

## Remembering the Martyrdom

D&C 135

by Jeffrey Mahas

When Joseph and Hyrum Smith left for a jail in Carthage, Illinois, to wait for a legal hearing, few suspected the two were leaving their homes for the last time. Joseph had faced imprisonment, mob violence, and death threats before, and he had always returned to lead the Saints forward. Hyrum, too, had endured periods of persecution with the Saints and had always emerged ready to rebuild and press forward.

But in the late afternoon of June 27, 1844, a lynch mob stormed Carthage Jail and murdered them both.

News of the violent deaths of the two brothers shocked the Saints in Nauvoo. In one day, they had lost their prophet and their patriarch. For many, Joseph and Hyrum were also friends and role models, men who had helped and blessed them in times of need. In the days, weeks, and months following the martyrdom, the Saints grappled with how to describe their reactions to the deaths.<sup>1</sup> Their letters, journals, and public writings stand alongside printed tributes to Joseph and Hyrum, such as the one now canonized in Doctrine and Covenants 135, as witnesses to the mission of the two men who served so faithfully and then sealed their testimony with their blood.

### Letters

Many Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo had friends and family members who were far away from the city at the time of the martyrdom. They were left with the difficult task of breaking the news to their loved ones.

“I shall not attempt to describe the scene that we have passed through,” Vilate Kimball wrote to her husband, Heber, who was in the eastern United States promoting Joseph’s presidential campaign. “God forbid that I should ever witness another like unto it. . . . Every heart is filled with sorrow, and the very streets of Nauvoo seem to mourn.” Like many, she also expressed concern about the threat of continuing violence against the Saints. “Where it will end,” she warned Heber, “the Lord only knows.”<sup>2</sup>

Almira Mack Covey, a cousin to the Smith brothers, wrote to her family about watching the bodies of Joseph and Hyrum return to Nauvoo. “You can judge what were our feelings better than I can tell them,” she wrote, “but this much I can say that a dry eye I did not



Hyrum & Joseph Smith

behold that day among that large assembly of people. It was enough to rend the heart of a stone to behold two Prophets of the Lord laid prost[r]ate.”<sup>3</sup>

Sarah M. Kimball, who had played a key role in the founding of the Relief Society, was also among those who saw the bodies returned to the city. “The scene of the reception of those corpses in nauvoo can be better imagined than described,” she wrote to a friend, “for pen was never made competent to do it justice.” Though it would have been impossible to capture the grief of the whole city, Kimball did try to describe the grief of one woman: the day after the murders, she had gone to sit with Lucy Mack Smith. Sarah Kimball remembered holding Lucy Mack Smith’s trembling hand and hearing her question between sobs, “How could they kill my poor boys, O how could they kill them when they were so precious?”<sup>4</sup>

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Joseph Smith, Jr.

Hyrum Smith

### Journals

Other writers tried to record details about the martyrdom and their responses to it by writing reflective entries in their journals. Rather than focusing on the moment and on immediate worries, as letters often did, journal entries often tried to sift out valuable details for future generations and to make spiritual sense of the tragedy. In seeking an explanation or precedent for the loss of their leaders, the Saints often turned to the Bible. Many compared the murders to biblical events, from the killing of Abel to the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. They often identified Joseph and Hyrum as among the many martyrs “that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held” mentioned in the book of Revelation. Accordingly, they believed that the two brothers were now numbered among those pleading to heaven, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”<sup>5</sup>

The events at Carthage led Joseph Fielding to fill several pages of his journal with commentary on the life, mission, and death of Joseph Smith. Fielding wrote that the arrival of the two martyrs’ bodies “was the most

solemn Sight that my Eyes ever beheld.” While he “had often re[a]d of the Martyrs of old,” Fielding wrote that he was now himself a witness for “2 of the greatest of Men who sealed the Truth which they had held and taught with their Blood.” In the end, he believed, Joseph and Hyrum would be justly “ranked with the Martyrs of Jesus Christ.”

In addition to looking to the martyrs of the past for understanding, Fielding had an eye to the future of the Lord’s work. “Joseph and Hiram had done all that they could have done,” he wrote, “and the Foundation of the great Work of the last Days was laid.” Building on that foundation, Fielding was sure, the work Joseph and Hyrum had lived and died for “could be finished by the 12 Appostles who had been instructed in all things pertaining to the Kingdom of God on the Earth.”<sup>6</sup>

Zina Huntington Jacobs, who had been sealed to Joseph Smith as a plural wife, recorded her shock upon seeing “the lifeless speechless Bod[i]es of the [two] Marters,” noting that “little did my heart ever think that mine eyes should witness this awful seen.”<sup>7</sup> In her journal, Jacobs counted the cost of the martyrdom for the men’s families, the community, and humanity as well as

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for the Church, describing Joseph and Hyrum not only as “the Prophet and Patrarch of the Church of the Latter day Saints,” but also as “kind husbands,” “affectionate Father[s],” “venerable statesman,” and “Friends of man kinde.”

