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The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith's Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective

Donald Q. Cannon

On Sunday afternoon, 7 April 1844, the Prophet Joseph Smith delivered what has been called his greatest sermon,¹ the King Follett Discourse.² It has also been published more frequently than any other of Joseph's discourses. In the speech, which lasted over two hours, the Prophet spoke concerning some twenty-seven doctrinal subjects, including the character of God, the origin and destiny of man, the unpardonable sin, the resurrection of children, and the Prophet's love for all men.³ Who was King Follett, and what were the historical circumstances surrounding this, the last conference address of Joseph Smith? What makes the King Follett Discourse the Prophet's greatest sermon?

King Follett was born 24 July 1788, somewhere in Vermont. While still a youth he moved to Cuyahoga County, Ohio. In the spring of 1831 he came in contact with the Mormon missionaries and was baptized.

Moving with the Saints from Ohio to Missouri, he encountered the hatred and abuse which most nineteenth-century Mormons experienced in that state.⁴ As Church members attempted to

Donald Q. Cannon is associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

¹Many students of Joseph Smith agree that the King Follett Discourse was his greatest sermon. See, for example, Preston Nibley, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1944), p. 503; Joseph Fielding McConkie, "A Historical Examination of the Views of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints on Four Distinctive Aspects of the Doctrine of Deity Taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith," (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1968), p. 135; John J. Stewart, *Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Mercury Publishing Company, 1966), p. 207; George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), p. 479; Jay R. Lowe, "A Study of the General Conferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1901" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1972), p. 212.

²There is some discrepancy in the early records on the spelling of the name *Follett*. Wilford Woodruff, Willard Richards, and William Clayton spelled it *Follet*, and Thomas Bullock spelled it *Follit*. Almost all of the published accounts of the King Follett Discourse use the current spelling—Follett—which is the correct spelling, according to the Genealogical Department and members of the Follett family.

³Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 6:302-17 (hereafter cited as *HC*).

⁴*HC*, 2:523; Andrew Jenson, *The Historical Record*, 9 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson, 1886), 5:31; Melvin R. Brooks, *LDS Reference Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), pp. 96-97.

flee from Missouri in the spring of 1839, Follett was captured and imprisoned with Parley P. Pratt and four others in the jail at Richmond, Missouri, on 24 April 1839, charged with robbery. Commenting on this charge, Parley P. Pratt wrote: "Being charged with robbery meant that he was one of a posse who took a keg of powder from a gang of ruffians who were out against the Mormons."⁵ On 22 May 1839, the State of Missouri transferred the prisoners from Richmond to Columbia, and on 4 July they escaped. Unfortunately, Elder Follett was recaptured and remained in confinement for several months. Finally, in October of 1839, he came to trial and was acquitted. Following his release, he joined his family in Illinois.⁶

King Follett was one of those who assisted in transforming swamp-infested Commerce into prosperous Nauvoo. He purchased property on the bluff on the northwest corner of the city (Block 26, Lot 1). His neighbors included Charles Hewlett and Hiram Kimball. He erected a large log house for his family and then went to work as a stonemason. According to the 1842 tax list, Follett had \$163 in real and personal property, making him somewhat better-off than most of his fellow citizens. He and his wife Louisa had six children and were members of the Nauvoo First Ward.⁷ On the morning of 9 March 1844, King Follett was walling up a well when a bucket of rock fell on him, crushing him to death. The following day, Wilford Woodruff recorded: "Brother King Follett was buried this day under Masonic honors."⁸

Joseph Smith, who spoke at the funeral, turned his thoughts to genealogy and temple work. In this 10 March funeral sermon, the Prophet stressed that the living cannot be saved without their dead, elaborating on the mission of Elijah.⁹ Less than one month later, the family of King Follett again prevailed upon the Prophet to speak in honor of their loved one, as Joseph acknowledged in the preface to his conference remarks.

THE 1844 SETTING

The spring of 1844 was a busy period in the Prophet's life. Earlier in the year he declared himself a candidate for the presidency

⁵Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), p. 226.

⁶Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 22 May 1839, 4 July 1839; Pratt, *Autobiography*, pp. 261-62.

