

# Gospel Topic Essays

By: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints  
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In the early 1830s, when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was less than three years old, the Lord invited members of the Church to seek wisdom by study and by the exercise of faith:

“And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

This is more than a simple exhortation to learn about the gospel. It is an invitation from the Lord to recognize that not all sources of knowledge are equally reliable. Seeking “out of the best books” does not mean seeking only one set of opinions, but it does require us to distinguish between reliable sources and unreliable sources.

Recognizing that today so much information about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be obtained from questionable and often inaccurate sources, officials of the Church began in 2013 to publish straightforward, in-depth essays on a number of topics. The purpose of these essays, which have been approved by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has been to gather accurate information from many different sources and publications and place it in the Gospel Topics section of LDS.org, where the material can more easily be accessed and studied by Church members and other interested parties.

The Church places great emphasis on knowledge and on the importance of being well informed about Church history, doctrine, and practices. Ongoing historical research, revisions of the Church’s curriculum, and the use of new technologies

allowing a more systematic and thorough study of scriptures have all been pursued by the Church to that end. We again encourage members to study the Gospel Topics essays cited in the links to the right as they “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”

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# Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo

Latter-day Saints believe that monogamy—the marriage of one man and one woman—is the Lord’s standing law of marriage.<sup>1</sup> In biblical times, the Lord commanded some of His people to practice plural marriage—the marriage of one man and more than one woman.<sup>2</sup> Some early members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also received and obeyed this commandment given through God’s prophets.

After receiving a revelation commanding him to practice plural marriage, Joseph Smith married multiple wives and introduced the practice to close associates. This principle was among the most challenging aspects of the Restoration—for Joseph personally and for other Church members. Plural marriage tested faith and provoked controversy and opposition. Few Latter-day Saints initially welcomed the restoration of a biblical practice entirely foreign to their sensibilities. But many later testified of powerful spiritual experiences that helped them overcome their hesitation and gave them courage to accept this practice.

Although the Lord commanded the adoption—and later the cessation—of plural marriage in the latter days, He did not give exact instructions on how to obey the commandment. Significant social and cultural changes often include misunderstandings and difficulties. Church leaders and members experienced these challenges as they heeded the command to practice plural marriage and again later as they worked to discontinue it after Church President Wilford Woodruff issued an inspired statement known as the Manifesto in 1890, which led to the end of plural marriage in the Church. Through it all, Church leaders and members sought to follow God’s will.

Many details about the early practice of plural marriage are unknown. Plural marriage was introduced among the early Saints incrementally, and participants were asked to keep their actions confidential. They did not discuss their experiences publicly or in writing until after the Latter-day Saints had moved to Utah and Church leaders had publicly acknowledged the practice. The historical record of early plural marriage is therefore thin: few records of the time provide details, and later reminiscences are not always reliable. Some ambiguity will always accompany our knowledge about this issue. Like the participants, we “see through a glass, darkly” and are asked to walk by faith.<sup>3</sup>

## The Beginnings of Plural Marriage in the Church

The revelation on plural marriage was not written down until 1843, but its early verses suggest that part of it emerged from Joseph Smith's study of the Old Testament in 1831. People who knew Joseph well later stated he received the revelation about that time.<sup>4</sup> The revelation, recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 132, states that Joseph prayed to know why God justified Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and Solomon in having many wives. The Lord responded that He had commanded them to enter into the practice.<sup>5</sup>

Latter-day Saints understood that they were living in the latter days, in what the revelations called the "dispensation of the fulness of times."<sup>6</sup> Ancient principles—such as prophets, priesthood, and temples—would be restored to the earth. Plural marriage was one of those ancient principles.

Polygamy had been permitted for millennia in many cultures and religions, but, with few exceptions, was rejected in Western cultures.<sup>7</sup> In Joseph Smith's time, monogamy was the only legal form of marriage in the United States. Joseph knew the practice of plural marriage would stir up public ire. After receiving the commandment, he taught a few associates about it, but he did not spread this teaching widely in the 1830s.<sup>8</sup>

When God commands a difficult task, He sometimes sends additional messengers to encourage His people to obey. Consistent with this pattern, Joseph told associates that an angel appeared to him three times between 1834 and 1842 and commanded him to proceed with plural marriage when he hesitated to move forward. During the third and final appearance, the angel came with a drawn sword, threatening Joseph with destruction unless he went forward and obeyed the commandment fully.<sup>9</sup>

Fragmentary evidence suggests that Joseph Smith acted on the angel's first command by marrying a plural wife, Fanny Alger, in Kirtland, Ohio, in the mid-1830s. Several Latter-day Saints who had lived in Kirtland reported decades later that Joseph Smith had married Alger, who lived and worked in the Smith household, after he had obtained her consent and that of her parents.<sup>10</sup> Little is known about this marriage, and nothing is known about the conversations between Joseph and Emma regarding Alger. After the marriage with Alger ended in separation, Joseph seems to have set the subject of plural marriage aside until after the Church moved to Nauvoo, Illinois.

## Plural Marriage and Eternal Marriage

The same revelation that taught of plural marriage was part of a larger revelation given to Joseph Smith—that marriage could last beyond death and that eternal marriage was essential to inheriting the fulness that God desires for His children. As early as 1840, Joseph Smith privately



taught Apostle Parley P. Pratt that the “heavenly order” allowed Pratt and his wife to be together “for time and all eternity.”<sup>11</sup> Joseph also taught that men like Pratt—who had remarried following the death of his first wife—could be married (or sealed) to their wives for eternity, under the proper conditions.<sup>12</sup>

The sealing of husband and wife for eternity was made possible by the restoration of priesthood keys and ordinances. On April 3, 1836, the Old Testament prophet Elijah appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple and restored the priesthood keys necessary to perform ordinances for the living and the dead, including sealing families together.<sup>13</sup> Marriages performed by priesthood authority could link loved ones to each other for eternity, on condition of righteousness; marriages performed without this authority would end at death.<sup>14</sup>

Marriage performed by priesthood authority meant that the procreation of children and perpetuation of families would continue into the eternities. Joseph Smith’s revelation on marriage declared that the “continuation of the seeds forever and ever” helped to fulfill God’s purposes for His children.<sup>15</sup> This promise was given to all couples who were married by priesthood authority and were faithful to their covenants.

## Plural Marriage in Nauvoo

For much of Western history, family “interest”—economic, political, and social considerations—dominated the choice of spouse. Parents had the power to arrange marriages or forestall unions of which they disapproved. By the late 1700s, romance and personal choice began to rival these traditional motives and practices.<sup>16</sup> By Joseph Smith’s time, many couples insisted on marrying for love, as he and Emma did when they eloped against her parents’ wishes.

Latter-day Saints’ motives for plural marriage were often more religious than economic or romantic. Besides the desire to be obedient, a strong incentive was the hope of living in God’s presence with family members. In the revelation on marriage, the Lord promised participants “crowns of eternal lives” and “exaltation in the eternal worlds.”<sup>17</sup> Men and women, parents and children, ancestors and progeny were to be “sealed” to each other—their commitment lasting into the eternities, consistent with Jesus’s promise that priesthood ordinances performed on earth could be “bound in heaven.”<sup>18</sup>

The first plural marriage in Nauvoo took place when Louisa Beaman and Joseph Smith were sealed in April 1841.<sup>19</sup> Joseph married many additional wives and authorized other Latter-day Saints to practice plural marriage. The practice spread slowly at first. By June 1844, when Joseph died, approximately 29 men and 50 women had entered into plural marriage, in addition to Joseph and his wives. When the Saints entered the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, at least 196 men and 521 women had entered into plural marriages.<sup>20</sup> Participants in these early plural marriages

pledged to keep their involvement confidential, though they anticipated a time when the practice would be publicly acknowledged.

Nevertheless, rumors spread. A few men unscrupulously used these rumors to seduce women to join them in an unauthorized practice sometimes referred to as “spiritual wifery.” When this was discovered, the men were cut off from the Church.<sup>21</sup> The rumors prompted members and leaders to issue carefully worded denials that denounced spiritual wifery and polygamy but were silent about what Joseph Smith and others saw as divinely mandated “celestial” plural marriage.<sup>22</sup> The statements emphasized that the Church practiced no marital law other than monogamy while implicitly leaving open the possibility that individuals, under direction of God’s living prophet, might do so.<sup>23</sup>

## Joseph Smith and Plural Marriage

During the era in which plural marriage was practiced, Latter-day Saints distinguished between sealings for time and eternity and sealings for eternity only. Sealings for time and eternity included commitments and relationships during this life, generally including the possibility of sexual relations. Eternity-only sealings indicated relationships in the next life alone.

Evidence indicates that Joseph Smith participated in both types of sealings. The exact number of women to whom he was sealed in his lifetime is unknown because the evidence is fragmentary.<sup>24</sup> Some of the women who were sealed to Joseph Smith later testified that their marriages were for time and eternity, while others indicated that their relationships were for eternity alone.<sup>25</sup>

Most of those sealed to Joseph Smith were between 20 and 40 years of age at the time of their sealing to him. The oldest, Fanny Young, was 56 years old. The youngest was Helen Mar Kimball, daughter of Joseph’s close friends Heber C. and Vilate Murray Kimball, who was sealed to Joseph several months before her 15th birthday. Marriage at such an age, inappropriate by today’s standards, was legal in that era, and some women married in their mid-teens.<sup>26</sup> Helen Mar Kimball spoke of her sealing to Joseph as being “for eternity alone,” suggesting that the relationship did not involve sexual relations.<sup>27</sup> After Joseph’s death, Helen remarried and became an articulate defender of him and of plural marriage.<sup>28</sup>

Following his marriage to Louisa Beaman and before he married other single women, Joseph Smith was sealed to a number of women who were already married.<sup>29</sup> Neither these women nor Joseph explained much about these sealings, though several women said they were for eternity alone.<sup>30</sup> Other women left no records, making it unknown whether their sealings were for time and eternity or were for eternity alone.

There are several possible explanations for this practice. These sealings may have provided a way to create an eternal bond or link between Joseph’s family and other families within the

Church.<sup>31</sup> These ties extended both vertically, from parent to child, and horizontally, from one family to another. Today such eternal bonds are achieved through the temple marriages of individuals who are also sealed to their own birth families, in this way linking families together. Joseph Smith's sealings to women already married may have been an early version of linking one family to another. In Nauvoo, most if not all of the first husbands seem to have continued living in the same household with their wives during Joseph's lifetime, and complaints about these sealings with Joseph Smith are virtually absent from the documentary record.<sup>32</sup>

These sealings may also be explained by Joseph's reluctance to enter plural marriage because of the sorrow it would bring to his wife Emma. He may have believed that sealings to married women would comply with the Lord's command without requiring him to have normal marriage relationships.<sup>33</sup> This could explain why, according to Lorenzo Snow, the angel reprimanded Joseph for having "demurred" on plural marriage even after he had entered into the practice.<sup>34</sup> After this rebuke, according to this interpretation, Joseph returned primarily to sealings with single women.

Another possibility is that, in an era when life spans were shorter than they are today, faithful women felt an urgency to be sealed by priesthood authority. Several of these women were married either to non-Mormons or former Mormons, and more than one of the women later expressed unhappiness in their present marriages. Living in a time when divorce was difficult to obtain, these women may have believed a sealing to Joseph Smith would give them blessings they might not otherwise receive in the next life.<sup>35</sup>

The women who united with Joseph Smith in plural marriage risked reputation and self-respect in being associated with a principle so foreign to their culture and so easily misunderstood by others. "I made a greater sacrifice than to give my life," said Zina Huntington Jacobs, "for I never anticipated again to be looked upon as an honorable woman." Nevertheless, she wrote, "I searched the scripture & by humble prayer to my Heavenly Father I obtained a testimony for myself."<sup>36</sup> After Joseph's death, most of the women sealed to him moved to Utah with the Saints, remained faithful Church members, and defended both plural marriage and Joseph.<sup>37</sup>

## Joseph and Emma

Plural marriage was difficult for all involved. For Joseph Smith's wife Emma, it was an excruciating ordeal. Records of Emma's reactions to plural marriage are sparse; she left no firsthand accounts, making it impossible to reconstruct her thoughts. Joseph and Emma loved and respected each other deeply. After he had entered into plural marriage, he poured out his feelings in his journal for his "beloved Emma," whom he described as "undaunted, firm and unwavering, unchangeable, affectionate Emma." After Joseph's death, Emma kept a lock of his hair in a locket she wore around her neck.<sup>38</sup>

Emma approved, at least for a time, of four of Joseph Smith's plural marriages in Nauvoo, and she accepted all four of those wives into her household. She may have approved of other marriages as well.<sup>39</sup> But Emma likely did not know about all of Joseph's sealings.<sup>40</sup> She vacillated in her view of plural marriage, at some points supporting it and at other times denouncing it. In the summer of 1843, Joseph Smith dictated the revelation on marriage, a lengthy and complex text containing both glorious promises and stern warnings, some directed at Emma.<sup>41</sup> The revelation instructed women and men that they must obey God's law and commands in order to receive the fulness of His glory.

The revelation on marriage required that a wife give her consent before her husband could enter into plural marriage.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, toward the end of the revelation, the Lord said that if the first wife "receive not this law"—the command to practice plural marriage—the husband would be "exempt from the law of Sarah," presumably the requirement that the husband gain the consent of the first wife before marrying additional women.<sup>43</sup> After Emma opposed plural marriage, Joseph was placed in an agonizing dilemma, forced to choose between the will of God and the will of his beloved Emma. He may have thought Emma's rejection of plural marriage exempted him from the law of Sarah. Her decision to "receive not this law" permitted him to marry additional wives without her consent. Because of Joseph's early death and Emma's decision to remain in Nauvoo and not discuss plural marriage after the Church moved west, many aspects of their story remain known only to the two of them.

## Trial and Spiritual Witness

Years later in Utah, participants in Nauvoo plural marriage discussed their motives for entering into the practice. God declared in the Book of Mormon that monogamy was the standard; at times, however, He commanded plural marriage so His people could "raise up seed unto [Him]."<sup>44</sup> Plural marriage did result in an increased number of children born to believing parents.<sup>45</sup>

Some Saints also saw plural marriage as a redemptive process of sacrifice and spiritual refinement. According to Helen Mar Kimball, Joseph Smith stated that "the practice of this principle would be the hardest trial the Saints would ever have to test their faith." Though it was one of the "severest" trials of her life, she testified that it had also been "one of the greatest blessings."<sup>46</sup> Her father, Heber C. Kimball, agreed. "I never felt more sorrowful," he said of the moment he learned of plural marriage in 1841. "I wept days. ... I had a good wife. I was satisfied."<sup>47</sup>

The decision to accept such a wrenching trial usually came only after earnest prayer and intense soul-searching. Brigham Young said that, upon learning of plural marriage, "it was the first time in my life that I had desired the grave."<sup>48</sup> "I had to pray unceasingly," he said, "and I had to exercise faith and the Lord revealed to me the truth of it and that satisfied me."<sup>49</sup> Heber C.

Kimball found comfort only after his wife Vilate had a visionary experience attesting to the rightness of plural marriage. “She told me,” Vilate’s daughter later recalled, “she never saw so happy a man as father was when she described the vision and told him she was satisfied and knew it was from God.”<sup>50</sup>

Lucy Walker recalled her inner turmoil when Joseph Smith invited her to become his wife. “Every feeling of my soul revolted against it,” she wrote. Yet, after several restless nights on her knees in prayer, she found relief as her room “filled with a holy influence” akin to “brilliant sunshine.” She said, “My soul was filled with a calm sweet peace that I never knew,” and “supreme happiness took possession of my whole being.”<sup>51</sup>

Not all had such experiences. Some Latter-day Saints rejected the principle of plural marriage and left the Church, while others declined to enter the practice but remained faithful.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, for many women and men, initial revulsion and anguish was followed by struggle, resolution, and ultimately, light and peace. Sacred experiences enabled the Saints to move forward in faith.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

The challenge of introducing a principle as controversial as plural marriage is almost impossible to overstate. A spiritual witness of its truthfulness allowed Joseph Smith and other Latter-day Saints to accept this principle. Difficult as it was, the introduction of plural marriage in Nauvoo did indeed “raise up seed” unto God. A substantial number of today’s members descend through faithful Latter-day Saints who practiced plural marriage.

Church members no longer practice plural marriage.<sup>54</sup> Consistent with Joseph Smith’s teachings, the Church permits a man whose wife has died to be sealed to another woman when he remarries. Moreover, members are permitted to perform ordinances on behalf of deceased men and women who married more than once on earth, sealing them to all of the spouses to whom they were legally married. The precise nature of these relationships in the next life is not known, and many family relationships will be sorted out in the life to come. Latter-day Saints are encouraged to trust in our wise Heavenly Father, who loves His children and does all things for their growth and salvation.<sup>55</sup>

### Resources

1. See “[The Family: A Proclamation to the World](#)”; [Jacob 2:27, 30](#).
2. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:34–39](#); [Jacob 2:30](#); see also [Genesis 16](#).
3. [1 Corinthians 13:12](#); Jeffrey R. Holland, “[Lord, I Believe](#),” *Ensign*, May 2013.
4. See Andrew Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” *Historical Record* 6 (May 1887): 232–33; “Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith,” *Millennial Star* 40 (Dec. 16, 1878): 788; Danel W.

- Bachman, "New Light on an Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Eternal Marriage," *Journal of Mormon History* 5 (1978): 19–32.
5. See [Doctrine and Covenants 132:1, 34–38](#).
  6. [Doctrine and Covenants 112:30; 124:41; 128:18](#).
  7. "Polygamy," in *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. John Bowker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 757; John Cairncross, *After Polygamy Was Made a Sin: The Social History of Christian Polygamy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).
  8. Lorenzo Snow, deposition, United States Testimony 1892 (Temple Lot Case), part 3, p. 124, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:193; Ezra Booth to Ira Eddy, Dec. 6, 1831, in *Ohio Star*, Dec. 8, 1831.
  9. See Brian C. Hales, "Encouraging Joseph Smith to Practice Plural Marriage: The Accounts of the Angel with a Drawn Sword," *Mormon Historical Studies* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 69–70.
  10. See Andrew Jenson, Research Notes, Andrew Jenson Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Benjamin F. Johnson to Gibbs, 1903, Benjamin F. Johnson Papers, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; "Autobiography of Levi Ward Hancock," Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
  11. Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt, One of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Parley P. Pratt Jr. (New York: Russell Brothers, 1874), 329.
  12. Hyrum Smith, sermon, Apr. 8, 1844, Historian's Office General Church Minutes, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
  13. These were the same priesthood keys Elijah had given to Apostles anciently. (See [Matthew 16:19; 17:1–9; Doctrine and Covenants 2](#).)
  14. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:7; 131:2–3](#).
  15. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:19–20, 63](#); see also "[Becoming Like God](#)."
  16. Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005), 145–60; Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, abridged ed. (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1985), 217–53.
  17. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:55, 63](#).
  18. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:46; Matthew 16:19](#).
  19. Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage has been discussed by Latter-day Saint authors in official, semi-official, and independent publications. See, for example, Jenson, "Plural Marriage," 219–34; B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 2:93–110, Daniel W. Bachman and Ronald K. Esplin, "Plural Marriage," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:1091–95; and Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Brigham Young University, 2002), 343–49.

20. Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 1:3, 2:165.
21. Joseph Smith, Journal, May 19, 24, and 26, 1842; June 4, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org). Proponents of “spiritual wifery” taught that sexual relations were permissible outside of legalized marital relationships, on condition that the relations remained secret.
22. In the denials, “polygamy” was understood to mean the marriage of one man to more than one woman but without Church sanction.
23. See, for example, “On Marriage,” *Times and Seasons*, Oct. 1, 1842, 939–40; and Wilford Woodruff journal, Nov. 25, 1843, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Parley P. Pratt, “This Number Closes the First Volume of the ‘Prophet,’” *The Prophet*, May 24, 1845, 2. George A. Smith explained, “Any one who will read carefully the denials, as they are termed, of plurality of wives in connection with the circumstances will see clearly that they denounce adultery, fornication, brutal lust and the teaching of plurality of wives by those who were not commanded to do so” (George A. Smith letter to Joseph Smith III, Oct. 9, 1869, in Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Oct. 9, 1869, Church History Library, Salt Lake City).
24. Careful estimates put the number between 30 and 40. See Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:272–73.
25. See Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:277–302. Despite claims that Joseph Smith fathered children within plural marriage, genetic testing has so far been negative, though it is possible he fathered two or three children with plural wives. (See Ugo A. Perego, “Joseph Smith, the Question of Polygamous Offspring, and DNA Analysis,” in Newell G. Bringham and Craig L. Foster, eds., *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* [Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2010], 233–56.)
26. J. Spencer Fluhman, “A Subject that Can Bear Investigation’: Anguish, Faith, and Joseph Smith’s Youngest Plural Wife,” in Robert L. Millet, ed., *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues* (Provo and Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2011), 104–19; Craig L. Foster, David Keller, and Gregory L. Smith, “The Age of Joseph Smith’s Plural Wives in Social and Demographic Context,” in Bringham and Foster, eds., *The Persistence of Polygamy*, 152–83.
27. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, Autobiography, [2], Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
28. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph: A Reply to Joseph Smith, Editor of the Lamoni (Iowa) “Herald”* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882); Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1884).
29. Estimates of the number of these sealings range from 12 to 14. (See Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997], 4, 6; Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:253–76, 303–48.) For an early summary of this



- practice, see John A. Widtsoe, "Evidences and Reconciliations: Did Joseph Smith Introduce Plural Marriage?" *Improvement Era* 49, no. 11 (Nov. 1946): 766–67.
30. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:421–37. Polyandry, the marriage of one woman to more than one man, typically involves shared financial, residential, and sexual resources, and children are often raised communally. There is no evidence that Joseph Smith's sealings functioned in this way, and much evidence works against that view.
  31. Rex Eugene Cooper, *Promises Made to the Fathers: Mormon Covenant Organization* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 138–45; Jonathan A. Stapley, "Adoptive Sealing Ritual in Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 53–117.
  32. For a review of the evidence, see Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:390–96.
  33. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 440.
  34. See Lorenzo Snow, deposition, United States Testimony 1892 (Temple Lot Case), part 3, p. 124.
  35. The revelation on marriage provided powerful incentives for a marriage performed by priesthood authority. (See Doctrine and Covenants 132:17–19, 63.)
  36. Zina Huntington Jacobs, autobiographical sketch, Zina Card Brown Family Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; spelling modernized.
  37. The historical record is striking for the lack of criticism found among those who had once been Joseph Smith's plural wives, although most of the wives left no written record.
  38. Joseph Smith, Journal, Aug. 16, 1842, in Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, vol. 2 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), 93–96, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org); Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, ed., *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1952), 85.
  39. Jenson, "Historical Record," 229–30, 240; Emily Dow Partridge Young, deposition, United States Testimony 1892 (Temple Lot Case), part 3, pp. 365–66, 384; Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:194.
  40. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:8, 48–50, 80; Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 473.
  41. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:54, 64](#). The warning to Emma Smith also applies to all who receive sacred ordinances by authority of the priesthood but do not abide the covenants associated with those ordinances. See, for example, [Psalm 37:38](#); [Isaiah 1:28](#); [Acts 3:19–25](#); and [Doctrine and Covenants 132:26, 64](#).
  42. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:61](#). In Utah, the first wife was part of the plural marriage ceremony, standing between her husband and the bride and placing the hand of the bride in the hand of the husband. "Celestial Marriage," *The Seer* 1 (Feb. 1853): 31.
  43. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:65](#); see also [Genesis 16:1–3](#).
  44. [Jacob 2:30](#).



45. On the question of children, see note 6 of [“Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah.”](#)
46. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage*, 23–24.
47. Heber C. Kimball, Discourse, Sept. 2, 1866, George D. Watt Papers, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, transcribed from Pitman shorthand by Lajean Purcell Carruth.
48. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:266.
49. Brigham Young, Discourse, June 18, 1865, George D. Watt Papers, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, transcribed from Pitman shorthand by Lajean Purcell Carruth; see also Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:128.
50. Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball, an Apostle: The Father and Founder of the British Mission* (Salt Lake City: Kimball Family, 1888), 338; see also Kiersten Olson, “‘The Embodiment of Strength and Endurance’: Vilate Murray Kimball (1806–1867),” in *Women of Faith in the Latter Days, Volume One, 1775–1820*, ed. Richard E. Turley Jr. and Brittany A. Chapman (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 137.
51. Lucy Walker Kimball, “Brief Biographical Sketch,” 10–11, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
52. Sarah Granger Kimball, for example, rejected plural marriage in Nauvoo but came west with the Saints. Many of the individuals who rejected plural marriage, including Emma Smith, later became members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.
53. For example, see “Evidence from Zina D. Huntington–Young,” *Saints’ Herald*, Jan. 11, 1905, 29; Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Mary Elizabeth Rollins,” Susa Young Gates Papers, Utah State Historical Society.
54. Gordon B. Hinckley, [“What Are People Asking about Us?”](#) *Ensign*, Nov. 1998; [“Polygamy,”](#) Newsroom, topics page.
55. [Alma 26:35](#); [Doctrine and Covenants 88:41](#); [1 Nephi 11:17](#).

# First Vision Accounts

Joseph Smith recorded that God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him in a grove of trees near his parents' home in western New York State when he was about 14 years old. Concerned by his sins and unsure which spiritual path to follow, Joseph sought guidance by attending meetings, reading scripture, and praying. In answer, he received a heavenly manifestation. Joseph shared and documented the First Vision, as it came to be known, on multiple occasions; he wrote or assigned scribes to write four different accounts of the vision.

Joseph Smith published two accounts of the First Vision during his lifetime. The first of these, known today as Joseph Smith—History, was canonized in the Pearl of Great Price and thus became the best known account. The two unpublished accounts, recorded in Joseph Smith's earliest autobiography and a later journal, were generally forgotten until historians working for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rediscovered and published them in the 1960s. Since that time, these documents have been discussed repeatedly in Church magazines, in works printed by Church-owned and Church-affiliated presses, and by Latter-day Saint scholars in other venues.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the firsthand accounts, there are also five descriptions of Joseph Smith's vision recorded by his contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

The various accounts of the First Vision tell a consistent story, though naturally they differ in emphasis and detail. Historians expect that when an individual retells an experience in multiple settings to different audiences over many years, each account will emphasize various aspects of the experience and contain unique details. Indeed, differences similar to those in the First Vision accounts exist in the multiple scriptural accounts of Paul's vision on the road to Damascus and the Apostles' experience on the Mount of Transfiguration.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite the differences, a basic consistency remains across all the accounts of the First Vision. Some have mistakenly argued that any variation in the retelling of the story is evidence of fabrication. To the contrary, the rich historical record enables us to learn more about this remarkable event than we could if it were less well documented.

## Accounts of the First Vision

Each account of the First Vision by Joseph Smith and his contemporaries has its own history and context that influenced how the event was recalled, communicated, and recorded. These accounts are discussed below.

**1832 Account.** The earliest known account of the First Vision, the only account written in Joseph Smith’s own hand, is found in a short, unpublished autobiography Joseph Smith produced in the second half of 1832. In the account, Joseph Smith described his consciousness of his own sins and his frustration at being unable to find a church that matched the one he had read about in the New Testament and that would lead him to redemption. He emphasized Jesus Christ’s Atonement and the personal redemption it offered. He wrote that “the Lord” appeared and forgave him of his sins. As a result of the vision, Joseph experienced joy and love, though, as he noted, he could find no one who believed his account. [Read the 1832 account here.](#)

**1835 Account.** In the fall of 1835, Joseph Smith recounted his First Vision to Robert Matthews, a visitor to Kirtland, Ohio. The retelling, recorded in Joseph’s journal by his scribe Warren Parrish, emphasizes his attempt to discover which church was right, the opposition he felt as he prayed, and the appearance of one divine personage who was followed shortly by another. This account also notes the appearance of angels in the vision. [Read the 1835 account here.](#)

**1838 Account.** The narration of the First Vision best known to Latter-day Saints today is the 1838 account. First published in 1842 in the *Times and Seasons*, the Church’s newspaper in Nauvoo, Illinois, the account was part of a longer history dictated by Joseph Smith between periods of intense opposition. Whereas the 1832 account emphasizes the more personal story of Joseph Smith as a young man seeking forgiveness, the 1838 account focuses on the vision as the beginning of the “rise and progress of the Church.” Like the 1835 account, the central question of the narrative is which church is right. [Read the 1838 account here.](#)

**1842 Account.** Written in response to *Chicago Democrat* editor John Wentworth’s request for information about the Latter-day Saints, this account was printed in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842. (The “Wentworth letter,” as it is commonly known, is also the source for the Articles of Faith.)<sup>4</sup> The account, intended for publication to an audience unfamiliar with Mormon beliefs, is concise and straightforward. As with earlier accounts, Joseph Smith noted the confusion he experienced and the appearance of two personages in answer to his prayer. The following year, Joseph Smith sent this account with minor modifications to a historian named Israel Daniel Rupp, who published it as a chapter in his book, *He Pasa Ekklesia* [The Whole Church]: *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States.*<sup>5</sup>[Read the 1842 account here.](#)

**Secondhand Accounts.** Besides these accounts from Joseph Smith himself, five accounts were written by contemporaries who heard Joseph Smith speak about the vision. [Read these accounts here.](#)

## Arguments Regarding the Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision

The variety and number of accounts of the First Vision have led some critics to question whether Joseph Smith's descriptions match the reality of his experience. Two arguments are frequently made against his credibility: the first questions Joseph Smith's memory of the events; the second questions whether he embellished elements of the story over time.

**Memory.** One argument regarding the accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision alleges that historical evidence does not support Joseph Smith's description of religious revival in Palmyra, New York, and its vicinity in 1820. Some argue that this undermines both Joseph's claim of unusual religious fervor and the account of the vision itself.

Documentary evidence, however, supports Joseph Smith's statements regarding the revivals. The region where he lived became famous for its religious fervor and was unquestionably one of the hotbeds of religious revivals. Historians refer to the region as "the burned-over district" because preachers wore out the land holding camp revivals and seeking converts during the early 1800s.<sup>6</sup> In June 1818, for example, a Methodist camp meeting took place in Palmyra, and the following summer, Methodists assembled again at Vienna (now Phelps), New York, 15 miles from the Smith family farm. The journals of an itinerant Methodist preacher document much religious excitement in Joseph's geographic area in 1819 and 1820. They report that Reverend George Lane, a revivalist Methodist minister, was in that region in both years, speaking "on Gods method in bringing about Reformations."<sup>7</sup> This historical evidence is consistent with Joseph's description. He said that the unusual religious excitement in his district or region "commenced with the Methodists." Indeed, Joseph stated that he became "somewhat partial" to Methodism.<sup>8</sup>

**Embellishment.** The second argument frequently made regarding the accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision is that he embellished his story over time. This argument focuses on two details: the number and identity of the heavenly beings Joseph Smith stated that he saw. Joseph's First Vision accounts describe the heavenly beings with greater detail over time. The 1832 account says, "The Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord." His 1838 account states, "I saw two Personages," one of whom introduced the other as "My Beloved Son." As a result, critics have argued that Joseph Smith started out reporting to have seen one being—"the Lord"—and ended up claiming to have seen both the Father and the Son.<sup>9</sup>

There are other, more consistent ways of seeing the evidence. A basic harmony in the narrative across time must be acknowledged at the outset: three of the four accounts clearly state that two personages appeared to Joseph Smith in the First Vision. The outlier is Joseph Smith's 1832 account, which can be read to refer to one or two personages. If read to refer to one heavenly being, it would likely be to the personage who forgave his sins. According to later accounts, the first divine personage told Joseph Smith to "hear" the second, Jesus Christ, who then delivered

the main message, which included the message of forgiveness.<sup>10</sup> Joseph Smith's 1832 account, then, may have concentrated on Jesus Christ, the bearer of forgiveness.

