



12-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Boyd, Hal R. and Black, Susan E. (2010) "A Question on My Mind: Robert McCorkle's 1844 Letter to Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 49 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol49/iss4/6>

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“A Question on My Mind”

Robert McCorkle's 1844 Letter to Joseph Smith

Hal Robert Boyd and Susan Easton Black

Robert Andrew Hope McCorkle (1807–1873)¹ was one of many Americans curious about Joseph Smith and Mormonism. In 1844, he ventured from his western Tennessee home to Nauvoo, Illinois, “with strong desires to familiarize [him]self with what is call’d Mormonism.” In Nauvoo he found “a vast net-full” of Latter-day Saints, but he returned south without having had an opportunity to speak personally with Joseph Smith: “I took with me a series of enquiries with the intention to present them to you, but being debard from becoming familiar with you, my natural timidity forbade my presenting them.” Back in Tennessee, McCorkle took up his pen on May 10, 1844, and put his questions in a letter, transcribed below, and sent it to Joseph.²

After Joseph’s murder, Church leaders and historians kept his official correspondence.³ His letters were carried west with other documents to the Salt Lake Valley and are now housed in the Joseph Smith Collection in

1. Robert Andrew Hope McCorkle was born in Rowan County, North Carolina, in March 1807 and married to Tirzah Scott on December 4, 1828, in Gibson County, Tennessee. Familysearch.org; marriage certificate of Robt. A. H. McCorkle and Tirzah Scott, December 1, 1828, copy in possession of Hal Robert Boyd; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850, Dyer County, Tennessee; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860, Gibson County, Tennessee.

2. Robert A. H. McCorkle to Joseph Smith, May 10, 1844, in “Received Letters,” Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

3. Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles kept most of the Prophet’s correspondence as property of the LDS Church. Linda Newell and

May the 10th 1844

To Joseph Smith Nauvoo Ill

Respected Sir—

Having in vain sought an interview with you during your Conference, being repulsed by a throng of business which bore weightily on you at that time— I was under the necessity of returning home without receiving that satisfaction that I desired and which I promised myself before I left for Nauvoo—

As to the teachings exhibited from the stand at the conference in the morn, as far as I understood, I believed— of course the mode of adrep being so far different from any thing with which I had ever be accustomed, I was not a little surprised.

Letter of Robert Andrew Hope McCorkle to Joseph Smith, May 10, 1844, page 1, detail. Courtesy Church History Library.

the Church History Library. McCorkle's letter is a unique part of this collection for both its content and format. It describes his interested but uncommitted involvement with Mormonism, his positive impression of Nauvoo, and his description of Mormon doctrines. Remarkably, after addressing Joseph in prose, McCorkle poses his questions to the Mormon prophet in a poem. While McCorkle's poetry may not appeal aesthetically to all readers, it nonetheless provides an unanticipated vista into Joseph Smith's world and yet another response to his remarkable ministry.

As mentioned, this letter sheds light on McCorkle's ambivalent relationship with Mormonism. That McCorkle had great affinity for Mormonism is evident in the names of his two sons: Joseph Smith McCorkle and Parley Pratt McCorkle.⁴ But there is no known evidence that he joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1847, he and others founded the Lemalsamac Church in Wood Scott's schoolhouse near Churchton, Tennessee, for which McCorkle served as a deacon.⁵

Valeen Tipetts, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Champaign and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 204.

4. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1880, 1910, and 1920 population censuses for Gibson County, Tennessee, entries for Joseph Smith McCorkle (born 1843); familysearch.org, entry for Parley Pratt McCorkle (born 1845).

5. The Lemalsamac Church of Christ credits McCorkle with coining the name Lemalsamac. He did so by using letters from the names of the founding members of the congregation (for example, mac for McCorkle). Lemalsamac Church of Christ, "The History of Lemalsamac Church of Christ," <http://www.lemalsamaccocf.com/Blog/?p=10> (accessed October 20, 2010).

McCorkle's letter suggests reasons why he remained apart. While claiming to believe in the doctrine of the gathering, McCorkle reasons that Mormons have no monopoly on Christian virtue. He also weighs the economic pros and cons of relocating to Nauvoo and decides against it. He enjoyed some security in Tennessee; he eventually died there in Yorkville, Gibson County, Tennessee, on September 26, 1873.⁶

His perspective on Nauvoo and the Saints is historically valuable. Not all visitors to Nauvoo left with positive impressions, but he did: "One thing candor forces me to say, there is more intelligence among the common people there, than ever I met with before; nor have I ever seen as little immorality exhib[it]ed in any city, town, or hamlet in which I ever spent the same length of time." In a doggerel summary, he wrote:

For this I know, That all is not true
That I have heard about Nauvoo.

