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Elder D. Todd Christofferson

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Editors’ Introduction

Several outstanding periodicals dealing with scripture, doctrine, and Church history are currently being published at Brigham Young University, such as BYU Studies and the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies. The Religious Educator, however, is designed to serve the interests and needs of those who study and teach the gospel on a regular basis. Although other journals cover topics of interest to our readers, the distinct focuses of The Religious Educator are on teaching the gospel, publishing studies on scripture, doctrine, and LDS Church history, and sharing the messages of outstanding devotional essays. The contributions to each issue are carefully reviewed and edited by experienced teachers, writers, and scholars.

The primary intended audiences for The Religious Educator are serious students of the Restoration, early-morning seminary teachers, and full-time faculty in the Church Education System, including religion professors throughout the Brigham Young University educational system. In every issue, we plan a selection of articles that will be helpful and appealing to this diverse audience. In addition, we anticipate that articles we select will appeal to anyone interested in perspectives on the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

The delay between volume 1 and volume 2 of The Religious Educator resulted from our work in producing a new format, establishing workable procedures to ensure scholarly work of the highest quality, and identifying the unique service role we intend to provide readers.

We hope you will enjoy this initial volume under our new editorship, and we look forward to publishing articles that will be helpful to all readers. We invite readers’ suggestions and comments and look forward to receiving manuscripts for possible publication.

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Editor-in-Chief
Ted D. Stoddard, Associate Editor
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Brigham Young, ca. 1864, Charles R. Savage

Courtesy of Neal A. and Colleen Hinckley Maxwell.
The Faith of a Prophet:
Brigham Young’s Life and Service—
A Pattern of Applied Faith

Elder D. Todd Christofferson

Elder D. Todd Christofferson serves as a member of the Presidency of the Seventy and as Executive Director of the Family and Church History Department.

Brigham Young was a prophet with few peers and a man of unusual accomplishments. I do not believe we have yet plumbed the depth of his character and contribution. What has impressed me most about President Brigham Young, however, is his exceptional faith in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is about that faith that I wish to address my remarks.

Brigham Young was the quintessential man of action. With seemingly inexhaustible energy and creativity, he was always about one enterprise or another. As I have studied his life, it seems to me that it is his faith in God—an implicit trust in divine providence—that permitted him to act where others waver or never go beyond the contemplation of action. If he knew or felt something to be right, Brigham Young had no hesitation in pursuing it, even where he could not see his way through to the end or did not at the moment possess the means to finish. He was convinced that the Lord would provide whatever Brigham legitimately could not. One sees this even early in his Church experience. In his article, "Brigham Young: Student of the Prophet," Ronald W. Walker related this incident occurring in Kirtland:

At first the Young family lived on life’s margins. On one occasion in Kirtland Brigham Young was invited by the Prophet [Joseph Smith] to attend certain sessions of instruction. The daytime sessions would prevent him from working and getting food for his family. Without a “mouthful of anything” in his home and fearing empty stomachs for his children, he nevertheless did what he was
asked. When he left the school that evening, so great was the anxiety for his family that he remembered “drops of sweat stood on me” despite a stiff north wind and blowing snow. How was he to feed his family? His question was answered when a friend unexpectedly offered to loan him $25. Believing the money was a reward for obeying, Brigham flew home “like a dove” to provide for his children.2

Similar faith concerning God’s provision for the welfare of his family permitted Brigham, in good conscience, to leave them in rather desperate circumstances for missionary service in New England and, later, Great Britain. Of the mission to New England, Leonard Arrington wrote:

Joseph Smith suggested that Brigham Young and Joseph Young undertake a mission to New England to preach to their family and friends. Although in debt, Brigham did not hesitate. “It has never entered into my heart,” he declared when later remembering this time, “from the first day I was called to preach the Gospel to this day, when the Lord said, ‘Go and leave your family,’ to offer the least objection.”

This did not necessarily mean that leaving Mary Ann and the children was easy, nor that his attitude toward their welfare was cavalier. He made arrangements for them as best he could. But he did trust the church (and, more than that, God) to provide for them in his absence, writing Mary Ann: “What shall I say to you to comfort your heart. . . . Tell the children that I remember them in my prayers. I pray the Lord to give you strength and wisdom in all things.”

Brigham probably knew by then that she was again pregnant, though he could not yet have guessed that she would produce twins.3

Circumstances surrounding his departure for the mission to England in 1839 were even more poignant and distressing:

Elders [Brigham] Young and [Heber C.] Kimball were the third and fourth apostles to strike out for New York City [on their way to England]. On September 14 Brigham crossed the river from Montrose to Commerce, leaving his little family so ill that none could go to the well for a pail of water, and so destitute that they had no change of clothes. He, too, was sick, and immediately went to bed at the home of Heber C. Kimball. On September 17 his wife, Mary Ann, arrived to nurse and comfort him, and the next day the two apostles, both deathly ill and practically penniless, left Commerce in a wagon.4
Brigham’s sister Fanny begged him to delay his departure. He resisted:

“Sister Fanny, I never felt better in my life.” She was a very eccentric woman and, looking at me, with tears in her eyes, she said, “You lie.” I said nothing, but I was determined to go to England or to die trying. My firm resolve was that I would do what I was required to do in the Gospel of life and salvation, or I would die trying to do it.

Heber’s wife, Vilate, and two of their three children were in bed with the ague and, he said, “It seemed to me as though my very innermost parts would melt within me at the thought of leaving my family in such a condition.” On impulse, he told the teamster to stop and, turning to Brigham, proposed that they give a cheer to those they were leaving behind. The two apostles stood up in the wagon and swung their hats over their heads three times, crying, “Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah for Israel!” The shout brought Vilate from her bed, and the two wives stood in the doorway bravely crying back to their husbands, “Good bye; God bless you!” The men returned the heartfelt prayer and continued on. By the second day they had gone only as far as Quincy, where, too feeble to continue, they stayed with helpful Saints for five more days.

It has always seemed a tender thing to me when, in 1841, after numerous such sacrifices, the Lord relieved faithful Brigham and his family of further separations. In Doctrine and Covenants, section 126, we read:

Dear and well-beloved brother, Brigham Young, verily thus saith the Lord unto you: My servant Brigham, it is no more required at your hand to leave your family as in times past, for your offering is acceptable to me.

I have seen your labor and toil in journeyings for my name.

I therefore command you to send my word abroad, and take especial care of your family from this time, henceforth and forever.

Amen (D&C 126:1–3).

Some would accuse Brigham Young of being foolhardy or of recklessly placing himself or his family in danger. Such an accusation might well be leveled by the unbelieving with respect to the great trek west. Brigham Young himself had never set foot in the place, yet he was leading hundreds and thousands into a thoroughly isolated wilderness. However, he was acting not in reckless disregard for his and others’ welfare but rather with full confidence that the Lord would not let the undertaking fail. Later, Brigham Young commented about this matter, asking the question, “Is there any harm in having faith?”
We had to have faith to come here. When we met Mr. Bridger on the Big Sandy River, said he, “Mr. Young, I would give a thousand dollars if I knew an ear of corn could be ripened in the Great Basin.” Said I, “Wait eighteen months and I will show you many of them.” Did I say this from knowledge? No, it was my faith; but we had not the least encouragement—from natural reasoning and all that we could learn of this country—of its sterility, its cold and frost, to believe that we could ever raise anything. But we travelled on, breaking the road through the mountains and building bridges until we arrived here, and then we did everything we could to sustain ourselves. We had faith that we could raise grain; was there any harm in this? Not at all. If we had not had faith, what would have become of us? We would have gone down in unbelief, have closed up every resource for our sustenance and should never have raised anything. I ask the whole world, is there any harm in having faith in God?

My wife, Kathy, is of the opinion (and I tend to agree with her) that Jim Bridger was right in his doubts about the ability of anyone to grow corn or other crops in the Salt Lake Valley as conditions then existed. Her conclusion is that the Lord modified the climate and soil conditions then existing in the Great Basin area—to permit a people to survive there. In any case, Brigham Young had the faith that if that were necessary, changes would occur and that, because it was the place the Lord had ordained for them, “the right place,” the Saints would not only survive but also prosper. He boldly proclaimed:

Here is the place God has appointed for His people. We have been kicked out of the frying-pan into the fire, out of the fire into the middle of the floor, and here we are and here we will stay. God has shown me that this is the spot to locate His people, and here is where they will prosper; He will temper the elements for the good of His Saints; He will rebuke the frost and the sterility of the soil, and the land shall become fruitful. Brethren, go to, now, and plant out your fruit seeds.

Thus, Brigham Young’s faith permitted him to go to the extreme and to pursue his course, not seeing the end from the beginning, confident that the end would be right. A simple illustration of this philosophy of faith is found in a brief entry in the Brigham Young Office Journal for 18 January 1862:

John Smith Patriarch came in. The Conversation was about faith. Pres. [Young] said I have spent the last dollar continually and then I can ask the Lord for more, [otherwise] the Lord might say, if you have no more confidence in me than that you can Keep your dollar and starve with it in your pocket.
His faith also led Brigham Young to make whatever sacrifices were required and to be very exacting in his response to the Lord's commandments. For example, the revelation now recorded as section 118 of the Doctrine and Covenants, given in July 1838 and envisioning the mission of the Twelve to Great Britain the following year, includes this direction:

And next spring let them depart to go over the great waters, and there promulgate my gospel, the fulness thereof, and bear record of my name.

Let them take leave of my saints in the city of Far West, on the twenty-sixth day of April next, on the building-spot of my house, saith the Lord (D & C 118:4–5).

When the time came to depart on this mission, the Saints had been driven from Far West and the state of Missouri altogether and were attempting to establish themselves in Illinois. Brigham Young recorded:

Many of the Authorities considered, in our present persecuted and scattered condition, the Lord would not require the Twelve to fulfil his words to the letter, and, under our present circumstances, he would take the will for the deed; but I felt differently and so did those of the Quorum who were with me. I asked them, individually, what their feelings were upon the subject. They all expressed their desires to fulfil the revelation. I told them the Lord God had spoken, and it was our duty to obey and leave the event in his hands and he would protect us.

In the early hours of the appointed day, knowing that the Missouri mobs had vowed that this was one prophecy of Joseph Smith that would not be fulfilled, the Twelve gathered at the Far West temple site, held a meeting, and then departed eastward again.

Brigham Young's understanding of faith led him to expect success, even in the face of apparent failure. He believed that acting diligently in harmony with God's will would always produce a beneficial result, whether or not an economically successful one. The Perpetual Emigrating Fund, for example, established to finance the immigration of converts to the Great Basin, was by strict financial measures a failure; yet it achieved a salutary and even divine purpose. Faith-based action would be met with divine intervention to produce an effective result.

Economic success . . . was not [Brigham Young's] primary concern. Ultimately he was less concerned with raising crops and money than he was with helping his people to become a holy nation. He knew from experience that they would grow from working hard
and accepting responsibility. “This is a good place to make Saints,” he told a congregation of members in Salt Lake City in 1856.10

In Brigham Young’s viewpoint of faith, however, God supplied only what one could not—not what one would not. A person was entitled to have faith once he or she had done all that was within his or her power. On one occasion, in his colorful way, Brigham said:

My faith does not lead me to think the Lord will provide us with roast pigs, bread already buttered, &c. He will give us the ability to raise the grain, to obtain the fruits of the earth, to make habitations, to procure a few boards to make a box, and when harvest comes, giving us the grain, it is for us to preserve it.

To explain how much confidence we should have in God, were I using a term to suit myself, I should say implicit confidence. I have faith in my God, and that faith corresponds with the works I produce. I have no confidence in faith without works.11

Although he saw a degree of faith or belief as the precursor to any action, Brigham Young believed that faith was nurtured and grew in proportion to one’s willingness to work. Action rooted in faith produced even greater faith. He said:

If we have good works and plenty of them, I have not the least doubt but what we shall reap a bountiful harvest this year, and have a surplus of grain after supplying all who will come here this season. But suppose that we should have no surplus, would not good works in abundance produce the faith that is necessary for the Lord to do the rest, when we have done what we can? Good works will produce good faith, and good faith will produce good works . . .

In all the labor of the Saints, when faith springs up in the heart, good works will follow, and good works will increase that pure faith within them.12

President Young’s approach was consistent with the doctrine taught in James: “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how works wrought with his faith, and by works was faith made perfect” (JST, James 2:20–21). Or, in other words, faith leads to works, which further perfect that faith. By way of counsel, Brigham added:

Let us pay attention to our duties. Attend to your crops, and let the gardens be attended to; and if your corn is eaten off to-day, plant again to-morrow; if your wheat is cut down by the grasshoppers, sow a little more and drag it in. Last season when the grasshoppers came on my crops, I said, “Nibble away, I may as well feed you as to have
my neighbors do it; I have sown plenty, and you have not raised any yourselves.” And when harvest came you would not have known that there had been a grasshopper there; the yield was as good as I expected at the planting and sowing.13

Brigham Young applied this principle to the Willie handcart company’s experience:

If brother Willie’s company had not been assisted by the people in these valleys, and he and his company had lived to the best light they had in their possession, had done everything they could have done to cross the Plains, and done justice as they did, asking no questions and having no doubting; or in other words, if, after their President or Presidents told them to go on the Plains, they had gone in full faith, had pursued their journey according to their ability, and done all they could, and we could not have rendered them any assistance, it would have been just as easy for the Lord to send herds of fat buffaloes to lay down within twenty yards of their camp, as it was to send flocks of quails or to rain down manna from heaven to Israel of old.

My faith is, when we have done all we can, then the Lord is under obligation, and will not disappoint the faithful; He will perform the rest. If no other assistance could have been had by the companies this season, I think they would have had hundreds and hundreds of fat buffaloes crowding around their camp, so that they could not help but kill them. But, under the circumstances, it was our duty to assist them, and we were none too early in the operation.

It was not a rash statement for me to make at our last Conference, when I told you that I would dismiss the Conference, if the people would not turn out, and that I, with my brethren, would go to the assistance of the companies. We knew that our brethren and sisters were on the Plains and in need of assistance, and we had the power and ability to help them, therefore it became our duty to do so.

The Lord was not brought under obligation in the matter, so He had put the means in our possession to render them the assistance they needed. But if there had been no other way, the Lord would have helped them, if He had had to send His angels to drive up buffaloes day after day, and week after week. I have full confidence that the Lord would have done His part; my only lack of confidence is, that those who profess to be Saints will not do right and perform their duty.14

On another occasion, he further described this interrelationship of works and faith:
If we are sick, and ask the Lord to heal us, and to do all for us that is necessary to be done, according to my understanding of the Gospel of salvation, I might as well ask the Lord to cause my wheat and corn to grow, without my plowing the ground and casting in the seed. It appears consistent to me to apply every remedy that comes within the range of my knowledge, and to ask my Father in heaven, in the name of Jesus Christ, to sanctify that application to the healing of my body; to another this may appear inconsistent.

But supposing we were traveling in the mountains, and all we had or could get, in the shape of nourishment, was a little venison, and one or two were taken sick, without anything in the world in the shape of healing medicine within our reach, what should we do? According to my faith, ask the Lord Almighty to send an angel to heal the sick. This is our privilege, when so situated that we cannot get anything to help ourselves. Then the Lord and his servants can do all. But it is my duty to do, when I have it in my power.

Suppose that we had done our best and had not raised one bushel of grain this year, I have confidence enough in my God to believe that we could stay here, and not starve to death. If all our cattle had died through the severity of the past winter, if the insects had cut off all our crops, if we still proved faithful to our God and to our religion, I have confidence to believe that the Lord would send manna and flocks of quails to us. But He will not do this, if we murmur and are neglectful and disunited.

Not having breadstuff nor manna, if we are cut off from those resources, from our provisions, the Lord can fill these mountains and valleys with antelope, mountain sheep, elk, deer, and other animals; He can cause the buffalo to take a stampede on the east side of the Rocky mountains, and fill these mountains and valleys with beef; I have just that confidence in my God. I have confidence enough to believe that if we had not raised our own provisions this year, and had proved true and faithful to our God and to our religion, that the Lord would have given us a little bread, even though he should have to put it in the minds of the people in the States to go to California and Oregon, and to load their wagons with sugar, flour, and everything needed, more than they could consume, and cause them to leave their superabundance here, as some did a great quantity of clothing, dried fruit, tools, and various other useful articles, in 1849, the first season that large emigrating companies passed through this valley to California. I could then buy a vest for twenty-five cents, that would now sell here for two or three dollars; and coats could be bought for a dollar each, such as are now selling for fifteen dollars.

This is my confidence in my God. I am no more concerned about this people’s suffering unto death, than I am concerned about the sun’s falling out of its orbit and ceasing to shine on this
earth again. I know that we should have that confidence in God; this has been my experience, I have been led into this confidence by the miraculous providences of God. My implicit confidence in God causes me to husband every iota of property He gives me; I will take the best care of my farm, I will prepare my ground as well as I can, and put in the best seed I have got, and trust in God for the result, for it is the Lord that gives the increase.15

In summary, both Brigham Young’s words and actions bore testimony that if he applied all the resources at his command and asked God in the name of Christ to bless or sanctify the application of those resources, he could then rely implicitly on God for anything yet lacking. This was the key to the success of the great exodus to the West, to the establishment of the Church and settlements throughout that vast area, and to all else the Saints were to achieve in their divinely appointed mission.

All of this, however, was based on the premise that the goal or course being undertaken was in harmony with the will of God. Brigham Young did not believe that God was obligated to help anyone in the achievement of a purpose in violation or unsupportive of what God ordained. Ronald K. Esplin, in his article, “Fire in His Bones,” notes this pattern in Brigham Young’s own experience: First, Brigham determined and became settled on what was the will of God; thereafter, he could go forward applying all his talents and resources with the faith that God would grant success. As Ronald Esplin stated:

Following Joseph Smith’s death, Brigham Young was absolutely clear about priorities: first, the Saints must finish the Nauvoo Temple and receive the endowment there. Then they must seek a new home, the prophesied place of refuge in the West. For President Young, these goals required resolute attention. Indeed, so contagious was his enthusiasm that the pace of construction on the Nauvoo Temple increased dramatically under leadership of the Twelve.

Ironically, such rapid progress inflamed enemies who, fearing that it might be impossible to drive the Mormons from Nauvoo after they finished their beloved temple, vowed to drive them out first. Faced with the probability of violence, in January 1845 Brigham Young momentarily hesitated; should they finish the temple even if it meant bloodshed? His diary records the answer: “I inquired of the Lord whether we should stay here and finish the temple. The answer was we should.”

Confirmed in his course, President Young pressed forward with iron resolve. In May, the capstone was laid and the Twelve announced that endowments would begin in December, a
timetable they kept. Brigham talked tough throughout this period, partly to intimidate enemies and prevent bloodshed. “We would rather suffer wrong than do wrong” was his motto, and his faith that the Lord had dictated the direction and would oversee the outcome allowed him to act boldly.16

The same approach was applied to the exodus, as explained by Esplin:

A major concern for Brigham was finding the right place. After frequent fasting and daily prayer in his room in the temple, he saw in vision the right spot and felt he could recognize it. His mind at ease, he was now ready. One month later, Brigham Young and the first company of Saints crossed the Mississippi River, though it was still winter. Once on his way, President Young seemed drawn westward as if by an unseen hand. “Do not think . . . I hate to leave my house and home,” he wrote his brother Joseph from the Iowa prairies. “No, far from that. . . . It looks pleasant ahead,” he wrote, “but dark to look back” toward Nauvoo.

President Young faced the challenge with such unwavering confidence because he knew the plan was not his own. As he told the Saints nearly ten years later, “I did not devise the great scheme of the Lord’s opening the way to send this people to these mountains.” Who did? “It was the power of God that wrought out salvation for this people,” he insisted.17

As Brigham Young succinctly stated it on one occasion, “My religion is to know the will of God and do it.”18

Brigham Young further taught that great faith does not come from a merely passive acceptance of the will of God but requires wholehearted adoption of the will of God as one’s own. God’s interest must be made our interest. He said:

All ought to seek to know the mind and will of the Lord, and when they know it, they will be taught that the interest of this people is the interest of the Lord, and that all we do is for His glory. This is not all, it is likewise for our own benefit, and when we learn the principles of the Gospel perfectly, we shall learn that our interest is one, that we have no correct individual interest separate from this kingdom; if we have true interest at all, it is in the kingdom of God. If we truly possess and enjoy anything, it is in this kingdom; if we build it up, we shall be built up; if we neglect so to do, we shall fail to sustain ourselves.

If we draw off in our feelings and have a divided interest from the kingdom of God, we shall fail in obtaining the object of our Priesthood. Nothing will stand on this earth, in the final issue, but the kingdom of God, and that which is in it; everything else will pass away—will be destroyed. Then if we in all our works seek to
identify our feelings, our interests, our whole efforts in one to sustain and build up the kingdom of God on the earth, we are sure to build ourselves up.\textsuperscript{19}

He added: “Your interest must be concentrated in the head on the earth, and all of our interest must centre in the Godhead in eternity, and there is no durable interest in any other channel.”\textsuperscript{20}

Brigham Young recognized that it is not always easy to get oneself aligned with the will of God so as to produce this more perfect faith. But he spoke encouragingly in this regard:

After all that has been said and done, after He has led this people so long, do you not perceive that there is a lack of confidence in our God? Can you perceive it in yourselves? You may ask, “Brother Brigham, do you perceive it in yourself?” I do, I can see that I yet lack confidence, to some extent, in Him whom I trust. Why? Because I have not the power, in consequence of that which the fall has brought upon me. I have just told you that I have no lack of confidence in the Lord’s sustaining this people; I never had one shadow of doubt on that point.

But through the power of fallen nature, something rises up within me, at times, that measurably draws a dividing line between my interest and the interest of my Father in heaven—something that makes my interest and the interest of my Father in heaven not precisely one.

I know that we should feel and understand, as far as possible, as far as fallen nature will let us, as far as we can get faith and knowledge to understand ourselves, that the interest of that God whom we serve is our interest, and that we have no other, neither in time nor in eternity.\textsuperscript{21}

Occasionally, Brigham Young spoke of a key to faith that few seem to appreciate fully—true faith is faith in Jesus Christ and comes from Him, a gift of the Spirit. In the end, Brigham Young’s faith was not based simply on experience or the evidence of God’s hand in blessing the faithful but on the revelation of Jesus Christ. President Young explained:

What the Lord has done for this people would convince any man in the world, upon rational principles, that it is not the wisdom of man, nor his power or might, nor the power or might of this people unitedly, that has accomplished what has been done, but that it has been brought to pass by an invisible power. Still a person, unless he has the light of the Spirit within him, will attribute the work of the Lord to the wisdom of man, or necromancy, or the power of the devil. . . .
We must have the testimony of the Lord Jesus to enable us to discern between truth and error, light and darkness, him who is of God, and him who is not of God, and to know how to place everything where it belongs. That is the only way to be a scientific Christian; there is no other method or process which will actually school a person so that he can become a Saint of God, and prepare him for a celestial glory; he must have within him the testimony of the spirit of the Gospel...

I make these remarks that you may understand that my faith is not placed upon the Lord's working upon the islands of the sea, upon His bringing the people here, upon His causing a drouth in the eastern lands, and wars, bloodshed, and destruction among the people, nor upon the favors He bestows upon this people, or upon whether we are blessed or not blessed, but my faith is placed upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and my knowledge I have received from him.

Brigham Young's life is an admirable pattern of faith that each of us can and should emulate. As he counseled, our study should be to know the will of God and to align our desires and interests with it. Then we must do all within our power to achieve those divine ends in matters great and small, in day-to-day living, and in the grander design of our mission upon the earth. After our having done this, our faith will be as Brigham's—implicit and complete. There will be no fear of advancing into the unknown. We will go forward with the utmost of assurance. As Joseph Smith expressed it: "Therefore, dearly beloved brethren, let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed" (D&C 123:17).

All of this, of course, must be founded on that spirit that leads to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the truest sense, there is no faith without Him and no other source of faith than He. One who pursues the testimony and knowledge of Jesus, as did Brigham Young, and one who acts according to the example of Brigham Young will have the faith of Brigham Young and the experience of Brigham Young, which is that having diligently done what you can in each circumstance and challenge of life, you can rely on God to provide, and your success is assured.
Notes

1. This article is adapted from a presentation given by Elder D. Todd Christofferson, "The Faith of a Prophet," 15 June 2001, the first in a series of lectures concerning "Brigham Young: Prophet, Colonizer, Patriarch—The 200th Anniversary of His Birth," Brigham Young University, sponsored by the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, Religious Education, and Division of Continuing Education.


5. Ibid., 71.


10. Deseret News (Weekly), 10 September 1856, 5; Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 9.


13. Ibid., 3:159.


15. Ibid., 4:24-26.


18. Ibid., 14:118.


22. Ibid., 3:155; emphasis added.
Lehi and Sariah left Jerusalem early in King Zedekiah’s reign.

“Out in the Wilderness” by C. C. A. Christensen
Jeremiah’s Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi’s Departure

S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely

When introducing his account on the small plates, Nephi pens the following chronological note: “For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah.” This note raises several questions. Let us explain. Nephi goes on to say that “in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4). Next, Nephi records the call and prophetic ministry of his father, Lehi, apparently as one of the “many prophets” who came to Jerusalem prophesying its destruction (1:4). Nephi then writes that his father prophesied to the people but was rejected and that the Jews in Jerusalem “sought his life” (1:5–20). Therefore, the Lord commanded Lehi to take his family into the wilderness, which Lehi did (2:1–4).

Since Nephi never explicitly specified the period of time between the call of Lehi in the first year of Zedekiah’s reign and the moment when Lehi and his family left Jerusalem, most readers of the Book of Mormon have assumed that Lehi led his family into the wilderness in the opening year of the reign of Zedekiah. This view finds evident confirmation from no less an author than Mormon, who declares in the heading to the book of 3 Nephi that Lehi “came out of Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah” (3 Nephi, heading). But this picture is not as clear as it looks on the surface. Another piece in this chronology of events adds complexity to the precise dating of this period.
While in the wilderness, Lehi dreamed a dream that led him to prophesy that “six hundred years from the time that [he] . . . left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world” (1 Nephi 10:4). On this basis, one seems justified in assuming that Lehi left Jerusalem six hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Although the internal chronology of the Book of Mormon is carefully kept, which dates events from Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem, these two notes concerning the first year of the reign of Zedekiah and the prophecy of the coming of the Messiah in six hundred years are the only concrete chronological evidences in the Book of Mormon that help to correlate Book of Mormon chronology with established biblical chronology.

Based on Babylonian records that can be correlated with astronomical events, biblical scholars date the first year of the reign of Zedekiah to 597 B.C. Therefore, six hundred years after 597 equates to A.D. 3 or 4. No scholarly consensus exists on the birthdate of Christ; scholars usually argue for several dates ranging from 8 B.C. to 1 B.C. Because Herod most likely died in 4 B.C. and because he is a major figure in the narratives of the birth of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, most scholars argue for a date of 5–4 B.C. for the birth of the Savior. This dating allows for only 593 or 592 years between the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah and the birth of the Messiah. This discrepancy between the first year of the reign of Zedekiah in 597 B.C. and the prophesied six hundred years to the birth of the Messiah remains an issue that has not been solved.

In 1993 and 1998, Randall P. Spackman published two important studies on this question in which he hypothesized that the best way to explain the six-hundred-year prophecy is to assume the Nephites adopted a lunar calendar (of about 354 days) that did not adjust itself through intercalation—that is, through adding a thirteenth month every three years or so—to catch up to the solar year (of about 365 days). Thus, the seventy-two-hundred lunar months of the six-hundred lunar years would equal 592 solar years, and this would fit with a birthdate of Jesus in 5 B.C. If scholars are to make this calculation fit the evidence in the Book of Mormon, however, they must postulate that Lehi and his family left Jerusalem between 588 and 587 B.C.—ten years later than the first year of the reign of Zedekiah and during the period of the Babylonian siege and capture of Jerusalem.

Spackman identifies two significant Book of Mormon passages that give evidence for his argument. The first passage is 1 Nephi 7:14 in which Nephi noted an imprisonment of Jeremiah, after Lehi and his
family had left Jerusalem, when Nephi and his brothers were escorting the family of Ishmael from Jerusalem to the first camp of Lehi and Sariah near the Red Sea. According to Spackman’s reading of the biblical evidence, Jeremiah went to prison once and once only, and this imprisonment occurred in the tenth year of the reign of Zedekiah. (See Jeremiah 32:1-2; 37:4, 12-21.) Thus, the timing of Jeremiah’s imprisonment should illumine the date of departure for the family of Lehi and Sariah, who had fled to their camp from Jerusalem.

The second passage is found in 2 Nephi 25:10, where Nephi prophesies that the destruction of Jerusalem should occur “immediately after my father left Jerusalem.” Spackman appeals to both of these passages as evidence (1) that Lehi prophesied for almost a decade in Jerusalem before he finally went into the wilderness, (2) that the imprisonment of Jeremiah noted in the Book of Mormon is the same one mentioned in the Bible in the tenth year of the reign of Zedekiah, and (3) that the word “immediately” refers to the imminence of the Babylonian destruction in 587.

In contrast to those who accept a date for the departure of Lehi and Sariah from Jerusalem within the first year or so of Zedekiah’s reign, Spackman opts for a later date. He concludes that Lehi’s prophetic ministry lasted about ten years, beginning early in Zedekiah’s reign (1 Nephi 1:4) until nearly its end. He further suggests that, even though the Babylonian army had begun its siege of Jerusalem before Lehi and Sariah left, an opening of at least five months allowed them not only to flee but even to send their sons back to the city twice. How so? The Babylonians had been forced to lift their initial siege when an Egyptian army moved up the Mediterranean coast to assist the beleaguered city (Jeremiah 37:5). The frame of Spackman’s views rests on the observation—apparently solid—that Jeremiah suffered imprisonment only once, occurring very late in Zedekiah’s reign. Spackman appeals both to Jeremiah’s record and to the evident five-month hiatus in the siege noted by Ezekiel (Ezekiel 29:1-16; 30:20-26; 31:1-18)—as well as to a notation of Nephi that reads: “Wherefore, it hath been told [the people of Judah] concerning the destruction which should come upon them, immediately after my father left Jerusalem; nevertheless, they hardened their hearts; and according to my prophecy they have been destroyed” (2 Nephi 25:10; emphasis added).

In Spackman’s reading, two key elements are found in this passage. The first is the phrase immediately after my father left Jerusalem, which evidently points to an imminent destruction of the city. Presumably,
this would not have been the case if Lehi and Sariah had left early in Zedekiah's reign and if the destruction were an event several years in the future. The second consists of the phrase according to my prophecy (2 Nephi 25:10), which Spackman attaches to 1 Nephi 7:13–14 where Nephi declared the following: "[Nephi’s brothers and others] shall know at some future period that the word of the Lord shall be fulfilled concerning the destruction of Jerusalem. . . . For behold, the Spirit of the Lord ceaseth soon to strive with them [the inhabitants of the city]; for behold, they have rejected the prophets, and Jeremiah have they cast into prison."

