



## Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet

By John G. Turner

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Brigham Young was a rough-hewn craftsman from New York whose impoverished and obscure life was electrified by the Mormon faith. He trudged around the United States and England to gain converts for Mormonism, spoke in spiritual tongues, married more than fifty women, and eventually transformed a barren desert into his vision of the Kingdom of God. While previous accounts of his life have been distorted by hagiography or polemical exposé, John Turner provides a fully realized portrait of a colossal figure in American religion, politics, and westward expansion.

After the 1844 murder of Mormon founder Joseph Smith, Young gathered those Latter-day Saints who would follow him and led them over the Rocky Mountains. In Utah, he styled himself after the patriarchs, judges, and prophets of ancient Israel. As charismatic as he was autocratic, he was viewed by his followers as an indispensable protector and by his opponents as a theocratic, treasonous heretic.

Under his fiery tutelage, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints defended plural marriage, restricted the place of African Americans within the church, fought the U.S. Army in 1857, and obstructed federal efforts to prosecute perpetrators of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. At the same time, Young's tenacity and faith brought tens of thousands of Mormons to the American West, imbued their everyday lives with sacred purpose, and sustained his church against adversity. Turner reveals the complexity of this spiritual prophet, whose commitment made a deep imprint on his church and the American Mountain West.



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

In this superb new biography, Turner's strong narrative, human insight, knowledge of context, meticulous use of sources, and sophisticated appreciation of Mormon theology combine to create an account of his larger-than-life subject that is at once informative, judicious, and profoundly engaging. (Daniel Walker Howe, author of *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848*)

A scholarly yet thoroughly readable historical/biographical study, of considerable interest to students of 19th-century American history and religious revivalism. (*Kirkus Reviews* 2012-05-01)

Turner provides a searing portrait of a leader at his most determined and—at times—ruthless in defense of his religion. A provocative and compelling view of one of the most elusive, yet influential, figures in our nation's westward expansion. (Ken Verdoia, author of *Utah: The Struggle for Statehood*)

The story Turner tells in this elegantly written biography will startle and shock many readers. He reveals a Brigham Young more violent and coarse than the man Mormons have known. While lauding his achievements as pioneer, politician, and church leader, the book will require a reassessment of Brigham Young the man. (Richard Bushman, author of *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*)

Inextricably tied together by bonds of fate and faith, Brigham Young and Mormonism rose as one in nineteenth-century America. It is that America, as well as that man and that religion, that Turner explores and explains so well in this wonderful book. (William Deverell, Director, Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West)

Turner's treatment of the complex Brigham Young is unsentimental, cogent, critical, and fair. It takes its place alongside Leonard Arrington's magisterial *American Moses* as the essential, mutually challenging portraits of one of America's greatest colonizers and religious figures. (Philip L. Barlow, author of *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*)

Turner's broad historical perspective clarifies why Young's ecclesiastical successors have still felt the man's influence--even after abandoning polygamy. An impressively detailed portrait of a controversial giant. (Bryce Christensen *Booklist (starred review)* 2012-08-01)

A definitive biography of Mormonism's greatest activist and apostle. (Adam Gopnik *New Yorker* 2012-08-13)

Previous biographers of Brigham Young have used epithets such as 'American Moses' and 'Lion of the Lord.' However, what Turner demonstrates here is that the three-dimensional Young cannot be reduced to saint or tyrant; he was bold, brave, crude, petty, visionary, manipulative, creative, charismatic, kindly, and much more besides. He presents Young as a family man navigating the complexities of polygamy, as a leader moving large numbers of people across the Great Plains, and as a politician negotiating enough independence for the Mormons from the American government that he could build the kingdom of God as he saw fit. Turner was given unprecedented access to the LDS church archives and he makes full use of them and other sources, as well as providing a cogent interpretive context. It is easy to forget Young's significance in American history, but at a minimum it needs to be remembered that he is responsible for settling a vast swath of the West. Turner gives him his due... There aren't enough superlatives for this book. It will remain

the standard biography for a long time. Because of its thorough documentation, academics will take it seriously, while general readers will appreciate its clarity of prose and argument. (D. S. Azzolina *Library Journal (starred review)* 2012-08-01)

[A] magnificent new biography...[Turner's] book should establish him as one of the best religious historians of his generation. Turner had unfettered access to Young's papers, and his keen eye for social context makes this book an excellent introduction to the story of Mormonism as well as an essential addition to the history of the American West. It should also do for Brigham Young what Richard Lyman Bushman's Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling did for the Mormon prophet: make the case not only that Young was one of the most fascinating people of the 19th century but also that his importance in American history can no longer be overlooked. Indeed, some of that history will have to be revised to fit this "pioneer prophet" into its narrative...Turner's prose is so smooth and his interpretations so balanced that I suspect Mormonism's defenders and detractors alike will flock to this book...Turner is not a member of the Mormon church, which makes his achievement all the more remarkable. (Stephen H. Webb *Books & Culture* 2012-09-01)