⁷Interview with James L. Kimball, Jr., 12 March 1976, Church Historical Department.

⁸Journal of Wilford Woodruff, Church Archives.

⁹HC, 6:249; Pearson H. Corbett, *Hyrum Smith: Patriarch* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), p. 340.

of the United States, drafted a formal political platform, and called elders to serve in the campaign. During the month of March, Joseph Smith created the obscure but powerful Council of Fifty to assist in his campaign and to function in other political matters.¹⁰ Also in the weeks immediately preceding April conference, a conspiracy developed against the Prophet. Those involved in the intrigue claimed that Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet, citing as evidence the practice of polygamy, the monopolistic economic policies of the Church, and the increase in his personal power. Hoping to raise popular support for their cause, the conspirators desired to confront the Prophet during the conference. Joseph, realizing that nothing could be gained by confronting his accusers directly, chose not to address himself to them during that conference,¹¹ though he did make occasional references to their charges.

April conference of that year was a most important one. Elders from all over the country were summoned home to attend the meetings and to be reassigned to the political campaign which would get underway in May. Historically, the conference was important because it turned out to be Joseph's last—within a few months, he would be dead. Joseph also identified April of 1844 as a special time in his life. At no other time did he sense his prophetic calling so keenly. In his opening remarks he disclosed, "I feel in closer communion and better standing with God than ever I felt before in my life, and I am glad of this opportunity to appear in your midst."¹² The Lord blessed the Saints with warm, spring-like weather on conference Sunday, although it had rained during the Saturday afternoon session. The coming of spring added to the joy of the occasion, and many diarists mentioned the beauty of the Mississippi River Valley, adorned as it was with blossoming trees.

Good weather was a blessing for the Saints because their meetings were held outdoors. In fact, the Mormons did not build any meetinghouses in Nauvoo. Virtually all of their public meetings were held outdoors in areas referred to as "the groves." The Saints held meetings in three different groves located on the edges of the bluff to the northeast, west, and south of the temple. The sloping contours of the bluffs provided a natural amphitheater, to which

¹⁰HC, 6:155–301. For additional information on the Council of Fifty, see Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1967).

¹¹Lowe, "General Conferences of the Church," pp. 197–211.

¹²HC, 6:288.

the Saints added wooden benches and a speaker's rostrum.¹³

While it is apparent that the groves which the Saints used for their meetings would accommodate large crowds, the actual size of the audience is a matter of dispute. Some of those who attended the conference and kept diaries maintained that 20,000 people heard Joseph Smith deliver the King Follett Discourse.¹⁴ Even those assigned to record the official proceedings of the conference used that figure. Present-day historians, however, are skeptical of the number.¹⁵

In any case, to however many thousands assembled in the grove on that pleasant spring Sunday in 1844, Joseph spoke for about 2¼ hours.¹⁶ Even by the standards of that day, the King Follett Discourse was a long sermon. Given the length of the sermon, the physical conditions, and the number of people present, definite problems developed. Given such poor hearing conditions, as well as some outside disturbances, the Prophet must have exerted himself tremendously to make himself heard. On the following day, he had to abbreviate the address he had prepared because his lungs had given out and he could no longer project his voice.¹⁷

OFFICIAL RECORDERS

As Joseph Smith spoke, three men made official notes: Thomas Bullock, William Clayton, and Willard Richards. Wilford Woodruff also took notes for his journal.¹⁸ These men, expe-

¹³David E. and Della S. Miller, *Nauvoo: The City of Joseph* (Salt Lake City and Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1974), pp. 70-71; James L. Kimball, Jr., "Nauvoo: Life and Worship," *Deseret News*, Church Section, 1 May 1976.

