

# High on the Mountain Top

May 2013 Hymn of the Month



[High on the Mountain Top - Live Performance SATB w/Organ](#)

## The Hymn



*High on the Mountain Top* is a Latter-day Saint hymn, frequently sung for its Temple messages for over a hundred years.

The hymn has particular reference to the pioneer settlement and establishment of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) in what is now the state of Utah.

The text was written by Joel H. Johnson in 1853, about six years after the first LDS pioneers arrived in the valley of the Great Salt Lake. The first pioneer encampment on City Creek became Salt Lake City and the headquarters of the church. Situated at the base of the Wasatch Mountains with an altitude of 4,330 ft, it is a place high in the mountains.

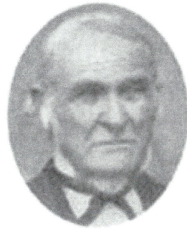
Greater understanding of the message of the hymn comes with knowledge of the circumstances in which it was written.

After the 1844 martyrdom of the first prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith, Jr., the mantle of leadership fell on the President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Brigham Young. Trouble and calamity afflicted the church members in Nauvoo, Illinois, and they knew they would have to leave for the west. It is recorded that Brigham Young fasted and prayed frequently for guidance. He received a vision of Joseph Smith who showed him the knob-like mountain immediately north of Salt Lake City. An ensign fell upon the mountain and Joseph told him, "Build under the point where the colors fall and you will prosper and have peace." Because of the clarity of the vision, when Brigham Young reached the Salt Lake valley on July 24, 1847 he knew he was in the right place. He gave the mountain he had seen in the vision the name it is known by today, 'Ensign Peak,' while on its summit with some of the apostles two days later. One of them suggested that this would be a good place to raise an ensign to the nations, to show that Zion was now established there and all of scattered Israel was invited to come.

On July 28, 1847, four days after Brigham Young arrived, he designated a site for a Temple, and ground was broken for the Salt Lake Temple in 1853.

In 1847 the Salt Lake area was outside of the United States and was impacted by negotiations

## The Author



Joel Hills Johnson was born in March of 1802 to Ezekiel and Julia Hills Johnson at Grafton, Massachusetts. Grafton is about eight miles southeast of Worcester.

His mother was a pious woman who taught him carefully and gave him a small New Testament which he carried in

his pocket and studied frequently.

In his childhood the family relocated to Vermont. In 1813, at the age of eleven, he went to live with his uncle, Joel Hills, in Kentucky or Ohio. The year 1815 found him in the southwest corner of New York, at Pomfret.

In 1826 Joel Johnson married Anna Pixley Johnson. He was twenty-four years of age and she was twenty-six. They moved 175 miles down the coast of Lake Erie to Amherst, Ohio in 1830. The next year they joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a life changing decision that they never questioned afterward.

About 1833 they moved fifty miles east to Kirtland, Ohio. It is reported that he operated a sawmill there and contributed to the building of the Kirtland Temple, and was present at the dedication. It is believed he served as a missionary for the church in several areas.

It is said that a mission call took Joel and his family to the Carthage, Illinois area. His wife, Anna, died of a fever while living near Fountain Green in 1840. It is believed she left six children, the youngest just a baby.

Joel wrote that from the time of his baptism he only lived a short time in any one place because of mob violence. It is said he was only seven miles from Carthage when the infamous mob there shot and killed Joseph and Hyrum Smith in 1844.

Joel had remarried in 1842 and in the spring of 1848 he sold his land in Illinois and with ox teams and wagons he and his family traveled to Winter Quarters, near Omaha, Nebraska, arriving in June. They joined the Willard Richards Company which left in early July for the city of Great Salt Lake, arriving in October. Joel was an active participant in the exploration and settling of the area. He was a member of the Territorial Legislature in 1849 and 1850, and it is said he held many positions of responsibility in the church. He was part of the group led by Parley P. Pratt that left Salt Lake City in 1849 to explore southern Utah and map out places for settlements.