For those who may hold the view of a late departure for Lehi and Sariah, the emphasis in this passage rests on the word soon. As we hope to show, however, these key passages do not introduce all the evidence that bears on the subject. Indeed, other passages in the Book of Mormon apparently point to an earlier departure of Lehi and Sariah. Moreover, other observations based on the text of Jeremiah tend in a similar direction.

Spackman exhibits acquaintance with a passage in 3 Nephi where Mormon writes that Lehi "came out of Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah" (3 Nephi, heading). But Spackman concludes that this must be an error on Mormon’s part, as Mormon did not have access to all the records of the Jews at the time and assumed, like many modern readers, that Lehi left Jerusalem in the same year that he received his prophetic calling—in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah. Spackman has produced a well-wrought work of scholarship arguing for his ingenious solution to the six-hundred-year problem. We believe, however, that a considerable amount of evidence exists, regarding these passages and other passages as well, that has not been considered and that argues for Lehi and his family leaving Jerusalem in the first year rather than during a later year of Zedekiah’s reign.

The Imprisonment of Jeremiah: 1 Nephi 7:14

Evidence exists that the imprisonment of Jeremiah noted in the Book of Mormon may not be the one mentioned in the Bible in the tenth year of Zedekiah’s reign but rather may be an earlier imprisonment. Let us make some important observations.

First, prophecies and narrative sections in the Book of Jeremiah are not organized chronologically. Many prophecies and some of the narrative are difficult to date. It is relevant to our discussion that there are 2 periods of roughly 7 years each, 604-597, and 594-588 [B.C.], during which we have no definite knowledge of Jeremiah’s
activities. Therefore, if there were an imprisonment either at the end of the reign of Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.) or at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah, a period that would agree with an earlier departure date for Lehi and Sariah, we would not expect to find record of it in the book of Jeremiah. Even so, we note the following.

We recall that Jeremiah had nothing good to say about King Jehoiakim. Jeremiah condemned the king for building luxurious quarters for himself, for fostering violence and dishonesty, and for not caring for the poor (Jeremiah 22:13–17). Jeremiah also prophesied a shameful death for Jehoiakim that would not be mourned in Judah (22:18–19). In this connection, there are two accounts of Jehoiakim “restraining” Jeremiah. Moreover, as an example of Jehoiakim’s vicious response to opponents, he executed the prophet Urijah, who had prophesied against Jerusalem as Jeremiah did (26:20–23).

In the case of King Zedekiah, Jeremiah was critical of him as well. In a prophecy dated to “the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah the son of Josiah” (27:1), Jeremiah warned the king against mounting a revolt against Babylon. This warning would be an early spark in the conflict that grew up between Zedekiah and Jeremiah and would have offered the king an excuse to punish the already intractable Jeremiah at the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign. Although it appears, in fact, that Zedekiah did not pursue the revolt against Babylon, this incident reveals conflict between Zedekiah and Jeremiah that could easily have resulted in imprisonment of the prophet.

Another point has to do with several passages in Jeremiah that may be interpreted as references to imprisonment either before or during the early stages of the reign of Zedekiah. One early instance occurred in 605 B.C. when Jeremiah declared, “I am shut up” (36:5), referring to the fact that he was restricted from going into the temple area. Although the Hebrew word he used, 'asûr, is ambiguous, it is usually rendered “imprisoned” or “in custody.” Significant for our discussion, this same word appears in Jeremiah 33:1, referring to the prophet’s imprisonment in Zedekiah’s tenth year “while he was yet shut up in the court of the prison.” We should note, not incidentally, that Jeremiah suffered two kinds of imprisonment during the tenth year of Zedekiah’s reign—in a dungeon and “in the court of the prison” (32:2; 33:1; 37:16, 21). When Jeremiah was “shut up in the court of the prison, which was in the king of Judah’s house” (32:2), he may have been under a kind of protective custody, as he retained some privileges. But in 37:16, the situation was different. Jeremiah was put into a “dungeon” from which the king delivered him to the “court of the
prison” (37:21). A further factor is the statement itself, “I am shut up” (36:5). Even though this expression could mean that Jeremiah was merely “debarred” from the temple, it may instead have involved some kind of formal or informal imprisonment. In this light, the imprisonment of the prophet in Zedekiah’s tenth year may not have been the first and only such occasion.

A later instance occurred in 601 B.C. Jeremiah was punished by being put in “the stocks” (20:1–6). The Hebrew term here is also rather unclear. Some translators take it to mean “imprisoned.” The Hebrew word is mahpeket, and it occurs in the Bible only in Jeremiah 20:2, 3 and 29:26 and 2 Chronicles 16:10. In the Chronicles passage, the phrase “house of stocks” suggests that stocks were associated with a prison. The Greek translation renders this term katarraktēs, which means “trapdoor,” possibly leading to an underground chamber for confinement (see 2 Kings 7:2). The Aramaic Targum reads kephta’, which can mean either “vault,” therefore “prison,” or “ceiling,” or some kind of wooden “collar” for confinement.

To conclude, although we cannot solve the issue at hand simply on the basis of other probable confinements of Jeremiah, it is clear that the prophet did not get along with two kings. On two occasions, when the Babylonians were politically on the rise and threatening Jerusalem, Jehoiakim had Jeremiah restrained in some way. We think it likely that Jeremiah, who was accused of being pro-Babylonian, was imprisoned during the last year of the reign of Jehoiakim, who by then had revolted against the Babylonians. Jeremiah’s imprisonment would have been for the same reasons that he was imprisoned later by Zedekiah when that king revolted against the Babylonians (Jeremiah 37–38). In this light, it is possible that Nephi was referring to an imprisonment that began during the last year of the reign of Jehoiakim and continued into the early months of Zedekiah’s reign. As we have seen, because evidence exists for conflict between Zedekiah and Jeremiah at the commencement of Zedekiah’s reign, that conflict may well have also resulted in imprisonment, as happened late in Zedekiah’s kingship. However, because we do not possess a record of Jeremiah’s activities during this critical period, we cannot demonstrate decisively an imprisonment in the first year of Zedekiah. Even so, elements are in place that would not contradict and, indeed, that would support the possibility that Jeremiah had been imprisoned late in Jehoiakim’s kingship or early in Zedekiah’s. These elements are the forceful repression of public dissent by the two kings, open conflict between the prophet and the kings, and occasions when Jeremiah suffered official restraint. The Book
of Mormon, therefore, may be referring to an early imprisonment. Let us next examine the second relevant passage from that work.

**“The Spirit of the Lord Ceaseth Soon”: 1 Nephi 7:14**

The declaration of Nephi, “The Spirit of the Lord ceaseth soon,” matches a key statement uttered by the Lord to Jeremiah. And the date of the Lord’s statement to Jeremiah may add a piece to solving our puzzle. The essential details are as follows.

After King Jehoiakim had destroyed the first version of Jeremiah’s prophecies by fire (Jeremiah 36), the Lord responded by issuing a blueprint for the destruction of the kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. Heretofore, the Lord had been warning the royal house and the citizens of a distant devastation if they did not repent. After the burning of the scroll, matters hardened. We note not only the tenor of the Lord’s words but also their devastating content: “Thus saith the Lord of Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David. . . . And I will punish him and his seed and his servants . . . and I will bring upon them, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and upon the men of Judah, all the evil that I have pronounced against them” (Jeremiah 36:30–31).

As William Holladay has pointed out, this divine decree represented “a crucial change” in the Lord’s relationship with His people. Although the dating of this utterance depends on which manuscript of Jeremiah one appeals to, it came to Jeremiah by at least November/December 601 B.C., clearly before Zedekiah’s accession to the throne and before Lehi’s call.

As we return to Nephi’s statement about the Lord’s Spirit ceasing “soon to strive with” the inhabitants of Jerusalem, it seems reasonable to place it closer in time to Jeremiah’s prophecy in Jeremiah 36:30–31 than farther away. If we say it another way, the messages from the Lord to Jeremiah and to Lehi or Nephi are similar both in content and in timing. It does not seem reasonable that the Lord would tell Jeremiah something in 601 B.C. and then wait more than ten years to inform Lehi and Nephi.

**Nephi’s Prophecy: 2 Nephi 25:10–11**

We first turn to the issue of Nephi’s “prophecy” in 2 Nephi 25:10, which reads in part: “Wherefore, it hath been told [the people of Judah] concerning the destruction which should come upon them, immediately after my father left Jerusalem; nevertheless, they hardened their hearts; and according to my prophecy they have been destroyed.”
Spackman tied reference to this prophecy to Nephi’s much earlier warning that Jerusalem and its inhabitants would suffer destruction (1 Nephi 7:13–14). This proposal exhibits an attractive side, chiefly because both passages warn of Jerusalem’s approaching horrible fate. But we consider the connection only tentative at best because Nephi clearly marks out his prophecy and because it stands entirely within the book of 2 Nephi, not in 1 Nephi 7.

We do not know when Nephi received inspiration for this prophecy. He may well have copied it from his fuller record on the large plates. But whether it came from the large plates or was a fresh prophetic statement that he added to the small plates, its date of composition remains unknown. Nephi opens it in 2 Nephi 25:4 by declaring that “I give unto you [those in his colony] a prophecy, according to the spirit which is in me.” He immediately emphasized his point by restating his intent: “I shall prophesy according to the plainness which hath been with me from the time that I came out from Jerusalem with my father.” Significantly, this prophecy consists of the rest of 2 Nephi 25 and all of 2 Nephi 26–30. How do we know this? Because Nephi opened 2 Nephi 31 with these words: “And now I, Nephi, make an end of my prophesying unto you, my beloved brethren” (31:1). Hence, his prophecy occupies almost the whole of six chapters, 2 Nephi 25–30. And the chief topics focus on the futures of “our children” (25:26, 27), the Gentiles, and the House of Israel. Only one tiny part has to do with the pending destruction of Jerusalem (25:10–11). And Nephi’s prophetic assurance of this devastating event seems to form the opening of his discussion of the future and thus serves mainly as a jumping-off point. Of course, we hasten to add that one should not minimize the importance of Nephi’s words about the fate of Jerusalem simply because of the broader themes of Nephi’s extended remarks. Even so, one must see them for what they are—that is, the beginning point for discussing everything in the following six chapters of 2 Nephi.

We now turn back briefly to Nephi’s statement of emphasis. As we have seen, he said, “I shall prophesy according to the plainness which hath been with me from the time that I came out from Jerusalem with my father” (2 Nephi 25:4). On the face of it, Nephi’s reference to “my father” is odd. The expression seems to indicate that Lehi was not among the listeners. If so, he may already have been dead, thus hinting that the date of composition of this “prophecy” of Nephi fell after Lehi’s family arrived in the New World. If so, the language of 25:10—“immediately after my father left Jerusalem”—loses some of its impor-
tance for dating Lehi’s departure from the city. But the case is not completely firm one way or the other.

Because the date of the original composition of this long prophecy is unknown, we cannot appeal to it to solve the issue of when Lehi’s party left Jerusalem. It is tempting, of course, to seize on Nephi’s words and see them saying that Lehi and Sariah had fled virtually on the eve of the destruction of the city. But because many details surrounding the composition of 2 Nephi 25–30 remain unknown (for example, its date of composition and the occasion that brought it forth), we must resist making this text agree with any predispositions. This is particularly true because of the way that Nephi opens his prophecy, referring to his father as if Lehi had already passed away. Hence, we cannot rest much weight on Nephi’s statements here when seeking to solve our dating dilemma.

Laban as Record Keeper

Laban, a distant relative of Lehi, was the custodian of the plates of brass until Nephi took them, as the Lord had directed. After Nephi and his brothers arrived back in camp with the brass plates in hand, Lehi and Nephi went carefully through the record and apparently made an inventory on the spot, as Nephi’s summary hints (1 Nephi 5:10–16). The summary of the contents of the plates is important because not only did Nephi mention that it included “many prophecies . . . of Jeremiah” but also twice he wrote that the record was complete only “down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” (5:12–13). The key phrase—repeated—is to the commencement of, meaning “to the beginning of.” The two parts of the record that had been completed “down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” were “a record of the Jews” and “the prophecies of the holy prophets.” These two sections of the record were evidently open ended—that is, they were being added to as time went on.11

At this point, one naturally asks whether Laban had been a faithful keeper of the record. If he was, then the double notation of Nephi about the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign surely carries implications for the date of his father’s departure from Jerusalem. On this view, the record would have been complete up to the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign, and nothing further had been recorded because nothing further had yet occurred. This explanation is the simpler of two alternatives. Let us explain.

The second possibility is to see Laban as a slothful keeper of the record. That is, he and/ or his scribe(s) had been derelict in his/ their
duties to keep a more or less up-to-date account of events and prophecies that affected citizens of Jerusalem. If this were the case, we could urge that Lehi and Nephi found themselves examining a record that was rather out of date in the two sections where additions might be expected. And if this is true, there are immediate consequences for our discussion here. For the door would be flung open to understanding that Lehi and Sariah had left well after the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign, perhaps as much as ten years later, as Spackman suggests. But this view is the more complex of the alternatives to reconstruct and thus is harder to accept if one uses the rule of seeing a simpler explanation as more likely. Moreover, there is another key consideration. When Nephi and his father inventoried the plates of brass, Nephi recorded no surprise at a presumed lapse on the part of Laban as record keeper. And one must assume such a lapse to sustain a later date for the departure of Lehi and Sariah. However, there is every appearance that Lehi and Nephi were satisfied with the state of the record as they found it on the plates.

Thus far, the weight of the evidence rests on the side of an early departure rather than a later one simply because the two ongoing parts of the record on the plates of brass were complete only “down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” and no further.

There is an ancillary issue that may or may not bear in the larger question before us. It takes the following form. When Nephi noted that the plates of brass included “many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah” (1 Nephi 5:13; emphasis added), his emphasis seemed to rest on the oral basis of the recorded prophecies rather than on a written source for them. As a result, it is our view that we cannot know whether the source of these prophecies was oral or written. For example, a scribe in the employ of Laban, or Laban himself, could have written down Jeremiah’s prophecies based on what one or both of them had heard directly (or indirectly) from Jeremiah. Alternatively, Laban or his scribe could have copied from the second, already extant, written record of those prophecies dictated by Jeremiah to his friend and scribe Baruch—the first record had been burned by king Jehoiachim (Jeremiah 36). In either case, however, we would have to see Laban as a faithful keeper of the record. For, in this role, he would have either sought out those who had heard Jeremiah preach to write down the prophet’s words, or he would have made the effort to find Baruch or Jeremiah himself to obtain a written copy of Jeremiah’s prophecies. Either case points to an active, attentive record keeper.
Jeremiah’s Record

Dating Jeremiah’s record seems inconclusive for the purposes of trying to date the departure of Lehi and Sariah from Jerusalem. The initial command from the Lord for Jeremiah to write his prophecies came to the prophet “in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah” (Jeremiah 36:1). The year was 605 B.C. Jeremiah was to obtain “a roll of a book, and write therein all the words that I [the Lord] have spoken unto thee against Israel, and against Judah, and against all the nations . . . unto this day” (36:2). The tone of those words is decidedly negative. In one of the most famous passages in prophetic literature, Jeremiah then “called Baruch the son of Neriah: and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord” (36:4). About a year later, during a national fast in the winter, Baruch read aloud “the words of Jeremiah” in the temple, “at the entry of the new gate of the Lord’s house” (36:10). The year was 604 B.C. Later, after “all the princes” heard what Baruch had read in the temple, for he read Jeremiah’s words again for them, the princes advised Baruch to hide himself and the prophet, while they reported the existence of the book to king Jehoiakim. The king, perhaps out of curiosity, asked a man named Jehudi to read the words written on the roll. As Jehudi “read three or four leaves” of the roll, the king “cut it with a penknife, and cast it into the fire,” thus destroying the initial copy of Jeremiah’s prophecies (36:12, 15, 19, 23).

But the Lord would not be put off by a mere king. He then commanded Jeremiah to dictate “all the former words that were in the first roll” (Jeremiah 36:28). So Jeremiah “gave” another roll “to Baruch the scribe” and then dictated “all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned . . . and . . . added besides unto them many like words” (36:32). It was in this way that Jeremiah’s prophetic book, as we know it, was born.

It is possible, perhaps even probable, that Laban or his scribe had copied this version of Jeremiah’s prophecies onto the plates of brass, which was incomplete because more prophecies were to come. But we must also remain open to the possibility that the version on the brass plates was a different copy. For when Nephi mentioned the work on the brass plates that bore Jeremiah’s name, he spoke of “many prophecies . . . of Jeremiah” (1 Nephi 5:13), almost as if the book were incomplete or not properly arranged. In any event, there are more questions than answers.
Mormon’s Note in the Heading of 3 Nephi

One of the key ingredients in Spackman’s reconstruction consists of an adjustment, this one having to do with Mormon at the beginning of 3 Nephi. Such adjustments, we must admit, are often part of attempted reconstructions of historical events. In a way, these adjustments also form an admission that the evidence one can assemble is somehow incomplete or contradictory and does not all lead to a definitive conclusion.

The statement in question is the following: “Lehi . . . came out of Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, the king of Judah” (3 Nephi, heading). At issue is Mormon’s reliability on this point because he was not an eyewitness to this event and depended on earlier sources, which he could have misread or not remembered correctly.

We happen to agree with Spackman that Nephi is a better witness than is Mormon, who lived a thousand years after the founding family fled Jerusalem. Nephi, after all, wrote of his personal experiences and was thus a witness of the first rank. Even so, one must not discount the fact that Mormon had access to the large plates of Nephi on which Nephi wrote “the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 19:2). Hence, presumably Mormon had read a fuller account of the family’s flight into the desert, including something akin to the actual date.

Circumstantial Considerations

We now turn to considerations based on how Nephi expressed certain features of his experience and how those features match what we know about both the situation of his family and that within the country. The first has to do with the five months when the Babylonian army lifted the siege of Jerusalem to face the Egyptian force approaching from the south. Spackman theorizes that it was during this five-month period, almost in the Babylonians’ dust, that Lehi’s family left the city, set up camp near the Gulf of Aqaba, and saw the sons go back to Jerusalem twice, initially for the record on the plates of brass and again for the family of Ishmael.

On the face of it, such an explanation presents more difficulties than an explanation theorizing that the family left early in Zedekiah’s reign when there was no Babylonian threat. Let us clarify.

The first difficulty is the period of five months. Although it is possible that all the business described in 1 Nephi 2–15 (the flight, the camp, etc.) took place within five months, it may have consumed more
time. Although we are inclined to agree that it was only a short period of several months that passed between the family’s departure from Jerusalem and their movement south from the first camp,\textsuperscript{13} not all students of the Book of Mormon agree.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, to postulate that the family must have experienced all they did within a specified time—five months—that was filled with military conflict near their home asks readers to make too many assumptions. The following considerations are relevant.

After Lehi had sent his sons back to the city from the camp the first time to obtain the plates, their mother, Sariah, grew worried as she waited for her sons’ return that they “had perished in the wilderness.” Moreover, in a pointed complaint against her husband, she accusingly said that he had “led us forth from the land of our inheritance” (1 Nephi 5:2). In contrast, when the sons went back to Jerusalem a second time to convince Ishmael and his family to join them, Nephi recorded no such worries or complaints from his mother. What might all this mean? From what Nephi has recorded, his mother’s anxieties were not connected to the close proximity of a foreign army, such as the Babylonians. If, in fact, the Babylonians had just broken off their siege of the city before she and her family fled to the neighborhood of the Red Sea and if the subsequent clash between the Babylonians and Egyptians was not yet settled (on this view, it would have been ongoing while the family of Lehi and Sariah were in their camp), we would expect Nephi to record a different set of anxieties for his mother. Furthermore, since there was no guarantee that the Babylonians would not return to Jerusalem to create havoc there, why would she agree to her sons’ returning to the family home only to face possible danger at the very heart of the conflict? In addition, if the Babylonians had already once surrounded the city and if the family estate was not within the walls,\textsuperscript{15} the Babylonian army would probably have already destroyed the family property as soldiers took control of the neighboring countryside. After all, both archaeology and the Lachish letters demonstrate that the Babylonians systematically destroyed all settlements within fifty miles of Jerusalem before beginning the initial siege.\textsuperscript{16} If so, what would any members of her family return to?

This question raises to view an important pair of responses from members of Lehi’s family about their property at or near Jerusalem. After the family, now in company with Ishmael’s family, had trudged off into Arabia and had reached “the place which was called Nahom,” certain members of the party threatened to return the fourteen hundred or so miles back to the city (1 Nephi 16:34, 36). Later, after they had all
arrived in their land of Bountiful, which was even farther away from home, some of the same persons bellowed that “we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy” (17:21). If, in fact, the family estate of Lehi and Sariah had been destroyed or had even narrowly escaped destruction, when the Babylonian army showed up at Jerusalem to begin the siege, why would people in the party think they could return? Why would they believe that their “possessions” and their “land of . . . inheritance” were somehow still intact? The simplest answer is they had no reason to believe that all was not well at home. They had evidently departed while affairs in and around Jerusalem were reasonably peaceful rather than on a war-time footing. And they had heard nothing different.

This observation leads us to the evident lack of news of Jerusalem’s fall. It is certain that party members met people as they traveled from their first camp deeper into Arabia. They could not have avoided such contacts for the entire trip. One of the most important proofs that they met others is the phrase “the place which was called Nahom” (1 Nephi 16:34). Unlike all the other place names noted by Nephi in his narrative, which his father conferred on those spots, Nahom already had a name when they arrived. And they learned it from someone else.

In this connection, camel caravans had been carrying incense out of southern Arabia into the Mediterranean world and into Mesopotamia long before the fall of Jerusalem. Those caravans carried goods north and brought news back to people in the south. If the Babylonians had captured and ravaged Jerusalem within, say, a few months after Lehi’s party had traveled farther into Arabia, we would expect such news to reach the travelers somehow. Even though the party probably avoided contact with others as much as possible, as some details in Nephi’s narrative hint (for example, 1 Nephi 17:12), they would certainly have learned of events connected to the wider world, including Babylonia’s military actions. In fact, news of Jerusalem’s fall would eventually have even traveled by boat around Arabia as far as Bountiful, which lay on the southeast coast. But Nephi offers no hint of such news before the party departed on its ship for the New World. Because the fall of the city had formed an important part in Lehi’s prophetic ministry (1:13, 18) and because it was also a part of Nephi’s prophesying (2 Nephi 25:9–10), it would be an omission of first magnitude if Nephi had failed to record the moment when party members heard the news of Jerusalem’s destruction.

Another issue centers on the ages of Sariah and her eight children. The matter attaches initially to two claims of Nephi about himself.
First, he assured readers that he wrote his record “according to my knowledge” (1 Nephi 1:3). Thus, we can reasonably conclude that Nephi was old enough to pay attention to events at the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign, the starting point of his record (1:4). Second, after Nephi’s family had set up camp near the Red Sea and he and his brothers had gone back to Jerusalem for the brass plates, he described himself as “exceedingly young, nevertheless . . . large in stature” (2:16; cf. 4:31). If Nephi had indeed been old enough to pay close attention to matters when Zedekiah came to power and if ten years had then passed before his family traveled to the Red Sea, his remark that he was “exceeding young” would make little sense. Let us explain.

In an important study on the family of Lehi and Sariah, John Sorenson has plausibly suggested that Nephi was no older than seventeen when his family went to the Red Sea, a point in accordance with the fact that none of his older brothers were yet married. Furthermore, Sariah’s child-bearing years also come into play here. Her situation takes the following form. If her fourth son, Nephi, were, say, in his early teens when Zedekiah became king of Judah and if the family had remained in Jerusalem for another ten years, Nephi would have been in his early twenties when the family departed to the Red Sea. Such a view would mean that Nephi’s oldest brother, Laman, was close to thirty years of age when the family went to the Red Sea. (We do not know whether Laman was Sariah’s oldest child because she also gave birth to at least two daughters [2 Nephi 5:6], and we do not know where they fit in the order of Sariah’s births.) If Sariah had borne Laman when she was, say, fifteen or sixteen years old, a plausible age, she would have been in her mid forties when she and Lehi departed Jerusalem, assuming they had remained there for ten years after Lehi’s prophetic ministry began. The problem at this point becomes obvious. She eventually gave birth to two more sons, Jacob and Joseph. But if she were already, say, forty-three or forty-four when she moved to the Red Sea, her biological clock would have almost expired. Hence, it is simpler, more plausible, to postulate an earlier departure when Sariah was a younger woman.

As a final note, we want to point to another pair of details in Nephi’s narrative that evidently support the earlier departure date. Both details tie to the fateful night when Nephi entered Jerusalem to seek the brass plates and later exited the city with both the plates and the man Zoram (1 Nephi 4). The two details concern the apparent ease with which Nephi at first entered and then left the city after dark. Let us explain. If we accept the later date for Lehi’s departure and
hypothesize that the first Babylonian siege had just been lifted a few weeks before so that the Babylonian army could meet the Egyptian army threatening from the south, we would expect that Jerusalem authorities would have still been worrying about a possible return of the Babylonian forces. Therefore, at night, the gates of the city would have been shut—or at least carefully watched. But Nephite offers no hint that he encountered difficulty at the gate where he entered. To be sure, he writes that he “crept into the city” (4:5). But Nephite’s caution seems to grow out of the two recent altercations with his kinsman Laban and that man’s henchmen rather than a need to avoid sentries at the gate (see 3:10–14, 22–27).

The second detail, that of Nephite’s exit from the city, offers a similar picture. In fact, when he writes of leaving Jerusalem with Zoram, it is as though the two of them strode out of the walls without sentries challenging them. They certainly were conversing in a way that guards would have heard them (see 1 Nephi 4:22–27). In addition, the two of them would have been quite visible in the strong light of the moon whereby Nephite had earlier examined the unusually fine features of Laban’s sword (see 4:9). In light of the evident laxness at the city gate, therefore, we are inclined to see Nephite’s nighttime entry and exit as occurring during a period of relative peace—that is, early in Zedekiah’s reign.

Lehi’s Vision

On balance, it appears that members of Lehi’s party possessed no firm knowledge of the fall of Jerusalem while they were on the trail in Arabia—or even after they had reached Bountiful. Such an observation weighs against a view that Lehi and Sariah left Jerusalem late in Zedekiah’s reign. Rather, it was evidently only through a vision, after they had reached the New World, that they learned of the fulfillment of prophecies about the city’s destruction. The receiver was Lehi.

On the occasion of his last blessings to his children and grandchildren, he announced, “I have seen a vision, in which I know that Jerusalem is destroyed; and had we remained in Jerusalem we should also have perished” (2 Nephi 1:4). Presumably, Lehi meant that they would have perished either when the Babylonian army was ravaging the countryside before beginning the siege or after the Babylonians had penetrated the gates of the city and slaughtered people who had fled within the walls for protection. Indeed, because it came as a vision, Lehi may have actually seen the fall of the city as the prophet Nahum did the fall of Nineveh. Further, from Lehi’s words, it seems clear that
neither he nor anyone else in the party had known for certain that the
city had fallen until this announcement from the Lord. This observation,
too, weighs against a notion that Lehi’s prophetic ministry had lasted
ten years, to the end of Zedekiah’s reign, virtually on the eve of
Jerusalem’s fall.

Conclusion

This review, as far as it has gone, inclines us to believe that Lehi
and Sariah left Jerusalem early in King Zedekiah’s reign rather than
near its end. The reason? There are fewer problems if one accepts the
earlier date. To be sure, each position faces challenges. But there seem
to be fewer such challenges if one postulates an earlier departure.

Notes

1. Jack Finegan, Handbook of Biblical Chronology, rev. ed. (Peabody,
2. Ibid., 291–302.
3. Randall P. Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology:
The Principal Prophecies, Calendars, and Dates,” FARMS Preliminary Studies
(Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1993) and
“The Jewish/ Nephite Lunar Calendar,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 7, no.1
Jewish/ Nephite Lunar Calendar,” 57–59.
5. For example, George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, Commentary on the
Book of Mormon, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1955), 57; Lynn M. and
Hope Hilton, In Search of Lehi’s Trail (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 48.
7. The King James Version following the Masoretic Text reads “reign of
Jehoiakim.” But the context and the manuscript evidence weigh in favor of “reign
of Zedekiah.” See William L. Holladay in Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book
8. Ibid., 4–5.
10. Consult the references to “their fathers”—that is, the generation that
came out from Jerusalem, which makes one think that this generation had died off
among the Lamanites (Jacob 3:7, 9; also cf. Enos 1:18; Jarom 12, 9; etc.).
11. Nephi hints that he—or perhaps his father Lehi—updated his own record
annually, a feature that John Sorenson has pointed out in private correspondence.
This explanation solves the rather awkward notations of dates that are joined in
1 Nephi 1:4: “in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah . . . in that same year.” If Nephi and/or Lehi by custom updated records each year, this might offer a clue to the frequency of Laban’s scribal activity.

12. The first written record of Jeremiah’s words is termed “the words which Baruch wrote at the mouth of Jeremiah,” perhaps underscoring the oral base of the dictated text (Jeremiah 36:27; emphasis added).


15. The family estate seems to have been located outside the walls of Jerusalem because Nephi wrote as if it were some distance away (1 Nephi 3:22–23).


17. Although no written records exist of ancient Arabs sailing around the Arabian Peninsula, no less an authority than George F. Hourani concludes that they were doing so centuries before Hellenistic culture reached Arabia in the third century b.c. (Arab Seafaring [Princeton: Princeton University, 1951], 11). Further, references to Solomon’s navy in the Red Sea point to ancient seafaring activity along Arabia’s coasts (1 Kings 9:26–28; 2 Chronicles 8:17–18).

18. The importance of these two passages and the ages of family members were pointed out by John Sorenson in private correspondence.


20. Later, Jacob, Lehi’s son, also received a vision of the destruction of Jerusalem in 2 Nephi 6:8.
The Sanctity of Food: A Latter-day Saint Perspective

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One hesitates to begin a paper by issuing disclaimers, but issue them I must. From my vantage point, most Latter-day Saints do not approach food and drink in the same sanctifying sense that many observant Jewish people do. The Jewish approach to diet includes an elaborate, highly detailed web of regulations that comprise a complete, ethical system. For reasons largely having to do with holiness rather than health or hygiene, many Jews follow this intricate and complex dietary system—one they consider to be divinely sanctioned and one that closely governs and limits what foods they eat.

