

## William Clayton

### “Our Hearts Rejoiced to Hear Him Speak”

D&C 129, 130, 131

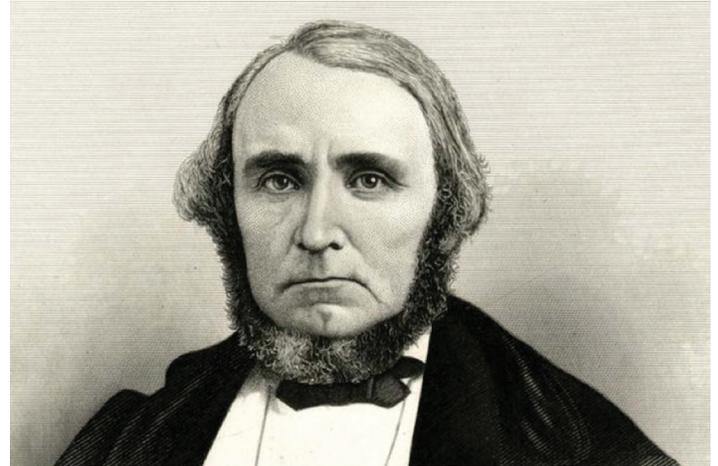
by Matthew McBride

William Clayton walked the last nine miles to Nauvoo. The boat he and his company had taken down the Mississippi toward their new home had stopped short of Nauvoo for the night. But after an 11-week, 5,000-mile journey from his home in Penwortham, England, William could wait no longer. He and a few friends trudged through the wintry early morning and arrived on foot just before noon, November 24, 1840. A convert of three years, William had testified of Joseph Smith’s prophetic call in his homeland. Now he was eager to meet the Prophet in person.

He soon met Joseph Smith and shared some of his early impressions in letters to his friends back in England. “Last night many of us were in company with Brother Joseph, [and] our hearts rejoiced to hear him speak of the things of the Kingdom,” he wrote. “If I had come from England purposely to converse with him a few days I should have considered myself well paid for my trouble,” he wrote on another occasion.<sup>1</sup>

William set about to make a life and a home for himself and his wife Ruth, who was expecting their second child at the time they arrived. The Claytons’ first year in their new home proved difficult, however. They purchased land on the west side of the Mississippi River, opposite Nauvoo, where they attempted to make a living as farmers. William had been a factory bookkeeper in an industrial English town and had neither the skill nor the physical makeup of a farmer. His efforts were soon toppled by a crop failure and a long bout with malaria.

Brought low by this turn of events, William took the advice of the missionary who had converted him, Heber C. Kimball, and moved his family back across the river to Nauvoo in December 1841. William’s former fellow counselor in the British Mission presidency, Willard Richards, was serving as Joseph Smith’s secretary and needed an assistant he could trust. Heber soon came to William asking him to report to Joseph Smith’s office. There, on February 9, 1842, William agreed to become a secretary and scribe to the Prophet.



**William Clayton**  
**Secretary and Scribe**

Over the next two and a half years, William Clayton had a closer view of Joseph Smith’s personal and public life than almost anyone. He was with Joseph almost every day and was deeply involved in Joseph’s business, political, and religious affairs. Their friendship gave William a unique opportunity to assess Joseph’s character up close, including his faults. He knew as well as anyone that Joseph was just a man, but for William, Joseph’s shortcomings were unimportant when weighed against the soul-expanding teachings the Lord delivered through His prophet. Through their association in Nauvoo, William became a stubborn lifelong defender of Joseph Smith.

In his work as secretary, William Clayton recorded the most significant revelations, teachings, and sermons given by Joseph Smith during the eventful final two years of the Prophet’s life. He recorded Joseph’s instructions on baptisms for the dead and the revelation on eternal and plural marriage, both of which later became part of the Latter-day Saint scriptures. He was also one of the scribes who kept an account of Joseph’s most well-known sermon, the King Follett discourse. He valued these teachings beyond price and seemed to sense the importance of preserving them.

Joseph Smith felt a growing urgency to communicate spiritual knowledge to the Saints. During his time in Nauvoo he gave one powerful public sermon after another and shared equally powerful teachings and or-

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dinances in private councils with his trusted friends. Joseph Smith did not deliver these teachings as formal revelations the way he often had earlier in his ministry, but William Clayton hung on every word. He recorded the Prophet's sayings in his own diary or in the journal he kept for Joseph, and these entries were later used as the basis for several sections of the Doctrine and Covenants.

### Precious Teachings D&C 129

William was present when Joseph Smith met with Parley P. Pratt on February 9, 1843, and shared with him knowledge about how to discern heavenly messengers from Satan and his angels. These instructions related to temple teachings that Joseph had shared with members of his trusted circle while Parley had been away in England. William recorded the instructions in Joseph's journal, and they were later canonized as Doctrine and Covenants 129:2

### D&C 130

On April 2, 1843, Joseph visited a stake conference in Ramus, Illinois, 20 miles east of Nauvoo. An American religious leader named William Miller had predicted that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ would occur the following day. Joseph took this occasion to assure the Saints in Ramus that the Lord had not revealed the time of His coming. Joseph also taught that God was an embodied personage; that all things past, present, and future are present before Him; and that our social relationships will endure in the eternities. William Clayton's record of these gems in his personal journal became the basis for the text of Doctrine and Covenants 130.<sup>3</sup>

Doctrine and Covenants 131 is composed largely of several short journal entries kept by William during May 1843.<sup>4</sup> Among these were teachings regarding eternal marriage given in Ramus at the home of Benjamin and Melissa Johnson on May 16. The Johnsons had been married since Christmas Day 1841, but Joseph told them he intended to marry them according to the law of the Lord. Benjamin jokingly said he would not marry Melissa again unless she courted him. But Joseph

was in earnest. He taught that men and women needed to enter into the new and everlasting covenant of marriage in order to obtain God's highest blessings. He then sealed Benjamin and Melissa for eternity.<sup>5</sup>

For William, recording these prophetic utterances was more than a duty; it was one of the great privileges of his life. He thrilled at the way Joseph Smith collapsed the distance between this world and the next and made the things of eternity feel tangible and real. When the Nauvoo Saints listened to Joseph speak, the many hardships they faced—death, sickness, poverty, and hunger—were swallowed up in anticipation of a millennial future and the promise that ties of family and friendship would outlast this life. William Clayton's delight in recording the words of Joseph Smith has had a lasting influence on Church teachings and continues to bless Latter-day Saints today.

### Footnotes

- 1 William Clayton letters quoted in James B. Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear: The Story of William Clayton* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 61, 63. This book is the best treatment of William Clayton's life generally and of his friendship with Joseph Smith. Allen's analysis of Clayton's views of Joseph Smith forms the basis for this article.
- 2 See "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 1, 21 December 1842–10 March 1843," 172–76, [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
- 3 See "William Clayton, Journal Excerpt, 1–4 April 1843," [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
- 4 Several of these journal entries are reproduced in Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear*, 393–96.
- 5 See Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Independence, Missouri: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1947), 96–97. For more on the context of Doctrine and Covenants 131, see Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 477–79.