

WAS JOSEPH SMITH A MARTYR OR A MURDERER?

by Lance Starr

The underworld of anti-Mormonism is replete with shallow arguments and unresearched accusations hurled without regard to accuracy or truth. One such argument is the assertion that Joseph Smith does not qualify as a martyr due to his actions on that dark day in Carthage Jail in 1844. Critics claim that Joseph Smith is not a martyr because, while in jail, he had a gun and he had the temerity to defend himself, his brother and companions by firing at the mob, killing two men. However, it is the purpose of this essay to show that these arguments are specious and completely without basis.

A QUESTION OF CHANGING DEFINITIONS

In order to make their argument tenable, the critics must do two things. First, they must take some creative liberties with the English language. This is a rather common tactic of anti-Mormons and usually consists of redefining a word with the intent to exclude. In this case, the word being redefined is the term *martyr*. Webster's New World Dictionary defines a martyr as "a person who chooses to suffer or die rather than give up his faith or his principles."¹ The online resource, Dictionary.com, defines a martyr as "one who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce religious principles."² Both are nearly identical and fairly standard definitions, and neither includes a requirement or qualifiers of any sort. However, some anti-Mormon writers have taken the term *martyr* and subtly changed its definition to suit their own needs. The new definition would probably read something like this: Martyr: a person who chooses to suffer or die rather than give up his faith or his principles without *any resistance or effort at self-defense on his part whatsoever*.³ Having thus redefined the term, they then apply it to the death of Joseph Smith in an attempt to deny him the title of a martyr. They do this with no lexical, historical or biblical justification whatsoever.⁴

DEALING WITH HISTORICAL TRIVIA

However, simply redefining the term is not sufficient to create a successful argument. Thus, the second prong of the attack relies on a person's ignorance of trivial facts of Mormon history. Many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (and this is especially true of new members or less-active members) are not aware of all the excruciatingly minute details of the history of the Church. It has become a common tactic among some anti-Mormon aficionados of Mormon history to use this historical ignorance as a weapon. These writers often claim to "expose" these minor events of Church history in a sensationalistic attempt to shock members of the Church with "hidden" revelations or "secret" accounts about various episodes in Church history. They will often claim that the Church has kept this knowledge under wraps for fear that if it was generally known it would cause many members of the Church to immediately renounce their faith and result in the ruination of the Church. They insinuate that the Church holds these "secrets" in some impenetrable vault with access restricted to the select few. What anti-Mormons never point out is that they found these "secrets" in books that are widely published by the LDS Church for public consumption. That is hardly the act of someone who wants to maintain a secret.⁵

Therefore, by altering the definition of a word, then finding some event in Church history that seems to contradict this altered definition, anti-Mormons have dishonestly abused LDS history and deceived many people.

Let us now turn our attention to the case at hand: the martyrdom of Joseph Smith and the elements that were aforementioned.



JOSEPH SMITH'S JAILHOUSE GUN

The first complaint lodged by critics is that Joseph Smith had a gun in his jail cell at the time he was attacked and that he fired that gun at

the attacking mob. This assertion is true. Smith did have a gun (in fact by some accounts he had two: a six-shooter⁶ and a single-shot Derringer-type pistol) and he did use that gun. However, despite what critics claim, this is not—nor has it ever been—a secret.⁷ John Taylor, who was also in the cell that day with the Smith brothers, recorded the events of that day:

I shall never forget the deep feeling of sympathy and regard manifested in the countenance of Brother Joseph as he drew nigh to Hyrum, and, leaning over him, exclaimed, “Oh! my poor, dear brother Hyrum!” He, however, instantly arose, and with a firm, quick step, and a determined expression of countenance, approached the door, and pulling the six-shooter left by Brother Wheelock from his pocket, opened the door slightly, and snapped the pistol six successive times. Only three of the barrels, however, were discharged. I afterwards understood that two or three were wounded by these discharges, two of whom, I am informed, died.⁸

There are a couple of things to be noted here. First, this account comes from an LDS publication.⁹ It was not hidden in any vault or secreted away in some mountain hideaway. Second, Joseph did not fire his gun until after his brother Hyrum was hit and killed. By any standard in U.S. common law, his firing the shots would be deemed a justifiable act of self-defense.¹⁰ Also, note that Taylor says that it was “his understanding” that two or three men were wounded by the shots Smith fired and that he was only “informed” later on that two of the men had died. In other words, Taylor had no first-hand knowledge of these events! Subsequent study shows that the information Taylor received was incorrect.