Why must observant Jews practice such dietary discipline? Why would God be so concerned about the food people eat? The reasons, many Jews will admit, are not altogether clear. The Torah gives only one reason for God’s requiring such observance: the dietary laws will help Israel become holy. In short, Jews believe that obeying such laws promotes holy living. “Jews who keep these laws,” as noted by scholar Louis Jacobs, “introduce a spiritual element into their lives, even into the satisfaction of hunger, the most basic and animal-like of all human appetites. By means of the dietary laws one’s everyday life becomes nobler and purer.”

The position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on food and drink (and it may be presumptuous to assume a position exists) is different. Many Latter-day Saints regard food and drink as a means to an end. The Church’s emphasis has always been on the
importance, or even sacredness, of the body and the necessity of treating it properly. We hold, as do many Jews, that the body is sacred. As Jacobs observed, most Jews believe that the “human body is given to a person in trust by God.” We are not uncomfortable with that observation. Our founding prophet, Joseph Smith, said, “We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the celestial kingdom. The great principle of happiness consists in having a body.”

According to Latter-day Saint theology, the soul of man or woman consists of both the spirit and the body (D&C 88:15). In emphasizing the importance of the body, Latter-day Saints often quote 1 Corinthians 3:16–17. It reads: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.”

Because we hold the body sacred, we take certain precautions to maintain its purity, strength, and integrity. Like many others, members of the Church believe in chastity before marriage and fidelity afterward. Because we hold the body sacred, we maintain that certain foods are especially important to eat and that certain substances or foods and drinks should be avoided. The Word of Wisdom, a revelation given to Joseph Smith, serves as a general guide in this respect.

The Coming Forth of the Word of Wisdom

The Word of Wisdom was given at a meeting of the School of the Prophets in Kirtland, Ohio, in February 1833. According to Brigham Young’s later recollection, it came about largely as a result of Joseph and Emma’s concerns about frequent tobacco use by school participants:

I think I am as well acquainted with the circumstances which led to the giving of the Word of Wisdom as any man in the Church, although I was not present at the time to witness them. The first school of the prophets was held in a small room situated over the Prophet Joseph’s kitchen, in a house which belonged to Bishop Whitney, and which was attached to his store, which store probably might be about fifteen feet square. In the rear of this building was a kitchen, probably ten by fourteen feet, containing rooms and pantries. Over this kitchen was situated the room in which the Prophet received revelations and in which he instructed his brethren. The brethren came to that place for hundreds of miles to attend school in a little room probably no larger than eleven by fourteen. When they assembled together in this room after breakfast, the first thing they did was to light their pipes, and while smoking, talk about the great things of the kingdom, and spit all
over the room, and as soon as the pipe was out of their mouths a large chew of tobacco would then be taken. Often when the Prophet entered the room to give the school instructions he would find himself in a cloud of tobacco smoke. This, and the complaints of his wife at having to clean so filthy a floor made the Prophet think upon the matter, and he inquired of the Lord relating to the conduct of the Elders in using tobacco, and the revelation known as the Word of Wisdom was the result of his inquiry.7

About twenty-two people were in attendance the day Joseph walked into the room and read the revelation. One of them, Zebedee Coltrin, recalled that Joseph’s reading of the revelation had an immediate impact on the assembled brethren: “The Prophet Joseph was in an adjoining room . . . and came in with that Revelation in his hand. Out of the twenty two members that were there assembled, all used tobacco more or less, except two. Joseph read the Revelation and when they heard it they all laid aside their pipes and use of tobacco.”8

The revelation Joseph read on that occasion became canonized scripture in 1835. Today, it is known as section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants. As almost all members of the Church know, section 89 contains far more than just a single prohibition against tobacco. It contains other proscriptions, some prescriptions, and a series of promises involving increased vitality and knowledge for those who adhere to the instructions contained in the revelation.

In terms of prescriptions, Saints were advised to eat herbs (including vegetables) and fruits, especially fresh ones. Grains were to serve as the staff of life. Meat was to be eaten sparingly—more specifically, only in times of winter or famine.

The proscriptions listed in section 89 were fewer in number but more pointed. Saints were instructed to use wine only of their “own make” for sacramental purposes. They were enjoined not to partake of or use internally any strong drink, tobacco, or hot drinks. Interestingly, with all these admonitions, there was an important qualification. Unlike other revelations Joseph received, this one was to be received “not by commandment or constraint.” In other words, when initially given, compliance with the instructions given in the revelation was advocated or recommended—but not necessarily mandated.

How unique was the Word of Wisdom? It was not as novel as many have supposed. As Lester Bush has demonstrated, most physicians in the United States in the 1830s, both orthodox and botanic or herbal, would have agreed with much of the counsel given in Doctrine and Covenants 89. In that era, many doctors felt disease was a result
of the overstimulation of one's energy source. Ardent spirits were deemed a major cause of overstimulation, and, to a lesser extent, so was meat. Thus, many medical practitioners recommended they be used sparingly. There was more ambivalence about the stimulating effects of tea and coffee. Tobacco would have weighed in somewhere between ardent spirits and tea and coffee on the "stimulation scale."

What was novel about the revelation, of course, at least for Church members, was the prophetic authority that was attached to it. Although many other Americans may have agreed with much of the counsel contained in section 89, there is no evidence such belief translated into lifestyle changes. The fact that Church members felt it was given by God rather than by man made a considerable difference in terms of overall acceptance. In large part, because of this divine stamp of approval, Latter-day Saints, collectively speaking, came to embrace the counsel contained in section 89—at least some portions of it—with a fair amount of willingness and, in some cases, enthusiasm.

The Interpretation of the Word of Wisdom in the Joseph Smith Era

How did Church members come to interpret the Word of Wisdom in the years immediately following its reception? What parts of the revelations were deemed most important? Not surprisingly, because the revelation was in its infancy and because Joseph never precisely delineated the relative importance of the various prescriptions and proscriptions, some lack of uniformity existed in early obedience patterns. In other words, different Saints embraced different parts of the revelation. For example, some took seriously the passage indicating that "all wholesome herbs God hath ordained for the constitution, nature, and use of man" (D&C 89:10). Botanic physician Willard Richards, among others, advocated the use of herbs. But despite Willard's advocacy of herbs, herb usage never took hold among the general populace of Saints; it never became a criterion for fellowship.

In addition to herb usage, there is limited evidence that at least two other notions, derived from various passages in the revelation, held some attraction for some Saints for a limited period. Regarding the injunction limiting meat eating to times of winter or famine, Joseph instructed some participants on the Zion's Camp march in 1834 that "fish was much healthier for us to eat than meat, and the use of fish in warm weather was not prohibited in the Word of Wisdom." And William W. Phelps was possibly alluding to avoiding drinks of extreme temperature as well as tea and coffee when he noted in
correspondence to his wife that the Kirtland Saints were unified in keeping the Word of Wisdom. "They drink cold water," Phelps said, "and dont [sic] even mention tea and coffee." 12

But like herbs, neither eating fish or any other kind of meat, in winter or whatever season, nor avoiding drinks of extreme temperature caught on. Nor did any other of the various prescriptions gain ascendancy. Indeed, it is interesting, perhaps instructive, just how quickly the overwhelming majority of leaders and lay members identified exclusively with the proscriptive stipulations dealing with alcohol, tobacco, and hot drinks (meaning tea and coffee). And, almost from the onset, there was a certain pecking order regarding these items. Alcohol, and more especially distilled liquor as opposed to fermented drinks like wine, was considered most objectionable. Tobacco use closely followed alcohol consumption as a transgression of consequence, with tea and coffee lagging somewhat behind.

The identification of hot drinks with tea and coffee was in place by the mid-1830s. Church member Joel Hills Johnson recalled that about four months following the reception of section 89, Joseph Smith said to the Saints: "I understand that some of the people are excusing themselves in using tea and coffee, because the Lord only said 'hot drinks' in the revelation of the Word of Wisdom. The Lord was showing us what was good for man to eat and drink. Now, what do we drink when we take our meals? Tea and Coffee is it not? Yes! tea and coffee then, they are what the Lord meant when he said 'hot drinks.'"13

In less than a decade following its reception, then, the contours of the revelation were in place. For nearly all Church members, observance of the Word of Wisdom implied either nonuse or sparing use of alcohol, tobacco, tea, and coffee. These were the only items that became criteria of Church fellowship. Why, it may be fairly asked, did the proscriptions prevail while the prescriptions were largely shoved aside? Probably, at least in part, because Church leaders felt the social and moral results of disobedience to the proscriptive counsel (especially with regard to alcohol and tobacco) were of far greater consequence.

How closely was the Word of Wisdom lived in its infancy? In all likelihood, more diligently than many historians have supposed. In February 1834, the high council of the Church resolved that "No official member in this Church is worthy to hold an office, after having the Word of Wisdom properly taught him, and he, the official member, neglecting to comply with or obey it."14 Most Church leaders and many Church members took this declaration at its word and emphasized
adherence to the proscriptive portions of the revelation with some vigor through at least 1837, especially at Church headquarters in Ohio.15

But the relatively strict approach to Word of Wisdom observance that characterized many Ohio Saints in the 1830s did not prevail for long. For reasons difficult to discern but probably in part having to do with the varied challenges of establishing and maintaining a church amid hostile surroundings, Word of Wisdom considerations assumed secondary status. This comparatively relaxed approach was in place by at least 1842 when the Saints lived in Nauvoo, Illinois.

**Latter-day Word of Wisdom Observance in Territorial Utah**

By and large, the comparatively liberal attitude toward Word of Wisdom observance that existed in Nauvoo prevailed in Utah Territory for the rest of the nineteenth century. It is true that Brigham Young asked Latter-day Saints in the September general conference of 1851 to covenant to keep the Word of Wisdom; it is also true that, for whatever reason, President Young chose not to require Latter-day Saints to keep that particular covenant.16 Perhaps, he reasoned, that with all the challenges inherent in settling and colonizing their Great Basin kingdom, it made little sense to quibble about a cup of coffee. As late as 1861, President Young indicated that although observance should be a worthy goal, he did not desire to make adherence to the Word of Wisdom a test of fellowship.17

In 1883, President John Taylor initiated the most zealous, widespread Word of Wisdom reform movement in the half century following the inception of the revelation. Following President Taylor's lead, at general conference in October 1883, Wilford Woodruff, President of the Quorum of the Twelve, preached Word of Wisdom observance to assembled Saints and indicated “the time was at hand when it would be necessary to keep the whole law of God.”18 Two months later, Elder Woodruff told members of the newly formed St. George School of the Prophets that the time had come for Church members to observe the Word of Wisdom.19 Unfortunately, the antipolygamy legislation and resultant persecution disrupted Latter-day Saint society and largely sapped the vigor of President Taylor’s Word of Wisdom crusade.20

What then, in summary, constituted Word of Wisdom observance in the nineteenth century? At least three general patterns of adherence can be identified: (1) moderation, rather than abstinence, was the major concern; (2) drunkenness was not tolerated; and (3) wine was generally not categorized as a “strong drink.”
The Word of Wisdom: A Twentieth-Century Test of Fellowship

From 1901 until 1945, two men, Joseph F. Smith and Heber J. Grant, directed the Church. Presidents Smith and Grant had very similar views on the Word of Wisdom—essentially, that abstinence rather than moderation should constitute the primary criterion for Word of Wisdom compliance. The path to our current interpretation of the Word of Wisdom can be traced to their administrations. President Grant probably emphasized Word of Wisdom compliance more than any other General Authority, before or since. At general conference in October 1935, President Grant announced he was going to read the revelation to the congregation. “It may be that it will be the fifty-third time in the past fifty-three years,” he declared to the congregation. “I think that I have read it at least once a year if not a half a dozen times.”

By the 1920s, abstinence became a requirement for a temple recommend. By that same period, Word of Wisdom adherence had clearly replaced plural marriage as the Latter-day Saint badge of identification. Certainly, the Word of Wisdom did not escape nineteenth-century non-Mormon detection—various travelers through Utah often commented on the overall orderliness and sobriety that prevailed in Latter-day Saint communities. But nineteenth-century non-Mormon emphasis on distinctive LDS Word of Wisdom patterns paled in significance compared to the deluge of twentieth-century gentile commentary. To outsiders, Mormons became known primarily as the people who wouldn’t consume alcohol, smoke, or drink coffee or tea.

The Word of Wisdom: A Temporal and Spiritual Guide

Although the differences and distinctions between Latter-day Saint and Jewish attitudes to food and diet will probably always be greater than the similarities, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that in the future, many Latter-day Saints, of their own volition, will adopt attitudes and assume patterns toward food and drink that are somewhat analogous to the Jewish approach. I predict (some would say, with unwarranted temerity) that some alteration of attitudes will take place along two fronts. The first such front has to do with the broadening of Word of Wisdom considerations to include more than just the present list of proscriptions. In short, in all likelihood, more and more Latter-day Saints will come to view Doctrine and Covenants 89 not only as a delineator of forbidden items but also as an indicator of what one should eat.
The second front where some alteration might occur has to do with perspective or viewpoint. I suspect that in this present age of environmental sensitivity and holistic living, a good many Church members might begin to view the entire revelation in a larger and more holistic sense—as a guide not only to physical well-being but also to spiritual growth.

Are there legitimate reasons or precedents to believe that such lifestyle changes will occur among some in the Latter-day Saint community in the future? I believe there are. Certainly there are strong scriptural precedents—both in canonized scripture and in the statements of presiding brethren whom Church members revere as prophets and revelators.

Regarding precedents contained in canonized scripture, I noted earlier that Doctrine and Covenants 89 included both prescriptions as well as proscriptions. In truth, the prescriptions actually take up more scriptural space. Among other things, Saints were advised in holy writ to eat herbs and fruits, regard grain as the “staff of life,” and eat meat sparingly. And, of course, the concluding verses of the revelation indicate “spiritual blessings” await those Saints who comply—presumably with both proscriptions and prescriptions.

The first latter-day prophet to emphasize a so-called expanded view of the Word of Wisdom—that is, to emphasize the importance of the prescriptions as well as the proscriptions—was Brigham Young. As early as 1855, President Young complained of the food he was fed when visiting Saints. “The only thing I crave,” he said, “is milk.” On this occasion, he also noted that he wished Latter-day Saints could become more of “a natural people.” In 1860, President Young observed that the Lord has given us wheat, beef, and herbs (probably including vegetables) for our benefit. Regarding herbs, he asked rhetorically that if they were useless, why did the Lord make them available? At the April 1868 general conference, both Brigham Young and George Q. Cannon advised Latter-day Saints to avoid eating pork.

Other General Authorities who have emphasized Word of Wisdom prescriptions are Lorenzo Snow, Heber J. Grant, John A. Widtsoe, Joseph F. Merrill, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Ezra Taft Benson. In the 1890s, Apostle Lorenzo Snow expressed surprise that so many of the brethren who preached on the Word of Wisdom avoided commenting on the passage advocating the use of meat sparingly. Elder Snow suggested, seemingly for humane reasons, that the time was not far distant when the eating of animal flesh would be prohibited. At one time, Heber J. Grant also apparently believed that the day would come when meat eating would be forbidden. John A. Widtsoe coauthored with
his wife, Leah, The Word of Wisdom: A Modern Interpretation, a widely read book that advocated the use of grains and the use of meat sparingly, among other things. A Modern Interpretation was used as the Melchizedek Priesthood study manual in 1938. In April general conference of 1948, Elder Joseph F. Merrill of the Quorum of the Twelve lamented that “all over the Church the belief is general that the Word of Wisdom is practically observed if the individual abstains from the use of tea, coffee, liquor, and tobacco. But a careful reading of the revelation,” cautioned Elder Merrill, “shows this belief to be erroneous.” Brother Merrill then proceeded to emphasize the injunction advocating the sparing use of meat.

In more recent times, LDS Presidents Joseph Fielding Smith and Ezra Taft Benson have advised Church members to heed the prescriptive portion of section 89. President Smith noted:

We seldom hear of the things mentioned which are “ordained for the constitution, nature, and use of man.” The Lord has given us all good herbs, fruits and grains. These are to be the main foods of men, beast, and fowls. But we should not overlook the fact that they are to be used with “prudence and thanksgiving.” . . . The difficulty with most of the human family, is eating too much, and failing to heed this counsel. There would be less disease and mankind would live longer if all would also heed the counsel of the Lord concerning the use of wholesome foods. Many a man thinks he keeps the Word of Wisdom, who knows only the “don’ts” which is [are] but a part of its great meaning.

Most recently, we are aware that at various times in his ministry, President Benson promoted the advantages of eating food in its natural state and partaking heartily of grains, fruits, and vegetables. I also understand that President Benson, in his personal life, was sparing in his use of meat and generous in his use of fresh vegetables and grains.

Clearly then, there are both scriptural and prophetic precedents for members of the Church—if they so desire to expand their own personal list of Word of Wisdom considerations. There are also scriptural and prophetic models for viewing the entire revelation in a more holistic way by our combining the physical with the spiritual—by our viewing the eating of foods that God has prescribed as a spiritual act or event. Indeed, if Latter-day Saints chose to pursue this path, it would be somewhat analogous to Jewish attitudes.

In his introduction to Jewish belief, Louis Jacobs indicated that “in Judaism everything must be brought into contact with the spiritual domain.” Latter-day Saints could identify with that notion. In the
Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord told Joseph Smith, “Wherefore ver-
ily I say unto you that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any
time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man,
nor the children of men; neither Adam, your father, whom I created”
(D&C 29:34). Mormonism, then, postulates a blending of the spiri-
tual and temporal domains.

Church members, if they so chose, could regard eating and drinking
as temporal-spiritual events. Orthodox Jews, by eating some foods and
refraining from others in obedience to their religion, actually elevate the
act of eating to a level of godliness. As Jacob Milgrom observed, “The
dietary laws are rungs on the ladder of holiness, leading to a life of
pure thought and deed, characteristic of the nature of God.”37

Although such a view is hardly widespread in the Latter-day Saint
community, it is scripturally supportable. For example, why couldn’t
Latter-day Saints, by avoiding food and drink God has placed off limits
and by eating only those foods they believe God has singled out as
being especially good for mankind, gain greater reverence for life and
increased appreciation for the Lord? My suspicion is that in the future,
some Church members will do so and thus come to regard eating as
much more than just a practical necessity.

To concern oneself with eating foods the Lord has prescribed and
to consider eating prescribed foods as an act of holiness are both attitudes
that could be understood as logical results of living in divine harmony
with the earth God has created. Latter-day Saints believe that men and
women are God’s superior creations but not His only creations. Many
also believe they are to respect, not abuse, the earth they are placed on
and live in divine harmony with it.38 The Lord indicates that “the good
things which come of the earth, whether for food or for raiment, . . .
are made for the benefit and the use of man.” But the revelation also
stipulates that such things are “to be used, with judgment, not to
excess, neither by extortion” (D&C 89:17–18).

Brigham Young, who respected and even revered the earth that
God created, taught: “Man cannot control the heavens; he cannot
control the earth, nor the elements; he can fertilize and prepare the
ground for the reception of seed; he can plant, water, till, and reap, . . .
but, until his mind is opened by the Spirit of God, he cannot see that
it is by a superior power that corn, wheat, and every kind of vegetation
spring into life, and ripen for the sustenance of man and beast.”39

I conclude with two very different observations. First, I want to
make plain my intentions. I have no hidden agenda. I am not crusading
for change in Word of Wisdom emphasis—that is hardly my province.
My motivation for writing this paper came when I was asked to compare Latter-day Saint attitudes toward food and drink with those of Jewish people. I have indicated that at present, the similarities are not striking; and I have speculated that in the future, at least for some Latter-day Saints, the similarities (in attitude rather than detail) will become more obvious. I wouldn’t be surprised if, in the future, some of the presiding leaders of the Church occasionally emphasize some of the prescriptive portions of section 89. I will be surprised, however, if such an emphasis ever assumes fellowship proportions. For social, moral, and practical reasons, I expect that adherence to the proscriptive elements of the Word of Wisdom will remain the only criteria for Church fellowship.

Second, it should be mentioned that one important similarity between Jewish and Latter-day Saint dietary approaches has not been discussed. Herman Wouk observed that Jewish dietary laws serve as both “a community bond and a reminder of personal identity that comes whenever a man gets hungry. It is a daily commitment in action to one’s faith, a formal choice, a quiet self-discipline.” Such laws are, Wouk concludes, “social instruments for keeping the Jewish nation alive, and psychological instruments for preserving the identity of individuals.”

Possibly to a lesser but still a highly meaningful extent, the Word of Wisdom has served a similar function among Latter-day Saints. Every time a Church member politely says “no thank you” to the generous offer of an acquaintance or stranger to partake of coffee or alcohol, the action has the effect of reminding everyone involved that Latter-day Saints are a “separate people,” that they made covenants with the Lord, and that because of their “peculiarity,” there are things they can and cannot do. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of a more suitable vehicle to remind us of our covenantal responsibilities and embed them into our self-consciousness than to require certain patterns of eating and drinking—something that is usually done openly and daily. In this very functional sense, Jews and Mormons—peculiar peoples both—can readily identify with one another.
Notes

1. This article is adapted from a paper given on 5 October 1995 as part of a lecture series featuring Jewish and Latter-day Saint scholars. The lecture series, "Jews and Mormons—A Common Heritage," was held at Utah Valley State College during fall semester 1995.


7. Journal of Discourses (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854-86), 12:158; hereafter cited as JD.

8. Minutes of the St. George School of the Prophets, 23 December 1883, LDS Church Archives.


12. William W. Phelps to Sally Waterman Phelps, 26 May 1835, Journal History of the Church, Church Archives.


15. I am not suggesting that Saints in the 1830s matched the levels of obedience their twentieth-century descendants reached. If for no other reason, two common perceptions preclude such a possibility. First, like many other nineteenth-century Americans, most early Saints genuinely believed the prohibited substances had legitimate medicinal and fatigue-removing properties that justified occasional use. Second, most Church members did not categorize occasional wine drinking, especially at sacramental or festive events, as an infringement of the Word of Wisdom.


17. JD, 9:35.
18. Journal History of the Church, 6 October 1883, 8, Church Archives.
19. "Minutes of the St. George School of the Prophets," 23 December 1883, Church Archives.
24. See, for example, the accounts of Solomon Nunes Carvalho, Incidents of Travel and Adventure in the Far West (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1857), 209; and William Hepworth Dixon, New America, 9th ed. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1869), 117.
26. Thomas Bullock Minutes, 1848–56, loose papers, 15 April 1855, Church Archives.
27. Brigham Young Office Journal, Book D, 12 March 1860, Church Archives.
28. Brigham Young Manuscript History, 6 April 1868, Church Archives; JD, 12:221.
29. Heber J. Grant Diary, 1 October 1895, Church Archives; Journal History, 5 May 1898, 2.
30. Heber J. Grant to Anna Grant, 16 September 1901, Church Archives.
35. Personal conversation with Reed A. Benson, son of President Ezra Taft Benson, 3 October 1995.
38. Hugh Nibley opined that "man's dominion is a call to service, not a license to exterminate." See Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks, eds. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1994), 18. Nibley's four essays on Brigham Young and the environment in this volume make for insightful reading.
39. JD, 3:119.
40. Wouk, This Is My God, 108.
“Christ with Mary and Martha” by Del Parson
Choosing the “Good Part”

Brent L. Top

One New Testament episode teaches us concerning what matters most in life. It also illustrates the dangers associated with becoming distracted, losing focus, and being diverted from our primary objectives.

We are familiar with the details of the story of Mary and Martha, but do we really understand the principles the Savior was teaching them and us? It is much more than a story. It is much more than a gentle chiding of conscientious Martha. Contained in this ancient account is a message for a modern world. It may be a simple story, but it is relevant for us today—it is vital for our emotional and spiritual survival in these challenging times. In Luke 10:38–40, the story begins:

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he [Christ] entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.

And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard his word.

But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.

Let me interject an item for your consideration at this point. From a cultural perspective, Martha had a good reason to be upset with her sister. Anciently (and even in some Palestinian settings today), the women did not socially intermingle with the men. The women gathered
together preparing the meal—eating by themselves and mingling among the other women in the party but not associating with the men, even if the guest of honor was speaking in the other room. So Martha is asking Jesus to remind Mary of “her place.” But how does Jesus respond?

And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, [You know you’re in big trouble if the Lord says your name twice!] thou art careful and troubled about many things:

But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her (Luke 10:41–42).

This story is often misquoted and misinterpreted. First, consider the misquote. If you ask people to quote the passage, more often than not they will say, “Mary chose the better part.” However, it doesn’t say that; it says “that good part.” In fact, some Bible translations say “the best part.” That leads to the misinterpretation. I have often heard people use this scriptural story to justify not doing housework—saying it is better to devote yourself to associating with good people and pursuing intellectual or spiritual learning than worrying about a clean house. They want to pit Mary the learner against Martha the housekeeper. Yet that is not the intent of the story at all!

What is it that Jesus wants us to learn from this experience? What application can we draw from Jesus’ words that will have meaning to us amidst the stresses and struggles of modern society? Important concepts emerge as we examine more closely some of the words and expressions in Jesus’ tender teaching of His friend, Martha.

Let’s look at Luke’s statement, “Martha was cumbered.” One translation of the word cumbered is “perplexed” or “frustrated.” What was the source of her frustration? At first glance, she was perplexed and annoyed by Mary’s unwillingness to help, but there seems to be something else that is bothering her. Martha was frustrated—or, as one translation says, “harassed”—by all the different cares and demands placed on her, pulling her in different directions at the same time. It was not a choice between good and bad or between sin and righteousness but rather the difficulty of having to decide between too many good things, good choices. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

So often our hardest choices are between competing and desirable alternatives (each with righteous consequences), when there is not time to do both at once. Indeed, it is at the mortal intersections—where time and talent and opportunities meet—that priorities, like traffic lights, are sorely needed. Quiet, sustained goodness is the order of heaven, not conspicuous but episodic busyness.
The Devil’s Dangerous Doctrine of Distraction

Have you ever been to a magnificent buffet dinner with table after table filled with sumptuous dishes—salads, main courses, and desserts of every imaginable kind? Despite all the good things to choose from, we often find ourselves frustrated because our eyes are bigger than our stomachs—we don’t have room for everything.

Our lives are often like that buffet experience. It is not uncommon to become impatient, frustrated, stressed out, and ultimately disappointed because there are so many good things we want to do (or perhaps feel we should do) that we cannot do them all.

The Savior told Martha, “Thou art careful and troubled about many things.” He was acknowledging her conscientiousness but also reminding her that her conscientiousness, as a strength of character, had in some ways become a weakness in her life. The phrase “troubled about many things” could also be translated as “You are distracted. Your attention and efforts are divided, and, as a result, all you do is less effective.”

In our day, the Lord has commanded us to be “anxiously engaged in a good cause” (D&C 58:27). However, that doesn’t mean we have to be anxiously engaged in every good cause. Trying to do all things or be all things to all people all the time results in Martha-like frustration. I believe we must learn, like Martha, that being “cumbered” with over-involvement in too many “good causes” actually diverts us away from the things that matter most. Martha wasn’t sinning or being evil in any way. All her efforts and attentions were drawn to doing good for someone else (in this particular case, the Savior), but instead of finding fulfillment and peace and joy in her labors, she was more frustrated and worn out than ever. She thinks the problem is Mary—for not helping out with all the preparations—but the real problem is Martha, herself—for being over involved and distracted from that which mattered most. She was “cumbered about much serving.”

Serving is a good thing. Yet when that useful activity takes us—our hearts and minds and souls—away from that which the original service or activity was intended to bring us to, we are left, like Martha, “harassed”—frustrated. Good things can take away better things. As Elder Maxwell said, “Some choices are diversions more than they are transgressions. As a result of these diversions, the sins of omission mount up. And they constitute a real deprivation because of what we withhold from our fellow human beings. Perhaps it is unintentional, but without that first commandment [to love God with all our heart, might, mind, and strength], some things get omitted.”
How many things in your life—good, desirable, honorable, righteous things—are actually getting in the way of the “good part,” which is an intimate relationship with God? As C. S. Lewis wrote: “God wants to give us something, but cannot, because our hands are full—there’s nowhere for Him to put it.” Many times these “other things” that fill our hands and our lives are not worldly or wicked things but are needful things—things that cannot be ignored or, as one religious leader called them, “the tyranny of the urgents.” We all can relate to Martha to some degree—pushed and pulled in many directions and by many different demands, most of which are not only good but also necessary. The end result can still be the same—distraction, frustration, and spiritual and emotional “burnout.”

It is important—more than important—how vital it is to take periodic inventory of our lives—discarding those things of lesser value and replacing them with the essential things. We need, like Martha, to be stopped dead in our tracks once in awhile and examine what we are doing and why we are doing it. Eternal priorities absolutely must guide our lives and actions and choices—for without them we will end up being “cumbered,” “perplexed,” and frustrated that we are spending our time and resources on lesser matters at the exclusion of celestial values.

Satan realizes he cannot always use his heavy arsenal of temptations to be immoral or dishonest or violent on good, conscientious people. These “fiery darts” would probably have little, if any, immediate effect on faithful people who are diligently striving to be righteous. He knows he will be far more successful if he can get us frustrated—“harassed” and “perplexed”—by our inability to do all the good things we would like to do (or sometimes feel we “have” to do).

I believe this is the very thing that Jesus is warning Martha about—the devil’s dangerous doctrine of distraction. It doesn’t seem as dangerous as many of his other temptations, but the end product is often the same. We become lost in the “mists of darkness” of the world because we have been distracted and have looked “beyond the mark” and, with our devotion diverted, end up letting go of the iron rod. Elder William R. Bradford of the Seventy counseled the Saints in general conference to “unclutter” their lives of such diversionary encumbrances.

We need to examine all the ways we use our time... [including] our work, our ambitions, our affiliations, and the habits that drive our actions. As we make such a study, we will be able to better understand what we should really be spending our time doing.

At the top of our list of basics, we will surely have the family. Next only to our devotion to God, the family comes first. Their
temporal and spiritual well-being is of vital importance, and so there must be work to provide for it. This means hard work. . . .

A mother should never allow herself to become so involved with extras that she finds herself neglecting her divine role. A father must not let any activity, no matter how interesting or important it may seem, keep him from giving of himself in the one-on-one service and close, constant care of each member of the family.

The titles of Mother and Father will persist after this life. All that we may acquire and any titles we may earn which are worldly will pass away. In the meantime, they may be cluttering up our lives and affecting our eternal outcome.

Young people must learn that none of the exciting and entertaining and fun things are worth it if they take you off the path that will lead you back home to your Heavenly Father.7

When we get any of these priorities “out of whack” or when we intentionally or unwittingly mix up their proper sequence, we, like Martha, are “cumbered by much serving”—frustrated instead of fulfilled, harassed and harried rather than happy. When we get diverted and distracted and drawn away in so many directions from what matters most, our spiritual tanks are left empty. We are left depleted, depressed, and discouraged—all because our priorities got mixed up.