Another way of reading the 1832 account is that Joseph Smith referred to two beings, both of whom he called "Lord." The embellishment argument hinges on the assumption that the 1832 account describes the appearance of only one divine being. But the 1832 account does not say that only one being appeared. Note that the two references to "Lord" are separated in time: first "the Lord" opens the heavens; then Joseph Smith sees "the Lord." This reading of the account is consistent with Joseph's 1835 account, which has one personage appearing first, followed by another soon afterwards. The 1832 account, then, can reasonably be read to mean that Joseph Smith saw one being who then revealed another and that he referred to both of them as "the Lord": "the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord."<sup>11</sup>

Joseph's increasingly specific descriptions can thus be compellingly read as evidence of increasing insight, accumulating over time, based on experience. In part, the differences between the 1832 account and the later accounts may have something to do with the differences between the written and the spoken word. The 1832 account represents the first time Joseph Smith attempted to write down his history. That same year, he wrote a friend that he felt imprisoned by "paper pen and Ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect Language." He called the written word a "little narrow prison."<sup>12</sup> The expansiveness of the later accounts is more easily understood and even expected when we recognize that they were likely dictated accounts—an, easy, comfortable medium for Joseph Smith and one that allowed the words to flow more easily.

## Conclusion

Joseph Smith testified repeatedly that he experienced a remarkable vision of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Neither the truth of the First Vision nor the arguments against it can be proven by historical research alone. Knowing the truth of Joseph Smith's testimony requires each earnest seeker of truth to study the record and then exercise sufficient faith in Christ to ask God in sincere, humble prayer whether the record is true. If the seeker asks with the real intent to act upon the answer revealed by the Holy Ghost, the truthfulness of Joseph Smith's vision will be manifest. In this way, every person can know that Joseph Smith spoke honestly when he declared, "I had seen a vision, I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it."<sup>13</sup>

## Resources

1. See, for example, James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of the First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?" *Improvement Era*, 73, (1970): 4–13; Richard L. Anderson, "[Joseph Smith's Testimony of the First Vision](#)," *Ensign*, Apr. 1996, 10–21; Milton V. Backman, *Joseph*

- Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971; 2d ed., 1980); Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012).
2. All of these accounts were reproduced in Dean C. Jessee, "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," in John W. Welch, ed., with Erick B. Carlson, *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820-1844* (Provo and Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press and Deseret Book, 2005), 1-33.
  3. [Acts 9:3-9](#); [22:6-21](#); [26:12-18](#); [Matthew 17:1-13](#); [Mark 9:2-13](#); [Luke 9:28-36](#).
  4. The full letter can be found in Joseph Smith, "Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3 (Mar. 1, 1842): 706-10.
  5. Joseph Smith, "Latter Day Saints," in I. Daniel Rupp, *He Pasa Ekklesia: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States* (Philadelphia: J. Y. Humphreys, 1844), 404-10.
  6. Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1950); Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
  7. Benajah Williams diary, July 15, 1820, copy in Church History Library, Salt Lake City; spelling regularized.
  8. 1838 account ([Joseph Smith—History 1:5, 8](#)).
  9. 1832 account (Joseph Smith History, ca. Summer 1832, 3, in Joseph Smith, "Letter Book A," Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City); 1838 account ([Joseph Smith—History 1:17](#)).
  10. 1838 account (Joseph Smith—History 1:17); 1835 account (Joseph Smith, "Sketch Book of the use of Joseph Smith, jr.," Journal, Nov. 9-11, 1835, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City).
  11. 1832 account (Joseph Smith History, ca. Summer 1832, 3, in Joseph Smith, "Letter Book A," Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City).
  12. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, Nov. 27, 1832, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; available at [www.josephsmithpapers.org](http://www.josephsmithpapers.org).
  13. 1838 account ([Joseph Smith—History 1:25](#)).

# Book of Mormon Translation

[Joseph Smith](#) said that the [Book of Mormon](#) was “the most correct of any Book on earth & the keystone of our religion & a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than any other Book.”<sup>1</sup> The Book of Mormon came into the world through a series of miraculous events. Much can be known about the coming forth of the English text of the Book of Mormon through a careful study of statements made by Joseph Smith, his scribes, and others closely associated with the translation of the Book of Mormon.

## “By the Gift and Power of God”

Joseph Smith reported that on the evening of September 21, 1823, while he prayed in the upper room of his parents’ small log home in Palmyra, New York, an angel who called himself Moroni appeared and told Joseph that “God had a work for [you] to do.”<sup>2</sup> He informed Joseph that “there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang.” The book could be found in a hill not far from the Smith family farm. This was no ordinary history, for it contained “the fullness of the everlasting Gospel as delivered by the Savior.”<sup>3</sup>

The angel charged Joseph Smith to translate the book from the ancient language in which it was written. The young man, however, had very little formal education and was incapable of writing a book on his own, let alone translating an ancient book written from an unknown language, known in the Book of Mormon as “reformed Egyptian”<sup>4</sup>. Joseph’s wife Emma insisted that, at the time of translation, Joseph “could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictat[e] a book like the Book of Mormon.”<sup>5</sup>

Joseph received the plates in September 1827 and the following spring, in Harmony, Pennsylvania, began translating them in earnest, with Emma and his friend Martin Harris serving as his main scribes. The resulting English transcription, known as the Book of Lehi and referred to by Joseph Smith as written on 116 pages, was subsequently lost or stolen. As a result, Joseph Smith was rebuked by the Lord and lost the ability to translate for a short time.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph began translating again in 1829, and almost all of the present Book of Mormon text was translated during a three-month period between April and June of that year. His scribe during these months was [Oliver Cowdery](#), a schoolteacher from Vermont who learned about the Book of Mormon while boarding with Joseph’s parents in Palmyra. Called by God in a vision, Cowdery traveled to Harmony to meet Joseph Smith and investigate further. Of his experience as scribe,

Cowdery wrote, “These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the *inspiration* of heaven.”<sup>7</sup>

The manuscript that Joseph Smith dictated to Oliver Cowdery and others is known today as the original manuscript, about 28 percent of which still survives.<sup>8</sup> This manuscript corroborates Joseph Smith’s statements that the manuscript was written within a short time frame and that it was dictated from another language. For example, it includes errors that suggest the scribe heard words incorrectly rather than misread words copied from another manuscript.<sup>9</sup> In addition, some grammatical constructions that are more characteristic of Near Eastern languages than English appear in the original manuscript, suggesting that the base language of the translation was not English.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike most dictated drafts, the original manuscript was considered by Joseph Smith to be, in substance, a final product. To assist in the publication of the book, Oliver Cowdery made a handwritten copy of the original manuscript. This copy is known today as the printer’s manuscript. Because Joseph Smith did not call for punctuation, such as periods, commas, or question marks as he dictated, such marks are not in the original manuscript. The typesetter later inserted punctuation marks when he prepared the text for the printer.<sup>11</sup> With the exceptions of punctuation, formatting, other elements of typesetting, and minor adjustments required to correct copying and scribal errors, the dictation copy became the text of the first printed edition of the book.<sup>12</sup>

## Translation Instruments

Many accounts in the Bible show that God transmitted revelations to His prophets in a variety of ways. [Elijah](#) learned that God spoke not to him through the wind or fire or earthquake but through a “still small voice.”<sup>13</sup> [Paul](#) and other early apostles sometimes communicated with angels and, on occasion, with the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> At other times, revelation came in the form of dreams or visions, such as the revelation to [Peter](#) to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, or through sacred objects like the [Urim and Thummim](#).<sup>15</sup>

Joseph Smith stands out among God’s prophets, because he was called to render into his own language an entire volume of scripture amounting to more than 500 printed pages, containing doctrine that would deepen and expand the theological understanding of millions of people. For this monumental task, God prepared additional, practical help in the form of physical instruments.

Joseph Smith and his scribes wrote of two instruments used in translating the Book of Mormon. According to witnesses of the translation, when Joseph looked into the instruments, the words of scripture appeared in English. One instrument, called in the Book of Mormon the “interpreters,” is better known to Latter-day Saints today as the “Urim and Thummim.” Joseph found the interpreters buried in the hill with the plates.<sup>16</sup> Those who saw the interpreters



described them as a clear pair of stones bound together with a metal rim. The Book of Mormon referred to this instrument, together with its breastplate, as a device “kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord” and “handed down from generation to generation, for the purpose of interpreting languages.”<sup>17</sup>

The other instrument, which Joseph Smith discovered in the ground years before he retrieved the gold plates, was a small oval stone, or “seer stone.”<sup>18</sup> As a young man during the 1820s, Joseph Smith, like others in his day, used a seer stone to look for lost objects and buried treasure.<sup>19</sup> As Joseph grew to understand his prophetic calling, he learned that he could use this stone for the higher purpose of translating scripture.<sup>20</sup>

Apparently for convenience, Joseph often translated with the single seer stone rather than the two stones bound together to form the interpreters. These two instruments—the interpreters and the seer stone—were apparently interchangeable and worked in much the same way such that, in the course of time, Joseph Smith and his associates often used the term “Urim and Thummim” to refer to the single stone as well as the interpreters.<sup>21</sup> In ancient times, Israelite priests used the Urim and Thummim to assist in receiving divine communications. Although commentators differ on the nature of the instrument, several ancient sources state that the instrument involved stones that lit up or were divinely illumined.<sup>22</sup> Latter-day Saints later understood the term “Urim and Thummim” to refer exclusively to the interpreters. Joseph Smith and others, however, seem to have understood the term more as a descriptive category of instruments for obtaining divine revelations and less as the name of a specific instrument. Some people have balked at this claim of physical instruments used in the divine translation process, but such aids to facilitate the communication of God’s power and inspiration are consistent with accounts in scripture. In addition to the Urim and Thummim, the Bible mentions other physical instruments used to access God’s power: the [rod of Aaron](#), a [brass serpent](#), [holy anointing oils](#), the [Ark of the Covenant](#), and even [dirt](#) from the ground mixed with saliva to heal the eyes of a blind man.<sup>23</sup>

## The Mechanics of Translation

In the preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith wrote: “I would inform you that I translated [the book], by the gift and power of God.” When pressed for specifics about the process of translation, Joseph repeated on several occasions that it had been done “by the gift and power of God”<sup>24</sup> and once added, “It was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon.”<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, the scribes and others who observed the translation left numerous accounts that give insight into the process. Some accounts indicate that Joseph studied the characters on the plates. Most of the accounts speak of Joseph’s use of the Urim and Thummim (either the interpreters or the seer stone), and many accounts refer to his use of a single stone. According

to these accounts, Joseph placed either the interpreters or the seer stone in a hat, pressed his face into the hat to block out extraneous light, and read aloud the English words that appeared on the instrument.<sup>26</sup> The process as described brings to mind a passage from the Book of Mormon that speaks of God preparing “a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light.”<sup>27</sup>

The scribes who assisted with the translation unquestionably believed that Joseph translated by divine power. Joseph’s wife Emma explained that she “frequently wrote day after day” at a small table in their house in Harmony, Pennsylvania. She described Joseph “sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.”<sup>28</sup> According to Emma, the plates “often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth.” When asked if Joseph had dictated from the Bible or from a manuscript he had prepared earlier, Emma flatly denied those possibilities: “He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.” Emma told her son Joseph Smith III, “The Book of Mormon is of divine authenticity—I have not the slightest doubt of it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me for hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him.”<sup>29</sup>

Another scribe, [Martin Harris](#) sat across the table from Joseph Smith and wrote down the words Joseph dictated. Harris later related that as Joseph used the seer stone to translate, sentences appeared. Joseph read those sentences aloud, and after penning the words, Harris would say, “Written.” An associate who interviewed Harris recorded him saying that Joseph “possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone.”<sup>30</sup>

The principal scribe, Oliver Cowdery, testified under oath in 1831 that Joseph Smith “found with the plates, from which he translated his book, two transparent stones, resembling glass, set in silver bows. That by looking through these, he was able to read in English, the reformed Egyptian characters, which were engraven on the plates.”<sup>31</sup> In the fall of 1830, Cowdery visited Union Village, Ohio, and spoke about the translation of the Book of Mormon. Soon thereafter, a village resident reported that the translation was accomplished by means of “two transparent stones in the form of spectacles thro which the translator looked on the engraving.”<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

Joseph Smith consistently testified that he translated the Book of Mormon by the “gift and power of God.” His scribes shared that testimony. The angel who brought news of an ancient record on metal plates buried in a hillside and the divine instruments prepared especially for Joseph Smith to translate were all part of what Joseph and his scribes viewed as the miracle of

translation. When he sat down in 1832 to write his own history for the first time, he began by promising to include “an account of his marvelous experience.”<sup>33</sup> The translation of the Book of Mormon was truly marvelous.

The truth of the Book of Mormon and its divine source can be known today. God invites each of us to read the book, remember the mercies of the Lord and ponder them in our hearts, “and ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true.” God promises that “if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>34</sup>

## Resources

1. Wilford Woodruff journal, Nov. 28, 1841, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
2. On the identity of the angel, see Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jenson, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 223 n 56.
3. Davidson et al., *Joseph Smith Histories*, 223; punctuation regularized; Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 1, 1842): 706–7. See also [Joseph Smith—History 1:33–34](#).
4. [Mormon 9:32](#). See also [1 Nephi 1:2](#).
5. “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald* 26 (Oct. 1, 1879), 290. Emphasis in original.
6. Joseph Smith History, 1838–ca. 1841, 8–11 (draft 2), in Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jenson, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 252–3; available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org); [Doctrine and Covenants 3:5–15](#).
7. Joseph Smith History, ca. summer 1832, in *Joseph Smith Histories*, 16; Oliver Cowdery to William W. Phelps, Sept. 7, 1834, in *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (Oct. 1834): 14; italics in original.
8. Most of the manuscript disintegrated or became otherwise unreadable due to water damage between 1841 and 1882, as a result of being placed in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House in Nauvoo, Illinois. Most of the surviving pages were later archived in the historian’s office of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. The extant original manuscript has been published in *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text*, ed. Royal Skousen (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001). A complete copy of this original, known as the printer’s manuscript, was made by Oliver Cowdery and two other unidentified scribes between August 1829 and early 1830. It was used to set the type for most of the printing in

Palmyra. The printer's manuscript is published in *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typological Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts*, ed. Royal Skousen (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001). Both the printer's manuscript and the original manuscript will be published in future volumes of *The Joseph Smith Papers*. (Dean C. Jessee, "The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 [Spring 1970]: 261–72; Royal Skousen, "Piecing Together the Original Manuscript," *BYU Today* 46, no. 3 [May 1992]: 18–24.)

9. For example, when Joseph translated the text that is now in 1 Nephi 13:29, the scribe wrote "&" in one place where he should have written "an." At 1 Nephi 17:48, the scribe wrote "weed" where he should have written "reed." (See Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* [Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997], 67; see also Grant Hardy, "Introduction," in *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, ed. Royal Skousen [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009], xv–xix.)
10. John A. Tvedtnes, "[Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon](#)" and "[Names of People: Book of Mormon](#)," in Geoffrey Kahn, ed., *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (Brill Online, 2013); M. Deloy Pack, "Hebraisms," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 321–25; John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 77–91; Donald W. Parry, "Hebraisms and Other Ancient Peculiarities in the Book of Mormon," in Donald W. Parry and others, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 155–89.

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11. On the role of the typesetter John Gilbert, see Royal Skousen, "John Gilbert's 1892 Account of the 1830 Printing of the Book of Mormon," in Stephen D. Ricks and others, eds., *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 383–405.
12. Some grammatical constructions that sound odd to English speakers were edited out of later editions of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith or others in order to render the translation into more standard current English. See Richard E. Turley Jr. and William W. Slaughter, *How*

*We Got the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 44–45. Approximately five–sixth of the 1830 first edition of the Book of Mormon was typeset from the printer’s manuscript. The other one–sixth was typeset from the original manuscript. (Royal Skousen, “Editor’s Preface,” in *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, xxx.)

13. [1 Kings 19:11–12](#).
14. [Acts 9:1–8](#); [12:7–9](#).
15. [Acts 11:4–17](#); [16:9–10](#); [Exodus 28:30](#); [Leviticus 8:8](#); [Numbers 21:9](#).
16. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grand Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), xxix.
17. [Mosiah 28:14–15, 20](#); see also [Mosiah 8:13, 19](#); and [Ether 4:5](#). Joseph Smith seems to have used the terms “interpreters” and “spectacles” interchangeably during the early years of the Church. Nancy Towle, an itinerant Methodist preacher, recounted Joseph Smith telling her about “a pair of ‘interpreters,’ (as he called them,) that resembled spectacles, by looking into which, he could *read* a writing engraven upon the plates, though to himself, in a tongue unknown.” (Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America* [Charleston: James L. Burges, 1832], 138–39.) Joseph’s 1832 history referred to “spectacles.” (Joseph Smith History, ca. summer 1832, in *Joseph Smith Histories*, 16.) In January 1833, the Latter-day Saint newspaper *The Evening and the Morning Star*, edited by William W. Phelps, equated “spectacles” and “interpreters” with the term “Urim and Thummim”: the Book of Mormon “was translated by the gift and power of God, by an unlearned man, through the aid of a pair of Interpreters, or spectacles— (known, perhaps, in ancient days as Teraphim, or Urim and Thummim).” (“The Book of Mormon,” *The Evening and the Morning Star*, January 1833, [2].) By 1835 Joseph Smith most often used the term “Urim and Thummim” when speaking of translation and rarely, if ever, used the terms “interpreters” or “spectacles.” (Joseph Smith, Journal, Nov. 9–11, 1835, in *Journals: Volume 1: 1832–1839*, 89; Joseph Smith, History, 1834–1836, in Davidson et al., *Histories, Volume 1*, 116; John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in John W. Welch, ed., with Erick B. Carlson, *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* [Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press and Deseret Book, 2005], 123–28.)
18. Joseph Smith probably possessed more than one seer stone; he appears to have found one of the stones while digging for a well around 1822. (Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* [Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1984], 69–70.)
19. According to Martin Harris, an angel commanded Joseph Smith to stop these activities, which he did by 1826. (See Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 64–76; and Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching,” *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 [Fall 1984]: 489–560.) Joseph did not hide his well-known early involvement in

- treasure seeking. In 1838, he published responses to questions frequently asked of him. “Was not Jo Smith a money digger,” one question read. “Yes,” Joseph answered, “but it was never a very profitable job to him, as he only got fourteen dollars a month for it.” (Selections from *Elders’ Journal*, July 1838, 43, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).) For the broader cultural context, see Alan Taylor, “The Early Republic’s Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780–1830,” *American Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 6–33.
20. Mark Ashurst–McGee, “A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo–Christian Prophet,” (Master’s Thesis, Utah State University, 2000).
  21. For example, when Joseph Smith showed a seer stone to Wilford Woodruff in late 1841, Woodruff recorded in his journal: “I had the privilege of seeing for the first time in my day the URIM & THUMMIM.” (Wilford Woodruff journal, Dec. 27, 1841, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.) See also [Doctrine and Covenants 130:10](#).
  22. Cornelius Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 9–26.
  23. [Exodus 7:9–12](#); [30:25](#); [40:9](#); [Leviticus 8:10–12](#); [Numbers 21:9](#); [Joshua 3:6–8](#); [John 9:6](#).
  24. Preface to the Book of Mormon, 1830 edition.
  25. Minutes, Church conference, Orange, OH, Oct. 25–26, 1831, in Minute Book 2, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org); Welch, “Miraculous Translation,” 121–9.
  26. Virtually all of the accounts of the translation process are reproduced in Welch, “Miraculous Translation.” Two accounts of the translation process, including the use of a seer stone, have been written by members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and published in Church magazines. Historians have also written about the seer stone in Church publications, both in the *Ensign* and in *The Joseph Smith Papers*. (See Neal A. Maxwell, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1997, 36–41; Russell M. Nelson, “A Treasured Testament,” *Ensign*, July 1993, 61–63; Richard Lloyd Anderson, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign*, Sept. 1977, 78–85; and *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, xxix–xxxii.)
  27. [Alma 37:23–24](#).
  28. “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald* 26 (Oct. 1, 1879), 289–90. Some outside reports describe the spectacles being placed in the hat during the translation process. A Palmyra newspaper published the earliest known account of the translation in August 1829: Jonathan Hadley, a Palmyra printer who may have spoken with Joseph Smith about translation, claimed that the plates were found with a “huge pair of Spectacles,” and that “by placing the Spectacles in a hat, and looking into it, Smith could (he said so, at least,) interpret these characters.” (“Golden Bible,” *Palmyra Freeman*, Aug. 11, 1829, [2].) In the winter of 1831, a Shaker in Union Village, Ohio, spoke of “two transparent stones in the form of spectacles” through which the translator “looked on the engraving & afterwards put his face into a hat & the interpretation then flowed into his mind.” (Christian Goodwillie, “Shaker

Richard McNemar: The Earliest Book of Mormon Reviewer," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 [Spring 2011]: 143.)

29. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 289–90.

30. "One of the Three Witnesses," *Deseret Evening News*, Dec. 13, 1881, 4. Here Martin Harris uses the term "Urim and Thummim" to refer to the interpreters found with the plates.

31. A. W. B., "Mormonites," *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* 2 (Apr. 19, 1831): 120.

32. Goodwillie, "Shaker Richard McNemar," 143. For additional accounts of translation by one of the Three Witnesses, see *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991).

33. Joseph Smith History, ca. Summer 1832, 1, in *Histories, Volume 1, 1832–1844*, 10; available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org). Spelling modernized.

34. [Moroni 10:3–5](#).



# Book of Mormon and DNA Studies

[The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) affirms that the [Book of Mormon](#) is a volume of sacred [scripture](#) comparable to the [Bible](#). It contains a record of God's dealings with three groups of people who migrated from the Near East or West Asia to the Americas hundreds of years before the arrival of Europeans.<sup>1</sup>

Although the primary purpose of the [Book of Mormon](#) is more spiritual than historical, some people have wondered whether the migrations it describes are compatible with scientific studies of ancient America. The discussion has centered on the field of population genetics and developments in DNA science. Some have contended that the migrations mentioned in the Book of Mormon did not occur because the majority of DNA identified to date in modern native peoples most closely resembles that of eastern Asian populations.<sup>2</sup>

Basic principles of population genetics suggest the need for a more careful approach to the data. The conclusions of genetics, like those of any science, are tentative, and much work remains to be done to fully understand the origins of the native populations of the Americas. Nothing is known about the DNA of Book of Mormon peoples, and even if their genetic profile were known, there are sound scientific reasons that it might remain undetected. For these same reasons, arguments that some defenders of the Book of Mormon make based on DNA studies are also speculative. In short, DNA studies cannot be used decisively to either affirm or reject the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

## The Ancestors of the American Indians

The evidence assembled to date suggests that the majority of Native Americans carry largely Asian DNA.<sup>3</sup> Scientists theorize that in an era that predated Book of Mormon accounts, a relatively small group of people migrated from northeast Asia to the Americas by way of a land bridge that connected Siberia to Alaska.<sup>4</sup> These people, scientists say, spread rapidly to fill North and South America and were likely the primary ancestors of modern American Indians.<sup>5</sup> The Book of Mormon provides little direct information about cultural contact between the peoples it describes and others who may have lived nearby. Consequently, most early Latter-day Saints assumed that Near Easterners or West Asians like Jared, Lehi, Mulek, and their companions were the first or the largest or even the only groups to settle the Americas. Building upon this assumption, critics insist that the Book of Mormon does not allow for the



presence of other large populations in the Americas and that, therefore, Near Eastern DNA should be easily identifiable among modern native groups.

The Book of Mormon itself, however, does not claim that the peoples it describes were either the predominant or the exclusive inhabitants of the lands they occupied. In fact, cultural and demographic clues in its text hint at the presence of other groups.<sup>6</sup> At the April 1929 general conference, President Anthony W. Ivins of the First Presidency cautioned: “We must be careful in the conclusions that we reach. The Book of Mormon ... does not tell us that there was no one here before them [the peoples it describes]. It does not tell us that people did not come after.”<sup>7</sup> [Joseph Smith](#) appears to have been open to the idea of migrations other than those described in the Book of Mormon,<sup>8</sup> and many [Latter-day Saint](#) leaders and scholars over the past century have found the Book of Mormon account to be fully consistent with the presence of other established populations.<sup>9</sup> The 2006 update to the introduction of the Book of Mormon reflects this understanding by stating that Book of Mormon peoples were “among the ancestors of the American Indians.”<sup>10</sup>

Nothing is known about the extent of intermarriage and genetic mixing between Book of Mormon peoples or their descendants and other inhabitants of the Americas, though some mixing appears evident, even during the period covered by the book’s text.<sup>11</sup> What seems clear is that the DNA of Book of Mormon peoples likely represented only a fraction of all DNA in ancient America. Finding and clearly identifying their DNA today may be asking more of the science of population genetics than it is capable of providing.

## Understanding the Genetic Evidence

A brief review of the basic principles of genetics will help explain how scientists use DNA to study ancient populations. It will also highlight the difficulty of drawing conclusions about the Book of Mormon from the study of genetics.

DNA—the set of instructions for building and sustaining life—is found in the nucleus of almost every human cell. It is organized in 46 units called chromosomes—23 received from each parent. These chromosomes contain about 3.2 billion instructions. Any two individuals share approximately 99.9% of their genetic arrangement, but the thousands of small differences account for the tremendous variation between people.

Genetic variations are introduced through what geneticists call random mutation. Mutations are errors that occur as DNA is copied during the formation of reproductive cells. These mutations accumulate over time as they are passed from generation to generation, resulting in unique genetic profiles. The inheritance pattern of the first 22 pairs of chromosomes (called autosomes) is characterized by continuous shuffling: half of the DNA from both the father and the mother recombine to form the DNA of their children. The 23rd pair of chromosomes

determines the gender of a child (XY for a male, XX for a female). Because only males have the Y chromosome, a son inherits this chromosome mostly intact from his father.

Human cells also have DNA in a component of the cell called the mitochondria. Mitochondrial DNA is relatively small—containing approximately 17,000 instructions—and is inherited largely intact from the mother. A mother’s mitochondrial DNA is passed to all of her children, but only her daughters will pass their mitochondrial DNA to the next generation.

Mitochondrial DNA was the first type of DNA to be sequenced and was thus the first that geneticists used to study populations. As technology has improved, analysis of autosomal DNA has allowed geneticists to conduct sophisticated studies involving combinations of multiple genetic markers.

Population geneticists attempt to reconstruct the origins, migrations, and relationships of populations using modern and ancient DNA samples. Examining available data, scientists have identified combinations of mutations that are distinctive of populations in different regions of the world. Unique mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosome profiles are called haplogroups.<sup>12</sup> Scientists designate these haplogroups with letters of the alphabet.<sup>13</sup>

At the present time, scientific consensus holds that the vast majority of Native Americans belong to sub-branches of the Y-chromosome haplogroups C and Q<sup>14</sup> and the mitochondrial DNA haplogroups A, B, C, D, and X, all of which are predominantly East Asian.<sup>15</sup> But the picture is not entirely clear. Continuing studies provide new insights, and some challenge previous conclusions. For example, a 2013 study states that as much as one-third of Native American DNA originated anciently in Europe or West Asia and was likely introduced into the gene pool before the earliest migration to the Americas.<sup>16</sup> This study paints a more complex picture than is suggested by the prevailing opinion that all Native American DNA is essentially East Asian. While Near Eastern DNA markers do exist in the DNA of modern native populations, it is difficult to determine whether they are the result of migrations that predated Columbus, such as those described in the Book of Mormon, or whether they stem from genetic mixing that occurred after the European conquest. This is due in part to the fact that the “molecular clock” used by scientists to date the appearance of genetic markers is not always accurate enough to pinpoint the timing of migrations that occurred as recently as a few hundred or even a few thousand years ago.<sup>17</sup>

Scientists do not rule out the possibility of additional, small-scale migrations to the Americas.<sup>18</sup> For example, a 2010 genetic analysis of a well-preserved 4,000-year-old Paleo-Eskimo in Greenland led scientists to hypothesize that a group of people besides those from East Asia had migrated to the Americas.<sup>19</sup> Commenting on this study, population geneticist Marcus Feldman of Stanford University said: “Models that suggest a single one-time migration

are generally regarded as idealized systems. ... There may have been small amounts of migrations going on for millennia.”<sup>20</sup>

## The Founder Effect

One reason it is difficult to use DNA evidence to draw definite conclusions about Book of Mormon peoples is that nothing is known about the DNA that Lehi, Sariah, Ishmael, and others brought to the Americas. Even if geneticists had a database of the DNA that now exists among all modern American Indian groups, it would be impossible to know exactly what to search for. It is possible that each member of the emigrating parties described in the Book of Mormon had DNA typical of the Near East, but it is likewise possible that some of them carried DNA more typical of other regions. In this case, their descendants might inherit a genetic profile that would be unexpected given their family’s place of origin. This phenomenon is called the founder effect.

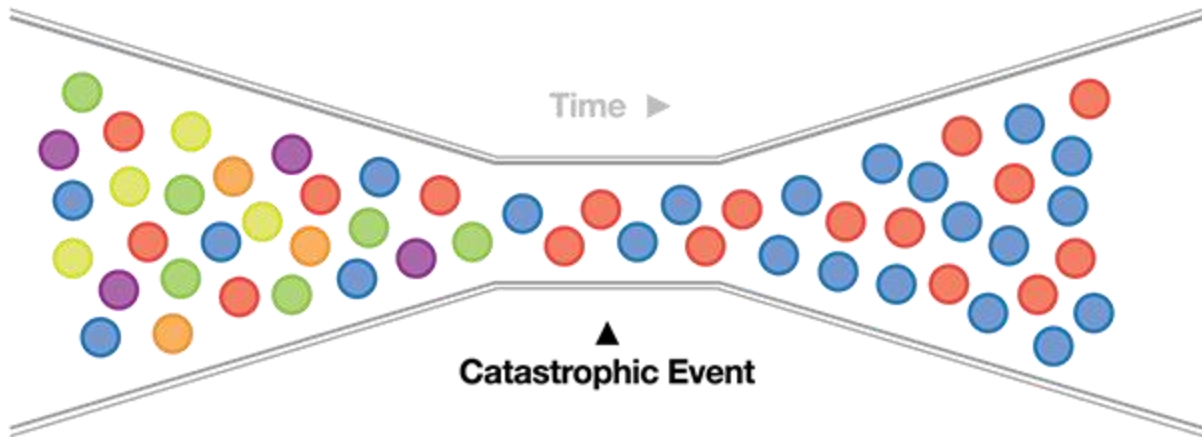
Consider the case of Dr. Ugo A. Perego, a Latter-day Saint population geneticist. His genealogy confirms that he is a multigeneration Italian, but the DNA of his paternal genetic lineage is from a branch of the Asian/Native American haplogroup C. This likely means that, somewhere along the line, a migratory event from Asia to Europe led to the introduction of DNA atypical of Perego’s place of origin.<sup>21</sup> If Perego and his family were to colonize an isolated landmass, future geneticists conducting a study of his descendants’ Y chromosomes might conclude that the original settlers of that landmass were from Asia rather than Italy. This hypothetical story shows that conclusions about the genetics of a population must be informed by a clear understanding of the DNA of the population’s founders. In the case of the Book of Mormon, clear information of that kind is unavailable.

