The law...could not be kept here: Consecration in Nauvoo, 1840-1842

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“The law… could not be kept here”: Consecration in Nauvoo, 1840-1842

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I. Introduction

Since the earliest days of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints there has been an ongoing discussion on the law of consecration and stewardship, the Church’s earliest attempt to establish what Joseph Smith’s revelations called Zion, a society unified in heart and mind and void of both poverty and materialism. Within a decade of Joseph Smith’s death Orson Pratt, and other Church leaders, taught said doctrine as though Joseph had revoked or rescinded the law sometime in the 1830s and that it was no longer necessary for the Saints to practice the principles contained therein.¹ This ideology has led to at least one assumption held by historians today; that is, the law of consecration was not practiced in Nauvoo nor did Joseph Smith ever try to implement it after the saints’ forced removal from Missouri in 1838.

On March 6, 1840 Joseph Smith stood before the Iowa Stake High Council and declared that “the Law of consecration could not be kept here, & that it was the will of the Lord that we should desist from trying to keep it.”² This quote has been most often understood by historians as a formal announcement of the end of consecration and its practice by the Mormon Church. However, this assumption is questioned due to the recent discovery of twenty consecration affidavits made out to Brigham Young during the summer months of 1842. This paper seeks to demonstrate that it was most likely not Joseph’s intention to end the practice consecration and that it was in fact implemented during the final years of the Prophet’s life in Nauvoo.

Some historians have touched upon the subject of the Iowa Stake High Council meeting in early March 1840, yet few have analyzed the proceedings. Richard Bushman wrote that

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² Iowa High Council, Record, October 5, 1839 – August 7, 1841, 89, Microfilm at Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
Joseph Smith “decided not to institute the consecration of properties in Illinois.” A deeper contextualization of the practice of consecration during the Nauvoo period in Mormon History questions the validity of these claims. The newly discovered affidavits support the idea that Joseph was desirous to implement the law in Nauvoo.

II. Missouri and Washington, D.C.

By October 1838 the Mormon Church resided for the most part in the northern counties of Missouri and was in the middle of the Missouri Mormon War. That same month the Missouri militia besieged the Saints in Far West and on October 31 Joseph Smith and other leaders of the Church surrendered to the Missouri Militia under the presumption that the Saints would be left alone. With the Mormon leaders in custody the militia continued to harass the Saints and within a few months they were driven from the state altogether. By the end of April 1839 Joseph and the other leaders escaped from their imprisonment and made their way to Illinois to rendezvous with the rest of the Church.

Soon thereafter Joseph focused his attention on reclaiming the lands and property that were lost when the Saints were driven from Missouri. On October 29, 1839 he set out for Washington, D.C. along with Elias Higbee to argue their case before the US Federal

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4 The United Order was actually a pseudonym for the United Firm. When the first revelations discussing the firm were published in the Doctrine & Covenants Joseph Smith and other leaders likely considered it wise to use the pseudonym (along with many others) to protect the Church from financial attack. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 142; Mark Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People*, 231.
Government. On November 29, the day after arriving, Joseph and “Judge” Higbee made their way to the White House to meet with President Martin Van Buren and later they presented their case before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Joseph grew weary of the proceedings and returned to Nauvoo during the first weeks of February 1840. He left affidavits and letters declaring the wrongs committed by the State of Missouri against the Saints with “Judge” Higbee and assigned him to oversee the proceedings and to report back to him in Illinois. By March 6, Joseph was back in Nauvoo and met with the Iowa Stake High Council to discuss the implementation of the law of consecration among the Saints living in Iowa Territory.

