

1837: Joseph Smith and the Kirtland Crisis Ronald K. Esplin

Ronald K. Esplin was managing director of the Joseph Smith Papers Project when this was published.

Two of the toughest years in Joseph Smith's life and ministry were 1837 and 1838, yet he believed in his calling and in the revelations. He rose time and again from his most challenging difficulties and demonstrated remarkable resilience.

Eighteen thirty-seven was a tough year. In fact, 1837 and 1838 were probably the two toughest years of Joseph Smith's life and ministry. Eighteen thirty-seven was emotionally disastrous and ended in apostasy and division. Eighteen thirty-eight in Missouri was militarily disastrous and ended in pain and suffering.[1] Together these two years comprised a very trying period. One of the things that I have been impressed with as we have worked on The Joseph Smith Papers is how resilient Joseph Smith was. He believed in his calling. He believed in the revelations. And partly because of this faith, and maybe also because of the constitution and will he was born with, he could rise, time and again, from the ashes of defeat and do something even better. He did so after 1837, and 1838 in Missouri started out promising. After the military and physical disaster there, the Saints straggled into Nauvoo and built the greatest city of Joseph's administration in a short five years.

Lessons from 1837

Even though 1837 was a difficult, sometimes discouraging year, it is one we need to understand. Exploring it helps us to understand Joseph Smith, but there are also lessons we can learn. One is that we are all susceptible to what may be called the cycle of prosperity, also known as the Nephite disease. President Brigham Young, a year after Joseph Smith's death, gave an interesting sermon in Nauvoo, one of his best before he went west, in which he said essentially that for twelve years under Joseph Smith the Saints had suffered through adversity and were still fine spiritually. Despite setbacks, they had made it through; they had done what they needed to do. Not so in prosperity, he concluded—one year of prosperity had almost killed them. Since Joseph's

death, they had had some peace, some good times, and it had been too much. Adversity is a better environment for making Saints, perhaps. Another thing we can learn is how adversity tries men and women, revealing character as they make decisions in difficult circumstances. The 1837 Kirtland crisis, or Kirtland apostasy as it is sometimes known, cost us perhaps a third of the leadership—not a third of the members, but some of the elite, some of the well-educated, some of the more prosperous. And it happened so suddenly that it is a lesson for all of us.

Another lesson of 1837 is the importance of having our loyalties in the right place. There was a cultural war going on in the Church in 1837 over what Joseph Smith was trying to introduce: a new way of thinking about society and religion based on ancient scripture models and modern revelation. This was the model of Enoch leading his people or Moses at the head of the children of Israel, where a religious leader had a great deal to say about everyday life and about how society was organized. This model was not the American way, nor is it today. People had to look into their hearts and decide what they were willing to do at the behest of a religious leader. Some liked the American civil religion, as it has sometimes been called. They liked the idea that they were free as Americans to do their business six days a week and on the seventh day go to church where a preacher would teach them morals and maybe a little doctrine. But they did not expect this preacher to interject himself into their politics, their property, or their economic organization. This was the Protestant model, the model most early Latter-day Saints grew up with. Yet little by little, Joseph Smith was trying to teach them the model of Enoch and of Moses, of organizing society around religious principles and around religious leaders. So one of the lessons we learn is that if we are in a situation where much is demanded, ultimately we will have to decide where our loyalties are. Very good people, including some leaders who left for a while and came back, had difficulty with that. For a while they thought their real loyalty was what they had done as "Sons of '76." They wanted to live life as Americans and not as Latter-day Saints or as children of Israel. Think of these lessons as we see how 1837 unfolds.

Contemporary Accounts of Kirtland in 1837

It has been difficult to understand 1837, and it is interesting why we have this trouble. Joseph Smith kept a wonderful diary from the fall of 1835 into the spring of 1836. It ended on April 3, 1836, with the coming of Elijah, Elias, and Moses to the Kirtland Temple. That closed his best diary of the 1830s, although we have a pretty decent one for part of 1838 in Missouri. But from early April 1836 through all of 1837 and well into 1838, we have no Joseph Smith diary. Not until March 13, 1838, when he arrived in Far West, Missouri, did the Prophet begin a new diary.

Not only do we not have any diary from Joseph Smith, we do not have any from his closest associates. So we have had difficulty understanding the story of how things came apart in the fall of 1836 and throughout 1837. We have many accounts and considerable information, but almost all are reminiscent accounts written much later. Eliza R. Snow and Lorenzo Snow later wrote of this pivotal period, and there are many reminiscences in the *Journal of Discourses* about these days. But they were written decades after the fact, and it is not possible to sort out from those accounts how all the events unfolded. These later accounts leave an impression that all the key events of this crisis year occurred in the summer of 1837, which was not the case. One result of this misconception is that apostasy has been connected almost exclusively to the failure of the bank and the economic difficulties, or to the economic Panic of 1837, as it was called. The bank failure and its aftermath played an important role, but the reality was more complex—and also more interesting and instructive.

