

Introduction

June 27, 1844 marks the date of one of the most tragic events in Mormon history—the day the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Patriarch Hyrum Smith became martyrs for the cause of truth at the Carthage, Illinois jail. After reviewing the events that led up to that dark day let us pause for a few moments to reflect upon the magnitude and meaning of the work of Joseph Smith, the Lord’s chosen servant.

Exodus from Missouri to the Promised Land of Nauvoo

The infamous extermination order issued by Governor Boggs on October 27, 1838 effectively drained the state of Missouri of all Mormons. Persecuted, driven and in despair they slowly made their way across the winter prairies of Missouri, over the Mississippi river to a temporary settlement in Quincy, Illinois. After many months in prison, the leading brethren were released from Liberty Jail and afforded the opportunity to return to their families. Soon the vigor of establishing Zion returned to Joseph and the saints. In the summer of 1839 a new gathering place was secured on the swampy shores of Commerce, Illinois, land was purchased, a city charter secured and a new name given—Nauvoo,¹ the beautiful city.

Nauvoo truly was a beautiful city unto the saints that found rest and repose from all their enemies. As they had done before in Kirtland, Independence and Far West the saints attempted to gather themselves together, to build a temple unto their God and establish the cause of Zion. Fearing a repeat of judicial problems that had vexed the saints everywhere they settled, Joseph Smith secured a provision in the city charter of Nauvoo that established a municipal court. Based on past experience with the judicial systems in regions that were less than friendly towards Mormons, the hope was to have recourse to a fair judicial review if ever lawsuits were brought against Joseph Smith, the church or any member of it.

Prosperity and Persecutions in Nauvoo

In a short time, no doubt due to the great faith and industrious nature of the early saints, the city of Nauvoo rose in prominence and prosperity. By June 1844 the city population was estimated to be 14,000 people strong, making it one of the largest cities in Illinois at the time. Its rapid growth and rise to prominence was both a blessing and a curse. Several other Illinois communities in the area such as Quincy, Warsaw and Carthage lost business and prestige because of growth at Nauvoo. Additionally, the land speculators and investors in these communities who sought to make money through speculation found their trade diminished as the Mormon church bought large sections of land and then sold them nearly at cost to the hundreds of newly arriving immigrants and settlers to Nauvoo.² Hence, the old cycle of jealousy and opposition against the Mormons began to grow. Other problems soon surfaced and vexed Joseph and the Church.

Even though the Nauvoo charter provided for all religious groups to come and settle freely within the city and the First Presidency issued a statement in support of such diversity and tolerance³ the religious unity and insularity of the Mormons tended to make them an exclusive group. This had the same effect upon the citizens of Illinois as it did upon the citizens of Missouri, namely to incite suspicion and jealousy. These feelings were further complicated by other factors. The Mormons espoused a set of religious beliefs that were not in line with “mainstream Christianity.” As the missionary labors continued to expand and bring in numbers of converts, ministers from other denominations grew frustrated as their own congregations diminished. But more than just losing their congregations, these ministers believed that the Mormon doctrines led people astray.

While all of these social circumstances were brewing in Illinois, Missouri sheriffs sought to capture or kidnap Joseph Smith and bring him back to Missouri for trial on old charges, most of them spurious. Thus, these difficulties often distracted Joseph Smith from church and family business, as he had to hide from time to time for the safety of his life.⁴ The biggest problems, however, were not from outside the church but from within. It was those who had at one time professed loyalty and friendship to Joseph and the church that proved the most dangerous and ultimately responsible for the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum.

Varied are the reasons that some early saints grew bitter, apostatized and then turned their efforts to persecute the