III. Iowa High Council

On December 7, 1840 the Iowa Stake record gives us a glimpse into an important issue concerning the entire Church at that time. According to the record, Lyman Wight, counselor in the Stake Presidency, introduced the issue to the council with this question: “Have the brethren a right to exact the payment of debts, which were due them from others, that were consecrated to the Bishop in the state of Missouri?” Apparantly while the church was in Missouri some members had “consecrated” property that may not have been in their possession at the time of consecration. They likely loaned the property to someone else and then told the bishop that they would consecrate such property to him as soon as they received it from their debtors. When the saints fled Missouri many of them became destitute with very few provisions for their families. Once settled in Illinois and Iowa some members began to call up said debts. The Stake

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6 See Iowa High Council, Record, 12.

7 This is best evidenced in a letter bishop Edward Partridge wrote to Joseph Smith on June 13, 1839, just a few months after the saints had been forced out of Missouri, “I have not at this time two dollars in the world, one dollar and forty-four cents is all. I owe for my rent, and for making clothes for some of the poor.” See Edward Partridge to Joseph Smith, June 13, 1839, Journal History of the Church: 1896-1923, Volume 11, June 5-28, 1839, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
President, John Smith, “decided that all such debts ought not to be called for, & that persons making such demands shall be disfellowshiped by the Church.”

On January 4, 1840 President John Smith “reported some objections raised by [the] brethren in Nauvoo against our endeavoring to keep the consecration law.” Despite the ideals of their brethren in Nauvoo the Iowa High Council resolved that it was of the same opinion and would continue to practice the law, “the objection of the brethren in Nauvoo to the Contrary notwithstanding.” The saints in Nauvoo were opposed to the Iowa saints living the law of consecration for the same reason that the Iowa High Council made the decision to disfellowship brethren for suing for debts incurred in Missouri; almost nobody in the Church had sufficient provisions at that time. The law of consecration required a surplus of wealth in order to function in its designated order and the saints suffered from a high level of poverty due to their exile from Missouri. The Nauvoo saints and leaders, including Joseph Smith, thought that if the law of consecration were to be implemented among them at that point it would have ruined the Church financially. How could the saints have expected to divide up a surplus of nothing and use it to support the poor? Such action would have pulled the saints deeper into the national depression that came as a result of the Crises of 1837 and 1839. It was not until Joseph Smith stood before the Iowa High Council that the council reversed its decision.

After arriving from Washington, Joseph Smith attended the Iowa High Council Meeting on March 6, 1840. Joseph was given a few minutes to address the council during which he

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8 See Iowa High Council, Record, 12.
9 See Iowa High Council, Record, 12.
10 See Iowa High Council, Record, 88.
discussed “the Consecration Law.” He claimed that “the only thing that ought to interest the saints” was the hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee in Washington, D.C. Joseph explained that no one member should be brought before the councils of the Church “for any offense whatever” until the results of the hearings were announced in Nauvoo. He continued by stating, “the Law of consecration could not be kept here, & that it was the will of the Lord that we should desist from trying to keep it & if persisted in it would produce a perfect defeat of its object.” Joseph took responsibility for this decision and declared he would assume the “whole responsibility of not keeping” the law, “until proposed by himself.” He then requested the saints make every effort possible to send letters and affidavits to Elias Higbee in Washington to provide him with evidence for the hearings before the Senate. The council then made four resolutions, the first coincided with the request of their Prophet; to halt, for the time being, the implementation of the law of consecration. Without the practice of the law the leaders of the Iowa Stake resorted to other means to provide for the poor. Evidence for this is found in the High Council’s minutes on September 3, 1840. The High Council passed a motion for the new bishop, Elias Smith, to speak with Bishop Vincent Knight of Nauvoo to purchase lands located in Iowa. The profits from the sale of those lands would be used to help support the poor saints in Iowa. Despite these events there is evidence supporting Joseph Smith’s desire to re-establish consecration among the saints in Nauvoo.

IV. Consecration Implemented in Nauvoo

12 Iowa High Council, Record, 89.
13 Iowa High Council, Record, 89.
14 See Iowa High Council, Record, 6, 94-7.
A year after speaking before the Iowa Stake High Council, on March 30, 1841, Joseph Smith said at the Nauvoo Lyceum, “If we were equa [sic.] in property at present[,] in six months we would be worse than Ever[.] For there is too many Dishonest men amongst us.”