## Population Bottleneck and Genetic Drift

The difficulties do not end with the founder effect. Even if it were known with a high degree of certainty that the emigrants described in the Book of Mormon had what might be considered typically Near Eastern DNA, it is quite possible that their DNA markers did not survive the intervening centuries. Principles well known to scientists, including population bottleneck and genetic drift, often lead to the loss of genetic markers or make those markers nearly impossible to detect.

### Population Bottleneck

Population bottleneck is the loss of genetic variation that occurs when a natural disaster, epidemic disease, massive war, or other calamity results in the death of a substantial part of a population. These events may severely reduce or totally eliminate certain genetic profiles. In such cases, a population may regain genetic diversity over time through mutation, but much of the diversity that previously existed is irretrievably lost.



*Illustration of population bottleneck. Due to a dramatic reduction in population, some genetic profiles (represented here by the yellow, orange, green, and purple circles), are lost. Subsequent generations inherit only the DNA of the survivors.*

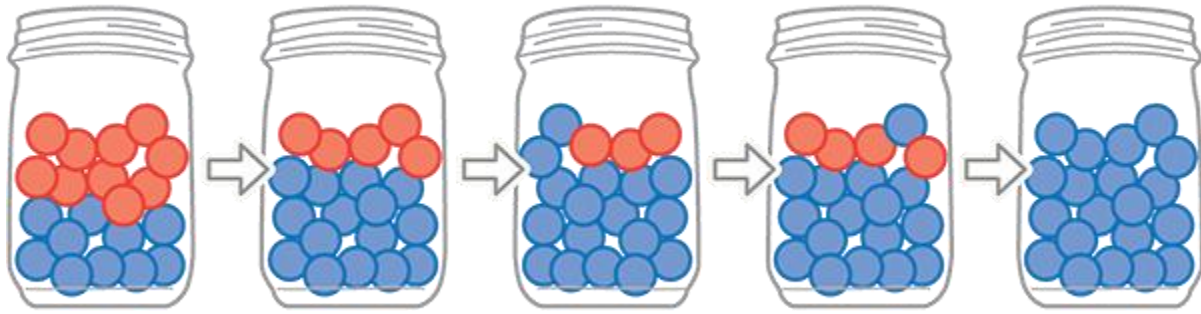
In addition to the catastrophic war at the end of the Book of Mormon, the European conquest of the Americas in the 15th and 16th centuries touched off just such a cataclysmic chain of events. As a result of war and the spread of disease, many Native American groups experienced devastating population losses.<sup>22</sup> One molecular anthropologist observed that the conquest “squeezed the entire Amerindian population through a genetic bottleneck.” He concluded, “This population reduction has forever altered the genetics of the surviving groups, thus complicating any attempts at reconstructing the pre-Columbian genetic structure of most New World groups.”<sup>23</sup>

## Genetic Drift

Genetic drift is the gradual loss of genetic markers in small populations due to random events. A simple illustration is often used to teach this concept:

Fill a jar with 20 marbles—10 red, 10 blue. The jar represents a population, and the marbles represent people with different genetic profiles. Draw a marble at random from this population, record its color, and place it back in the jar. Each draw represents the birth of a child. Draw 20 times to simulate a new generation within the population. The second generation could have an equal number of each color, but more likely it will have an uneven number of the two colors.

Before you draw a third generation, adjust the proportion of each color in the jar to reflect the new mix of genetic profiles in the gene pool. As you continue drawing, the now-uneven mix will lead to ever more frequent draws of the dominant color. Over several generations, this “drift” toward one color will almost certainly result in the disappearance of the other color.



*Illustration of genetic drift using colored marbles.*

This exercise illustrates the inheritance pattern of genetic material over the course of several generations and shows how drift can result in the loss of genetic profiles. The effect of drift is especially pronounced in small, isolated populations or in cases where a small group carrying a distinct genetic profile intermingles with a much larger population of a different lineage.

A study in Iceland combining both genetic and genealogical data demonstrates that the majority of people living in that country today inherited mitochondrial DNA from just a small percentage of the people who lived there only 300 years ago.<sup>24</sup> The mitochondrial DNA of the majority of Icelanders living at that time simply did not survive the random effects of drift. It is conceivable that much of the DNA of Book of Mormon peoples did not survive for the same reason.

Genetic drift particularly affects mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosome DNA, but it also leads to the loss of variation in autosomal DNA. When a small population mixes with a large one, combinations of autosomal markers typical of the smaller group become rapidly overwhelmed or swamped by those of the larger. The smaller group's markers soon become rare in the combined population and may go extinct due to the effects of genetic drift and bottlenecks as described above. Moreover, the shuffling and recombination of autosomal DNA from generation to generation produces new combinations of markers in which the predominant genetic signal comes from the larger original population. This can make the combinations of markers characteristic of the smaller group so diluted that they cannot be reliably identified.

The authors of a 2008 paper in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* summarized the impact of these forces succinctly: "Genetic drift has been a significant force [on Native American genetics], and together with a major population crash after European contact, has altered haplogroup frequencies and caused the loss of many haplotypes."<sup>25</sup> Genetic profiles may be entirely lost, and combinations that once existed may become so diluted that they are difficult to detect. Thus, portions of a population may in fact be related genealogically to an individual

or group but not have DNA that can be identified as belonging to those ancestors. In other words, Native Americans whose ancestors include Book of Mormon peoples may not be able to confirm that relationship using their DNA.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

Much as critics and defenders of the Book of Mormon would like to use DNA studies to support their views, the evidence is simply inconclusive. Nothing is known about the DNA of Book of Mormon peoples. Even if such information were known, processes such as population bottleneck and genetic drift make it unlikely that their DNA could be detected today. As Elder [Dallin H. Oaks](#) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles observed, “It is our position that secular evidence can neither prove nor disprove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>27</sup> Book of Mormon record keepers were primarily concerned with conveying religious truths and preserving the spiritual heritage of their people. They prayed that, in spite of the prophesied destruction of most of their people, their record would be preserved and one day help restore a knowledge of the fulness of the [gospel](#) of [Jesus Christ](#). Their promise to all who study the book “with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ,” is that God “will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the [Holy Ghost](#).”<sup>28</sup> For countless individuals who have applied this test of the book’s authenticity, the Book of Mormon stands as a volume of sacred scripture with the power to bring them closer to [Jesus Christ](#).

## Resources

1. [See introduction to the Book of Mormon](#).
2. This article uses the terms *Native American* and *American Indian* to refer to all the indigenous peoples of both North and South America. For more on the relationship of DNA studies and the Book of Mormon generally see Ugo A. Perego, “The Book of Mormon and the Origin of Native Americans from a Maternally Inherited DNA Standpoint,” in Robert L. Millet, ed., *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues* (2011), 171–216; Michael F. Whiting, “DNA and the Book of Mormon: A Phylogenetic Perspective,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 1 (2003), 24–35; Daniel C. Peterson, ed., *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research* (2008).
3. Antonio Torroni and others, “Asian Affinities and Continental Radiation of the Four Founding Native American mtDNAs,” *American Journal of Human Genetics* 53 (1993), 563–90; Alessandro Achilli and others, “The Phylogeny of the Four Pan-American MtDNA Haplogroups: Implications for Evolutionary and Disease Studies,” *PloS ONE* 3, no. 3 (Mar. 2008), e1764.
4. Ugo A. Perego and others, “Distinctive Paleo-Indian Migration Routes from Beringia Marked by Two Rare mtDNA Haplogroups,” *Current Biology* 19 (2009), 1–8.
5. Martin Bodner and others, “Rapid Coastal Spread of First Americans: Novel Insights from South America’s Southern Cone Mitochondrial Genomes,” *Genome Research* 22 (2012), 811–20.

6. John L. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1992), 1–34. These arguments were summarized more recently in John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (2013). Sorenson suggests that indicators in the book's text makes it "inescapable that there were substantial populations in the 'promised land' throughout the period of the Nephite record, and probably in the Jaredite era also" ("When Lehi's Party Arrived," 34).
7. Anthony W. Ivins, in Conference Report, Apr. 1929, 15.
8. "Facts Are Stubborn Things," *Times and Seasons* 3 (Sept. 15, 1842): 922. This article is unattributed but was published under Joseph Smith's editorship. See also Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (1988), 250.
9. For a review of statements on this subject, see Matthew Roper, "Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003), 91–128.
10. Introduction to the Book of Mormon. The introduction, which is not part of the text of the Book of Mormon, previously stated that the Lamanites were the "principal ancestors of the American Indians." Even this statement, first published in 1981, implies the presence of others. (See introduction to the Book of Mormon, 1981 ed.)
11. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived," 5–12.
12. Peter A. Underhill and Toomas Kivisild, "Use of Y Chromosome and Mitochondrial DNA Population Structure in Tracing Human Migrations," *Annual Review of Genetics* 41 (2007), 539–64.
13. Haplogroup names follow a standardized nomenclature of alternated letters of the alphabet and numbers. See International Society of Genetic Genealogy, "[Y-DNA Haplogroup Tree 2014](http://www.isogg.org/tree)"; Mannis van Oven and Manfred Kayser M., "[Updated Comprehensive Phylogenetic Tree of Global Human Mitochondrial DNA Variation](http://www.phylotree.org)," *Human Mutation* 30 (2009), E386–E394. You are about to access <http://www.isogg.org/tree> and <http://www.phylotree.org>. You are now leaving a website maintained by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We provide the link to this third party's website solely as a convenience to you. The linked site has its own terms of use, privacy policies, and security practices that differ from those on our website. By referring or linking you to this website, we do not endorse or guarantee the content, products, or services offered.
14. Vincenza Battaglia and others, "The First Peopling of South America: New Evidence from Y-Chromosome Haplogroup Q," *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 8 (Aug. 2013), e71390.
15. Ugo A. Perego and others, "The Initial Peopling of the Americas: A Growing Number of Founding Mitochondrial Genomes from Beringia," *Genome Research* 20 (2010), 1174–79.
16. Maanasa Raghavan and others, "Upper Palaeolithic Siberian Genome Reveals Dual Ancestry of Native Americans," *Nature*, Nov. 20, 2013.
17. This "clock" is based on the observed rate at which random mutations occur in DNA over time. For an example of a proposed mitochondrial DNA molecular clock see Pedro Soares



- and others, "Correcting for Purifying Selection: An Improved Human Mitochondrial Molecular Clock," *American Journal of Human Genetics* 84 (2009), 740–59.
18. Alessandro Achilli and others, "Reconciling Migration Models to the Americas with the Variation of North American Native Mitogenomes," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 35 (2013), 14308–13.
  19. Morten Rasmussen and others, "Ancient Human Genome Sequence of an Extinct Palaeo-Eskimo," *Nature*, Feb. 11, 2010, 757–62. This hypothetical migration would have been separated by approximately 200 generations from early migrations to the Americas.
  20. Quoted in Cassandra Brooks, "First Ancient Human Sequenced," *Scientist*, Feb. 10, 2010, [www.thescientist.com/blog/display/57140](http://www.thescientist.com/blog/display/57140). Michael H. Crawford, molecular anthropologist at the University of Kansas, noted similarly that the "evidence does not preclude the possibility of some small-scale cultural contacts between specific Amerindian societies and Asian or Oceanic seafarers" (Michael H. Crawford, *The Origins of Native Americans: Evidence from Anthropological Genetics* [1998], 4).
  21. Perego, "Origin of Native Americans," 186–87.
  22. Native populations were reduced by as much as 95 percent. See David S. Jones, "Virgin Soils Revisited," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, vol. 60, no. 4 (Oct. 2003), 703–42.
  23. Crawford, *Origins of Native Americans*, 49–51, 239–41, 260–61.
  24. Agnar Helgason and others, "A Populationwide Coalescent Analysis of Icelandic Matrilineal and Patrilineal Genealogies: Evidence for a Faster Evolutionary Rate of mtDNA Lineages than Y Chromosomes," *American Journal of Human Genetics* 72 (2003), 1370–88.
  25. Beth Alison Schultz Shook and David Glenn Smith, "Using Ancient MtDNA to Reconstruct the Population History of Northeastern North America," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 137 (2008), 14.
  26. See "[How Many Genetic Ancestors Do I Have?](#)" Co-op Lab, Population and Evolutionary Genetics, UC Davis.  
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  27. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Historicity of the Book of Mormon," in Paul Y. Hoskisson, ed., *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures* (2001), 239.
  28. [Moroni 10:4](#).



# Race and the Priesthood

In theology and practice, [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) embraces the universal human family. Latter-day Saint scripture and teachings affirm that God loves all of His children and makes salvation available to all. God created the many diverse races and ethnicities and esteems them all equally. As the [Book of Mormon](#) puts it, “all are alike unto God.”<sup>1</sup> The structure and organization of the Church encourage racial integration. Latter-day Saints attend Church services according to the geographical boundaries of their [local ward](#), or congregation. By definition, this means that the racial, economic, and demographic composition of Mormon congregations generally mirrors that of the wider local community.<sup>2</sup> The Church’s lay ministry also tends to facilitate integration: a black bishop may preside over a mostly white congregation; a Hispanic woman may be paired with an Asian woman to visit the homes of a racially diverse membership. Church members of different races and ethnicities regularly minister in one another’s homes and serve alongside one another as teachers, as youth leaders, and in myriad other assignments in their local congregations. Such practices make The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints a thoroughly integrated faith. Despite this modern reality, for much of its history—from the mid-1800s until 1978—the Church did not ordain men of black African descent to its [priesthood](#) or allow black men or women to participate in temple endowment or sealing ordinances.

The Church was established in 1830, during an era of great racial division in the United States. At the time, many people of African descent lived in slavery, and racial distinctions and prejudice were not just common but customary among white Americans. Those realities, though unfamiliar and disturbing today, influenced all aspects of people’s lives, including their religion. Many Christian churches of that era, for instance, were segregated along racial lines. From the beginnings of the Church, people of every race and ethnicity could be baptized and received as members. Toward the end of his life, Church founder [Joseph Smith](#) openly opposed slavery. There has never been a Churchwide policy of segregated congregations.<sup>3</sup>

During the first two decades of the Church’s existence, a few black men were ordained to the priesthood. One of these men, Elijah Abel, also participated in temple ceremonies in Kirtland, Ohio, and was later baptized as proxy for deceased relatives in Nauvoo, Illinois. There is no evidence that any black men were denied the priesthood during Joseph Smith’s lifetime.

In 1852, President [Brigham Young](#) publicly announced that men of black African descent could no longer be ordained to the priesthood, though thereafter blacks continued to join the Church through [baptism](#) and receiving [the gift of the Holy Ghost](#). Following the death of Brigham

Young, subsequent Church presidents restricted blacks from receiving the temple endowment or being married in [the temple](#). Over time, Church leaders and members advanced many theories to explain the priesthood and temple restrictions. None of these explanations is accepted today as the official doctrine of the Church.

## The Church in an American Racial Culture

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was [restored](#) amidst a highly contentious racial culture in which whites were afforded great privilege. In 1790, the U.S. Congress limited citizenship to “free white person[s].”<sup>4</sup> Over the next half century, issues of race divided the country—while slave labor was legal in the more agrarian South, it was eventually banned in the more urbanized North. Even so, racial discrimination was widespread in the North as well as the South, and many states implemented laws banning interracial marriage.<sup>5</sup> In 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that blacks possessed “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”<sup>6</sup> A generation after the Civil War (1861–65) led to the end of slavery in the United States, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” facilities for blacks and whites were constitutional, a decision that legalized a host of public color barriers until the Court reversed itself in 1954.<sup>7</sup>

In 1850, the U.S. Congress created [Utah Territory](#), and the U.S. president appointed Brigham Young to the position of territorial governor. Southerners who had converted to the Church and migrated to Utah with their slaves raised the question of slavery’s legal status in the territory. In two speeches delivered before the Utah territorial legislature in January and February 1852, Brigham Young announced a policy restricting men of black African descent from priesthood ordination. At the same time, President Young said that at some future day, black Church members would “have [all] the privilege and more” enjoyed by other members.<sup>8</sup>

The justifications for this restriction echoed the widespread ideas about racial inferiority that had been used to argue for the legalization of black “servitude” in the Territory of Utah.<sup>9</sup> According to one view, which had been promulgated in the United States from at least the 1730s, blacks descended from the same lineage as the biblical Cain, who slew his brother Abel.<sup>10</sup> Those who accepted this view believed that God’s “curse” on Cain was the mark of a dark skin. Black servitude was sometimes viewed as a second curse placed upon Noah’s grandson Canaan as a result of Ham’s indiscretion toward his father.<sup>11</sup> Although slavery was not a significant factor in Utah’s economy and was soon abolished, the restriction on priesthood ordinations remained.

## Removing the Restriction

Even after 1852, at least two black Mormons continued to hold the priesthood. When one of these men, Elijah Abel, petitioned to receive his temple endowment in 1879, his request was

denied. Jane Manning James, a faithful black member who crossed the plains and lived in Salt Lake City until her death in 1908, similarly asked to enter the temple; she was allowed to perform [baptisms for the dead](#) for her ancestors but was not allowed to participate in other ordinances.<sup>12</sup> The curse of Cain was often put forward as justification for the priesthood and temple restrictions. Around the turn of the century, another explanation gained currency: blacks were said to have been less than fully valiant in the premortal battle against Lucifer and, as a consequence, were restricted from priesthood and temple blessings.<sup>13</sup>

By the late 1940s and 1950s, racial integration was becoming more common in American life. Church President [David O. McKay](#) emphasized that the restriction extended only to men of black African descent. The Church had always allowed Pacific Islanders to hold the priesthood, and President McKay clarified that black Fijians and Australian Aborigines could also be ordained to the priesthood and instituted missionary work among them. In South Africa, President McKay reversed a prior policy that required prospective priesthood holders to trace their lineage out of Africa.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, given the long history of withholding the priesthood from men of black African descent, Church leaders believed that a revelation from God was needed to alter the policy, and they made ongoing efforts to understand what should be done. After praying for guidance, President McKay did not feel impressed to lift the ban.<sup>15</sup>

As the Church grew worldwide, its overarching mission to “go ye therefore, and teach all nations”<sup>16</sup> seemed increasingly incompatible with the priesthood and temple restrictions. The [Book of Mormon](#) declared that the gospel message of salvation should go forth to “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people.”<sup>17</sup> While there were no limits on whom the Lord invited to “partake of his goodness” through baptism,<sup>18</sup> the priesthood and temple restrictions created significant barriers, a point made increasingly evident as the Church spread in international locations with diverse and mixed racial heritages.

Brazil in particular presented many challenges. Unlike the United States and South Africa where legal and de facto racism led to deeply segregated societies, Brazil prided itself on its open, integrated, and mixed racial heritage. In 1975, the Church announced that a temple would be built in São Paulo, Brazil. As the temple construction proceeded, Church authorities encountered faithful black and mixed-ancestry Mormons who had contributed financially and in other ways to the building of the São Paulo temple, a sanctuary they realized they would not be allowed to enter once it was completed. Their sacrifices, as well as the conversions of thousands of Nigerians and Ghanaians in the 1960s and early 1970s, moved Church leaders.<sup>19</sup> Church leaders pondered promises made by prophets such as Brigham Young that black members would one day receive priesthood and temple blessings. In June 1978, after “spending many hours in the Upper Room of the [Salt Lake] Temple supplicating the Lord for divine

guidance,” Church President [Spencer W. Kimball](#), his counselors in the [First Presidency](#), and members of the [Quorum of the Twelve Apostles](#) received a revelation. “He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come,” the First Presidency announced on June 8. The First Presidency stated that they were “aware of the promises made by the prophets and presidents of the Church who have preceded us” that “all of our brethren who are worthy may receive the priesthood.”<sup>20</sup> The revelation rescinded the restriction on priesthood ordination. It also extended the blessings of the temple to all worthy Latter-day Saints, men and women. The First Presidency statement regarding the revelation was canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants as Official Declaration 2.

This “revelation on the priesthood,” as it is commonly known in the Church, was a landmark revelation and a historic event. Those who were present at the time described it in reverent terms. [Gordon B. Hinckley](#), then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, remembered it this way: “There was a hallowed and sanctified atmosphere in the room. For me, it felt as if a conduit opened between the heavenly throne and the kneeling, pleading prophet of God who was joined by his Brethren. . . . Every man in that circle, by the power of the Holy Ghost, knew the same thing. . . . Not one of us who was present on that occasion was ever quite the same after that. Nor has the Church been quite the same.”<sup>21</sup>

Reaction worldwide was overwhelmingly positive among Church members of all races. Many Latter-day Saints wept for joy at the news. Some reported feeling a collective weight lifted from their shoulders. The Church began priesthood ordinations for men of African descent immediately, and black men and women entered temples throughout the world. Soon after the revelation, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, an apostle, spoke of new “light and knowledge” that had erased previously “limited understanding.”<sup>22</sup>

## The Church Today

Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.<sup>23</sup> Since that day in 1978, the Church has looked to the future, as membership among Africans, African Americans and others of African descent has continued to grow rapidly. While Church records for individual members do not indicate an individual’s race or ethnicity, the number of Church members of African descent is now in the hundreds of thousands.

The Church proclaims that redemption through [Jesus Christ](#) is available to the entire human family on the conditions God has prescribed. It affirms that God is “no respecter of persons”<sup>24</sup> and emphatically declares that anyone who is righteous—regardless of race—is favored of Him. The teachings of the Church in relation to God’s children are epitomized by a

verse in the second book of Nephi: “[The Lord] denieth none that cometh unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; . . . all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.”<sup>25</sup>

## Related Gospel Topics

- [Priesthood](#)
- [Aaronic Priesthood](#)
- [Melchizedek Priesthood](#)
- [Restoration of the Gospel](#)

## Resources

1. [2 Nephi 26:33](#). See also [Acts 10:34–35](#); [17:26](#); [Romans 2:11](#); [10:12](#); [Galatians 3:28](#).
2. To facilitate involvement of Church members who do not speak the dominant language of the area in which they live, some congregations are organized among speakers of the same language (such as Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, or Tongan). In such cases, members can choose which congregation to attend.
3. At some periods of time, reflecting local customs and laws, there were instances of segregated congregations in areas such as South Africa and the U.S. South.
4. “An Act to Establish an Uniform Rule of Naturalization,” 1<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., Chap. 3 (1790).
5. Elise Lemire, *“Miscegenation”: Making Race in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Utah outlawed miscegenation between 1888 and 1963. See Patrick Mason, “The Prohibition of Interracial Marriage in Utah, 1888–1963,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 108–131.
6. Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 347.
7. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896); *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
8. Brigham Young, Speeches Before the Utah Territorial Legislature, Jan. 23 and Feb. 5, 1852, George D. Watt Papers, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, transcribed from Pitman shorthand by Lajean Purcell Carruth; “To the Saints,” *Deseret News*, April 3, 1852, 42.
9. In the same session of the territorial legislature in which Brigham Young announced the priesthood ordination policy, the territorial legislature legalized black “servitude.” Brigham Young and the legislators perceived “servitude” to be a more humane alternative to slavery. Christopher B. Rich Jr., “The True Policy for Utah: Servitude, Slavery, and ‘An Act in Relation to Service,’” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 80, no.1 (Winter 2012): 54–74.

10. David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 178–182, 360n20; Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
11. Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
12. Margaret Blair Young, “The Lord’s Blessing Was with Us’: Jane Elizabeth Manning James, 1822–1908,” in Richard E. Turley Jr. and Brittany A. Chapman, eds., *Women of Faith in the Latter Days, Volume Two, 1821–1845* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 120–135.
13. Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith, for example, wrote in 1907 that the belief was “quite general” among Mormons that “the Negro race has been cursed for taking a neutral position in that great contest.” Yet this belief, he admitted, “is not the official position of the Church, [and is] merely the opinion of men.” Joseph Fielding Smith to Alfred M. Nelson, Jan. 31, 1907, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
14. Edward L. Kimball, “[Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood](#),” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (Spring 2008), 18–20; Marjorie Newton, *Southern Cross Saints: The Mormons in Australia* (Laie: Hawaii: The Institute for Polynesian Studies, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, 1991), 209–210. Even before this time, President George Albert Smith concluded that the priesthood ban did not apply to Filipino Negritos. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on the Priesthood,” 18–19.  
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15. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” 21–22.
16. [Matthew 28:19](#).
17. [Mosiah 15:28](#); [1 Nephi 19:17](#).
18. [2 Nephi 26:23, 28](#).
19. Mark L. Grover, “Mormonism in Brazil: Religion and Dependency in Latin America,” (PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, 1985), 276–278. For a personal account of events in Brazil, see Helvecio Martins with Mark Grover, *The Autobiography of Elder Helvecio Martins* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1994), 64–68. For the conversions of Africans, see E. Dale LeBaron, ed., *“All Are Alike unto God”: Fascinating Conversion Stories of African Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990); *Pioneers in Africa: An Inspiring Story of Those Who Paved the Way* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Broadcasting, 2003).
20. [Official Declaration 2](#).

21. Gordon B. Hinckley, "[Priesthood Restoration](#)," *Ensign*, Oct. 1988, 70, available at [ensign.lds.org](http://ensign.lds.org). The impressions of others who were in the room have been compiled in Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," 54–59.
22. Bruce R. McConkie, "All Are Alike unto God" (CES Religious Educator's Symposium, Aug. 18, 1978); available at [speeches.byu.edu](http://speeches.byu.edu).
23. Gordon B. Hinckley, "[The Need for Greater Kindness](#)," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2006, 58–61.
24. [Acts 10:34](#).
25. [2 Nephi 26:33](#).

# Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints embraces the book of Abraham as scripture. This book, a record of the biblical prophet and patriarch Abraham, recounts how Abraham sought the blessings of the priesthood, rejected the idolatry of his father, covenanted with Jehovah, married Sarai, moved to Canaan and Egypt, and received knowledge about the Creation. The book of Abraham largely follows the biblical narrative but adds important information regarding Abraham's life and teachings.

The book of Abraham was first published in 1842 and was canonized as part of the Pearl of Great Price in 1880. The book originated with Egyptian papyri that Joseph Smith translated beginning in 1835. Many people saw the papyri, but no eyewitness account of the translation survives, making it impossible to reconstruct the process. Only small fragments of the long papyrus scrolls once in Joseph Smith's possession exist today. The relationship between those fragments and the text we have today is largely a matter of conjecture.

We do know some things about the translation process. The word *translation* typically assumes an expert knowledge of multiple languages. Joseph Smith claimed no expertise in any language. He readily acknowledged that he was one of the "weak things of the world," called to speak words sent "from heaven."<sup>1</sup> Speaking of the translation of the Book of Mormon, the Lord said, "You cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me."<sup>2</sup> The same principle can be applied to the book of Abraham. The Lord did not require Joseph Smith to have knowledge of Egyptian. By the gift and power of God, Joseph received knowledge about the life and teachings of Abraham.

On many particulars, the book of Abraham is consistent with historical knowledge about the ancient world.<sup>3</sup> Some of this knowledge, which is discussed later in this essay, had not yet been discovered or was not well known in 1842. But even this evidence of ancient origins, substantial though it may be, cannot prove the truthfulness of the book of Abraham any more than archaeological evidence can prove the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt or the Resurrection of the Son of God. The book of Abraham's status as scripture ultimately rests on faith in the saving truths found within the book itself as witnessed by the Holy Ghost.



# The Book of Abraham as Scripture

Thousands of years ago, the prophet Nephi learned that one purpose of the Book of Mormon was to “establish the truth” of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> In a similar way, the book of Abraham supports, expands, and clarifies the biblical account of Abraham’s life.

In the biblical account, God covenants with Abraham to “make of thee a great nation.”<sup>5</sup> The book of Abraham provides context for that covenant by showing that Abraham was a seeker of “great knowledge” and a “follower of righteousness” who chose the right path in spite of great hardship. He rejected the wickedness of his father’s household and spurned the idols of the surrounding culture, despite the threat of death.<sup>6</sup>

In the Bible, God’s covenant with Abraham appears to begin during Abraham’s life. According to the book of Abraham, the covenant began before the foundation of the earth and was passed down through Adam, Noah, and other prophets.<sup>7</sup> Abraham thus takes his place in a long line of prophets and patriarchs whose mission is to preserve and extend God’s covenant on earth. The heart of this covenant is the priesthood, through which “the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal” are conveyed.<sup>8</sup>

The book of Abraham clarifies several teachings that are obscure in the Bible. Life did not begin at birth, as is commonly believed. Prior to coming to earth, individuals existed as spirits. In a vision, Abraham saw that one of the spirits was “like unto God.”<sup>9</sup> This divine being, Jesus Christ, led other spirits in organizing the earth out of “materials” or preexisting matter, not ex nihilo or out of nothing, as many Christians later came to believe.<sup>10</sup> Abraham further learned that mortal life was crucial to the plan of happiness God would provide for His children: “We will prove them herewith,” God stated, “to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them,” adding a promise to add glory forever upon the faithful.<sup>11</sup> Nowhere in the Bible is the purpose and potential of earth life stated so clearly as in the book of Abraham.

## Origin of the Book of Abraham

The powerful truths found in the book of Abraham emerged from a set of unique historical events. In the summer of 1835, an entrepreneur named Michael Chandler arrived at Church headquarters in Kirtland, Ohio, with four mummies and multiple scrolls of papyrus.<sup>12</sup> Chandler found a ready audience. Due partly to the exploits of the French emperor Napoleon, the antiquities unearthed in the catacombs of Egypt had created a fascination across the Western world.<sup>13</sup> Chandler capitalized on this interest by touring with ancient Egyptian artifacts and charging visitors a fee to see them.