In a broad sense, one might find some of the roots of this apostasy as far back as the aftermath of Zion's Camp in 1834. But the immediate roots can be seen in the late summer and fall of 1836, during Kirtland's brief prosperity. Before economic troubles had even started, there was an effort to depose Joseph Smith, hardly the scenario one would expect from reading the reminiscent accounts alone. Gratefully we are not left with only those. We can sort this out more clearly thanks to two contemporaneous sources. One is the diary of Wilford Woodruff, who returned to Kirtland after thirty months on missions in various places. A great diary keeper, he

kept a very important record from the fall of 1836 until the end of May of 1837, when he departed Kirtland for yet another mission. At the very time he left, Mary Fielding, who had come to Kirtland with her brother Joseph and her sister Mercy, started a series of letters to Mercy, who had returned to Canada. These letters overlap a few days with Woodruff's diary and continue recording her firsthand observations of Kirtland through much of the summer, weeks after Woodruff's diary falls silent.

With these two sources and a few corroborating evidences such as lawsuits, we can create a chronology that helps us put the reminiscences into context so that we can better understand not only how this unfolded but why. When we do that, we discover that what was at issue was not simply prosperity or economic decline or the failure of the bank, although all of those were important. The central issue for many was their understanding of prophetic leadership: What was the role of a prophet? Was a prophet, like the Protestant minister in American tradition, expected to preach to us on Sunday out of the Book of Mormon or modern revelation, but not lead the community? Or was a prophet to lead a community of gathered Saints into a new way of organizing themselves, where all of their labors worked together to build the kingdom of God on earth? This second model was what Nauvoo became. This was what Joseph was beginning to teach and trying to implement to some degree in Kirtland. And this—the role of prophetic leadership—was what people divided over.

A Bit of 1836

To understand 1837, we must mention a few events of 1836. The temple dedication was in late March of 1836, and Joseph's diary closes on the third of April, a few days later. This is the diary that provides the best contemporary evidence of all the great spiritual experiences connected with the completion of the Kirtland Temple. But we know from other accounts that the great spiritual highlights of 1836 did not just stop when the diary stopped. Reading the diary conveys a sense that now that Christ and Moses and Elijah had come, what more was there to say? That was the climax of the season of spiritual experiences and the diary ended with that

account. But the temple and the community of Saints who had participated in these great events still enjoyed a lingering aura that stayed for months. On April 6 the temple provided the setting for a great jubilee marking the sixth anniversary of the organization of the Church. The spiritual experiences and the warm feelings of gathering in the house of the Lord continued into the summer.

It was in this atmosphere that members of the Quorum of the Twelve left Kirtland on their summer mission. Since their call in 1835, the Apostles had begun a pattern of being at home in the winter, when each took care of farm and family, and spending the summers preaching. When they returned to Kirtland in the fall of 1836, just a few months later, the scene had changed dramatically. Heber C. Kimball's reaction demonstrates what it meant to them to see this shocking change: "We were much grieved . . . on our arrival in Kirtland, to see the spirit of speculation that was prevailing in the Church. Trade and traffic seemed to engross the time and attention of the Saints. . . . Some men, who, when I left, could hardly get food to eat, I found on my arrival to be men of supposed great wealth; in fact everything in the place seemed to be moving in great prosperity, and all seemed to be engaged to become rich." [2]

Warren A. Cowdery, editor of the *Messenger and Advocate*, also commented on the changes. He wrote in the *Messenger and Advocate* a few months later that many of the Saints were "guilty of wild speculation and visionary dreams of wealth and worldly grandeur, as if gold and silver were their gods, and houses, farms and merchandize their only bliss or their passport to it." [3] That was quite a change from the early spring of 1836 when members of the Quorum of the Twelve—Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and others—left. Interestingly, when the Saints had nothing, they felt more comfortable with the idea that Joseph Smith would guide them in their economic development. But when prosperity hit them briefly and they had dreams of gaining prosperity on their own power, and some had actual prospects of doing so, the situation looked very different to many.

The Cowdery Brothers against "Tyranny"

I will use the Cowdery brothers, Warren and Oliver, to demonstrate how this worked. By the middle of 1837,

Warren Cowdery, still writing in the Church's newspaper, was really writing against what Joseph Smith was trying to do. Warren Cowdery argued against allowing religious leaders to cross traditional American boundaries: "If we thus barter away our liberties, we are unworthy of them." [4] In another place he said that ecclesiastical tyranny was tyranny just the same, as if he were accusing Joseph Smith of this. "Whenever a people have unlimited confidence in a civil or ecclesiastical ruler or rulers, who are but men like themselves, and begin to think they can do no wrong, they increase their tyranny, and oppression, establish a principle that man, poor frail lump of mortality like themselves, is infallible. Who does not see a principle of popery?" [5]

Today it is difficult to understand how demeaning that criticism was meant to be. Popery, the Catholic system of priests presiding among the people, was viewed as the opposite of the religious model in America. It was viewed as priestcraft, as privileged religious leaders lording over the people. "Who does not see a principle of popery and religious tyranny involved in such an order of things? Who is worthy the name of a freeman, who thus tamely surrenders, the rights the privileges, and immunities of an independent citizen? . . . Intelligence of the people is the only guarantee against encroachments upon their liberties, whether those encroachments are from the civil or ecclesiastical power." [6]