Though happy with his visit, McCorkle still left with unanswered questions. Thus, in the letter he inquires about prophecy, gifts of the spirit, the Book of Mormon, modern revelation, the gathering of Israel, ministering angels, and the priesthood. He was particularly interested in prophetic authority and asserted that if Joseph were a true prophet, he would be able to provide evidence of accurately predicting events.⁷

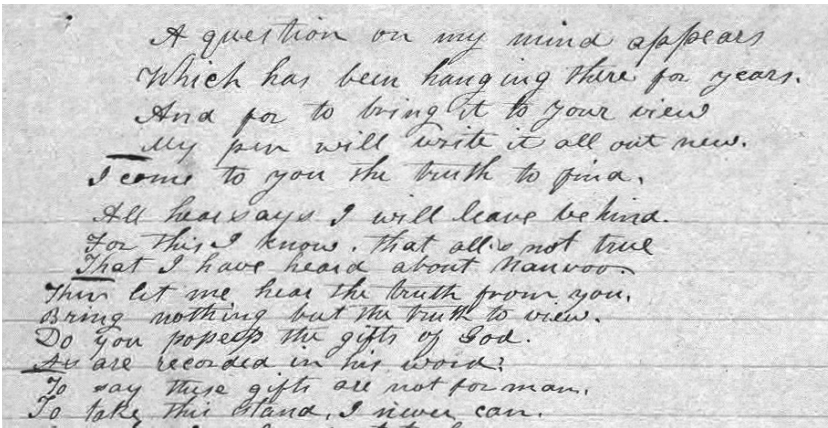
McCorkle's inquiries rendered as verse make his letter curious and distinctive. While since the Church's earliest days Latter-day Saints have used poetry as "a vehicle for preaching the gospel,"⁸ here an enquirer used poetry to ask his questions. He even invited Joseph to respond similarly, but Joseph left no known response. It is not certain that Joseph read the letter, but it seems likely: his clerk, Thomas Bullock, endorsed it.⁹ Either way, Joseph's time was short. He was murdered forty-eight days after McCorkle wrote the correspondence.

6. <http://www.marshahuie.com/>; email from Marsha Huie to Hal Robert Boyd, October 27, 2010. Marsha Huie is a descendent of Robert McCorkle's brother Edwin McCorkle.

7. McCorkle to Smith, May 10, 1844.

8. Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert explain that the Saints were prolific poets in part because of their use of poetry in preaching. Richard E. Cracroft and Neal A. Lambert, "Poetry," in *Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), 251.

9. British-born Thomas Bullock was baptized on November 20, 1841. By 1843, he was residing in Nauvoo and serving as a clerk for Joseph Smith. He later served as a clerk for Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. See Jerald F. Simon, "Thomas Bullock as an Early Church Historian," *BYU Studies* 30, no. 1 (1990) 71–88.



Letter of Robert Andrew Hope McCorkle to Joseph Smith, May 10, 1844, page 3, detail. Courtesy Church History Library.

In the transcript below, McCorkle's spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and paragraphing have been retained, but line endings and thus words broken at line endings have not. McCorkle's erasures and strike-outs are represented like ~~this~~ or noted in footnotes. McCorkle's insertions are enclosed in angled brackets <like these>. Editorial insertions are enclosed in square brackets [like these]. McCorkle often used a subscript apostrophe that looks like a comma, as in *call,d*. In such cases the apostrophes have been raised, as in *call'd*. McCorkle used a heavy, elongated stroke to end sentences, to set off clauses for emphasis, and to separate the stanzas of his poem. These strokes are rendered below as periods (.) when they end sentences, as em dashes (—) when they set off clauses, and as double spaces between stanzas. McCorkle's commas and periods are hard to distinguish. Thus, identical marks are represented in the transcription below as periods when they end sentences and as commas when they do not.

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Letter of Robert Andrew Hope McCorkle to Joseph Smith

May the 10th 1844
To Joseph Smith Nauvoo Ill

Respected Sir—

Having in vain sought an interview with you during your conference,¹⁰ being repulsed by a throng of business which bore weightily on you at that time¹¹—I was under the necessity of returning home without receiving that satisfaction that I desired, and which I promised myself before I left for Nauvoo.