¹⁴Journal of Edward Stevenson, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

¹⁵T. Edgar Lyon believes that 8,000 would be closer to the actual size of the gathering (interview with T. Edgar Lyon, 5 December 1975). In their book, *Nauvoo: The City of Joseph*, David and Della Miller maintain that both Mormons and non-Mormons in nineteenth century Illinois regularly overestimated the population (Miller, *Nauvoo*, p. 5). James L. Kimball, Jr., says that census figures for Nauvoo effectively discount the accuracy of the 20,000 figure. State census records from 1845, in the possession of Brother Kimball, report 11,057 inhabitants in Nauvoo. Even with the influx of Church members from surrounding communities, Kimball sees no way that 20,000 people could have been in attendance during April conference of 1844. In addition, according to Kimball, the groves would not accommodate 20,000. Also, one must bear in mind the impossible task of speaking to 20,000 people without the aid of a loudspeaker (*Ibid.*). Then where did the 20,000 figure come from? The noted American historian Daniel J. Boorstin has suggested a plausible answer. He argues convincingly that nineteenth century Americans spoke and wrote in terms of anticipation. Instead of current population figures, they used numbers which they anticipated, resulting in a "language of exaggeration," definitely related to the language of twentieth century advertising. (Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* [New York: Random House, 1965], pp. 289-98.) Thus, the residents of Nauvoo spoke of the 20,000 people who would eventually live there, and not of the 11,000 who actually did.

¹⁶Diary of Joseph Smith, kept by Willard Richards, Church Archives (hereafter cited as Smith [Richards] diary). Richards wrote that the sermon started at 3:15 and ended at 5:30.

¹⁷Woodruff Journal.

¹⁸The reports of Thomas Bullock, Willard Richards, and William Clayton are preserved in the

rienced in note-taking, often recorded sermons given by Church authorities. While all of them recorded the King Follett Discourse, their notes and methods of note-taking differed greatly. Thomas Bullock, perhaps the least known in our day of the four recorders, served with distinction in his native England as a law clerk, a position for which he had received formal training. He also served as an officer of excise (clerk of customs) under Queen Victoria. Recognizing the clerical talents of the newly-arrived English Saint, Joseph appointed Bullock as his personal clerk in October of 1843. Other clerical duties he filled during his residence in Nauvoo included clerk of conferences of the Church, secretary of the courts-martial for the Nauvoo Legion, clerk assigned to write brief synopses of sermons given by the Prophet, and clerk for the "Maid of Iowa," an LDS-owned vessel on the Mississippi. His official conference minutes were by far the most nearly complete made on the King Follett Discourse.¹⁹

William Clayton, another recorder, also served as a private secretary to Joseph Smith. According to one biographer, Clayton "received a good common-school education" and was "a clear writer" with a "love for order."²⁰ The popularity and versatility of his missionary and pioneer journals bear witness of his ability as a recorder of historical events.²¹

The third clerk, Willard Richards, served the Prophet Joseph Smith as "private secretary" and historian. In that position, he kept Joseph Smith's daily journal for the years 1842-44, and recorded his summary of the King Follett Discourse in that journal. Of Richards' abilities as a scribe, Orson Spencer wrote that he "was eminently gifted. He chronicled events, dates, circumstances, and incidents with rare accuracy of judgement and rare tenacity of memory."²²

Wilford Woodruff, by far the best-known of the four recorders today, had received no formal stenographic training, but had a

LDS Church Archives. Bullock's journal indicates that he had been assigned to take minutes; Willard Richards had the assignment by virtue of his calling as Church Historian. He was keeping Joseph's journal, in which he was recording Joseph's teachings and actions. William Clayton was also a clerk and probably had been assigned to take minutes of the conference. Wilford Woodruff also reported it in his journal, but unofficially.

¹⁹C. Ward Despain, "Thomas Bullock: Early Mormon Pioneer" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1956), pp. 6, 14, 17.

²⁰Paul E. Dahl, "William Clayton: Missionary, Pioneer, and Public Servant" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1959), pp. 8-9.

²¹See William Clayton, *Manchester Mormons: The Journal of William Clayton 1840-1842*, ed. James B. Allen and Thomas G. Alexander (Salt Lake City and Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1974), and William Clayton, *William Clayton's Journal* (Salt Lake City: Clayton Family Association, 1921).

