

1836

Joseph Smith and the Kirtland Temple, 1836**Steven C. Harper**

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In one sense, Moroni enlisted the seventeen-year-old seer to save the world when he told young Joseph that he had a role in fulfilling ancient prophecy, adding that “if it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted.” (George Edward Anderson, August 1907, Church History Library, image digitally enhanced.)

The story of the Kirtland Temple began in Joseph Smith’s bedroom. “When I was about 17 years,” Joseph said, “I had another vision of angels; in the night season, after I had retired to bed; I had not been asleep, but was meditating on my past life and experience. I was well aware I had not kept the commandments, and I repented heartily for all my sins and transgressions, and humbled myself before him, whose eye surveys all things at a glance. All at once the room was illuminated above the brightness of the sun; An angel appeared before me.”

“I am a Messenger sent from God,” he told Joseph, introducing himself as Moroni. He said that God had vital work for Joseph to do. There was a sacred book written on golden plates and buried in a nearby hillside. “He explained many of the prophecies to me,” Joseph said, including “Malachi 4th chapter.” Moroni appeared three times that night and twice the next day, emphasizing and expounding the same message. There was something vital in that prophecy—something Joseph needed to know.[1]

When Joseph wrote his history beginning in 1838, he captured the words Moroni spoke, noting the “little variation from the way it reads in our Bibles.” Moroni “quoted the fifth verse [of Malachi 4] thus, ‘Behold I will reveal unto you the Priesthood by the hand of Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.’ He also quoted the next verse differently. ‘And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to their fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers, if it were not so the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming.’”[2]



Kirtland Temple, Kirtland, Ohio.

The angel’s words obviously made a deep impression on the teenage seer. Whether he understood all the words that night is not clear, but they remained in his mind and heart until he witnessed their fulfillment and comprehended them well. Malachi foretold that Elijah, the Old Testament prophet, would return to the earth on a mission to turn the hearts of the first Israelites with whom God made covenants to the hearts of their descendants, to whom Malachi wrote. The prophecy was vague. All a Bible reader could tell is that the Lord would send Elijah sometime before the Second Coming—but to do what? Moroni made the prophecy directly relevant to Joseph, specifying that Elijah would reveal priesthood that would plant the same promises God made to the patriarchs deep in the hearts of their covenant-keeping descendants.

Young Joseph had only sought forgiveness of personal sins, but here was an angel telling him that he had a role in fulfilling ancient prophecy, adding that “if it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted” (Doctrine and Covenants 2:3). Nearly thirteen years passed before Elijah fulfilled the prophecy by bringing Joseph the priesthood keys needed to seal families. Meanwhile,

Moroni prepared Joseph to receive and use those keys. Joseph's role was to use them—and enable others to use them—to give every willing soul, living and dead, full access to the Atonement of Jesus Christ. He was to assist the Savior in offering eternal life. Elder Russell M. Nelson taught that “eternal life, made possible by the Atonement, is the supreme purpose of Creation. To phrase that statement in its negative form, if families were not sealed in holy temples, the whole earth would be utterly wasted.”[3] So, in one sense, Moroni enlisted the seventeen-year-old seer to save the world.

The Temple Revelation

Joseph subsequently translated the Book of Mormon, received the holy priesthood, restored the Church of Jesus Christ, and obeyed a revealed command to gather all who were willing to Ohio. There, in December 1832, he assembled nine high priests in his translating room and taught them that “to receive revelation and the blessing of Heaven, it was necessary to have our minds on God and exercise faith and become of one heart and one mind.” He asked them each to pray in turn that the Lord would “reveal His will to us concerning the upbuilding of Zion and for the benefit of the saints and for the duty . . . of the elders.” Each man “bowed down before the Lord, after which each one arose and spoke in his turn his feelings and determination to keep the commandments of God.”[4]

The revelation known as Doctrine and Covenants section 88 began to flow, and by nine o'clock that night it had not ended. The brethren retired but returned the next morning and received more revelation.[5] Samuel Smith, Joseph's younger brother and one of those present, wrote briefly about the experience. He did not like to write, and what he chose to put down tells us what he thought was important about the revelation. Like Joseph, he focused on what the Lord told him to do. “Some of the elders assembled together,” Samuel wrote, “& the word of the Lord was given through Joseph & the Lord declared that those Elders who were the first labourers in this last vineyard should assemble themselves together that they should call a solemn assembly & every man call upon the name of the Lord & continue in Prayer that they should Sanctify themselves & wash

their hands and feet for a testimony that their garments were clean from the Blood of all men & the Lord commanded we the first Elders to Establish a School & appoint a teacher among them & get learning by study & by faith.”[6]

Section 88 is a thoroughly temple-oriented revelation. Beginning with a promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ to the faithful, the revelation describes the purposeful creation of the earth and then tells how to obey divine law to advance by degrees of light or glory through a perfect resurrection and into the presence of God.[7]

Section 88 is expansive. It maps the universe. Its concepts stretch the mind, inviting inquiry and awe. “Truth shineth,” it says, introducing a string of related if not synonymous concepts that include truth, light, power, life, spirit, and even law (see vv. 7–15). The concepts in section 88 pervade other temple texts. Methodist scholar Margaret Barker wrote that in such texts, “light and life . . . are linked and set in opposition to darkness and death. The presence of God is light; coming into the presence of God transforms whatever is dead and gives it life.”[8]

The word “therefore” in verse 117 marks the beginning of the Lord's final point in the initial two-day revelation (see vv. 117–26). This concluding segment reviews the revelation's instructions in what one might call the “therefore what?” It is a temple preparation text. The “therefore what” of the whole revelation is “therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:68).