Putting Christ at the Center of Our Lives

In the story of Mary and Martha and their interaction with the Master, there is another important statement that is relevant to us today: “One thing is needful.” Jesus gently and lovingly chided Martha for being worried and troubled about many things (Luke 10:41). The “many things” were not just worries about family or health or conditions in the world. An interesting translation of this passage reveals that the “things” causing her so much consternation were, in reality, the many different “dishes” she had prepared for this dinner.8

Jesus is teaching her that all her elaborate preparations and the wide array of side dishes she had prepared Him and her guests were nice, but not necessary. She had done much more than the Savior required or even desired. “Only one thing is needful,” Jesus said to her. Remember the translation of the word thing—dish. Jesus is saying to her that a simple meal with only a few dishes—really only one—would have been ample. Martha was, in reality, wasting much time, energy, and resources. Worse yet, she seems to have lost perspective as to why she was having the dinner anyway. I can almost hear Martha saying, “But I want it to be really nice—something people will remember!”
Now don’t get me wrong. I believe we should do things nicely—things that are appealing both to the eye and the taste buds and to the heart and the soul. But that does not seem to be the real issue with Martha, nor is it often with what we do. Are we “stressed out” and “cumbered by many things” because we are overly concerned about how we appear or what people may think of us? Have we lost sight of why we do what we do? Did Martha feel that she would be less acceptable to the Lord or that others would view her with scorn if she did not prepare a big meal and do everything just right and make everything “really nice”? What was more important—to have a “really nice dinner” for the guests or to be able to spend time at the feet of the Savior—especially knowing that His days on earth were numbered? Can’t you see how Jesus must have felt? I can almost hear the Master saying, “Martha, I want you to spend time with me, not spend all your time in the kitchen. Why are you upset with Mary when she is doing that which I wish you were doing as well—spending time with me!”

When The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced its new budget policy many years ago, there were some expressions of concern. How will we ever be able to do everything for the youth and for the ward on such a small budget? How can we go on a “super activity”? What will we have to cut out? The brethren were mindful of those concerns. Perhaps they were trying to teach us like Jesus lovingly taught Martha about being “cumbered” by “many things” when “only one thing is needful.”

At a fireside for the entire Church to discuss this new budget policy, President Boyd K. Packer taught: “Sometimes more can be less, and sometimes less is more.” In addition, “Nothing essential will be lost; rather, essential things will be rediscovered, be found!” Whether it be in our personal lives, in our homes, in our professions, or in our service in the Church, perhaps we should remember Nephi’s counsel in the Book of Mormon. He was quoting the prophet Isaiah when he declared:

Come, my brethren [and sisters], every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come buy and eat; yea, come buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Wherefore do not spend money for that which is of no worth, nor your labor for that which cannot satisfy (2 Nephi 9:50–51; emphasis added).

There is another phrase Jesus used, as he taught Martha, that has profound significance. When Martha was upset that her sister, Mary, was not helping with the “many things” Martha was doing, Martha
asked Jesus to scold Mary and make her help. That sounds like some of the sibling squabbles we have had at our house—"Mom, make her help! Dad make him stop!" Wisely, Jesus did not give in to her but instead lovingly taught an important lesson. We often think that Mary had not done anything to help. But that is not necessarily the case. She may have done her part and made the necessary preparations but reached a point when she thought "enough is enough"—the time has come to be with the Master. What Mary was doing was something, the Savior declared, "which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). What did He mean by that? The implication seems to be that what Martha was worrying about and spending her time doing would be "taken from her." How could that be? The dinner—no matter how pleasing the preparations were and how delicious the food may have been—would soon be gone, forgotten, with nothing much to show for it. Mary, on the other hand, had been taught at the feet of the Savior. What she learned in her mind, what she felt in her heart, and what she experienced in her soul could not be taken away.

Similarly, when we get bogged down in the "thick of things" and when our efforts, preparations, and activities—those things that take our time, energy, and money, no matter how noble our intentions—divert us or distract from that which should matter most, we will sense we have lost something important.

I love Nephi's Book of Mormon imagery that perhaps applies to modern-day Martha's (and Marvins). When we lose our spiritual focus and when we "look beyond the mark"—whether it be individual or institutional—we become like the man who Nephi says goes to bed hungry and thirsty and dreams that he eats and drinks until he is full, only to awake from his dream to discover his stomach is still empty (2 Nephi 27:3). That is why Jesus reminds us that some things do not satisfy the soul or have lasting impact, whereas there is something that does. That one "needful thing"—that which cannot be taken away—is the Lord Himself and His eternal gospel. As Nephi declared, "Come unto the Holy One of Israel, and feast upon that which perisheth not, neither can be corrupted, and let your soul delight in fatness" (2 Nephi 9:51). That leads me to my final point.

The key statement in the scriptural account of Mary and Martha—the "moral of the story," if you will—seems to be "Mary hath chosen that good part" (Luke 10:42; emphasis added). Jesus is using a play on words here. The word "part" is sometimes rendered as "portion." He is using the food and the dishes Martha has prepared as His object lesson. There is a double meaning in His words—"but one thing is needful."
He is certainly telling Martha that a simple meal—“one thing,” maybe even only one dish—would have sufficed for the occasion, but there is something else He is saying. There is something more needful, more important, more life sustaining than just one dish at the meal, for even that will pass away.

However, the “one thing” that is “needful,” “that good part,” is Christ Himself—His atoning sacrifice, His teachings, His plan of salvation, and His charity—H is pure and perfect love for us. This is not just “the good part” but is indeed “the best part”—the only part that can never, ever, ever be taken away. No matter what else we do in life, what we choose, what we enjoy, or what we become, it will have been in vain if we don’t fully choose the “good part,” even this “best part,” and take a heaping portion of it into our lives. Christ is the “Bread of Life” and the “Living Waters” that can nourish our souls and satisfy our spiritual hunger. Nothing else has that kind of power.

In recent years, President Gordon B. Hinckley has reminded us of our covenantal obligation to retain the converts to the Church. He often says that it doesn’t matter one whit if we baptize millions and yet do nothing to keep them safe and faithful in the gospel fold. He has said that all of us—the new converts, the less active, and the lifetime members who have pioneer ancestry and who can trace their genealogy back to Adam—need three things to remain steadfast in these trying times. We all need (1) nourishment by the good word of God, (2) a friend (social connections), and (3) a responsibility.

Each of these is important and vital. Yet real spiritual power—indeed, saving power—is to be found in the first one. Any person, even with many friends and social activities in the Church and even with important callings and responsibilities, who does not get the spiritual nourishment the gospel affords will have shallow roots and will quickly wilt in the scorching heat of temptations and tribulations. That is why we must never lose sight of WHY we do what we do. All we do in the Church, all we do in our homes, and all we do in our personal lives should be leading us and those we love to Him and to the partaking of H is love, H is mercy, and H is salvation. Some things are interesting; other things are important. But “one thing” is absolutely imperative. H e is “that good part.” In fact, H e is the “best part.” Only in Christ is there to be found lasting sustenance. Without that “main dish,” all other things are ultimately tasteless and unsatisfying. Only when we choose to partake of “that good part” are we able to know the abundance of life that Jesus offers (see John 10:10). As President Gordon B. Hinckley declared:
With all of our doing, with all of our leading, with all of our teaching, the most important thing we can do for those whom we lead is to cultivate in their hearts a living, vital, vibrant testimony and knowledge of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world, the Author of our salvation, He who atoned for the sins of the world and opened the way of salvation and eternal life. I would hope that in all we do we would somehow constantly nourish the testimony of our people concerning the Savior. I am satisfied, I know it’s so, that whenever a man [or woman] has a true witness in his [or her] heart of the living reality of the Lord Jesus Christ all else will come together as it should. . . . That is the root from which all virtue springs among those who call themselves Latter-day Saints.10

Notes

1. Adapted from a devotional address delivered at the Education for Daily Living Conference, BYU-Hawaii, 7 August 1999.
8. The Interpreter’s Bible, 197–98.
We have the scriptures and are therefore under obligation to search them.
A quarter of a century after the fact, I vividly remember when the scriptures became an important focus in my life. I had a friend named John. His family joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when I was seven, and we became close friends. Everything that John did, I wanted to do. When he started collecting movie ticket stubs, I did also. When he began writing the words to some favorite hymns in a little pocket-sized address book, I had to get one exactly the same and do likewise.

Can you imagine what I was thinking when I saw that John’s parents gave him a missionary triple combination for his birthday? You guessed it. I wanted one exactly the same. The problem, however, was how I would achieve that desire. Initially, I wasn’t too worried. Surely my mother would see this as a very righteous desire and would, therefore, be ecstatic about my sudden interest in the scriptures. My confidence, however, was soon shattered. She told me we already had plenty of sets of scriptures. I could use any one of those. Of course, my mother’s response just underscored the fact that she didn’t understand what was at stake here. I tried to explain that I didn’t want just any set of scriptures. I needed a black missionary set with thumb tabs because that was what John had. My mother was like the Rock of Gibraltar in her responses. I was devastated. I had not even entertained the idea that she would say no. I repeatedly pleaded my case—all to no avail.

So I decided I needed to modify my plan of attack. Maybe if I saved up the money myself, Mum would acquiesce. And she actually
agreed when I put my new proposal on the table. Looking back, I have no memory of how I earned the money. All I remember is how excited I was when she took me to the LDS bookstore where I bought my first triple combination. I couldn’t wait to get home so I could gently, reverently unstick the pages one by one. Hindsight has helped me realize that perhaps that day wouldn’t have been so sweet if Mum had simply bought it for me. But this is just half of the story.

Soon after that day, I was at my sister’s place where I picked up my brother-in-law’s set of missionary scriptures. As I thumbed through them, I saw he had color coded them, each color representing a different gospel topic. I figured that because I had missionary scriptures, I should mark them like a missionary does. As I sat down and very carefully began the process, something wonderful happened. I really enjoyed what I was doing—not just that I was coloring but that I genuinely enjoyed what I read and learned. I think my mother was sufficiently impressed with my new interest because she gave me a missionary Bible for Christmas, and I immediately began another wonderful adventure with it. It was these experiences that first introduced me to the importance of the statement in 3 Nephi 10:14: “He that hath the scriptures, let him search them.”

Today, I realize we have many different ways of searching the scriptures. We could talk with more depth about color coding, or we could talk about archaeological, historical, or cultural backgrounds of the scriptures—and so on. Each of these approaches can be very helpful aids to searching the scriptures. But as I have pondered and prayed about what I could share with you, three things have continually popped into my mind and have guided my preparation. They all have to do with another dimension of searching the scriptures. The first idea relates to something that Sister Camilla Kimball used to say whenever she was asked, “What is it like to be married to an Apostle?” Invariably, her reply was, “Well, you know, I was married to him twenty-five years before he was one.” Hang on to that thought.

The second event that keeps popping into my head was an experience I had while I participated as a student at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies program. As one of my electives, I took a class on Isaiah from Sister Anne Madsen. Sister Madsen required that we write three papers during the course. For one of those papers, she asked us to write about the man Isaiah, but she did not want us to go to commentaries and synthesize a paper from what others have said about him. She wanted us to write the paper based on what the book of Isaiah tells us about Isaiah. That single assignment had a profound influence on how I study the scriptures.
As I prepared to write that paper, some wonderful things happened to me. Isaiah was transformed from simply a name on a page to a living, breathing individual who had a family, who had hopes and dreams, and who also experienced trials, afflictions, and frustrations. As I read and pondered, I came to feel an inkling of the cost he was asked to pay to be the Lord’s prophet. I had never read Isaiah through that lens before. As I did so, I came to feel Isaiah’s deep and abiding love and respect for God. As I came to these realizations and wrote the paper, I also came to appreciate and understand Isaiah’s teaching because I understood him as a real person—a person I could relate to and a person I could look to in my own struggles. In a very real sense, the book of Isaiah came alive for me as a result of this assignment.

The third and final thought that has influenced my preparations is a comment one of my students made during student evaluations. This student, complaining about the tests, said, “Who cares who introduced Peter to the Savior?” That comment saddened me—not because of the criticism but because I had failed as a teacher. The comment indicated that, for this student, Peter and Andrew were still just names on a page. This student had not made the transition during the semester to the point where these people became real.

Although I realize there are numerous approaches to studying the scriptures, here I would like to focus on one aspect: reading the scriptures so the people become real and meaningful to us and so they become more than just names on a page. You’ve heard the old adage that you can’t know people until you’ve walked a mile in their moccasins—a very important element that comes into our scripture reading as we make conscious efforts to walk spiritually in the moccasins of the people we read about. The power of the scriptures, after all, comes not from reading about these people but from learning the lessons they learned.

All the prophets in the scriptures, to be sure, were foreordained to their callings, but none of them were born as prophets. Remember Sister Kimball’s comment. All of them had to develop their relationship with deity, and that pursuit required doing the same kinds of things I have to do. Can I suggest that as we struggle to see these individuals as real people, we not only draw closer to them but also come to better appreciate their teachings.

I will now test these ideas with two scriptural personalities. One is a well-known and well-loved scriptural personality: Nephi. The other, Anna, occupies only three verses in Luke. I think both have important things to teach us as we reach out to them as real people.
As I ponder about Nephi, Sister Kimball’s statement, in particular, rings loudly. Although Nephi was an extraordinary man who eventually became the Lord’s prophet among the Nephites, he was not always a prophet. As much as 1 and 2 Nephi describe the physical journey Nephi and his family made as they left Jerusalem and traveled to the promised land, I think the most important journey we should look for in these passages is Nephi’s spiritual journey that prepared and enabled him to become the Lord’s prophet. It is that spiritual journey that helps me best to relate to Nephi in my own spiritual quest. I don’t have space to discuss his whole life, so I have chosen to discuss three major events: (1) his declaration in 1 Nephi 3:7; (2) his experience with Laban; and (3) his vision of the tree of life.

Recall with me the famous passage in 1 Nephi 3:7. I think this passage was the first scripture I memorized when I was a child: “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing he commandeth them.”

This is a superb statement of faith. The children sing about it in Primary, and I am willing to suggest that it is one of the most-often-quoted passages in scripture. We use magnificent statements like this to formulate our images of Nephi.

As I read this passage, though, I want to ask some questions. First, how old was Nephi when he made this declaration? In 1 Nephi 2, Nephi tells us he was “exceedingly young” when his family left Jerusalem. Another question that surfaces is how can someone who is “exceedingly young” make such a bold declaration of faith, especially when his older brothers, Laman and Lemuel, could not do so? Certainly we know of other individuals who exhibit spiritual sensitivities at a young age; but, with Nephi, we find some very explicit signs of how he developed that type of spiritual sensitivity. Turn with me to 1 Nephi 2. It is here, while the family is camped in the valley of Lemuel, that we first learn of Laman’s and Lemuel’s displeasure over leaving Jerusalem (2:11–13)—a displeasure that was magnified over time and was the source of many confrontations both with their father and with Nephi.

The verse I find interesting is 1 Nephi 2:16: “And it came to pass that I, Nephi, being exceedingly young, nevertheless being large in stature, and also having great desires to know the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and
did soften my heart that I did believe the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers.”

Notice that Nephi had “great desires to know the mysteries of God.” Leaving Jerusalem and all of their wealth and property at a moment’s notice must have been something of a mystery to Lehi’s family—Nephi not excluded. It certainly was to Laman and Lemuel. You’ll notice, however, that Nephi’s reactions to this mystery were very different from those of Laman and Lemuel. While his brothers murmured against their father, Nephi “cried unto the Lord.” As we will note in other situations, this reaction is an important theme in Nephi’s spiritual development. When faced with a situation he didn’t understand, Nephi always turned to the Lord. And what did Nephi say happened in response to his prayer? He said that the Lord “did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father” (1 Nephi 2:16).

What does this incident tell us about Nephi’s feelings toward leaving Jerusalem? It seems to me that he was also a little bewildered and had a propensity for rebelling against his father as well. Otherwise, why did the Lord need to soften his heart so he would not rebel? For me, the critical point between Nephi and his brothers is not their feelings about leaving home but their responses to those feelings. Does this incident reflect a lesson for me? I think so. There are plenty of times in my life where I bump up against things that don’t make sense to me. In these situations, I have two choices: I can complain about it, or I can turn to the Lord. We might try to make it more complicated than that, but that’s really what it boils down to. Nephi also had to struggle with his father’s decision to leave Jerusalem, but Nephi chose a path that differed from his brothers’ path, and that made all the difference.

Now let’s read 1 Nephi 2:19: “And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me, saying: Blessed art thou, Nephi, because of thy faith, for thou hast sought me diligently, with lowliness of heart.” Then note what the Lord went on to say: “And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands. . . . And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren” (2:20, 22). Here is the promise, mentioned twice: Keep the commandments, and you will be blessed. Notice that Nephi received this promise before he boldly declared that he would “go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded.” I don’t think the sequence
here is happenstance. I think there is a direct relationship between God’s promise and Nephi’s declaration.

Let us now turn to the brass-plates confrontation between Nephi and Laban that occurred in 1 Nephi 4. I’m not interested here in the legal or social ramifications of Nephi’s killing of Laban; others have done excellent work in that area. I’m more interested in the inner struggle that Nephi experienced. You’ll recall that the whole purpose of Nephi’s declaration back in 1 Nephi 3 is that the Lord told Lehi to return to Jerusalem to get the plates. It is that command, in particular, to which Nephi assented. Relying on chance and their own wisdom, the brothers made two unsuccessful attempts to get the plates. After each one, Laman and Lemuel were ready to give up and leave, but Nephi was committed to “go and do”—not just to “go and try.”

I have often thought about Nephi’s commitment in this situation. It is all well and good to make declarations of faith when you are in a position of relative safety, as Nephi was with Lehi, but it is another thing to maintain that commitment when you try something and it fails. And then you try something different and it fails; and, as a result of the second failure, you are beaten up. When the angel came, he spoke to Laman and Lemuel. He commanded them to “go up to Jerusalem again, and the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands” (1 Nephi 3:29), but we all know it was Nephi, alone, who obeyed.

As Nephi entered the city, he said he was “led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do” (1 Nephi 4:6). Is it possible that Nephi was willing to be led by the Spirit because of his experiences in 1 Nephi 2 and 3? I think so. He possessed confidence in the Lord because he had turned to Him in the past and received help. Surely Nephi had every right to expect that the Lord would help him again. But this time the Lord’s response was not simply a softening of his heart and a quiet assurance that his father was indeed a prophet. This time the Spirit told him to kill a man. Do you notice that, in this instance in the narrative, there is no immediate declaration that Nephi would “go and do the things that the Lord had commanded”? This time Nephi hesitated. “Never at any time have I shed the blood of a man,” he said; and, as a result, he “shrunk and would that [he] might not slay him” (4:10).

May I be so bold as to suggest I’m glad Nephi hesitated. How many people have been murdered throughout history while the culprits have claimed that “God told me to do it”? Nephi knew how important it was to get the plates from Laban, he knew the Lord commanded his father to do so, and he knew an angel reiterated the commandment to
him. Nephi had no doubt the Lord would prepare a way to accomplish the thing that had been commanded. But when the way was finally prepared, Nephi took a minute to weigh the consequences of what he was being asked to do. This was a commandment for which Nephi needed to make sure he was interpreting the still, small voice accurately. For Nephi to carry out this commandment, he had to have his own personal witness that what he was doing was indeed the will of God. Relying on his father’s prophetic mantle in this instance would not have been sufficient for what Nephi had to do. And so he listened more intently to the Spirit until he was satisfied that this act was indeed the will of the Lord, and then—and only then—he obeyed.

It seems to me that there is an important lesson here for us. There are times in our spiritual development that we rely on the testimonies and spiritual insights of others. The Prophet Joseph learned through revelation that with the gifts of the Spirit, “to some it is given to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world,” and “to others it is given to believe on their words” (D&C 46:13–14). To believe on the words of others is an important stepping stone in our spiritual development, but it should never be the final destination.

President Heber C. Kimball is reported to have said the following: “The time will come when no man nor woman will be able to endure on borrowed light. Each will have to be guided by the light within himself. If you do not have it, how can you stand?” Ultimately, we need to have our own personal testimony of the divinity of Jesus Christ, the prophetic calling of the Prophet Joseph, the inspired nature of the Book of Mormon, and the reality that Gordon B. Hinckley is the Lord’s anointed on the earth today. Ultimately, the testimonies of our parents, spouses, children, friends, or priesthood leaders will not bring us salvation until we make those testimonies our own. Do you recall Elder McConkie’s wonderful final testimony at general conference? Testifying of the Atonement, he said:

In speaking of these wondrous things I shall use my own words, though you may think they are the words of scripture, words spoken by other Apostles and prophets.

True it is they were first proclaimed by others, but they are now mine, for the Holy Spirit of God has borne witness to me that they are true; and it is now as though the Lord had revealed them to me in the first instance. I have thereby heard His voice and know His word.
If Nephi hadn’t realized the importance of his own personal testimony before, he certainly came to that conclusion here with Laban. 

The impact of this lesson for Nephi becomes even more clear just a few chapters later. You will recall that when the brothers returned to their parents with the plates, Lehi was ecstatic and immediately began studying them (1 Nephi 5:9–16). Perhaps it was this searching of the plates that acted as a catalyst for Lehi’s great vision of the tree of life. Note that upon hearing his father’s account of the vision and reacting to Lehi’s subsequent teachings, Nephi was not satisfied to sit back and rely on his father’s testimony. Rather, Nephi wrote that he was “desirous also that [he] might see, and hear, and know of these things by the power of the Holy Ghost,” which is given to “all those who diligently seek him” (10:17).

So Nephi chose to pay the price. In 1 Nephi 11:1, we read the following: “For it came to pass after I desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in my heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord.” Notice Nephi’s formula here: first, he had a desire to know; second, he believed the Lord would open his understanding (a principle he had learned back in 1 Nephi 2); and third, he put forth every effort through pondering in his heart what he had heard his father teach. As a result of this process, the heavens were opened, and he was privy to one of the greatest visions ever recorded.

May I suggest to you that the result might not have been the same if the vision had been received by Lehi in Jerusalem or shortly after embarking into the wilderness? Nephi had developed his spiritual sensitivity because of the way he responded to earlier spiritual experiences, as I have noted. Many years later, Nephi taught his people, “For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more” (2 Nephi 28:30). Nephi could teach that principle because that is exactly the way he developed his own spirituality.

In contrast, do you remember how Laman and Lemuel responded to their father’s vision and teachings? When Nephi returned from his visionary experience, he found his brothers “disputing one with another” (1 Nephi 15:2). So Nephi “spake unto [them]” and asked the “cause of their disputations” (15:6). Note how they responded: “Behold, we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken” (15:6). In return, Nephi asked if they had “inquired of the Lord?” (Note that,
for Nephi, this was a natural reaction to a failure to understand and that he had been applying this reaction since the second chapter.) But that was not the case for his brothers: “We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us” (15:9). Why didn't the Lord do for Laman and Lemuel what He did for Nephi? The simple answer is because they never asked. Five hundred years later, Alma the Younger taught the same principle to Zeezrom: “It is given to many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him” (Alma 12:9; emphasis added).

Nephi's response to his brothers tells us the Lord did want Laman and Lemuel to understand their father's vision, but they did not give the heed and diligence that would qualify them for it, as Nephi had.

I believe that experiences such as these molded Nephi into the great prophet he eventually became. It was those same types of experiences that enabled him, toward the end of his life, to penetratively ask us if we “are in the strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life” and to encourage us to “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men” (2 Nephi 31:18, 20). Nephi can ask us such questions precisely because he had spent his life living those principles. But the important element for our discussion is that Nephi had to make the same spiritual journey God requires of us.

I love Nephi—not just because the Book of Mormon portrays him as a righteous individual who seems to always choose the right, even when his father had a momentary lapse. I also love him because I see in 1 and 2 Nephi the metamorphosis of a young man who, foreordained to great things, still had to learn to find his way spiritually. It is this side of Nephi that I can turn to and relate to as I face my own spiritual growing pains. As I have read 1 and 2 Nephi from this perspective, I have caught something of a vision of what is possible for me because I see Nephi struggling with the same type of spiritual yearnings I struggle with. And I see him initiate the same spiritual steps I know I must implement in my life. Nephi has become one of my great heroes.

Anna of the New Testament

I will now shift gears a little and turn to a lesser-known scriptural personality from the New Testament. Forty days after the Savior's birth—and long before the wise men ever showed up—Joseph and Mary went to the temple to offer the purification sacrifice for the new
Like our temples today, the temple then was a busy place. In the eyes of most of the people, Mary and Joseph’s sacrifice was apparently just another sacrifice, but at least two people had the spiritual insight to appreciate the significance of the child who accompanied this couple. One of those is a woman named Anna.

Luke records just three verses about this amazing woman. As a result of such brief mention, she, like so many women, is often overlooked in our scriptural study and discussions. The paucity of information about her, however, should not blind us to her spiritual abundance. As I have read and pondered about Anna, she has also become one of my great heroes. Read with me what Luke has to say about her:

And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity;

And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.

And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem (Luke 2:36–38).

Even with such a short description, Anna has been the source of some significant reflection for me. My initial question when I first read about Anna was the following: Why was she privy to such an important event when so many others just went about their business at the temple? I think it is significant that these events took place at the temple. President Hinckley taught us that the temple and its ordinances are “the crowning blessings the Church has to offer.” In the ancient world, as in the modern, the fundamental purpose for attending the temple was and is to enter the presence of God. Thus, Elder Bruce R. McConkie describes the temple as “a holy sanctuary, set apart from the world, wherein the saints of God prepare to meet their Lord; where the pure in heart shall see God, according to the promises.” Yet, on this day, Anna was one of only two people, as Luke recorded, who recognized the presence of God. The others, it seems, were too busy doing other things to recognize the magnitude of this moment. Anna, on the other hand, did not allow herself to get so caught up in the ritual that she lost sight of the purpose behind the ritual; and, in so doing, she had spiritual eyes to see what was truly going on.
The first descriptive clue Luke gives us about this amazing woman is that she is a prophetess. The scriptures designate only five other women with that title. In Anna’s case, the exact meaning is unclear. We have no information about her past to help us understand it; and, unlike Simeon, she makes no prophetic declaration about the Christ child (Luke 2:32). However, as a result of this experience, she certainly fulfilled Revelation’s definition of prophecy as “the testimony of Jesus” (19:10). Thus, one way of understanding Anna’s designation of “prophetess” is “in preparation for her inspired identification of” Christ. Luke also tells us that she “gave thanks . . . unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (2:38). The word translated with the phrase, “gave thanks,” is anthropologeōmai. It means to “confess freely and openly.” Additionally, the imperfect tense of the verb “to speak” suggests that this confession was something she did repeatedly. Unlike Mary who “kept all these sayings in her heart” (2:51), Anna “spread abroad the word about the child.” She could not keep her testimony contained; she wanted everyone to know that all the prophecies had been fulfilled and that the Messiah had, in reality, come. The Lord, I think, will not have to admonish Anna as He did some of the early missionaries when He said that “with some I am not well pleased, for they will not open their mouths” (D&C 60:2).

The second characteristic of Anna that stands out to me is she had been serving in the temple with “fastings and prayers night and day” for a very long time. Some ambiguity exists in the Greek textual tradition over exactly how long Anna had served in the temple. Some texts, which the King James translators followed, indicate she had served there for eighty-four years since she became a widow. If this is the case, Anna would have been over a hundred years old when Mary and Joseph came to the temple with Jesus. Other texts, however, indicate that she was eighty-four years old at the time of these events. Regardless of these differences, both textual groups emphasize that Anna had been a constant temple patron for over sixty years. Unlike Simeon, who “came by the Spirit into the temple” (Luke 2:27), Anna needed no such guidance because she was always there.

I have often wondered, as I have read these verses, what the motivation was behind Anna’s constant and prolonged dedication to the temple. It surely couldn’t have been simply a job or an assignment. If that were the case, she would have retired or would have been released long before—but still she came. At her age, it couldn’t have been physically easy for her to get to the temple or to spend so much time
there—but still she came. Perhaps she, unlike many of her contemporaries, saw beyond the outward manifestations of the temple ritual. Perhaps she understood the true purpose behind temple worship; and, for one day, that purpose became a reality as she came into the presence of God’s Only Begotten Son. Is it any wonder that this wonderful woman recognized Him immediately?

Are there lessons for me to learn from Anna? I think so. I would like to touch on just two. First, her story teaches me I cannot allow myself to be complacent in my worship. In the 1907 October general conference, Elder David O. McKay declared, “The peril of this century is spiritual apathy.” We may have moved on to a new century, but I’m not sure we have put Elder McKay’s indictment behind us. Do you remember Nephi’s prophecy that in the last days, Satan will pacify people “and lull them away into carnal security, [so] that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth”? (2 Nephi 28:21). Of this Nephi warns: “Wo be unto him that is at ease in Zion” (28:24). Can we regularly attend our church meetings and the temple and still be included in Nephi’s prophecy? Can we be lulled into a false sense of security and think that all is well in our personal Zions because we mechanically attend to our worship? Elder John A. Widstoe taught that “the endowment which was given by revelation can best be understood by revelation.” But then note how he continues when he says that “to those who seek most vigorously, with pure hearts, will the revelation be greatest.” Remember that many people were probably at the temple the same day Anna was there, and yet they were not prepared to receive the greatest revelation of all—that they were in the presence of Christ.

Second, and clearly related to the first lesson, the story of Anna teaches me that the temple is where I really come to know that Jesus is the Christ and also to understand the significance of that statement. The temple helps us to understand the plan of salvation and Christ’s central role therein. Perhaps that is why President Howard W. Hunter issued the following challenge to members of the Church:

I . . . invite the members of the Church to establish the temple of the Lord as the great symbol of their membership and the supernal setting for their most sacred covenants. It would be the deepest desire of my heart to have every member of the Church be temple worthy. I would hope that every adult member would be worthy of—and carry—a current temple recommend, even if proximity to a temple does not allow immediate or frequent use of it.

Let us be a temple-attending and a temple-loving people. Let us hasten to the temple as frequently as time and means and personal
circumstances allow. Let us go not only for our kindred dead, but let us also go for the personal blessing of temple worship, for the sanctity and safety which is provided within those hallowed and consecrated walls. The temple is a place of beauty, it is a place of revelation, it is a place of peace. It is the house of the Lord. It is holy unto the Lord. It should be holy unto us.¹⁹

Even in three short verses in Luke, we can see the temple was holy to Anna. She loved the temple, and so her constant and unwavering attendance at the temple enabled her to have the greatest revelation possible—to know that Jesus is the Christ. Aren’t all revelations really ancillary to that revelation?