In 1838, Oliver Cowdery was excommunicated. He was charged, among other things, with virtually denying the faith by declaring that he would not be governed by any ecclesiastical authority nor revelation whatever in his temporal affairs. He was essentially asked, "If your church organization and ecclesiastical leaders offered guidance to help organize your temporal life, would you submit to their guidance?" Oliver Cowdery said he would not. He answered by paraphrasing in writing a central charge against him: "I will not be influenced, governed, or controlled, in my temporal interests by any ecclesiastical authority or pretended revelation whatever, contrary to my own judgment." He said, "Such being still my opinion [I] shall only remark that the three great principles of English liberty, as laid down in the books, are 'the right of personal security, the right of personal liberty, and the right of private property.'" He

continued: “My venerable ancestor was among the little band, who landed on the rocks of Plymouth in 1620. . . . I am wholly unwilling to exchange [his American principles] for anything less liberal, less benevolent, or less free.”[7]

Others agreed that this was a central issue but saw it from a very different perspective. During the height of the 1837 crisis, new convert Mary Fielding expressed the opposite view—that the crisis was not because Joseph Smith or the presidency attempted to exert too much influence but because some leaders and members did not submit enough. She wrote to her sister Mercy, “I know not what the Lord will have to do with his Church before it will submit to be governed by the Head but I fully believe we shall have no prosperity till this is the case.”[8] Wilford Woodruff and Brigham Young, among others, would share Mary’s view, not Oliver’s.

We may be grateful that we are not generally asked to make the same kind of choice that Oliver Cowdery was asked to make in 1837 and 1838 between what he saw as his rights as a free man and his responsibility as a Latter-day Saint. Perhaps this is useful food for thought about where our loyalties would lie if one day we organize around communities of Saints where ecclesiastical leaders will help to organize temporal as well as spiritual affairs, as was the emerging situation in Kirtland in 1837.

Wilford Woodruff’s Views of Unfolding Events

Wilford Woodruff’s diary helps us establish a chronology that sheds light on how events unfolded. We also gain insight from the power of his personal reaction to all of this and from what he conveyed of Joseph Smith’s own experience as he viewed Joseph Smith combating the great vortex of disaffection, dissention, and difficulty. His Kirtland account opens in November 1836 with excitement and optimism. “We soon entered the village [of Kirtland] & I spent one of the happiest days of my life at this time in visiting Kirtland & the House of the Lord & the Presidents & Elders of the Church. I was truly edified to again strike hands with President Joseph Smith Jr. & many other beloved saints of God who are rolling on the mighty work of God & of Israel.”[9] He described how he was filled with joy at do-

ing this and how he had longed to see with his own eyes the house of the Lord. Construction had barely begun when he left, and now finally it was real: “After Spending a short time in Conversing With my friends A more important scene was now to open to my view than Kings ever saw or Princes ever Knew in this generation.”[10] This scene was the temple. He described in his diary his feelings at going inside and seeing the pulpits and the fine workmanship of the interior, at visiting the top story to see the mummies and the Book of Abraham, and then going outside and seeing the printing shop and the bank—the Kirtland Bank, which still was a thing of hope and promise for the Saints.

All of this caused him to ponder the wonderful progress that had occurred in the “two & a half years since I left Kirtland with my Brethren in their Poverty to go fourth and to visit our brethren in tribulation in Zion. Then our Brethren in Kirtland were poor, despised, & even looked upon . . . with Disdain & disgrace.”[11] And now, he said, “How Changed the scene now I behold cheerfulness beaming upon every countenance that indicates Prosperity & the noise of the ax & the hammer & the sight of their walls & dwellings newly erected & their Bank & markets & especially house of God.”[12] He went on to say that the community had been transformed in the thirty months he had been gone. He could not have known, as Heber C. Kimball and his fellow Apostles did that same fall, that except for the completion of the temple, much of this remarkable transformation had occurred in only a few months.

Two days later, Wilford Woodruff had his first experience meeting with the Saints in the house of the Lord, a moving, wondrous experience that he described in some detail. Elders Parley P. Pratt and Orson Pratt of the Quorum of the Twelve were seated in the pulpits, but so was Warren Parrish, the scribe for Joseph Smith’s Kirtland journal and Wilford’s close friend with whom he was lodging. “I truly felt to thank God that his promises had been verified unto me by giving me a seat & a name within his house.”[13] He also wrote about Joseph Smith addressing the Saints and how marvelous everything was.

That was in late November 1836. Two weeks later, on another Sunday, the tone of Wilford’s account had

changed. He now knew that not all was well in Zion. “I went up to the house of God to worship & O what a meeting. May it be Printed upon my heart as a memorial forever. For on this day the God of Israel Sharply reprov’d this stake of Zion (Kirtland) through the Prophets & Apostles for all our sins & backslidings & also a timely warning that we may escape the Judgments of God that otherwise will fall upon us.”[14] Wilford did not mention what the failings were, but he did record that Joseph Smith and other Church leaders pointedly chastised the Saints and warned them to repent and mend their ways or face the consequences.

It was Wilford Woodruff’s habit, as a year ended, to write a summary of his year: whom he baptized, what blessings he had given, how many miles he had walked, how many times he had preached. To this he might add an assessment. This year he wrote: “1836 is gone. It cannot be recalled. . . . The endowment of the Latter Day Saints hath b[e]spake a God in Israel, & is sufficient to show that though the heavens & earth pass away the word of God spake through the Prophets must all be fulfilled.”[15] As he began 1837, he wrote of the things he hoped for the year, especially that by the end of the year he could say that great things had happened in Kirtland and in the Kingdom. Unfortunately, what 1837 had in store was not happy for the Saints or for Joseph Smith.