For Jacobs, the murders of Joseph and Hyrum were evidence of the wickedness of the world. In her journal, she prayed that God would acknowledge “the innozent blood that has be[e]n shed” and asked “how long must widows mourn and orphans cry before thou wilt avenge the Earth and cause wick[ed]ness to seace”?<sup>8</sup> On July 4, about a week after the martyrdom, Jacobs noted that it was Independence Day for the United States, and she contrasted the promise of American freedom and justice with the brutal murder of the two brothers. “The once noble banner of liberty is fallen,” she wrote. “The bo[a]sted land of fre[e]dom is now sta[i]ned with innocent blood.”<sup>9</sup>

William Clayton, a British immigrant and one of Joseph Smith’s clerks, wrote in his journal a meticulous account of how Joseph and Hyrum had been killed, an account pieced together from interviews with Willard Richards, John Taylor, and others who had been present. After reviewing the evidence, Clayton placed much of the blame for the murders with government officials, including Illinois governor Thomas Ford. “He had pledged his faith and the faith of the State that they should be protected from all harm,” Clayton noted. And yet the militia that was supposed to protect Joseph and Hyrum had cooperated with the mob. Like Zina Jacobs, Clayton saw a broad contrast between American ideals of religious liberty and the reality the Saints were experiencing. “Liberty is fled,” he wrote. He coolly added that there was “no public celebration in Nauvoo” on July 4.<sup>10</sup> With his faith in the nation shattered, Clayton turned to God. “We look to thee for justice,”<sup>11</sup> he wrote.

### Poetry

Some Latter-day Saints shared their reactions by publishing poetry in the *Times and Seasons*, a newspaper run by the Church. The authors included accomplished poets such as Eliza R. Snow, William W. Phelps, John Taylor, and Parley P. Pratt as well as anonymous Latter-day Saints.<sup>12</sup> Different writers focused on different emotions. William W. Phelps’s “Praise to the Man”



### Last Ride

Nauvoo Temple, Illinois

reflected on the legacy Joseph had left and looked forward to his work on the other side of the veil. John Taylor’s “O Give Me Back My Prophet Dear” spoke with longing about the loss of two beloved leaders. These and some other poems were published as lyrics with suggested popular melodies. A few were later included in Latter-day Saint hymnals and continue to be sung today.<sup>13</sup>

Many of the poems mixed grief and outrage over the murders with reference to past martyrs, even Jesus Christ. In her poem published in the July 1, 1844, edition of the *Times and Seasons*, which announced the murder, Eliza R. Snow wrote:

*Now Zion mourns—she mourns an earthly head:  
The Prophet and the Patriarch are dead!  
The blackest deed that men or devils know  
Since Calv’ry’s scene, has laid the brothers low!  
One in their life, and one in death—they prov’d  
How strong their friendship—how they truly lov’d:  
True to their mission, until death, they stood,  
Then seal’d their testimony with their blood.*<sup>14</sup>

### Editorials

As many of the Saints crafted and shared their personal responses to the tragedy in letters, journals, and poems, Church leaders and representatives felt an ob-

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ligation to report and comment on the deaths in editorials, seeking in doing so to provide news and comfort to Latter-day Saints everywhere. On July 1, Apostles Willard Richards and John Taylor, who had been with the brothers in Carthage Jail when the mob attacked, attached their names to a notice in the *Times and Seasons* by newspaper editor William W. Phelps. Their editorial urged Latter-day Saints to “hold fast to the faith that has been delivered to them in the last days” and placed Joseph and Hyrum within a long line of biblical martyrs. The three men reminded the Latter-day Saints that “the murder of Abel; the assassination of hundreds; the righteous blood of all the holy prophets, from Abel to Joseph, sprinkled with the best blood of the Son of God, as the crimson sign of remission, only carries conviction to the business and bosoms of all flesh, that the cause is just and will continue; and blessed are they that hold out faithful to the end.”<sup>15</sup>

In the next edition of the *Times and Seasons*, Phelps published a longer editorial about the murders that included a report of Joseph’s words as he left for Carthage. “I am going like a lamb to the slaughter,” the Prophet had said, “but I am calm as a summer’s morning: I have a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward all men: I shall die innocent.” Phelps also reported that “Joseph’s last exclamation was ‘O Lord my God!’”<sup>16</sup> Around the same time that Phelps published his editorial, Willard Richards wrote his own detailed account of the murders, which included for the first time the report of the last words of Hyrum: “I’m a dead man.” Richards’s account was published on July 24, 1844, in Nauvoo’s local newspaper.<sup>17</sup>