Conclusion

“He that hath the scriptures, let him search them” (3 Nephi 10:14). This injunction was given to those who survived the great destruction in the New World to show them the fulfillment of the words of the prophets. The same plea to search the scriptures has been proclaimed by all of God’s prophets. In this dispensation of the fullness of times, we have been blessed with not only the Bible but also the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. We can hearken to the prophets in many different ways. In this paper, I have discussed just one of these. Nephi and Anna are just two examples of real people mentioned in the scriptures. Their lives and experiences happened in real time. I believe that if we take the time to come to know them, then we will begin to identify with them—with their struggles and with their joys. Then, we can see the gospel and its doctrines not just as theology but also as practical guides that really work in the lives of people just like us. Listen to what President Kimball taught:

To know the patriarchs and prophets of ages past and their faithfulness under stress and temptation and persecution strengthens [our resolve]. To come to know Job well and intimately is to learn to keep faith through the greatest of adversities. To know well the strength of Joseph in the luxury of ancient Egypt when he was tempted by a voluptuous woman, and to see this clean young man resist all the powers of darkness embodied in this one seductive person, certainly should fortify the intimate reader against such sin. To see the forbearance and fortitude of Paul when he was giving his life to his ministry is to give courage to those who feel they have been injured and tried. . . . While starving, choking, freezing, poorly clothed, Paul was yet consistent in his service. He never wavered once after the testimony came to him following his supernatural
experience. To see the growth of Peter with the gospel as the catalyst moving him from a lowly fisherman—uncultured, unlearned, and ignorant, as they rated him—blossoming out into a great organizer, prophet, leader, theologian, teacher. Thus [we can] take courage and know that nothing can stop [our] progress but [ourselves] and [our] weaknesses.20

I know that to be true. As I have sought to identify with individuals in the scriptures, I have grown to love them. I am so grateful for their lives and examples. As I read about them, I take heart in knowing it is possible for even you and me to reach great spiritual heights if we follow the paths they did. We have the scriptures and therefore are under obligation to search them.  

Notes

1. This paper is based on an earlier, shorter version presented at a BYU Women’s Conference. That version was published as “Walking in Their Shoes,” Arise and Shine Forth (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 47–53.
8. See Leviticus 12 for the Mosaic Law requirements.
9. Simeon seems to be the only exception (Luke 2:25–32).
12. Miriam (Exodus 15:20); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22); Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14); and Isaiah’s wife (Isaiah 8:3), although Luke records that the daughters of Philip “did prophesy” (Acts 21:9). In Revelation 2:20, we read that Jezebel “calleth herself a prophetess,” but the author clearly does not approve of the self-designation.


16. For an overview of issues involved, see ibid., 431.


Elder Holland warned, “Inspired teaching must never become a lost art in the Church.”
What Is Education?

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While encouraging religious educators associated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to excel in teaching, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland warned, “Inspired teaching must never become a lost art in the Church, and we must make certain our quest for it does not become a lost tradition.”¹ I find it interesting that while Elder Holland expressed concern over preserving religious education, secular pedagogues share similar worries. For example, Neil Postman called his provocative analysis of education “The End of Education” and explained that this title was carefully selected “with a view toward its being an ambiguous prophecy.”² Postman is neither a pessimist nor a cynic. Although he is an educational critic, he is hopeful—yet worried. Another interesting, yet controversial, commentary on education that hints of similar worry is David Solway’s Education Lost.³ The title speaks for itself. These authors are not alone with their concerns over the changing face of education, for there are many who believe we are losing something in the way we approach education. Though we may not join the ranks of the anxious, it behooves us as educators to at least consider what education was, what it has become, how we define education, and how that might affect our teaching.

What Has Happened to Education?

Education has changed. At least what we perceive education to be has changed. I first noticed the change as I read pre-twentieth-century
stories and accounts from journals. It wasn’t so much the pedagogy or even the form of education that struck me as being so different as much as it was the way people felt about education. It was viewed differently; and, as a result, it was esteemed differently. Tevye, a character in Fiddler on the Roof, characterized this disposition well as he pondered how his life would be different if he were a rich man. Of all the imagined benefits, he felt the sweetest thing of all would be to discuss the holy books with learned men seven hours every day.

In earlier times, education was by no means an entitlement, and thus it was somewhat mysterious. Those lucky enough to experience the exercise of education were referred to literally as “educated” men and women. Fathers in every successive generation hoped their children would be more educated than the generation before them. Obviously, they hoped the next generation would enjoy a better lifestyle materially, but there was more to it than that. Education was viewed as a necessary ingredient of a fulfilled life. It was not valued merely for the tangible benefits as much as it was valued for the intangible benefit—an almost indescribable attribute of empowerment. Brigham Young once described education as “the power to think clearly, the power to act well in the world’s work, and the power to appreciate life.”4 In this respect, the power of education broadened perspective and greatly influenced not only how individuals lived their lives but also how individuals approached life, in general.

No Longer Living in the World

It seems that our values have changed over the years. I have heard people lament that modern society has turned into a culture without values. I do not believe we have lost our values as much as we have come to value something else instead. Thus, it is not that education no longer holds value today; however, somewhere along the line, it was devalued. Something has displaced education in terms of relevance and importance; and, as a result, education has changed.

In earlier times, the expressed value of education was that it helped man define the world and establish his role in the world around him. Ultimately, this would help him find some measure of fulfillment in that relationship. Oddly enough, we now find the tables turned. It is the world that defines man and sets the agenda, methodology, ideals, patterns, and expectations for fulfillment within that new relationship. We have shifted our role in the world by becoming of the world—defined by it, driven by it, and shaped by it. “The encroachment of the world into our lives is threatening!” Spencer W. Kimball warned.
"How hard it seems for many of us to live in the world and yet not of the world." I can’t help but think of Wordsworth’s haunting verse: "The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: Little we see in Nature that is ours; We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!"

As the world redefined man, education lost its charm, its esteem, its meaning, and its relevance. The value of being educated has been replaced with the value of being employed. While recruiting potential university students, James R. Kearl asked the candidates to tell him about their dreams and aspirations and hopes. "It's always about 'money and a job,'" Kearl says. "None of them dream of becoming educated people. That just never comes up." As you can see, even some of those who consider education to be important actually feel that education is nothing more than a tool of acquisition. It is a means to a vocative end. Since the world deals mostly in tangibles, knowing things has become important because that is how we get things. But underlying this notion is the cold reality that having things is far more important than understanding things. This attitude has made education expendable. I have met many individuals who feel that since they have the valued things of the world, they no longer need to seek education. I guess that education’s general relevance had been reduced to individual relevance.

Alfred North Whitehead, considered as one of the most original educational philosophers of the twentieth century, wrote: "In the history of education, the most striking phenomenon is that schools of learning, which at one epoch are alive with a ferment of genius, in a succeeding generation exhibit merely pedantry and routine." I believe this phenomenon is directly connected with the way we perceive education. If our perceptions and disposition of education change, we will approach and practice education differently. This is an important point I cannot emphasize enough. The way we define, perceive, and value education will directly determine how we approach education.

The world’s view of education seems to bestow the term “educated” according to what people have done and where they have been—rather than by what type of person they are and what their contributions to family and society have been. For example, we rarely refer to individuals as “educated” unless, of course, we are speaking of someone with several degrees or someone who has attended a school of reputation.

Similarly, while education has always been connected with knowledge, we now consider educated people not only as those who know something but also as those who seem to know more than anyone else. The
obsession with comparative knowledge has directly affected the way we teach. Our pedantic obsession with facts has fueled a deep-seated educational philosophy and approach. As a result, educational pedagogy is obsessed with—as Richard Mitchell described it—“filling up the registry.” The “registry,” of course, refers to the mind, which Mitchell presented as “a perpetual catalogue of whatever presents itself.” For me, this conjures images of an educational service station where poised instructors stand with a nozzle in hand next to the pumps of knowledge. I can see students arriving and matter of factly stating, “Fill ’er up!”

Our fascination with comparative knowledge has been embraced with such zeal that it is now an unwitting part of us. For example, when children return home from school, we routinely ask, “What did you learn in school today?” If they can recite something new that has been cataloged in their registry of knowledge, we assume they are becoming educated. We feel satisfied because we can actually see education in action. After all, that tidbit of information they just shared with us was not in the registry earlier that morning when they left for school. I must, however, point out that gaining knowledge isn’t bad. In fact, we are exhorted to learn theory, principle, and doctrine pertaining to things both in heaven and in the earth (D & C 88:77–78). It is not the quest for knowledge that causes problems as much as it is the pedantic approach.

If the sole purpose of education is to fill the registry with facts, figures, dialogue, etc. and if that is the end we seek to foster, then it seems fitting that those at the front line of teaching are often called instructors. The term instructor is derived from the Latin instruere, literally meaning to “pile on.” You would be hard pressed to find a student who wouldn’t agree with this historical definition—at least at one time or another during the student’s instructional career.

Now What?

I have felt unsettled with the changes in education, especially in the way we perceive, esteem, and frame it. I must point out that I am not necessarily longing for the “good old days of yesteryear,” nor am I trying to forecast an educational apocalypse (although both ideas might have some merit). I have concluded that the way we define education directly affects the way we approach education; thus, it is important to reevaluate what education really means. As an educator, or, in other words, as one whose profession is education, I believe I should know what my profession is—or, at the very least, what it ought to be.
**Education Defined**

The term education is derived from the Latin *ducare* (coming from the root *ducere*)—literally meaning “to lead or draw out.” This definition makes it clear that education is more than filling registries. It is an endeavor of leading or drawing individuals out. I have found it is one thing to know an etymological definition and quite another to understand what it really means.

As I began fussing with the various possibilities, I first thought that maybe education was supposed to draw out the natural gifts from within a student. In this sense, education would be defined as an endeavor of “drawing something out of students.” Although this is a worthy approach, it tends to discount the importance of adding anything to one’s register because it suggests everything is already in the student waiting to be drawn out. Typically, sparsely filled registers make it difficult—if not impossible—to draw something out that isn’t even there. No wonder that some teachers are discouraged with a lack of participation from students or find that relevant comments during class discussion are almost nonexistent. We must recognize that sometimes students cannot discuss something they have never thought of, known, or don’t understand. With this in mind, I decided that there must be more to the etymological definition of education, and I continued to think it over. Before moving on, I feel I must point out that we have an obligation to be aware of and sensitive to latent talents, gifts, and potentials of our students.

After considerable fussing, I concluded that education must be an endeavor that “leads or draws the student out of something.” That “something” could be ignorance, poverty, lifestyle, attitudes, unhappiness, or even sin. I believe this definition is striking because it is purposeful. By purposeful, I mean that education—when understood correctly—is driven by an intended purpose. It is designed to actually do something. Thus, knowledge, in and of itself, is of little value if it doesn’t draw the possessor out of some previous condition.

**Religious Education**

To assume that religious education has remained unsullied and unchanged would be either a demonstration of naivete or denial. For even with a cursory comparison, we find that religious educators have embraced many of the same educational pedagogies, methodologies, philosophies, and dispositions as their secular colleagues. We soon realize that we (secular and religious educators) not only are from the same
family tree and share the same family secrets but also discover we are roommates living in the same house. Thus, in many ways, the only difference between secular education and religious education is the topic.

David O. McKay, esteemed for his insights and perspectives on education, felt the religious educator bore a responsibility that was greater than the high ethical standards and responsibilities required of other teachers. I do not believe President McKay was intimating that religious educators are better than other teachers. I do, however, believe he was reminding those in religious education that they have the responsibility to literally educate their students. Religious education, by definition, is more than teaching and beyond filling the registry with religious information (instruction). We must embrace the core meaning of education and teach in ways that literally draw our students out. “There is true nobility,” President McKay taught, “in the soul of that man or woman who sincerely desires and strives to lead children out of contaminating influences into an environment of high ideals and lofty endeavors.”

Although “drawing students out” is the general etymological core of education, drawing individuals out of the world is at the heart of religious education. Christ lived and taught this principle superbly. Although a mortal resident, Christ never claimed the world as His home. Though He did say He was in the world (see John 17:11-12), Christ always clarified that He was never of the world (see 17:14-15,17). You see, He may have lived here, but He was not of—the world. After triumphantly declaring that He overcame the world (16:33), Christ prayed that those left behind would be kept from evil, sanctified, and eventually become one with Him (17:15-26). I believe this is what religious education is all about—providing disciples with enough information that draws them out of the world and leads them unto Christ.

Because of Christ’s desire that we become one with Him, the disciples of Jesus have been urged to avoid the world. Joseph Fielding Smith said, “If we are living the religion which the Lord has revealed and which we have received, we do not belong to the world.” He then emphasized, “We should have no part in all its foolishness.” Consider how Abram, after entering into an oath with the Lord, refused to take a thread to a shoe latchet from the king of Sodom (Genesis 14:21). He wanted no part of Sodom’s world. In restorative times, the Lord commands the Saints again that they should not “live after the manner of the world” (D & C 95:13). I suspect that religious educators would do well to shun the world and its forms of teaching with the same fervor as Abram.
Religiously Educating People

“The most vital knowledge you can learn,” according to Ezra Taft Benson, “is the saving truths of the gospel—the truths that will make the difference in your eternal welfare.” I expect that most religious teachers believe this to be true. But I also suspect that some teachers are distracted by personal interests, specialized training, languages, emotion, pedagogy, etc. and become religious instructors rather than religious educators. They seem to value the tidbits while discounting the greater connections. Wilford Woodruff warned: “Men may labor to make a great display of talent, learning, and knowledge, either in printing or preaching. They may try to preach the mysteries and to present something strange, great, and wonderful, and they may labor for this with all their might, in the spirit and strength of man without the aid of the Holy Spirit of God, and yet the people are not edified, and their preaching will not give much satisfaction.” In truth, the people are not educated, for they are left in their previous state and not drawn out of their fallen situation.

Religious educators should, therefore, be vigilant in what is taught and in what is not taught. “There is much reading material that is available which is either time-wasting or corrupting,” President Ezra Taft Benson taught. Although an instructor has little regard for what is taught—as long as there is plenty of it—educators constantly seek the best material that will connect students with the greater principles and accord possible change.

The notion of a seminary has always intrigued me. Typically thought of an institution where religious instruction takes place, a seminary literally means a “seedbed.” Consider how appropriate that name is for religious education. Educators carefully plant seeds that will bring forth a calculated future harvest. This process reflects nicely Alma’s metaphor of sowing seeds of truth with hopes of a swelling growth (Alma 32). John Dewey, a favorite in many educational circles, wrote: “Hence it is nonsense to talk about the aim of education—or any other undertaking—where conditions do not permit of foresight of results, and do not stimulate a person to look ahead to see what the outcome of a given activity is to be.”

Conclusion

Education, properly understood and appropriately administered, draws or leads individuals to new territory. “The most cherished opportunities of the religious teacher,” David O. McKay taught,
“should be to lead the child to see, through the trouble and turmoil of a physical world.” Religious education draws individuals out of the world and leads them to God through the gospel of Christ.

When asked “What is true education?” President McKay responded: “It is awakening a love for truth; giving a just sense of duty; opening the eyes of the soul to the great purpose and end of life. It is not so much giving words, as thoughts; or mere maxims, as living principles. It is not teaching to be honest, because ‘honesty is the best policy’; but because it is right. It is teaching the individual to love the good, for the sake of the good; to be virtuous in action because one is so in heart; to love and serve God supremely not from fear, but from delight in his perfect character. No one can successfully controvert the fact that upon the teacher rests much of the responsibility of lifting society to this high ideal.”

Finally, I return to Elder Holland’s exhortation that inspired education can never become a lost art in the Church. If religious educators will be true to their profession by planting seeds of truth in the seedbed of their students and remaining aloof to the world and its methods, then authentic education will always be found in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Notes

10. The actual roots are as follows: (< in- on + struere to pile).
12. Ibid., 442.
What Is Education?

18. Ibid., 437.
The term “reproving with sharpness” is found in D&C 121:43.
Reproving with Sharpness—When?

Robert L. Millet and Lloyd D. Newell

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Many years ago, a middle-aged couple sat across from me (Millet). She had her head bowed, and he busily eyed my office. Before I had the chance to ask why they had sought marriage counseling, Sister G. raised her head, revealing numerous bruises around the eyes and cheeks and an upper lip severely swollen. My question was an obvious one: “What happened to you?”

She started to answer but was quickly interrupted by an anxious husband: “We have just had a family disagreement. But then, that’s beside the point—let’s talk about why we are here!”

Brother G. went on and on about how his “needs” were going unmet, how he felt ignored and slighted in the home, and how his family had failed to recognize him as the head of the household. After a few minutes, I interrupted as I pointed to his wife’s bruises: “Brother G., did you do this to your wife?”

“I certainly did,” he retorted in a somewhat proud fashion.

“Why?” I asked, almost dumbfounded.

He paused for a few seconds, smiled, and then reached across my desk and grabbed my triple combination. “I have only done,” he replied, “what the Lord said fathers and priesthood holders should do when leading the Church or their families.” He read and commented: “‘Reproving betimes with sharpness. . . .’ You see, the Lord says we need to be sharp in our reproof or corrections.” He pounded my desk in synchrony with the word sharp. “I am only trying to establish myself as the head of my home, the patriarch.” He smiled again, confidently.
I stared in amazed stupor for what must have seemed like minutes. Surely, I thought, no member of the Church could be so perverse in judgment as to justify spouse abuse through the very section of the Doctrine and Covenants that warns harshly against the evils of unrighteous dominion. Or could he or she?

**Moved upon by the Holy Ghost**

Granted, this particular man’s problem was overly extreme—far more exaggerated than the problems of average members of the Church. But his basic misunderstanding and his misguided abuse of priesthood authority and scriptural injunction centered around a vital principle of relationship building that is internalized far too infrequently in the homes of Latter-day Saints. To uncover this true and timely principle, we need always to include additional words from the verse Brother G. cited, placing the emphasis where it belongs—at the end of the expression. Note these additional words: “Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost” (D&C 121:43; emphasis added).

Too often, we reprove for inappropriate or unjustified reasons. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has confirmed that the correct manner and motivation for reproof are indicated in this vital verse. “In practice, however, when we undertake to reprove we frequently are prompted not by the Holy Ghost but by ego. Moreover, we often fail to reprove ‘betimes,’ meaning speedily and early on. Time can harden feelings as surely as the sun bakes wet clay.”

Our pride may prompt us to lash out and reprove harshly. Our own insecurity and fear may precipitate unkind responses. Possibly, we may truly misunderstand or have a stilted notion of reproof. Perhaps we have let it fester until the situation has become much larger than it warrants. Reproving with sharpness does not merit callous disregard for the sensitivities of the other person or heartless actions that demean.

It is possible that far too often we are “moved upon,” not by the Spirit, but by our own emotions—or even by the adversary, the author of contention. The Master taught His Nephite disciples that “he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another” (3 Nephi 11:29). The Holy Ghost must dictate the need for reproof to us, or else we reprove improperly and for the wrong reason. That requires the personal righteousness of the reprover, a loving and patient disposition, and a sincere desire to help rather than to harm and to bless rather than to damage.
Perhaps the following chart and discussion will be useful in pointing out differences between reproving when divinely guided to do so and when motivated to do so for other reasons. How may we know if our reproves are prompted by and are worthy of the companionship of the Holy Ghost?

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<td>1. The reprover is anger motivated.</td>
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1. The reprover is love motivated

Anger is a prostitution of true feelings and consequently accomplishes little of virtue or value. “The wrath of man,” wrote James, “worketh not the righteousness of God” (James 1:20). We are on the proper path when we simply reprove for the right reason—that is, when it is clear the correction is out of genuine love for the loved one. When we reprove in anger or lash out in any form of violence, our behavior is a reflection of a fault in character and a weakness in Christian discipleship.

The Holy Ghost would certainly never prompt anyone to indulge in brutality, physical viciousness, or emotional cruelty. A prompting of the Spirit would never authorize shouting, swearing, expressing feelings of hatred or discord, or exhibiting a desire to harm the other person. “A violent temper is such a terrible, corrosive thing. And the tragedy is that it accomplishes no good; it only feeds evil with resentment and
rebellion and pain,” said President Gordon B. Hinckley in general conference. “Anger is not an expression of strength. It is an indication of one’s inability to control his thoughts, words, his emotions. Of course it is easy to get angry. When the weakness of anger takes over, the strength of reason leaves. Cultivate within yourselves the mighty power of self-discipline.”

When our hearts are right and our purposes pure, we will be filled with love—not anger. The Holy Ghost moves upon us when we are, and have been, in tune with the Spirit prior to the reproof. When our sincerest motive is love and our deepest intention is growth for the person receiving the reproof, our hearts will be “filled with love towards God and all men” (Mosiah 2:4). Always, the reproof will be appropriate.

2. The reproof is necessary

Some things simply don’t matter. If what a loved one is doing is temporarily disturbing or inconvenient, we need to ask frequently, “Does it really matter? Do I honestly need to ‘make waves’ over this issue (or ‘make an issue’ over something that need not be taken so seriously)?”

A number of years ago, my wife and I (Millet) entered into a pact that we would work together to avoid tension or contention in the home by one of us asking the other (delicately, quietly, and at the right moment), “Does it really matter?” or “Do we need to let this thing get blown out of proportion?” or “Is this really all that important?”

While making a family trip across the country one summer, I remember finding myself getting annoyed by our youngest son who was propping his feet on my tape player. “Jeff, could you move your feet?” “Move your feet, Jeffery.” “Do you hear Daddy, Jeffery? I asked you to take your feet off the tape player!” Just as I was about to raise my voice and insist upon obedience, my wife nudged me gently and responded, “Sweetheart, does it really matter?” My tendency then (and perhaps our tendency in similar circumstances) was to blurt out: “Of course it matters! I am his father and he needs to learn to obey!” But I caught myself and suddenly realized that it “wasn’t that big of a deal,” as we say sometimes.

Consider the father who decides he “needs” his rest on Sunday afternoon but is unexpectedly disturbed by a little one landing on his stomach. Does the father leap from the couch and spank the child, or does he smile and move to the floor to play also? Instead of a thoughtless reaction, stopping to consider whether the reproof is really necessary can save some hurt feelings. What is a response of love? President Hinckley counseled in general priesthood meeting:
You men who are husbands and fathers should have had kindled in your hearts . . . a resolve so to conduct yourselves in your homes as to be worthy of the love, the respect, the honor, the companionship of your wives and your children. Holding the priesthood does not give any man the right to domineer over those for whom he should show the greatest of love and the greatest of consideration. Each of us should go home this night with a stronger resolve in our hearts to live worthy of the companionship of those who love us most and whom we should love and honor and respect without reservation.3

Some things are better left unsaid; some actions may be better off ignored. Of course, that doesn’t mean that children should be left without discipline or that others in our circle of influence should be left uncorrected. But wisdom is knowing when to act, how to act, and why you should or should not act. Brigham Young gave a key to making righteous reproof possible: “If you are ever called to chasten a person, never chasten beyond the balm you have within you to bind up. . . . When you have the chastening rod in your hands, ask God to give you wisdom to use it, that you may not use it to the destruction of an individual, but to his salvation.”4 If we use correct governing principles and strive for personal righteousness, answers will come, the prompting of the Spirit will be our constant companion, and our dominion will be everlasting (D&C 121:46).

3. Showing love after the reproof is natural and easy

We are not justified in flying off the handle in a burst of anger. Further, we can do much to prevent any resentment and alienation resulting from the reproof by reinforcing the other person with “an increase of love.” When parents reaffirm sincere love for their children and confidence in them after the reproof, the relationship is strengthened; and meaningful lessons beyond the reproof are internalized. Some of a family’s closest and most spiritual moments can occur at such times. We all make mistakes. We overreact from time to time. But we can show forth greater love every time. We can admit error when it is made; we can repent and improve. And we can explain our reproof with kindness, gentleness, and love unfeigned. This is a crucial teaching moment for children—a moment that transcends the reproof. It’s a time for parents to model gospel principles enacted in loving reproofs.

Part of the scriptural mandate is to reprove promptly—without harboring ill will or bitterness. We follow reproof with more love; and the love should come on the heels of the reproof—not after hours or days of the “cold shoulder” or silent treatment. This reassurance
should be repeated often so the reproof does not become a barrier to a continuing, nurturing relationship.⁵

President Harold B. Lee counseled us to temper criticism with love:

During my lifetime I have learned much about reproving with sharpness, “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost” (D&C 121:43). And I have learned something else: that the higher the position or duty of the stewardship, there is the greater danger of wounding sensitive souls. We must always reach out for the wounded soul whom we may have offended, and unintentionally in some cases, lest he esteem us to be his enemy. I have learned that sincere appreciation for accomplishment should always precede any supposed criticism. . . .

I recall an incident in my own family where one of my young granddaughters was being criticized by her father for not properly taking care of her room, making her bed, etc., etc. And then with considerable feeling she said, “Well, Daddy, why do you only see the thing to criticize and never see the good things that I do?” This brought the father to some serious reflections, and that night he placed under her pillow a letter of love and understanding telling her of all the things that he admired in her, and thus began to bridge over the hurt that had been implied by his constant criticism with no approval for the good things. . . .

There are times when we need to reprove, but even when we must correct those who need reproof, they hear what we say to them more clearly and lasting if they know that we love them and honor them and respect them in their callings.⁶

4. Teaching moments occur during the expression of love

Showing love after the reproof is critical. It is during such expressions of love that the parent is able to make those difficult discriminations for the child between “I love you” and “I don’t love or appreciate what was done.” If the parent is truly love motivated, the love will flow during and after the reproof. Godly sorrow is born of love. So when parents are sensitive and tender during teaching moments (for example, “You know, when I was your age . . . ” or “Some things are kind of hard to understand, aren’t they? Let me explain. . . .” or “I want you to understand that the reason I have taken this disciplinary action is because I love you. . . .”), the love they exhibit will more readily create a repentant attitude in the child.

The very next verse in the revelation to which we have referred states: “That he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death” (D&C 121:44). There must be no question in the
mind of a child, for example, as to how the parent stands on matters of good and evil and right and wrong. The reproved one must know that the other’s faithfulness to God and His laws is genuine and deep. But the child should also sense that the relationship matters and that the mother’s (or the father’s, wife’s, husband’s, bishop’s, teacher’s, etc.) love is constant. The essence of the “great plan of mercy” is love and forgiveness (Alma 42:31). The child should come to feel, through the experience of divine reproof, that the parent’s faithfulness to her or him (the child) is pure and certain—literally, what has been done was for the child’s best good.

Elder Maxwell has stated: “If we seek to administer reproof properly, we must also be willing to listen and to respond after we have issued our reproof. The receiver will often need some time to test the accuracy of our reproof and the implications of that reproof. He needs to reassure himself that we care for him, that he is still safely within our circle of concern.”

On occasion, when it has been necessary to correct one of my children, I (Newell) have learned that, more often than not, what they wanted was to be noticed, appreciated, and loved. They’ve needed a hug, a quiet moment together, and a little more attention and concern. I have also learned that we must be willing to be taught, corrected, and even reproved by our children. Once when I didn’t handle a discipline situation with my five-year-old son very well, my seven-year-old daughter calmly said (words she had heard my wife and I say to our children), “You surely could have handled that better.” She was right. I asked for forgiveness, learned a valuable lesson, grew as a person, and improved as a father.

President Hinckley has given specific insight on what it means to reprove with sharpness when moved upon by the Holy Ghost. Some years ago, he spoke of a boy who visited him in his office and detailed a story of a troubled life. The boy spoke of his father who had an uncontrolled temper:

Whenever he disciplined his children, he lost control and destroyed both them and himself.

As I looked across the desk at that trembling, broken young man, estranged from a father he considered his enemy, I thought of some great words of revealed truth given through the Prophet Joseph Smith. They set forth in essence the governing spirit of the priesthood, and I believe they apply to the government of our homes. Let me read them to you.
“No power or influence can or ought to be maintained . . ., only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

“By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy and without guile—”

I believe those marvelous and simple words set forth the spirit in which we should stand as parents. Do they mean that we should not exercise discipline, that we should not reprove? Listen to these further words:

“Reproving betimes with sharpness [When? While angry or in a fit of temper? No—] when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy;

“That he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death” (D&C 121:41–44).

This . . . is the key to government in the home directed by the Holy Spirit.8

5. The reproof is person centered

Our concern must be to “save souls”—not to “save face.” When we deeply understand that “the worth of souls is great in the sight of God,” we do all we can to increase feelings of self-worth in others, engender self-confidence, teach others to live and grow in meaningful ways, and sincerely strive to build and bless others (D&C 18:10). As President Spencer W. Kimball reminds us:

Jesus lived and taught the virtues of love and kindness and patience. He also taught the virtues of firmness and resolution and persistence and courageous indignation. These two sets of virtues seem to clash with each other . . . , yet both are necessary. If there were but one, love without discipline, love without deep conviction of right and wrong, without courage to fight the wrong, such love becomes sentimentalism. Conversely, the virtues of righteous indignation without love can be harsh and cruel.9

If our concern is for “the other” and not for ourselves, we’ll be more likely to reprove appropriately and with the Spirit; we’ll be more inclined to be both loving and firm. If our reproof has been preceded “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness and pure knowledge” (D&C 121:41–42), it will be difficult to not be wholly motivated by love for the other, and, in large measure, to forget ourselves. It will help to shift the focus from our needs, our frustrations, and our desires and to concentrate
more on questions such as the following: What does this child need to learn and grow? or How can I best help her learn a crucial gospel principle? or When would be the most effective time to talk to him? or How can I prepare for the reproof so as to be spiritually strengthened? This inventory will help to purify our motives and concentrate our attention on “the other.”

6. The bond of love is strengthened between individuals

Parents who are preoccupied with themselves and their own needs will have more difficulty bringing and leading their children to a desired pattern of behavior and, particularly, into the realm of divine experience. We must never let our concerns for our own appearance crowd out the nobler concerns of our children. A sad commentary on a family in the Church is when a father or mother censures a young person who chooses to go to a priesthood leader to seek counsel or make proper confession. One young lady parked her car three blocks from the chapel, literally walked a half mile out of her way to get to the chapel, and then sat on pins and needles during the entire interview with her bishop. The problem? She had a matter to discuss with her church leader and knew that her parents (active members) would “badger” her about talking to other people about private matters. In contrast, young people who sense in their parents the virtues of integrity and pure faithfulness to the truth will have a deeper and more abiding love for parents and other authorities.

In marriage and parenting, a Christlike disposition, which has at heart the sincere best interests of the other person and sees the child (or spouse) as a growing, changing child of God, will strengthen bonds and inspire emulation. “Nor should we neglect the power of gentle reproof,” Elder Maxwell reminds us. “Sometimes we need not declaim the actions of others so much as remind them of who they are and what they should be.”10 A parent or spouse who humbly and in a heartfelt way lives the Golden Rule and believes with whole heart that this child/person is a cherished child of God will do much to help create love, confidence, and goodness in the other person.

