotes, like the Lee, Hyde, and Woodruff narratives, are belated recounts, a George Laub diary reference was thought by many, until recently, to have been written in 1846. "Now when President Young arose to address the congregation," Laub’s account begins, "his voice was the voice of Bro. Joseph and his face appeared as Joseph’s face & Should I not have seen his face but heard his voice I should have declared that it was Joseph." This small tan-colored leather diary, which has misled many scholars, has now been determined to be a copy of the original by Laub himself, with additions.80 p.21-p.22

When 8 August 1844 is stripped of emotional overlay, there is not a shred of irrefutable contemporary evidence to support the occurrence of a mystical event either in the morning or afternoon gatherings of that day. A more likely scenario was that it was the force of Young’s commanding presence, his well-timed arrival at the morning meeting, and perhaps a bit of theatrical mimicry that swayed the crowd rather than a metaphysical transfiguration of his physical body. Mormon Bishop George Miller, present at the gathering, later recalled that nothing supernatural had occurred on that day. Young made a "long and loud harangue," Miller later wrote, for which I “could not see any point in the course of his remarks than to overturn Sidney Rigdon’s pretensions.”78 p.22

Rigdon himself, in an 6 December 1877 letter to Brigham Young, accused his former sparring partner of duplicity in encouraging transfiguration anecdotes to propagate:

O vain man. ... Did you suppose that your hypocritical and lying pretense that the spirit of Joseph Smith had [entered into you], was going to prevail with God and man. You knew you lied when you made that pretense. Your ignorance was such that you did not know that there were those living who knew that there never was, is, nor will be, such a metamorphosis on this earth as you wickedly, heaven enduringly pretended had taken place with you.79

Apostles Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Willard Richards, and Wilford Woodruff, all of whom made 8 August 1844 entries in their diaries, make no reference to an epiphany. Such an event, had it truly transpired, would have stood at the apex of world history, a physical metamorphosis unsurpassed except for the transfiguration and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet neither the Times and Seasons nor the Nauvoo Neighbor, local newspapers owned by the church, mention such a wonder. Neither do the 1844 and 1845 accounts of Jedediah Grant and Orson Hyde, specifically written to refute Sidney Rigdon’s robust challenge to the Quorum of Twelve’s succession claims. p.22-p.23

The most damning evidence to claims of a transfiguration is the fact that on 8 August 1844 the congregation sustained a committee rather than an individual to run the church. They confirmed the collective Quorum of the Twelve as their presiding authority. Furthermore, Young’s ascent to the presidency was no ceremonial stroll, as could be expected if something as phenomenal as a transfiguration occurred. His emergence as the dominant, uncontestable Mormon guiding force was not complete until late 1847, after the pioneer trek west. Even then there was substantial opposition to Brigham setting himself apart from his brethren. Orson Hyde, who would succeed Young as quorum president, later said: “Did it require argument to prove that brother Brigham Young held the position of Joseph, the martyred Prophet? Did it require proof that Joseph was there in the person of Brigham, speaking with an angel’s voice? It required no argument; with those who feared God and loved truth, it required none.”80 p.23

This observation was not accurate, however. Considerable opposition to Brigham Young establishing a First Presidency is evident in original, unaltered accounts. Particularly outspoken were Wilford Woodruff, Orson Pratt, and to a lesser degree John Taylor, Parley P. Pratt, George A. Smith, and Amasa Lyman. The number of meetings on the topic is ample proof of contention. Woodruff told Young on 12 October 1847 that he felt it “would require [a] revelation to change the order of that Quorum.”81 Six weeks later Woodruff, again objecting to Young’s formation of a First Presidency, said that if three were taken out of the Twelve it seemed like “severing the body in 2.” Furthermore, if the Quorum of the Twelve surrendered its power “unto [three],” he added, “I shoul[d] be totally opposed to it.” Pratt’s viewpoint was that the “head of the church consists of the Apostleship united together.”82 The matter was not resolved until a lengthy, emotional-filled meeting of the quorum on 5 December 1847.83