These artifacts had been uncovered by Antonio Lebolo, a former cavalryman in the Italian army. Lebolo, who oversaw some of the excavations for the consul general of France, pulled 11

mummies from a tomb not far from the ancient city of Thebes. Lebolo shipped the artifacts to Italy, and after his death, they ended up in New York. At some point the mummies and scrolls came into Chandler's possession.<sup>14</sup>

By the time the collection arrived in Kirtland, all but four mummies and several papyrus scrolls had already been sold. A group of Latter-day Saints in Kirtland purchased the remaining artifacts for the Church. After Joseph Smith examined the papyri and commenced "the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics," his history recounts, "much to our joy [we] found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham."<sup>15</sup>

## Translation and the Book of Abraham

Joseph Smith worked on the translation of the book of Abraham during the summer and fall of 1835, by which time he completed at least the first chapter and part of the second chapter.<sup>16</sup> His journal next speaks of translating the papyri in the spring of 1842, after the Saints had relocated to Nauvoo, Illinois. All five chapters of the book of Abraham, along with three illustrations (now known as facsimiles 1, 2, and 3), were published in the *Times and Seasons*, the Church's newspaper in Nauvoo, between March and May 1842.<sup>17</sup>

The book of Abraham was the last of Joseph Smith's translation efforts. In these inspired translations, Joseph Smith did not claim to know the ancient languages of the records he was translating. Much like the Book of Mormon, Joseph's translation of the book of Abraham was recorded in the language of the King James Bible. This was the idiom of scripture familiar to early Latter-day Saints, and its use was consistent with the Lord's pattern of revealing His truths "after the manner of their [His servants'] language, that they might come to understanding."<sup>18</sup>

Joseph's translations took a variety of forms. Some of his translations, like that of the Book of Mormon, utilized ancient documents in his possession. Other times, his translations were not based on any known physical records. Joseph's translation of portions of the Bible, for example, included restoration of original text, harmonization of contradictions within the Bible itself, and inspired commentary.<sup>19</sup>

Some evidence suggests that Joseph studied the characters on the Egyptian papyri and attempted to learn the Egyptian language. His history reports that, in July 1835, he was "continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arranging a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients."<sup>20</sup> This "grammar," as it was called, consisted of columns of hieroglyphic characters followed by English translations recorded in a large notebook by Joseph's scribe, William W. Phelps. Another manuscript, written by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, has Egyptian characters followed by explanations.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship of these documents to the book of Abraham is not fully understood. Neither the rules nor the translations in the grammar book correspond to those recognized by Egyptologists today. Whatever the role of the grammar book, it appears that Joseph Smith began translating portions of the book of Abraham almost immediately after the purchase of the papyri.<sup>22</sup> Phelps apparently viewed Joseph Smith as uniquely capable of understanding the Egyptian characters: “As no one could translate these writings,” he told his wife, “they were presented to President Smith. He soon knew what they were.”<sup>23</sup>

## The Papyri

After the Latter-day Saints left Nauvoo, the Egyptian artifacts remained behind. Joseph Smith’s family sold the papyri and the mummies in 1856. The papyri were divided up and sold to various parties; historians believe that most were destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Ten papyrus fragments once in Joseph Smith’s possession ended up in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.<sup>24</sup> In 1967, the museum transferred these fragments to the Church, which subsequently published them in the Church’s magazine, the *Improvement Era*.<sup>25</sup> The discovery of the papyrus fragments renewed debate about Joseph Smith’s translation. The fragments included one vignette, or illustration, that appears in the book of Abraham as facsimile 1. Long before the fragments were published by the Church, some Egyptologists had said that Joseph Smith’s explanations of the various elements of these facsimiles did not match their own interpretations of these drawings. Joseph Smith had published the facsimiles as freestanding drawings, cut off from the hieroglyphs or hieratic characters that originally surrounded the vignettes. The discovery of the fragments meant that readers could now see the hieroglyphs and characters immediately surrounding the vignette that became facsimile 1.<sup>26</sup> None of the characters on the papyrus fragments mentioned Abraham’s name or any of the events recorded in the book of Abraham. Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists agree that the characters on the fragments do not match the translation given in the book of Abraham, though there is not unanimity, even among non-Mormon scholars, about the proper interpretation of the vignettes on these fragments.<sup>27</sup> Scholars have identified the papyrus fragments as parts of standard funerary texts that were deposited with mummified bodies. These fragments date to between the third century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., long after Abraham lived.

Of course, the fragments do not have to be as old as Abraham for the book of Abraham and its illustrations to be authentic. Ancient records are often transmitted as copies or as copies of copies. The record of Abraham could have been edited or redacted by later writers much as the Book of Mormon prophet-historians Mormon and Moroni revised the writings of earlier peoples.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, documents initially composed for one context can be repackaged for another context or purpose.<sup>29</sup> Illustrations once connected with Abraham could have either drifted or been dislodged from their original context and reinterpreted hundreds of years later in terms of burial practices in a later period of Egyptian history. The opposite could also be

true: illustrations with no clear connection to Abraham anciently could, by revelation, shed light on the life and teachings of this prophetic figure.

Some have assumed that the hieroglyphs adjacent to and surrounding facsimile 1 must be a source for the text of the book of Abraham. But this claim rests on the assumption that a vignette and its adjacent text must be associated in meaning. In fact, it was not uncommon for ancient Egyptian vignettes to be placed some distance from their associated commentary.<sup>30</sup> Neither the Lord nor Joseph Smith explained the process of translation of the book of Abraham, but some insight can be gained from the Lord's instructions to Joseph regarding translation. In April 1829, Joseph received a revelation for Oliver Cowdery that taught that both intellectual work and revelation were essential to translating sacred records. It was necessary to "study it out in your mind" and then seek spiritual confirmation. Records indicate that Joseph and others studied the papyri and that close observers also believed that the translation came by revelation. As John Whitmer observed, "Joseph the Seer saw these Record[s] and by the revelation of Jesus Christ could translate these records."<sup>31</sup>

It is likely futile to assess Joseph's ability to translate papyri when we now have only a fraction of the papyri he had in his possession. Eyewitnesses spoke of "a long roll" or multiple "rolls" of papyrus.<sup>32</sup> Since only fragments survive, it is likely that much of the papyri accessible to Joseph when he translated the book of Abraham is not among these fragments. The loss of a significant portion of the papyri means the relationship of the papyri to the published text cannot be settled conclusively by reference to the papyri.

Alternatively, Joseph's study of the papyri may have led to a revelation about key events and teachings in the life of Abraham, much as he had earlier received a revelation about the life of Moses while studying the Bible. This view assumes a broader definition of the words *translator* and *translation*.<sup>33</sup> According to this view, Joseph's translation was not a literal rendering of the papyri as a conventional translation would be. Rather, the physical artifacts provided an occasion for meditation, reflection, and revelation. They catalyzed a process whereby God gave to Joseph Smith a revelation about the life of Abraham, even if that revelation did not directly correlate to the characters on the papyri.<sup>34</sup>

## The Book of Abraham and the Ancient World

A careful study of the book of Abraham provides a better measure of the book's merits than any hypothesis that treats the text as a conventional translation. Evidence suggests that elements of the book of Abraham fit comfortably in the ancient world and supports the claim that the book of Abraham is an authentic record.

The book of Abraham speaks disapprovingly of human sacrifice offered on an altar in Chaldea. Some victims were placed on the altar as sacrifices because they rejected the idols worshipped

by their leaders.<sup>35</sup> Recent scholarship has found instances of such punishment dating to Abraham's time. People who challenged the standing religious order, either in Egypt or in the regions over which it had influence (such as Canaan), could and did suffer execution for their offenses.<sup>36</sup> The conflict over the religion of Pharaoh, as described in Abraham 1:11–12, is an example of punishment now known to have been meted out during the Abrahamic era. The book of Abraham contains other details that are consistent with modern discoveries about the ancient world. The book speaks of "the plain of Olishem," a name not mentioned in the Bible. An ancient inscription, not discovered and translated until the 20th century, mentions a town called "Ulisum," located in northwestern Syria.<sup>37</sup> Further, Abraham 3:22–23 is written in a poetic structure more characteristic of Near Eastern languages than early American writing style.<sup>38</sup>

Joseph Smith's explanations of the facsimiles of the book of Abraham contain additional earmarks of the ancient world. Facsimile 1 and Abraham 1:17 mention the idolatrous god Elkenah. This deity is not mentioned in the Bible, yet modern scholars have identified it as being among the gods worshipped by ancient Mesopotamians.<sup>39</sup> Joseph Smith represented the four figures in figure 6 of facsimile 2 as "this earth in its four quarters." A similar interpretation has been argued by scholars who study identical figures in other ancient Egyptian texts.<sup>40</sup> Facsimile 1 contains a crocodile deity swimming in what Joseph Smith called "the firmament over our heads." This interpretation makes sense in light of scholarship that identifies Egyptian conceptions of heaven with "a heavenly ocean."<sup>41</sup>

The book of Abraham is consistent with various details found in nonbiblical stories about Abraham that circulated in the ancient world around the time the papyri were likely created. In the book of Abraham, God teaches Abraham about the sun, the moon, and the stars. "I show these things unto thee before ye go into Egypt," the Lord says, "that ye may declare all these words."<sup>42</sup> Ancient texts repeatedly refer to Abraham instructing the Egyptians in knowledge of the heavens. For example, Eupolemus, who lived under Egyptian rule in the second century B.C.E., wrote that Abraham taught astronomy and other sciences to the Egyptian priests.<sup>43</sup> A third-century papyrus from an Egyptian temple library connects Abraham with an illustration similar to facsimile 1 in the book of Abraham.<sup>44</sup> A later Egyptian text, discovered in the 20th century, tells how the Pharaoh tried to sacrifice Abraham, only to be foiled when Abraham was delivered by an angel. Later, according to this text, Abraham taught members of the Pharaoh's court through astronomy.<sup>45</sup> All these details are found in the book of Abraham.

Other details in the book of Abraham are found in ancient traditions located across the Near East. These include Terah, Abraham's father, being an idolator; a famine striking Abraham's homeland; Abraham's familiarity with Egyptian idols; and Abraham's being 62 years old when he left Haran, not 75 as the biblical account states. Some of these extrabiblical elements were

available in apocryphal books or biblical commentaries in Joseph Smith's lifetime, but others were confined to nonbiblical traditions inaccessible or unknown to 19th-century Americans.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

The veracity and value of the book of Abraham cannot be settled by scholarly debate concerning the book's translation and historicity. The book's status as scripture lies in the eternal truths it teaches and the powerful spirit it conveys. The book of Abraham imparts profound truths about the nature of God, His relationship to us as His children, and the purpose of this mortal life. The truth of the book of Abraham is ultimately found through careful study of its teachings, sincere prayer, and the confirmation of the Spirit.

## Resources

1. [Doctrine and Covenants 1:17, 19, 24.](#)
2. [Doctrine and Covenants 9:9.](#)
3. See, for example, Daniel C. Peterson, "News from Antiquity," *Ensign*, Jan. 1994, and John Gee, "[Research and Perspectives: Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts](#)," *Ensign*, July 1992.
4. [1 Nephi 13:40](#). See also [Mormon 7:8-9](#).
5. [Genesis 12:2](#).
6. [Abraham 1:1-2, 5-12](#).
7. [Abraham 1:2-3, 19](#).
8. [Abraham 2:11](#). See also [Doctrine and Covenants 84:19-21](#).
9. [Abraham 3:24](#).
10. [Abraham 3:24; 4:1, 12, 14-16](#).
11. [Abraham 3:25-26](#).
12. Joseph Smith History, 1838-1856, vol. B-1, 596, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
13. See S. J. Wolfe with Robert Singerman, *Mummies in Nineteenth Century America: Ancient Egyptians as Artifacts* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009); and John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).
14. The most extensive treatment of Lebolo and his excavations, though dated in some particulars, is H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 36-85. On the whereabouts of the mummies after they arrived in the United States, see Brian L. Smith interview by Philip R. Webb, "Mystery of the Mummies: An Update on the Joseph Smith Collection," *Religious Studies Center Newsletter* 20, no. 2 (2005): 1-5.
15. Joseph Smith History, 1838-1856, vol. B-1, 596, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).

16. Brian M. Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2010), 6, 84, 110.
17. Joseph Smith, Journal, March 8–9, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org); “A Fac-Simile from the Book of Abraham” and “A Translation,” *Times and Seasons*, Mar. 1, 1842, 703–6, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org); “The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons*, Mar. 15, 1842, 719–22, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org); and “A Fac-Simile from the Book of Abraham” and “Explanation of Cut on First Page,” *Times and Seasons*, May 16, 1842, 783–84.
18. [Doctrine and Covenants 1:24](#).
19. Robert J. Matthews, *“A Plainer Translation”: Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), 253. In Joseph Smith’s day, the word *translate* could mean “to interpret; to render into another language.” The word *interpret* could mean “to explain the meaning of words to a person who does not understand them,” or “to explain or unfold the meaning of predictions, vision, dreams or enigmas; to expound and lay open what is concealed from the understanding.” (Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* [New York: S. Converse, 1828], s.v. “Translate,” “Interpret.”)
20. Joseph Smith History, 1838–1856, vol. B–1, 597, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
21. Transcriptions and digital images of these manuscripts, known collectively as the “Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” can be found at “Book of Abraham and Egyptian Material,” [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
22. Joseph Smith History, 1838–1856, vol. B–1, 596, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
23. W. W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, July 19–20, 1835, in Bruce A. Van Orden, “Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835–1836),” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 555, available at [byustudies.byu.edu](http://byustudies.byu.edu).
24. John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 2. The fragments are known to have been part of the papyri owned by the Church because they were mounted on paper with early Mormon records, which conforms to contemporary descriptions of the display of the papyri.
25. Jay M. Todd, “New Light on Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Papyri,” *Improvement Era*, Feb. 1968, 40–41. Another fragment was located in the Church Historian’s Office around the same time as the Metropolitan discovery, making 11 fragments in all.
26. Michael D. Rhodes, “[Why Doesn’t the Translation of the Egyptian Papyri found in 1967 Match the Text of the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price?](#)” *Ensign*, July 1988, 51–53.
27. Kerry Muhlestein, “[Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View](#),” and Brian M. Hauglid, “[Thoughts on the Book of Abraham](#),” both in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2011), 217–58. On the lack of unanimity among Egyptologists, see, for example, John Gee, “[A Method for Studying the Facsimiles](#),” *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 348–51; and Hugh Nibley, *The*



- Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2d. ed. (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 51–53. For translation of and commentary on the fragments, see Michael D. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tschemmin and Neferirrib: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2010); Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002); and Nibley, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 34–50.
28. Joseph Smith, or perhaps a colleague, introduced the published translation by saying that the records were “written by his [Abraham’s] own hand, upon papyrus.” The phrase can be understood to mean that Abraham is the author and not the literal copyist. Hugh Nibley and Michael Rhodes, *One Eternal Round* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2010), 20–22; Michael D. Rhodes, “[Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles](#),” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 2 (2003): 117–18.
  29. Kevin L. Barney, “[The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources](#),” in John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 107–30.
  30. Henk Milde, “Vignetten–Forschung,” in Burkhard Backes and others, eds., *Totenbuch–Forschungen* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 221–31; Holger Kockelmann, *Untersuchungen zu den späten Totenbuch–Handschriften auf Mumienbinden* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2008), 2:212–14; Valérie Angenot, “Discordance entre texte et image. Deux exemples de l’Ancien et du Nouvel Empires,” *GöttingerMiszellen* 187 (2002): 11–21.
  31. John Whitmer, [History, 1831–ca. 1837](#), 76, in Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, eds., *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Historical Writings, 1831–1847*, vol. 2 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 86. “I have set by his side and penned down the translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks as he claimed to receive it by direct inspiration of Heaven,” wrote Warren Parrish, Joseph Smith’s scribe. (Warren Parrish, Feb. 5, 1838, Letter to the editor, *Painesville Republican*, Feb. 15, 1838, [3].)
  32. Hauglid, *Textual History of the Book of Abraham*, 213–14, 222.
  33. “Joseph Smith as Translator,” in Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter–day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 233–47; Nibley, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 51–59. See also footnote 19.
  34. By analogy, the Bible seems to have been a frequent catalyst for Joseph Smith’s revelations about God’s dealings with His ancient covenant people. Joseph’s study of the book of Genesis, for example, prompted revelations about the lives and teachings of Adam, Eve, Moses, and Enoch, found today in the book of Moses.
  35. [Abraham 1:8, 10–11](#). Most scholars today locate “Chaldea” (or Ur) in southern Mesopotamia, removed from the area of Egyptian influence, but cogent arguments have been made for a



- northern location, within the realm of Egyptian influence. (Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?" in H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr., eds., *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God* [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1989], 119–36; and Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 84–85, 234–36.)
36. Kerry Muhlestein, *Violence in the Service of Order: The Religious Framework for Sanctioned Killing in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, U.K.: Archaeopress, 2001), 37–44, 92–101; Kerry Muhlestein, "Royal Executions: Evidence Bearing on the Subject of Sanctioned Killing in the Middle Kingdom," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51, no. 2 (2008): 181–208; Anthony Leahy, "Death by Fire in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 27, no. 2 (1984): 199–206; Harco Willems, "Crime, Cult and Capital Punishment (Mo'alla Inscription 8)," *Journal of Egyptian Archeology* 76 (1990): 27–54.
  37. [Abraham 1:10](#); John Gee, "Has Olishem Been Discovered?," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scriptures* 22, no. 2 (2013): 104–7, available at [maxwellinstitute.byu.edu](http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu).
  38. Julie M. Smith, "A Note on Chiasmus in Abraham 3:22–23," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 187–90, available at [mormoninterpreter.com](http://mormoninterpreter.com); Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, "When Are Chiasms Admissible as Evidence?" *BYU Studies* 49, no. 4 (2010): 131–54, available at [byustudies.byu.edu](http://byustudies.byu.edu).
  39. Kevin L. Barney, "On Elkenah as Canaanite El," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 22–35, available at [maxwellinstitute.byu.edu](http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu); John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, "Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 75.
  40. Martin J. Raven, "Egyptian Concepts of the Orientation of the Human Body," in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists* (2007), 2:1569–70.
  41. Erik Hornung, "Himmelsvorstellungen," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, 7 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1977–1989), 2:1216. For these and other examples, see Peterson, "News from Antiquity"; Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2009), 115–78; Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 236–45; John Gee, "A New Look at the Conception of the Human Being in Ancient Egypt," in *Being in Ancient Egypt: Thoughts on Agency, Materiality and Cognition*, ed. Rune Nyord and Annette Kjølby (Oxford, U.K.: Archaeopress, 2009), 6–7, 12–13.
  42. [Abraham 3:2–15](#).
  43. Excerpts from Eupolemus, in John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, Studies in the Book of Abraham, ed. John Gee, vol. 1 (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001), 8–9. For other references to Abraham teaching astronomy, see, for example, Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, 7, 35–43.

44. Excerpts from P. Leiden I 384 (*PGM XII*), in Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, 501-2, 523.
45. John Gee, "An Egyptian View of Abraham," in Andrew C. Skinner, D. Morgan Davis, and Carl Griffin, eds., *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2011), 137-56.
46. See E. Douglas Clark, [review of Michael E. Stone, \*Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Abraham\* \(2012\)](#), in *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53:2 (2014): 173-79; Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*; Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 1-73. Some of these extrabiblical elements were available to Joseph Smith through the books of Jasher and Josephus. Joseph Smith was aware of these books, but it is unknown whether he utilized them.

# Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah

The [Bible](#) and the [Book of Mormon](#) teach that the marriage of one man to one woman is God’s standard, except at specific periods when He has declared otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

In accordance with a [revelation](#) to [Joseph Smith](#), the practice of plural marriage—the marriage of one man to two or more women—was instituted among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the early 1840s. Thereafter, for more than half a century, plural marriage was practiced by some [Latter-day Saints](#). Only the Church President held the keys authorizing the performance of new plural marriages.<sup>2</sup> In 1890, the Lord inspired Church President [Wilford Woodruff](#) to issue a statement that led to the end of the practice of plural marriage in the Church. In this statement, known as the [Manifesto](#), President Woodruff declared his intention to abide by U.S. law forbidding plural marriage and to use his influence to convince members of the Church to do likewise.<sup>3</sup>

After the Manifesto, monogamy was advocated in the Church both over the pulpit and through the press. On an exceptional basis, some new plural marriages were performed between 1890 and 1904, especially in Mexico and Canada, outside the jurisdiction of U.S. law; a small number of plural marriages were performed within the United States during those years.<sup>4</sup> In 1904, the Church strictly prohibited new plural marriages.<sup>5</sup> Today, any person who practices plural marriage cannot become or remain a member of the Church. This essay primarily addresses plural marriage as practiced by the Latter-day Saints between 1847 and 1890, following their exodus to the U.S. West and before the Manifesto.

Latter-day Saints do not understand all of God’s purposes for instituting, through His [prophets](#), the practice of plural marriage during the 19th century. The Book of Mormon identifies one reason for God to command it: to increase the number of children born in the gospel covenant in order to “raise up seed unto [the Lord]” ([Jacob 2:30](#)). Plural marriage did result in the birth of large numbers of children within faithful Latter-day Saint homes.<sup>6</sup> It also shaped 19th-century Mormon society in other ways: marriage became available to virtually all who desired it; per-capita inequality of wealth was diminished as economically disadvantaged women married into more financially stable households;<sup>7</sup> and ethnic intermarriages were increased, which helped to unite a diverse immigrant population.<sup>8</sup> Plural marriage also helped create and strengthen a sense of cohesion and group identification among Latter-day Saints. Church members came to

see themselves as a “peculiar people,”<sup>9</sup> covenant-bound to carry out the commands of God despite outside opposition, willing to endure ostracism for their principles.<sup>10</sup> For these early Latter-day Saints, plural marriage was a religious principle that required personal sacrifice. Accounts left by men and women who practiced plural marriage attest to the challenges and difficulties they experienced, such as financial difficulty, interpersonal strife, and some wives’ longing for the sustained companionship of their husbands.<sup>11</sup> But accounts also record the love and joy many found within their families. They believed it was a commandment of God at that time and that obedience would bring great blessings to them and their posterity, both on earth and in the life to come. While there was much love, tenderness, and affection within many plural marriages, the practice was generally based more on religious belief than on romantic love.<sup>12</sup> Church leaders taught that participants in plural marriages should seek to develop a generous spirit of unselfishness and the pure love of Christ for everyone involved.

During the years that plural marriage was publicly taught, all Latter-day Saints were expected to accept the principle as a revelation from God.<sup>13</sup> Not all, however, were expected to live it. Indeed, this system of marriage could not have been universal due to the ratio of men to women.<sup>14</sup> Church leaders viewed plural marriage as a command to the Church generally, while recognizing that individuals who did not enter the practice could still stand approved of God.<sup>15</sup> Women were free to choose their spouses, whether to enter into a polygamous or monogamous union, or whether to marry at all.<sup>16</sup> Some men entered plural marriage because they were asked to do so by Church leaders, while others initiated the process themselves; all were required to obtain the approval of Church leaders before entering a plural marriage.<sup>17</sup> The passage of time shaped the experience of life within plural marriage. Virtually all of those practicing it in the earliest years had to overcome their own prejudice against plural marriage and adjust to life in polygamous families. The task of pioneering a semiarid land during the middle decades of the 19th century added to the challenges of families who were learning to practice the principle of plural marriage. Where the family lived—whether in Salt Lake City, with its multiple social and cultural opportunities, or the rural hinterlands, where such opportunities were fewer in number—made a difference in how plural marriage was experienced. It is therefore difficult to accurately generalize about the experience of all plural marriages.

Still, some patterns are discernible, and they correct some myths. Although some leaders had large polygamous families, two-thirds of polygamist men had only two wives at a time.<sup>18</sup> Church leaders recognized that plural marriages could be particularly difficult for women. Divorce was therefore available to women who were unhappy in their marriages; remarriage was also readily available.<sup>19</sup> Women did marry at fairly young ages in the first decade of Utah settlement (age 16 or 17 or, infrequently, younger), which was typical of women living in frontier areas at the time.<sup>20</sup> As in other places, women married at older ages as the society matured. Almost all women married, and so did a large percentage of men. In fact, it appears that a larger

percentage of men in Utah married than elsewhere in the United States at the time. Probably half of those living in Utah Territory in 1857 experienced life in a polygamous family as a husband, wife, or child at some time during their lives.<sup>21</sup> By 1870, 25 to 30 percent of the population lived in polygamous households, and it appears that the percentage continued to decrease over the next 20 years.<sup>22</sup>

The experience of plural marriage toward the end of the 19th century was substantially different from that of earlier decades. Beginning in 1862, the U.S. government passed laws against the practice of plural marriage. Outside opponents mounted a campaign against the practice, stating that they hoped to protect Mormon women and American civilization. For their part, many Latter-day Saint women publicly defended the practice of plural marriage, arguing in statements that they were willing participants.<sup>23</sup>

After the U.S. Supreme Court found the anti-polygamy laws to be constitutional in 1879, federal officials began prosecuting polygamous husbands and wives during the 1880s.<sup>24</sup> Believing these laws to be unjust, Latter-day Saints engaged in civil disobedience by continuing to practice plural marriage and by attempting to avoid arrest. When convicted, they paid fines and submitted to jail time. To help their husbands avoid prosecution, plural wives often separated into different households or went into hiding under assumed names, particularly when pregnant or after giving birth.<sup>25</sup>

By 1890, when President Woodruff's [Manifesto](#) lifted the command to practice plural marriage, Mormon society had developed a strong, loyal core of members, mostly made up of emigrants from Europe and the Eastern United States. But the demographic makeup of the worldwide Church membership had begun to change. Beginning in the 1890s converts outside the United States were asked to build up the Church in their homelands rather than move to Utah. In subsequent decades, Latter-day Saints migrated away from the Great Basin to pursue new opportunities. Plural marriage had never been encouraged outside of concentrated populations of Latter-day Saints. Especially in these newly formed congregations outside of Utah, monogamous families became central to religious worship and learning. As the Church grew and spread beyond the American West, the monogamous nuclear family was well suited to an increasingly mobile and dispersed membership.

For many who practiced it, plural marriage was a significant sacrifice. Despite the hardships some experienced, the faithfulness of those who practiced plural marriage continues to benefit the Church in innumerable ways. Through the lineage of these 19th-century Saints have come many Latter-day Saints who have been faithful to their gospel covenants as righteous mothers and fathers, loyal disciples of Jesus Christ, and devoted Church members, leaders, and missionaries. Although members of the contemporary Church are forbidden to practice plural

marriage, modern Latter-day Saints honor and respect these pioneers who gave so much for their faith, families, and community.

## Related Topics

- [Agency](#)
- [Covenant](#)
- [Divorce](#)
- [Family](#)
- [Marriage](#)
- [Obedience](#)
- [Revelation](#)
- [Temples](#)

## Resources

1. [Jacob 2:27, 30](#). For instances of plural marriage in the Bible, see [Genesis 16:3; 25:1; 29:21–30; 30:3–4, 9](#). See also [D&C 132:34–35](#).
2. [D&C 132:7](#). The Church President periodically set apart others to perform plural marriages.
3. See [Official Declaration 1](#).
4. Kathryn M. Daynes, *More Wives than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840–1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 208–9; Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 60–73; *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. (1992), “Manifesto of 1890,” 2:852–53.
5. “Official Statement,” Apr. 6, 1904, in James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (1965–1975), 4:84–85.
6. Studies have shown that monogamous women bore more children per wife than did polygamous wives except the first. Fertility at the societal level, however, was enhanced because of the near universality of marriage among women and the abundant opportunities for remarriage among previously married women of childbearing age. L. L. Bean and G. P. Mineau, “The Polygyny–Fertility Hypothesis: A Re–evaluation,” *Population Studies* 40 (1986): 67–81; Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen, *Polygamy: A Cross Cultural Analysis* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), 62–63.
7. Daynes, *Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System*, 130–33.
8. Kathryn M. Daynes, “Forging Mormon Society: Polygamy and Assimilation,” (Presentation at the Western Historical Association, Fort Worth, TX, Oct. 10, 2003).
9. [1 Peter 2:9](#).
10. See [Jacob 1:8](#); and [Acts 5:41](#). Studies of the 19th-century Mormon image in the United States have found the Mormons were most closely associated with plural marriage. Jan

Shippo, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 51–97.

11. For an exploration of some of these difficulties, see Jessie L. Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008).
12. For one example of the feelings that existed between husband and wives, see Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 305, 329–30.
13. Plural marriage was first introduced privately to a small group of Church members, which expanded over time. Church leaders publicly announced the practice in 1852.
14. Recent calculations using a 3 percent growth rate and an average five-year age interval between husbands and wives at first marriage (reasonable estimates for the 19th-century Mormon population) indicate that the upper limit of sustainable polygamy in a stable society is 16 percent of husbands and 28 percent of wives. Davis Bitton and others, “Probing the High Prevalence of Polygyny in St. George, 1861–1880,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2012): 11–15.
15. See, for example, the comments of George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:124–25, 23:278.
16. See, for example, Emmeline B. Wells, Ellen B. Ferguson, Emily S. Richards, and Joseph M. West, letter to the Honorable Committee of the Senate on Education and Labor, May 12, 1886, quoted in Daynes, *Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System*, 61. They testified, “No Mormon woman, old or young, is compelled to marry at all, still less to enter into polygamy.” In addition, Brigham Young stated: “When your daughters have grown up, and wish to marry let them have their choice in a husband. ... Take this or that man if you want them my girls, ... you shall have your own agency in the matter even as I want mine.” Brigham Young Sermon, Apr. 16, 1854, Brigham Young Office Files, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
17. See, for example, Lowell C. Bennion, “Mapping the Extent of Plural Marriage in St. George, 1861–1880,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2012): 34–49; and Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families*, 75–81.
18. These figures are based on two different studies using different sources. Stanley S. Ivins, “Notes on Mormon Polygamy,” *Western Humanities Review* 10, no. 3 (Summer 1956): 233; and Daynes, *Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System*, 130. Brigham Young’s large family was definitely atypical. See Dean C. Jessee, “‘A Man of God and a Good Kind Father’: Brigham Young at Home,” *BYU Studies* 40, no. 2 (2001): 23–53.
19. Brigham Young to William H. Dame, Aug. 8, 1867, Brigham Young Letterbook, vol. 10, p. 340, Brigham Young Office Files, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Daynes, *Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System*, 141–70. In general, women in Utah Territory could obtain a divorce more easily than in most other places in the United States at the time. One of Brigham Young’s clerks explained: “As a rule, the Prest. [Brigham Young]

- never refuses a bill [of divorcement] on the application of a wife, and NEVER when she INSISTS on it.” Quoted in Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families*, 253.
20. Daynes, *Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System*, 107; Cynthia Culver Prescott, “‘Why Didn’t She Marry Him’: Love, Power and Marital Choice on the Far Western Frontier,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 25–45; Paul Bourke and Donald DeBats, *Washington County, Politics and Community in Antebellum America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 121.
  21. Lowell C. Bennion, “Plural Marriage, 1841–1904,” in Brandon S. Plewe, ed., *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History*, (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2013), 122–25; Daynes, *Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System*, 101.
  22. Bennion, “Plural Marriage,” 122–25; Lowell C. Bennion, “The Incidence of Mormon Polygamy in 1880: ‘Dixie’ versus Davis Stake,” *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 17, 31.
  23. *Proceedings in Mass Meeting of the Ladies of Salt Lake City, to Protest against the Passage of Cullom’s Bill, January 14, 1870* (Salt Lake City: 1870); Lola Van Wagenen, “In Their Own Behalf: The Politicization of Mormon Women and the 1870 Franchise,” in Carol Cornwall Madsen, ed., *Battle for the Ballot: Essays on Woman Suffrage in Utah, 1870–1896* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1997), 60–73.
  24. Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
  25. Ronald W. Walker, “A Mormon ‘Widow’ in Colorado: The Exile of Emily Wells Grant,” in *Qualities That Count: Heber J. Grant as Businessman, Missionary, and Apostle* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2004), 175–93; Kimberly Jensen James, “‘Between Two Fires’: Women on the ‘Underground’ of Mormon Polygamy,” *Journal of Mormon History* 8 (1981): 49–61.