church and see the downfall of Joseph. In the Nauvoo period much of the controversy and apostasy surrounded the rumors of plural marriage. From historical records it appears that Joseph Smith first learned of the principle of plural marriage in 1831, however he only shared the principle with but few of his associates. As the years passed, Joseph had deep reservations about introducing the principle among the people. This principle seemed to go against all the virtuous ideas espoused by Western civilized society. Not until 1840 was the principle practiced, and even then it was a small handful of people and this in secrecy. A few years later in 1843, the principle was more openly discussed among church leaders as the revelation of the marriage covenant was put into writing and shared with “the High Council at Nauvoo.”⁵ But there were a few who abused the purity of the principle and used it to justify their lustful desires. One such individual was John C. Bennett who had served with Joseph Smith in the 1st Presidency. When Joseph discovered the moral wrongs that Bennett had committed, the latter was quickly excommunicated. Embittered by these circumstances, Bennett left Nauvoo and began to publish exposes against the prophet and the Mormons. However, the greatest threat came from those who opposed the prophet and yet remained in Nauvoo. Because of the secretive nature of the practice of polygamy the apostates had an easy argument against the church leaders of immorality. Such misrepresentations only bolstered the resentment felt by outsiders (whether due to economic or religious reasons) and caused much confusion among the saints of Nauvoo.

About this same time a secret combination formed in Nauvoo based upon the intent to assassinate Joseph Smith. Among the prominent individuals in this secret combination were William Marks, Leonard Soby, Charles Foster, Wilson Law and William Law (another counselor to the prophet Joseph Smith!). Determined to destroy Joseph, several of these men pressed charges of adultery and perjury against the Prophet in Carthage late in May 1844. Then they established a printing press in Nauvoo called *The Nauvoo Expositor*, which advocated, “the unconditional repeal of the Nauvoo City Charter and to expose the immoral practices of the Church.”⁶ The City Council of Nauvoo deemed the press to be “a public nuisance” and so they had it destroyed.⁷ Anti-Mormons immediately claimed that their “freedom of the press” was denied. This so-called abuse of this guaranteed constitutional right caused a mighty uproar throughout the surrounding communities. Soon an arrest warrant was issued for Joseph and several other leaders of the church with charges of inciting a riot. Governor Ford of Illinois demanded that Joseph submit to the arrest. On June 24th, 1844, Joseph Smith turned himself over and the next day he was committed to the Carthage jail together with a few other prominent leaders of the church.

During the next few days the Mormons sought every means to exonerate their captive leaders from false and misleading charges. Appeals were made to every level of government for mercy and for justice. However, the dark shadows from the valley of death could not be restrained from engulfing the small town of Carthage, Illinois.

On June 27, 1844 a little after 5 o’clock in the evening, an armed mob stormed the jail, overran the few guards stationed to protect the Mormon prisoners and murdered Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum in cold blood.

To Seal the Testimony

In modern times, as in ancient, the Lord has designated special servants to share saving truths and ordinances with others that they might know joy in this life and eternal salvation in the life to come. Unfortunately, these servants are often not well received and it has not been uncommon for their blood to witness of their final testimony. We have several designations for those who die for the sake of their testimony—*testator* or *martyr*. A *testator* is one who “dies leaving a will or testament in force.”⁸ A *testament* is defined as “tangible proof.”⁹ Therefore, the death of the *testator* serves as tangible proof of the veracity of his testimony.

The other word, *martyr*, has an English definition stated as “one who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of witnessing to and refusing to renounce his religion...one who sacrifices his life or something of great value for the sake of principle.”¹⁰ Originally the word *martyr* derived from the Greek language and initially meant “a witness who bears a divine message.”¹¹ Over time, as those who bore divine witness were killed (such as Stephen in Acts 7:55-56; also Abinadi in Mosiah 17), *martyr* began to refer to one who was killed for the sake of the witness he bore. Joseph Smith fulfills the description of both *testator* and *martyr*. His brother Hyrum shares the same honor. This is quite significant for we have two witnesses who are martyrs to seal the opening of the last dispensation. The closing of the last dispensation will be sealed as well by the death of two martyrs. This powerful parallel becomes

more significant when we remember that the two future prophets will seal their testimony with their deaths in Jerusalem—the Old City—and then we realize that the name Carthage means *New City*.¹² In other words, the opening of the last dispensation was sealed by the blood of two martyrs in the *New City* while the closing of the last dispensation will be sealed by the blood of two martyrs in the *Old City*.

Praise to the Man

Apostle John Taylor who was an eyewitness of the martyrdom penned the stirring testimonial published as D&C 135. In this unique document Apostle Taylor testifies, “Joseph Smith, the Prophet...has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it.” Let us take a few moments to reviews the marvelous work accomplished by God through his servant Joseph.