January and February 1837: A Warning and a Mutiny

The year started out well for Wilford Woodruff. On January 3 he was made a member of the first Quorum of the Seventy. On his first missions he had been a priest, on later missions an elder, and now he became a member of the Seventy, organized about the time he left Kirtland in 1835. His return to Kirtland also gave him the opportunity to attend the high school as well as prayer meetings and other worship services in the Kirtland Temple and listen to Joseph Smith and others talk optimistically about the Kirtland Safety Society. All this he appreciated and enjoyed. But despite a very hopeful beginning, by January 10 Wilford’s diary took on a much more somber tone, and by the end of January, there was nothing but difficulty on the horizon.

On Tuesday, January 10, Woodruff wrote, “I met in the House of the Lord with the quorum of the Seventies. . . . We had a spiritual meeting. Elder Brigham Young one of the twelve gave us an interesting exhortation & warned us not to murmur against Moses (or) Joseph or the heads of the Church.”[16] Very early, Brigham Young used this terminology for Joseph Smith. Joseph was the Moses whom the Lord had given them. If the Saints wanted a Moses at the head, then Joseph was that man. If they, like Brigham Young and Wilford Woodruff, wanted him to do what Moses did, then they were going to be fine with what Joseph Smith was trying to do. But for Church members like Oliver Cowdery who wanted to be Americans first and Saints second, then there was a problem. This undercurrent of murmuring emerged early in the year while there was still a feeling of prosperity. Before the bank failed, before the severe economic downturn, the murmuring had already begun.

On Sunday, January 15, Woodruff “attended a meeting in the House of the Lord. President Rigdon preached in the Spirit & exhorted the Church to union that they might be prepared to meet every trial & difficulty that awates them.”[17] There was an impending sense that something bad was coming—that they needed to be united or they would be destroyed as a people. On the seventeenth, Wilford “met at Candle light with the quorums of the Seventies & was favored with a lecture—a rebuke, not instructions—from President David Whitmer.”[18] David Whitmer, president of the Church in Missouri, had not yet left Kirtland following the temple experiences he had come to participate in. “He warned us to humble ourselves before God lest his hand rest upon us in anger for our pride & many sins that we were runing into in our days of prosperity as the ancient Nephites did & it does now appear evident that a scourge awates this stake of Zion even Kirtland if their is not great repentance immediately.” Woodruff concluded that “almost every Countenance” of the heads of the Church indicated their agreement and approval of this point of view. “May the Lord in mercy enable us to Meet every event with resignation,” he wrote.[19]

Though the Saints held more meetings in the temple, the sense of foreboding was not dispelled. By Jan-

uary 29, “the latter part of the day was spent in communion & addresses from Presidents O Cowdery & J Smith Jr. JOSEPH blessed us in the name of the Lord & Said if we would be faithful we should rise above our imbarressments & be delivered from the hands of our enemies.” The inverse, of course, was that if they were not faithful, they would not escape impending difficulties. On January 31, they “herd an address from President’s J. Smith jr and S Rigdon on the temporal business of the Church.”[20] The brethren were still hoping to have a great blessing out of the bank, hoping to get out of their financial troubles, and still saying that in unity they could and would get through this.

Despite these concerns, things were going along well enough at this point that Joseph Smith decided that he could leave on business. His business probably had to do with the Bank of Monroe, a chartered bank in Michigan that the Church had purchased to help support their unchartered bank in Ohio. He had been gone less than three weeks when on Sunday, February 19, he returned and addressed the Saints. Wilford Woodruff did not detail what had occurred to lead Joseph Smith to rise up “in the power of God” to defend himself and denounce those who betrayed him, but we know from reminiscences what happened. While Joseph Smith was gone, dissenters who did not accept the direction the Church was going tried to depose Joseph Smith and place David Whitmer in his stead.

In his diary entry for February 19, Woodruff wrote: “I beheld President JOSEPH SMITH Jr. arise in the stand & for several hours addressed the Saints in the power of God. Joseph had been absent from Kirtland on business for the Church, though not half as long as Moses was in the mount, & many were stir’d up in their hearts & some were against him as the Israelites were against Moses. But when he arose in the power of God in their midst, as Moses did anciently, they were put to silence for the complainers saw that he stood in the power of a Prophet”[21] in defense of himself. A week later on Sunday, Joseph Smith again addressed the congregation of the Saints “in the power and spirit of God.” The problems continued, and he continued to stand forward and defend the point of view of the presidency of the Church, trying to help his people become a community, a people of God.

April and May 1837 Friends and Enemies

Following the problems of winter, tensions within the Church at Kirtland eased for a time, and by April the Saints briefly enjoyed better times. On the anniversary of the Kirtland Temple dedication, they had a number of affirming temple experiences. Joseph presided over another solemn assembly for the elders who had been abroad so that they could receive their endowments of power, and Woodruff and other Kirtland residents enjoyed other great experiences as well. Woodruff’s diary contains a moving account of his feelings as he saw Joseph Smith and, for a time at least, the Saints united in these temple experiences. He gloried in what he saw and heard “out of the heart & mouth of the prophet JOSEPH whose Soul like Enochs swell’d wide as eternity. I say such evidences presented in such a forcible manner ought to drive into oblivion every particle of unbelief & dubiety from the minds of the hearers.”[22] The plans that Joseph Smith was unfolding did not resonate with all the Saints, however. Some began to distance themselves from his purposes.