In response to section 88's command for the Saints to build a house of God, call a solemn assembly in it, and present themselves there sanctified in order to enter the Lord's presence, the Saints were obedient. They built the Kirtland Temple, the first in this last dispensation, and entered, both symbolically and literally, into the presence of the Lord.

Preparing to Enter the Lord's Presence

But the process was not easy or cheap; ultimate blessings never are. Joseph struggled to help the Saints understand what section 88 called the great and last promise. It was a promise of entering the Lord's pres-

ence based on the conditions that they would build a temple, convene a solemn assembly in it, and sanctify their lives in the process. A few days after section 88 was completed, Joseph sent a copy of it with a rebuke to Church leaders in Missouri. Hard feelings continued to fester there, and the Missouri Saints had not acted on section 84's earlier command to build a temple in Zion. "I send you the . . . Lord's message of peace to us," Joseph wrote, "for though our Brethren in Zion, indulge in feelings towards us, which are not according to the requirements of the new covenant yet we have the satisfaction of knowing that the Lord approves of us & has accepted us, & established his name in kirtland for the salvation of the nations, for the Lord will have a place from whence his word will go forth in these last days in purity, for if Zion, will not purify herself so as to be approved of in all things in his sight he will seek another people for his work will go on untill Isreal is gathered & they who will not hear his voice must expect to feel his wrath." [9]

Joseph drew on section 84 to remind the Missouri Saints that, like the children of Israel, they were in danger of losing their temple blessings. "Seek to purify yourselves, & also all the inhabitants of Zion," he wrote, "lest the Lords anger be kindled to fierceness, repent, repent, is the voice of God, to Zion, & yet strange as it may appear, yet it is true mankind will presist in self Justification until all their eniquity is exposed & their character past being redeemed, & that which is treasured up in their hearts be exposed to the gaze of mankind, I say to you (& what I say to you, I say to all) hear the <warning> voice of God lest Zion fall, & the Lord swear in his wrath the inhabitants of Zion shall not enter into my rest." [10]

Joseph assured the Saints in Zion that "the Brethren in Kirtland pray for you unceasingly, for knowing the terrors of the Lord, they greatly fear for you." Referring to the copy of section 88 he had sent, Joseph suggested that the Lord, frustrated with disobedience in Zion, had also commanded the Saints in Kirtland to build a temple. "You will see," Joseph wrote, "that the Lord commanded us in Kirtland to build an house of God, & establish a school for the Prophets, this is the word of the Lord to us, & we must yea the Lord helping us

we will obey, as on conditions of our obedience, he has promised <us> great things, yea <even> a visit from the heavens to honor us with his own presence." [11]

Joseph had learned from section 84 that the only way into the presence of God was through the temple. Nothing should therefore be more important. Yet, like Moses, he worried that Latter-day Saints would harden their hearts and provoke the Lord's wrath (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:24). "We greatly fear before the Lord lest we should fail of this great honor which our master proposes to confer on us," Joseph said. "We are seeking for humility & great faith lest we be ashamed in his presence." He concluded his letter to the Missouri Saints by saying that "if the fountain of our tears are not dried up we will <still> weep for Zion, this from your brother who trembles greatly for Zion, and for the wrath of heaven which awaits her if she repent not." [12]

Joseph worked hard to get the Saints to see the importance of the momentous revelation and to understand the temple and ultimate blessings. Like Moses, he wanted to usher his sometimes shortsighted people into the presence of the Lord (see Doctrine and Covenants 84). The temple revelations preoccupied Joseph's attention. He wanted their promised blessings, and he worked to explain them to the Saints. Joseph was driven by section 88's command to build a temple and by the promise that the Lord would honor them with his presence (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:68). He urged the Saints forward, at enormous sacrifice, to build the house of the Lord in Kirtland. Joseph established schools and convened priesthood meetings to train and motivate the brethren because the promise that the Savior would "visit from the heavens" was predicated not only on building the temple but on his command to "sanctify yourselves" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:68). [13]

The Saints in Kirtland began building the house of the Lord in the summer of 1833 and, after some interruptions and a rebuke (see section 95), they dedicated it in 1836. Joseph, meanwhile, instructed the Saints to purify and prepare themselves for an outpouring of the Lord's power—an endowment. In November 1835 he met with the newly called Apostles. He confessed his own shortcomings and then taught them section 88, or, as he called it, "how to prepare your selves for the great

things that God is about to bring to pass.”[14]