# Are Mormons Christian?

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints unequivocally affirm themselves to be Christians. They worship God the Eternal Father in the name of Jesus Christ. When asked what the Latter-day Saints believe, Joseph Smith put Christ at the center: “The fundamental principles of our religion is the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, ‘that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended up into heaven;’ and all other things are only appendages to these, which pertain to our religion.”<sup>1</sup> The modern-day Quorum of the Twelve Apostles reaffirmed that testimony when they proclaimed, “Jesus is [the Living Christ](#), the immortal Son of God. ... His way is the path that leads to happiness in this life and eternal life in the world to come.”<sup>2</sup>

In recent decades, however, some have claimed that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not a Christian church. The most oft-used reasons are the following:

1. Latter-day Saints do not accept the creeds, confessions, and formulations of post-New Testament Christianity.
2. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not descend through the historical line of traditional Christianity. That is, Latter-day Saints are not Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant.
3. Latter-day Saints do not believe scripture consists of the [Holy Bible](#) alone but have an expanded canon of scripture that includes the [Book of Mormon](#), the [Doctrine and Covenants](#), and the [Pearl of Great Price](#).

Each of these is examined below.

## Latter-day Saints Do Not Accept the Creeds of Post-New Testament Christianity

Scholars have long acknowledged that the view of God held by the earliest Christians changed dramatically over the course of centuries. Early Christian views of God were more personal, more anthropomorphic, and less abstract than those that emerged later from the creeds written over the next several hundred years. The key ideological shift that began in the second century A.D., after the loss of apostolic authority, resulted from a conceptual merger of Christian doctrine with Greek philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Latter-day Saints believe the melding of early Christian theology with Greek philosophy was a grave error. Chief among the doctrines lost in this process was the nature of the Godhead. The true nature of God the Father, His Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost was restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith. As a consequence, Latter-day Saints hold that God the Father is an embodied being, a belief consistent with the attributes ascribed to God by many early Christians.<sup>4</sup> This Latter-day Saint belief differs from the post-New Testament creeds.

Whatever the doctrinal differences that exist between the Latter-day Saints and members of other Christian religions, the roles Latter-day Saints ascribe to members of the Godhead largely correspond with the views of others in the Christian world. Latter-day Saints believe that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and all-loving, and they pray to Him in the name of Jesus Christ. They acknowledge the Father as the ultimate object of their worship, the Son as Lord and Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as the messenger and revealer of the Father and the Son. In short, Latter-day Saints do not accept the post-New-Testament creeds yet rely deeply on each member of the Godhead in their daily religious devotion and worship, as did the early Christians.

## Latter-day Saints Believe in a Restored Christianity

Another premise used in arguing that Latter-day Saints are not Christians is that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not descend from the traditional line of today's Christian churches: Latter-day Saints are not Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant. Latter-day Saints believe that by the ministering of angels to Joseph Smith priesthood authority to act in God's name was returned or brought back to earth. This is the "restored," not a "reformed," church of Jesus Christ. The Latter-day Saint belief in a restored Christianity helps explain why so many Latter-day Saints, from the 1830s to the present, have converted from other Christian denominations. These converts did not, and do not, perceive themselves as leaving the Christian fold; they are simply grateful to learn about and become part of the restored Church of Jesus Christ, which they believe offers the fulness of the Lord's gospel, a more complete and rich Christian church—spiritually, organizationally, and doctrinally.

Members of creedal churches often mistakenly assume that all Christians have always agreed and must agree on a historically static, monolithic collection of beliefs. As many scholars have acknowledged, however, Christians have vigorously disagreed about virtually every issue of theology and practice through the centuries, leading to the creation of a multitude of Christian denominations.<sup>5</sup> Although the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints differs from that of the many creedal Christian churches, it is consistent with early Christianity. One who sincerely loves, worships, and follows Christ should be free to claim his or her understanding of the doctrine according to the dictates of his or her conscience without being branded as non-Christian.

## Latter-day Saints Believe in an Open Canon

A third justification argued to label Latter-day Saints as non-Christian has to do with their belief in an open scriptural canon. For those making this argument, to be a Christian means to assent to the principle of *sola scriptura*, or the [self-sufficiency of the Bible](#). But to claim that the Bible is the sole and final word of God—more specifically, the final written word of God—is to claim more for the Bible than it claims for itself. Nowhere does the Bible proclaim that all revelations from God would be gathered into a single volume to be forever closed and that no further scriptural revelation could be received.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, not all Christian churches are certain that Christianity must be defined by commitment to a closed canon.<sup>7</sup> In truth, the argument for exclusion by closed canon appears to be used selectively to exclude the Latter-day Saints from being called Christian. No branch of Christianity limits itself entirely to the biblical text in making doctrinal decisions and in applying biblical principles. Roman Catholics, for example, turn to church tradition and the magisterium (meaning teachers, including popes and councils) for answers. Protestants, particularly evangelicals, turn to linguists and scripture scholars for their answers, as well as to post-New Testament church councils and creeds. For many Christians, these councils and creeds are every bit as canonical as the Bible itself. To establish doctrine and to understand the biblical text, Latter-day Saints turn to living prophets and to additional books of scripture—the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price.

Together with the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon supports an unequivocal testimony of Jesus Christ. One passage says that the Book of Mormon “shall establish the truth” of the Bible “and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world; and that all men must come unto him, or they cannot be saved.”<sup>8</sup> In its more than six thousand verses, the Book of Mormon refers to Jesus Christ almost four thousand times and by over one hundred different names: “Jehovah,” “Immanuel,” “Holy Messiah,” “Lamb of God,” “Redeemer of Israel,” and so on.<sup>9</sup> The Book of Mormon is indeed “Another Testament of Jesus Christ,” as its title page proclaims.

## Conclusion

Converts across the world continue to join The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in part because of its doctrinal and spiritual distinctiveness. That distinctiveness flows from the knowledge restored to this earth, together with the power of the Holy Ghost present in the Church because of restored priesthood authority, keys, ordinances, and the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The fruits of the restored gospel are evident in the lives of its faithful members.

While members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have no desire to compromise the distinctiveness of the restored Church of Jesus Christ, they wish to work together with other Christians—and people of all faiths—to recognize and remedy many of the moral and family issues faced by society. The Christian conversation is richer for what the Latter-day Saints bring to the table. There is no good reason for Christian faiths to ostracize each other when there has never been more urgent need for unity in proclaiming the divinity and teachings of Jesus Christ.

## Related Gospel Topics

- [Jesus Christ](#)
- [Joseph Smith](#)
- [Mormons](#)
- [Prophets](#)
- [Revelation](#)
- [Worship](#)

## Resources

1. This response attempted to answer the frequently asked query, “What are the fundamental principles of your religion?” Published in *Elders’ Journal* 1 (July 1838): 44, available at [www.josephsmithpapers.org](http://www.josephsmithpapers.org); republished with punctuation changes in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 49.
2. [“The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles.”](#) *Ensign*, Apr. 2000, 3.
3. See, for example, Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999); D. Jeffrey Bingham, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2010); Daniel W. Graham and James L. Siebach, “The Introduction of Philosophy into Early Christianity,” in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 205–37.
4. For evidence of this belief among early Christians, see David L. Paulsen, “Early Christian Belief in Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 2 (1990): 105–16. For the increasing complexity of creedal formulations over time, see J. Stevenson, ed., *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, AD 337–461*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1989).
5. The scholarly literature on debates over Christian theology and practice is vast. For early Christianity, see, for example, Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For Christian theological debates in the early United States, see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America:*

*Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

6. Many Christians understand Revelation 22:18–19 to mean that nothing can be added to the Bible. The warning in this scripture against adding “unto these things,” however, refers to the book of Revelation and not to the Bible as a whole. See Howard W. Hunter, “[No Man Shall Add to or Take Away](#),” *Ensign*, May 1981, 64–65.
7. See, for example, Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 254–56.
8. [1 Nephi 13:40](#).
9. See Boyd K. Packer, “[The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ—Plain and Precious Things](#),” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2005, 6–9; Susan Ward Easton, “[Names of Christ in the Book of Mormon](#),” *Ensign*, July 1978, 60–61.

# Becoming Like God

One of the most common images in Western and Eastern religions alike is of God as a parent and of human beings as God's children. Billions pray to God as their parent, invoke the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people to promote peace, and reach out to the weary and troubled out of deep conviction that each of God's children has great worth.

But people of different faiths understand the parent-child relationship between God and humans in significantly different ways. Some understand the phrase "child of God" as an honorary title reserved only for those who believe in God and accept His guidance as they might accept a father's. Many see parent-child descriptions of God's relationship to humanity as metaphors to express His love for His creations and their dependence on His sustenance and protection.

Latter-day Saints see all people as children of God in a full and complete sense; they consider every person divine in origin, nature, and potential. Each has an eternal core and is "a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents."<sup>1</sup> Each possesses seeds of divinity and must choose whether to live in harmony or tension with that divinity. Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all people may "progress toward perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny."<sup>2</sup> Just as a child can develop the attributes of his or her parents over time, the divine nature that humans inherit can be developed to become like their Heavenly Father's.

The desire to nurture the divinity in His children is one of God's attributes that most inspires, motivates, and humbles members of the Church. God's loving parentage and guidance can help each willing, obedient child of God receive of His fulness and of His glory. This knowledge transforms the way Latter-day Saints see their fellow human beings. The teaching that men and women have the potential to be exalted to a state of godliness clearly expands beyond what is understood by most contemporary Christian churches and expresses for the Latter-day Saints a yearning rooted in the Bible to live as God lives, to love as He loves, and to prepare for all that our loving Father in Heaven wishes for His children.

## What does the Bible say about humans' divine potential?

Several biblical passages intimate that humans can become like God. The likeness of humans to God is emphasized in the first chapter of Genesis: "God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."<sup>3</sup> After Adam and Eve partook of the fruit of "the tree of

the knowledge of good and evil,” God said they had “become as one of us,”<sup>4</sup> suggesting that a process of approaching godliness was already underway. Later in the Old Testament, a passage in the book of Psalms declares, “I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.”<sup>5</sup>

New Testament passages also point to this doctrine. When Jesus was accused of blasphemy on the grounds that “thou, being a man, makest thyself God,” He responded, echoing Psalms, “Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?”<sup>6</sup> In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded His disciples to become “perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”<sup>7</sup> In turn, the Apostle Peter referred to the Savior’s “exceeding great and precious promises” that we might become “partakers of the divine nature.”<sup>8</sup> The Apostle Paul taught that we are “the offspring of God” and emphasized that as such “we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.”<sup>9</sup> The book of Revelation contains a promise from Jesus Christ that “to him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.”<sup>10</sup>

These passages can be interpreted in different ways. Yet by viewing them through the clarifying lens of revelations received by Joseph Smith, Latter-day Saints see these scriptures as straightforward expressions of humanity’s divine nature and potential. Many other Christians read the same passages far more metaphorically because they experience the Bible through the lens of doctrinal interpretations that developed over time after the period described in the New Testament.

## How have ideas about divinity shifted over Christian history?

Latter-day Saint beliefs would have sounded more familiar to the earliest generations of Christians than they do to many modern Christians. Many church fathers (influential theologians and teachers in early Christianity) spoke approvingly of the idea that humans can become divine. One modern scholar refers to the “ubiquity of the doctrine of deification”—the teaching that humans could become God—in the first centuries after Christ’s death.<sup>11</sup> The church father Irenaeus, who died about A.D. 202, asserted that Jesus Christ “did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be what He is Himself.”<sup>12</sup> Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 150–215) wrote that “the Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God.”<sup>13</sup> Basil the Great (A.D. 330–379) also celebrated this prospect—not just “being made like to God,” but “highest of all, the being made God.”<sup>14</sup>

What exactly the early church fathers meant when they spoke of becoming God is open to interpretation,<sup>15</sup> but it is clear that references to deification became more contested in the late

Roman period and were infrequent by the medieval era. The first known objection by a church father to teaching deification came in the fifth century.<sup>16</sup> By the sixth century, teachings on “becoming God” appear more limited in scope, as in the definition provided by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. A.D. 500): “Deification ... is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him *so far as is possible*.”<sup>17</sup>

Why did these beliefs fade from prominence? Changing perspectives on the creation of the world may have contributed to the gradual shift toward more limited views of human potential. The earliest Jewish and Christian commentaries on the Creation assumed that God had organized the world out of preexisting materials, emphasizing the goodness of God in shaping such a life-sustaining order.<sup>18</sup> But the incursion of new philosophical ideas in the second century led to the development of a doctrine that God created the universe *ex nihilo*—“out of nothing.” This ultimately became the dominant teaching about the Creation within the Christian world.<sup>19</sup> In order to emphasize God’s power, many theologians reasoned that nothing could have existed for as long as He had. It became important in Christian circles to assert that God had originally been completely alone.

Creation *ex nihilo* widened the perceived gulf between God and humans. It became less common to teach either that human souls had existed before the world or that they could inherit and develop the attributes of God in their entirety in the future.<sup>20</sup> Gradually, as the depravity of humankind and the immense distance between Creator and creature were increasingly emphasized, the concept of deification faded from Western Christianity,<sup>21</sup> though it remains a central tenet of Eastern Orthodoxy, one of the three major branches of Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

## How were ideas about deification introduced to Latter-day Saints?

The earliest Latter-day Saints came from a society dominated by English-speaking Protestants, most of whom accepted both *ex nihilo* creation and the Westminster Confession’s definition of God as a being “without body, parts, or passions.”<sup>23</sup> They likely knew little or nothing about the diversity of Christian beliefs in the first centuries after Jesus Christ’s ministry or about early Christian writings on deification. But revelations received by Joseph Smith diverged from the prevailing ideas of the time and taught doctrine that, for some, reopened debates on the nature of God, creation, and humankind.

Early revelations to Joseph Smith taught that humans are created in the image of God and that God cares intimately for His children. In the Book of Mormon, a prophet “saw the finger of the Lord” and was astonished to learn that human physical forms were truly made in the image of God.<sup>24</sup> In another early revelation, Enoch (who “walked with God” in the Bible<sup>25</sup>) witnessed God weeping over His creations. When Enoch asked, “How is it thou canst weep?” he learned that



God's compassion toward human suffering is integral to His love.<sup>26</sup> Joseph Smith also learned that God desires that His children receive the same kind of exalted existence of which He partakes. As God declared, "This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."<sup>27</sup>

In 1832, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon experienced a vision of the afterlife. In the vision, they learned that the just and unjust alike would receive immortality through a universal resurrection, but only those "who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise" would receive the fulness of God's glory and be "gods, even the sons of God."<sup>28</sup> Another revelation soon confirmed that "the saints shall be filled with his glory, and receive their inheritance and be made equal with him."<sup>29</sup> Latter-day Saints use the term *exaltation* to describe the glorious reward of receiving one's full inheritance as a child of Heavenly Father, which is available through the Atonement of Christ, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.<sup>30</sup>

This striking view of each human's potential future was accompanied by revealed teachings on humanity's past. As Joseph Smith continued to receive revelations, he learned that the light or intelligence at the core of each human soul "was not created or made, neither indeed can be." God is the Father of each human spirit, and because only "spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy," He presented a plan for human beings to receive physical bodies and progress through their mortal experience toward a fulness of joy. Earthly birth, then, is not the beginning of an individual's life: "Man was also in the beginning with God."<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Joseph Smith taught that the material world has eternal roots, fully repudiating the concept of creation *ex nihilo*. "Earth, water &c—all these had their existence in an elementary State from Eternity," he said in an 1839 sermon.<sup>32</sup> God organized the universe out of existing elements.

Joseph Smith continued to receive revelation on the themes of divine nature and exaltation during the last two years of his life. In a revelation recorded in July 1843 that linked exaltation with eternal marriage, the Lord declared that those who keep covenants, including the covenant of eternal marriage, will inherit "all heights and depths." "Then," says the revelation, "shall they be gods, because they have no end." They will receive "a continuation of the seeds forever and ever."<sup>33</sup>

The following April, feeling he was "never in any nearer relationship to God than at the present time,"<sup>34</sup> Joseph Smith spoke about the nature of God and the future of humankind to the Saints, who had gathered for a general Church conference. He used the occasion in part to reflect upon the death of a Church member named King Follett, who had died unexpectedly a month earlier. When he rose to speak, the wind was blowing, so Joseph asked his listeners to give him their

“profound attention” and to “pray that the L[ord] may strengthen my lungs” and stay the winds until his message had been delivered.<sup>35</sup>

“What kind of a being is God?” he asked. Human beings needed to know, he argued, because “if men do not comprehend the character of God they do not comprehend themselves.”<sup>36</sup> In that phrase, the Prophet collapsed the gulf that centuries of confusion had created between God and humanity. Human nature was at its core divine. God “was once as one of us” and “all the spirits that God ever sent into the world” were likewise “susceptible of enlargement.” Joseph Smith preached that long before the world was formed, God found “himself in the midst” of these beings and “saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself”<sup>37</sup> and be “exalted” with Him.<sup>38</sup>

Joseph told the assembled Saints, “You have got to learn how to be a god yourself.”<sup>39</sup> In order to do that, the Saints needed to learn godliness, or to be more like God. The process would be ongoing and would require patience, faith, continuing repentance, obedience to the commandments of the gospel, and reliance on Christ. Like ascending a ladder, individuals needed to learn the “first prin[ciples] of the Gospel” and continue beyond the limits of mortal knowledge until they could “learn the last prin[ciples] of the Gospel” when the time came.<sup>40</sup> “It is not all to be comprehended in this world,” Joseph said.<sup>41</sup> “It will take a long time after the grave to understand the whole.”<sup>42</sup>

That was the last time the Prophet spoke in a general conference. Three months later, a mob stormed Carthage Jail and martyred him and his brother Hyrum.

## What has been taught in the Church about divine nature since Joseph Smith?

Since that sermon, known as the King Follett discourse, the doctrine that humans can progress to exaltation and godliness has been taught within the Church. Lorenzo Snow, the Church’s fifth President, coined a well-known couplet: “As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be.”<sup>43</sup> Little has been revealed about the first half of this couplet, and consequently little is taught. When asked about this topic, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley told a reporter in 1997, “That gets into some pretty deep theology that we don’t know very much about.” When asked about the belief in humans’ divine potential, President Hinckley responded, “Well, as God is, man may become. We believe in eternal progression. Very strongly.”<sup>44</sup>

Eliza R. Snow, a Church leader and poet, rejoiced over the doctrine that we are, in a full and absolute sense, children of God. “I had learned to call thee Father, / Thru thy Spirit from on high,” she wrote, “But, until the key of knowledge / Was restored, I knew not why.” Latter-day Saints have also been moved by the knowledge that their divine parentage includes a Heavenly

Mother as well as a Heavenly Father. Expressing that truth, Eliza R. Snow asked, “In the heav’ns are parents single?” and answered with a resounding *no*: “Truth eternal / Tells me I’ve a mother there.”<sup>45</sup> That knowledge plays an important role in Latter-day Saint belief. As Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles wrote, “Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them.”<sup>46</sup>

Humankind’s divine nature and potential for exaltation have been repeatedly taught in general conference addresses, Church magazines, and other Church materials. “Divine nature” is one of eight core values in the Church’s Young Women program. Teaching on human beings’ divine parentage, nature, and potential features prominently in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” Divine nature and exaltation are essential and beloved teachings in the Church.

## Does belief in exaltation make Latter-day Saints polytheists?

For some observers, the doctrine that humans should strive for godliness may evoke images of ancient pantheons with competing deities. Such images are incompatible with Latter-day Saint doctrine. Latter-day Saints believe that God’s children will always worship Him. Our progression will never change His identity as our Father and our God. Indeed, our exalted, eternal relationship with Him will be part of the “fulness of joy” He desires for us.

Latter-day Saints also believe strongly in the fundamental unity of the divine. They believe that God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost, though distinct beings, are unified in purpose and doctrine.<sup>47</sup> It is in this light that Latter-day Saints understand Jesus’s prayer for His disciples through the ages: “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.”<sup>48</sup>

If humans live out of harmony with God’s goodness, they cannot grow into God’s glory. Joseph Smith taught that “the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only [except] upon the principles of righteousness.” When humans abandon God’s selfless purposes and standards, “the heavens withdraw themselves [and] the Spirit of the Lord is grieved.”<sup>49</sup> Pride is incompatible with progress; disunity is impossible between exalted beings.

## How do Latter-day Saints envision exaltation?

Since human conceptions of reality are necessarily limited in mortality, religions struggle to adequately articulate their visions of eternal glory. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.”<sup>50</sup> These limitations make it easy for images of salvation to become cartoonish when represented in popular culture. For example, scriptural expressions of the deep peace and overwhelming joy of salvation are often reproduced in the well-known

image of humans sitting on their own clouds and playing harps after death. Latter-day Saints' doctrine of exaltation is often similarly reduced in media to a cartoonish image of people receiving their own planets.

A cloud and harp are hardly a satisfying image for eternal joy, although most Christians would agree that inspired music can be a tiny foretaste of the joy of eternal salvation. Likewise, while few Latter-day Saints would identify with caricatures of having their own planet, most would agree that the awe inspired by creation hints at our creative potential in the eternities.

Latter-day Saints tend to imagine exaltation through the lens of the sacred in mortal experience. They see the seeds of godhood in the joy of bearing and nurturing children and the intense love they feel for those children, in the impulse to reach out in compassionate service to others, in the moments they are caught off guard by the beauty and order of the universe, in the grounding feeling of making and keeping divine covenants. Church members imagine exaltation less through images of what they will *get* and more through the relationships they have now and how those relationships might be purified and elevated. As the scriptures teach, "That same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy."<sup>51</sup>

## How important are teachings about exaltation to Latter-day Saint beliefs overall?

The teaching that human beings have a divine nature and future shapes the way Latter-day Saints view fundamental doctrine. Perhaps most significantly, belief in divine nature helps us more deeply appreciate the Atonement of Jesus Christ. While many Christian theologians have expressed the magnitude of the Savior's Atonement by emphasizing human depravity, Latter-day Saints understand the magnitude of the Atonement of Christ in terms of the vast human potential it makes possible. Christ's Atonement not only provides forgiveness from sin and victory over death, it also redeems imperfect relationships, heals the spiritual wounds that stifle growth, and strengthens and enables individuals to develop the attributes of Christ.<sup>52</sup> Latter-day Saints believe that it is only through the Atonement of Jesus Christ that we can have a sure hope of eternal glory and that the power of His Atonement is fully accessed only by faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end in following the instruction and example of Christ.<sup>53</sup> Thus, those who become like God and enter into a fulness of His glory are described as people who have been "made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood."<sup>54</sup>

An awareness of humans' divine potential also influences Latter-day Saints' understanding of gospel principles such as the importance of divine commandments, the role of temples, and the sanctity of individual moral agency. Belief that human beings are actually God's children also changes Latter-day Saints' behavior and attitudes. For example, even in societies where casual and premarital sex are considered acceptable, Latter-day Saints retain a deep reverence for the God-given procreative and bonding powers of human sexual intimacy and remain committed to a higher standard in the use of those sacred powers. Studies suggest that Latter-day Saints place an exceptionally high priority on marriage and parenthood,<sup>55</sup> a consequence in part of a strong belief in heavenly parents and a commitment to strive for that divinity.

## Conclusion

All human beings are children of loving heavenly parents and possess seeds of divinity within them. In His infinite love, God invites His children to cultivate their eternal potential by the grace of God, through the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup> The doctrine of humans' eternal potential to become like their Heavenly Father is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ and inspires love, hope, and gratitude in the hearts of faithful Latter-day Saints.

### Resources

1. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2010, 129.
2. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 129.
3. Genesis 1:26-27.
4. Genesis 2:17; 3:22.
5. Psalm 82:6.
6. John 10:33-34.
7. Matthew 5:48. The word *perfect* in Matthew 5:48 can also be translated *whole* or *complete*, implying a distant objective and ongoing, concerted effort (see Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 86).
8. 2 Peter 1:4.
9. Acts 17:29; Romans 8:16-17.
10. Revelation 3:21.
11. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (2004), 6.
12. Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (1977), 1:526.
13. Clement, "Exhortation to the Heathen," in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:174.
14. Saint Basil the Great, "On the Spirit," in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series (1994), 8:16.

15. There are likely important differences as well as similarities between the thinking of the church fathers and Latter-day Saint teachings. For a discussion of similarities and differences between exaltation as understood by Latter-day Saints and modern Eastern Orthodox understanding of statements by church fathers on deification, see Jordan Vajda, “Partakers of the Divine Nature: A Comparative Analysis of Patristic and Mormon Doctrines of Divinization,” Occasional Papers Series, no. 3 (2002), available at [maxwellinstitute.byu.edu](http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu).
16. See Vladimir Kharlamov, “Rhetorical Application of *Theosis* in Greek Patristic Theology,” in Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (2008), 115.
17. Quoted in Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 1; italics added.
18. As the second-century church father Justin Martyr said, “We have been taught that He in the beginning did of His goodness, for man’s sake, create all things out of unformed matter” (*The First Apology of Justin*, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:165; see also Frances Young, “‘Creatio Ex Nihilo’: A Context for the Emergence of the Christian Doctrine of Creation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44, no. 1 [1991]: 139–51; Markus Bockmuehl, “‘Creation Ex Nihilo’ in Palestinian Judaism and Early Christianity,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66, no. 3 [2012]: 253–70).
19. For information on the second-century context that gave birth to creation ex nihilo, see Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of ‘Creation out of Nothing’ in Early Christian Thought* (2004).
20. See Terryl L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (2010).
21. A minor resurgence of the doctrine of deification within Western Christianity occurred at the hands of a group of 17th-century English clergymen-scholars, called the Cambridge Platonists. (See Benjamin Whichcote, “The Manifestation of Christ and the Deification of Man,” in C. A. Patrides, ed., *The Cambridge Platonists* [1980], 70.)
22. In “The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology,” Andrew Louth describes Eastern Orthodoxy as focused on a “greater arch, leading from creation to deification” and feels that Catholic and Protestant theologies have focused on a partial “lesser arch, from Fall to redemption” to the exclusion of that whole (in Christensen and Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 35).
23. Westminster Confession of Faith, chap. 2 (1646). The Westminster Confession was drawn up by the Westminster Assembly of 1646 as a standard for the doctrine, worship, and government of the Church of England. Its contents have guided the worship of a number of Protestant churches since the time of its writing.
24. [Ether 3:6](#); see also [Doctrine and Covenants 130:22](#); [Moses 6:8–9](#). On Joseph Smith’s teachings on the embodiment of God, see David L. Paulsen, “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995–96): 13–39, available at [byustudies.byu.edu](http://byustudies.byu.edu).
25. [Genesis 5:22](#).

26. See [Moses 7:31–37](#). On the profundity of this image, see Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (2012).
27. [Moses 1:39](#).
28. [Doctrine and Covenants 76:53, 58](#).
29. [Doctrine and Covenants 88:107](#).
30. See Dallin H. Oaks, “[No Other Gods](#),” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2013; Russell M. Nelson, “[Salvation and Exaltation](#),” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2008; see also [Articles of Faith 1:3](#).
31. [Doctrine and Covenants 93:29, 33](#).
32. Joseph Smith, remarks, delivered before Aug. 8, 1839, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (1980), 9; also available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
33. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:19–20](#).
34. Wilford Woodruff journal, Apr. 6, 1844, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
35. Discourse, Apr. 7, 1844, as reported by William Clayton, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org). While the King Follett discourse represents Joseph Smith’s most detailed known discussion of divine nature and exaltation, it is important to note that because of the wind on the day the sermon was delivered and the limitations of transcription techniques, we are left without certainty about Joseph Smith’s exact or complete wording during the sermon. The partial accounts of four witnesses and an early published account give us a record, if only an imperfect one, of what Joseph Smith taught on the occasion, and what he taught gives us insight into the meaning of numerous passages of scripture. But the surviving sermon text is not canonized and should not be treated as a doctrinal standard in and of itself. For the accounts of Willard Richards, William Clayton, Thomas Bullock, Wilford Woodruff, and the August 15, 1844, *Times and Seasons*, see “[Accounts of the ‘King Follett Sermon’](#)” on the Joseph Smith Papers website.
36. Discourse, Apr. 7, 1844, as reported by Willard Richards, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org), spelling modernized.
37. Discourse, Apr. 7, 1844, as reported by William Clayton, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
38. Discourse, Apr. 7, 1844, as reported by Wilford Woodruff, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org), spelling modernized.
39. Discourse, Apr. 7, 1844, as reported by William Clayton, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
40. Discourse, Apr. 7, 1844, as reported by Thomas Bullock, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
41. Discourse, Apr. 7, 1844, as reported by William Clayton, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
42. Discourse, Apr. 7, 1844, as reported by Wilford Woodruff, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
43. Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (1884), 46. The couplet, which has never been canonized, has been formulated in slightly different ways. For others, see *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (1996), 1–9.
44. Don Lattin, “Musings of the Main Mormon,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Apr. 13, 1997; see also David Van Biema, “Kingdom Come,” *Time*, Aug. 4, 1997, 56.

45. First published as a poem, this later became a popular hymn. (Eliza R. Snow, “My Father in Heaven,” *Times and Seasons*, Nov. 15, 1845, 1039; “O My Father,” *Hymns*, no. 292; see also Jill Mulvay Derr, “The Significance of ‘O My Father’ in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 [1996–97]: 84–126, available at [byustudies.byu.edu](http://byustudies.byu.edu).) For Latter-day Saint thought on Mother in Heaven, see David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 70–97, available at [byustudies.byu.edu](http://byustudies.byu.edu).
46. Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 84.
47. See [Doctrine and Covenants 130:22](#).
48. [John 17:21](#).
49. [Doctrine and Covenants 121:36–37](#).
50. [1 Corinthians 2:9](#).
51. [Doctrine and Covenants 130:2](#).
52. See [Alma 7:11–12](#).
53. See [2 Nephi 31:20](#); [Articles of Faith 1:4](#).
54. [Doctrine and Covenants 76:69](#).
55. See “Mormons in America—Certain in Their Beliefs, Uncertain of Their Place in Society,” Pew Research, Religion and Public Life Project, Jan. 12, 2012, available at [pewforum.org](http://pewforum.org).
56. [Moroni 10:32–33](#); Bible Dictionary, “[Grace](#).”