²²*Deseret News*, 16 March 1854.

strong desire to write a history of the Church. Consequently, he recorded not only his own activities, but also the sermons, teachings, and prophecies of Joseph Smith and other Church leaders. He chose to record most of this material in his personal journal, which has been characterized as "careful and painstaking."²³ Woodruff developed a unique note-taking method which one writer described in this manner:

He had a gift from God. It was this, that when he did not have pencil or paper with him, he could, after hearing the Prophet Joseph Smith preach a sermon, go home and write it word for word and sentence for sentence; but after completing the writing . . . the sermon would pass from his mind, as though he had never heard it.²⁴

Apparently on the day of the King Follett Discourse, Brother Woodruff had "pencil and paper," for he said that he wrote the sermon on the crown of his hat, while standing in the congregation.²⁵ At any rate, one realizes that Wilford Woodruff, working either from memory or from brief notes, habitually made a summary in his journal of the discourses he heard.²⁶ Other people attending the conference kept brief notes on the sermon, but the current published version of the King Follett Discourse was constructed from the notes of Woodruff, Richards, Clayton, and Bullock.

COMPARATIVE TECHNIQUES

The opening statement, or lead paragraph, of the King Follett sermon, as recorded by each of the four writers, provides a concise and useful comparison of the length, style, and methodology of the four reporters:

[BULLOCK] "The Prophet: While I address you on the subject which was contem[plated] in the fore[part] of the con[ference]—as the wind blows very hard it will be hardly possible for me to make you all hear it is of the greatest importance & most solemn of any that co[uld] occupy our attention & that is the subject of the dead on the decease of our bro. Follit who was crushed to death in a well—& inasmuch as there are a great many of this congre[gation] who live in this city & who have lost friend[s] I shall speak in general & offer you my ideas so far as I have ability & so far as I shall be inspired by the H[oly] S[pirit] to dwell on this subject."²⁷

[CLAYTON] "President Smith called the attention of the con[gregation] upon

²³Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), p. v.

²⁴Southern Utah Mission, Historical Record, pp. 124–25, Church Archives.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶One of the pleasing features of the Woodruff journal is that he printed his entries in block script, making it considerably easier to read than many other diaries from that period.

²⁷Thomas Bullock report of 7 April 1844 Conference Discourses, manuscript, Church Archives.

the subject contemplated in the for part of the con[ference]—as the wind blows very hard it will be hardly possible for me to make you hear unless profound attention—subject of the greatest importance and most solemn that could occupy our attention, the subject of the dead been requested to speak on the de-cease of Br Follet who was crushed to death—I have been requested to speak by his friends & relatives & inasmuch as great many here in con[gregation] who live in this city as well as elsewhere who have deceased friends feel dis-posed to speak on the subject in general—wil offer my ideas as far as ability & as far as inspired by H[oly] S[pirit]. . . .”²⁸

[RICHARDS] 3 ¼ P. M. Joseph commenced speaking on the subject of the dead relative to the death of Elder King Follet who was crushed in a well by the falling of a tub of rock on him.²⁹

[WOODRUFF] The following important edeyfying + interesting discourse was delivered by President Joseph Smith to about twenty thousand souls upon the subject of the death of Elder King Follett.

I now call the attention of this congregation while I address you upon the subject of the dead the case of our beloved brother King Follett who was crushed to death in a well as well as many others who have lost friends will be had in mind this afternoon. I shall speak upon the subject in general as far as I shall be inspired by the Holy Spirit to treat upon the subject. . . .³⁰

These opening statements reveal the characteristics of each writer, which are apparent throughout the body of the record of each. Thomas Bullock wrote in more complete phrases, making use of his own method of abbreviation, which allowed him to record more of the talk. William Clayton’s record is comparable to Bullock’s in depth, although it stops about three-quarters of the way through the sermon. Willard Richard’s account is the shortest, featuring only the basic details. Wilford Woodruff’s text is more concise, shortening the thoughts into compact powerful sentences.