Joseph told them he had assumed the Church was fully organized, but then the Lord had taught him more, including “the ordinance of the washing of feet” mentioned in section 88:139. “This we have not done as yet,” Joseph taught the Apostles, “but it is necessary now as much as it was in the days of the Saviour, and we must have a place prepared, that we may attend to this ordinance, aside from the world.” He continued to emphasize the need for the temple:

We must have all things prepared and call our solemn assembly as the Lord has commanded us [see Doctrine and Covenants 88:70], that we may be able to accomplish his great work: and it mu[s]t be done in Gods own way, the house of the Lord must be prepared, and the solemn assembly called and organized in it according to the order of the house of God and in it we must attend to the ordinance of washing of feet; it was never intended for any but official members, it is calculated to unite our hearts, that we may be one in feeling and sentiment and that our faith may be strong, so that satan cannot overthrow us, nor have any power over us,—the endowment you are so anxious about you cannot comprehend now, nor could Gabriel explain it to the understanding of your dark minds, but strive to be prepared in your hearts, be faithful in all things that when we meet in the solemn assembly that is such as God shall name out of all the official members, will meet, and we must be clean evry whit.[15]

Echoing section 88:123–26, Joseph urged the brethren:

Do not watch for iniquity in each other if you do you will not get an endowment for God will not bestow it on such; but if we are faithful and live by every word that procedes forth from the mouth of God I will venture to prophesy that we shall get a blessing that will be worth remembering if we should live as long as John the Revelator, our blessings will be such as we have not realized before, nor in this generation. The order of the house of God has and ever will be the same, even after Christ comes, and after the termination of the thousand years it will be the same, and we shall finally roll into the celestial Kingdom of God and enjoy it forever [see Doctrine and Covenants 88:96–117]:—you need an en-

dowment brethren in order that you may be prepared and able to over come all things.[16]

Joseph helped them understand the relationship between the power with which God intended to endow them and their calling to preach the gospel (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:80–82). Then he concluded his teaching by reaffirming what section 88 twice calls the “great and last promise”: “I feel disposed to speak a few words more to you, my brethren, concerning the endowment. All who are prepared and are sufficiently pure to abide the presence of the Savior will see Him in the solemn assembly” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:69, 75).[17] William Phelps wrote to his wife in Missouri about what he was learning from Joseph. “Our meeting[s] will grow more and more solemn, and will continue till the great solemn assembly when the house is finished! We are preparing to make ourselves clean, by first cleansing our hearts, forsaking our sins, forgiving every body; putting on clean decent clothes, by anointing our heads and by keeping all the commandments. As we come nearer to God we see our imperfections and nothingness plainer and plainer.”[18] Oliver Cowdery gave even more detail about one of these temple preparation meetings, noting how the Latter-day Saints followed Old Testament patterns in washing and anointing priests for temple service. Oliver wrote that he met with Joseph and others at the Prophet’s house. “And after pure water was prepared, called upon the Lord and proceeded to wash each other’s bodies, and bathe the same with whiskey, perfumed with cinnamon. This we did that we might be clean before the Lord for the Sabbath, confessing our sins and covenanting to be faithful to God. While performing this washing with solemnity, our minds were filled with many reflections upon the propriety of the same, and how the priests anciently used to wash always before ministering before the Lord.”[19]

Redemption of the Dead

When the house of the Lord (as the early Saints called the Kirtland Temple) was nearing completion Joseph convened the preparation meetings in the rooms of its third-floor garret on the evening of January 21, 1836. There, in the western-most room, Joseph met with his secretary, other members of the First Presidency, his

father (the Church's patriarch), and the bishoprics from Missouri and Ohio. The brethren came to the meeting freshly bathed, symbolizing their efforts to repent and present themselves sanctified before the Lord. The First Presidency consecrated oil, then anointed and blessed Father Smith, who in turn anointed and blessed Joseph. Then the heavens opened. Oliver Cowdery wrote that "the glorious scene is too great to be described. . . . I only say, that the heavens were opened to many, and great and marvelous things were shown." Bishop Edward Partridge affirmed that some of the brethren "saw visions & others were blessed with the outpouring of the Holy Ghost." [20] Joseph was the only one present who described in detail some of what he experienced.

Doctrine and Covenants section 137 derives from his journal, where Joseph described his vision of the future celestial kingdom. There he saw his oldest brother, Alvin, who had died painfully in 1823, shortly after Moroni appeared to Joseph and taught him of the Book of Mormon plates. Nearly twenty years later, Joseph dictated an entry in the Book of the Law of the Lord, the blessing and record book he kept near the end of his life. "I remember well the pangs of sorrow that swelled my youthful bosom and almost burst my tender heart, when he died," Joseph said of Alvin. "He was the oldest, and the noblest of my fathers family. He was one of the noblest of the sons of men." [21] Even so, at Alvin's funeral his mother's minister, Reverend Benjamin Stockton, "intimated very strongly that he had gone to hell, for Alvin was not a Church member." Joseph's father "did not like it." [22] Father Smith recognized what theologians call the "soteriological problem of evil," meaning a dilemma between doctrines of salvation. [23] The problem seems to arise from three truths, any two of which can work together but not all three:

1. God desires the salvation of his children.
2. Salvation comes only through one's acceptance of Christ's Atonement.
3. Many, many of God's children have lived and died without an opportunity to accept Christ's Atonement.

