

On another occasion Joseph stated, "Hanging is the popular method of execution among the Gentiles in all countries professing Christianity, instead of blood for blood according to the law of heaven."⁷

Although the doctrine was taught, or at least suggested before the Saints went to Utah, blood atonement was fully developed by Brigham Young:

There are sins that men commit for which they cannot receive forgiveness in this world, or in that which is to come, and if they had their eyes open to see their true condition, they would be perfectly willing to have their blood spilled upon the ground, that the smoke thereof might ascend to heaven as an offering for their sins; and the smoking incense would atone for their sins, whereas, if such were not the case, they would stick to them and remain upon them in the spirit world. . . .

It is true that the blood of the Son of God was shed for sins through the fall and those committed by men, yet, men can commit sins which it can never remit . . . There are sins that can be atoned for . . . [only] by the blood of the man.⁸

Other early Mormon leaders, including Jedediah M. Grant and Heber C. Kimball, both counselors in the First Presidency of the Church, taught the doctrine of blood atonement⁹ and all played major roles in implementing the first capital punishment law in Utah.

While the most fervent sermons on blood atonement were preached during the reformation movement in the 1850s, a period of intense Mormon revivalism bordering on fanaticism,¹⁰ the doctrine also seems to have been defended by nineteenth century church leaders after the excessive rhetoric of the reformation had subsided. Responding to anti-Mormon critics in 1884, George Q. Cannon said, "We do not believe in hanging. We think that if a man sheds blood, his blood should be shed by execution . . . [But] it is a process of law [not a Church function] and has no reference to any Church ordinance."¹¹ In 1889, the First Presidency and Council of Twelve issued an official proclamation answering claims that the Mormon Church had practiced blood atonement extralegally. "We regard the killing of a human being, except in conformity with the civil law, as a capital crime, which should be punished by shedding the blood of the criminal after a public trial before a legally constituted court of the land."¹²

In 1891, President Wilford Woodruff answered scurrilous charges against the Mormons:

It is a fundamental doctrine of our creed that a murderer cannot be forgiven; that he 'hath not eternal life abiding in him'; that if a member of our Church, having received the light of the Holy Spirit, commits this capital crime, he will not receive forgiveness in this world nor in the world to come. . . . It is part of our faith that the only atonement a murdered [sic] can make for his 'sin unto death' is the shedding of his own blood [through capital punishment as practiced by the State and not the Church] according to the fiat of the Almighty after the flood: 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed.' But the law must be executed by the lawfully appointed officer. This is 'blood atonement' so much perverted by maligners of our faith. We believe also in the atonement wrought by the shedding of Christ's blood on Calvary; that it is efficacious for all the race of Adam for the sin