# Peace and Violence among 19th-Century Latter-day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is founded on the teachings of Jesus Christ. The virtues of peace, love, and forgiveness are at the center of Church doctrine and practice. Latter-day Saints believe the Savior's declaration, found in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, that "blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."<sup>1</sup> In Latter-day Saint scripture, the Lord has commanded His followers to "renounce war and proclaim peace."<sup>2</sup> Latter-day Saints strive to follow the counsel of the Book of Mormon prophet-king Benjamin, who taught that those who are converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ "will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably."<sup>3</sup>

Despite these ideals, early Latter-day Saints did not obtain peace easily. They were persecuted, often violently, for their beliefs. And, tragically, at some points in the 19th century, most notably in the Mountain Meadows Massacre, some Church members participated in deplorable violence against people they perceived to be their enemies. This essay explores both violence committed against the Latter-day Saints and violence committed by them. While historical context can help shed light on these acts of violence, it does not excuse them.

## Religious Persecution in the 1830s and 1840s

In the first two decades after the Church was organized, Latter-day Saints were often the victims of violence. Soon after Joseph Smith organized the Church in New York in 1830, he and other Church members began settling in areas to the west, in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Time and again, the Saints tried to build their Zion community where they could worship God and live in peace, and repeatedly they saw their hopes dashed through forcible and violent removal. Mobs drove them from Jackson County, Missouri, in 1833; from the state of Missouri in 1839, after the governor of the state issued an order in late October 1838 that the Mormons be expelled from the state or "exterminated"<sup>4</sup>; and from their city of Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1846. Following their expulsion from Nauvoo, Latter-day Saints made the difficult trek across the Great Plains to Utah.<sup>5</sup>

As Latter-day Saints faced these difficulties, they sought to live by revelations to Joseph Smith that counseled them to live their religion in peace with their neighbors. Nevertheless, their adversaries in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois resented the Saints' differing religious beliefs and social and economic practices. They also felt threatened by the Saints' growing numbers, which meant that Mormons could increasingly control local elections. These opponents attacked the Saints, first verbally and then physically. Church leaders, including Joseph Smith, were tarred and feathered, beaten, and unjustly imprisoned. Other members of the Church were also the victims of violent crimes. In the most infamous incident, at least 17 men and boys, ranging in age from 9 to 78, were slaughtered in the Hawn's Mill Massacre.<sup>6</sup> Some Latter-day Saint women were raped or otherwise sexually assaulted during the Missouri persecutions.<sup>7</sup> Vigilantes and mobs destroyed homes and stole property.<sup>8</sup> Many of the Saints' opponents enriched themselves with land and property that was not justly theirs.<sup>9</sup>

The expulsion from Missouri—involving at least 8,000 Latter-day Saints<sup>10</sup>—occurred during the winter months, heightening the suffering of the thousands of refugees who lacked adequate food and shelter and were sometimes subject to epidemic diseases.<sup>11</sup> In March 1839, when Joseph Smith, imprisoned in Liberty, Missouri, received reports of the suffering of the exiled Latter-day Saints, he exclaimed, “O God, where art thou?” and prayed, “Remember thy suffering saints, O our God.”<sup>12</sup>

After being driven from Missouri, the Saints were initially welcomed by the people of the neighboring state of Illinois and found peace for a time in Nauvoo. Ultimately, however, conflict arose again as non-Mormons and dissenters from the Church renewed their attacks. Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were brutally martyred by a mob in an Illinois prison despite the promise of the state's governor that the brothers would be protected while in custody.<sup>13</sup> Eighteen months later, beginning in the cold winter month of February 1846, the main body of the Saints left Nauvoo under tremendous pressure. They settled in temporary camps—what would now be called refugee camps—on the plains of Iowa and Nebraska. An estimated 1 in 12 Saints died in these camps during the first year.<sup>14</sup> Some of the elderly and poor initially remained in Nauvoo and hoped to join the main body of Saints later. But a mob forcibly expelled them from Nauvoo in September 1846 and then desecrated the temple.<sup>15</sup> One non-Mormon who passed through the Saints' camps shortly thereafter wrote, “Cowed and cramped by cold and sunburn, alternating as each weary day and night dragged on, they were, almost all of them, the crippled victims of disease. ... They could not satisfy the feeble cravings of their sick: they had not bread to quiet the fractious hunger cries of their children.”<sup>16</sup> The scope of this violence against a religious group was unprecedented in the history of the United States.

Church leaders and members repeatedly attempted to gain redress from local and state governments; when these petitions failed, they appealed unsuccessfully to the federal

government to correct past wrongs and gain future protection.<sup>17</sup> Latter-day Saints long remembered the persecutions they experienced and the unwillingness of government authorities either to protect them or to prosecute their attackers. They often lamented that they experienced religious persecution in a land that promised religious freedom.<sup>18</sup> In the face of this extended persecution, some of the Saints, beginning in 1838, responded on some occasions with defensive—and at times, retaliatory—actions of their own.

## Violence and Vigilantism in the 19th-Century United States

In 19th-century American society, community violence was common and often condoned. Much of the violence perpetrated by and against Latter-day Saints fell within the then-existing American tradition of extralegal vigilantism, in which citizens organized to take justice into their own hands when they believed government was either oppressive or lacking. Vigilantes generally targeted minority groups or those perceived to be criminal or socially marginal. Such acts were at times fueled by religious rhetoric.<sup>19</sup>

The existence of community-based militias also contributed to this culture of vigilantism. Congress passed a law in 1792 requiring every able-bodied male between 18 and 45 years of age to belong to a community militia.<sup>20</sup> Over time, the militias turned into the National Guard, but in early America, they were often unruly, perpetrating acts of violence against individuals or groups perceived to be opponents of the community.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the Latter-day Saints' communities in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and Utah were all located in the western frontier regions of the United States, where community violence was readily sanctioned.

## The Mormon Missouri War and the Danites

The isolated acts of violence committed by some Latter-day Saints can generally be seen as a subset of the broader phenomenon of frontier violence in 19th-century America.<sup>21</sup> In 1838, Joseph Smith and other Church members fled from mobs in Ohio and moved to Missouri, where Latter-day Saints had already established settlements. Joseph Smith believed that opposition from Church dissidents and other antagonists had weakened and ultimately destroyed their community in Kirtland, Ohio, where only two years before they had completed a temple at great sacrifice. By the summer of 1838, Church leaders saw the rise of similar threats to their goal of creating a harmonious community in Missouri.

At the Latter-day Saint settlement of Far West, some leaders and members organized a paramilitary group known as the Danites, whose objective was to defend the community against

dissident and excommunicated Latter-day Saints as well as other Missourians. Historians generally concur that Joseph Smith approved of the Danites but that he probably was not briefed on all their plans and likely did not sanction the full range of their activities. Danites intimidated Church dissenters and other Missourians; for instance, they warned some dissenters to leave Caldwell County. During the fall of 1838, as tensions escalated during what is now known as the Mormon Missouri War, the Danites were apparently absorbed into militias largely composed of Latter-day Saints. These militias clashed with their Missouri opponents, leading to a few fatalities on both sides. In addition, Mormon vigilantes, including many Danites, raided two towns believed to be centers of anti-Mormon activity, burning homes and stealing goods.<sup>22</sup> Though the existence of the Danites was short-lived, it resulted in a longstanding and much-embellished myth about a secret society of Mormon vigilantes. As a result of their experience in Missouri, the Latter-day Saints created a large, state-sanctioned militia, the Nauvoo Legion, to protect themselves after they moved to Illinois. This militia was feared by many who saw the Latter-day Saints as enemies. But the legion avoided offensive or retaliatory action; it did not respond even in the crisis leading up to the mob murders of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum in June 1844 or in the aftermath of those murders. When the governor of Illinois ordered that the legion disband, the Saints followed the instruction.<sup>23</sup>

## Violence in Utah Territory

In Utah, aggression or retaliation by Latter-day Saints against their perceived enemies occurred most frequently during the first decade of settlement (1847–1857). For many, the scars of former persecutions and the trek to the Rocky Mountains were still fresh and personal. As they tried to carve out a living in the Utah desert, the Saints faced continuing conflict. Many factors worked against the success of the Latter-day Saint venture in Utah: tensions with American Indians, who had been displaced by Mormon settlement and expansion; pressure from the U.S. federal government, particularly after the public announcement of plural marriage in 1852; uncertain land claims; and a rapidly expanding population. Community leaders felt an unrelenting burden of responsibility, not only for the spiritual welfare of the Church but also for the physical survival of their people. Many of these leaders, including Church president and territorial governor Brigham Young, simultaneously held ecclesiastical and civil offices.

## Latter-day Saints' Relationship with American Indians

Like other settlers in frontier areas, Latter-day Saints occupied areas already inhabited by American Indians. The tragic history of the annihilation of many Indian tribes and the devastation of others at the hands of European immigrant settlers and the United States military and political apparatus has been well documented by historians. Settlers throughout the 19th century, including some Latter-day Saints, mistreated and killed Indians in numerous conflicts, forcing them off desirable lands and onto reservations.

Unlike most other Americans, Latter-day Saints viewed Indians as a chosen people, fellow Israelites who were descendants of Book of Mormon peoples and thus heirs to God's promises. As Church president, territorial governor, and territorial superintendent of Indian Affairs, Brigham Young pursued a peace policy to facilitate Mormon settlement in areas where Indians lived. Latter-day Saints learned Indian languages, established trade relations, preached the gospel, and generally sought accommodation with Indians.<sup>24</sup> This policy, however, emerged unevenly and was inconsistently applied.<sup>25</sup>

Peaceful accommodation between Latter-day Saints and Indians was both the norm and the ideal. At times, however, Church members clashed violently with Indians. These two cultures—European and American Indian—had vastly different assumptions about the use of land and property and did not understand each other well. Mormons often accused Indians of stealing. Indians, meanwhile, believed the Mormons had a responsibility to share goods and livestock raised on Indian tribal lands. In areas where Mormons settled, Indian experience with Europeans had previously consisted mostly of mutually beneficial interactions with trappers and traders, people who passed through the land or briefly dwelled on it, not staked permanent claim to it as the Mormons did. These misunderstandings led to friction and violence between the peoples.<sup>26</sup>

In late 1849, tensions between Ute Indians and Mormons in Utah Valley escalated after a Mormon killed a Ute known as Old Bishop, whom he accused of stealing his shirt. The Mormon and two associates then hid the victim's body in the Provo River. Details of the murder were likely withheld, at least initially, from Brigham Young and other Church leaders. Settlers at Fort Utah did, however, report other difficulties with the Indians, including the firing of weapons at settlers and the theft of livestock and crops. Brigham Young counseled patience, telling them to "stockade your fort, to attend to your own affairs and let the indiens take care of theirs."<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, tensions mounted at Fort Utah, in part because local Mormons refused to turn over those involved in the murder of Old Bishop to the Utes or to pay reparations for his death. In the winter of 1849–1850, a measles epidemic spread from the Mormon settlers to the Ute camps, killing many Indians and heightening tensions. At a council of Church leaders in Salt Lake City on January 31, 1850, the leader of Fort Utah reported that the Utes' actions and intentions were growing increasingly aggressive: "they say they mean to hunt our Cattle. & go & get the other Indians to kill us."<sup>28</sup> In response, Governor Young authorized a campaign against the Utes. A series of battles in February 1850 resulted in the deaths of dozens of Utes and one Mormon.<sup>29</sup> In these instances and others, some Latter-day Saints committed excessive violence against native peoples.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, for the most part, the Saints had more amicable relations with Indians than did settlers in other areas of the American West. Brigham Young enjoyed friendships with several American Indian leaders and taught his people to live peacefully with their Indian neighbors

whenever possible.<sup>31</sup> Some Indians even distinguished between “Mormonees,” whom they considered friendly, and other American settlers, who were known as “Merocats.”<sup>32</sup>

## The “Reformation” and the Utah War

In the mid-1850s, a “reformation” within the Church and tensions between the Latter-day Saints in Utah and the U.S. federal government contributed to a siege mentality and a renewed sense of persecution that led to several episodes of violence committed by Church members. Concerned about spiritual complacency, Brigham Young and other Church leaders delivered a series of sermons in which they called the Saints to repent and renew their spiritual commitments.<sup>33</sup> Many testified that they became better people because of this reformation.<sup>34</sup>

Nineteenth-century Americans were accustomed to violent language, both religious and otherwise. Throughout the century, revivalists had used violent imagery to encourage the unconverted to repent and to urge backsliders to reform.<sup>35</sup> At times during the reformation, President Young, his counselor Jedediah M. Grant, and other leaders preached with fiery rhetoric, warning against the evils of those who dissented from or opposed the Church. Drawing on biblical passages, particularly from the Old Testament, leaders taught that some sins were so serious that the perpetrator’s blood would have to be shed in order to receive forgiveness.<sup>36</sup> Such preaching led to increased strain between the Latter-day Saints and the relatively few non-Mormons in Utah, including federally appointed officials.

In early 1857, U.S. President James Buchanan received reports from some of the federal officials alleging that Governor Young and the Latter-day Saints in Utah were rebelling against the authority of the federal government. A strongly worded memorial from the Utah legislature to the federal government convinced federal officials the reports were true. President Buchanan decided to replace Brigham Young as governor and, in what became known as the Utah War, sent an army to Utah to escort his replacement. Latter-day Saints feared that the oncoming army—some 1,500 troops, with more to follow—would renew the depredations of Missouri and Illinois and again drive the Saints from their homes. In addition, Parley P. Pratt, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was murdered in Arkansas in May 1857. News of the murder—as well as newspaper reports from the eastern United States that celebrated the crime—reached Utah in late June 1857.<sup>37</sup> As these events unfolded, Brigham Young declared martial law in the territory, directed missionaries and settlers in outlying areas to return to Utah, and guided preparations to resist the army. Defiant sermons given by President Young and other Church leaders, combined with the impending arrival of an army, helped create an environment of fear and suspicion in Utah.<sup>38</sup>

## The Mountain Meadows Massacre

At the peak of this tension, in early September 1857, a branch of the territorial militia in southern Utah (composed entirely of Mormons), along with some Indians they recruited, laid siege to a wagon train of emigrants traveling from Arkansas to California. As the wagon train traveled south from Salt Lake City, the emigrants had clashed verbally with local Mormons over where they could graze their cattle. Some of the members of the wagon train became frustrated because they had difficulty purchasing much-needed grain and other supplies from local settlers, who had been instructed to save their grain as a wartime policy. Aggrieved, some of the emigrants threatened to join incoming troops in fighting against the Saints.<sup>39</sup> Although some Saints ignored these threats, other local Church leaders and members in Cedar City, Utah, advocated violence. Isaac C. Haight, a stake president and militia leader, sent John D. Lee, a militia major, to lead an attack on the emigrant company. When the president reported the plan to his council, other leaders objected and requested that he call off the attack and instead send an express rider to Brigham Young in Salt Lake City for guidance. But the men Haight had sent to attack the emigrants carried out their plans before they received the order not to attack. The emigrants fought back, and a siege ensued.

Over the next few days, events escalated, and Mormon militiamen planned and carried out a deliberate massacre. They lured the emigrants from their circled wagons with a false flag of truce and, aided by Paiute Indians they had recruited, slaughtered them. Between the first attack and the final slaughter, the massacre destroyed the lives of 120 men, women, and children in a valley known as Mountain Meadows. Only small children—those believed to be too young to be able to tell what had happened—were spared. The express rider returned two days after the massacre. He carried a letter from Brigham Young telling local leaders to “not meddle” with the emigrants and to allow them to pass through southern Utah.<sup>40</sup> The militiamen sought to cover up the crime by placing the entire blame on local Paiutes, some of whom were also members of the Church.

Two Latter-day Saints were eventually excommunicated from the Church for their participation, and a grand jury that included Latter-day Saints indicted nine men. Only one participant, John D. Lee, was convicted and executed for the crime, which fueled false allegations that the massacre had been ordered by Brigham Young.

In recent years, the Church has made diligent efforts to learn everything possible about the massacre. In the early 2000s, historians in the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints scoured archives throughout the United States for historical records; every Church record on the massacre was also opened to scrutiny. In the resulting book, published by Oxford University Press in 2008, authors Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard concluded that while intemperate preaching about outsiders by Brigham Young, George A. Smith, and other leaders contributed to a climate of hostility, President Young did not order the massacre. Rather, verbal confrontations between individuals

in the wagon train and southern Utah settlers created great alarm, particularly within the context of the Utah War and other adversarial events. A series of tragic decisions by local Church leaders—who also held key civic and militia leadership roles in southern Utah—led to the massacre.<sup>41</sup>

Aside from the Mountain Meadows Massacre, a few Latter-day Saints committed other violent acts against a small number of dissenters and outsiders. Some Latter-day Saints perpetrated acts of extralegal violence, especially in the 1850s, when fear and tensions were prevalent in Utah Territory. The heated rhetoric of Church leaders directed toward dissenters may have led these Mormons to believe that such actions were justified.<sup>42</sup> The perpetrators of these crimes were generally not punished. Even so, many allegations of such violence are unfounded, and anti-Mormon writers have blamed Church leaders for many unsolved crimes or suspicious deaths in early Utah.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

Many people in the 19th century unjustly characterized the Latter-day Saints as a violent people. Yet the vast majority of Latter-day Saints, in the 19th century as today, lived in peace with their neighbors and families, and sought peace in their communities. Travelers in the 19th century often noted the peace and order that prevailed in Mormon communities in Utah and elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the actions of relatively few Latter-day Saints caused death and injury, frayed community relationships, and damaged the perception of Mormons as a peaceful people.<sup>45</sup>

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints condemns violent words and actions and affirms its commitment to furthering peace throughout the world. Speaking of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, Elder Henry B. Eyring, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, stated, “The gospel of Jesus Christ that we espouse abhors the cold-blooded killing of men, women, and children. Indeed, it advocates peace and forgiveness. What was done here long ago by members of our Church represents a terrible and inexcusable departure from Christian teaching and conduct.”<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the Church’s history, Church leaders have taught that the way of Christian discipleship is a path of peace. Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles connected the Latter-day Saints’ faith in Jesus Christ to their active pursuit of love of neighbor and peace with all people: “The hope of the world is the Prince of Peace. ... Now, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, what does the Lord expect of us? As a Church, we must ‘renounce war and proclaim peace.’ As individuals, we should ‘follow after the things which make for peace.’ We should be personal peacemakers.”<sup>47</sup>

## Resources



1. [Matthew 5:9](#); [3 Nephi 12:9](#).
2. [Doctrine and Covenants 98:16](#).
3. [Mosiah 4:13](#).
4. Lilburn W. Boggs letter to John B. Clark, Oct. 27, 1838, Mormon War Papers, Missouri State Archives. One contemporary meaning of the word *exterminate* was “to drive from within the limits or borders.” (Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* [New York: S. Converse, 1828], s.v. “exterminate.”)
5. For scholarly treatments of these expulsions, see Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1987); and Alexander L. Baugh, *A Call to Arms: The 1838 Mormon Defense of Northern Missouri*, Dissertations in Latter-day Saint History (Provo, UT: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History; BYU Studies, 2000). For primary accounts, see John Whitmer, History, 39–67, and “A History, of the Persecution,” 1839–1840, in Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, eds., *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Historical Writings, 1831–1847*, vol. 2 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 52–76, 202–86.
6. Joseph Young, Affidavit, Adams Co., IL, June 4, 1839, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; Beth Shumway Moore, *Bones in the Well: The Haun’s Mill Massacre, 1838, A Documentary History* (Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2006).
7. Parley P. Pratt, Testimony, July 1, 1843, p. 4, Nauvoo, IL, Records, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Hyrum Smith, Testimony, July 1, 1843, p. 24, Nauvoo, IL, Records, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
8. Latter-day Saints later wrote nearly a thousand petitions and affidavits detailing their suffering. One petition to the Missouri state legislature, written by several Church leaders and members, described the various incidents of violence, including the Hawn’s Mill Massacre, and detailed the destruction of property: “Much property was destroyed by the troops in town, during their stay there: such as burning house-logs, rails, corn-cribs, boards &c., the using of corn and hay, the plundering of houses, the killing of cattle, sheep, and hogs, and also the taking of horses not their own, and all this without regard to owners, or asking leave of any one. In the mean time, men were abused, women insulted and abused by the troops.” (Edward Partridge and others, Dec. 10, 1838, petition to the Missouri State Legislature, in Clark V. Johnson, ed., *Mormon Redress Petitions: Documents of the 1833–1838 Missouri Conflict* [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1992], 18.)
9. Jeffrey N. Walker, “Mormon Land Rights in Caldwell and Daviess Counties and the Mormon Conflict of 1838: New Findings and New Understandings,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 1 (2008): 5–55.

10. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832-1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 498n25.
11. For a detailed account of the 1838-1839 expulsion from Missouri, see William G. Hartley, "The Saints' Forced Exodus from Missouri," in Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson, eds., *Joseph Smith: The Prophet and Seer* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2010), 347-89.
12. [Doctrine and Covenants 121:1, 6](#).
13. Thomas Ford letter to Joseph Smith and others, June 22, 1844, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
14. Richard E. Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri, 1846-1852: "And Should We Die. . ."* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 141.
15. Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 600-621.
16. Thomas L. Kane, *The Mormons: A Discourse Delivered before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania: March 26, 1850* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1850), 9-10. Kane's statement came during a lecture he delivered four years after his visit to the camps. His contemporary letters to his family, written from the main refugee camps in Iowa in July and August 1846, reflect similar sentiments. He lamented to his parents that a people "so innocent, should, for conscience sake in our 19th century, be beaten, robbed, ravished and murdered." (Thomas L. Kane letter to John K. Kane and Jane D. Kane, July 20-23, 1846, Thomas L. Kane Papers, American Philosophical Society.)
17. Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 41-44, 101-2; Kenneth H. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830-1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 96-105, 145, 154-56.
18. See, for example, "Prospects of the Church," *The Evening and the Morning Star*, Mar. 1833, [4]; "Extract, from the Private Journal of Joseph Smith Jr.," *Times and Seasons*, Nov. 1839, 9, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org); and Parley P. Pratt, *History of the Late Persecution Inflicted by the State of Missouri upon the Mormons* (Detroit, MI: Dawson & Bates, 1839), iv-v, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
19. On American extralegal vigilantism, see Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). The scholarly literature on violence inspired by religion or religious rhetoric is vast. For reflections on the topic in general, see R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). For studies focusing on 19th-century America, particularly religiously inspired violence in the South, see Donald G. Mathews, "Lynching Is Part of the Religion of Our People: Faith in the Christian South," in

- Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews, eds., *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 153–94; Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Washington DC: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1998); Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole, eds., *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005); and Patrick Q. Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
20. Militia Act of 1792, 1 Stat. chap. 33 (1792).
  21. For a classic study of American frontier violence, see Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
  22. The Danites viewed this theft as the appropriation of needed goods in a wartime atmosphere. (See Baugh, *Call to Arms*, 36–43; Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, with the assistance of Jed Woodworth [New York: Knopf, 2005], 349–55; 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*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman [Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008], 231, 292–93, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org); and “Danites,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed Jan. 23, 2014.)
  23. Leonard, *Nauvoo*, 374–75.
  24. See Ronald W. Walker, “Toward a Reconstruction of Mormon and Indian Relations, 1847 to 1877,” *BYU Studies* 29, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 23–42; and Sondra Jones, “Saints or Sinners? The Evolving Perceptions of Mormon–Indian Relations in Utah Historiography,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 19–46. Brigham Young served as territorial governor from 1850–1857 and as territorial superintendent of Indian Affairs from 1851 to 1857.
  25. See Howard A. Christy, “The Walker War: Defense and Conciliation as Strategy,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (Fall 1979): 395–420.
  26. On cultural misunderstanding between Mormons and Indians, see Marlin K. Jensen, “The Rest of the Story: Latter-day Saint Relations with Utah’s Native Americans,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 16–25.
  27. Brigham Young letter to Isaac Higbee, Oct. 18, 1849, Brigham Young Office Files, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
  28. Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, Jan. 31, 1850, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
  29. D. Robert Carter, *Founding Fort Utah: Provo’s Native Inhabitants, Early Explorers, and First Year of Settlement* (Provo, UT: Provo City Corporation, 2003), 52, 114–15, 135, 142, 145, 153–57, 163, 227. Contemporaneous sources indicate that the number of Indians who died was between 24 and 40, though a much later reminiscence places the death count among the Utes at around 100. (See Epsy Jane Williams, Autobiography, [1], Church History Library,

- Salt Lake City; and Jared Farmer, *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* [Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2008], 67–77.)
30. See Albert Winkler, “The Circleville Massacre: A Brutal Incident in Utah’s Black Hawk War,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 4–21.
  31. For an overview of Latter-day Saint interactions with American Indians, see Jensen, “Latter-day Saint Relations with Utah’s Native Americans,” 16–25; see also Ronald W. Walker, “Wakara Meets the Mormons, 1848–52: A Case Study in Native American Accommodation,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 215–37.
  32. Jensen, “Latter-day Saint Relations with Utah’s Native Americans,” 23.
  33. On the “reformation,” see Paul H. Peterson, “The Mormon Reformation of 1856–1857: The Rhetoric and the Reality,” *Journal of Mormon History* 15 (1989): 59–87.
  34. See, for example, John Brown, journal, Nov. 27 and Dec. 11, 1856 and Jan. 1, 1857, 202–6, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Benjamin F. Johnson, autobiography, Dec. 1856, 198, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; *No Place to Call Home: The 1807–1857 Life Writings of Caroline Barnes Crosby, Chronicler of Outlying Mormon Communities*, ed. Edward Leo Lyman and others (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2005), 442; and Hannah Tapfield King, autobiography, Mar. 16–Apr. 9, 1857, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
  35. For the mixing of religious language with violence throughout U.S. history, see John D. Carlson and Jonathan H. Ebel, eds., *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Violent rhetoric was often used in the political realm as well. In 1857, for instance, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas harshly denounced the “treasonable, disgusting and bestial practices” of the Mormons. Protecting those who practiced polygamy, Douglas said, was a “disgrace to the country—a disgrace to humanity—a disgrace to civilization.” He continued: “The knife must be applied to this pestiferous, disgusting cancer which is gnawing into the very vitals of the body politic. It must be cut out by the roots and seared over by the red-hot iron of stern and unflinching law.” The most inflammatory language was edited down in the official version. (See “Great Rally of the People,” *Marshall County [Indiana] Democrat*, June 25, 1857, [1]; *Remarks of the Hon. Stephen A. Douglas, on Kansas, Utah, and the Dred Scot Decision* [Chicago: Daily Times Book and Job Office, 1857], 11–15; “Senator Douglas’ Speech in Illinois,” *New York Herald*, June 22, 1857, 2; and Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* [Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997], 568–69.)
  36. See, for example, Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:53–54; and Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:160–21. This concept, which came to be known as *blood atonement*, was a stock component of anti-Mormon rhetoric in the 19th century. While many of the exaggerated claims that appeared in the popular press and anti-Mormon literature are easily disproven, it is likely that in at least one instance, a few Latter-day Saints acted on this rhetoric. Nevertheless, most Latter-day Saints seem to have recognized that the blood atonement sermons were, in the words of historian Paul Peterson, “hyperbole or incendiary talk” that were “likely designed to frighten church members into conforming with Latter-day

- Saint principles. To Saints with good intentions, they were calculated to cause alarm, introspection, and ultimately repentance. For those who refused to comply with Mormon standards, it was hoped such ominous threats would hasten their departure from the Territory.” (See Isaac C. Haight letter to Brigham Young, June 11, 1857, Brigham Young Office Files; Peterson, “Mormon Reformation of 1856–1857,” 67, 84n66; see also *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. [1992], “Blood Atonement,” 1:131.)
37. On the murder of Parley P. Pratt, see Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 366–91; for the relationship of news of the murder and the massacre, see Richard E. Turley Jr., “The Murder of Parley P. Pratt and the Mountain Meadows Massacre,” in Gregory K. Armstrong, Matthew J. Grow, and Dennis J. Siler, eds., *Parley P. Pratt and the Making of Mormonism* (Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2011), 297–313.
38. On the Utah War, see William P. MacKinnon, ed., *At Sword’s Point, Part 1: A Documentary History of the Utah War to 1858* (Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2008); and Matthew J. Grow, “*Liberty to the Downtrodden*”: *Thomas L. Kane, Romantic Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 149–206.
39. Some of the cattle owned by the emigrants died along the Utah trail, further exacerbating their sense of grievance. (Richard E. Turley Jr., “[The Mountain Meadows Massacre](#),” *Ensign*, Sept. 2007, 14–18.)
40. Brigham Young letter to Isaac C. Haight, Sept. 10, 1857, Letterbook, vol. 3, pp. 827–28, Brigham Young Office Files.
41. Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Much has been written on the Mountain Meadows Massacre. A classic study is Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1950). See also Richard E. Turley Jr., “[The Mountain Meadows Massacre](#),” *Ensign*, Sept. 2007, 14–21; and *BYU Studies* 47, no. 3 (2008), a special issue dedicated to the subject, available at [byustudies.byu.edu](http://byustudies.byu.edu).  
You are about to access: <http://byustudies.byu.edu>  
You are now leaving a website maintained by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We provide the link to this third party's website solely as a convenience to you. The linked site has its own terms of use, privacy policies, and security practices that differ from those on our website. By referring or linking you to this website, we do not endorse or guarantee the content, products, or services offered.
42. See, for example, Polly Aird, *Mormon Convert, Mormon Defector: A Scottish Immigrant in the American West, 1848–1861* (Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2009); and Walker, Turley, and Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, 42–43, 93. Ambiguous instructions from Church leaders also may have contributed to some episodes of violence. (See, for example, Ardis E. Parshall, “‘Pursue, Retake & Punish’: The 1857 Santa Clara Ambush,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 [Winter 2005]: 64–86.)

43. George Q. Cannon to Brigham Young, March 23, 1876, Brigham Young Office Files. For example, in December 1875 the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune* ran half a column on the disappearance of Sam D. Surrine, a Salt Lake City policeman. Without presenting any evidence, the *Tribune* reported that Surrine must have been killed (“blood-atoned”) by Mormon leaders as recompense for the death of a Latter-day Saint doctor named J. King Robinson. Surrine was located living in California a few years later. (“Sam D. Surrine,” *Salt Lake Daily Tribune*, Dec. 5, 1875; “District Attorney Howard Discovers a Long Lost Danite,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, July 17, 1877; “That Danite,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, July 18, 1877.)
44. For instance, Franklin Buck, a non-Mormon miner, visited several southern Utah towns in 1871. He wrote: “The Mormons are the Christians and we are the Heathens. In Pioche [Nevada] we have two courts, any number of sheriffs and police officers and a jail to force people to do what is right. There is a fight every day and a man killed about every week. ... In these Mormon towns there are no courts, no prisons. ... All difficulties between each other are settled by the Elders and the Bishop. Instead of every man trying to hang his neighbor, they all pull together.” (Franklin A. Buck, *A Yankee Trader in the Gold Rush: The Letters of Franklin A. Buck*, Katherine A. White, comp. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930], 235; see also William Chandless, *A Visit to Salt Lake; Being a Journey across the Plains and a Residence in the Mormon Settlements at Utah* [London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1857], 181; and Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints, and Across the Rocky Mountains to California* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1862], 214, 224.)
45. In responding to some of these allegations in 1889, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles wrote: “We denounce as entirely untrue the allegation which has been made, that our Church favors or believes in the killing of persons who leave the Church or apostatize from its doctrines. We would view a punishment of this character for such an act with the utmost horror, it is abhorrent to us and is in direct opposition to the fundamental principles of our creed.” (Official Declaration, Dec. 12, 1889, in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1833-1964*, 6 vols. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966], 3:185.)
46. Henry B. Eyring, Remarks, Sept. 11, 2007, available at [mormonnewsroom.org](http://mormonnewsroom.org).
47. Russell M. Nelson, “[Blessed Are the Peacemakers](#),” *Ensign*, Nov. 2002, 41; quoting [Doctrine and Covenants 98:16](#) and [Romans 14:19](#).