The Book of Mormon clarified that unaccountable infants would not be damned, but it said nothing of accountable adults who died before accepting the gospel.

Joseph received the priesthood, restored the Church, worked to establish Zion, and built the house of the Lord. But for all Joseph knew, Reverend Stockton had been right. Not until the temple was nearly finished did the Lord refute the reverend's doctrine. Then he did so beautifully in the vision recorded for us in Doctrine and Covenants section 137. The point of that revelation is to resolve the soteriological problem of evil, which it does in verses 7–10. But before revealing the answer, the Lord showed Joseph a vision that begged the question. Joseph envisioned the flaming gate to the celestial world, the golden streets, and the Father and the Son on their blazing throne. He saw Adam and Abraham. And he saw Alvin and his parents there, too. He "marveled" at Alvin's appearance, since he had not been baptized before his death (Doctrine and Covenants 137:6).

The Lord spoke the answer not just for Alvin but for "all who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry" (v. 7). They will inherit celestial glory. Indeed, anyone who dies without knowing the gospel but who would have received it otherwise, will receive it. The emphatic point is that death is not a deadline that determines salvation, "for I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts" (v. 9). Desire—not the timing of one's death—is the determinant of salvation through Christ.

Some of the greatest theological minds have wrestled with the soteriological problem of evil. Early Christians believed that the Lord had planned a "rescue for the dead," as one scholar called it. [24] Put simply, early Christians baptized each other for their kindred dead, as the Apostle Paul noted at 1 Corinthians 15:29 and Hugh Nibley demonstrated. [25] Later Christian philosophers recognized the problem and believed that Christ would somehow save all the righteous, but already they had lost the significance of truths Peter and Paul taught, leaving no certain answer to the question, "shall those be wholly deprived of the kingdom of heaven who died before Christ's coming?" [26] Then later, largely influenced by Augustine, Christianity apostatized generally from the doctrine of redemption for the dead, giving rise to the soteriological problem.

By the eighteenth century, the Puritan theologian

Jonathan Edwards longed to find a solution. One contemporary Evangelical scholar finds in Edwards the seeds of a “dispositional soteriology,” or a doctrine of salvation that only requires one’s disposition to be redeemed by God through Christ. It does not require one to knowingly accept the Savior.[27] But such a solution negates agency and Bible passages to the contrary. The question persists, what about those who never heard? The revealed answer is not to subtract from the three known truths but to add one that makes them all compatible and whole rather than problematic. That truth is found in verses 8–9 of section 137: all who have died or will die without knowledge of the gospel who would otherwise have received it, will receive it according to their desires and thus inherit the celestial kingdom. “Thank God for Joseph Smith!” wrote Latter-day Saint philosopher David L. Paulsen, who knows full well the problem and therefore appreciates the profound solution. His gratitude for Joseph is “not merely for being God’s conduit in resolving one more thorny problem of evil, but for being the instrument through whom God restored the knowledge and priesthood powers that make the redemption of the dead possible.”[28]

Later, in Nauvoo, Joseph revealed the ordinance of baptism for the dead that enables all humankind to make and keep gospel covenants (see sections 127–28). Joseph taught the doctrine to his father on his deathbed. In contrast to his reaction to Reverend Stockton’s sermon, Father Smith “was delighted to hear” the truth and asked Joseph to attend to the ordinance. Joseph and Hyrum fulfilled their father’s dying wish. “I see Alvin,” Father Smith said just a few minutes before his passing. [29] Prophetically, section 137 solved a persistent problem faced by Joseph’s family and many, many others.

The Temple Dedication

Meanwhile, in March 1836 the Saints put finishing touches on the house of the Lord in Kirtland and prepared to assemble in it solemnly as section 88 had commanded them more than three years earlier (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:70, 117). Joseph spent the day before the solemn assembly making final arrangements with his counselors and secretaries.[30] Oliver Cowdery’s diary tells us that he assisted Joseph “in writ-

ing a prayer for the dedication of the house.”[31] The next morning the house of the Lord filled to capacity with nearly a thousand Saints. An overflow meeting convened next door. The solemn assembly began at nine with scripture readings, choir singing, prayer, a sermon, and the sustaining of Joseph Smith as prophet and seer. In the afternoon session the sustaining continued, with each quorum and the general body of the Church sustaining, in turn, the leaders of the Church.[32] Another hymn followed, “after which,” Joseph’s journal says, “I offered to God the . . . dedication prayer.”[33]

That prayer is preserved for us in Doctrine and Covenants section 109. It is an inspired prayer. It begins with thanks to God, then makes requests of him in the name of Jesus Christ. It is based heavily on section 88’s temple instructions as well as other temple-related scriptural texts. It “sums up the Church’s concerns in 1836, bringing before God each major project.”[34] It is a temple prayer.