This shows Joseph’s mind had not yet changed in regard to the law of consecration. Yet, in the coming months his mind did change. By December of that year the Twelve Apostles published an article in the *Times and Seasons* in Nauvoo calling the saints to once again consecrate their property for building the Temple. Wilford Woodruff wrote in his journal on June 18, 1842 that “Joseph commanded the Twelve to organize the Church more according to the Law of God;” a direct connection to the law of the Church as revealed to Joseph Smith on February 9, 1831—one of the first times the law of consecration was detailed in any of Joseph’s revelations. But under what context did Joseph Smith make this change in Church policy and why?

On January 19, 1841 Joseph Smith received a revelation calling him and others to “build a house unto [the Lord].” Building such an edifice, however, would require sacrifice from the entire membership of the Church. From March to December 1841 Nauvoo began to grow and a need for supplies became apparent to the leaders. Upon their return from a mission to Great Britain, Joseph asked the Twelve Apostles to organize and control the Church’s finances. With this call the Twelve published an article in the *Times & Seasons* calling all saints “to consecrate

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17 Orson Hyde, scribe, “Revelation Given to Joseph Smith,” January 19, 1841, 3, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.
all they find in their hearts so to do.”¹⁹ The publication articulates multiple principles of the law of consecration and it is evident that Joseph considered re-implementing the law among the saints. Probably the most important evidence in support of this theory comes from June and July, 1842. Twenty recently discovered consecration affidavits dated to the summer months of 1842 demonstrate that these sources hold direct connections to the law of consecration.

On June 26, 1842 Brigham Young gave a Sunday sermon in which he “preached on [the law of] consecration or union of action in building up the city [of Nauvoo] & providing labor & food for the poor.”²⁰ During previous and following months at least twenty members created and signed affidavits for the purpose of consecrating their goods and individual efforts for the building up the Nauvoo Temple. Albern Allen consecrated property, livestock, furniture and clothing and stated he was “willing to do the will of the Lord.”²¹ After listing 16 head of livestock and other essentials, Stephen Abbot wrote, “I do hereby declare that I am willing to submit to the consecration law and to the will of God in all things.”²² Lewis Zeigler concluded his affidavit affirming his faith in the leaders of the Church. “I for my part feel willing to lay what little is commited to my trust at the Apostles feet for such I firmly believe them to be and am willing to submit to their distribution of said mentioned property, asking the blessing of my heavenly Father to strengthen their hands abundantly.”²³ These rare affidavits provide strong

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²¹ Albern Allen to Brigham Young/Twelve, Affidavit of Consecration, June 20, 1842, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
²² Stephen Abbatt to Brigham Young/Twelve, Affidavit of Consecration, June 28, 1842, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
²³ Lewis Zeigler to Brigham Young/Twelve, Affidavit of Consecration, c. June 26, 1842, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
evidence that Joseph Smith did intend to re-implement the law of consecration while the Mormon Church was headquartered in Nauvoo, Illinois.

V. Conclusion

By taking at face value Joseph Smith’s words from March 6, 1840 one can assume that Joseph intended to rescind the practice of the law of consecration for good. By contextualizing his words before the Iowa Stake High Council the opinion Joseph supposedly held, changes. Historians of Mormon History must reconsider previous assumptions surrounding the law of consecration and its practice among early Latter-day Saints. It is most likely Joseph did not intend to rescind the law of consecration during his lifetime. This paper has demonstrated that through proper contextualization historians are better enabled to analyze his words concerning the law. It also shows that a simple reading of Joseph’s teachings leaves readers with many holes and misunderstandings. Historical context is therefore key to comprehend Joseph’s teachings, especially surrounding the law of consecration. With further research we will better understand the origins of a truly consecrated people. Thank you.