

though aimed at outside enemies, no doubt impacted how Mormons viewed their own black converts.⁵⁶

The episode in Missouri also influenced the view of Mormon leaders toward immediate abolitionism and amalgamation. Mormons repeatedly distanced themselves from any notion that they intended to incite slave rebellion or even associate with abolitionist societies. They simultaneously expressed fear that wholesale and immediate abolishment of slavery would send an uneducated and jobless mass of blacks throughout the country who would automatically threaten white women. Mormons inserted themselves into the national debate in an effort to avoid the same type of antiabolitionist violence then impacting the North and a repeat of events that led to their expulsion from Jackson County.

In 1835 Mormons joined many other denominations that decade to declare themselves against immediate abolitionism. Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Presbyterians, and even Quakers either adopted formal resolutions, spoke out against abolitionist movements, or took steps to distance themselves from radical abolitionists. The Quakers had long been opposed to slavery but emphasized gradual emancipation. In 1837 Orthodox Quakers in Philadelphia embraced a conservative stance and counseled against joining fanatical antislavery groups. Two years later a Baltimore faction of Quakers also cautioned its members against uniting with immediate abolitionists. In a similar fashion, between 1831 and 1835, almost all leading Congregational clergymen “lined up squarely against abolitionism.” In fact, when forty theological students at one Congregational seminary failed to heed warnings not to attend an abolition rally, administrators dismissed them. The following year, a majority of delegates at a Methodist conference in Cincinnati called the abolitionist movement a danger to the union.⁵⁷

The disruption to the American religious landscape did not end with abolitionism. In the 1840s and 1850s the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches experienced schisms or split altogether along a North-South divide over slavery and questions about race.⁵⁸ The Mormon position avoided any such split. It did so in a way that created space within the fold for slave masters who converted to Mormonism and for enslaved blacks. There was no proscription against slaveholding as a barrier to membership, priesthood, or missionary service. Mormonism, in fact, honored the master-slave relationship when it made preaching to slaves and baptism of slaves contingent upon the permission of a slave’s master. The LDS stance proclaimed, “We do not believe it right to interfere with bondservants neither preach the gospel to, nor baptize them, contrary to the will and wish of their masters.” It was a sentiment that the Saints canonized as a declaration of beliefs, not as revelation, and included in the Book of Commandments and its successor the Doctrine and Covenants, books they accepted as scripture.⁵⁹

While carving out this position in the mid-1830s was politically expedient and even perceived as necessary to prevent the same type of violence that led to the Mormon expulsion from Jackson County, it simultaneously helped to create the circumstances that would lead to Brigham Young's announcement of a priesthood ban in 1852. Young's announcement was made to the Utah territorial legislature as it considered how to deal with the issue of slavery, an issue that was relevant only because slaveholders from the South converted to Mormonism, as did some of their slaves, and then moved to the Great Basin with the rest of the Saints. The decision in the 1830s that attempted to maintain an open gospel message for slave masters and slaves alike, while simultaneously avoiding the perceived pitfalls of immediate abolitionism, had consequences that were perhaps unintended. It avoided the split or schism that tore the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians apart, even as it created the circumstances—the inclusion of slaves and slave masters in the Mormon fold—that would later lead Brigham Young to split the lay priesthood along racial lines. It was a case of the universal Mormon message casting a net wide enough to incorporate “black and white, bond and free” (2 Nephi 26:33) and then sorting those who responded according to prevailing cultural notions of racial superiority, white and free over black and bound. The very universalism of the opening decades of Mormonism laid the groundwork for the later racial constriction.

In the meantime, Mormon antiabolitionist sentiment found its fullest expression in 1836 in a series of articles published in the *Messenger and Advocate*, a newspaper published out of Kirtland, Ohio, with Oliver Cowdery as editor. The immediate context for the articles was the visit of an abolitionist agitator, John Watson Alvord, who Mormon leaders wanted to distance themselves from. Alvord was a student at Oberlin College, sixty miles west of Kirtland, where in 1835 school administrators voted to admit African American students. Alvord embraced his school's progressive stance on race and became an organizer for the American Anti-Slavery Society. During a speaking tour of northern Ohio in the winter of 1835 and 1836, he preached abolitionism and organized local antislavery societies wherever he found receptive audiences. Sometimes antiabolitionists pelted him with snowballs and apples, as well as drowned out his lectures with ringing bells and blowing horns. At Kirtland, however, he was “well received.” He organized an antislavery chapter there with eighty-six members, some of whom were Mormon.⁶⁰

In the immediate aftermath of Alvord's visit to Kirtland, Joseph Smith Jr. moved to put as much distance between Alvord and the Mormons as possible. Smith wanted to be clear that simply because Alvord spoke at Kirtland, it did not follow that Mormons endorsed his ideas. Smith and two other Mormon leaders, Warren Parrish and Oliver Cowdery, published responses in the *Messenger and Advocate*. Smith noted that there were no “mobs or disturbances” that marked