## The Composer



Ebenezer Beesley was born in 1840 at Bicester, Oxfordshire, England, about sixty miles northwest of London. It is reported that he showed a tendency to great musical talent even at the age of two years and as a child his gift was aided by the meeting of the Wesleyan Choir in the

home of his parents.

An only living child at the age of six, his parents declined an offer by some influential ladies for his training as a choir boy at St. George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, founded in 1348 by Edward III. This would have been a great honor; however, it turned out to be a crucial decision.

Ebenezer's family joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints a short time later and Ebenezer was baptized in 1849. The family immigrated to Utah in 1859, shortly after Ebenezer married Sarah Hancock. Leaving England in April, they crossed the Atlantic on the 'William Tapscott' ship, and then traveled by train and steamboat to the edge of the frontier. They then traveled west in the George Rowley Handcart Company. They departed from Florence, Nebraska (near Omaha) in June of 1859 with 233 others, arriving in the Salt Lake Valley in September.

Ebenezer's musical skills were a great boon to the company as he loved to sing and sang along the way when the going allowed and played the flute (or fife) and violin around the campfire at night. Although both Ebenezer and his new bride were not yet twenty, the journey was very difficult as, with two others, they pushed and pulled the handcart with their belongings across the plains through the heat and dust of summer, sleeping on the ground in the open, with scarce food supplies.

A company sent out from Salt Lake City saved their lives at Green River, 300 miles east, where they were about to perish from starvation. Upon their arrival at Emigration Canyon, a few miles directly east of Salt Lake City, they were met by a band and thousands gathered to escort them into the city, with a brass band preceding and a martial band behind. They made their last encampment on the public square that night and then were taken into a home until they were established in a home of their own.

Ebenezer and Sarah first lived for a short time in the town of Tooele, about 35 miles southwest of Salt Lake City, where it is said that he conducted the

between the United States and Mexico at the end of the Mexican-American war in 1848. Needing a government to handle civil duties separate from the ecclesiastical leaders who had become overwhelmed, in 1849 the settlers determined a boundary for a large area they named 'The State of Deseret.' They then set up a provisional government which governed for about two years, before the Utah Territory was created by the U.S. Congress.

The name 'Deseret' was meant to be a symbol of thrift and industry, the word coming from the scriptural record of the Jaredites in the Book of Mormon where it is interpreted as 'a honey bee.' The beehive is still used as a Utah state symbol. Throughout the text of *High on a Mountain Top*, the history of the LDS Church in the area is shown poetically by the author as fulfillment of the Biblical prophecies of Isaiah in the Old Testament.

"And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths..." "And he will lift up an ensign to the nations from far..."

The phrases "the mountain of the Lord" or "Holy Mountain" are used in various contexts in the Old Testament, generally agreeing with the book of Joel, in which the Lord calls Zion his holy mountain. "The mountain of the Lord's house" is understood to mean the Temple in Zion, dedicated as 'The House of the Lord.'

The terms "banner," "standard," "ensign," and "colors" are synonyms in the sense used here. The word "ensign" has the same Latin root as "insignia," and denotes a flag with an identifying emblem or symbol. The term "standard" has origins in the history of battle; when the sovereign's identifying banner or emblem on a pole was used as a rallying point in hand to hand combat. The use of the terms "unfurl," meaning to unwrap from around, and "unfold" further demonstrate that in the literal sense the banner and standard referred to by the author are what the modern reader would describe as flags. In the figurative sense, the banner and standard represent the restored gospel of Jesus Christ which is held up as an emblem of light to the world by his disciples.

It could be conjectured that the writing of *High on a Mountain Top* may have been in recognition of the groundbreaking of the Salt Lake Temple that same year (1853). It is believed that the hymn text first appeared in 1856, published in *The Western Standard*, a San Francisco LDS newspaper. The original version had six verses. Ebenezer Beesley composed a hymn tune he named DESERET for the text and the completed work appeared with that name in the 1889 Latter-day Saints' Psalmody. In later editions of *Hymns*, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (LDS Hymnbook), the title was changed from *Deseret* to the text of the first line as we know it today. In the 1985 edition of the LDS hymnbook, the fifth and six verses were omitted and the music was transposed to a lower simpler key.

