



9-2-2002

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Taylor, Michael D. "The Baptisms of Latter-day Prophets." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 3, no. 3 (2002). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol3/iss3/21>

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# The Baptisms of Latter-day Prophets

*Michael D. Taylor*

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As Jesus began His three-year ministry in Palestine, His first priority was to seek baptism at the hands of an authorized servant of God, one who held the proper priesthood to perform this sacred ordinance. He sought out His cousin, John the Baptist, and was baptized by immersion in the River Jordan. Likewise, when the Savior appeared to and taught the Nephites on the American continent, one of the first instructions He gave them was the necessity of and the proper mode of baptism. The importance of this crucial ordinance has been emphasized in our dispensation, with the Prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery being instructed in this ordinance by John the Baptist himself.

All our latter-day prophets have followed the Savior's example by being baptized by immersion by one holding the priesthood of God. Our first five prophets were baptized as young men in their twenties or thirties as converts to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our last ten prophets were baptized as children.<sup>1</sup> The table that follows shows the date of each prophet's baptism, his place of baptism, his age when he was baptized, and the name of the person who performed the ordinance.

Interestingly, only one of our prophets (Gordon B. Hinckley) was baptized in an indoor baptismal font. The other fourteen were baptized in open bodies of water or makeshift fonts. Two prophets (Joseph Smith and Lorenzo Snow) were baptized in rivers, two (Brigham Young and Harold B. Lee) in ponds, six (John Taylor, Wilford

Woodruff, Joseph F. Smith, George Albert Smith, David O. McKay, and Joseph Fielding Smith) in streams or creeks, one (Heber J. Grant) in a wagon box, one (Spencer W. Kimball) in a tub and then later in a canal, one (Ezra Taft Benson) in a canal, one (Howard W. Hunter) in a swimming pool, and one (Gordon B. Hinckley) in a baptismal font in a chapel.

I can find no records that specifically state where Joseph Fielding Smith was baptized. However, he was baptized on a warm July day in 1884 by his father, Joseph F. Smith, and we can assume he was baptized in City Creek, a commonly used baptismal area of that day and the place where Joseph F. Smith himself was baptized.

Wilford Woodruff's baptism must have been memorable for several reasons. He was baptized in an icy stream on 31 December 1833 in Richland, New York. He recorded the following in his journal concerning his baptism: "The snow was about three feet deep, the day was cold, and the water was mixed with ice and snow, yet I did not feel the cold!"<sup>2</sup> Wilford was baptized just two days after first hearing the gospel preached.

Interestingly, I have not been able to determine who baptized Heber J. Grant. ❏

| Prophet          | Date of Baptism | Place of Baptism   | Age at Baptism     | Name of Baptizer                                |
|------------------|-----------------|--|--------------------|---|
| Joseph Smith     | 15 May 1829     | Susquehanna River near Harmony, Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania | 23 years 5 months  | Oliver Cowdery, as directed by John the Baptist |
| Brigham Young    | 14 April 1832   | A millpond near Mendon, Monroe County, New York                  | 30 years 10 months | Eleazar Miller, an early Church missionary      |
| John Taylor      | 9 May 1836      | A stream near Toronto, Ontario, Canada                           | 27 years 6 months  | Parley P. Pratt, an Apostle                     |
| Wilford Woodruff | 31 Dec 1833     | An icy stream near Richland, Oswego County, New York             | 26 years 10 months | Zera Pulsipher, an early Church missionary      |
| Lorenzo Snow     | 3 June 1836     | Chagrin River near Kirtland, Lake County, Ohio                   | 22 years 2 months  | John F. Boynton, an Apostle                     |

| Prophet               | Date of Baptism | Place of Baptism  | Age at Baptism       | Name of Baptizer  |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---|----------------------|---|
| Joseph F. Smith       | 21 May 1852     | City Creek, Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County, Utah  | 13 years<br>6 months | Heber C. Kimball, First Counselor in the First Presidency |
| Heber J. Grant        | 2 June 1864     | In a wagon box rigged up as a font near City Creek, Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County, Utah            | 7 years<br>6 months  |   |
| George Albert Smith   | 6 June 1878     | City Creek, Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County, Utah  | 8 years<br>2 months  | James Moyle   |
| David O. McKay        | 8 Sep 1881      | Spring Creek near Huntsville, Weber County, Utah  | 8 years              | Peter Geertsen  |
| Joseph Fielding Smith | 19 July 1884    | Probably in City Creek, Salt Lake County, Utah  | 8 years              | Joseph F. Smith, his father                               |
| Harold B. Lee         | 9 June 1907     | Bybee Pond, near Clifton, Franklin County, Idaho  | 8 years<br>2 months  | Lester Bybee, a neighbor and family friend                |
| Spencer W. Kimball    | 28 Mar 1903     | Hog-scalding tub (the family bathtub), Thatcher, Graham County, Arizona                               | 8 years              | Andrew Kimball, his father                                |
|                       | 5 Oct 1907      | Union Canal, Thatcher, Arizona; rebaptized because of concerns about the propriety of the tub baptism | 12 years<br>6 months |   |
| Ezra Taft Benson      | 4 Aug 1907      | Logan River Canal, Whitney, Franklin County, Idaho  | 8 years              | George Taft Benson, his father                            |
| Howard W. Hunter      | 4 April 1920    | Natatorium swimming pool, Boise, Ada County, Idaho  | 12 years<br>5 months | George W. Willis  |
| Gordon B. Hinckley    | 28 April 1919   | Font in First Ward chapel, Salt Lake Liberty Stake, Salt Lake City, Utah                              | 8 years              | Bryant S. Hinckley, his father                            |

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## Notes

1. I am indebted to the following article for some of the baptismal information: William Hartley, "Our Prophets' Places of Baptism," *Friend*, August 1997, 42-43.

2. Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 35.