### The Doctrine and Covenants

While many outside observers expected the Church to collapse following the murders of Joseph and Hyrum, the work of the Church continued despite their deaths. During the last two years of Joseph’s life, Church leaders had been working on a new edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*. Just prior to the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum, they had announced an expected publication date for mid-July of 1844.<sup>18</sup>

The publication was only slightly delayed by the unrest preceding and following the events at Carthage Jail. Soon after the martyrdom, the decision was made to



**Brothers Together In Eternity  
Carthage Jail, Illinois**

go ahead with the printing but to add a final section to “close” the book with a statement regarding the deaths. The statement was likely written in July or August, as the volume was published and in use by September.<sup>19</sup> This statement, titled “Martyrdom of Joseph Smith and Hyrum Smith,” has been canonized as *Doctrine and Covenants 135*.

Since at least the early 20th century, commentators

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and Church leaders had assumed that the statement was written by John Taylor, an Apostle and the head of the printing office.<sup>20</sup> The section was never attributed to Taylor during his lifetime, however, and it may have been the work of Taylor, Richards, Phelps, or another regular contributor in the Nauvoo printing office. Regardless of authorship, the statement drew heavily on the eyewitness testimonies of Taylor and Richards and quoted from earlier newspaper editorials and notices published by the Church that they had helped write. Like those earlier published accounts, this statement echoed themes of martyrdom, innocence, and divine judgment—themes that likewise appeared in the private writings of Latter-day Saints.

Because the printers had to fit the statement into an already typeset (though not yet printed) volume, the section was printed in significantly smaller font than the rest of the volume and fit into the page and a half of blank space between the previous section and the index. As a result of its placement in the Doctrine and Covenants, this statement was widely read and quoted and has become the official epitaph for Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum.

### Footnotes

1. See Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 287–98.
2. Vilate M. Kimball letter to Heber C. Kimball, June 30, 1844, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
3. Almira M. Covey letter to Harriet Mack Whittemore, July 18, 1844, Harriet Mack Whittemore Correspondence, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; capitalization modernized.
4. Sarah M. Kimball letter to Sarepta Heywood, circa 1844, Joseph L. Heywood Letters, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; punctuation modernized.
5. Revelation 6:9–10.
6. Joseph Fielding journal, December 1843–March 1859, 47–51, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
7. Zina D. H. Young diaries, June 28, 1844, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
8. Zina D. H. Young diaries, June 26, 1844.
9. Zina D. H. Young diaries, July 4, 1844.
10. William Clayton journal, July 4, 1844, quoted in James B. Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear: The Story of William Clayton* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 149.
11. William Clayton journal, June 28, 1844, quoted in Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear*, 137.
12. See Davis Bitton, “The Martyrdom of Joseph Smith in Early Mormon Writings,” in Roger D. Launius and John E. Hallwas, eds., *Kingdom on the Mississippi Revisited: Nauvoo in Mormon History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 181–97; see also Benjamin E. Park, “‘We Announce the Martyrdom’: The Murder of Joseph Smith as Portrayed in Times and Seasons Poetry,” *Selections from the Religious Education Student Symposium 2008* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2008), 34–47.
13. “Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons*, vol. 5, no. 14 (Aug. 1, 1844), 607; John Taylor, “The Seer,” *Times and Seasons*, vol. 5, no. 24 (Jan. 1, 1845), 775; “Poetry,” *Times and Seasons*, vol. 6, no. 14 (Aug. 1, 1845), 991; *Sacred Hymns and Spiritual Songs for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 19th ed. (Liverpool, England: George Teasdale, 1889), 89, 278, 314.
14. Eliza R. Snow, “The Assassination of Gen’ls Joseph Smith and Hyrum Smith,” *Times and Seasons*, vol. 5, no. 12 (July 1, 1844), 575.
15. W. W. Phelps, Willard Richards, and John Taylor, “To The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,” *Times and Seasons*, vol. 5, no. 12 (July 1, 1844), 568.
16. “The Murder,” *Times and Seasons*, vol. 5, no. 13 (July 15, 1844), 585.
17. Willard Richards, “Two Minutes in Jail,” *Nauvoo Neighbor*, July 24, 1844, 3.
18. See “Book of Doctrine and Covenants,” *Times and Seasons*, vol. 3, no. 5 (Jan. 1, 1842), 639; see also “Notice,” June 11, 1844, in *Nauvoo Neighbor*, vol. 2, no. 9 (June 26, 1844), 4.
19. Peter Crawley, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Mormon Church, Volume One 1830–1847* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1997), 279.
20. See Robert J. Woodford, “The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants, Volume I” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 1794.