Conclusion

President Hinckley has sternly reproved those who are guilty of any form of abuse and unrighteous dominion:

It is difficult for me to understand the tragic accounts of troubled marriages that come to me. They speak of abuse. They speak of
dictatorial attitudes, and of some husbands who are bullies in their own homes. They speak of violations of trust, and of broken covenants. They speak of divorce and tears and heartache. . . .

To men within the sound of my voice, wherever you may be, I say, if you are guilty of demeaning behavior toward your wife, if you are prone to dictate and exercise authority over her, if you are selfish and brutal in your actions in the home, then, stop it! Repent! Repent now while you have the opportunity to do so. . . .

The time is now for husbands and wives who may have offended one another to ask forgiveness and resolve to cultivate respect and affection one for another, standing before the Creator as sons and daughters worthy of His smile upon us.11

The Holy Ghost will engender love and respect, not fear and distrust. When we give heed to the Spirit, our reproof will be motivated by love, done with meekness, and sanctioned by heaven.

Clearly, there are times when reproof is necessary and appropriate. Seeking to live righteously so as to be worthy of the influence of the Holy Ghost will do much to ensure our reproofs are inspired of heaven. The Holy Ghost can help us to know when and what the reproof should be. The sanction of the Spirit will bless the interaction, during and after the reproof.

God’s love toward His children is manifest through chastening as well as commending, through reproof as well as blessing, “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” (Hebrews 12:6; Revelation 3:19). His reproof always comes because he loves us (D & C 95:1)—and always as a means to a greater end. The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “If I did not love men, I would not reprove them.”12 Let us follow where the Lord and His prophets lead.

Notes

1. Neal A. Maxwell, A Wonderful Flood of Light (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 113.


Joseph Smith published facsimilies from the book of Abraham in Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1842. The facsimilies were taken from the collection of Egyptian antiquities that were transported from Ohio to Missouri—and eventually to Illinois.

A book of Abraham facsimile from the *Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842.
The story detailing the discovery of the Egyptian mummies in Upper Egypt, together with the papyri scrolls, their subsequent purchase by the Latter-day Saints in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835, and Joseph Smith's translation of the papyrus scroll containing the writings of Abraham, is a fascinating and important narrative. However, the focus of this paper will be to outline briefly the history of the four Egyptian mummies during the Kirtland and Missouri periods of the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Kirtland Period

During the decades of 1820 and 1830, a number of Egyptian mummies were shipped to the United States for commercial display. Michael Chandler, an Irish immigrant, purportedly acquired eleven mummies from his Italian relative, Antonio Lebolo. By 1833, Chandler was moving from one city to the next, displaying his mummies in commercial exhibits. Newspaper ads indicate that his venues included Philadelphia in April 1833, Baltimore in July/August 1833, and Harrisburg in September 1833. Eventually, Mr. Chandler settled in Stow, Ohio—not far from the Mormon settlement of Kirtland. Here he resumed his traveling exhibit, making stops in Cleveland and vicinity during the spring of 1835. As of that date, his collection had dwindled from eleven to only four mummies, and he openly offered to sell them along with the ancient papyri.¹
During Chandler’s travels, he was informed of Joseph Smith’s translation work with the Book of Mormon. When Chandler arrived in Kirtland, he specifically invited Joseph to come and view the collection. After examining the artifacts, Joseph asked if he could purchase only the papyri, but Chandler denied that request. The price for the mummies and papyri was a considerable sum of $2,400. Nevertheless, a group of members and nonmembers emerged and purchased the Egyptian antiquities. With papyri in hand, Joseph Smith recorded: “Soon after . . . the Saints at Kirtland purchased the mummies and papyrus, . . . and with W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdrey as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt.”

Although Joseph Smith may have initially kept the mummies at his residence in Kirtland, by mid-October of 1835, they had been moved to the home of Frederick G. Williams. The movement of the mummies to the Williams's home is substantiated by several statements made by the Prophet:

Saturday, October 24: Mr. Goodrich and wife called to see the ancient [Egyptian] records, and also Dr. Frederick G. Williams to see the mummies.

Thursday, October 29: Returned to our writing room, went to Dr. Williams’ after my large journal; made some observations to my scribe concerning the plan of the city, which is to be built up hereafter on this ground consecrated for a Stake of Zion.

While at the doctor’s, Bishop Edward Partridge came in in company with President Phelps. I was much rejoiced to see him. We examined the mummies, returned home, and my scribe commenced writing in my journal.

Tuesday, November 17: Exhibited the alphabet of the ancient records, to Mr. Holmes, and some others. Went with him to Frederick G. Williams’, to see the mummies.

Apparently, the mummies may have been kept at the residence of Frederick G. Williams from October 1835 to mid-February 1836—at which time they were delivered to Joseph Coe, a member of the first high council of the Church in Kirtland (see D&C 102:3). Regarding this event, Joseph Smith stated:

Elder Coe called to make some arrangements about the Egyptian mummies and records. He proposes to hire a room at John Johnson’s Inn, and exhibit them there from day to day, at certain
hours, that some benefit may be derived from them. I complied
with his request, and only observed that they must be managed
with prudence and care, especially the manuscripts.7

Joseph Coe had earlier contributed $800 of the $2,400 needed to
purchase the mummies and papyri from Michael Chandler in July
1835.8 It was probably Coe's intention to exhibit the antiquities at
Johnson's Inn so he could recover some of the $800 he had loaned for
the purchase of the mummies and papyri. The fact that the mummies
were to be exhibited at an inn, a rest stop for travelers and strangers,
clearly prompted the Prophet to counsel Coe to manage the mummies
and papyri with "prudence and care."9 Little, if any, information is
known about Coe's venture to exhibit the mummies at John Johnson's
Inn. How long the mummies remained in Joseph Coe's possession
remains a mystery. What is known, however, is that both the mummies
and the papyri were moved to the upper floor of the Kirtland Temple
sometime prior to or following its dedication on 26 March 1836. This
fact is affirmed by a statement in the History of the Church on 2
November 1837 as well as in a journal entry by Wilford Woodruff,
who viewed both the mummies and papyri during a visit to the temple:

Thursday, November 2, 1837: The Church in Kirtland voted to
sanction the appointment of Brother Phineas Richards and Reuben
Hedlock, by the Presidency, to transact business for the Church in
procuring means to translate and print the records taken from the
Catacombs of Egypt, then in the Temple.10

Elder Smoot and myself visited each appartment of the House
accompanied by Elder Parrish & I must confess the scenery is
indisscribable. When I entered the threshold of the house &
Passed into the lower room their was great solemnity if not awe
immediately overwhelmed me. I felt indeed as if my footsteps were
in the Temple of the Lord. After walking into the Pulpets erected
for the Priesthoods & viewing the curtains all bespeaking that
grandure, solemnity & order that nothing short of wisdom from
God could invent. We then visited the upper rooms & there viewed
four Egyptian Mumies & also the Book of Abram written by his
own hand & not owly the hieroglyphicks but also many figures
that this precious treasure contains are calculated to make a lasting
impression upon the mind which is not to be erased.11

It also appears that as early as December 1835, Joseph Smith had
planned to use a room in the temple as both a repository for the mum-
 mies/ papyri and a place for translation. In his journal on Thursday, 31
December, Joseph observed: "In the after noon I attended at the Chapel
to give directions concerning the upper rooms, and more especially the
west room which I intend occupying, for a translating room, which will be prepared this week.”

The Kirtland Temple would have been an ideal location to translate the ancient texts as well as store the mummies and papyri together. However, neither the temple nor Kirtland itself would remain places of tranquility and peace. By the summer of 1837, just three or four months following the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, the seeds of apostasy were sown among a significant number of Church members. The temple itself was scene to several heated debates between those faithful to Joseph and those who opposed him. Eliza R. Snow described one such event:

Soon after the usual opening services, one of the brethren on the west stand arose, and just after he commenced to speak, one on the east interrupted him. Father Smith, presiding, called for order—he told the apostate brother that he should have all the time he wanted, but he must wait his turn—as the brother on the west took the floor and commenced first to speak, he must not be interrupted. A fearful scene ensued—the apostate speaker becoming so clamorous that Father Smith called for the police to take that man out of the house, when Parrish, John Boynton, and others, drew their pistols and bowie-knives, and rushed down from the stand into the congregation; John Boynton saying he would blow out the brains of the first man who dared to lay hands on him. Many in the congregation, especially women and children, were terribly frightened—some tried to escape from the confusion by jumping out of the windows. Amid screams and shrieks, the policemen, in ejecting the belligerents, knocked down a stove-pipe, which fell helterskelter among the people; but, although bowie-knives and pistols were wrested from their owners, and thrown hither and thither to prevent disastrous results, no one was hurt, and after a short, but terrible scene to be enacted in a temple of God, order was restored, and the services of the day proceeded as usual.

As a result of the apostates’ hatred and opposition to Joseph and other key leaders of the Church, Joseph was forced to leave Kirtland on the night of 12 January 1838. Following his departure, the apostates sought to seize control of properties belonging to the Prophet or the Church. Regarding these events, Lucy Mack Smith said:

Their first movement was to sue Joseph for debt, and, with this pretense, seize upon every piece of property belonging to any of the family. Joseph then had in his possession four Egyptian mummies, with some ancient records that accompanied them. These the mob swore they would take, and then burn every one of them. Accordingly, they obtained an execution upon them for an unjust debt of fifty dollars; but, by various stratagems, we succeeded in keeping them out of their hands.
One of the strategies referred to by Lucy Smith involved hiding the mummies and papyri in the homes of Latter-day Saints still living in the Kirtland area. One such home was that of William H. Huntington. Oliver B. Huntington, a son of William, recorded the following:

This same Fall of 1837 the Kirtland Bank broke and with it Kirtland broke and the Devil broke out among the members of the Church. Many of the leading Elders apostatised and turned against the Prophet seeking to take his life, but God warned him to rise up by night and depart for Missouri which he did and as fast as possible all the faithful followed, and those who could not go but were forced to stay another winter were hunted, harassed, robbed and mobed by apostates and among that number I was one although at the same time my house was a hiding place for old father Joseph Smith his sons Carlos and Samuel and many others. In my house the mummies and Egyptian Records were hid to keep them from sworn destruction by apostates.15

It appears that while the mummies were in the Huntington home, they were stored for a time under the bed of Zina Diantha, a daughter of William H. Huntington. The following is descriptive of Zina’s bedtime routine with the four mummies stored under her bed:

Candle in hand, Zina opened the door of her dark bedroom. In the dim light, she could see the four black shapes protruding from under the big, hand-carved wooden bed. They were sarcophagi, each containing the mummified body of an ancient Egyptian—enough to frighten the sleep out of any teenage youngster.

But Zina was not to be frightened by a few mummies, Egyptian or otherwise. She set her candlestick down on the chest of drawers, matter-of-factly dressed for bed and went to sleep wondering if the permanent sleepers beneath her had been nobles or kings or just ordinary folk like herself.14

With the collapse of the Mormon community at Kirtland, those who remained loyal to this nascent faith either left town or went into hiding. This hurried departure necessitated leaving the mummies and papyri secretly hidden at William H. Huntington’s home in New Portage, Ohio, which was about twenty miles south of Kirkland. In the absence of the Prophet Joseph, it appears that his parents were entrusted with the care of the Egyptian artifacts.

During this same time, a pair of brothers, Edwin and Samuel Woolley, became interested in Mormonism. Edwin had heard the missionaries preach and felt compelled to meet the Mormon Prophet. Edwin arrived too late at Kirtland, but he did manage to locate Joseph Smith Sr. at the Huntington home.
Edwin convinced Father Smith, according to Edwin’s brother Samuel, “to bring the mummies and the Record of Abraham” with him to his home in Rochester, Ohio. A wagon was hired to transport the artifacts, and Father Smith commenced a lengthy stay with the Woolleys that winter of 1837–38. His absence prompted his wife Lucy Mack to send son William to locate him. After rejoining the family, they began their slow journey to Missouri, arriving at Far West during July 1838.

**The Missouri Period**

What became of the mummies and the ancient writings during the Missouri period becomes somewhat obscured. One pioneer writer omits the entire Missouri episode, claiming that the mummies went directly from the Kirtland area to Nauvoo. However, a handful of others document that the mummies passed through Missouri during 1838. Samuel Woolley is perhaps the most forthright Missouri source. He records in his diary that he transported the mummies and papyri from Kirtland (or Rochester, Ohio) to Far West. His statement seems plausible, even though no other accounts confirm his claim. Two additional facts do raise significant questions about Woolley’s statement. First, the Woolley brothers did not officially join the Church until 1840 in Nauvoo. With the recognized financial value of these artifacts, would they have been entrusted to newcomers with no formal Church commitments? And second, the pattern of guardianship during this period points consistently to Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith as being overseers of the mummies. Joseph’s parents are the last to have the artifacts during the Kirtland era, and they are the first to be mentioned with them as the Nauvoo period commences. Why then would they have not retained them during the Missouri period?

On the other hand, perhaps the Woolley claim can be reconciled with these loyalty and guardianship issues. What if Father Smith journeyed to Missouri in tandem with the Woolley brothers? None of the extant pioneer journals make reference to such a joint effort, but it does have some circumstantial support. For instance, Edwin Woolley did have the means to hire a wagon and transport the mummies from New Portage to Rochester just after the trouble began—why not then from Rochester to Far West? Also, either Joseph Sr. was quite comfortable with the Woolleys or he liked their cooking because Lucy Mack had to summon him to return home during the winter of 1838. Both of these facts point toward a mutual trust and relationship between the Smiths and the Woolleys, even though the journals remain silent on any joint venture.
The first account of the mummies in Missouri comes from an anti-Mormon writer, a William Swartzell. He wrote on 24 May 1838 from Richmond’s landing, “This is the place where the Mormons land their goods for transportation across the country. I saw there Joseph Smith’s box of mummys.” Two months later, he observed that they were gathering logs for a house where Joseph would translate the “hieroglyphics of the Egyptian mummies.” Even though he was bent on criticizing Mormonism, he does record the first sighting of the box of mummies.

The only other mention of the Egyptian artifacts in Missouri comes from Anson Call, who visited Far West sometime during the summer of 1838. He recalls seeing the papyri in John Corrill’s store and then, with the help of Vincent Knight, carrying them in boxes to Joseph’s office. There they found Joseph with a number of the brethren. Joseph was delighted to receive the records; and then, as a group, they read from the book of Abraham for the space of two hours. This account is especially significant because of a sympathetic record keeper who actually saw the papyri.

When these previous two references are excluded, no other mention is made of the artifacts in Missouri. On one occasion, the Prophet did preach using the book of Abraham to explain some of “the mysteries of the kingdom of God; such as the history of the planets, Abraham’s writings upon the planetary systems, etc.” This entry verifies that notwithstanding their whereabouts, the writings of Abraham were not forgotten even during the brief Missouri period.

The notorious “Order of Extermination” on 27 October 1838 sounded the exodus for the Saints once again. Shortly thereafter, Joseph Jr. relocated his family to the border town of Quincy, Illinois. He remained behind in Missouri and was imprisoned in the Liberty Jail during the winter of 1838–39. The mummies and papyri were once again entrusted to Joseph Sr. and Lucy, as attested by Henry Ashbury, a non-Mormon writer in the Quincy area. He described the scene rather derogatorily:

The winter passed in quietness and the Mormons were on their good behavior. Old Daddy Smith and his aged wife, Joe Smith’s father and mother, rented the house or part of it, situated on the northeast corner of Sixth and Hampshire Streets, and set up a sort of museum of curiosities, consisting mainly of several mummies from Egypt. The old lady charged ten cents admittance and acted as exhibitor, explaining who and what each object really was. I am now unable to accurately give the substance of these explanations by the old lady, but in substance they amounted to an assertion that
one or more of the mummies was one of the Pharaohs or kings of Egypt, and there belonged to him some hieroglyphics or writings upon papyrus, which she said in some way proved the truth of Mormonism or something tending in that direction. The show did not seem to pay and did not run long here.24

Note the reference to both the mummies and the hieroglyphics/papyrus. If the artifacts had been previously separated for security purposes, at least they had been reunited by the time of the Quincy/Nauvoo period.

Conclusion

This analysis reviews, as far as current sources permit, the route of the Egyptian artifacts from Kirtland to Missouri and then to Nauvoo. Of primary interest to this study has been the Missouri period. Even though the source material is scant, evidence exists that the senior Smith family was overseeing the artifacts. The family appears to have accepted support from the Woolley brothers in the Kirtland/Far West transition. It also stands to reason that the mummies and the papyri were separated at times during the short-lived Missouri sojourn. What was anticipated as a time to resume the Abrahamic translations became instead a brief stopover with relentless opposition. Even though the Egyptian artifacts made their way to Missouri, it was a discrete journey with a short stay. It would be in Nauvoo where the sun would shine again upon the mummies and their papyri. 26

Notes

4. Ibid., 2:291.
5. Ibid., 2:293.
6. Ibid., 2:316.
7. Ibid., 2:396.
10. Ibid., 2:520–21.
Joseph F. Smith, ca. 1905, Fox and Symons

Courtesy of Ann Alice Smith Nebeker
“And I Saw the Hosts of the Dead, Both Small and Great”:
Joseph F. Smith, World War I, and His Visions of the Dead

Richard E. Bennett

As I pondered over these things which are written, the eyes of my understanding were opened, and the Spirit of the Lord rested upon me, and I saw the hosts of the dead, both small and great (D&C 138:11).

Joseph F. Smith’s discourses on life, death, and war are revered today by Latter-day Saints as profoundly important contributions to Mormon doctrine. Sixth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (he served from 1901 to 1918) and nephew of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church, President Smith proclaimed some of his most comforting and most important discourses on the topics of death and suffering during the waning months of World War I. His final sermon, his “Vision of the Redemption of the Dead,” now canonized as revelation by the Church, stands as the authoritative Mormon declaration of its time.

A thorough study of the historical process that brought this doctrinal statement out of obscurity and into the realm of modern Mormon scripture begs to be written. However, the purpose of this paper is to place this and his other wartime sermons in their historical context, to suggest their place in the wider tapestry of Christian thought, and to argue for their fuller application as commentary on temple work, war, and several other critical issues of the day. Just as it took Church leaders years to rediscover the full significance of President Smith’s visions of the redemption of the dead and their full significance as a vital assist to
modern temple work, so also Latter-day Saint historians have been slow to view them as essential documents, pointers, and commentaries of the age. To the views and comments of other religionists of the day who were sharing their own important visions at war’s end, Joseph F. Smith’s must now be added.2

At a time when prayers in schools are discouraged, if not denied, at the “eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month,” school children across Canada and throughout much of the British Commonwealth of Nations are asked to bow their heads in grateful remembrance for those who died in war. To this day, Remembrance Day, November 11, is a Sabbath-day-like observance, a tolling bell, in honor of those who gave their last true measure of devotion to the cause of God, king, and country. Canadians wear scarlet poppies on their lapels and gather respectfully at public war memorials across the land, sing hymns, honor mothers who lost sons in battle, and listen reverently to the following poem, penned by John McCrae during the frightful battle of Ypres where men by the tens of thousands died in the blooming poppy fields of Belgium:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow;
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe;
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.3

Indeed, “lest we forget,” more than nine million men in uniform and countless legions of civilians perished in the battlefields, battle-ships, and bombed-out byways of World War I. Another twenty-one million were permanently scarred and disfigured. Whatever the causes of that conflict, they have long been overshadowed by the “sickening mists of slaughter” that, like a pestilence, hung over the world for four and a half years. The terrible battles of the Marne, Ypres, Verdun, the
Somme, Vimy Ridge, Jutland, Passchendaele, Gallipoli, and many others are place names synonymous with unmitigated human slaughter in what some have described as a nineteenth-century war fought with twentieth-century weaponry. This was the conflict, remember, that witnessed the awful stalemate of protracted trench warfare and pitched hand-to-hand combat in the "no-man's lands" of western Europe, the introduction of Germany's lethal submarine attacks, chemical-gas mass killings, and aerial bombings on a frightening scale. Yet the Great War, that "war to end all wars," became but the catalyst and springboard for an even deadlier conflict a generation later. And with its long-prayed-for conclusion on 11 November 1918 came prayers for a lasting peace, hopes for a League of Nations that would guarantee future world peace, and sermons and visions that spoke of new hopes and new dreams for a blighted world.

Joseph F. Smith's Responses to War

Compared to the other great religions of the time, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with a membership then of only a few hundred thousand, most of whom lived in Utah and surrounding states, may seem like a very small voice in a vastly overcrowded cathedral. Though as many as fifteen thousand Latter-day Saints saw battle, mainly as enlisted men in the United States Army, Mormonism as a religion was spared the tragedy of killing its own, as opposed to Catholic shooting Catholic and of Lutheran gunning down Lutheran on the distant battlefields of Europe. Headquartered far away in the tops of the Rocky Mountains of the American West, the Church remained relatively unscathed from the intimate hell and awful horror of war, much as it had done during America's Civil War fifty years before. Nevertheless, the Church's leaders held definite positions toward the war, some of which were modified over time.

With the sudden, unexpected outbreak of the war and in response to President Woodrow Wilson's request for prayers of peace, Joseph F. Smith, himself a confirmed Republican, and his counselors in the First Presidency, the highest ecclesiastical body in the Church, called upon the entire membership to support the nation's president and to pray for peace. "We deplore the calamities which have come upon the people in Europe," he declared, "the terrible slaughter of brave men, the awful sufferings of women and children, and all the disasters that are befalling the world in consequence of the impending conflicts, and earnestly hope and pray that they may be brought to a speedy end."
His counselor, Charles W. Penrose, speaking further on President Smith’s behalf, condemned neither side in the war: “We ask Thee, O Lord, to look in mercy upon those nations. No matter what may have been the cause which has brought about the tumult and the conflict now prevailing, wilt Thou grant, we pray Thee, that it be overruled for good, so that the time shall come when, though thrones may totter and empires fall, liberty and freedom shall come to the oppressed nations of Europe, and indeed throughout the world.” This spirit of the entire Church praying for peace lasted throughout the war.

Speaking in the general conference of the Church just one month after the outbreak of war, President Smith expressed, for the first time, his public interpretation of the war and of its causes. Still stunned by news of the enormously high numbers of casualties so soon inflicted, he reiterated his desire for peace, pointed to the “deplorable” spectacle of war, and blamed it not upon God but squarely upon man’s inhumanity to man, on dishonest politics, on broken treaties, and, above all, on the apostate conditions he believed were endemic to modern Christianity, “God did not design or cause this,” he preached. “It is deplorable to the heavens that such a condition should exist among men.” Choosing not to interpret the conflict in economic, political, or even nationalist tones, he ever saw it, at base, as the result of moral decline, of religious bankruptcy, and of the world’s refusal to accept the full gospel of Jesus Christ. “Here we have nations arrayed against nations,” he said, “and yet in every one of these nations are so-called Christian peoples professing to worship the same God, professing to possess belief in the same divine Redeemer . . . and yet these nations are divided against the other, and each is praying to his God for wrath upon and victory over his enemies.” Loyal in every way to the message of the Book of Mormon and the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he saw it this way:

Would it be possible—could it be possible, for this condition to exist if the people of the world possessed really the true knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? And if they really possessed the Spirit of the living God—could this condition exist? No; it could not exist, but war would cease, and contention and strife would be at an end. . . . Why does it exist? Because they are not one with God, nor with Christ. They have not entered into the true fold, and the result is they do not possess the spirit of the true Shepherd sufficiently to govern and control their acts in the ways of peace and righteousness.

The only real and lasting antidote to the sin of war, he believed, was the promulgation of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ “as far as we have power to send it forth through the elders of the Church.”
Though the war was not the work of God, the Mormon leader was nonetheless quick to see in it a fulfillment of divine prophecy, both ancient and modern. “The newspapers are full of the wars and the rumors of wars,” he wrote in a private family letter of November 1914, “which seem to be literally poured out upon all nations as foretold by the Prophet [Joseph Smith] in 1832. The reports of the carnage and destruction going on in Europe are sickening and deplorable, and from the latest reports the field of carnage is greatly enlarging instead of diminishing.”

A few weeks later, in his annual Christmas greeting to the Church for December 1914, he returned to this same theme. “The sudden ‘outpouring’ of the spirit of war upon the European nations which startled the whole world and was unexpected at the time of its occurrence, had long been expected by the Latter-day Saints, as it was foretold by the Prophet Joseph Smith on Christmas Day, December 25th, 1832.”

Yet no one took pleasure in seeing such foreboding prophecy fulfilled. Nor could predictions be made tantamount to divine imposition on the affairs of men. At stake was the agency—and the evil—of man. As the cold calamity of war spread across the battlefields of Europe, President Smith continually stressed this point. “God, doubtless, could avert war,” he said in December of 1914, “prevent crime, destroy poverty, chase away darkness, overcome error, and make all things bright, beautiful and joyful. But this would involve the destruction of a vital and fundamental attribute of His sons and daughters that they become acquainted with evil as well as good, with darkness as well as light, with error as well as truth and with the results of the infraction of eternal laws.” Thus, the war, among so many other things, was a schoolmaster, a judgment of man’s own doing, a terrible lesson of what inevitably transpires when hate and greed rule the day.

Despite these broken laws and with them the inevitable fulfillment of calamitous prophecy, there can be found, like a stream of clear water running throughout his teachings, the doctrine of ultimate redemption and resolution:

Therefore [God] has permitted the evils which have been brought about by the acts of His creatures, but will control their ultimate results for His glory and the progress and exaltation of His sons and daughters, when they have learned obedience by the things they suffer... The foreknowledge of God does not imply His action in bringing about that which He foresees.

Vowing initially not to take sides in the struggle, President Smith found it increasingly challenging, however, to remain neutral. The
sinking of the Lusitania in May 1915 struck an ominous chord in America, intent as the country was in staying clear of the conflict. His colleague, James E. Talmage, then a member of the Church’s Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, described the sinking as “one of the most barbarous developments of the European war,” charging Germany for staining its hands “with innocent blood never to be washed away.”

Despite such wartime atrocities, President Smith clung to the hope that America could somehow remain detached from the war. “I am glad that we have kept out of war so far, and I hope and pray that we may not be under the necessity of sending our sons to war, or experience as a nation the distress, the anguish and sorrow that come from a condition such as exists upon the old continent.”

Nevertheless, as America lurched reluctantly toward war, President Smith saw America’s involvement as a necessity. News of the Zeppelin bombing raids over England and his consequent fear for the safety of his own mission-president son and missionaries then serving in England particularly bothered him and led him to question ever further Germany’s wartime tactics. “It seems to me that the only object of such raids is the wanton and wicked destruction of property and the taking of defenseless lives,” he wrote.

It appears that the spirit of murder, the shedding of blood, not only of combatants but of anyone connected with the enemy’s country seems to have taken possession of the people, or at least the ruling powers in Germany. What they gain by it, I do not know. It is hardly possible that they expect to intimidate the people by such actions, and it surely does not diminish the forces of the opposition. By such unnecessary and useless raids in the name of warfare, they are losing the respect of all the nations of the earth.

A staunch patriot, he was soon to admit the obvious: “I have a feeling in my heart that the United States has a glorious destiny to fulfil, and that part of that glorious destiny is to extend liberty to the oppressed, as far as it is possible to all nations, to all people.” Gradually, he forged a cautious, nonpacifist view in behalf of the entire Church: “I do not want war; but the Lord has said it shall be poured out upon all nations, and if we escape, it will be ‘by the skin of our teeth.’ I would rather the oppressors should be killed, or destroyed, than to allow the oppressors to kill the innocent.

If Latter-day Saints must fight—and thousands of them soon enlisted in the cause—their attitude must ever be that of “peace and good will toward all mankind, . . . that they will not forget that they are also soldiers of the Cross, that they are ministers of life and not of
death; and when they go forth, they may go forth in the spirit of defending the liberties of mankind rather than for the purpose of destroying the enemy. . . . Let the soldiers that go out from Utah be and remain men of honor.”¹⁹ Eager to demonstrate Mormon loyalty to an America still suspicious of the Church and of some of its teachings and to support President Wilson’s entry into the war, President Smith led active campaigns to enlist Latter-day Saints in the ranks of the military and to involve the Church and its membership in the various Liberty Bond drives of the time, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars in the process.²⁰

Significantly, his writings bear an absence of malice or a spirit of vengeance toward the aggressor. Less critical than other younger leaders, such as James E. Talmage who, although not given to retribution, felt Germany had a debt to pay, President Smith was ever slow to condemn. Said he: “Let the Lord exercise vengeance where vengeance is needed. And let me not judge my fellow men, nor condemn them lest I condemn them wrongly.”²¹

Meanwhile, until the war ended, Latter-day Saints joined with others in praying for peace and in taking up arms in the cause of victory over the enemy. America’s involvement eventually turned the tide of war, ultimately bringing a defeated Germany and the other Axis powers to Versailles. And though half a world away, news of the pending peace was as jubilantly received in Utah as it was most everywhere else in the free world.²²

The Armistice

The Latter-day Saints were, of course, not alone in proclaiming a vision of the war and of peace. A sampling of what others saw as the war wore away may be instructive. Randall Thomas Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury, was trying earnestly to see meaning out of a senseless war, to see divine purpose in man’s malignancy, and to bring vision to a groping world. “There, then, with all that the war has brought us of darkened homes and of shattered hopes for those we loved,” he said in his war-closing sermon of gratitude preached at Westminster Abbey in London on 10 November 1918,

with all its hindering and setting back of our common efforts and energies to promote things peaceable and lovely and of good report, [the war] has, beyond any doubt, been our schoolmaster to bring us to a larger vision of the world as God sees it. It is one of the great things which our sons, our dear sons, have wrought for us by their dauntless sacrifice. . . . Just now, this week, when the whole
life—I do not think I am exaggerating—the whole life of the world is being re-conditioned, re-established, re-set for good. This is that crisis-hour. Something has happened, is happening, which can best find description in . . . the living word or message of God to man. It cuts right to the centre of our being.23

He closed a later sermon with his particular vision of a new Christian way:

Jesus Christ is the real centre and strength of the best hopes and efforts man can make for the bettering and the brightening of the world. Only we must quietly, determinedly, thoughtfully, take His law and His message as our guide. . . . The task is hardest perhaps when we are dealing with life’s largest relationship—the relationship between peoples. Can we carry the Christian creed and rule there? Who shall dare to say we cannot? It needs a yet larger outlook. . . . Surely it is a vision from on high.24

Pope Benedict XV, in his first encyclical immediately following the end of the war, rejoiced that “the clash of arms has ceased,” allowing “humanity [to] breathe again after so many trials and sorrows.” Next only to gratitude, his sentiment was one of profound regret, bordering on apology, that a leading cause of the war had been the “deplorable fact that the ministers of the Word” had not more courageously taught true religion rather than the politics of accommodation from the pulpit. The conscience of Christianity had been scarred by its own advocates. “The blame certainly must be laid on those ministers of the Gospel,” he lamented. He went on to chastise the pulpit and called for a new vision, a new order of valiant, righteous Christian spokesmen who would declare peace and the cross fearlessly. “It must be Our earnest endeavor everywhere to bring back the preaching of the Word of God to the norm and ideal to which it must be directed according to the command of Christ Our Lord, and the laws of the Church.”25

The official American Catholic response may best be seen in the pastoral letters of its bishops. At its base, the war showed a deep “moral evil” in man where “spiritual suffering” and “sin abounded.” Despite all of mankind’s progress—“the advance of civilization, the diffusion of knowledge, the unlimited freedom of thought, the growing relaxation of moral restraint—. . . we are facing grave peril.” Scientific and materialistic progress notwithstanding, a world without moral discipline and faith will lead only to destruction. The only true vision of hope is “the truth and the life of Jesus Christ,” and the Catholic Church must uphold the dignity of man, defend the rights of the people, relieve distress, consecrate sacrifice, and bind all classes together in the love of the Savior.26
James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, the leading American Catholic spokesman, in calling upon Americans to “thank God for the victory of the allies and to ask him for grace to ‘walk in the ways of wisdom, obedience and humility,’” ordered his priests to substitute the prayer of thanksgiving in the Mass in place of the oration. He instructed them further that a solemn service be held in all the churches of the archdiocese on 28 November 1918 at which the Church’s official prayer of thanksgiving, the Te Deum, should be sung. Written as early as A.D. 450, the words to one of Catholicism’s most famous hymns speak of man’s immortality, of Christ’s divinity, and of His redemption of the dead:

We praise Thee, O God: we
acknowledge Thee to be the Lord
Thee, the Eternal Father, all
the earth doth worship . . .