Joel returned to southern Utah by assignment in 1850 to help settle Parowan, Utah, about 230 miles south of Salt Lake City, and was instrumental in establishing Johnson's Fort, about fourteen miles further southwest, near Enoch. The fort was necessary to protect the homesteading families from attacks by the Native American tribes.

It is said that Joel made and operated sawmills and shingle mills, and grew vineyards in the area. Although he did not have many opportunities for formal education, he was said to have a literary gift. In his spare time he wrote poems, song lyrics and prose, and left a journal with more than 700 works. *High on the Mountain Top* is his best known work, and one other hymn by him is found in the 1985 LDS hymnbook.

Joel Johnson was a man who endured a great deal of hardship, but it is said his faith never wavered, and he was eighty years old when he passed away in September of 1882. It is interesting to note that he passed away before the hymn for which he is remembered was published in the 1889 Psalmody.



#### *High on the Mountain Top Text*

High on the mountain top  
A banner is unfurled.  
Ye nations, now look up;  
It waves to all the world.  
In Deseret's sweet, peaceful land,  
On Zion's mount behold it stand!

For God remembers still  
His promise made of old  
That he on Zion's hill  
Truth's standard would unfold!  
Her light should there attract the gaze  
Of all the world in latter days.

His house shall there be reared,  
His glory to display,  
And people shall be heard  
In distant lands to say:  
We'll now go up and serve the Lord.  
Obey his truth and learn his word.

For there we shall be taught  
The law that will go forth,  
With truth and wisdom fraught,  
To govern all the earth.  
Forever there his ways we'll tread,  
And save ourselves with all our dead.

Then hail to Deseret!  
A refuge for the good,  
And safety for the great,  
If they but understood  
That God with plagues will shake the world  
Till all its thrones shall down be hurled.

In Deseret doth truth  
Rear up its royal head;  
Though nations may oppose,  
Still wider it shall spread;  
Yes, truth and justice, love and grace,  
In Deseret find ample place.

ward (congregation) choir at Sunday services. They then settled in Salt Lake City where he again led the choir and conducted the singing for Sunday School. It is believed that he copied music for the choir by hand as was the custom for the choir leader, until the Sunday School magazine, *Juvenile Instructor*, began printing music for the choir conductors.

Ebenezer became involved in organizing and preparing music for the *Juvenile Instructor*. Assisted by notable LDS musicians George Careless, Evan Stephens and others, he directed the compilation and publication of both the *Deseret Sunday School Song Book* and the *Latter-day Saint's Psalmody*, which was the first LDS hymnal to include both the text and the music.

It is reported that Ebenezer studied violin under Professors C. J. Thomas and George Careless, and joined the Salt Lake Theater Orchestra directed by Professor Careless, assisting as a substitute director. In 1880 he succeeded his mentor, George Careless, as director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, which position he held until 1889. It is said that he initiated programs to increase the musical ability of the choir during his time there. After his time with the Tabernacle Choir he taught music in Tooele and Lehi before returning to Salt Lake City. Ebenezer Beesley passed away in 1906, leaving a large musical family posterity and a large collection of remarkable musical works. Eleven hymns in the current 1985 English Language LDS Hymnbook were composed by him. It is instructive to note that this man, who could have been associated with the rich and famous in the courts of England, was instead led by the hand of God through great trial and poverty to contribute greatly to the building up of a musical people in a desert land. In this work he gained abilities he would probably not otherwise have known and because of this service his name will always be remembered by the people of his faith.

Ebenezer Beesley was also the composer of the hymn tune for *Let us Oft Speak Kind Words*, which was the September 2012 Hymn of the Month. The information here is duplicated from the previous article.



Much of the hymn text can be read historically. However, its enduring appeal most likely comes from the timeless poetic symbolism of the restored gospel spreading to the nations of the earth, of people coming to the house of the Lord, the Temple, to learn his word and his ways; to be taught his law and the truth and wisdom with which it is fraught (well supplied or charged); to perform saving ordinances for themselves, and, by proxy, for their deceased kindred. The Temple makes it possible that we may forever, together, walk with the Lord.



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