Comparison of these four texts to the current published edition of the discourse reveals the rough percentage of material that each recorder contributed to the composite text:

Bullock	51%
Clayton	37%
Richards	11%
Woodruff	29%
Total	128% ³¹

AUDIENCE REACTION

How did Joseph’s audience respond to his lengthy and elo-

²⁸William Clayton report of 7 April 1844 Conference Discourses, manuscript, Church Archives.
²⁹Smith (Richards) Diary.
³⁰Woodruff Journal.
³¹This comparison was made by typing the most frequently printed version of the text and then

quent sermon? Reactions ranged from brief comments in diaries, lengthy articles in newspapers, to gossip in personal letters. The amazing thing is that the Saints would bother to comment at all during a time when so much was transpiring. Certainly the candidacy of Joseph Smith, the conspiracy against him, and in several weeks, the martyrdom, would overshadow a conference talk. The fact that the people did record their reactions at all is remarkable.

Most of the thousands who heard the Prophet speak did not leave written comment on the sermon. Some left only brief statements. A few, however, made both lengthy and meaningful comments on the King Follett Discourse. (Most of these are positive, though it is well to remember that the diaries we have come west with Saints who accepted both the leadership of the Twelve and many of the doctrines which were denied by those groups who broke away from the Church after the death of the Prophet.) Joseph Fielding's journal clearly indicates that the discourse profoundly moved him: "April 6th-7th '44. Our annual conference began and continued 4 days. Joseph's discourse on the origin of man, the nature of God, and the resurrection was the most interesting matter of this time." Fielding went on to say that Joseph Smith was not a fallen prophet, but was acting under the inspiration of God, noting, "I never felt more delighted with his discourse than at this time. They said at his oration, it is the voice of a god not of a man."³²

Wandle Mace, another early Mormon diarist who recorded his impressions of the King Follett Discourse, had been ordained a high priest at that conference. Expecting the Prophet to confront the conspirators at the conference, Mace discovered that Joseph Smith had chosen another course. Quoting the opening remarks of the Prophet, Mace recorded: "It had been expected that the little difficulties which existed would be investigated before the conference, but they are too trivial a nature to occupy the attention of so large a body." Mace was impressed by the words and conduct of the Prophet. Later in his diary, Brother Mace called the funeral sermon of King Follett a "remarkable discourse." Still later, he recorded another entry concerning "this most interesting

using a color code system. Each recorder was indicated by a different color and the percentages calculated by tabulating the differently colored portions. The percentages total more than 100% because of overlapping among the four records.

³²Journal of Joseph Fielding, Church Archives. My research assistants and I read some 300 journals at the LDS Church Archives and at Brigham Young University. Most did not comment on the discourse, however those who did comment made meaningful observations.

and instructive conference.”³³ The words of the Prophet had left a lasting impression on him.

Edward Stevenson was so inspired by the sermon that he recorded major selections from the address in his diary. He called it the “Grand funeral sermon of King Follett.” Summarizing his experiences at the conference, including the discourse, Stevenson wrote some time after Joseph’s death:

What a glorious time we have had; the occasion was a most interesting one, the weather was lovely and the surrounding river and the Iowa side with its sloping hills looks lovely. The Prophet appeared to be full of instruction, and so near his final end of this present life.³⁴

Samuel W. Richards looked forward to the conference with great anticipation, for he had never attended one before. He recorded: “Nor were my expectations in vain.” Summarizing the conference, he recorded: “The conference closed having had a joyful time together being made glad by the spirit of God which was there with them.”³⁵ Erastus Snow, describing the conference and sermon, said: “All were highly edified and highly delighted.”³⁶ Joseph Lee Robinson claimed that the Prophet’s statements amazed him and caused him to wonder.³⁷ Angus M. Cannon commented on the strength he received from the words of the Prophet.³⁸ Wilford Woodruff called the King Follett Discourse “important, edifying and interesting.”³⁹ Alfred Cordon wrote: “I was much delighted with the teachings and doings of the conference.”⁴⁰ James Burgess recorded that it “truly was a glorious time.”⁴¹ Thomas Bullock wrote in his diary that these were “the greatest, best, and most glorious five days that ever were.”⁴²

But some who heard the King Follett Discourse were converts who had just joined the Church and had been raised in religions where the ideas Joseph taught in the King Follett Discourse would have been considered “horrid blasphemy.” For some time

³³Wandle Mace Journal.

³⁴Edward Stevenson Journal.

³⁵Journal of Samuel W. Richards, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

³⁶Sketchbook of Erastus Snow, Lee Library.