On April 9 there was a powerful but also painful set of meetings regarding the ailing bank. With economic problems looming, President Rigdon addressed the Saints and told them to be united and they would get through this yet. “Sidney Closed and Joseph arose & like the lion of the tribe of JUDAH poured out his Soul in the midst of the Congregation of the Saints. . . . Yea in the name of God he proclaimed that Severe Judgment awaited those Characters that had professed to be his friends . . . But had turned tritors & opposed the Currency [of the the bank] & its friends which has given power into the hands of the enemy. . . . Joseph uttered the feelings of his Soul in pain while viewing the poverty & afflictions of . . . the Saints in Kirtland.”[23]

As a single young man, Wilford Woodruff had served many missions; now he planned to settle down with the love of his life, Phoebe Carter, and Joseph Smith agreed to perform their marriage ceremony. But when the appointed day came, Joseph had left Kirtland, fearing for his life because of threats from dissenters and enemies outside of the Church. The marriage, however, proceeded in Joseph Smith’s home as planned, but

Joseph Smith's friend and counselor Frederick G. Williams performed the marriage. Woodruff wrote, "There is not a greater man than Joseph standing in this generation. The gentiles look upon him & he is to them like bed of Gold concealed from human view. They know not his principle, his spirit, his wisdom, virtue, philanthropy, nor his calling. His mind like Enoch's swells wide as eternity. Nothing short of a God can comprehend his Soul." [24]

We will close this section with one more excerpt from Wilford Woodruff's life—an experience so difficult for him that he could not even write down the details. This occurred on May 28 in the house of the Lord.

Sunday I repaired to the House of the Lord to worship the GOD of Israel with the Congregation of the Saints. . . .

The same spirits of murmuring, complaining, & of mutiny, that I spake of in Feb. 19th in this journal, hath not slept from that day to the present. . . . Untill many & some in high places had risen up against Joseph the servant whom God had raised up to lead Israel. And they were striving to overthrow his influence & cast him down untill Joseph was grieved in spirit to stand in such perils among fals brethren.

But notwithstanding this thick cloud of darkness standing over Kirtland Joseph being unmoved in the cause entered the Congregation of the Saints arose in the stand & spake to the people in the name of the Lord in his own defence. The Lord was with him by his power & spirit to the Convincing of the honest that he would stand & his enemies fall.

Sidney followed him . . . but; Alas, one arose, once a friend, (not now) in the blackness of his face & corruption of his heart stretched out his puny arm and proclaimed against Joseph. Joseph acted wisely while all saw the spirit of his foe. [25]

The one who raised his arm against Joseph was Joseph's scribe Warren Parrish, one of Woodruff's friends. Woodruff was so beside himself with pain that he could not even write details of the experience. He said simply, "Let memory speak upon this subject. . . . The Presidents withdrew. The council closed without transacting business." [26]

Gratefully, Mary Fielding attended that same meet-

ing. Although Woodruff could not bring himself to write about it, Mary did. Parrish openly denounced Joseph Smith, and not content with this, he also pronounced a curse upon him. He then declared by the God of heaven that this curse would be sealed upon Joseph because of Joseph's wickedness. Not surprisingly, the whole meeting ended in confusion. We can only imagine the feelings of the Saints when two weeks later Joseph fell deathly ill and his life was despaired of. This proved to be a trial of faith for many. Though Mary Fielding made it through what was to come, I am not sure all of us would have.

June 1837

Mission to England and More Trouble at Home

At this very time, Joseph Smith was inspired to do something different for the salvation of the Church. At a meeting in the temple on June 4, he approached Heber C. Kimball and said, in essence: "Brother Kimball, you've got to go to England and fulfill the mission that the Quorum of the Twelve is preparing for. But the quorum is now divided and, despite the difficulties, you must go alone." Elder Kimball was planning on going, but as one of the Twelve, not the leader of the mission. The prospect frightened him; he was uneducated and felt unprepared, believing that he could not do this alone. "Let me at least take Brother Brigham," he asked. "No, I need Brigham here," said Joseph Smith, and indeed as things unfolded during the rest of 1837, he very much needed Brigham Young there. Reluctantly, Heber said that he would do his duty; he would do what the Prophet had asked of him. Just before he was set apart on June 11, Orson Hyde, who had been disaffected for a time, came back and begged for the privilege of going with them. So Heber Kimball, Orson Hyde, Joseph Fielding, and several of the Canadian Saints were sent on this great mission.

Heber Kimball was absolutely the right man for this mission. Within eight months, the missionaries had performed nearly two thousand baptisms and laid the foundation for what the Quorum of the Twelve would do two years later. That later mission would elevate the membership in Great Britain from two thousand to over six thousand. And those British converts, with

their skills, resources, and faith, were the ones who indeed saved the Church. It is hard to imagine the city of Nauvoo or the Nauvoo Temple without their skills, dedication, and numbers. In the midst of the darkness of 1837, Joseph was inspired to send these missionaries, and they had faith enough to do their duty.