The first anti-Mormon argument focuses on the fact that Joseph had a firearm and that he used that firearm to defend himself. If you recall the anti-Mormon definition of a martyr, the martyr is required to submit willingly to his fate, i.e., he must go as a “lamb to the slaughter.”¹¹ This phrase is somewhat misleading, however, especially to those critics who are completely unaware of agricultural fact. To the detractors, the phrase “lamb to the slaughter” implies a complete submission to one’s fate without any attempt at self-defense or escape.¹² However, anyone who has ever worked on a farm or in a slaughterhouse knows that sheep do not go willingly to the slaughter. They kick and buck, bleat, scream, and make every attempt to escape their fate. In fact, they make such a haunting sound, that the title of an extremely popular Hollywood film was based on it: *The Silence of the Lambs*.

The term “lamb to the slaughter” simply refers to the inevitability of the final outcome. No matter how val-

iantly they struggle, the fate of the sheep is ultimately sealed. If we apply this understanding to Joseph Smith and his brother, it is clear that they truly were slaughtered like lambs.¹³

Interestingly enough, it seems that the imminent threat of death and pain can cause even the most perfect of men to have second thoughts. A very plausible argument can be made that, by adopting the new definition of the term “martyr” and applying it as they do, the critics deny the term not only to Joseph Smith, but to the ultimate martyr Himself, Jesus Christ. The scriptures show that Christ was not a completely willing sacrifice:

And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation. And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.¹⁴

It seems then, that Christ, at the very least, had second thoughts about bearing the sins of the world, having spikes driven through his hands and feet, being lifted up on a cross, and having a spear driven through his side. If that is the case, then surely Joseph Smith, being merely human, can be excused for his actions taken in the heat of the moment, under fear and duress of death and pain. However, according to anti-Mormon critics, this reticence on Christ’s part is not allowable as it deviates from their self-established definition of what a martyr is. Thus we can see the dangers and pitfalls of using altered definitions as an exclusionary tool.

THE “DEATH” OF THE MOBSTERS

The second objection of the critics is that—in the course of defending himself—Joseph Smith shot and killed two members of the mob that attacked Carthage Jail. As noted above in the quote from John Taylor, this was a fairly common belief among the early Saints, who don’t seem to have questioned the reports they received. This is unfortunate, however, because the evidence shows that these reports were false.

First, a little history lesson: After the death of Joseph and his brother, Hyrum, the State of Illinois did make a half-hearted attempt at justice. Nine defendants were charged with the murder of Joseph Smith. “John Wills, William Voras (Vorhees), William N. Grover, Jacob C. Davis, Mark Aldrich, Thomas C. Sharp, Levi Williams, and two men named Gallaher and Allen, whose names were not given.”¹⁵

Not much is known about most of the men who were indicted but four of them were never arrested.

Wills, Voras and Gallaher were probably named in the indictment because their wounds, which testimony showed were received at the jail, were irrefutable evidence that they had participated in the mob. They undoubtedly recognized their vulnerability and fled the county. A contemporary witness reported these three as saying that they were the first men at the jail, that one of them shot through the door killing Hyrum, that Joseph wounded all three with his pistol, and that Gallaher shot Joseph as he ran to the window.¹⁶

According to the eyewitness testimony, Wills was shot in the arm, Gallaher was shot in the face and Voras was shot in the shoulder.¹⁷

The facts show that Smith did indeed fire three shots from his pistol, wounding three men named above. The testimony also shows that not one of them died. In fact, they lived long enough to receive new suits from some local citizens as a reward for their part in the murder of an innocent man.¹⁸ This effort at deception thus crumbles under the weight of its own untruths.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Anti-Mormons are fond of taking Christian terms that are familiar to a Christian audience and then twisting the definition of those words to exclude certain groups of people. They have done this in conjunction with the term “martyr,” as it is applied to Joseph Smith. They claim that since Smith used a gun to defend himself in Carthage Jail, he cannot be a martyr because a martyr, by definition, does not fight back but goes willingly to his death. This definition, however, is factually incorrect, as the true definition of a martyr has no restriction regarding the actions of the martyr. A martyr is simply someone who dies defending his or her faith. The method and circumstances of death are of no consequence. Anti-Mormons have purposely invented this new definition of a martyr in an attempt to exclude Joseph Smith from the category. They say that since Smith fought back, using a pistol to wound his attackers, that he does not qualify.