³⁷Journal of Joseph Lee Robinson, Lee Library.

³⁸Hyrum L. and Helen Mae Andrus, *They Knew the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), p. 163.

³⁹Woodruff Journal

⁴⁰Journal of Alfred Cordon, Church Archives.

⁴¹Journal of James Burgess, Church Archives.

⁴²Journal of Thomas Bullock, Church Archives.

prior to the spring of 1844, some of these had been dissatisfied with conditions in Nauvoo, and Joseph's actions and personality, new doctrines, and general disenchantment were leading more and more Saints into dissension or apostasy.

They had arrived in Nauvoo knowing only the first principles, the Book of Mormon, and the gathering. They had no idea of the plurality of gods, plural marriage, temple ordinances, and other "mysteries," which were being taught at Nauvoo. This is understandable because Brigham Young had admonished the elders at October conference, 1841, "on the importance of teaching abroad the first principles of the gospel, leaving the mysteries of the kingdom to be taught among the saints."⁴³ Apparently this meant Nauvoo, for in January of 1844, one Saint at Nauvoo wrote to his daughter, a member in Canada, and told her of a new revelation that marriages for eternity could be performed, and that "the work of *generation* is not to cease forever." He did, however, explain that

There are many things connected with this subject, which I am not at liberty to communicate to you, where you are living which would make the matter plainer to your minds and more satisfactory, therefore, beware how you treat this subject for no doubt it is of God. Other revelations intimately connected with this momentous dispensation and which are almost ready to unfold themselves to us, I cannot communicate to you at present although I know them in part, for you could not bear them now. If you were living with the Church, your spiritual advantages would be much greater, than they now are: but to inform you of *all*, that is made known to the Church, here, it would go abroad from you and likely cause you much persecution.⁴⁴

Yet, while many suffered much anxiety after sacrificing significantly to gather to Nauvoo to find doctrines being taught which challenged their religious beliefs, most viewed the new teachings as glorious new revelations of truth, "hid from before the foundation of the world . . . revealed to babes and sucklings in the last days."⁴⁵ But it is easy to understand how there would be some who, as Joseph put it, would "fly to pieces like glass as soon as

⁴³*Times and Seasons* 2 (15 October 1841):578. This was common instruction. See also Joseph Fielding Smith, comp, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), pp. 292, 77 (hereafter cited as *Teachings*); *Times and Seasons* 1 (November 1839):13; *Times and Seasons* 5 (15 March 1844):474; and *Times and Seasons* 5 (15 July 1844): 580. The material in the text between footnotes 43 and 48 was compiled and contributed by Van Hale.

⁴⁴Jacob Scott to his daughter, 5 January 1844, Church Historical Department. The original is at the RLDS Department of History.

⁴⁵*Teachings*, p. 321.

anything comes that is contrary to their traditions: they cannot stand the fire at all.”⁴⁶ One who had to struggle was Sarah Scott, who expressed her anxiety in a letter to her parents, six days after hearing the Discourse:

Mother you think you have trials but I can tell you there is nothing there to try your faith; I mean comparatively speaking. I never fully understood the place in the holy writ where the Lord says he will have a tried people until I came here with the Church. Sometimes I almost fear that I shall give up but by the help of the Lord I mean to endure to the end. You know little concerning the Church, I can assure you; I think that if the saints were as wise before they start as after they get here, many would not have faith enough to come. A word to the wise is sufficient. Dear Mother pray for me that I may be of the household of faith.⁴⁷

Sarah Scott represented those who wanted to believe but weren't sure they could. Most who could not accept these new doctrines quietly left the Church without making any attempt to change Mormonism. There was, however, a growing nucleus who would not follow that course. Most prominent of these were the Laws, the Fosters, and the Higbees, the primary figure being William Law, Joseph's second counselor in the First Presidency. Although these men had some rather serious differences with Joseph over temporal matters, they had retained their standing in the Church and community, claiming to believe “that the religion of the Latter Day Saints as originally taught by Joseph Smith, which is contained in the Old and New Testament, Book of Covenants, and Book of Mormon, is verily true.” They hoped that “many items of doctrine, as now taught . . . considerate men will treat with contempt; for we declare them heretical and damnable in their influence, though they find many devotees.” As well as stating their total contempt for the doctrine of plurality of wives, they indicated that “among the many items of false doctrine that are taught the Church, is the doctrine of many Gods, one of the most direful in its effects that has characterized the world for many centuries.” By 7 June 1844 they had determined that “earnestly seeking to explode the vicious principles of Joseph Smith” was their moral obligation, feeling “as if forbearance has ceased to be a virtue.” They had

⁴⁶*Teachings*, p. 331.