# The Manifesto and the End of Plural Marriage

For much of the 19th century, a significant number of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints practiced plural marriage—the marriage of one man to more than one woman. The beginning and end of the practice were directed by revelation through God’s prophets. The initial command to practice plural marriage came through Joseph Smith, the founding prophet and President of the Church. In 1890, President Wilford Woodruff issued the Manifesto, which led to the end of plural marriage in the Church.

The end of plural marriage required great faith and sometimes complicated, painful—and intensely personal—decisions on the part of individual members and Church leaders. Like the beginning of plural marriage in the Church, the end of the practice was a process rather than a single event. Revelation came “line upon line, precept upon precept.”<sup>1</sup>

## Antipolygamy Laws and Civil Disobedience

For half a century, beginning in the early 1840s, Church members viewed plural marriage as a commandment from God, an imperative that helped “raise up” a righteous posterity unto the Lord.<sup>2</sup> Though not all Church members were expected to enter into plural marriage, those who did so believed they would be blessed for their participation. Between the 1850s and the 1880s, many Latter-day Saints lived in plural families as husbands, wives, or children.<sup>3</sup>

In many parts of the world, polygamy was socially acceptable and legally permissible. But in the United States, most people thought that the practice was morally wrong. These objections led to legislative efforts to end polygamy. Beginning in 1862, the U.S. government passed a series of laws designed to force Latter-day Saints to relinquish plural marriage.<sup>4</sup>

In the face of these measures, Latter-day Saints maintained that plural marriage was a religious principle protected under the U.S. Constitution. The Church mounted a vigorous legal defense all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In *Reynolds v. United States* (1879), the Supreme Court ruled against the Latter-day Saints: religious belief was protected by law, religious practice was not. According to the court’s opinion, marriage was a civil contract regulated by the state. Monogamy was the only form of marriage sanctioned by the state. “Polygamy,” the court explained, “has always been odious among the northern and western nations of Europe.”<sup>5</sup>

Latter-day Saints sincerely desired to be loyal citizens of the United States, which they considered a divinely founded nation. But they also accepted plural marriage as a commandment from God and believed the court was unjustly depriving them of their right to follow God's commands.

Confronted with these contradictory allegiances, Church leaders encouraged members to obey God rather than man. Many Latter-day Saints embarked on a course of civil disobedience during the 1880s by continuing to live in plural marriage and to enter into new plural marriages.<sup>6</sup> The federal government responded by enacting ever more punishing legislation.

Between 1850 and 1896, Utah was a territory of the U.S. government, which meant that federal officials in Washington, D.C., exercised great control over local matters. In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the Edmunds Act, which made unlawful cohabitation (interpreted as a man living with more than one wife) punishable by six months of imprisonment and a \$300 fine. In 1887 Congress passed the Edmunds-Tucker Act to punish the Church itself, not just its members. The act dissolved the corporation of the Church and directed that all Church property over \$50,000 be forfeited to the government.

This government opposition strengthened the Saints' resolve to resist what they deemed to be unjust laws. Polygamous men went into hiding, sometimes for years at a time, moving from house to house and staying with friends and relatives. Others assumed aliases and moved to out-of-the-way places in southern Utah, Arizona, Canada, and Mexico.<sup>7</sup> Many escaped prosecution; many others, when arrested, pled guilty and submitted to fines and imprisonment. This antipolygamy campaign created great disruption in Mormon communities. The departure of husbands left wives and children to tend farms and businesses, causing incomes to drop and economic recession to set in. The campaign also strained families. New plural wives had to live apart from their husbands, their confidential marriages known only to a few. Pregnant women often chose to go into hiding, at times in remote locales, rather than risk being subpoenaed to testify in court against their husbands. Children lived in fear that their families would be broken up or that they would be forced to testify against their parents. Some children went into hiding and lived under assumed names.<sup>8</sup>

Despite countless difficulties, many Latter-day Saints were convinced that the antipolygamy campaign was useful in accomplishing God's purposes. They testified that God was humbling and purifying His covenant people as He had done in ages past. Myron Tanner, a bishop in Provo, Utah, felt that "the hand of oppression laid on the parents, is doing more to convince our Children of the truth of Mormonism than anything else could have done."<sup>9</sup> Incarceration for "conscience' sake" proved edifying for many. George Q. Cannon, a counselor in the First Presidency, emerged from his five months in the Utah penitentiary rejuvenated. "My cell has seemed a heavenly place, and I feel that angels have been there," he wrote.<sup>10</sup>



The Church completed and dedicated two temples during the antipolygamy campaign, a remarkable achievement.<sup>11</sup> But as federal pressure intensified, many essential aspects of Church government were severely curtailed, and civil disobedience looked increasingly untenable as a long-term solution. Between 1885 and 1889, most Apostles and stake presidents were in hiding or in prison. After federal agents began seizing Church property in accordance with the Edmunds–Tucker legislation, management of the Church became more difficult.<sup>12</sup>

## The Manifesto

After two decades of seeking either to negotiate a change in the law or avoid its disastrous consequences, Church leaders began to investigate alternative responses. In 1885 and 1886 they established settlements in Mexico and Canada, outside the jurisdiction of U.S. law, where polygamous families could live peaceably. Hoping that a moderation in their position would lead to a reduction in hostilities, Church leaders advised plural husbands to live openly with only one of their wives, and advocated that plural marriage not be taught publicly. In 1889, Church authorities prohibited the performance of new plural marriages in Utah.<sup>13</sup> Church leaders prayerfully sought guidance from the Lord and struggled to understand what they should do. Both President John Taylor and President Wilford Woodruff felt the Lord directing them to stay the course and not renounce plural marriage.<sup>14</sup>

This inspiration came when paths for legal redress were still open. The last of the paths closed in May 1890, when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Edmunds–Tucker Act, allowing the confiscation of Church property to proceed. President Woodruff saw that the Church’s temples and its ordinances were now at risk. Burdened by this threat, he prayed intensely over the matter. “The Lord showed me by vision and revelation,” he later said, “exactly what would take place if we did not stop this practice,” referring to plural marriage. “All the temples [would] go out of our hands.” God “has told me exactly what to do, and what the result would be if we did not do it.”<sup>15</sup>

On September 25, 1890, President Woodruff wrote in his journal that he was “under the necessity of acting for the Temporal Salvation of the Church.” He stated, “After Praying to the Lord & feeling inspired by his spirit I have issued ... [a] Proclamation.”<sup>16</sup> This proclamation, now published in the Doctrine and Covenants as [Official Declaration 1](#), was released to the public on September 25 and became known as the Manifesto.<sup>17</sup>

The Manifesto was carefully worded to address the immediate conflict with the U.S. government. “We are not teaching polygamy, or plural marriage, nor permitting any person to enter into its practice,” President Woodruff said. “Inasmuch as laws have been enacted by Congress forbidding plural marriages, which laws have been pronounced constitutional by the

court of last resort, I hereby declare my intention to submit to those laws, and to use my influence with the members of the Church over which I preside to have them do likewise.”<sup>18</sup> The members of the Quorum of the Twelve varied in their reactions to the Manifesto. Franklin D. Richards was sure it was “the work of the Lord.” Francis M. Lyman said that “he had endorsed the Manifesto fully when he first heard it.”<sup>19</sup> Not all the Twelve accepted the document immediately. John W. Taylor said he did “not yet feel quite right about it” at first.<sup>20</sup> John Henry Smith candidly admitted that “the Manifesto had disturbed his feelings very much” and that he was still “somewhat at sea” regarding it.<sup>21</sup> Within a week, however, all members of the Twelve voted to sustain the Manifesto.

The Manifesto was formally presented to the Church at the semiannual general conference held in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in October 1890. On Monday, October 6, Orson F. Whitney, a Salt Lake City bishop, stood at the pulpit and read the Articles of Faith, which included the line that Latter-day Saints believe in “obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.” These articles were sustained by uplifted hand. Whitney then read the Manifesto, and Lorenzo Snow, President of the Quorum of the Twelve, moved that the document be accepted as “authoritative and binding.” The assembly was then asked to vote on this motion. The *Deseret News* reported that the vote was “unanimous”; most voted in favor, though some abstained from voting.<sup>22</sup>

Rank-and-file Latter-day Saints accepted the Manifesto with various degrees of reservation. Many were not ready for plural marriage to come to an end. General Relief Society president Zina D. H. Young, writing in her journal on the day the Manifesto was presented to the Church, captured the anguish of the moment: “Today the hearts of all were tried but looked to God and submitted.”<sup>23</sup> The Manifesto prompted uncertainty about the future of some relationships. Eugenia Washburn Larsen, fearing the worst, reported feeling “dense darkness” when she imagined herself and other wives and children being “turned adrift” by husbands.<sup>24</sup> Other plural wives, however, reacted to the Manifesto with “great relief.”<sup>25</sup>

## After the Manifesto

Latter-day Saints believe that the Lord reveals His will “line upon line; here a little, there a little.”<sup>26</sup> Church members living in 1890 generally believed that the Manifesto was the “work of the Lord,” in Franklin D. Richards’s words. But the full implications of the Manifesto were not apparent at first; its scope had to be worked out, and authorities differed on how best to proceed. “We have been led to our present position by degrees,” Apostle Heber J. Grant explained.<sup>27</sup> Over time and through effort to receive continuing revelation, Church members saw “by degrees” how to interpret the Manifesto going forward.

At first, many Church leaders believed the Manifesto merely “suspended” plural marriage for an indefinite time.<sup>28</sup> Having lived, taught, and suffered for plural marriage for so long, it was difficult to imagine a world without it. George Q. Cannon, a counselor in the First Presidency,

likened the Manifesto to the Lord's reprieve from the command to build temples in Missouri in the 1830s after the Saints were expelled from the state. In a sermon given immediately after the Manifesto was sustained at general conference, Cannon quoted a passage of scripture in which the Lord excuses those who diligently seek to carry out a commandment from Him, only to be prevented by their enemies: "Behold, it behooveth me to require that work no more at the hands of those sons of men, but to accept of their offerings."<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, many practical matters had to be settled. The Manifesto was silent on what existing plural families should do. On their own initiative, some couples separated or divorced as a result of the Manifesto; other husbands stopped cohabiting with all but one of their wives but continued to provide financial and emotional support to all dependents.<sup>30</sup> In closed-door meetings with local leaders, the First Presidency condemned men who left their wives by using the Manifesto as an excuse. "I did not, could not and would not promise that you would desert your wives and children," President Woodruff told the men. "This you cannot do in honor."<sup>31</sup> Believing that the covenants they made with God and their spouses had to be honored above all else, many husbands, including Church leaders, continued to cohabit with their plural wives and fathered children with them well into the 20th century.<sup>32</sup> Continued cohabitation exposed those couples to the threat of prosecution, just as it did before the Manifesto. But these threats were markedly diminished after 1890. The Manifesto marked a new relationship with the federal government and the nation: prosecution of polygamists declined, plural wives came out of hiding and assumed their married names, and husbands interacted more freely with their families, especially after U.S. president Benjamin Harrison granted general amnesty to Mormon polygamists in 1893.<sup>33</sup> Three years later, Utah became a state with a constitution that banned polygamy.

The Manifesto declared President Woodruff's intention to submit to the laws of the United States. It said nothing about the laws of other nations. Ever since the opening of colonies in Mexico and Canada, Church leaders had performed plural marriages in those countries, and after October 1890, plural marriages continued to be quietly performed there.<sup>34</sup> As a rule, these marriages were not promoted by Church leaders and were difficult to get approved. Either one or both of the spouses who entered into these unions typically had to agree to remain in Canada or Mexico. Under exceptional circumstances, a smaller number of new plural marriages were performed in the United States between 1890 and 1904, though whether the marriages were authorized to have been performed within the states is unclear.<sup>35</sup>

The precise number of new plural marriages performed during these years, inside and outside the United States, is unknown. Sealing records kept during this period typically did not indicate whether a sealing was monogamous or plural, making an exhaustive calculation difficult. A rough sense of scale, however, can be seen in a chronological ledger of marriages and sealings kept by Church scribes. Between the late 1880s and the early 1900s, during a time when

temples were few and travel to them was long and arduous, Latter-day Saint couples who lived far away from temples were permitted to be sealed in marriage outside them.

The ledger of “marriages and sealings performed outside the temple,” which is not comprehensive, lists 315 marriages performed between October 17, 1890, and September 8, 1903.<sup>36</sup> Of the 315 marriages recorded in the ledger, research indicates that 25 (7.9%) were plural marriages and 290 were monogamous marriages (92.1%). Almost all the monogamous marriages recorded were performed in Arizona or Mexico. Of the 25 plural marriages, 18 took place in Mexico, 3 in Arizona, 2 in Utah, and 1 each in Colorado and on a boat on the Pacific Ocean. Overall, the record shows that plural marriage was a declining practice and that Church leaders were acting in good conscience to abide by the terms of the Manifesto as they understood them.<sup>37</sup>

The exact process by which these marriages were approved remains unclear. For a time, post-Manifesto plural marriages required the approval of a member of the First Presidency. There is no definitive evidence, however, that the decisions were made by the First Presidency as a whole; President Woodruff, for example, typically referred requests to allow new plural marriages to President Cannon for his personal consideration.<sup>38</sup> By the late 1890s, at least some of the men who had authority to perform sealings apparently considered themselves free to either accept or reject requests at their own discretion, independent of the First Presidency. Apostle Heber J. Grant, for example, reported that while visiting Mormon settlements in Mexico in 1900, he received 10 applications in a single day requesting plural marriages. He declined them all. “I confess,” he told a friend, “that it has always gone against my grain to have any violations of documents [i.e. the Manifesto] of this kind.”<sup>39</sup>

## The Second Manifesto

At first, the performance of new plural marriages after the Manifesto was largely unknown to people outside the Church. When discovered, these marriages troubled many Americans, especially after President George Q. Cannon stated in an 1899 interview with the *New York Herald* that new plural marriages might be performed in Canada and Mexico.<sup>40</sup> After the election of B. H. Roberts, a member of the First Council of the Seventy, to the U.S. Congress, it became known that Roberts had three wives, one of whom he married after the Manifesto. A petition of 7 million signatures demanded that Roberts not be seated. Congress complied, and Roberts was barred from his office.<sup>41</sup>

The exclusion of B. H. Roberts opened Mormon marital practices to renewed scrutiny. Church President Lorenzo Snow issued a statement clarifying that new plural marriages had ceased in the Church and that the Manifesto extended to all parts of the world, counsel he repeated in private. Even so, a small number of new plural marriages continued to be performed, probably without President Snow’s knowledge or approval. After Joseph F. Smith became Church

President in 1901, a small number of new plural marriages were also performed during the early years of his administration.<sup>42</sup>

The Church's role in these marriages became a subject of intense debate after Reed Smoot, an Apostle, was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1903. Although Smoot was a monogamist, his apostleship put his loyalty to the country under scrutiny. How could Smoot both uphold the laws of the Church, some of whose officers had performed, consented to, or participated in new plural marriages, and uphold the laws of the land, which made plural marriage illegal? For four years legislators debated this question in lengthy public hearings.

The Senate called on many witnesses to testify. Church President Joseph F. Smith took the stand in the Senate chamber in March 1904. When asked, he defended his family relationships, telling the committee that he had cohabited with his wives and fathered children with them since 1890. He said it would be dishonorable of him to break the sacred covenants he had made with his wives and with God. When questioned about new plural marriages performed since 1890, President Smith carefully distinguished between actions sanctioned by the Church and ratified in Church councils and conferences, and the actions undertaken by individual members of the Church. "There never has been a plural marriage by the consent or sanction or knowledge or approval of the church since the manifesto," he testified.<sup>43</sup>

In this legal setting, President Smith sought to protect the Church while stating the truth. His testimony conveyed a distinction Church leaders had long understood: the Manifesto removed the divine command for the Church collectively to sustain and defend plural marriage; it had not, up to this time, prohibited individuals from continuing to practice or perform plural marriage as a matter of religious conscience.

The time was right for a change in this understanding. A majority of Mormon marriages had always been monogamous, and a shift toward monogamy as the only approved form had long been underway. In 1889, a lifelong monogamist was called to the Quorum of the Twelve; after 1897, every new Apostle called into the Twelve, with one exception, was a monogamist at the time of his appointment.<sup>44</sup> Beginning in the 1890s, as Church leaders urged members to remain in their native lands and "build Zion" in those places rather than immigrate to Utah as in previous years, it became important for them to abide the laws mandating monogamy. During his Senate testimony, President Smith promised publicly to clarify the Church's position about plural marriage. At the April 1904 general conference, President Smith issued a forceful statement, known as the Second Manifesto, attaching penalties to entering into plural marriage: "If any officer or member of the Church shall assume to solemnize or enter into any such marriage he will be deemed in transgression against the Church and will be liable to be dealt with according to the rules and regulations thereof and excommunicated therefrom."<sup>45</sup>This

statement had been approved by the leading councils of the Church and was unanimously sustained at the conference as authoritative and binding on the Church.<sup>46</sup>

The Second Manifesto was a watershed event. For the first time, Church members were put on notice that new plural marriages stood unapproved by God and the Church. The Second Manifesto expanded the reach and scope of the first. “When [the Manifesto] was given,” Elder Francis M. Lyman, President of the Quorum of the Twelve, explained, “it simply gave notice to the Saints that they need not enter plural marriage any longer, but the action taken at the conference held in Salt Lake City on the 6th day of April 1904 [the Second Manifesto] made that manifesto prohibitory.”<sup>47</sup>

Church leaders acted to communicate the seriousness of this declaration to leaders and members at all levels. President Lyman sent letters to each member of the Quorum of the Twelve, by direction of the First Presidency, advising them that the Second Manifesto would be “strictly enforced.”<sup>48</sup> Contrary to direction, two Apostles, John W. Taylor and Matthias F. Cowley, continued to perform and encourage new plural marriages after the Second Manifesto. They were eventually dropped from the quorum.<sup>49</sup> Taylor was later excommunicated from the Church after he insisted on his right to continue to perform plural marriages. Cowley was restricted from using his priesthood and later admitted that he had been “wholly in error.”<sup>50</sup>

Some couples who entered into plural marriage between 1890 and 1904 separated after the Second Manifesto, but many others quietly cohabited into the 1930s and beyond.<sup>51</sup> Church members who rejected the Second Manifesto and continued to publicly advocate plural marriage or undertake new plural marriages were summoned to Church disciplinary councils. Some who were excommunicated coalesced into independent movements and are sometimes called fundamentalists. These groups are not affiliated with or supported by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Since the administration of Joseph F. Smith, Church Presidents have repeatedly emphasized that the Church and its members are no longer authorized to enter into plural marriage and have underscored the sincerity of their words by urging local leaders to bring noncompliant members before Church disciplinary councils.

## Conclusion

Marriage between one man and one woman is God’s standard for marriage, unless He declares otherwise, which He did through His prophet, Joseph Smith. The Manifesto marked the beginning of the return to monogamy, which is the standard of the Church today.<sup>52</sup> Speaking at general conference soon after the Manifesto was given, President George Q. Cannon reflected on the revelatory process that brought the Manifesto about: “The Presidency of the Church have to walk just as you walk,” he said. “They have to take steps just as you take steps. They have to depend upon the revelations of God as they come to them. They cannot see the end from the beginning, as the Lord does.” “All that we can do,” Cannon said, speaking of the First

Presidency, “is to seek the mind and will of God, and when that comes to us, though it may come in contact with every feeling that we have previously entertained, we have no option but to take the step that God points out, and to trust to Him.”<sup>53</sup>

## Resources

1. [Doctrine and Covenants 98:12](#).
2. [Jacob 2:30](#); “[Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo](#).”
3. “[Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah](#).”
4. See Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
5. *Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. 145 (1879): 164.
6. J. David Pulsipher, “‘Prepared to Abide the Penalty’: Latter-day Saints and Civil Disobedience,” *Journal of Mormon History* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 131–62. Latter-day Saints drew upon a long tradition of civil disobedience in the United States, which had begun with the turmoil that led to the American Revolution.
7. See, for example, Benjamin Johnson, *My Life’s Review: Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin Johnson* (Provo, UT: Grandin Book, 1997), 276–325; and *In the Whirlpool: The Pre-Manifesto Letters of President Wilford Woodruff to the William Atkin Family, 1885–1890*, ed. Reid L. Nielson (Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2011), 45–49.
8. Jessie L. Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 17–22; “A Mormon ‘Widow’ in Colorado: The Exile of Emily Wells Grant,” in Ronald W. Walker, *Qualities That Count: Heber J. Grant as Businessman, Missionary, and Apostle* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2004), 175–93; Kimberly Jensen James, “‘Between Two Fires’: Women on the Underground of Mormon Polygamy,” *Journal of Mormon History* 8 (1981):49–61; Martha Sonntag Bradley, “‘Hide and Seek’: Children on the Underground,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 133–53.
9. Utah Stake Relief Society, General Minutes, Nov. 26, 1886, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
10. *Within These Prison Walls: Lorenzo Snow’s Record Book, 1886–1897*, eds. Andrew H. Hedges and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2010); Davis Bitton, *George Q. Cannon: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 296.
11. Temples were dedicated in Logan, Utah, in 1884 and in Manti, Utah, in 1888.
12. “Crisis in Zion: Heber J. Grant and the Panic of 1893,” in Walker, *Qualities That Count*, 116.
13. George Q. Cannon diary, May 29, 1888; Aug. 15, Sept. 9, 1889, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Heber J. Grant diary, Jan. 1, 1890, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Thomas G. Alexander, “The Odyssey of a Latter-day Prophet: Wilford Woodruff and the Manifesto of 1890,” in Nielson, *In the Whirlpool*, 72–73.



14. Alexander, "The Odyssey of a Latter-day Prophet," 77–78. President John Taylor's son, the Apostle John W. Taylor, later reported that he found among his father's papers, after his death, "a revelation given him [President Taylor] of the Lord." "President Taylor desired to have to have it [plural marriage] suspended, but the Lord would not permit it to be done" (Abraham H. Cannon diary, April 1, 1892, Church History Library, Salt Lake City). Years later, Apostle Taylor presented a copy of this revelation to the Twelve at his excommunication trial for continuing to perform plural marriages. Francis M. Lyman, President of the Twelve, noted in his diary entry for that day that this "purported revelation" was "never submitted to the Councils of the Priesthood nor the church" and was therefore not binding on the Church (Francis M. Lyman diary, Feb. 22, 1911). If authentic, the revelation had been superseded by the Manifesto, which was given by revelation to President Wilford Woodruff and was accepted by the Church at general conference.
15. "Remarks Made by President Wilford Woodruff," *Deseret Evening News*, Nov. 7, 1891, 4; and excerpts accompanying [Official Declaration—1](#), Doctrine and Covenants.
16. Wilford Woodruff journal, Sept. 25, 1890, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
17. George Q. Cannon journal, Sept. 23–25, 1890.
18. [Official Declaration 1](#); "Official Declaration," *Deseret Evening News*, Sept. 25, 1890.
19. Heber J. Grant diary, Sept. 30, 1890. Heber J. Grant said, "I approve of the manifesto, and feel that it is merely a public announcement of the course which we had already decided in our private councils to adopt" (Abraham H. Cannon diary, Oct. 1, 1890).
20. Abraham H. Cannon diary, Sept. 30, 1890.
21. Heber J. Grant diary, Oct 1, 1890.
22. *President Woodruff's Manifesto: Proceedings at the Semi-Annual General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Monday Forenoon, October 6, 1890* (Salt Lake City, 1890), 1–3; "Third Day," *Deseret Evening News*, Oct. 6, 1890; Marriner Wood Merrill journal, Oct. 6, 1890, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Abraham H. Cannon diary, Oct. 6, 1890; Joseph H. Dean journal, October 6, 1890, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
23. Zina D. H. Young diary, Oct. 6, 1890, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; spelling standardized.
24. Larsen soon experienced a powerful change of heart. "There was a light whose brightness cannot be described which filled my soul," she recalled, helping her to know the Manifesto was right (*Autobiography of Lorena Eugenia Washburn Larsen* [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1962], 105–6).
25. Annie Clark Tanner, *A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography by Annie Clark Tanner* (Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund and University of Utah Library, 1991), 130; Lisa Olsen Tait, "The 1890s Mormon Culture of Letters and the Post-Manifesto Marriage Crisis: A New Approach to Home Literature," *BYU Studies* 52, no. 1 (2013): 98–124.



26. [Isaiah 28:10, 13](#); see also [2 Nephi 28:30](#); [Doctrine and Covenants 98:12](#).
27. Abraham H. Cannon diary, April 1, 1892.
28. Heber J. Grant diary, Sept. 30, 1890; "Amnesty Petition," Dec. 19, 1891, in James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 3:230.
29. *President Woodruff's Manifesto*, 3; [Doctrine and Covenants 124:49](#).
30. Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families*, 13–14; Francis M. Lyman journal, Dec. 15, 1893, Church History Library; Utah Stake High Council minutes, Aug. 5, 1892, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
31. Abraham H. Cannon diary, Oct. 7, 1890, Nov. 12, 1891.
32. Kenneth L. Cannon II, "Beyond the Manifesto: Polygamous Cohabitation among LDS General Authorities after 1890," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 24–36.
33. President Harrison's amnesty proclamation pardoned all those who might have been found in violation of the Edmonds and Edmonds–Tucker Acts who had abstained from unlawful cohabitation since November 1, 1890.
34. Polygamy was illegal in Mexico and, after 1890, in Canada as well, but the governments of those countries did not actively prosecute Mormon polygamists. In the case of Mexico, Mormon authorities worked out a verbal agreement with Mexican officials allowing them to practice plural marriage in their colonies. (B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992], 173–82.)
35. See, for example, Matthias Cowley, *Marriages Solemnized, 1898–1903*, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
36. *Marriages and Sealings Performed Outside the Temple, 1853–1857, 1873–1903*, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. The ledger does not record plural and monogamous marriages known to have been performed by Anthony W. Ivins, Matthias F. Cowley, and Abraham O. Woodruff during the 1890s and early 1900s. In all, 8 of 19 members of the Quorum of the Twelve who served between 1890 and 1904 married new plural wives during those years, and these marriages are not represented on the ledger. These members include Brigham Young Jr., George Teasdale, John W. Taylor, Abraham H. Cannon, Marriner W. Merrill, Matthias F. Cowley, Abraham Owen Woodruff, and Rudger Clawson. It is alleged that President Wilford Woodruff married an additional plural wife in 1897, but the historical record makes this unclear (see Thomas G. Alexander, *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991], 326–28).
37. Plural marriages performed within temples drastically diminished in number even before the Manifesto. In the Logan Temple, for example, plural marriage sealings peaked at 188 in the year 1885. The number diminished to 51 in the year 1888 and then 4 in the year 1889. Between 1890 and 1903, when the record of plural marriage sealings ends, no plural

marriages are recorded as having taken place within the temple, and 6 plural marriages are recorded as having taken place in Logan or its vicinity. Logan Temple Sealings, 1884–1903, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

38. Francis M. Lyman journal, April 18, 1901; Joseph F. Smith to Reed Smoot, April 1, 1911, Joseph F. Smith Papers, Church History Library; B. H. Roberts letter to Heber J. Grant, July 9, 1929, B. H. Roberts Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Joseph T. Bentley, *Life and Letters of Joseph Charles Bentley: A Biography* (Provo, UT: By the author, 1977), 77–81. President Joseph F. Smith later affirmed that he, President Woodruff, and President Snow, as Presidents of the Church, “have not given authority to any one to perform or enter into plural marriages since the Manifesto” (Francis M. Lyman journal, Dec. 14, 1905).
39. Heber J. Grant to Frank Y. Taylor, April 28, 1904, Heber J. Grant Letterpress Copybook, 38:591, Heber J. Grant Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
40. Eugene Young, “Polygamy Is Reviving,” *New York Herald*, Feb. 5, 1899, 2.
41. Davis Bitton, “The Exclusion of B. H. Roberts from Congress,” in *The Ritualization of Mormon History and Other Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 150–70.
42. “Polygamy and Unlawful Cohabitation,” *Deseret Evening News*, Jan. 8, 1900; Lu Ann Faylor Snyder and Phillip A. Snyder, *Post-Manifesto Polygamy: The 1899–1904 Correspondence of Helen, Owen, and Avery Woodruff* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2009); Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 62–63. The number of plural marriages remained relatively small in proportion to the number of monogamous marriages performed in the Church. One of the most aggressive proponents of new plural marriages, Apostle Matthias F. Cowley, listed the plural marriages he performed in a small notebook. The book contains 3 marriages for 1898, 4 for 1899, 9 for 1900, 20 for 1901, 18 for 1902, and 3 for 1903. (Cowley, Marriages Solemnized, 1898–1903.)
43. U.S. Senate, Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate: In the Matter of the Protests against the Right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a Senator from the State of Utah, to Hold His Seat*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904–6), 1:129–30. On President Smith’s testimony in Washington, D.C., see Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 56–81.
44. The one exception was Charles W. Penrose, called in July 1904. He was the husband of two wives whom he married decades earlier, and a plural wife whom he married in 1886. Anthon H. Lund, the monogamist who was called to the Twelve in 1889, became a counselor in the First Presidency under President Joseph F. Smith beginning in 1901.
45. “Official Statement by President Joseph F. Smith,” *Deseret Evening News*, Apr. 6, 1904, 1.
46. Francis M. Lyman journal, Apr. 6, 1904.