Joseph Smith set the missionaries apart on June 11. When they went to see the Prophet on the thirteenth to bid him farewell, he was so sick that he could not raise his head from his pillow to visit with them. By the following day, he was worse and suffering intensely. This story we know largely from the letters of Mary Fielding written to her sister Mercy. Mary reports that “on June 18th, our beloved Brother Joseph appeared to be so far gone that Brother Rigdon told us that he should not wonder, naturally speaking, if he did not live until night.”[27]

According to Mary, Parley Pratt spoke that day in a great meeting in the assembly room of the temple. In his talk, Parley attempted to show how all the Church had departed from the good way. Parley was disaffected from the Church at that time, as was Orson. Unwilling to hear more from dissenters, President Sidney Rigdon dismissed the meeting, but some stayed. The afternoon meeting presented another unforgettable “scene of confusion,” to use Mary Fielding’s language. Both of the Pratt brothers, Warren Parrish, and others of the disaffected were present. President Rigdon, carrying this burden almost alone and “bowed down with the sad condition of the Church and the situation of dear Brother Joseph,” stood before the Church “and in language that is impossible . . . to describe”[28] rehearsed the dissenters’ actions and declared that he would bear no more the public insulting of Joseph. When Rigdon left the building, many of the Saints left with him. Mary herself stayed to hear Oliver Cowdery attempt to justify his position, but when Orson Pratt attempted to do the same, she felt he was so far off track that she left too. As she passed Joseph Smith’s home on her way back to her own dwelling, she wondered if he would live until morning.

That night, according to Mary Fielding, a number of the brethren fasted and prayed for Joseph in the temple. From that time, wrote Mary, to the great relief and joy of

his friends, Joseph began to recover, and she predicted “he shall yet stand in his place and accomplish the work God has given him to do however much many seek his removal.”[29] By Sunday, June 25, Joseph Smith was still too unwell to attend meetings. Warren Parrish arrived at the temple early enough to seat himself in the place usually occupied by the Prophet. Hyrum conducted the meeting. He spoke until tears forced him to his seat. When he took the stand again, “he seemed to be filled with the spirit and power of God” and prophesied “with great energy that from that hour the Church should begin to rise.”[30]

July and August 1837 Relief, Riot, and Reprisal

The next week brought favorable changes. On Sunday, July 2, Joseph Smith attended meetings for the first time in several weeks. With Joseph back among his people, Mary Fielding called the meeting “a quiet comfortable waiting upon God in his House.”[31] President Rigdon prophesied that the kingdom “should never be destroyed, nor be left to other people.”[32] Many who lived in Kirtland said that they had never before seen “such a time of love and refreshing” as they had that day. Mary Fielding, who had not lived in Kirtland long, wrote, “I do assure you Brother Hyrum Smith’s prediction that from that hour the Lord would begin to bless his people has been verily fulfilled. . . . What I felt that day seemed to outweigh all the affliction and distress of mind I have suffered since I came here.”[33]

In the meantime, interesting things were going on among some of the dissenters. Though at the moment he lacked confidence in Joseph Smith, Parley Pratt still wanted to go to England and claimed to have faith in the gospel and in his own calling. He refused to listen to Brigham Young, who urged him to stay in Kirtland and work things through. Instead he took off for Missouri, a nearly nine-hundred-mile trip. On his way there, he met his quorum leaders Thomas B. Marsh and David W. Patten, who were traveling from Missouri to Kirtland. Marsh succeeded where Brigham Young had failed; he convinced Parley to turn around, and they all went back to Kirtland.

Meanwhile, David Patten had his own brief crisis

of faith. Although he had heard all the criticisms of Joseph, he had confidence in Joseph, loved Joseph, and believed in Joseph. Still, Patten wanted to hear both sides of the issue. He determined to hear the worst there was to hear and then see the Prophet. Thomas B. Marsh tried to convince Patten that his proposed approach was backward: he should go see the Prophet first, then talk to the dissenters. Once they arrived at Kirtland, however, Patten visited the dissenters first and got an earful. What he heard got him so worked up that when he went to see the Prophet, according to Brigham Young, “he insulted Joseph,” who kicked him out of the yard, and this experience “done David good” and quickly brought him to his senses.[34] It was later said in Nauvoo that of all the original Quorum of the Twelve, only Brigham Young and Heber Kimball never lifted their heel against Joseph Smith.

By now, things were finally looking more orderly, and Joseph Smith was ready to go on another business trip. He went to visit the Saints in Canada and also sent Brigham Young to conduct business in the East. While they were gone, there was a great row in the temple. Apostle was pitted against Apostle, pistols and knives were brandished, people jumped out of windows, and stovepipes were knocked over—it was a horrible melee with the dissenters, who remained unrepentant. When Joseph Smith Sr., who was conducting the meeting, could not impose order, he called in the police, who expanded the melee. At the end of the day, nobody had been killed, but many blows had been struck, and a horrible scene had transpired in the House of the Lord. Reminiscences preserve memories of the awful scene, but without the resulting lawsuit, it may have been impossible to date the event. Dissenters who had been arrested by the police filed a lawsuit for false arrest, resulting in Joseph Smith Sr., William Smith, and others being hauled into court to defend the arrests. They were acquitted, but, as one can imagine, the ruling did not help heal feelings among the apostates.