New Scripture

The most monumental work that will stand the test of time is Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Mormon. Bold in every way for it was a “new” book of scripture to burst forth upon the scene in a culture that preached the infallibility and sufficiency of the Bible, the Book of Mormon continues today to flood the earth with the good news that Jesus is the very Christ, the Savior of the world.¹³ Personally, what I find amazing is the fact that this mighty task of translation that produced (in today’s current edition) 531 printed pages was completed in the matter of several months.¹⁴ Joseph was 25 years young when the Book of Mormon was published. This is an accomplishment without parallel in world history.

Other marvelous scriptures soon followed. Beginning in 1830 Joseph Smith worked on the Inspired Translation of the Old Testament. Only the martyrdom stopped Joseph from completing this great work and publishing it in full unto the world. Nevertheless, Joseph recorded hundreds of additional insights and corrections in the Old and New Testaments. Furthermore, he made record of various revelations received from June 1830 until February 1831 now known as the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price.

Then in 1835 Joseph made public the Book of Abraham, now published in the Pearl of Great Price. This small gem of a book throws greater light on the life and character of father Abraham while also exploring some of the most wondrous doctrines of astronomy, the nature of God, man’s purpose on the earth and eternal increase. Some of the most sublime doctrines to be found in any body of literature await us in the Pearl of Great Price, this small but invaluable book.

Of course we cannot fail to mention the Doctrine & Covenants. This book compiles many of the revelations received by Joseph Smith during his lifetime. Of the 138 sections of this book, Joseph received a full 135 sections amounting to nearly 300 pages of additional scripture available for the feasting of a spiritually famished world.¹⁵

Bold Missionary Efforts

By June 1844, missionaries had been called and sent forth on a regular basis for over a decade to the four corners of the United States of America. In addition, missionaries had also raised the standard of salvation in numerous other countries. The following lists many of them: Canada, England, Scotland, Wales, Germany, Israel (Palestine), Austria, Holland, Turkey, Italy, France, East Indies, Syria and Egypt.¹⁶ From these many nations thousands had flocked to the standard of truth and that number increases daily for the work does not cease (Moses 1:38).

City and Temple Builder

One of the lasting legacies that Joseph Smith left, which has ever after been the heritage of the saints, is to build cities and temples unto God. As early as 1831 Joseph Smith was establishing new cities and dedicating temple sites. The first was in Independence, Jackson County, Missouri (August 1831). In 1833 Joseph received a revelation to build a temple in Kirtland, which was dedicated on March 27, 1836 in the midst of spiritual outpouring and manifestations. Then in 1838 Far West, Missouri became the official headquarters of the Church and plans were set in place for a temple to be built. On July 4, 1838 a great cornerstone ceremony took place for a

beautiful temple to be built.¹⁷ Unfortunately, by the end of 1838 the Missourians had expelled the Mormons and forced them to leave their temple lying dormant in the ground to await a future day when it will be built to the glory of God.

The greatest city and temple built during Joseph’s ministry was Nauvoo. In Nauvoo, Joseph established a city with a charter that provided for a university, a judicial system, a militia, prosperous business enterprises and of course the pearl of the city, the Nauvoo temple. Joseph served as Nauvoo mayor, general of the militia, prophet and president of the church all at the same time. Joseph, however, never lived to see the completion of the temple and eventually the persecuted saints had to abandon the sacred edifice not many weeks after it was dedicated.¹⁸

Temples are the House of the Lord, the sacred mountain that we ascend to receive our endowment¹⁹ in preparation to enter the salvation and presence of the Lord. It is through temple ordinances that the fulness of the Gospel Plan is revealed, administered and secured through faithfulness unto our salvation. It is the holy spot where all humanity is linked through unbreakable bonds of charity—the sealing power of the generations which binds the hearts of the children to the fathers and turns the hearts of the fathers to the children. Indeed, in temples is the Lord’s great Latter-day work of salvation perfected.

Praise to the Man Reprise

The purity of doctrines, the testimony of the reality of Jesus Christ as Savior, the power and authority of the Priesthood to administer ordinances of salvation, the continuing process of spreading the true word of God—all of these were revealed in the Latter-days through Joseph Smith. All of these things are necessary for our eternal salvation. Therefore, we are justified in testifying that Joseph Smith has done more for the salvation of man, save Jesus only, than any other man that has lived in it. And for these reasons we sing:

Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah!