The paramount dilemma with retrospective transfiguration recounts is why so many otherwise honorable, pious people recalled experiencing something they probably did not. A rational and likely explanation for this faulty group memory is that a “contagious” thought can spread through the populace to create a “collective mind.” This phenomenon is what social scientists call contagion theory or scenario fulfillment, whereby one sees what one expects, especially belatedly. Memory is more than direct recollection. It springs from tales harbored in the common fund or heaven enduringly pretended had taken place with you.
Fables can be useful to a culture. Who can deny that Santa Claus makes Christmas more memorable to the child in us all. And what a wonderful tale of George Washington and the cherry tree did Mason Locke Weems weave out of whole cloth not “to give information about George Washington but to suggest virtuous conduct to young Americans.” In religious matters, however, folk tales equated with reality can ultimately destroy conviction when unmasked. Latter-day Saints who base their faith on such irresolute stories as Paul H. Dunn’s allegories or the “Transfiguration of Brigham Young,” when faced with evidence that their belief system seems to rest on sources that are dubious at best or duplicitous at worst, may conclude as Elder Brigham H. Roberts once warned “that since these things are myth and our Church has permitted them to be perpetuated ... might not the other fundamentals to the actual story of the Church, the things in which it had its origin, might they not all be lies and nothing but lies.” Answering his own compelling question Roberts responded, “I find my own heart strengthened in the truth by getting rid of the untruth, the spectacular, the bizarre, as soon as I learn that it is based upon worthless testimony.” That advice, like a spectral voice of reason from the past, remains as sound today as it did six decades ago.

2. For five years Rigdon had been weakened by episodic bouts of malaria and depression. For a discussion of his health problems, see Richard S. Van Wagoner, Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 266-70, 279, 281-85.


4. Joseph Smith, History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, B. H. Roberts, ed., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1892), 7:389; hereafter HC. For other references regarding revisions, see ibid., 389-90, 408, 411, 414, 427-28, 514, 519, 529, 532, 533, 556.


6. Charles W. Penrose diary, 10 Jan. 1897, Utah Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

7. Young's false statement was made during Heber C. Kimball's funeral (see Journal History, 24 June 1868, archives, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter LDS archives).


9. Joseph Smith diary, loose sheet under date, microfilm copy in Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Harold B. Lee Library, Provo, Utah; hereafter BYU Library. I am indebted to D. Michael Quinn for drawing this unpublished reference to my attention.


11. Latter Day Saint's Messenger and Advocate (Pittsburgh) 4 (6 Dec. 1844). Richard Savary, Benjamin Stafford, and Ebeaezer Robinson constituted a committee of Rigdon followers to counter Quorum of the Twelve accusations that Smith and Rigdon were estranged when he went to Pittsburgh. They published a late 1844 notice in Pittsburgh which claimed that Rigdon "enjoyed Joseph's confidence to the fullest extent until the time of his decease." They asserted that Smith wished Rigdon "to stand next to himself in political as well as religious matters," and that is why he was selected as his vice-presidential running mate (ibid.).

12. Although at the time Rigdon was shocked to learn of the prophet's death, in a 25 May 1873 letter to Charles F. Woodard (after Sidney's mind was addled by a series of strokes) he stated: "The Lord notified us that the church of Jesus Christ of Latter day saints were a going to be destroyed and for us to leave we did so and the Smiths were killed a few days after we started" (Rigdon Collection, LDS archives).


15. Woodruff to Young, 16 July 1844, in "Brigham Young Collection of Wilford Woodruff Correspondence, 1840-44," Brigham Young Collection, LDS archives.


17. This quotation is from either the Willard Richards or William Clayton diary, both of which are presently unavailable to researchers. The citation was taken from Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Crisis," M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1962, 197.