When Joseph returned in late August, he was of course appalled at what had happened. At this point he apparently came to the conclusion that the faithful Saints could no longer tolerate the dissenters’ actions, nor could he. But why did the Prophet tolerate it this

long? How could Warren Parrish still get into the temple, after all he had done, and sit in Joseph’s own seat? Why were wayward leaders still part of the congregation? Joseph never said why, but it appears that he felt that patience was a virtue and that until this point it was not time to move against his critics. The time had now come to cut the apostates off from the Church and have a fresh start with those that were willing to support him. Had he done it earlier, he might have lost Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, or Orson Hyde. Gratefully, Joseph was willing to tolerate this spring and summer of rebellion, mutiny, and pain before finally acting definitively. A number of repentant leaders who came back stayed with him and helped lead the Church throughout the nineteenth century.

September through December 1837 Restoring Order and Leaving Kirtland

In September Joseph decided to convene a major conference in order to confront those still in rebellion and cut them off. Dissent had been widespread enough that some must have wondered how such a meeting would turn out. Brigham Young, for one, was not going to take any chances. He had defended Joseph Smith throughout the summer against the apostates, he had defended the Prophet’s life against anti-Mormon threats, and now he was going to pack the house with the faithful so they could voice their support for the Prophet and his decisions. Brigham Young later described how, early in the morning, he gathered supporters so that when the meeting opened at 9:00 a.m. on September 3, the faithful were front and center as the apostates and wavering members were called to account. Several were repentant, while others tried to give excuses or justification. John F. Boynton of the Quorum of the Twelve is perhaps the best example of this. He was not sustained, but he was allowed time to try and give satisfaction. He came back a few days later with a more humble and complete apology and was allowed to remain in his position a while longer, until he again went off the rails. Overall, the conference resulted in a much-needed housecleaning, and finally the leadership could once again be united and prepare for the things that were ahead.

But the task was not yet finished. The Saints in Missouri also needed to sustain the changes in Church leadership, and the dissenters living there also needed to be called to account. So later in September, Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and a few other leaders traveled to Missouri to hold another conference. In this Missouri conference, Hyrum was sustained as a member of the First Presidency in place of Frederick G. Williams. Hyrum Smith served in the Presidency from that point forward, although Frederick G. Williams later returned to the Church and died a faithful Latter-day Saint.

While he and Joseph were in Missouri, Hyrum's wife, Jerusha Barden Smith, became ill and died during childbirth. Hyrum's brothers Don Carlos and Samuel wrote him a heartwrenching letter declaring that despite "all our diligence of care and our prayers [she] did not prevail" and "Jerusha has gone from a world of trouble and affliction and toil . . . to rest until the morning of the resurrection." Of course they would care for his children until his return.[35] When the letter reached him, Hyrum left immediately for home. Now that Hyrum was in the First Presidency, Joseph needed him more than ever, and bereaved Hyrum did not know how to take care of his family, let alone how to help Joseph lead the Church. According to family tradition, Joseph said to Hyrum, "Take Mary Fielding as your wife," and once she agreed, he did.[36]

Mary's story is interesting. She had had opportunities to be married but had elected not to. A surviving letter indicates that she declined one suitor because she did not want to be a stepmother, something her own mother had warned her against. In Hyrum's case, despite her general preference, Mary felt it was the will of the Lord and accepted the proposal. Mary came to love Hyrum and the children, but, as she had understood, being a stepmother meant certain inescapable and difficult realities. In a fall 1842 letter to Hyrum, who was traveling on Church business, Mary conveyed to him the continuing challenge inherent in being a stepmother to his children (who occasionally stung her feelings by insisting she was only a stepmother) by signing the letter as "your faithful Companion and Friend but unhappy StepMother M. Smith." [37] Thanks to the new arrangement, at the end of 1837 the Hyrum Smith family

again had a wife and mother, and the family was ready to go forward the best it could.

After a period of relative calm, by late fall dissent erupted again in Kirtland, this time violently. Apostates had set up another organization and were ridiculing the faithful Saints who still followed Joseph, whom they called the Lick-Skillets. Finally Church leaders cut off nearly thirty people, but even that did not end the Church's problems. The apostates were angry, the anti-Mormons were coming after Joseph, the bank had failed, and the economy was in crisis. Emotions ran high, and many lives were threatened—none more so than Brigham Young's. During an entire year of boldly defending Joseph, Brigham had angered many people and feared for his life. Though his ailing wife Mary Ann was about to give birth to twins, he fled to Missouri on December 22, leaving his wife and family to follow later. When they did, the Youngs settled not in Far West with the largest body of the Saints but on a quiet farm some miles away. This was because Joseph counseled Brigham to settle his family there so he could nurse his wife back to health; this counsel was ratified by revelation on April 17, 1838.[38] So it was that when the crisis came in late 1838, Brigham Young was not among those arrested, and he was able to step forward and lead when Joseph and other leaders were imprisoned in Liberty.

Back in Kirtland, meanwhile, Joseph and Sidney Rigdon had received a revelation which confirmed that their labors were "finished in this place for a season" and instructed them to leave with their families for Missouri "as soon as it is practicable." [39] They had already been planning to leave for Missouri when circumstances permitted, but there had not yet come a time when they could all depart. An earlier revelation had indicated that Kirtland would be a place of safety and refuge, "a strong hold," but for only five years (see Doctrine and Covenants 64:21–22). Those five years had passed, and on January 12, 1838, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon departed for Missouri. Their families soon caught up with them, and together they made a winter migration—nearly nine hundred miles overland—to get their families and themselves safely to Missouri, where they arrived on March 13.