[Turner] provides an admirably balanced account of this complex man, and his little-understood and frequently reviled faith...When finished with this superb biography, readers will find [Brigham Young] less of a curiosity but still fascinating. (Alan Cate *Cleveland Plain Dealer* 2012-08-25)

In his richly researched new biography of Brigham Young, John G. Turner not only profiles the man who brought the church to Utah, but also satisfies both high-minded and lowbrow curiosity about this most American of religions. (*Boston Globe* 2012-09-23)

Young's life is admirably chronicled in this fine new biography...The character who emerges from Turner's elegantly written and well-researched biography is a man for whom the word 'protean' might almost have been invented. He became one of the foremost colonizers of American history, leading the Mormons on a perilous journey to the Great Basin and laying claim to approximately a sixth of the western United States...Turner shows [Young] to be a shrewd and subtle politician...Turner's story never drags, partly because the tale itself is so fascinating, but also because he writes with clarity and energy. (Richard Aldous *Irish Times* 2012-09-22)

Brigham Young is a landmark work...There is no aspect of Young's fascinating life that eludes Turner's scrutiny. (Alex Beam *New York Times Book Review* 2012-10-21)

A major accomplishment that, more than any past treatment of Young, situates the protean prophet squarely in the context of his turbulent times. Turner is not a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and brings to Young an emotional objectivity and distance that greatly benefit his profile of the 19th century Mormon leader and colonizer...Turner unflinchingly tackles the full spectrum, warts and all, of Young's multifarious personality and life...For Turner, no topic is off-limits, too controversial, too intimate. He exhibits a healthy skepticism and curiosity that are as bracing as they are salutary...He is balanced, insightful, sympathetic, even occasionally affectionate. Turner's Young is a far cry from the (take your pick) superficial, cartoonish, angelic/devilish caricatures of most popularized portrayals. He is a fully rendered, flesh-and-blood, flawed-but-earnest human being who sincerely believed he had been "called" to govern God's new covenant people as heaven's representative. The biography adds much to both our understanding and appreciation of Young. (Gary James Bergera *Salt Lake Tribune* 2012-10-06)

Turner offers an unflinching account of Young's life "within the context of mid-19th-century American religion and politics," yet evinces throughout a sympathetic understanding of the way Young and the Mormon pioneers saw themselves: as a chosen people delivered by God from their persecutors and led to a

latter-day Zion...Turner's portrait is of a man both great and greatly flawed. (Jason Lee Steorts *National Review* 2012-10-29)

A comprehensive biography of Young and his times...It is an exceptional work...We can learn a lot about the development of Mormon theology from Turner's book, far more than can be gleaned from previous biographies of Young...Turner is at his best when he is placing the elements of Young's life within the main contours of broader 19th-century America...Those who want to know more about Mormonism's birth and growth will want to get a copy. (Edward J. Blum *Christian Century* 2012-10-17)

[An] exceptionally well-researched and endlessly interesting biography. (Stuart Kelly *The Scotsman* 2012-09-29)

[A] strong and authoritative biography. (Jackson Lears *New Republic* 2012-10-19)

Fascinating...Young very much emerges with his faults manifest in **Turner**'s impressive biography. At the same time, [Brigham Young] takes Mormon studies forward, avoiding the pitfalls of apologetics and polemic. (Jeremy Black *Standpoint* 2012-10-26)

**John G. Turner**'s new biography of Brigham Young...portrays a social experiment, the most ambitious in American history, that until Young's death in 1877 explicitly rejected the core values of Victorian capitalism: possessive individualism and Darwinian competition. (Mike Davis *Los Angeles Review of Books* 2012-10-25)

The great virtue of **John G. Turner**'s new biography of Brigham Young--the first major study since LDS historian Leonard Arrington's *Brigham Young: American Moses* (1985)--is the author's stolid resistance to either version of the traditional Young caricature. (Chris Lehmann *The Nation* 2012-12-17)

[Turner] presents a very thoughtful, well-contextualized account of a complex and contradictory religious leader who was profane as well as pious and powerful. The book traces the development of an aimless young man who became the prophet and president of a sprawling theocracy. Turner offers a fair consideration of Young...This well-researched, readable biography will satisfy all but the most partisan reader. (D. Liestman *Choice* 2013-02-01)

#### About the Author

John G. Turner is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at George Mason University.

### Users Review

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**Michael Joslyn:**

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