As to the teachings exhibited from the stand at the conference in the mien, as far as I understood, I believ'd—of course the mode of address being so far different from any thing with which I had ever be accustomed, I was not a little surprised, but considerably amused.¹² Passing these things by, I want to come to a point, & that is your prophetic power, if I rem[em]ber correctly, you stated in your address, (the only public one you made while I was <there>) That you would be able to show, and prove to the satisfaction of the audience, that you had not be come so far a fallen prophet as some would have it you were,¹³—I of course was an entire

10. McCorkle is likely referring to the April 6–9, 1844, conference of the Church in Nauvoo. See Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 6:287–330 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

11. Joseph Smith's schedule prior to conference is given as follows: April 2, "at home, somewhat unwell, and kept my house this fine day"; April 3, "presided in a special session of the Municipal Court"; April 4, "in a general council in the assembly room from nine to twelve, a.m. and from one to four, p.m."; April 5, "attended dedication of the Masonic temple." *History of the Church*, 6:285–87. *History of the Church* mistakenly notes April 4 as April 14.

12. The word *amused* likely means "having the mind engaged by something pleasing," rather than laughter-provoking. See Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1846), s.v. "amused."

13. McCorkle is likely referring to Joseph's April 7, 1844, sermon, commonly known as the King Follett discourse. Several hearers took notes. See Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, Utah: Religious

stranger to whome, or what, you alluded. My expectations were raised, thinking to hear you prophecy, but if you made any; I have no recollection of it. I claim to be honest, I believe God never owned any people as <his> people or church, without having prophets among them; when I say prophets, I mean one, who by the power of God, can, and does foresee, & foretell events in the future, which will come to pass literally at the time and place, as by the prophet seen—none other than a literal fulfilment will do me.

I dont want you to think hard of me, when I tell you that I as yet, have not been made acquainted with any prophecy that you have made; which has, or has not been fulfilled, hence I am left without any ground on which to predicate a belief wheather or not, you are a prophet, (true or false) If any you have ever made. I have an honest desire to see¹⁴ them if it be not contrary to wisdom—a private communication on that subject would be of considerable satisfaction, or if a public exhibit would be less objectionable I would just as soon.

I went to Nauvoo with strong desires to familiarize my self with what is call'd Mormonism, but through timidity I was baffled [end of page 1]

Again, I went to Nauvoo with an honest desire to ascertain whether the virtues of the members of the chuch of Jesus Christ of Latter day saints were aparantly greater, than are¹⁵ common amongst the different sectarian churches. In this respect I found them [that is, Latter-day Saints], as might have been expected in such a vast net-full, (a promiscuous¹⁶ squad). One thing candor forces me to say, there is more intelligence among the common people there, than ever I met with before; nor have I ever seen as little immorality exhib[it]ed in <any> city, town, or hamlet in which I ever spent the same length of time.

I took with me a searies of enquiries with the intention to present them to you, but being debard from becoming familiar with you, my natural timidity forbade my presenting them. I however shewed them to several of the elders—some thought them deserving an answer; others ran over them rough shod.

Studies Center Brigham Young University, 1980), 340–55. Thomas Bullock's notes were redacted and published in "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 5 (August 15, 1844): 612–17. Also see Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 533–37.

14. An uppercase S on the word *see* was wiped away and replaced with a lowercase s.

15. Apparently the original word *is* was overwritten by the word *are*.

16. The word *promiscuous* here means "mingled; consisting of individuals united in a body or mass without order." Webster, *American Dictionary* (1846), s.v. "promiscuous."

I have concluded that in as much as I have an opportunity of sending them to you free of cost, I will submit them to your scrutiny; an answer in poetic form¹⁷ would be thankfully rec'd, either privately, or in the "Times & Seasons"¹⁸

I have some inquiries to make with regard to locating in, or near to Nauvoo. I am somewhat of a believer in the gathering¹⁹—but I am desirous to know how as poor a man as I, could make, or secure a comfortable living. I have a comfortable little home here,²⁰ have to use industry, and economy in order to get a long well—but by the by, I am not very able to labor; I am no mechanic, and it looks like if I were to move, unless I could sell for a fair price, it would be rather an imprudent act, & to sell appears out of the question. In your wisdom how would you direct that I should procede? would there be any chance to get a small farm, or piece of land from the church near to Nauvoo having a sufficiency of timber on it, by paying two spans²¹ of mules or horses, and waggons, by advancing two or three hundred dollars in Tennessee currency—if so, what would be the price of the land, and what might I expect for the property say on an average. The scarcity of timber in your country to me, is a great obstacle.²² I will turn over and write down my honest enquiries [end of page 2]

A question on my mind appears
Which has been hanging there for years.
And for to bring it to your view
My pen will write it all out new.

17. McCorkle's request that Joseph Smith respond to his questions in verse follows the form of conversational poetry in which successive poems respond to each other. This type of poetry appears with relative frequency throughout early Mormon literature. Most notably, W. W. Phelps's poem "Vade Mecum, (Translated,) Go With Me," was published along with Joseph Smith's response, titled "A Vision." *Times and Seasons* 4 (February 1, 1843): 81–85.