Thou, O Christ, art the King of glory.
Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father.
Thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s
womb, when Thou tookest upon
Thee human nature to deliver man.

When Thou hadst overcome the
sting of death, Thou didst open
to believers the kingdom of heaven.

Thou sittest at the right hand of
God, in the glory of the Father.
Thou, we believe, art the Judge to come.

The American Protestant view of the war, and more especially of its postwar opportunities, are varied and diverse and defy simple categorization and analysis. There were almost as many “visions” as there were hundreds of denominations. While most, like Bishop Charles P. Anderson of the Protestant Episcopal Church, spoke in terms of gratitude, many others soon were speaking jingoistically, calling for immediate punishment and retribution. “The Christian Century, which was representative of a great portion of Christendom, believed in the thorough chastisement of Germany.” Likewise, the Congregationalist editorialized that “Germany is a criminal at the bar of justice.” Reverend Dr. S. Howard Young of Brooklyn called “retribution upon the war lords” as “divine,” “the first world lesson to be derived from the German downfall.”
Meanwhile, Billy Sunday, “God’s Grenadier” and by far the most popular patriot/evangelist of his day, saw the war as good against evil, God against Satan, “America and Christ, indissolubly linked, forging ahead in a glorious struggle.” Though some others shared his view, Billy characteristically always went a step or two further. “Hey, Jesus, you’ve gotta send a country like that to damnation,” he once said. “I’ll raise enough of an army myself to help beat the dust off the Devil’s hordes.” He also saw the end of the war as a window, a God-given opportunity to revitalize the evangelical cause of Christian revivalism and of individual spiritual rebirth, a time to confront the anti-Christ of such foreign-inspired teachings as evolution, social Darwinism, higher criticism, and every other philosophical evil of the age.

Other, more moderate, clergymen like the positive-minded Presbyterian, Robert E. Speer, saw a moral victory stemming out of the war, a new vision rising out of the ashes of Europe. “The war also has unmistakably set in the supreme place those moral and spiritual principles which constitute the message of the Church,” he declared. “The war has shown that these values are supreme over personal loss and material interest. . . . We succeeded in the war whenever and wherever this was our spirit. . . . The war says that what Christ said is forever true.”

Rabbi Silverman, speaking in Chicago’s Temple Beth-El synagogue, mirrored Speer’s sentiments. “The world was nearer its millennium today than ever before,” he is reported to have said. “War had brought mankind nearer to brotherhood than had centuries of religious teachings. . . . War had brought religion back to its original task of combating bigotry, fighting sin, and uplifting mankind.”

Both Reverend Speer and Henry Emerson Fosdick, professor of the Union Theological Seminary in New York, along with other leading religious leaders, welcomed the end of war as an opportunity to launch “the Church Peace Union,” a new united religious order funded, in part, by Andrew Carnegie and his Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to unite multiple Protestant faiths marching under one grand united banner—“the new political heaven [to] regenerate earth,” as Bishop Samuel Fallows of the Reformed Episcopal Church liked to describe it. Though destined to failure because of oppressive debts, internal disagreements, and opposition from Protestant fundamentalism, for a brief moment, this Interchurch World Movement of Protestants, Catholics, and Jewish leaders in America became “the principal voice of institutional religion on behalf of peace-keeping and peace-making” and appeared to hold enormous promise for church unity, social reform, and economic improvement.
Fosdick, one of the most eloquent American Protestant statesmen of his time, had grudgingly supported America’s entry into the war but came out of it a confirmed pacifist. Reflecting the utter disillusionment the war wrought on many religionists, Fosdick listed several elements in his vision of warning for the future: “There is nothing glamorous about war any more,” “war is not a school for virtue any more,” “there is no limit to the methods of killing in war any more,” “there are no limits to the cost of war any more,” “there is no possibility of sheltering any portion of the population from the direct effect of war any more,” and “we cannot reconcile Christianity and war any more.” Every effort must be made to avoid such a future calamity. He, like many others, was bitterly disappointed by America’s refusal to ratify the Versailles Peace Treaty and enter the League of Nations. As one commentary said, “God won the war and the devil won the peace.”

Joseph F. Smith’s Visions of the Dead

Worn out by a long life of devoted Church service and worn down in sorrow with the recent deaths of several members of his immediate family, Joseph F. Smith, though a loving soul, knew all about grief. “I lost my father when I was but a child,” he once said. “I lost my mother, the sweetest soul that ever lived, when I was only a boy. I have buried one of the loveliest wives that ever blessed the lot of man, and I have buried thirteen of my more than forty children... And it has seemed to me that the most promising, the most helpful, and, if possible, the sweetest and purest and the best have been the earliest called to rest.” Speaking of the loss of one of his former polygamous wives, Sarah E., and, shortly thereafter, of his daughter Zina, he said: “I cannot yet dwell on the scenes of the recent past. Our hearts have been tried to the core. Not that the end of mortal life has come to two of the dearest souls on earth to me, so much as at the sufferings of our loved ones, which we were utterly powerless to relieve. Oh! How helpless is mortal man in the face of sickness unto death!”

His daughter’s death triggered four of the most revealing discourses ever given by a Latter-day Saint leader on the doctrines of death, the spirit world, and the resurrection. As one noted scholar put it: “It is doubtful if in any given period of like duration in the entire history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints so much detail as to the nature of the life after death has been given to any other prophet of this dispensation.” All were well received by the membership and extended hope and comfort to those who had lost loved ones or who might be asked to sacrifice family members in times of peace or of...
conflict. The war, raging loud and cruel, served as a vivid backdrop to these emerging doctrines.

On 6 April 1916, with the battles of Verdun and the Somme very much dominating the daily news, he gave a talk entitled “In the Presence of the Divine.” In it he spoke of the very thin veil separating the living and the dead. Speaking of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Wilford Woodruff, and his other predecessors, he preached the doctrine that the dead, those who have gone on before, “are as deeply interested in our welfare today, if not with greater capacity, with far more interest behind the veil, than they were in the flesh. I believe they know more. . . . Although some may feel and think that it is a little extreme to take this view, yet I believe that it is true.” He went on to say, “We cannot forget them; we do not cease to love them; we always hold them in our hearts, in memory, and thus we are associated and united to them by ties that we cannot break.”

President Smith taught that death was neither sleep nor annihilation; rather, death involved a change into another world where the spirits of those once here can be solicitous of our welfare, “can comprehend better than ever before, the weaknesses that are liable to mislead us into dark and forbidden paths.”

Two years later, speaking at a meeting in Salt Lake City in February 1918, he spoke additional words of comfort and consolation, particularly to those who had lost children or whose youthful sons were dying overseas. “The spirits of our children are immortal before they come to us,” he began,

and their spirits after bodily death are like they were before they came. They are as they would have appeared if they had lived in the flesh, to grow to maturity, or to develop their physical bodies to the full stature of their spirits. . . . [Furthermore,] Joseph Smith taught the doctrine that the infant child that was laid away in death would come up in the resurrection as a child; and, pointing to the mother of a lifeless child, he said to her: “You will have the joy, the pleasure and satisfaction of nurturing this child, after its resurrection, until it reaches the full stature of its spirit.” . . . It speaks volumes of happiness, of joy and gratitude to my soul.

Two months later, having recovered from illness sufficiently to speak at the April 1918 general conference of the Church, he gave a talk entitled “A Dream That Was a Reality.” In it, he recounted a particularly poignant and unforgettable dream he had experienced sixty-five years earlier as a very young missionary in Hawaii, a dream-vision that dramatically influenced the rest of his life. He spoke of seeing his father, Hyrum, his mother, Mary, Joseph Smith, and several others
who had ushered him into a mansion after he had bathed and cleansed himself. "That vision, that manifestation and witness that I enjoyed that time has made me what I am," he confessed. "When I woke up I felt as if I had been lifted out of a slum, out of despair, out of the wretched condition that I was in.... I know that that was reality, to show me my duty, to teach me something, and to impress upon me something that I cannot forget."47

Just weeks before, on 23 January, his Apostle son, Hyrum, then only forty-five years of age, was struck down in his prime by a ruptured appendix. It was a devastating blow from which Joseph F. never fully recovered, compounded as it was with the further sorrowful news of the death of his daughter-in-law and Hyrum's wife, Ida Bowman Smith, just a few months thereafter. Wrote Talmage in behalf of the Twelve: "Our great concern has been over the effect the great bereavement will have upon President Joseph F. Smith, whose health has been far from perfect for months past. This afternoon he spent a little time in the office of the First Presidency, and we find him bearing up under the load with fortitude and resignation."48 Sick and intermittently confined to bed rest for several months afterwards, he had rallied sufficiently to speak briefly in the October general conference of the Church, long enough to proclaim his particular message of peace to a war-weary world.49

He spoke of having lately received, while pondering on the Biblical writings of the Apostle Peter, another, ultimately his final, vision of the dead. While meditating upon these things, he said he "saw the hosts of the dead, both small and great," those who had died "firm in the hope of a glorious resurrection," waiting in a state of paradise for their ultimate redemption and resurrection. Suddenly, the "Son of God appeared, declaring liberty to the captives who had been faithful." Choosing not to go Himself to the wicked and unfaithful dead who waited in the more nether realms of the spirit world, Christ organized a great missionary force among His most faithful followers, dispatching them to minister and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ to "all the spirits of men," those who had been less faithful and obedient in their mortal lives, including, as Peter writes, "those who were sometime disobedient" in the days of Noah and the great flood. In addition, he saw many of the ancient prophets, including Adam and Eve, involved in this spirit prison ministry of redemption. Likewise, "the faithful elders of this dispensation" were called to assist. His vision closed with the declaration that the dead "who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God... after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions."50
Whereas his earlier discourses have remained memorable sermons, this sixty-verse document was immediately sustained, in the words of James E. Talmage, as “the word of the Lord” by his counselors in the First Presidency and by the Quorum of the Twelve. For reasons not entirely clear, though widely read in the Church, the document was not formally accepted as canonized scripture for almost sixty years. Then, in 1976, President Spencer W. Kimball directed that it be added to the Pearl of Great Price. Later, in June 1979, the First Presidency announced it would become section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Considered an indispensable contribution to a fuller understanding of temple work—especially in an age of very active temple construction—the performances of proxy ordinances for the dead, including baptism for the dead and confirmation, and of the relationship between the living and the dead, it has been heralded as “central to the theology of the Latter-day Saints because it confirms and expands upon earlier prophetic insights concerning work of the dead.” Others have written elsewhere about the contributions of this document to Mormon temple work.

Because this document is far more than a mere sermon to the faithful Latter-day Saint and because it is regarded as the word and will of the Lord—in fact, it is the only canonized revelation of the twentieth century—it bears careful scrutiny. And, as a wartime document, it may have other meanings and applications not plumbed before.

For instance, although a discourse on the dead, it owed nothing to spiritualism. It is a matter of record that public interest in the dead and in communicating with the dead peaked during and immediately following the war. In 1918, Arthur Conan Doyle of Sherlock Holmes fame published his book, New Revelation, on the subject of psychical research and phenomena, bemoaning the decline in church attendance in England and of Christianity generally and proclaiming a new religion, a new revelation. He urged a belief not in the fall of man or in Christ’s redemption as the basis of faith but in the validity of “automatic writings,” seances, and other expressions of spiritualism as a new universal religion and of communicating with lost loved ones—or, as he put it, “the one provable thing connected with every religion, Christian or non-Christian, forming the common solid basis upon which each raises, if it must needs raise, that separate system which appeals to the varied types of mind.”

In contrast, President Smith’s vision was very much Christ centered, a reiteration of the Savior’s Atonement for a fallen world. Though he certainly believed that “we move and have our being in the presence
of heavenly messengers and heavenly beings” and though the dead may even transcend the veil and appear unto loved ones, if so authorized, he steered the Church away from any hint of spiritualism.56 Latter-day Saints were to seek after the dead—that is, their spiritual welfare—rather than to seek the dead.

His revelation also reaffirmed the Christian belief in Adam and Eve and in a divine creation, for, in President Smith’s words, he saw “Father Adam, the Ancient of Days, and father of all” as well as “our glorious Mother Eve” (D&C 138:38–39). Though nothing is said specifically about evolution and the caustic, contemporary debates of the time over the origin of the species, these verses very simply restated the doctrines of the Church on this subject without argument or ambiguity.

Likewise, in an age of higher criticism with its attack on the authenticity and authority of the Bible, the revelation reestablished, for Latter-day Saints at least, a twentieth-century belief in the primacy and authority of scripture, a belief in the writings of Peter, a belief in Noah and the flood not as allegory but as actual event, and, by extension, a renewed belief in the entire Old and New Testaments. For a Church oftentimes criticized for its belief in additional scripture, if nothing else, section 138 is a classic declaration of Biblical authority for modern times.57

The vision may also be important for what it does not say. There is no discussion of peace treaties, no references to ecumenism or the interchurch movements of the times, no calls for social repentance and the social gospel. Neither prowar nor pacifist, it says nothing about cultural or nationalistic superiorities. The problem of evil is reduced to redeemable limits; and although man will always reap what he sows, there is still hope and redemption. Meanwhile, the Church retains its own mission as the gospel of Jesus Christ upon the earth as preestablished in its restoration a century earlier.

Finally, it proclaimed God’s intimate involvement in the affairs of humankind and His benevolent interest in His children. Steering the Church away from the yawning secularism that stood to envelope many other faiths in the postwar era, President Smith spoke confidently, above all, about Christ and His triumphant victory over sin and death.58 To the utter waste and sheer terror of the just-concluded catastrophe, there was ultimate redemption. To those who had lost faith in God and in their fellowmen, there was certain restoration. To the soldier lost in battle, to the sailor drowned at sea, and to a prophet-leader mourning the deaths of his own family, there was the reality of the resurrection.59
Notes

1. I thank my research assistant, Keith Erekson, for his valuable assistance in helping me prepare this work.


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 8. In a letter to his son, Hyrum, then a mission president in Liverpool, England, President Smith said: “We still see from the papers that the war in Europe is going on, the whole thing is a sad comment upon the civilization and Christian spirit of the age” (Joseph F. Smith to Hyrum Smith, 7 November 1914, Correspondence Files, Joseph F. Smith Collection, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter referred to as Church Archives).


12. From “A Christmas Greeting from the First Presidency,” MFP, 4:319. The prophecy alluded to, commonly referred to as the “Civil War Prophecy,” spoke of the pending Civil War and its commencement in South Carolina. Later, the South would be compelled to call upon Great Britain for assistance. Great Britain, in turn, “shall also call upon other nations, in order to defend themselves against other nations, and thus war shall be poured out upon all nations” (D&C 87:4).


14. Ibid.

15. Journal of James E. Talmage, 7 and 13 May 1915, James E. Talmage Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham
Young University. For a thorough study of Elder Talmage’s corresponding views of the war, see the author’s “How Long, Oh Lord, How Long?” James E. Talmage and the Great War,” a paper delivered at “The Church Meets the Twentieth Century” symposium, sponsored by the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, 18 March 2000. Its publication is pending.

16. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, April 1915, 6. Writing in an editorial of December 1915, he said much the same: “We pray that [America’s] leaders may receive wisdom of our Father in Heaven, to so direct the affairs in their charge that we may continue in the enjoyment of peace and prosperity throughout the land” (Joseph F. Smith to the editor of the Liahona, The Elders’ Journal, 18 December 1915, Joseph F. Smith Papers, Church Archives).

17. Joseph F. Smith to his son, Hyrum Smith, 19 February 1916, Joseph F. Smith Papers, Church Historical Department.


20. The Church itself participated in the war effort by purchasing $850,000 in liberty bonds. In addition, it strongly encouraged its membership to participate in the bond drive with the result that the people of Utah far exceeded the state’s quota of $6.5 million.

One reason the Church was so eager to participate in the war effort was to shed the negative publicity cast upon it during and immediately following the Reed Smoot Senate hearing in Washington, D.C. Elected in 1903, Smoot, a Mormon Apostle, had been barred from taking his seat until 1907 because of acrimonious debates over Mormon plural marriage and Mormon loyalties. President Smith and many other prominent Church leaders traveled to Washington on several occasions to testify on behalf of the Church. In 1907, the First Presidency issued a special address to the world explaining the Church’s stand on these and many other topics, including its loyalty to America. For a fine summary of the Reed Smoot hearings and their impact upon the Church, see Thomas G. Alexander, Mormonism in Transition, A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 16–36.


22. Official word reached Salt Lake City very early in the morning of 11 November 1918. Despite the late hour and the curfews imposed because of the influenza epidemic, the city seemed to spring into life. In the words of James E. Talmage, “Bells were tolled, whistles blown, and within an incredibly short time hundreds of automobiles were dashing about the streets, most of them having tin cans, sheet iron utensils and other racket-making appendages attached to the rear.” Later in the day, “flags and bunting appeared in abundance everywhere, tons of confetti were thrown from the tops of high buildings, every available band was pressed into service, and during the afternoon and well on into the night dancing was indulged in on Main Street.” Talmage enthusiastically concluded: “Such a day as this has never before been witnessed in the world’s history” (James E. Talmage Journal, 11 November 1917).


27. The Chicago Daily Tribune, 11 November 1918, 3.


32. Ibid., 233.

33. The Chicago Daily Tribune, 11 November 1918, 11.

34. Roger A. Bruns, Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism (New York: Norton, 1922), 249.

35. Ibid., 252.


37. Chicago Daily Tribune, 11 November 1918, 11. The editor of The Methodist Review called for the regeneration of the family and of motherhood and for reenshrining the teachings of Christ. “Without this light the world must stumble along in darkness. Is it not evident then that it is the bounden duty of the Church to seek a fresh Pentecost? The times, wild and disturbed as they are, are not unripe for a baptism of power from within the veil” (“What the World Is Facing,” The Methodist Review 68, no. 4 [October 1919]: 590).

38. Gaustad, A Documentary History of Religion, 148. This Interchurch vision continued to a lesser extent as the Federal Council of Churches, Reverend Robert E. Speer playing an active part.

39. Henry Emerson Fosdick, “‘Shall We End the War,’ A Sermon Preached at the First Presbyterian Church, New York, June 5, 1921,” (distributed through the Clearing House for the Limitation of Armament, New York), 3–12.


41. MFP, 5:92.

42. Joseph F. Smith to Hyrum Smith, 3 November 1915, Joseph F. Smith Papers, Church Archives.

43. Editorial note by James R. Clark in MFP, 5:5.

44. MFP, 5:6–7.
45. Ibid., 7.


47. From a discourse entitled “A Dream That Was a Reality,” MFP, 5:100–1. It is interesting to note that this was not the first unique dream he had of his beloved mother. On 21 July 1891, he had dreamed that his “precious mother came to live with him. It seemed that she had been gone for a long time.” In this dream, he “fixed her up a room all for herself and made it as comfortable as I could. . . . This is the third time I have seemed to put [up] my mother since she left us” (Joseph F. Smith to “My Dear Aunt Thompson,” 21 July 1891, Letters of Joseph F. Smith, as cited in the Scott G. Kenney Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University).


49. Because of his frail condition, President Smith did not actually read this document in conference but had it delivered in writing to the leadership of the Church shortly after the conference had concluded.

50. See D&C 138 to read the vision in its entirety.

51. Wrote Elder Talmage for 31 October 1918: “Attended meeting of the First Presidency and the Twelve. Today President Smith, who is still confined to his home by illness, sent to the Brethren the account of a vision through which, as he states, were revealed to him important facts relating to the work of the disembodied Savior in the realm of departed spirits, and of the missionary work in progress on the other side of the veil. By united action the Council of the Twelve, with the Counselors in the First Presidency, and the Presiding Patriarch accepted and endorsed the revelation as the Word of the Lord. President Smith’s signed statement will be published in the next issue (December) of the Improvement Era.” James E. Talmage Journal, 31 October 1918.

52. From time to time, General Authorities referred to the vision before 1976. See, for example, Joseph L. Wirthlin, April 1945 general conference; Marion G. Romney, April 1964 general conference; Spencer W. Kimball, September 1966 general conference; Boyd K. Packer, October 1975 general conference. For this information, I am indebted to Robert L. Millet, “The Vision of the Redemption of the Dead,” in Harken, O Ye People: Discourses on the Doctrine and Covenants (Sandy, Utah: Randall Book, 1984), 268.

Latter-day Saints accept the messages of their living prophets as scripture. “Whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation” (D&C 68:4). However, there are degrees of scripture within the Church. Once Joseph F. Smith’s vision had been presented to the Church membership and voted upon and accepted as scripture, it shifted in significance from scripture to canonized scripture. As Robert L. Millet said, “Prior to 3 April 1976 it represented a theological document of inestimable worth to the Saints, one that deserved the study of those interested in spiritual things; on that date it was circumscribed into the standard works, and thus its message—principles and doctrines—became binding upon the Latter-day Saints, the same as the revelations of Moses or Jesus or Alma or Joseph Smith. The Vision of the Redemption of the Dead became a part of the
canon, the rule of faith and doctrine and practice—the written measure by which we discern truth from error" (Robert L. Millet, "The Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," in Harken O Ye People, 265).


55. Arthur Conan Doyle, The New Revelation (New York: George H. Doran, 1918), 52. Doyle visited Salt Lake City in May 1923, lecturing one night in the Salt Lake Tabernacle to more than five thousand people. Spiritualism was not an unknown phenomenon to the Latter-day Saints. Years before, the Godbeite movement in Salt Lake had proclaimed it part of their new religion, claiming former Apostle Amasa Lyman in the process. See Ronald W. Walker, Wayward Saints: The Godbeites and Brigham Young (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 254–57.


57. Joseph F. Smith knew all about how decisive the debate over modernism and higher criticism could become. In 1913, after a series of prolonged hearings and debates, Brigham Young University dismissed four professors because of their tendency to accommodate the theory of evolution and to “de-mythologize” the Bible. For a full discussion of this controversy, see Brigham Young University—The First One Hundred Years, ed. Ernest L. Wilkinson (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 1:412–32.

58. For more on the rising secularism after the war, see Alan D. Gilbert, The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society (London: Longman Group, 1980) and Burnham P. Beckwith, The Decline of U.S. Religious Faith 1912–1984 and the Effects of Education and Intelligence on Such Faith (Palo Alto, California: P. A. Beckwith, 1985). According to one study, the decline in church attendance in England since World War I has been precipitous. Between 1885 and 1928, the proportion of the population in England of the age of fifteen and over who were Easter Day communicants in the Church of England never fell below 84 per 1,000. In 1925, it was 90 per 1,000. But since the early
1930s, that number has steadily declined: by 1939 the proportion had dropped to
73 per 1,000, 63 per 1,000 by 1958, and 43 per 1,000 by 1973 (Alan Wilkinson,
The Church of England and the First World War [London: SPCK, Holy Trinity
Church, 1978], 292). In contrast, Latter-day Saint membership has grown from
four hundred thousand to eleven million, and activity rates are higher now than
ever before (see Rodney Stark, "The Basis of Mormon Success: A Theological
Application," in Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church
and Its Members, ed. James T. Duke [Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center,
Brigham Young University, 1998]: 29–70).
Preservation of Life as Manifested in the Lives of Latter-day Prophets

David F. Boone

Students of the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are aware of numerous instances where the Prophet Joseph Smith’s life was preserved. In great probability, there are also many that are not readily recognized and perhaps many more that were never recorded. Most Latter-day Saints are at least somewhat familiar with the many accidents that befell young Wilford Woodruff, any one of which could have proven fatal. Few, however, fully appreciate the frequency of heavenly intervention that the Presidents of the Church have experienced. It is likewise inspiring to note the accounts wherein the prophets recognize the hand of the Lord in having preserved their lives. As Spencer W. Kimball declared in 1972:

Full provision has been made by our Lord for changes. . . . There have been some eighty apostles . . . since Joseph Smith, though only eleven have occupied the place of the President of the Church, death having intervened; and since the death of his servants is in the power and control of the Lord, he permits to come to the first place only the one who is destined to take that leadership. Death and life become the controlling factors.¹

Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor

The accounts of the preservation of the Prophet Joseph’s life are numerous. On many occasions in New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, mobs and individuals continually sought to destroy him.
Upon receiving the gold plates, young Joseph was told by Moroni that “God had a work for me to do, and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people” (Joseph Smith—History 1:33). For the rest of his life, individuals shot at him, hid to waylay him, tarred and feathered him, and otherwise attempted to frustrate or alter his divinely appointed mission. Numerous accounts could be cited wherein his life was miraculously preserved. One account, however, dramatically demonstrates how the Lord raised Joseph up as well as others who would play a prominent role in helping to preserve the life of the young prophet.

When about seven years of age, Joseph Smith endured a very difficult operation. If the surgery had not been successful, young Joseph may have lost his leg—if not his life. The Prophet remembered, “I was attacked with the Typhus [typhoid] Fever, and at one time, during my sickness, my father despaired of my life.” As a complication from the fever, Joseph’s leg became infected and needed to be operated on. Dr. LeRoy S. Wirthlin, a historian and doctor, commented on the medical process the ailing boy was required to endure: “With an absence of specific treatment and before antibiotics, this illness [osteomyelitis] took [a] great toll of many youth in both morbidity [characteristic and severity of disease] and mortality [death rate].” Further, Dr. Wirthlin points out that the medical technology was not generally available to perform the kind of surgery needed in this specific instance at that particular time.

Not by mere coincidence, the Joseph Smith Sr. family was required to move eight times in an approximate ten-year period as a result of crop failure, subsequent loss of homes, etc. These moves put the Smith family in close proximity to the Dartmouth Medical School precisely when Dr. Nathan Smith was experimenting with the very procedure that would save the future Prophet’s life. Wirthlin further suggests that Dr. Nathan Smith “had more experience with osteomyelitis than anyone had previously recorded in the medical literature in the English language. Although he enjoyed good results, his work and results were not repeated until the early twentieth century.”

Despite the painful ordeal, the young Joseph Smith survived the operation. Neither the doctor nor perhaps even the future prophet knew, at the time, the reason for this providential preservation. Joseph Smith was foreordained as an “instrument in the hands of the Almighty to perform an important work” for the salvation of mankind (2 Nephi 3:24). Still later, through revelation, the Prophet learned in
a blessing given under the hands of his own father that he (Joseph Smith Jr.) had been given a promise of life until his earthly efforts to restore the Church and Kingdom of God were completed. He likewise knew at a tender age (twenty-four years) that his life would be forfeited for the cause of Christ (D&C 5:22). To both promises, Joseph Smith the Prophet was a faithful and willing participant.

In 1842, having returned from the British Mission, Brigham Young, who would succeed the Prophet Joseph, was attacked by a slight fit of apoplexy, a condition in which an individual loses consciousness because of a lack of blood reaching the brain. As a part of this attack, he had a high fever that lasted more than two weeks. During his illness, he was administered to by the Prophet Joseph and Willard Richards. The Prophet prophesied that Brigham would recover from his illness and live. According to Elder Young’s own account of the experience, after eighteen days of illness, he ceased breathing. “I was bolstered up in my chair, but was so near gone that I could not close my eyes, which were set in my head; my chin dropped down, and my breath stopped.” His wife, Mary Angell Young, seeing his condition, “threw some cold water in my face and eyes, which I did not feel in the least; neither did I move a muscle. . . . I was perfectly conscious of all that was passing around me; my spirit was as vivid as it ever was in my life; but I had no feeling in my body.”

When her initial efforts to revive her husband failed, Mary “held my nostrils between her thumb and finger, and placing her mouth directly over mine, blew into my lungs, until she filled them with air. This set my lungs in motion, and I again began to breathe.”

Elder Young had another brush with death in July 1839 when he and hundreds of other Saints contracted the dreaded malaria. Chills, severe fever, and debilitating weakness threatened to thwart still another mission to England. Brigham was so sick he could not even get up to secure water for himself or his suffering family. It was, he recorded, “a day never to be forgotten.” The Prophet Joseph, himself afflicted, arose from his own sickbed and blessed others. Elder Woodruff, another witness, recorded, “It was a day of God’s power. There was many Sick . . . on both sides of the river & Joseph went through the midst of them taking them by the hand & in a loud voice Commanding them in the name of Jesus Christ to arise from their beds & be made whole & they leaped from their beds made whole by the power of God.” Elder Woodruff relates that the first person Joseph visited in Montrose was Brigham Young. “Joseph healed [President Young;]
then he arose and accompanied the Prophet on his visit to others who were in the same condition.”

Brigham indicated, “I arose and was healed, and followed him and the brethren of the twelve [all of whom were stricken] to other homes.”

In April 1877, a few months prior to his death, President Young noted, “I feel many times that I could not live an hour longer, but I mean to live just as long as I can. I know not how soon the messenger will call for me, but I calculate to die in the harness.” Barely four and a half months later, President Young died as he said he would, still in the harness.

John Taylor, third President of the restored Church, was known during his lifetime as a “living martyr.” He was savagely shot in the Carthage Jail. Later, he became known as the “double martyr” because of his earlier experience at Carthage and the situation surrounding his subsequent death. He died in exile as a result of being pressed by federal prosecution.