47. "President Lyman Very Emphatic," *Deseret Evening News*, October 31, 1910, 1.
48. Francis M. Lyman letter to John W. Taylor, May 3, 1904, Francis Marion Lyman Papers, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Francis M. Lyman letter to Matthias F. Cowley, May 6, 1904, in Francis M. Lyman journal, May 6, 1904.
49. It is sometimes asserted that Taylor and Cowley were asked to resign from their quorum merely to satisfy public opinion in Washington, D.C. Contemporary documents, however, state that they were "out of harmony" with their quorum in 1905 and 1906. Beginning in October 1904, the First Presidency ended the practice of permitting sealings to be performed outside of temples. Nevertheless, Cowley and Taylor continued to perform plural marriage sealings outside temples, including several on their own behalf. Cowley married a plural wife in 1905, and Taylor married a plural wife in 1909. (Matthias F. Cowley journal, July 5, 1906, Church History Library; First Presidency to George Teasdale, Oct. 26, 1904, Church History Library; Francis M. Lyman journal, September 29, 1904; October 28, 1905; April 10, 12, July 3, 1906.)
50. Francis M. Lyman journal, March 28, 1911; "Reconciliation," *Deseret News*, April 3, 1936, 4. Ruder Clawson, a member of the Twelve who married a plural wife in 1904, was not disciplined by Church authorities, likely in part because he did not insist on the right to perform new plural marriages. The plural marriage he undertook ended in separation. David S. Hoopes and Roy Hoopes, *The Making of a Mormon Apostle: The Story of Ruder Clawson* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1990), 215–20, 225–27, 287–88.
51. See, for example, Carolyn O'Bagy Davis, *The Fourth Wife: Polygamy, Love, & Revolution* (Tucson, AZ: Rio Nuevo, 2011).
52. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
53. George Q. Cannon, Oct. 5, 1890, in *Collected Discourses: Delivered by President Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others*, Brian H. Stuy, comp., 5 vols. (Burbank, CA: B.H.S. Publishing, 1987–92), 2:115–16.

# Joseph Smith's Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women

Women and men enjoy many opportunities for service in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, both within local congregations and at the Churchwide level. Among other things, Latter-day Saint women preach sermons in Sunday meetings and the Church's general conference; serve full-time proselytizing missions; perform and officiate in holy rites in the Church's temples; and lead organizations that minister to families, other women, young women, and children. They participate in priesthood councils at the local and general levels. Professional women teach Latter-day Saint history and theology at Church universities and in the Church's educational programs for youth. Because only men are ordained to priesthood office, however, questions have arisen about women's standing in the Church. This essay provides relevant historical context for these important questions and explains Joseph Smith's teachings about women and priesthood authority.

The restoration of priesthood authority through the Prophet Joseph Smith is a fundamental doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Early in his ministry, Joseph Smith received priesthood authority from heavenly messengers; with that authority, he organized the Church, conferred priesthood upon other men, and ordained them to offices in the priesthood.<sup>1</sup> By this same authority, Joseph Smith organized the Relief Society as part of the structure of the Church, which formally defined and authorized a major aspect of women's ministry. All this was done to prepare the Saints to participate in the ordinances of the temple, which were introduced soon after the founding of the Relief Society. At the time of his death, the revelatory vision imparted to Joseph Smith was securely in place: women and men could receive and administer sacred priesthood ordinances in holy temples, which would help prepare them to enter the presence of God one day.

## Early Latter-day Saint Understandings of Priesthood

The restoration of priesthood authority came at a time of intense religious excitement in the United States. This excitement was driven in part by questions about divine authority—who had it, how it was obtained, and whether it was necessary.<sup>2</sup> In the early 19th century, most Christians believed that the authority to act in God’s name had remained on the earth since the time of Jesus’s mortal ministry. Joseph Smith taught that Christ’s priesthood was lost after the deaths of the ancient apostles and had been newly restored through angelic ministrations. Even so, many Latter-day Saints initially understood the concept of priesthood largely in terms common for the day. In 1830s America, the word *priesthood* was defined as “the office or character of a priest” and “the order of men set apart for sacred offices,” identifying priesthood with religious office and the men who held it.<sup>3</sup> Early Latter-day Saints likewise thought of priesthood primarily in terms of ordination to ecclesiastical office and authority to preach and perform religious rites.<sup>4</sup> As in most other Christian denominations during this era, Latter-day Saint men alone held priesthood offices, served formal proselytizing missions, and performed ordinances like baptism and blessing the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

Unlike those in many other churches, Latter-day Saints extended priesthood ordination broadly to laymen, as directed by revelation. Over time, an extensive structure of priesthood offices and quorums was established. From the beginning, this structure was governed by revelation under the direction of priesthood leaders holding “keys.”<sup>5</sup> The keys of the Melchizedek priesthood, given through divine messengers to Joseph Smith and later passed to others, bestowed the “right of presidency,” the right “to administer in spiritual things,” and the “right to officiate in all the offices in the church.”<sup>6</sup>

Latter-day Saints’ understanding of the nature of priesthood and keys grew as a result of revelations received by Joseph Smith. An 1832 revelation taught that the greater, or Melchizedek, priesthood held “the key of the knowledge of God,” and that in the ordinances of the priesthood, “the power of godliness is manifest.” Joseph Smith was charged, like Moses, “to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God.”<sup>7</sup> In 1836, angelic messengers committed priesthood keys to Joseph Smith that would enable church members to receive temple ordinances.<sup>8</sup> In an 1841 revelation, the Lord commanded the Saints to build a temple in Nauvoo, Illinois, where He would reveal to His people “all things pertaining to this house, and the priesthood thereof.”<sup>9</sup> The culminating ordinances of the priesthood were to be found in the temple and would help prepare men and women to enter into God’s presence.

Latter-day Saint women in the Church’s earliest years, like women elsewhere, participated actively in their new religious community. They ratified decisions by voting in conferences;<sup>10</sup> they furnished the temple with their handiwork; they worshipped alongside men

in meetings and choirs; they shared the gospel with relatives and neighbors; they hosted meetings in their homes; and they exercised spiritual gifts in private and in public.<sup>11</sup> Early revelation authorized women to “expound scriptures, and to exhort the church.”<sup>12</sup> Even so, like most other Christians in their day, Latter-day Saints in the early years of the Church reserved public preaching and leadership for men.<sup>13</sup>

## Joseph Smith and the Nauvoo Relief Society

Revelatory developments in Nauvoo afforded women new opportunities to participate in the Church and expanded Latter-day Saints’ understanding of the eternal relationship between men and women. The organization of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo on March 17, 1842, marked a significant step in these developments.<sup>14</sup> Wanting to provide charitable support to men working to build the temple, a group of Mormon women planned to form a benevolent society, mirroring a popular practice of the time.<sup>15</sup> When they presented their plan to Joseph Smith, he felt inspired to move beyond such precedents. As Sarah Granger Kimball, a founding member of the Relief Society, later recalled, the Prophet told them he had “something better” for them and said he would organize the women “in the Order of the Priesthood after the pattern of the Church.”<sup>16</sup>

The women named their new organization “Relief Society.” It was unlike other women’s societies of the day because it was established by a prophet who acted with priesthood authority to give women authority, sacred responsibilities, and official positions within the structure of the Church, not apart from it. The women were organized, as Apostle John Taylor remarked at the founding meeting, “according to the law of Heaven.”<sup>17</sup>

Joseph Smith charged the women to “relieve the poor” and to “save souls.”<sup>18</sup> He stated that his wife Emma Hale Smith’s appointment as president of the Relief Society fulfilled a revelation given to her twelve years earlier, in which she was called an “Elect lady.”<sup>19</sup> He also declared to the Society, “I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time.”<sup>20</sup>

Sarah Kingsley Cleveland, counselor to Emma Smith, expressed the women’s sense of divine authorization when she said, “We design to act in the name of the Lord.”<sup>21</sup> Emma Smith called upon each member of the Society to be “ambitious to do good,” declaring that together they would do “something extraordinary.” She anticipated “extraordinary occasions and pressing calls.”<sup>22</sup>

Two aspects of Joseph Smith’s teachings to the women of the Relief Society may be unfamiliar to members of the Church today. First is his use of language associated with priesthood. In organizing the Relief Society, Joseph spoke of “ordain[ing]” women and said that Relief Society

officers would “preside over the Society.”<sup>23</sup> He also declared, “I now turn the key to you in the name of God.”<sup>24</sup>

These statements indicate that Joseph Smith delegated priesthood authority to women in the Relief Society.<sup>25</sup> Joseph’s language can be more fully understood in historical context. During the 19th century, Latter-day Saints used the term keys to refer at various times to authority, knowledge, or temple ordinances.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Mormons sometimes used the term *ordain* in a broad sense, often interchangeably with *set apart* and not always referring to priesthood office.<sup>27</sup> On these points, Joseph’s actions illuminate the meaning of his words: neither Joseph Smith, nor any person acting on his behalf, nor any of his successors conferred the Aaronic or Melchizedek Priesthood on women or ordained women to priesthood office.

In later years, words like *ordination* and *keys* were more precisely defined, as when President John Taylor, who acted by assignment from Joseph Smith to “ordain and set apart” Emma Smith and her counselors, explained in 1880 that “the ordination then given did not mean the conferring of the Priesthood upon those sisters.”<sup>28</sup> Women did receive authority to preside in the women’s organization and to appoint officers as needed to conduct the organization in the pattern of the priesthood, including being led by a president with counselors.<sup>29</sup> By the time of President Taylor’s statement, women-led organizations were also in place for young women and children. These organizations also had presidencies, who acted with delegated priesthood authority.

The second aspect of Joseph Smith’s teachings to the Relief Society that may be unfamiliar today is his endorsement of women’s participation in giving blessings of healing. “Respecting the female laying on hands,” the Nauvoo Relief Society minutes record, Joseph said that “it is no sin for any body to do it that has faith,” and admonished, “if the sisters should have faith to heal the sick, let all hold their tongues, and let every thing roll on.”<sup>30</sup> Some women had performed such blessings since the early days of the Church. At that time, Latter-day Saints understood the gift of healing primarily in terms of the New Testament’s teaching that it was one of the gifts of the Spirit available to believers through faith. Joseph Smith taught that the gift of healing was a sign that would follow “all that believe whether male or female.”<sup>31</sup>

During the 19th century, women frequently blessed the sick by the prayer of faith, and many women received priesthood blessings promising that they would have the gift of healing.<sup>32</sup> “I have seen many demonstrations of the power and blessing of God through the administration of the sisters,” testified Elizabeth Ann Smith Whitney, who was, by her own account, blessed by Joseph Smith to exercise this gift.<sup>33</sup> In reference to these healing blessings, Relief Society general president Eliza R. Snow explained in 1883, “Women can administer in the name of JESUS, but not by virtue of the Priesthood.”<sup>34</sup>

Women’s participation in healing blessings gradually declined in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as Church leaders taught that it was preferable to follow the New Testament directive to “call for the elders.”<sup>35</sup> By 1926, Church President Heber J. Grant affirmed that the First Presidency “do not encourage calling in the sisters to administer to the sick, as the scriptures tell us to call in the Elders, who hold the priesthood of God and have the power and authority to administer to the sick in the name of Jesus Christ.”<sup>36</sup> The current *Handbook of Instructions* directs that “only Melchizedek Priesthood holders may administer to the sick or afflicted.”<sup>37</sup>

## Priesthood and the Temple

Joseph Smith said that his instructions to the Relief Society were intended to prepare women to “come in possession of the privileges & blessings & gifts of the priesthood.” This would be accomplished through the ordinances of the temple.<sup>38</sup> These new ordinances taught the nature of God, the purpose of life, the meaning of eternal life, and the nature of humankind’s relationship to divinity. They brought men and women into a covenant relationship with God. Joseph Smith’s teachings about temple ordinances provide further context for his priesthood–related teachings to the Relief Society. Joseph spoke of establishing a “kingdom of priests.”<sup>39</sup> He had used similar terms earlier when speaking of the relationship of all the Saints to the temple.<sup>40</sup> This “kingdom of priests” would be comprised of men and women who made temple covenants.

In the last two years of his life, Joseph Smith introduced temple ordinances and covenants to a core group of men and women. In May 1842, he officiated in the first temple endowments—a ritual in which participants made sacred covenants and received instruction regarding God’s plan of salvation.<sup>41</sup> Joseph Smith began sealing (or marrying for eternity) husbands and wives and then initiated women into the endowment by the end of September 1843. He taught men and women that by receiving temple ordinances, culminating in the sealing ordinance, they entered into an “order of the priesthood.”<sup>42</sup> By the time of his death, he had given these ordinances to several dozen men and women, who met together often to pray and to participate in temple ceremonies as they awaited completion of the Nauvoo Temple in December 1845. Temple ordinances were priesthood ordinances, but they did not bestow ecclesiastical office on men or women. They fulfilled the Lord’s promise that his people—women and men—would be “endowed with power from on high.”<sup>43</sup> That priesthood power was manifest in individuals’ lives in many ways and was available to adult members, regardless of marital status. The endowment opened channels of personal revelation to both women and men. It bestowed a greater measure of “faith and knowledge” and the “help of the Spirit of the Lord”—power that fortified the Saints for subsequent hardships they would face as they traveled 1,300 miles across a forbidding wilderness and settled in the Salt Lake Valley.<sup>44</sup> It prepared endowed Latter–day Saints to go forth “armed with thy [God’s] power” to “bear exceedingly great and glorious tidings ... unto the ends of the earth.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, through the ordinances of the temple, the power of godliness was manifest in their lives.<sup>46</sup>



During the Nauvoo era, Latter-day Saints came to understand that all people are children of heavenly parents and that it is the ultimate destiny of faithful men and women to become like them.<sup>47</sup> Additional revelation about the eternal nature and purpose of marriage accompanied these teachings. Joseph Smith taught associates that marriage performed and solemnized—or “sealed”—by proper authority in temples would last into the eternities.<sup>48</sup> These revelations and ordinances imparted new understanding of the interdependent relationship of women and men. As Bishop Newel K. Whitney expressed it shortly after receiving his endowment, “Without the female all things cannot be restor’d to the earth. It takes all to restore the Priesthood.”<sup>49</sup> Mary Isabella Horne, a member of the Nauvoo Relief Society, later expressed joy in being “co-laborers with our brethren in building up the kingdom of God.” “In all the ordinances received in the House of the Lord,” she said, “woman stands beside the man, both for the living and the dead, showing that the man is not without the woman nor the woman without the man in the Lord.”<sup>50</sup>

The priesthood power bestowed in the Nauvoo Temple—and by extension, in temples today—extends beyond this life, for temple ordinances make possible the exaltation of God’s children.<sup>51</sup> The ordinances of the temple, Joseph Smith taught, would create a “welding link” between all members of the human family, one family at a time, extending backward and forward in time.<sup>52</sup>

When a man and a woman are sealed in the temple, they enter together, by covenant, into an order of the priesthood.<sup>53</sup> If they are faithful to their covenants, they receive “honor, immortality, and eternal life,” “exaltation and glory in all things,” and “a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever.”<sup>54</sup> Some do not have the opportunity to marry in this life, and many experience broken family relationships. Because God is just, every child of God will have the opportunity, either in this life or in the next, to accept the gospel and receive all promised blessings (including eternal marriage), conditioned upon faithfulness.<sup>55</sup>

## Women and Priesthood Today

In some respects, the relationship between Latter-day Saint women and priesthood has remained remarkably constant since Joseph Smith’s day. As in the earliest days of the Church, men are ordained to priesthood offices, while both women and men are invited to experience the power and blessings of the priesthood in their lives.<sup>56</sup> Men and women continue to officiate in sacred ordinances in temples much as they did in Joseph Smith’s day. Joseph taught that men and women can obtain the highest degree of celestial glory only by entering together into an order of the priesthood through the temple sealing ordinance. That understanding remains with Latter-day Saints today.

The priesthood authority exercised by Latter-day Saint women in the temple and elsewhere remains largely unrecognized by people outside the Church and is sometimes misunderstood or overlooked by those within. Latter-day Saints and others often mistakenly equate priesthood with religious office and the men who hold it, which obscures the broader Latter-day Saint concept of priesthood.

Since Joseph Smith's day, Church prophets, exercising the keys of the priesthood, have adapted structures and programs in a world in which educational, political, and economic opportunities have expanded for many women.<sup>57</sup> Today, Latter-day Saint women lead three organizations within the Church: the Relief Society, the Young Women, and the Primary. They preach and pray in congregations, fill numerous positions of leadership and service, participate in priesthood councils at the local and general levels, and serve formal proselytizing missions across the globe. In these and other ways, women exercise priesthood authority even though they are not ordained to priesthood office.<sup>58</sup> Such service and leadership would require ordination in many other religious traditions.

Priesthood blesses the lives of God's children in innumerable ways. Priesthood defines, empowers, ennobles, and creates order. In ecclesiastical callings, temple ordinances, family relationships, and quiet, individual ministry, Latter-day Saint women and men go forward with priesthood power and authority. This interdependence of men and women in accomplishing God's work through His power is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

## Resources

1. [Doctrine and Covenants 13](#); [27:12](#); [Joseph Smith—History 1:72](#).
2. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 170–78.
3. *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Noah Webster (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. “priesthood.”
4. Understanding of priesthood offices and terminology, including the divisions of Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthood, developed over time. (See William G. Hartley, *My Fellow Servants: Essays on the History of the Priesthood* [Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2010], 12.)
5. [Doctrine and Covenants 27:12](#); [42:69](#); [90:1–3](#). Today, priesthood keys are defined as “the authority God has given to priesthood leaders to direct, control, and govern the use of His priesthood on the earth.” Revelations to Joseph Smith spoke of his receiving the “keys of your ministry,” the “keys of the church,” and the “keys of the kingdom.” (*Handbook 2: Administering the Church* [2010], [2.1.1](#).)
6. [Doctrine and Covenants 107:8–9](#).
7. [Doctrine and Covenants 84:19–20, 23, 33–40](#).

8. [Doctrine and Covenants 110:11-16](#).
9. [Doctrine and Covenants 124:40-42](#).
10. This process was known as “common consent.” (See [Doctrine and Covenants 26:2](#).)
11. For a summary of early Latter-day Saint women’s spiritual gifts and participation in the Church, see Jill Mulvay Derr and others, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 10–17.
12. [Doctrine and Covenants 25:7](#). Verse 16 of this revelation declares that “this is my voice unto all.” (See also Janiece L. Johnson, “[‘Give Up All and Follow Your Lord’: Testimony and Exhortation in Early Mormon Women’s Letters, 1831–1839](#),” *BYU Studies* 41, no. 1 [2002]: 77–107.)
13. See Ann Braude, *Women and American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11–57; and Sue Morgan and Jacqueline deVries, eds., *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800–1940* (London: Routledge, 2010). In general, female Quakers, Freewill Baptists, and northern and African Methodists enjoyed more liberty than women in the mainline churches. (See Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light, Quaker Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700–1775* [New York: Knopf, 1999]; and Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998].)
14. Derr and others, *Women of Covenant*, 23–40; see also Glen M. Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 222–26.
15. Anne M. Boylan, “Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women’s Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1747–1840,” *Journal of American History* 71 (1984): 497–523.
16. Sarah M. Kimball, “Early Relief Society Reminiscence,” Mar. 17, 1882, in Relief Society Record, 1880–1892, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. In another account, Kimball rendered Joseph Smith’s statement as “under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood.” No contemporary documentation corroborates Joseph Smith’s use of this language; however, Sarah Kimball and other Relief Society leaders who were members of the Nauvoo Relief Society repeatedly expressed this idea as their understanding of what Joseph Smith taught them. Moreover, in 1843, Reynolds Cahoon, member of the temple committee, told the women of the Nauvoo Relief Society that they had been organized “according to the Order of God connected with the priesthood.” The common thread in these statements is a sense that Joseph Smith saw the Relief Society as integral to the structure of the Church and patterned its leadership after the three-member presidency already established for priesthood quorums. (Sarah M. Kimball, “Auto-Biography,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12, no. 7 [Sept. 1, 1883]: 51; Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Aug. 13, 1843, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).)
17. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Mar. 17, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org). According to Eliza R. Snow, Joseph Smith also taught that women had been formally organized in previous dispensations. (See Eliza R. Snow, “Female Relief Society,” *Deseret News*, Apr. 22, 1868, 1; and [Daughters in My Kingdom: The History and Work of Relief Society](#) [2011], 1–7.)

18. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, June 9, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
19. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Mar. 17, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org); see also [Doctrine and Covenants 25:3](#).
20. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Apr. 28, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
21. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Mar. 17, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
22. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Mar. 17, 1842, underlining in original, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
23. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Mar. 17, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
24. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Apr. 28, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
25. Dallin H. Oaks, "[The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood](#)," *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2014, 50–51.
26. For examples of broad use of the term *keys*, see [Doctrine and Covenants 6:28](#); [27:5–6, 9, 12–13](#); [28:7](#); [81:2](#); and [124:34, 91–92, 97](#); see also Jason H. Lindquist, "Unlocking the Door of the Gospel": The Concept of 'Keys' in Mormonism," *Archive of Restoration Culture: Summer Fellows' Papers, 1997–1999* (Provo, UT: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, 2000), 29–41.
27. For example, William W. Phelps was "ordained" to assist with the Church's printing operations, and Newel K. Whitney was "ordained" to act as an agent for the Church in business matters. The use of the term "set apart" to indicate a blessing given in conjunction with calling to a specific assignment developed in the late 19th century. ([Doctrine and Covenants 55:4](#); [63:45](#); see also [Doctrine and Covenants 104:61](#).)
28. "R.S. Reports," *Woman's Exponent* 9, no. 7 (Sept. 1, 1880): 55. Relief Society leaders present on this occasion, who had also been present at the original Nauvoo Relief Society meetings, concurred with President Taylor's clarification. Taylor went on to say that "the sisters hold a portion of the Priesthood in coneciton [connection] with their husbands," referring to the understanding, as discussed below, that couples who received the sealing ordinance in the temple entered into an order of the priesthood together.
29. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Mar. 17, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
30. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Apr. 28, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
31. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Apr. 28, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org); see also [Mark 16:17–18](#).
32. Some patriarchal blessings, for example, made these promises. Judith Higbee reported that the patriarch who blessed her promised that "she should heal thousands." (Sixteenth Ward, Riverside Stake, Sixteenth Ward Relief Society Minutes and Records, 1868–1968, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Mar. 9, 1880.) Women's participation in healing rituals is discussed extensively in Derr and others, *Women of Covenant*, 44–45, 67–68, 114, 220–21, 429–30. A more recent and comprehensive treatment is Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, "[Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism](#)," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 1–85.

33. Whitney recalled: "I was also ordained and set apart under the hand of Joseph Smith the Prophet to administer to the sick and comfort the sorrowful. Several other sisters were also ordained and set apart to administer in these holy ordinances." [Elizabeth Ann Whitney], "A Leaf from an Autobiography," *Woman's Exponent* 7, no. 12 (Nov. 15, 1878): 91.
34. Morgan Utah Stake Relief Society Minutes and Records, 1878–1973, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, vol. 1, Apr. 28, 1883, p. 88, emphasis in original; see also "To All Authorities of the Priesthood—Instruction for the Relief Society," First Presidency, Salt Lake City, to all priesthood leaders and Latter-day Saints, Oct. 6, 1880, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. President Wilford Woodruff spoke in similar terms in a letter of instruction to the general secretary of the Relief Society. He said that women administered to the sick "not as members of the priesthood, but as members of the Church." Wilford Woodruff to Emmeline B. Wells, 27 Apr. 1888, First Presidency Letterpress Copybooks, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, vol. 18, pp. 733–36.
35. [James 5:14](#).
36. Heber J. Grant to Zina Young Card, March 26, 1926, Zina Card Brown Family Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. See also Anthony W. Ivins and Charles W. Nibley to Joseph McMurrin, December 14, 1927, California Mission President's Correspondence, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. For additional discussion, see Stapley and Wright, "[Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism](#)," 64–85.
37. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, [20.6.1](#).
38. Joseph Smith, Journal, Apr. 28, 1842, spelling regularized, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](#); Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Mar. 31, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](#). At the Relief Society meeting of April 28, 1842, Joseph Smith said that "the church is not now organiz'd in its proper order, and cannot be until the Temple is completed." (Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Apr. 28, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](#).)
39. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, Mar. 31, 1842, spelling and punctuation regularized, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](#); see also [Exodus 19:6](#); and [Revelation 1:6](#).
40. Joseph Smith, Journal, Jan. 6, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](#).
41. Joseph Smith, Journal, May 4, 1842, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](#). The endowment was first administered to nine men. (See Alma P. Burton, "[Endowment](#)," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. [New York: Macmillan, 1992], 2:454–56.)
42. [Doctrine and Covenants 131:1–4](#).
43. [Doctrine and Covenants 38:32](#).
44. Sarah P. Rich, Autobiography, 1885, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, p. 66; see also Guinevere Thomas Woolstenhulme, "I Have Seen Many Miracles': Sarah De Armon Pea Rich (1814–1893)," in *Women of Faith in the Latter Days*, 271–85.
45. [Doctrine and Covenants 109:22–23](#).
46. See [Doctrine and Covenants 84:20](#).
47. See "[Mother in Heaven](#)"; and "[Becoming Like God](#)."

48. Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt, One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, ed. Parley P. Pratt Jr. (New York: Russell Brothers, 1874), 329. The revelation on eternal marriage (Doctrine and Covenants 132) also included instructions on plural marriage. (See “[Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo](#).”)
49. Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, May 27, 1842, punctuation regularized, available at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org).
50. “To the Presidents and Members of the Relief Society of Salt Lake Stake of Zion, Greeting!,” *Woman’s Exponent* 6, no. 16 (Jan. 15, 1878): 123; see also [1 Corinthians 11:11](#).
51. [Doctrine and Covenants 131:1-4](#).
52. See Lynn A. McKinlay, “[Patriarchal Order of the Priesthood](#),” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1067; see also Jonathan A. Stapley, “Adoptive Sealing Ritual in Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 56–67.
53. [Doctrine and Covenants 131:1-2](#).
54. [Doctrine and Covenants 124:55](#); [132:19-20](#); see also “[Becoming Like God](#).”
55. [1 Nephi 17:35](#). President Lorenzo Snow taught: “There is no Latter-day Saint who dies after having lived a faithful life who will lose anything because of having failed to do certain things when opportunities were not furnished him or her. In other words, if a young man or a young woman has no opportunity of getting married, and they live faithful lives up to the time of their death, they will have all the blessings, exaltation and glory that any man or woman will have who had this opportunity and improved it. That is sure and positive.” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow* [2013], [130](#).)
56. “The Lord has directed that only men will be ordained to offices in the priesthood,” Elder Dallin H. Oaks has stated. Presiding authorities “are not free to alter [this] divinely decreed pattern.” (Oaks, “[The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood](#),” 50–51.)
57. As President Dieter F. Uchtdorf has taught, “The Restoration is an ongoing process.” (Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “[Are You Sleeping through the Restoration?](#)” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2014, 59.)
58. Oaks, “[The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood](#),” 50–51.

# Mother in Heaven

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that all human beings, male and female, are beloved spirit children of heavenly parents, a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother. This understanding is rooted in scriptural and prophetic teachings about the nature of God, our relationship to Deity, and the godly potential of men and women.<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of a Heavenly Mother is a cherished and distinctive belief among Latter-day Saints.<sup>2</sup>

While there is no record of a formal revelation to Joseph Smith on this doctrine, some early Latter-day Saint women recalled that he personally taught them about a Mother in Heaven.<sup>3</sup> The earliest published references to the doctrine appeared shortly after Joseph Smith's death in 1844, in documents written by his close associates.<sup>4</sup> The most notable expression of the idea is found in a poem by Eliza R. Snow, entitled "My Father in Heaven" and now known as the hymn "O My Father." This text declares: "In the heav'ns are parents single? / No, the thought makes reason stare; / Truth is reason—truth eternal / Tells me I've a mother there."<sup>5</sup>

Subsequent Church leaders have affirmed the existence of a Mother in Heaven. In 1909, the First Presidency taught that "all men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity."<sup>6</sup> Susa Young Gates, a prominent leader in the Church, wrote in 1920 that Joseph Smith's visions and teachings revealed the truth that "the divine Mother, [is] side by side with the divine Father."<sup>7</sup> And in "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," issued in 1995, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles declared, "Each [person] is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny."<sup>8</sup>

Prophets have taught that our heavenly parents work together for the salvation of the human family. "We are part of a divine plan designed by Heavenly Parents who love us," taught Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.<sup>9</sup> President Harold B. Lee stated, "We forget that we have a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother who are even more concerned, probably, than our earthly father and mother, and that influences from beyond are constantly working to try to help us when we do all we can."<sup>10</sup>

Latter-day Saints direct their worship to Heavenly Father, in the name of Christ, and do not pray to Heavenly Mother. In this, they follow the pattern set by Jesus Christ, who taught His disciples to "always pray unto the Father in my name."<sup>11</sup> Latter-day Saints are taught to pray to Heavenly Father, but as President Gordon B. Hinckley said, "The fact that we do not pray to our Mother in



Heaven in no way belittles or denigrates her.”<sup>12</sup>Indeed, as Elder Rudger Clawson wrote, “We honor woman when we acknowledge Godhood in her eternal Prototype.”<sup>13</sup>

As with many other truths of the gospel, our present knowledge about a Mother in Heaven is limited. Nevertheless, we have been given sufficient knowledge to appreciate the sacredness of this doctrine and to comprehend the divine pattern established for us as children of heavenly parents. Latter-day Saints believe that this pattern is reflected in Paul’s statement that “neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.”<sup>14</sup> Men and women cannot be exalted without each other. Just as we have a Father in Heaven, we have a Mother in Heaven. As Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said, “Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them.”<sup>15</sup>

## Resources

1. Genesis 1:26–27; Moses 3:4–7; Romans 8:16–17; Psalm 82:6; Doctrine and Covenants 132:19–20.
2. See “[Becoming Like God](#)”; see also Elaine Anderson Cannon, “[Mother in Heaven](#),” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:961. For an extensive survey of these teachings, see David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 70–97.
3. Zina Diantha Huntington Young recalled that when her mother died in 1839, Joseph Smith consoled her by telling her that in heaven she would see her own mother again and become acquainted with her eternal Mother. (Susa Young Gates, *History of the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911], 15–16.)
4. See W. W. Phelps, “Come to Me,” in “Poetry, for the Times and Seasons,” *Times and Seasons* 6 (Jan. 15, 1845): 783.
5. “My Father in Heaven,” in “Poetry, for the Times and Seasons,” *Times and Seasons* 6 (Nov. 15, 1845): 1039; “[O My Father](#),” *Hymns*, no. 292; see also Jill Mulvay Derr, “The Significance of ‘O My Father’ in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996–97), 84–126.
6. “The Origin of Man,” *Improvement Era* 13, no. 1 (Nov. 1909): 78.
7. “The Vision Beautiful,” *Improvement Era* 23, no. 6 (Apr. 1920): 542. At this time, Gates was the recording secretary of the Relief Society general presidency.
8. “[The Family: A Proclamation to the World](#),” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2010, 129.
9. M. Russell Ballard, *When Thou Art Converted: Continuing Our Search for Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 62.
10. Harold B. Lee, “The Influence and Responsibility of Women,” *Relief Society Magazine* 51, no. 2 (Feb. 1964): 85.



11. [3 Nephi 18:19–21](#); [Matthew 6:6–9](#); [John 17:1, 5, 21, 24–25](#); see also [Matthew 4:10](#); [Luke 4:8](#); and [3 Nephi 13:9](#); [17:15](#).
12. Gordon B. Hinckley, “[Daughters of God](#),” *Ensign*, Nov. 1991, 100.
13. “Our Mother in Heaven,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 72, no. 39 (Sept. 29, 1910): 620.  
Rudger Clawson was the editor of the periodical and likely author of this editorial.
14. [1 Corinthians 11:11](#).
15. Dallin H. Oaks, “[Apostasy and Restoration](#),” *Ensign*, May 1995, 84.