What does one pray for in such settings? Joseph began by asking God to accept the temple on the terms he had given in section 88 and the Saints had tried to fulfill in order to obtain the promised blessing of entering the Lord’s presence (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:68; 109:4–12). Joseph prayed that all who worshipped in the temple would be endowed with God’s power, that they would be taught by God “that they may grow up in thee, and receive a fulness of the Holy Ghost, and be organized according to thy laws, and be prepared to obtain every needful thing” (Doctrine and Covenants 109:15). Joseph prayed, in other words, a temple prayer that the Saints would become like their Heavenly Father by degrees of glory as they obeyed his laws and prepared to enter his presence. He prayed for what section 88 taught him to pray for.

Joseph prayed that the Saints, “armed” or endowed with priesthood power from the temple, could go to “the ends of the earth” with the “exceedingly great and glorious tidings” of the gospel to fulfill prophecies (vv. 22–23). He asked Heavenly Father to protect the Saints from their enemies (see vv. 24–33). He asked for mercy upon the Saints and to seal the anointing ordinances that many of the priesthood brethren had received in the weeks leading up to the solemn assembly. He asked

for the gifts of the Spirit to be poured out as on the biblical day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:2–3). He asked the Lord to protect and empower the missionaries and postpone judgment until they had gathered the righteous. He prayed that God’s will would be done “and not ours” (Doctrine and Covenants 109:44).

Joseph prayed that the Saints would be delivered from the prophesied calamities. He asked Heavenly Father to remember the Saints who had been oppressed and driven from Jackson County, Missouri, and he prayed for their deliverance. He asked how long their afflictions would continue until avenged (see v. 49). He asked for mercy “upon the wicked mob, who have driven thy people, that they may cease to spoil, that they may repent of their sins if repentance is to be found” (v. 50). Joseph prayed for Zion.

Joseph prayed for mercy on all nations and political leaders, so that the principles of individual agency captured in the United States Constitution would be established forever. He prayed for “all the poor, the needy, and afflicted ones of the earth” (v. 55). He prayed for an end to prejudices so that the missionaries “may gather out the righteous to build a holy city to thy name, as thou hast commanded them” (v. 58). He asked for more stakes to facilitate the gathering and growth of Zion. He asked for mercy for the scattered remnants of Jacob and for the Jews. Indeed, he prayed for “all the scattered remnants of Israel, who have been driven to the ends of the earth, [to] come to a knowledge of the truth, believe in the Messiah, and be redeemed from oppression” (v. 67).

Joseph prayed for himself, reminding the Lord of his sincere effort to keep his covenants. He asked for mercy upon his family, praying that Emma and the children “may be exalted in thy presence” (v. 69). This is the first usage of “exalted” in Joseph’s revelations to refer to the fulness of salvation through temple blessings.[35] Joseph prayed for his in-laws to be converted. He prayed for the others in the First Presidency and their families. He prayed for all the Saints and their families and their sick and afflicted. He prayed, again, for “all the poor and meek of the earth,” and for the glorious kingdom of God to fill the earth as prophesied (see vv. 68–74).

Joseph prayed that the Saints would rise in the First

Resurrection with pure garments, “robes of righteousness,” and “crowns of glory upon our heads” to “reap eternal joy” (v. 76). Thrice repeating his petition, Joseph asked the Lord to “hear us” and accept the prayers and petitions and offerings of the Saints in building the house to his name (v. 78). He prayed for grace to enable the Saints to join the choirs surrounding God’s throne in the heavenly temple “singing Hosanna to God and the Lamb” (v. 79). Joseph concluded the prayer, “And let these, thine anointed ones, be clothed with salvation, and thy saints shout aloud for joy. Amen, and Amen” (v. 80).

Joseph’s prayer dedicated the first house of the Lord in the last dispensation and set the pattern for all subsequent solemn assemblies met for the same holy purposes. It teaches the Saints how to pray, including what to pray for, and to ask according to the will of God. It teaches the doctrine and evokes the imagery of the temple, perhaps most poignantly in the idea that temple worshippers can “grow up” by degrees of glory until they become like their Heavenly Father (compare section 93). This is what it means to be exalted in God’s presence. The temple revelations call this “fulness,” including fulness of joy. The prayer continues the expansive work of the temple revelations in sections 76, 84, 88, and 93 and points us forward to the culminating revelation on exaltation, section 132:1–20. Joseph’s temple prayer invites mortals, who occupy a polluted celestial planet where they cannot think of more than one thing at a time and generally only in finite terms, to receive power that will enable them to journey to the real world where God lives “enthroned, with glory, honor, power, majesty, might, dominion, truth, justice, judgment, mercy, and an infinity of fulness, from everlasting to everlasting” (v. 77).[36]