⁴⁷Sarah Scott to her mother, 13 April 1844, “The Death of a Mormon Dictator: Letters of Massachusetts Mormons, 1843–1848,” ed. George F. Partridge, *The New England Quarterly* 9 (December 1936):592, 593.

sought a reformation in the church, without a public exposition of the enormities of crimes practiced by its leaders, thinking that if they would hearken to counsel, and shew fruit meet for repentance, it would be as acceptable with God, as though they were exposed to public gaze.⁴⁸

Their efforts were in vain.

Non-Mormon newspaper accounts of the conference also tended to be negative. Thomas Sharp, a notorious leader of the anti-Mormons, commented sarcastically about the conference in Nauvoo in his newspaper, the *Warsaw Signal*. Sharp datelined his article from "The Holy City" rather than Nauvoo:

Of course all the Saints and some of the sinners from the adjoining districts were in attendance. The number that was on the ground on this occasion is estimated at from 15-20 thousand—nearly all of whom were of the faith. Truly, one could think that so many fools congregated on one spot would disturb the equilibrium of the earth.⁴⁹

The single edition of the ill-fated *Nauvoo Expositor* contained some serious attacks on the doctrines presented by Joseph Smith in the King Follett Discourse. After stating that the religion of the Latter-day Saints as originally taught by the Prophet was true, the paper attacked him for the practice of polygamy and other "vicious principles." One item of "false doctrine" especially repugnant to the proprietors and editors of the *Expositor* was the doctrine of the plurality of gods and the notion that man could become a god, a doctrine clearly set forth in the King Follett Discourse.⁵⁰

PUBLICATION HISTORY

Before the end of 1844, the King Follett Discourse had been published at least three times, attesting to the impact it had on the Saints. It first appeared in the *Times and Seasons* of 15 August 1844. During the fall of 1844, it came out in print in the *Millennial Star*⁵¹ and in a publication by John Taylor called the *Voice of Truth*.⁵² The sermon was published at least five more times before 1900, appearing in the *Zion's Watchman*,⁵³ the *Deseret (Weekly)*

⁴⁸*Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844.

⁴⁹*Warsaw Signal*, 10 April 1844.

⁵⁰*Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844.

⁵¹*Millennial Star*, November 1844, pp. 87–93.

⁵²This publication is now very obscure, but was widely read in 1844.

⁵³*The Zion's Watchman*, 12 April 1855, pp. 249–56. This was the first edition of an LDS publication published in Sydney, Australia.

News,⁵⁴ the *Journal of Discourses*,⁵⁵ in a revised form in the *Millennial Star* in 1861, and in an 1883 *Contributor*, the official publication of the MIA.⁵⁶

Interestingly, the King Follett Discourse has been published more times in this century than in the previous one. Since 1900 it has appeared in at least eleven different publications: the *Improvement Era* in 1909, in a pamphlet published privately by Magazine Printing Company in 1913 and later editions, in two privately printed editions with no specific dates,⁵⁷ in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* in 1938, in a German translation printed in Switzerland in 1943,⁵⁸ in the *Liabona* in 1945,⁵⁹ in the *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Messages of the First Presidency*, and the *LDS Reference Encyclopedia* (all printed in 1965), and most recently in the *Ensign*, April and May 1971.