These same anti-Mormons claim that the Church has tried to withhold this information. This is also demonstrably untrue, as several books published by the Church contain this information.

Lastly, critics claim that Smith is a murderer because two of the three men he wounded died. This is reminis-

cent of something an LDS scholar once said: “Calling Smith a murderer is akin to calling a married woman who is raped an adulterer.” The murder charge is, however, also demonstrably false. Witnesses at the trial of the murderers of Smith identified the three men who were wounded. The men were alive and well and actually received gifts for their part in the martyrdom.

Interestingly enough, while many anti-Mormons take issue with the fact that Smith had the temerity to defend himself and his family and friends when they were attacked by an illegal mob while ostensibly under the protection of the State of Illinois, I have never seen a single anti-Mormon criticize the actions of the mob that day in anything other than the most vacuous terms; this despite the fact that many of the leaders of the mob were clergy from various surrounding denominations. I wonder: If one of these clergymen had been struck by Smith’s bullets and died, would he be considered a martyr?

FURTHER READING

Oaks, Dallin and Hill, Marvin. *Carthage Conspiracy, the Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1979.

Doctrine & Covenants Section 135

Roberts, B.H. *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 Volumes. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965.

NOTES

1. *Websters New World Dictionary of the American Language*, Second College Edition (New York: World Publishing Company, 1970), 870.
2. <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=martyr> (accessed May 7, 2003).
3. For example, in an on-line article, Gerald and Sandra Tanner say: “we feel that it is going beyond the facts to compare the death of Joseph with that of Jesus. The Mormon leaders seem to be appealing to Isaiah 53:7: ‘He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.’ In the New Testament it is claimed that Christ fulfilled this prophesy (see Acts 8:32). He died without resistance. In 1 Peter 2:23 we read: ‘Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again, when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.’ When Peter tried to defend Jesus with the sword, Jesus told him to “put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (John 18:11).” See <http://www.utlm.org/onlineresources/jesusandjosephsmith.htm> (accessed May 7, 2003).

4. This is the same tactic used by anti-Mormons in relation to the term *Christian*. They have added qualifiers to the definition in order to exclude those—such as Mormons and Catholics—whose doctrines they disagree with.

5. For example, Gerald and Sandra Tanner quote the *History of the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 617–618 and *History of the Church*, vol. 7, pp. 102–103, both of which are LDS publications. Luke Wilson’s organization, the Institute for Religious Research, quotes the same two sources.

6. Calling Joseph’s gun a “six-shooter” is misleading. It was actually a “pepperbox,” an example of which is shown here: <http://www.fortunecity.com/marina/spinnaker/982/pepperbox.html> (accessed May 7, 2003). Technically it was a six-shooter, but it had six barrels that rotated rather than a single barrel with a rotating cylinder. Pepperboxes were notoriously unreliable, and the fact that three chambers misfired was not unusual for this type of weapon. Contrast this with an armed mob, both in the jail and on the ground, of perhaps 80–120 men, armed with actual rifles and it is apparent that the outcome was not in any doubt whatsoever.

7. See, for example, <http://www.utlm.org/onlineresources/jesusandjosephsmith.htm>; <http://www.helpingmormons.org/lamb.htm>; <http://www.irr.org/mit/WDIST/wdist-contradictions.html>. (accessed May 7, 2003).

8. Taylor, John, *The Gospel Kingdom*, edited by G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 360.

9. In fact, this exact account appears in several LDS publications. See, for example, Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979); *History of the Church*; George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1967), 524; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1950), 382; John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith. An American Prophet* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 204f; and Edward Tullidge, *Life of Joseph the Prophet*, (New York, 1878), 541.

10. Joseph’s actions would also be considered legal under the “defense of others” doctrine that is a part of the common law self-defense doctrine.

11. See Isaiah 53:7.

12. See <http://www.utlm.org/onlineresources/jesusandjosephsmith.htm> (accessed May 7, 2003).

13. See D&C 135:4

14. Luke 22: 40–42.

15. Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press), 1979, 51.

16. *Ibid.*, 52.

17. *Ibid.*, 53.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Smith had shot and killed one or more of his attackers, it still does not follow that he was neither a prophet nor a martyr. Certainly killing a man in self-defense or in the defense of another does not disqualify one as a prophet, as is witnessed by the case of Moses. He killed an Egyptian guard who was abusing a fellow Israelite. Certainly if Moses can be considered a prophet despite killing a man in defense of another then Joseph Smith could also be considered a prophet despite killing a man in self-defense (had he actually done so).

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