Keys

A week after he dedicated the house of the Lord in Kirtland, Joseph attended meetings there, including an afternoon sacrament meeting. For Christians it was Easter Sunday, while Jews were celebrating the Passover season.[37] After sacrament, Joseph and Oliver Cowdery retreated behind the heavy curtains used to divide the room. They bowed in what Joseph’s jour-

nal describes as “solemn, but silent prayer to the Most High,” noting that “after rising from prayer [a] vision was opened to both of them.”[38]

The Lord unveiled the minds of his seers, who envisioned and heard the Lord standing before them. Three times, in a voice like rushing water, he declared, “I am,” evoking Old Testament revelations in which he repeatedly identified himself saying, “I am the Lord your God” (see Exodus 20 and Leviticus 19). This is a play on the related words of the Hebrew verb for to be and the name transliterated in English as Jehovah. It is the Lord Jesus Christ declaring that he is the God who told Moses to tell the Israelites that “I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3:14). It is Jesus of Nazareth testifying that he is the God of Israel, the promised Messiah, and proclaiming it in this dispensation in a building that still exists.

In a powerful juxtaposition of present and past verb tenses, the Savior declared himself the crucified Christ who conquered death: “I am he who liveth. I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father” (Doctrine and Covenants 110:4). He forgave Joseph and Oliver, pronounced them clean, and commanded them and those who had built the temple to rejoice. He accepted the temple and made conditional promises to manifest himself to his people there, prophesying that tens of thousands would rejoice in the endowment poured out on his servants in the house of the Lord as its fame spread to foreign lands.

The Lord disappeared, and Moses appeared and committed keys for gathering Israel from all the earth, the permission to lead the lost tribes of Israel from their scattered locations. Next Elias appeared and dispensed the gospel of Abraham, “saying that in us and our seed all generations after us should be blessed” (v. 12). Another glorious vision followed as Elijah, who went to heaven without tasting death, appeared and said that it was time to fulfill Malachi’s prophecy that Elijah would turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and vice versa before the dreadful day of the Lord. The vision closed with a heavenly announcement that Joseph now held the keys of the last dispensation. He had received the priesthood several years earlier. What he had now was permission to put it to work in new ways—including sealing families, officiating in temple ordinances,

and sending missionaries globally.

The glorious vision, recorded for us in Doctrine and Covenants section 110, fulfilled the Lord’s conditional promise to the Saints in section 38 that if they would move to Ohio and build him a holy house, he would endow them with power in it (see sections 38, 88, 95). It fulfilled section 88’s great and last promise that the sanctified would come into the presence of the Lord.[39] Finally, it fulfilled Malachi’s multilayered prophecy. Through Malachi the Lord prophesied, “I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5). Moroni reiterated that prophecy to Joseph Smith in 1823 (see Doctrine and Covenants 2). Elijah fulfilled it less than thirteen years later. Jews had long awaited Elijah’s prophesied return and still invite him into their homes during the Passover Seder. During the very season that some Jews were celebrating the sacred meal with the hope that Elijah would return, he came to the house of the Lord.[40]

Moses’s appearance is just as significant. “His appearance in company with Elijah offers another striking parallel between Mormon teachings and Jewish tradition, according to which Moses and Elijah would arrive together at the ‘end of time.’”[41] Joseph and Oliver’s vision reenacts the endowment received in the biblical account of the Mount of Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:1–9).

Few texts weld dispensations as thoroughly as this revelation. Given on Easter and during the Passover season, the revelation links Israel’s Old Testament deliverance with Christ’s New Testament resurrection and affirms that Joseph Smith and the temple-building Latter-day Saints are the heirs of God’s promises to the Israelite patriarchs. Christ is the Passover lamb who “was slain” and then resurrected and now appears to Joseph in Kirtland to approve of the latter-day work and commission the Prophet to fulfill the work of Moses (the gathering of Israel), Elias (the gospel of Abraham), and Elijah (the sealing of families).

Joseph put these priesthood keys to use against great opposition. Not long after receiving the keys to gather Israel from Moses, Joseph found Heber C. Kimball in the temple and whispered in his ear a mission call to

Great Britain. Joseph had previously sent missionaries on short local or regional missions. Heber and his companions began the ongoing process of gathering Israel from the ends of the earth. Though oppressed by what seems like a concerted opposition that included financial collapse, widespread apostasy, an executive order driving the Saints from Missouri, and then unjust imprisonment in Liberty, Missouri, Joseph began to teach and administer the ordinances of the temple. In sum, the endowment of priesthood keys he received authorized him to begin performing temple ordinances.

The vision recorded in section 110 communicated temple knowledge and power. It came in the temple behind a veil, was recorded but not preached, and was acted on but not publicly explained.[42] After the revelation, Joseph used the keys to gather, endow, and seal in anticipation of the Savior's Second Coming. Section 110 marks the restoration of temple-related power and knowledge that Moses possessed and "plainly taught," but which had been forfeited by the children of Israel (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:19–25).