18. *Times and Seasons* was an LDS newspaper printed (November 1839–February 1846) in Nauvoo, often featuring LDS poetry.

19. "And ye are called to bring to pass the gathering of mine elect; for mine elect hear my voice and harden not their hearts" (D&C 29:7).

20. Robert McCorkle's property in Gibson County, Tennessee, was valued at \$5,000 in 1850 and at \$10,000 in 1860. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850 and 1860 population censuses for Gibson County, Tennessee.

21. A "span of horses" is "two [horses] of nearly the same color, and otherwise nearly alike, which are usually harnessed side by side." Webster, *American Dictionary* (1846), s.v. "span."

22. Joseph Smith also recognized the need for wood in Nauvoo and sent Latter-day Saints to the Wisconsin forests to cut and then ship wood down the Mississippi River to Nauvoo. See *History of the Church*, 6:256.

I come to you the truth to find.
 All hearsays I will leave behind.
 For this I know, that all is not true,
 That I have heard about Nauvoo.²³

Then let me hear the truth from you.
 Bring nothing but the truth to view.
 Do you possess the gifts of God,
 As are recorded in his word?

To say these gifts are not for man,
 To take this stand, I never can.
 But this I only want to know,
 Do you possess them at Nauvoo?

If from on high, you have rec'd
 The gifts of God, your not deceiv'd
 Then is it so, that from the Lord
 An angel's brot a true record?²⁴

Does this record come with a grace;
 Does it reveal the Indian's race?
 Your manly honor I invite,
 To give an answer that is right.

My heart within me now doth burn²⁵
 To get an answer in return.
 For if its true, That God has given
 Late revelations right from heaven,

23. By 1844, anti-Mormonism was at a feverish pitch in Warsaw, Illinois. "Joe Smith is not safe out of Nauvoo," trumpeted the *Warsaw Signal*. "We would not be surprised to hear of his death by violent means in a short time. He has deadly enemies. . . . The feeling in this county is now lashed to its utmost pitch, and it will break forth in fury upon the slightest provocation." *Warsaw Signal*, May 29, 1844, 2.

24. This is a reference to the angel Moroni and the Book of Mormon.

25. This may be a reference to Luke 24:32: "And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?"

Its also true, he's set his hands
To gather Israel from all lands.²⁶
And if that's so, we all may know
All kingdoms sure, God will o'er throw,²⁷

Then dont deceive my honest soul,
I want Gods law, me to control,
Then if you are the chosen few
Show it to me, while at Nauvoo,

Your elders say, that you possess
The power of God, thro righteousness,
Th[at] you've rec'd the priesthood new
An angel gave it unto you.²⁸

This priesthood they pretend to say
Unveils the truth in this our day.
That by this power to man is given
An earnest²⁹ of the joys of heaven.

If an angel of the Lord
Has come to man with a record
Such record surely was design'd
To be the blessing to mankind.

26. The gathering of Israel is discussed in Ezekiel 37:21–22: “And say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land: And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all.”

27. The idea of God overthrowing all other kingdoms is found in Daniel 2:44: “And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.”

28. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood on May 15, 1829, by John the Baptist (D&C 13). Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood by the ancient Apostles Peter, James, and John (D&C 27:12).

29. One definition of *earnest* (noun) is “first fruits; that which is in advance, and gives promise of something to come.” Webster, *American Dictionary* (1846), s.v. “earnest.”

Then if it were by God design'd,
 Sent as a blessing to mankind.
 Then what am I, that I should stand
 And raise objections to the plan?

But if it be a project³⁰ plan
 Invented by a cunning man,
 This truth unveil, and set me free
 An[d] show me who the Mormons be.

If you the special gifts enjoy
 These blessings I would not destroy.
 If with these powers you have been bless'd
 Your joy far triumphs o'er the rest.

Give me some reasons to decide
 That you'r companions of the bride,³¹
 Or else come out, and plainly say
 That you'r deceivers of our day.

If any questions I have form'd
 Are calculated to do harm
 Then to such questions point your hand
 And I will lay them to the land.

These lines convey my mind to you
 Or any other in Nauvoo
 If they deserve a moments time,
 You will an answer form in rhyme

But if they like their author prove
 Unworthy of your time, and love
 In silence they'l remain unheard
 By man! But answerd from the Lord

R. A. H. M'Corkle
 Dyer county Yorkville post offic[e]. Tennessee

30. One definition of *project* (verb) is "to scheme; to contrive," or *project* (noun) "a design not practicable." Webster, *American Dictionary* (1846), s.v. "project."

31. In Revelation 21:2, a holy people and holy city are symbolized as a bride: "And I [John] saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."