The exclusion and inclusion of the King Follett Discourse in the *History of the Church* constitutes one of the most interesting episodes in the history of Church publishing. B. H. Roberts, editor of the six-volume work, decided to include the King Follett Discourse in Volume 6 of the first edition. Apparently, at the last minute, it was removed. An examination of the first edition of Volume 6 (1912) provides conclusive evidence that the King Follett Discourse was indeed removed as the book was ready to be bound, as pages 302–317 are missing. In the second edition of Volume 6 (1950), pages 302–317 are reinserted, and they contain the King Follett Discourse.⁶⁰

We do not know exactly why the sermon was removed or who ordered its removal, but available evidence indicates that some of the Brethren had become suspicious of the King Follett Discourse, maintaining that all of its doctrines might not be authentic, and expressing some concern over the accuracy of the text. In a letter to Samuel O. Bennion, president of the Central States Mission, George Albert Smith said:

⁵⁴The "History of Joseph Smith" was published in the *Deseret News*, beginning in the 1850s, the King Follett Discourse appearing on 8 July 1857. This is the first time the Grimshaw Amalgamation appeared in print.

⁵⁵*Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1855–86), 6:1–11.

⁵⁶*The Contributor*, April 1883, pp. 252–61.

⁵⁷C. C. Anderson, comp., *The Boy Prophet's Wonderful Sermon of the Funeral of King Follett* (n.p., n.d.); Newman Bulkely, S. M. Farnsworth, C. D. Evans, *Wonderful Sermon of the Prophet Joseph Smith at the Funeral of King Follett* (n.p., n.d.).

⁵⁸Joseph Smith, *Die King Follett Ansprache*, trans. Max Zimmer (Basel: n.p., 1943).

⁵⁹The *Liabona*, May 1945. The King Follett Discourse appears in an abbreviated form in this publication of the Mexican Mission.

⁶⁰On the deletion, see T. Edgar Lyon, "Doctrinal Development of the Church during the Nauvoo Sojourn, 1839–1846," *BYU Studies* 15 (Summer 1975):445, note 12. Brother Lyon also provided valuable insight into this matter in the interview referred to in footnote 15 above.

I have thought that the report of that sermon might not be authentic and I have feared that it contained some things that might be contrary to the truth. . . . Some of the brethren felt as I did and thought that greater publicity should not be given to that particular sermon.⁶¹

Testifying in Washington, D.C., during the Reed Smoot hearings, Charles W. Penrose stated that:

there are some sermons published in the *Journal of Discourses* the authenticity of which has been disputed . . . for instance some of the sermons attributed to Joseph Smith, the Prophet. They were taken down at the time in longhand and have been published in the *Journal of Discourses* and there have been disputes as to their correctness.⁶²

Whatever the reasons, the King Follett Discourse remained outside the official *History of the Church* for thirty-eight years. It was included in the second edition, however. The reincorporation of the sermon in the 1950 *History of the Church*, coupled with the fact of the numerous reprintings in other books and magazines since that time, attest to its acceptance in the mid-twentieth century.

That the King Follett Discourse has value for Latter-day Saints today has been affirmed by eyewitnesses to the event as well as by present-day students of the sermon. Concerning the discourse, Elder George Q. Cannon recorded:

His address ceased to be a mere eulogy of an individual, and became a revelation of eternal truths concerning the glories of immortality. . . . The Prophet seemed to rise above the world. It was as if the light of heaven already encircled his physical being. . . . Those who hear that sermon may never forget its power. Those who read it today think it was an exhibition of superhuman power and eloquence.⁶³

Since that time, biographers, historians, theologians, and others have joined in proclaiming the sermon's value and asserting that it was indeed Joseph Smith's greatest sermon.⁶⁴

⁶¹George Albert Smith to Samuel O. Bennion, 30 January 1912, George Albert Smith Family Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

⁶²*Proceedings Before the Committee on Privileges and Elections, United States Senate in the Matter of the Protest against the Right Hon. Reed Smoot, A Senator from the State of Utah, to Hold His Seat.* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1904) 2:442.

⁶³McConkie, "A Historical Examination of the Views of the LDS and RLDS. . .," pp. 145-73.

⁶⁴Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith*, pp. 478-79.

⁶⁴See references in footnote 1. A recent article by a psychotherapist shows the wide range of present interest in the King Follett Discourse. See Frances H. Tuckett's "Perfectionism in Religion and Psychotherapy or: On Discerning the Spirits," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 4 (Winter 1976):25-33.