"So Great a Cause"

Imagine for a moment being Joseph Smith. Imagine that you are a seventeen-year-old seer. You know that God lives and Jesus is the very Christ, that they love you and have promised to provide you further knowledge in due time. But you don't have any idea about temples, salvation for the dead, or the prophecies of Isaiah, Joel, and Malachi. You do not have the first hint that Malachi's prophecy of Elijah's return will intimately involve you. You're worried about simple, sincere things: your own teenage sins, the religious divisions in your family, and your uncertain future. You pray for personal forgiveness, and an angel greets you with a staggering learning curve and a call to assist in saving the world.

Now you are twenty-seven years old. You have just received one of the most sublime revelations on record, including a command to build a house for the Lord and assemble your followers in it, solemn and sanctified (see Doctrine and Covenants 88). You have your own weaknesses and sins to wrestle with in addition to the shortcomings of a sincere but fallen body of Latter-day Saints. You do everything in your power to explain the

imperative need they have for the power that only flows through the temple and the Savior's promise to reveal himself if you will build him a house and sanctify your lives. Try as you might, the Saints are slow to grasp the magnitude of what you alone seem to sense. You keep trying. You quarry rock. You get the Saints to see as you see, to sacrifice as you sacrifice, and to be sanctified as you are sanctified through service. You rebuke them. You receive rebukes. You wash, anoint, and bless them. You wash their feet. You have an indomitable will. You raise the house of the Lord upward until it is finished. And then you call the solemn assembly as you were commanded. You do exactly as you were commanded to do, and then you report on your mission. You kneel in solemn prayer and anticipate the promised blessings. You expect the Lord to unveil himself, to appear in his holy house. And he does. He forgives your sins. Perhaps you remember your seventeen-year-old prayer for just such a blessing.

You are thirty years old. Moses, Elias, and Elijah have committed into your hands the keys of the last dispensation. You now have all the power and permission you need to gather Israel, endow them with power, and seal them together before the Lord's imminent coming. All hell seems to break loose. Intense opposition stalks you. The "envy and wrath of man" are your lot all the days of your life (Doctrine and Covenants 127:2). Your best efforts to deliver your people financially result in bankruptcy. You receive a revelation warning you and your faithful friends to flee Kirtland and the house of the Lord. You arrive in Missouri only to have an extermination order issued against you. You are captured, charged with treason, and imprisoned on a capital offense in a state where there is no due process of law for Latter-day Saints. You are imprisoned in a tiny, stinking, depressing cellar, powerless to support your refugee wife and children. If God had not called you to the work, you would back out. "But I cannot back out," you say, for "I have no doubt of the truth." [43] And so you work and watch and fight and pray with all your might and zeal.[44] Eventually, the Lord delivers you from your enemies so you can exercise the keys of the holy priesthood. You reunite with your family and call for the Apostles.

Five years to the day before you will be killed, you begin the process of endowing the Apostles with power. [45] You teach, endow, and ordain them as quickly as you can. Three months before your death, you finish. “I roll the burthen and responsibility of leading this church off from my shoulders on to yours,” you tell the Apostles. “Now, round up your shoulders and stand under it like men; for the Lord is going to let me rest a while.” [46] You are thirty-eight years old. The commission you received at age seventeen from an angel sent from the presence of God specifically to you is now fulfilled. Your work on earth is done. You are no longer safe. You publicly declare, “I dont blame you for not believing my history had I not experienced it [I] could not believe it myself.” [47] It has been remarkable—not because you were flawless or immortal, but because you were not. You were an imperfect, sincere seventeen-year-old seeking the salvation of your soul. Little did you know that your own salvation would be so wrapped up in God’s vast, eternal plan for the salvation of the human family. But as you began to grasp the glad tidings, as you began to piece together line by line and precept by precept, with the help of ministering angels, how the keys, powers, and privileges of the holy priesthood would be restored to everyone who wants them, you rejoiced and resolved to push the work forward. “Forward and not backward,” you said to the Saints. “Courage, brethren; and on, on to the victory! Let your hearts rejoice, and be exceedingly glad. Let the earth break forth into anthems of eternal praise to the King Immanuel, who hath ordained, before the world was, that which would enable us to redeem them out of their prison; for the prisoners shall go free” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:22).

Indeed, they shall. Because of what occurred in the house of the Lord in Kirtland, the prisoners shall go free. Oh, how well Joseph knew what it meant for the prisoners to be free! His heart rejoiced and was exceedingly glad. I fervently pray that Joseph’s rhetorical question will ever ring in our ears—“Shall we not go on in so great a cause?” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:22). We are the heirs of Joseph’s legacy. Let us spend our lives gathering, endowing, and sealing the living and the dead. Let us present ourselves sanctified in the house of the Lord against great opposition. Let us “as Latter-day

Saints, offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness; and let us present in his holy temple . . . the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptation” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:24).