Conclusion

That, then, is the story of Joseph Smith's 1837. It was a year he would never want to repeat, but a year that had held great lessons and great beginnings, especially in Britain, that would bless the Church for years to come. In Missouri the Prophet hoped to continue the progress of the Church and advance projects that could not be completed in 1837. In 1836 Joseph Smith's diary had ended, as I mentioned before, with section 110 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Elijah had brought the sealing keys and now, at the beginning of 1838, Joseph was separated from the only temple where he could use them. With little prospect of returning to Kirtland, Joseph moved on, ready to build another temple in another place. Not surprisingly, a temple site was designated at Far West just a month after his arrival, but he could not fulfill the promises of 1836 and 1837 until Nauvoo, when he would have both the keys and a temple and could pass on the blessings of the temple to the Saints.

I have learned a great deal studying Joseph Smith's life in 1836–38. The story ranges from the highs of the temple to the lows of apostasy and open rebellion, the military confrontation of the Mormon war, and the imprisonment of Joseph Smith for six months, mostly in Liberty Jail. At the end of that period, Joseph Smith emerged as a man who was prepared to face new challenges and succeed, who had learned, who had become stronger in the right ways for the calling and responsibility of finishing his work in Nauvoo. Nauvoo would have been very different had Joseph not gone through what he did during those difficult years of 1837 and 1838. Those were difficult in the most dramatic way, but they made him who he was.

Just one example that helps illustrate this change: On December 16, 1838, Joseph wrote an angry letter from prison about his enemies, about what the Saints had gone through, about their pain and suffering, and about all their difficulties. Indeed, the Saints had suffered, and the circumstances they were in merited an angry letter. Three months later, his epistle to the Church from Liberty Jail, parts of which became Doctrine and Covenants 121, 122, and 123, breathed a different spirit. And when Joseph emerged from Liberty Jail, he published in Commerce, before it became Nauvoo, what he called

“an extract from the private journal of Joseph Smith.” He composed this document to record his sufferings in Missouri, but compared to his December 16 letter, its tone was tempered rather than angry. He had mellowed; he had come to understand that his trials were part of the lot of mortality, and he had renewed confidence that he and the Saints could make it through their difficulties and come out the better for it.

I am grateful that Joseph Smith had the calling, the vision, the fortitude, and the Spirit of God within him to accomplish the things he did even in those dark times of late Kirtland in 1837 and the Missouri difficulties of 1838, and that he emerged from these difficulties with the steel and vision to finish his mission in Nauvoo.

Notes

- 1 For a more detailed account of many of these events and for access to the original sources supporting this retelling, see Ronald K. Esplin, *The Emergence of Brigham Young and the Twelve to Mormon Leadership, 1830–1841*, Dissertations in Latter-day Saint History series (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2006); chapters 5–8. Citations to many of the sources used in this article are to the most widely accessible version.
- 2 Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Kimball Family, 1888), 111.
- 3 Warren A. Cowdery, *Messenger and Advocate*, May 1837, 509.
- 4 Warren A. Cowdery, *Messenger and Advocate*, July 1837, 538.
- 5 Cowdery, *Messenger and Advocate*, July 1837, 538.
- 6 Cowdery, *Messenger and Advocate*, July 1837, 538.
- 7 Oliver Cowdery to Edward Partridge, Far West, Missouri, April 12, 1838, in 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), 3:18.
- 8 Mary Fielding to Mercy Fielding, June 15, 1837, Church History Library, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Salt Lake City.
- 9 Wilford Woodruff's Journal: 1833–1878, Typescript, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 1:106–7.
- 10 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:107.

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

1837

- 11 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:107–8.
- 12 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:108.
- 13 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:109.
- 14 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:111.
- 15 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:115.
- 16 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:121.
- 17 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:121.
- 18 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:122.
- 19 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:122.
- 20 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:124.
- 21 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:125.
- 22 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:133–34.
- 23 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:138.
- 24 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:139.
- 25 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:147–48.
- 26 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1:148.
- 27 Mary Fielding to Mercy Fielding, ca. June 15, 1837, Church History Library.
- 28 Mary Fielding to Mercy Fielding, ca. June 15, 1837.
- 29 Mary Fielding to Mercy Fielding, ca. June 15, 1837.
- 30 Mary Fielding to Mercy Fielding, ca. June 15, 1837.
- 31 Mary Fielding to Mercy Fielding, July 8, 1837, Church History Library.
- 32 Mary Fielding to Mercy Fielding, July 8, 1837.
- 33 Mary Fielding, 1837 Letters, Church History Library, 60–61.
- 34 Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 5:63.
- 35 Samuel H. Smith to Hyrum Smith with Don Carlos Smith postscript, October 13, 1837, Church History Library.
- 36 Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Life of Joseph F. Smith: Sixth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 120.
- 37 Mary Fielding Smith to Hyrum Smith, September 14, 1842, Church History Library.
- 38 Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 257–58; see also *History of the Church*, 3:23.
- 39 Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journals, Volume 1*, 283–84.