In June 1844, he was one of only two members of the Quorum of the Twelve who remained in Nauvoo while the rest of his quorum traveled in the East to campaign for the Prophet Joseph Smith as U.S. president. Brother Taylor was one of only a few select individuals who accompanied the Prophet and Patriarch Hyrum Smith to prison in Carthage, Illinois. There, Elder Taylor sang for, reassured, and wrote for the Prophet. When the shooting began, Elder Taylor suffered along with other victims of the ordeal. In less than it takes to tell of the awful episode, two men had died; and another, Elder John Taylor, was critically wounded.

When Elder Taylor first noticed the mob approaching the jail, he attempted to secure the door, but the lock was unusable. As gun muzzles were thrust through the door, he endeavored to hinder their aim by deflecting them with a walking stick. Outnumbered and overpowered at the door, Elder Taylor attempted to jump from the second-story jail window, believing that possibly there were friends who could assist him on the outside. His effort to leap from the window, however, was frustrated, and he was pushed back when a shot from the doorway of the room hit his left thigh, rendering him helpless on the window ledge. Almost simultaneously, another shot from the outside struck his watch in his vest pocket, propelling him back into the room. While he was on the prison floor, three other bullets struck him—one in the same left leg, just below the knee; a second in the left hip; and a third “entered the forepart of his left arm, a little above the wrist, and, passing down by
the joint, lodged in the palm of his left hand."15 Immediately following these incidents, the Prophet Joseph likewise attempted to jump from the window. Moments later, he lay dead.

Several days after the ordeal, examination showed that Elder Taylor's vest pocket watch, which had been hit by a bullet aimed at his heart, was the means of knocking him back into the room, thus saving his life.

Up to that time . . . his being thrown back into the room when he felt himself falling out had been a mystery . . . Had he fallen on the outside he would have dropped into the very midst of his enemies and would have been instantly dispatched; but the bullet aimed at his heart was turned by an over-ruling Providence into a messenger of mercy—it saved his life.16

Elder Taylor said of this experience: "I felt that the Lord had preserved me by a special act of mercy; that my time had not yet come, and that I had still a work to perform upon the earth."17 Thus, having been severely wounded but having survived those wounds for a higher purpose, he has been referred to as a living martyr whose blood was mingled with that of the slain prophets. Addressing a group of Saints in Salt Lake City in 1885, President Taylor lamented: "You fled from Missouri to Illinois, and then from Illinois to this land, and why? Why did you leave Illinois and come here? Did you injure anybody? No. They killed your Prophets, and I saw them martyred, and was shot most unmercifully myself . . . and they thought they had killed me; but I am alive yet by the grace of God."

Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, and Joseph F. Smith

As a youth, President Woodruff was what we would refer to today as "accident prone." It required special and frequent divine intervention to preserve him to become the Lord's mouthpiece on earth. "Evidently, I have been numbered with those who are apparently the marked victims of misfortunes," President Woodruff said. "It has seemed to me at times as though some invisible power were watching my footsteps in search of an opportunity to destroy my life."19

His troubles began at age three when he fell into a cauldron of scalding water. Although he was instantly rescued, several months elapsed before his family felt he would recover fully. Late in his life, he gave a summary of his numerous accidents: "I have broken both legs, one of them in two places; both arms, both ankles, my breastbone, and three ribs; I have been scalded, frozen, and drowned; I have been in
two water wheels while turning under a full head; I have passed through a score of other hairbreadth escapes.”

As if these misfortunes were not enough, he fell down stairs, off beams, and out of trees. He was charged by an infuriated bull, kicked by an ox, and dragged and thrown from fractious horses. He was buried and almost suffocated under a load of hay, bitten by a rabid dog, injured by axes and falling trees, and narrowly escaped death when shot at point-blank range.

Through all these incidents, President Woodruff recognized the merciful protection and preservation the Lord had afforded him. “I have not now a lame limb about me . . . [and] I have been able to endure the hardest kind of manual labor, exposures, hardships and journeys. I have walked forty, fifty and, on one occasion, sixty miles in a single day.”

At the conclusion of his chronicle of unusual and narrow escapes with his life, he observed: “The repeated deliverances from all these remarkable dangers I ascribe to the mercies of my Heavenly Father. In recalling them to mind I always feel impressed to render the gratitude of my heart, with thanksgiving and joy, to the Lord.”

Like that of President Woodruff, the preservation of President Lorenzo Snow’s life was both unusual and dramatic. In 1864, at age fifty, Elder Snow was called on a special mission to the Hawaiian Islands. The Saints in Hawaii had been virtually left alone since LDS missionaries had returned to the continental West during the Utah War.

Walter Murray Gibson, an opportunistic missionary, became the self-appointed leader of the native Saints. His actions and activities soon became inconsistent with the Church’s principles and policies. Among other things, Gibson, as their leader, sold priesthood offices. Eventually, Church leaders received reports of his improprieties and sent a delegation of faithful missionaries and leaders to deal with Gibson personally and to attempt to negate the influences he had on the people.

When the missionaries arrived in Hawaii in 1864, they experienced a severe storm. Elder Joseph F. Smith, a former missionary to the islands and a member of the delegation, would not board the small landing vessel. He said to his companions: “If you by the authority of the Priesthood of God, which you hold, tell me to get into that boat and attempt to land I will do so, but unless you command me in the authority of the Priesthood, I will not do so, because it is not safe to attempt to land in a small boat while this storm is raging.”

Elder Snow did, however, board the small vessel with the missionaries
and started for shore under the escort of the natives. The boatload of missionaries was struck by a huge wave and violently capsized. Within moments, all the passengers were accounted for except Elder Snow. Many minutes of frantic searching ensued. A missionary companion noted, “Finally one of the natives in edging himself around the capsized boat, felt Brother Snow with his feet and turned and pulled him out from under the boat. His body was stiff and apparently life was gone. There was little doubt in the minds of any of those present that he was dead.”

Elder Snow had spent approximately fifteen minutes under water and showed no sign of life when taken from the ocean. Even when others had given up hope, the elders prayed for his life and worked over his body. One missionary, not willing to accept that Elder Snow had drowned, noted, “We did not only what was customary in such cases, but also what the Spirit seemed to whisper to us.”

After a full hour of laboring over their comrade and implementing known techniques to revive drowning victims, they attempted some lesser-known practices and a priesthood blessing. Finally, Elder Snow’s eye twitched, and a low, barely audible gurgle was heard in his throat. These indications of life, though faint, continued to increase in frequency until Elder Snow completely revived.

President Snow related his memory of the incident: “Having been somewhat subject to faint, I think that after a few moments in the water I must have fainted, as I did not suffer the pain common in the experience of drowning persons. I had been in the water only a few moments, until I lost consciousness. The first I knew afterwards, I was on shore, receiving the kind and tender attentions of my brethren.”

Elder Joseph F. Smith, Snow’s companion and his successor to the Presidency of the Church, testified, “It is very evident if the Lord had not come to the rescue through the faith and administration of the Elders that Elder Lorenzo Snow would not have recovered, notwithstanding the manipulations resorted to.”

President Joseph F. Smith, like his predecessors, was not immune from life-threatening and precarious situations. Elder Smith lived during a time of severe persecution.

In November 1838, Joseph F. Smith was born in Far West, Missouri, amidst the uncertainty of mob activity. He was the first child born to Hyrum and Mary Fielding Smith. His father was in prison, and Mary was seriously ill. Within days of Joseph’s birth, a mob burst into the house and began to plunder the Smith family’s possessions. President Smith later noted:
I, being an infant, and lying on the bed ... was entirely overlooked by the family ... during the fright and excitement. So when the mob entered the room where I was, the bed on the floor was thrown on to the other completely smothering me up, and here I was permitted to remain until after the excitement subsided. When thought of, and discovered, my existence was supposed to have come to an end; but subsequent events have proved their suppositions erroneous, however well founded!30

Although his entire life was marked by threats and harassment from enemies to the Church, the preservation of President Smith’s life is illustrated by his survival as a young missionary in Hawaii. Elder Smith became seriously ill and had a raging fever that persisted for nearly three months. He was cared for by a native woman named M a M auhuii. Years later, President Joseph F. Smith visited Hawaii with his close friend, Presiding Bishop Charles W. Nibley. Acquaintances from President Smith’s earlier visits to Hawaii came to welcome them in customary Hawaiian fashion. When President Smith saw his aged Hawaiian mother, “he ran to her and clasped her in his arms, hugged her, and kissed her over and over again. . . . With tears streaming down his cheeks he turned to me and said, . . . ‘She nursed me when I was a boy, sick and without anyone to care for me. She took me in and was a mother to me!’”31

H eber J. Grant, G eorge A lbert Smith, and D avid O. M cKay

President Heber J. Grant’s life was also beset with numerous obstacles and reversals. When Heber was only nine days old, his father, Jedediah Morgan Grant, died. In addition to numerous childhood diseases and hardships occasioned by the rigors and dangers of pioneer life, young Heber also had his share of more dangerous sicknesses. Yet, as a child, he was promised he would live to one day preside over the Church. Elder Heber C. Kimball, a counselor in the First Presidency to Brigham Young, prophesied “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that you should become an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ and become a greater man in the Church than your own father”32

As a young man, Heber was taken seriously ill with an appendicitis infection that had spread throughout his body. The doctor reported that, in his opinion, Heber would die. Heber Grant apparently didn’t care for the doctor’s opinion and asked for another doctor’s prognosis. This doctor, also, was dubious of Heber’s chances for recovery, and when this second doctor offered a similar medical opinion as the first, a different opinion was sought. Likewise, the third through the eighth
doctors concluded that Heber Grant’s condition was desperate and unlikely to improve. Still, Heber was not satisfied. A ninth doctor was called upon. In him, Heber finally found one who was not bound by the beliefs and opinions of the former eight and who suggested Heber would live. Elder Grant did live to fulfill the prophecy given to him as a child that he would live to preside over the Church.33 When Elder Grant questioned the doctor about the doctor’s optimistic outlook concerning Heber’s own recovery, the Southern gentleman doctor said, “Mistah Grant, ah [I] just took a chance, suh [sir]. Ah have felt the pulse, suh, of thousands of patients . . . But ah never felt a pulse just like yours, suh . . . in all of the tests that I made during an hour and three quarters that you were under the knife your heart nevah missed one single, solitary beat, and ah made up my mind that that heart would pull through.”34

Later, President Grant remembered this experience and attributed his survival to the fact that in his youth he had kept the principles embodied in the Word of Wisdom. He said, “I leave my testimony . . . that I would not be standing here today talking to you if I had not obeyed the Word of Wisdom [and] because in the kind providences of the Lord it had been revealed in a manifestation that I did not have to die.”35

George Albert Smith likewise experienced the divine preservation of his life. Two such experiences occurred while Elder Smith was in full-time missionary service in the Southern States Mission. One night, well after dark, two missionaries were traveling a narrow mountain road in anticipation of finding some much-needed hospitality. The path was bordered on one side by a high mountain wall and on the other by a sheer precipice at the bottom of which ran a deep, swift river. Elder Smith recalled:

We walked almost with a shuffle, feeling each foot of ground as we advanced, with one hand extended toward the wall of the mountain. . . . As I walked along I felt the hard surface of the trail under my feet. In doing so I left the wall of the mountain which had acted as a guide and a steadying force. After I had taken a few steps away I felt impressed to stop immediately, that something was wrong.36

Not knowing where he was, Elder Smith called to his companion. Directed by the sound of his voice, Elder Smith backed up until he came again to the wall. During the continued process of his maneuvering along the mountain trail, Elder Smith’s travel case/valise popped open, and its contents were scattered along the path. The two elders
gathered what they could and determined to return to the scene in the morning light, as some items were thought to still be missing.

The next morning we returned to the scene of my accident. . . . While there, my curiosity was stimulated and aroused to see what had happened the night before when I lost my way in the dark. . . . I retraced my steps . . . and discovered that in the darkness I had wandered to the edge of a deep precipice. Just one more step and I would have fallen over into the river and been drowned.37

Elder Smith was sickened at the realization of how close he had come to disaster and concluded his account: "I also was very grateful to my Heavenly Father for protecting me."38

Later, while still laboring in the Southern States Mission, Elder George Albert Smith had another harrowing experience. He, his companion, and some other elders were proselyting in a heavily wooded, rural area. The missionaries had enjoyed considerable success among the humble country people and had even been invited to spend the night with one family. Elder Smith remembered that about midnight, they awoke to a terrible noise caused by people yelling and shouting outside. With the aid of a bright moon, the missionaries inside the house could plainly see the individuals outside. Because of the foul language those outside used and the threats they made, the missionaries knew the intruders were no friends of theirs. "In just a few seconds the room was filled with shots. Apparently the mob had divided itself into four groups and were shooting into the corners of the house. Splinters were flying over our heads in every direction. There were a few moments of quiet, then another volley of shots was fired and more splinters flew."39

Despite the desperate nature of the situation, the missionaries remained calm. Elder Smith did not even get out of bed. "I felt absolutely no terror. I was very calm as I lay there, experiencing one of the most horrible events of my life, but I was sure that as long as I was preaching the word of God and following his teachings that the Lord would protect me, and he did."40

Young David O. McKay grew up in the farming community of Huntsville, Utah. His life spanned the years between the horse-and-buggy era and the new world of automation and air travel. He loved the technological improvements and delighted in the innovations they brought to his life. Perhaps in his exuberance and enthusiasm for the new and the exciting, young David sometimes lost sight of temperance and caution.

On one occasion in 1916, as a young Apostle, Elder McKay was driving in an area that warranted greater care because of dangerous
conditions brought about by the flooding of the Ogden River. It had washed out a part of the road and threatened to destroy the bridge. David had consented to take his brother Thomas by car to make necessary connections to get to work. As a result of delays and needing to make his own train connection, David had second thoughts about trying to make the trip in the short time left. Elder McKay said, "I received a strong impression to 'go up to the bridge and back.'" Although the two men had not consulted with each other, Elder McKay's brother confirmed those feelings by suggesting that they not attempt to cross the bridge because of potential flood conditions. Elder McKay remembered:

Notwithstanding these two warnings, as we approached the bridge I thought I could spend another five minutes and take him [farther]. . . . I saw the pile of rocks there at the bridge, and it seemed to be intact. . . . So jocularly I said, "I'm going across the bridge. Can you swim?" With that I stepped on the gas and dashed across the bridge. . . . The watchman . . . had stretched the derrick rope across the road, and . . . the day watchman, had not arrived. . . . The rope smashed the [front] window, threw back the top, and caught me just in the chin, severing my lip, knocking out my lower teeth, and breaking my upper jaw.

Although the accident could easily have been fatal, Elder McKay learned some valuable lessons. First, he learned the importance of listening to the prompting of the Spirit. Second, he was given an unusual blessing not only that he would be healed but also that he would neither be disfigured by the accident nor have pain from the injury as it healed. Each of the blessings was specifically and significantly fulfilled. Elder McKay's life was preserved in spite of the severity of the ordeal, but it was also a powerful learning experience for the future leader of the Church.

An important experience of Elder McKay's early apostleship was the assignment given to him in 1920 to tour all the Church's missions. His travels took him and his companion, Hugh J. Cannon, literally around the globe and lasted during parts of two years. During Elder McKay's visit to the Hawaiian Islands, the local Saints took him to visit the world-famous Kilauea Volcano. One of the participants recorded:

After a day of inspiring conference meetings in Hilo, Hawaii, a night trip to the Kilauea volcano was arranged for the visiting brethren and some of the missionaries. . . . We stood on the rim of that fiery pit watching . . . [with] our backs chilled by the cold winds sweeping down from snowcapped Mauna Loa, and our faces almost blistered by the heat of the molten lava.
An enterprising missionary found a natural shelf just inside the volcanic crater where the visitors could view the spectacle without being exposed to either the cold wind or the searing heat. “After first testing its safety, Brother McKay and three of the elders climbed down into the hanging balcony. . . . After being down there in their protected spot for some time, suddenly Brother McKay said to those with him, ‘Brethren, I feel impressed that we should get out of here.’”

The group quickly assisted each other to climb back up the side of the crater where others of the party had remained. “It seems incredible, but almost immediately the whole balcony crumbled and fell with a roar into the molten lava a hundred feet or so below. . . . Not a word was said. . . . The whole thing was too awful, with all that word means.”

Throughout his world tour, Elder McKay fought bouts of severe sickness, was quarantined for disease, was introduced to unfamiliar foods, and was exposed to diseases in dozens of countries on several continents. Throughout it all, however, his health and vigor were preserved in an unusual and miraculous way, all in fulfillment of a very impressive blessing given to him by President Heber J. Grant:

We bless you with every gift and grace and every qualification necessary for you to possess to fully magnify this calling. We say unto you: Go forth in peace, in pleasure and happiness, and return in safety to your loved ones and to the body of the Church. We bless you with power over disease. . . . You shall be warned of dangers seen and unseen and be given wisdom and inspiration from God to avoid all the snares and pitfalls that may be laid for your feet by wicked and designing men.

Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, and Spencer W. Kimball

President Joseph Fielding Smith grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah, under the tutelage of his father, the Apostle and later Prophet, Joseph F. Smith. Joseph Fielding loved learning and enjoyed reading books from his father’s vast library, and often, as a young boy, he hurried to finish his assigned chores so he could return to his reading.

On one occasion, while performing his chores, Joseph had a close brush with death. He and his brother George were working in the field loading hay to store in the barn. “They had stopped [his team] on a road by the canal to stack some bales [of hay] and give the team a drink. Because they had a skittish horse, Joseph told George to stand by the head of the team and hold their bridles until he [Joseph] could climb up and take the reins.”
Instead of minding his older brother, George climbed up the back of the wagon onto the load. Something frightened the horses, and they jerked forward, jolting Joseph while he was climbing up the front of the wagon load. Joseph lost his balance and fell down between the horses. The boy was concerned about his precarious predicament and remembered thinking, “Well, here’s my finish!” However, miraculously, “something turned the horses and they ran into the canal, while Joseph was thrown clear of their hoofs and the wheels of the wagon.”

Joseph was not pleased with his brother’s inattentiveness, but neither was he seriously hurt in what could easily have been a fatal accident. Young Joseph hurried home only to be met on the way by his father, the Apostle, who had “received a strong impression that his son was in some kind of danger.”

Another experience illustrating the preservation of President Joseph Fielding Smith’s life is captured by another writer:

The Lord purposely spared the life of Joseph Fielding Smith, who outlived fifteen of the apostles called after him and was in the Quorum of the Twelve longer than any man in this dispensation. . . . The Lord preserved him so that for two and a half years he could preside over the Church, lending to the Saints his tremendous understanding of Church doctrine and knowledge of the scriptures, his orthodoxy, and his uncompromising commitment to revealed truth.

Joseph Fielding Smith became President of the Church at the age of ninety-three and served energetically until his death in July 1972. He was succeeded by the relatively youthful Harold B. Lee.

Once, as a young man, Harold B. Lee was violently knocked down by his mother. More surprised by her unusual behavior than hurt by her spontaneous actions, he soon learned the cause of her uncharacteristic roughness: “A bolt of lightning came down the chimney of the kitchen stove, out through the kitchen’s open doorway, and split a huge gash from top to bottom in a large tree immediately in front of the house. Had it not been for Mother’s intuitive action, and if I had remained in the door opening, I wouldn’t be writing this story today.”

As a young man, Harold accidentally drank a lye solution; on another occasion, he spilled lye on his face. In both instances, his quick-thinking mother saved him from certain injury or death. President Lee attributed his preservation on these and other occasions to the fact that his mother lived close to the Spirit and knew intuitively what to do in emergency situations.

President Lee shared another account about his early life and
testified of divine intervention. While exploring an area contiguous to his father’s farm, young Harold heard an audible voice warn him away from his intended destination. “Don’t go... over there,” the voice commanded. He looked around to determine the source of the voice, but finding himself alone, he determined to heed the warning and “then ran as fast as possible away from some unknown danger.” Although he never knew what danger lurked, he had learned to be obedient to the promptings of the Spirit, and this obedience had greater importance than his youthful curiosity. This experience became foundational.

In March 1967, Elder Lee suffered the effects of a grueling schedule. While in New Jersey, he became faint and had to lie down, and he received a priesthood blessing. The next morning, after a long night, he felt weak once again and concluded that he must return home immediately. In a subsequent general conference, President Lee related his unusual experience:

On the way across the country, we were sitting in the forward section of the airplane. . . . As we approached a certain point en route, someone laid his hands upon my head. I looked up; I could see no one. That happened again before we arrived home, again with the same experience. Who it was, by what means or what medium, I may never know, except I knew that I was receiving a blessing that I came a few hours later to know I needed most desperately.

Upon his arrival home, he experienced a massive hemorrhage, which, “had [it] occurred while we were in flight, I wouldn’t be here today talking about it.” President Lee further testified:

I know that there are powers divine that reach out when all other help is not available. . . . One can only suppose that the Almighty has it in his hand to give or to take and he alone keeps the timetable. To the thoroughness and the skill of doctors, I owe much, but I’m not unmindful of the spiritual power which has been in evidence in the events leading up to the operation as well as circumstances resulting therefrom.

At age seventy-three, Elder Lee, who had served for over thirty years as a General Authority, came to preside over the Church because he was the man the Lord wanted to preside over His Church at that time.

When President Lee died unexpectedly on 26 December 1973 of cardiac arrest and lung failure, he was succeeded by President Spencer W. Kimball. President Kimball’s experiences in battling adversities and physical ailments have become legendary. At a young age, he battled
the usual childhood diseases, including smallpox and typhoid fever; but, in addition to these killer ailments, he also narrowly escaped drowning. In later life, his experiences with cancer, heart attacks, Bell’s palsy, and strokes were humbling. Elder Russell M. Nelson, a noted heart surgeon, shares an unusual personal insight into the preservation of the life of the Lord’s anointed:

On October 9, 1971, I performed a selective coronary arteriogram on him. We found that he had not only severe aortic valve disease, but also a high-grade obstruction. . . . His heart was being overworked because of the valve disease, and the overworked heart was being undersupplied with blood due to the obstruction in the main arterial supply line to the cardiac muscle. Indeed, this would be analogous to asking soldiers to fight a war with increasing opposition while decreasing the supplies to the troops.56

Surgery was not recommended because of the complexities of such an operation and because of the advanced age of the patient. President Kimball discussed his condition with the First Presidency. His doctors provided their expert evaluations, and those present were free to ask questions about Elder Kimball’s condition. Finally, President Kimball spoke, “I’m an old man and ready to die. It is well for a younger man to come to the Quorum and do the work I can no longer do.”57 Upon hearing this admission from President Kimball, President Lee, “speaking for the First Presidency, rose to his feet, pounded his fist to the desk, and said, ‘Spencer you have been called! You are not to die! You are to do everything that you need to do in order to care for yourself and continue to live.’”58

Elder Kimball obediently complied and made arrangements for the surgery to take place. Elder Russell M. Nelson remembered:

On the eve of the operation, April 11, 1972, I received a blessing, at my request, from . . . President Harold B. Lee and President Nathan Eldon Tanner. They blessed me that the operation would be performed without error, that all would go well, and that I need not fear my own inadequacies, for I had been raised up by the Lord to perform this operation.59

Elder Nelson continued: “From that very first maneuver until the last one, everything went as planned. There was not one broken stitch, not one instrument had fallen from the table, not one technical flaw had occurred in a series of thousands of intricate manipulations. . . . Even more special than that was the overpowering feeling that came upon me. . . . The Spirit told me that I had just operated upon a man
who would become president of the Church! . . . It was revealed to me that he would preside over the Church!”

Ezra Taft Benson, Howard W. Hunter, and Gordon B. Hinckley

President Ezra Taft Benson’s mortal existence was tenuous from the moment of his birth. Ezra was the firstborn of eleven children. At birth, he was in critical condition and appeared to be stillborn, as he did not start breathing immediately. The attending doctor said he would attempt to save Ezra’s mother but held little hope for the infant’s survival. President Benson later explained, “The faith of my father, the administrations of the priesthood, and the quick action of my two grandmothers, who placed me in a pan of cold water and then in a pan of warm water alternately, brought forth a husky yell to the joy of all.” In later years, “both grandmothers bore testimony that the Lord had spared the child.”

The baby soon grew to young manhood. At age sixteen, the future Prophet received a patriarchal blessing in which the preservation of his life was further predicated upon condition of his faithfulness. Further, “Ezra was told that, if faithful, he would go on a mission to the nations of the earth, that his life would be preserved on land and sea, that he would raise his voice in testimony and would grow in favor with the Almighty, and that many would rise up and bless his name.”

This blessing was fulfilled in minute detail and, in some cases, several times. In 1918, a dreadful epidemic of influenza swept the country, killing thousands. In addition, World War I was raging in Europe, and the number of soldiers recruited caused a shortage of farm laborers. Nineteen-year-old Ezra Taft Benson was one of those in training, and because help was needed on the family farm, a two-week furlough was granted. The leave was to begin on a Saturday. On Friday morning, Ezra felt a strong impression that he should leave for home immediately. . . . He requested permission to leave early [which was granted], caught a ride to Whitney, and arrived home around noon. Almost immediately he was stricken with a severe fever.

For three days, the life of Ezra hung in the balance. Finally, his fever broke, and he began the long process of recovery. Sadly, Ezra learned that his two comrades who had bunked on either side of him back at his military quarters, one his cousin, had died from the effects of the illness. Ezra expressed his feeling that the Lord had a hand in preserving his life. “Had I waited,” he said, “I would have suffered there with the rest of them, and probably passed away.”
Latter-day Saints worldwide are grateful that the life of President Benson was preserved. His enthusiasm for the gospel, his emphasis on the Book of Mormon, and his love for the gospel are legendary and have contributed much to the lives of others.

When President Benson died in May 1994, the senior Apostle on earth was Howard William Hunter. President Hunter brought with him unique experiences of his own. Along with his predecessors, he enjoyed a preservation of life that enabled him to come to the “first place.”

As a young boy, Howard suffered from the debilitating effects of polio. Although he escaped many of the life-long consequences so often associated with this dreaded killer disease, Howard carried the reminder of his experience with him throughout his eventful life.

Later, in what President Hunter described as a refining process, he suffered, in succession, the effect of mumps, a serious operation to remove a tumor, a heart attack, heart bypass surgery, bleeding ulcers, diabetes, and the deterioration of a vertebrae in his back. In addition to being extremely painful, each of his illnesses required lengthy recovery periods, and each of them required immense patience. In conjunction with his characteristic humor and a personal policy of deflecting the attention away from himself, President Hunter said, “I have had surgery, a heart attack, and the next may be a nervous breakdown for not being allowed to do anything.”

In the October 1987 general conference, following several of the problems noted above, President Hunter, seated in a wheelchair, spoke on the blessings of adversity in one’s life. He spoke on this topic with conviction, as his doctors had advised him he would never stand or walk again.

In the April 1988 general conference, President Hunter was again scheduled to speak. As a result of much practice and personal effort on his part, President Hunter “slowly stood and began to move, with his walker, to the pulpit.” Following the address, President Monson, who was conducting, referred to President Hunter’s herculean effort to stand and walk again as a miracle. Interestingly enough, and likely not by coincidence, the topic of President Hunter’s discourse in conference that day was the greatest miracle—the Resurrection of Christ. Although President Hunter lived for only nine more months once he became the Prophet, he did as he instructed—he lived what he taught.

On Monday, 13 March 1995, President Gordon B. Hinckley stood before an international press corps to be introduced as the newest Church President and to introduce his counselors who would
serve with him. As a part of his introduction, he announced that in the almost eighty-five years of his life, “he had spent only one night in the hospital,” and that night was for observation.70

Gordon was a “spindly, frail boy susceptible to earaches and other illnesses.” He also “suffered from allergies, asthma, and hay fever,” and at “two he contracted a severe case of whooping cough.” As a result of his illness and upon the recommendation of a doctor, the family moved to a more rural setting to preserve his health.71

During the dreaded pandemic of Spanish influenza of 1918, over twenty-five million people died worldwide. In Salt Lake City, eight-year-old Gordon Hinckley and several of his immediate family members contracted the illness. The elderly, infirm, and those already weakened by other sickness were particularly susceptible to the dreaded disease. After Gordon went through weeks of special care, his mother, Ada, “was relieved when Gordon pulled through, for he was still a skinny boy susceptible to illness.” 72

Notwithstanding his preservation despite early illnesses and weaknesses, President Hinckley has avoided serious injury or death on numerous other occasions, as illustrated by two brief examples. In May 1970, he flew to South America for a series of conferences. After completing his assignments in Lima, he flew to Santiago, Chile, for additional meetings. While in Chile, he received a telegram from the Peruvian mission president indicating that “less than a minute after his plane had left Lima, Peru had been hit with a devastating earthquake.” 73 In London eight years later, fire broke out in the hotel. Awakened to potential risk, President Hinckley and other guests “lugged their bags down six flights of steps to escape danger.” 74

Conclusion

The Presidents of the Church of Jesus Christ have been blessed during times of sickness or danger, and their lives have been preserved by the hand of a merciful providence. As a result of their lives being preserved, they have been permitted to serve, for a time, during the unfolding of unusual events during this last dispensation. Likewise, the lives of many other leaders of the Church have also been preserved.

At the funeral of President N. Eldon Tanner, President Ezra Taft Benson noted: “The death of a righteous individual is both an honorable release and a call to new labors.” 75 President Kimball further testified, “The death of his [the Lord’s] servants is in the power and control of the Lord. He permits to come to the first place only the one
who is destined to take that leadership. Death and life become the controlling factors.” President Benson added on another occasion in a similar tone, “It has been said that the death of a righteous man is never untimely because our father sets the time. I believe that with all my soul.”

The Lord alone has the right to control life and death. He preserves the life of a prophet whose service can bless the lives of His children everywhere. When a prophet completes his mission, he is given an honorable release from mortality and thereby from his sacred office. Upon a prophet's death, another individual, whose life has also been preserved and prepared for a specific purpose, will take the helm of leadership in the Church. The successor assumes the position but never his predecessor’s place—the place that each prophet has molded in the hearts of his brothers and sisters.

Notes

5. Ibid., 341.
9. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 150.
17. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 11.
22. Ibid., 11.
23. Ibid., 11–12.
26. Ibid., 215.
28. Ibid., 280.
30. Ibid., 124.
31. Ibid., 186.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 326–27.
35. Ibid., 326.
37. Ibid., 157–58.
38. Ibid., 158.
39. Ibid., 156.
40. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 138–39.
43. Ibid., 52.
44. Ibid., 53.
45. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
51. L. Brent Goates, Harold B. Lee Prophet and Seer (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 41.
53. Ibid., 23. See also Goates, Harold B. Lee Prophet and Seer, 40.
55. Goates, Harold B. Lee Prophet and Seer, 387–89.
57. Ibid., 163–64.
58. Ibid., 164.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 164–65.
63. Ibid., 29.
64. Ibid., 45.
66. Ibid., 284.
67. Ibid., 285.
68. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 24–25.
72. Ibid., 38–39.
73. Ibid., Go Forward with Faith, 313.
74. Ibid., 360.
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