19. Orson Hyde, Speech of Elder Orson Hyde, Delivered Before the High Priest's Quorum, in Nauvoo, April 27th, 1845, Upon the Course and Conduct of Mr. Sidney Rigdon, and Upon the Merits of His Claims to the Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Liverpool: James and Woodburn, 1845), 12.

20. Ibid., 12. In a special blessing given to Rigdon on 13 December 1833, Joseph Smith designated him as "spokesman unto the Lord ... all the days of his life" (Patriarchal Blessing Book 1, 12, in Richard L. Anderson, "The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching," Brigham Young University Studies 24 [Fall 1984]: 529. See also D&C 100:9, 11).


22. Hyde, 16.


24. HC, 7:226.

25. The original minutes of this 7 August 1844 meeting, presently controlled by the Quorum of the Twelve, are "not available for public scrutiny" (F. Michael Watson, secretary to the First Presidency, to Richard S. Van Wagoner, 14 June 1993). The account of the meeting in William Clayton's diary (in possession of the First Presidency) is also unavailable. I therefore cite Ehat, 197-98.

26. Ann Lee Stanley (1736-84) claimed to be the female incarnation of Jesus Christ and was leader of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming, the "Shaking Quakers."

27. Ehat, 198.


29. Thomas Bullock's report of the special afternoon meeting of 8 August 1844, General Minutes Collection, LDS archives.

30. Manuscript minutes of Brigham Young sermon "on the occasion of a family meeting, held at his residence," 25 Dec. 1857, Brigham Young Collection.

31. Miscellaneous Minutes, 12 Feb. 1849, Brigham Young Collection.

32. Journal History, 7 Oct. 1860. Woodruff confirmed in his 12 Oct. 1847 diary: "I had a question put to me by President Young what my opinion was concerning one of the Twelve Apostles being appointed as the President of the Church with his two Counsellors. I answered that a quorum like the Twelve who had been appointed by revelation & confirmed by revelation from time to time I thought it would require a revelation to change the order of that quorum" (Kenney, 3:283). Woodruff also recorded another of Brigham Young's references to this matter in his 28 July 1869 diary entry. When I met with the Saints in Nauvoo at the first meeting after Joseph[']s death in defending the true organization against Sidney Rigdon I had it in my mind all the time that there would have to be a Presidency of three Appointed but I knew the people Could not hear it at the time and on our return as the pioneers from the valley I Broached the subject first to Brother Woodruff and afterwards to the rest of the Quorum. They received it & finally sustained it (Kenney, 5:478).

