



Thomas Baldwin Marsh

(1799–1866)

Testimony of the Twelve Apostles,
D&C 31; 52:22; 56:5; 75:31; 112; 118:2

At age 14 Thomas ran away from home and ended up in New York City, where he became a grocer. He failed in his grocery endeavor and moved on to Boston, where he worked in a type foundry. In the bustling seaport city, he united with the Methodist Church. “[I] tried for two years to be a genuine Methodist, but did not succeed any better in getting Methodist religion than I did in the grocery business,” Thomas wrote. After stepping away from the Methodist faith, he believed himself led by the Spirit to travel to western New York. On his travels to the west, he heard rumors about a “golden book that had been found by a youth named Joseph Smith.” Hoping to substantiate the rumors, he went to the E. B. Grandin’s print shop in Palmyra. “Highly pleased with the information I had obtained concerning the new found book,” Thomas took sixteen pages of the sacred text and returned to Boston.¹

¹ Thomas B. Marsh, “History of Thomas B. Marsh,” *Millennial Star* 26 (June 4, 1864): 360, 375.

Before long, he moved his family to western New York and entered baptismal waters on September 3, 1830. A few days later, he was ordained an elder and called to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ: "Lift up your heart and rejoice, for the hour of your mission is come; and your tongue shall be loosed, and you shall declare glad tidings of great joy unto this generation" (D&C 31:3).

Three years after his call to missionary service, Thomas was appointed president of the Big Blue Branch of the Church in Jackson County, Missouri. A year later, he was called to the Clay County high council. As to his call to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1835, he was informed by a letter. Based on seniority in age, Thomas was appointed President of the Twelve. On July 23, 1837, the Prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation informing him,

I have heard thy prayers, and thine alms have come up as a memorial before me. . . . There have been some few things in thine heart and with thee with which I, the Lord, was not well pleased. . . . Be thou humble; and the Lord thy God shall lead thee by the hand, and give thee answer to thy prayers (D&C 112:1, 2, 10).

Thomas failed to heed the divine warning. In August 1838 the oft-quoted "cream strippings" fiasco arose. George A. Smith explained that the wife of Thomas Marsh and the wife of George Harris

agreed to exchange milk. . . . It was agreed that they should not save the strippings, but that the milk and strippings should all go together. . . . Mrs. Marsh, wishing to make some extra good cheese, saved a pint of strippings from each cow and sent Mrs. Harris the milk without the strippings.

From small beginnings the issue escalated. Before it ended with Sister Marsh being declared guilty of withholding strippings, the case came before a bishop, a high council, and the First Presidency of the Church. George A. Smith wrote, "Thomas B. Marsh then declared that he would sustain the character of his wife, even if he had to go to hell for it."² Upset by the ecclesiastical verdict, Thomas sent an affidavit to Missouri Governor Lilburn W. Boggs slandering Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was excommunicated on March 17, 1839.

For the next eighteen years Thomas remained aloof from the Church. John Taylor said of him,

² George A. Smith, "The Leaven of the Gospel, etc.," *Journal of Discourses* 26 vols. (Liverpool: Latter-Day Saints' Book Depot, 1856), 3:283

[Thomas] has been all the time since [his apostasy] afraid of his life, afraid the “Mormons” would kill him and he durst not let them know where he was. In meeting with some of the apostates he said to them, “You don’t know what you are about; if you want to see the fruits of apostasy, look on me.”³

In 1857 Wandle Mace described 58-year-old Thomas “as an old man, a stranger carrying a satchel and wearing a black waterproof coat to shield him from the storm . . . [withal] palsied frame.” Mace also recorded that Thomas said, “I want to die in the Church. Oh, if I could see Joseph, and talk with him and acknowledge my faults to him, and get his forgiveness . . . then I would die happy.”⁴

In the summer of 1857, Thomas journeyed to the Salt Lake Valley. On September 5, 1857, he visited Brigham Young, who said, “He came into my office and wished to know whether I could be reconciled to him, and whether there could be a reconciliation between himself and the Church of the living God.”⁵ On September 6, 1857, Thomas spoke to a congregation of Saints on Temple Square and said,

My voice never was very strong, but it has been very much weakened of late years by the afflicting rod of Jehovah. He loved me too much to let me go without whipping. . . . For if he had not cared anything about me, he would not have taken me by the arm and given me such a shaking. . . . I know that I was a very stiffnecked man. . . . I want your fellowship; I want your God to be my God. . . . I have learned to understand what David said when he exclaimed, “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.”⁶

At the conclusion of Thomas’s remarks, President Young addressed the congregation, saying, “Brother Marsh now wishes to be received into full fellowship, and to be again baptized here. I shall call a vote.” Hands were raised in affirmation. Thomas remarked, “I thank God for it.” Brigham then declared, “In conversing with brother Marsh, I find that he is about the same Thomas that he always was—full of anecdotes and chit-chat. . . . He

³ Journal History of the Church, August 9, 1857.

⁴ Wandle Mace Journal, 209. Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

⁵ Brigham Young, “Return of Thomas B. Marsh to the Church,” *Journal of Discourses*, 5:206.

⁶ Young, “Return of Thomas B. Marsh to the Church,” 206–208.

has told me that he would be faithful, and that he would do this and the other, but he [does not] know what he will do next week or next year.”⁷

In the early 1860s the thought patterns of Thomas were clouded. John Taylor wrote,

I remember hearing him talk in the Fourteenth Ward meetinghouse. It seemed to me about the most foolish and ridiculous talk, devoid of common sense, common intelligence, and common manhood, that I had heard for a long time. Said I to myself: “There is a specimen of apostasy.”⁸

Thomas died a pauper and an invalid in January 1866 at age 67.

⁷ Young, “Return of Thomas B. Marsh to the Church,” 212.

⁸ John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 188.