Notes

- 1 Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92), 1:127.
- 2 Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:278.
- 3 Russell M. Nelson, in *Conference Report*, October 1996, 97.
- 4 *Kirtland Minute Book*, December 27, 1832, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
- 5 *Kirtland Minute Book*, December 27, 1832; *Kirtland Revelation Book*, 47–48, 166, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
- 6 *Samuel H. Smith Journal*, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
- 7 Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 206.
- 8 Margaret Barker, *On Heaven as It Is in Earth: Temple Symbolism in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 13.
- 9 Joseph Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, to William W. Phelps, Independence, Missouri, January 11, 1833, in *Joseph Smith Letterbook 1*, 18–20, in hand of Frederick G. Williams, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
- 10 Joseph Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, to William W. Phelps, Independence, Missouri, January 11, 1833, in *Joseph Smith Letterbook 1*, 18–20. Compare with *Doctrine and Covenants* 84:23–25.
- 11 Joseph Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, to William W. Phelps, Independence, Missouri, January 11, 1833, in *Joseph Smith Letterbook 1*, 18–20.
- 12 Joseph Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, to William W. Phelps, Independence, Missouri, January 11, 1833, in *Joseph Smith Letterbook 1*, 18–20.
- 13 Joseph Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, to William W. Phelps, Independence, Missouri, January 11, 1833, in *Joseph Smith Letterbook 1*, 18–20.
- 14 Joseph Smith discourse, Kirtland, Ohio, November 12, 1835, *Joseph Smith Journal*, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:76; see also 75–78.
- 15 Joseph Smith, Discourse, Kirtland, Ohio, November 12, 1835, *Joseph Smith Journal*, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:76–77.

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- 16 Joseph Smith discourse, Kirtland, Ohio, November 12, 1835, Joseph Smith Journal, in Jessee, Papers of Joseph Smith, 2:77.
- 17 Joseph Smith, History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 2:308; fulfillments of this prophecy are documented in Steven C. Harper, "A Pentecost and Endowment Indeed": Six Eyewitness Accounts of the Kirtland Temple Experience," in Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844, ed. John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson (Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press and Deseret Book, 2005): 327–71.
- 18 William W. Phelps to Sally Waterman Phelps, January 1836, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.
- 19 Oliver Cowdery Sketch Book, January 16, 1836, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
- 20 Harper, "A Pentecost and Endowment Indeed," 338, 344; see Joseph's description on 354.
- 21 Jessee, Papers of Joseph Smith, 2:440.
- 22 According to Joseph's brother, William Smith, cited in Deseret News, January 20, 1894, cited in Richard Lyman Bushman, Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling (New York: Knopf, 2005), 110.
- 23 David L. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil," BYU Studies 39, no. 1 (2000): 61.
- 24 See Jeffrey A. Trumbower, Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 25 See Hugh Nibley, "Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times," Mormonism and Early Christianity (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987), 148–49.
- 26 Hugh Nibley, Mormonism and Early Christianity (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 103.
- 27 Gerald R. McDermott, Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 28 Paulsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil," 62.
- 29 Lucy [Mack] Smith, Biographical Sketches, 265–66, 270. Richard E. Turley Jr., "The Latter-Day Saint Doctrine of Baptism for the Dead," BYU family history fireside, Joseph Smith Building, November 9, 2001, copy in author's possession. Nauvoo baptismal records show that Alvin was baptized at the instance of his brother Hyrum (Nauvoo Temple, Baptisms for the Dead 1840–45, Book A, 145, 149, Church History Library, Salt Lake City).
- 30 Jessee, Papers of Joseph Smith, 2:191.
- 31 Oliver Cowdery, Sketch Book, March 26, 1836, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
- 32 Harper, "A Pentecost and Endowment Indeed," 327–71.
- 33 Jessee, Papers of Joseph Smith, 2:195.
- 34 Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, 317.
- 35 See section 49:10, 23 for earlier usages in a different context.
- 36 Hugh Nibley, "A House of Glory" (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993).
- 37 John P. Pratt, "The Restoration of Priesthood Keys on Easter 1836, Part 2: Symbolism of Passover and of Elijah's Return," Ensign, July 1985, 55.
- 38 Jessee, Papers of Joseph Smith, 2:209.
- 39 Joseph Smith, Kirtland, Ohio, to William W. Phelps, Independence, Missouri, January 11, 1833, in Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, 18–20.
- 40 Stephen D. Ricks, "The Appearance of Elijah and Moses in the Kirtland Temple and the Jewish Passover," BYU Studies 23, no. 4 (1983): 483–86.
- 41 Ricks, "Appearance of Elijah and Moses," 485.
- 42 Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, 320–21.
- 43 Discourse, April 6, 1843, Nauvoo, Illinois, Joseph Smith, Papers, Journals, Church History Library; also in Faulring, An American Prophet's Record, 347–50; Ehat and Cook, Words of Joseph Smith, 177–80; and Smith, History of the Church, 5:333–37.
- 44 Will L. Thompson, "Put Your Shoulder to the Wheel," Hymns (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), no. 252.
- 45 Wilford Woodruff Journal, June 27, 1839, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
- 46 Declaration of the Twelve, circa 1844, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
- 47 Discourse, April 7, 1844, Nauvoo, Illinois, Joseph Smith, Papers, Journals, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; also in Smith, History of the Church, 6:302–17; Ehat and Cook, Words of Joseph Smith, 340–43; and Faulring, An American Prophet's Record, 465–76.