33. While the official reorganization of the First Presidency may not have taken place until 1847, the manuscript minutes of 7 April 1845 general conference show that Brigham Young was unanimously voted on and sustained as "the President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to this Church and nation, and all nations, and also as the President of the whole Church of Latter Day Saints."
33. Watson to Van Wagoner.
34. Hyde, 13.
35. Ibid.
40. Times and Seasons 5 (2 Sept. 1844): 637. While my narration generally follows the 8 August 1844 Journal History account, which for the most part paraphrases Thomas Bullock's 8 August p.m. minutes (General Minutes Collection), other important references are Wilford Woodruff's diary account (Kenney, 2:434-40); Brigham Young diary entry for 8 August 1844; William Clayton diary entry for 8 August 1844, in George D. Smith, ed., An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in Association with Smith Research Associates, 1991), 142, and HC, 7:231-42.
41. 8 Aug. 1844 p.m. minutes in unknown scribe's hand (General Minutes Collection).
42. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. 8 Aug. 1844 p.m. minutes in Thomas Bullock's handwriting.
46. Ibid. William C. Staines Journal, cited in HC, 7:236, reported there were "a few dissenting voices." "History of William Adams, Wrote by himself January 1894," 15, adds that "out of that vast multitude about twenty voted for Rigdon to be Gardian" (Special Collections, BYU Library).
47. 8 Aug. 1844 p.m. minutes in Thomas Bullock's handwriting.
48. Ibid.
49. JD, 13 (6 Oct. 1869): 180.
53. Ibid. 5 (2 Sept. 1844): 632.
54. This latter terminology likely evolved from a figurative or allegorical description such as the one in an anonymous letter published in the 15 October 1844 Times and Seasons (5:675). "Who can't see," began the communication, "that the mantle of the prophet has fallen on Pres. Young and the Twelve? The same spirit," continued the letter, "which inspired our beloved bro. Joseph Smith, now inspires Pres. Young."
55. Kate B. Carter, comp., Heart Throbs of the West (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1943), 4:420; see also Andrew Jenson, The Historical Record, Book 1:789-91, and JD 23 (29 Oct. 1882): 358.
57. Azra Hinckley diary, 20 Nov. 1844, Special Collections, BYU Library.
58. William Burton diary, May 1845, LDS archives.
60. Ibid.
61. JD, 7:232; italics mine.
64. Donald Benson Alder and Elsie L. Alder, comp., The Benson Family--The Ancestry and Descendants of Ezra T. Benson (Salt Lake City: Ezra T. Benson Genealogical Society, Inc., 1979), 238.
65. Burton, 50.
66. John D. Lee, Mormonism Unveiled; including the Remarkable Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop, John D. Lee (St Louis: Scammell and Company, 1881), 155.
Although Rigdon was Hyde’s mentor in both the Reformed Baptist Movement and Mormonism, he never forgave Rigdon for opposing his return after his defection during the Missouri difficulties. Additional problems between the two also arose when Hyde’s wife, Nancy, served as the go-between in Joseph Smith’s attempted seduction of Rigdon’s daughter Nancy. See Van Wagoner, 266, 282, 294-95, 320, 324, 354.

See Wilford Woodruff diary under date in Kenney, 2:441.

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Ibid. 19 (5 Apr. 1877): 58. In 1860 Hyde also embellished his recall of the 1847 organization of the First Presidency. He said that he heard the voice of God declare: “Let my servant Brigham step forth and receive the full power of the presiding Priesthood in my Church and kingdom” (JD 8 [7 Oct. 1860]: 234). Yet when President Wilford Woodruff was asked during an 1894 meeting of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve if he observed any of the special manifestations described by Hyde in connection with the 1847 organization, he said he did “not remember any particular manifestations at the time of the organization of the Presidency” (Abraham H. Cannon Journal, 30 Aug. 1894, Special Collections, BYU Library).

HC, 2:435.


Deseret News, 12 Mar. 1892.

The original diary, which also exists, contains no reference to a transfiguration of Brigham Young.

Orson Hyde, in 1869 comments, raised the issue of Brigham Young sounding like Joseph Smith on 8 August 1844 by noting that “President Young is a complete mimic, and can mimic anybody,” although he added, “I would like to see the man who can mimic another in stature who was about four or five inches higher than himself” (JD 13 [6 Oct. 1869]: 181), emphasis in original.

Correspondence of Bishop George Miller with the Northern Islander From His Acquaintance with Mormonism Up to Near the Close of His Life, 1855 (Burlington, WI: W. Watson, 1916), 20-21.

An undated copy is in the Stephen Post Collection, box 1, folder 1, LDS archives; and also is listed as Section 61 in Copying Book A. The mailed letter to Young is in the Brigham Young Collection (Box 42, fd. 2, reel 73).

To the [Church] Officers and Members,” in Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star, Feb. 1845.

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HC, 2:435.
Some consider the 1844 transfiguration of President Brigham Young to be the greatest miracle since the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph! More recently, President Brigham Young's character and teachings are under heavy attack. The discounting of the transfiguration event has become common as a growing number of scholars (both from within and without the Church) have joined to criticize and discount the spiritual manifestation as "folklore". Folklore seems to be the new buzzword for much of our sacred history and prophetic teachings. Was Brigham Young transfigured into the personag