Jesus anointed that Prophet and Seer.

Blessed to open the last dispensation,

Kings shall extol him, and nations revere.

Hail to the Prophet, ascended to heaven!

Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain—

Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren;

Death cannot conquer the hero again.

Praise to his mem’ry, he died as a martyr

Honored and blest be his ever great name!

Long shall his blood, which was shed by assassins,

Plead unto heav’n while the earth lauds his fame.

Great is his glory and endless his priesthood.

Ever and ever the keys he will hold.

Faithful and true, he will enter his kingdom,

Crowned in the midst of the prophets of old.

Sacrifice brings forth the blessings of heaven;

Earth must atone for the blood of that man.

Wake up the world for the conflict of justice.

Millions shall know “Brother Joseph” again.²⁰

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1. Nauvoo is a transliteration from a rare Hebrew word found in the Old Testament that has several significant meanings when one considers what the city of Nauvoo represented for the persecuted saints. Here are several of the meanings, “to rest (as at home)...*beauty*...to *celebrate* (with praises):—keep at home, prepare an habitation...*at home*; hence (by impl. of satisfaction) *lovely*; also (noun) a *home*, of God (temple), men (residence), flocks (pasture), or wild animals (den):—comely, dwelling (place), fold, habitation, pleasant place.” Found in James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers [?](#))
 2. William Edwin Berrett, *The Restored Church: A Brief History of the Growth and Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4th edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1944), pp. 227-228. [?](#)
 3. The statement reads, “We wish it likewise to be distinctly understood that we claim no privileges but what we feel cheerfully disposed to share with our fellow citizens of every denomination, and every sentiment of religion; and therefore say, that so far from being restricted to our own faith, let all those who desire to locate in this place (Nauvoo) or the vicinity, come and we will hail them as citizens and friends, and shall feel it not only a duty, but a privilege to reciprocate the kindness we have received from the benevolent and kind-hearted citizens of the State of Illinois.” Found in Berrett, p. 226. [?](#)
 4. Berrett, pp. 236ff. [?](#)
 5. Berrett, p. 260 [?](#)
 6. Berrett, p. 244. [?](#)
 7. Berrett, p. 245. [?](#)
 8. *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1988), p. 1219. [?](#)
 9. *Ibid.* [?](#)
 10. *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, p. 730. [?](#)
 11. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Trans. by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979; second edition), p. 494. [?](#)
 12. The word *Carthage* derives from the Phoenician word *qrthdsht* (*qiryat hodeshet*), which means “New City/Town” (*The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, ed. by Hornblower & Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 141). Ancient Phoenicia was located just north of Israel (what is now modern day Lebanon) and it had many important cities such as Tyre and Sidon. The Phoenicians were great

sea-farers and colonizers. Between 800 BC – 600 BC many of them emigrated in order to establish flourishing trade settlements all over the Mediterranean basin. They had sites along North Africa, others on the island of Sicily, they even had settlements along the coast of Spain. In fact, the modern Spanish City called *Cartegena* was anciently a “new city” settlement of the Phoenicians. Today of course the Spaniards live in this [?](#)

13. At the turn of the millennium “the Church passed the 100 million mark in printing copies of the Book of Mormon.” Additionally, the Book of Mormon or portions of it have been translated into 100 languages. *Ensign*, “*Taking the Scriptures to the World*” (July 2000). [?](#)
14. In my academic studies I have experienced numerous moments where several lines or paragraphs of Hebrew or Greek text have required hours upon hours of translating effort before the task is complete. I marvel at what Joseph accomplished in such a short period of time without the aid of formal training. [?](#)
15. The other 3 sections (135, 136 & 138) are attributed to John Taylor, Brigham Young & Joseph F. Smith, respectively. Although section 102 is a record of the high council meeting from February 17, 1834 Joseph Smith reviewed, amended and approved the minutes taken by Oliver Cowdery and Orson Hyde. [?](#)
16. HC 4:540 [?](#)
17. See HC 3:41ff [?](#)
18. What a blessing it is to live in a day when the Nauvoo Temple is restored to its original location and glory. [?](#)
19. The English word “endowment” derives from the Greek *enduo*, which means “to dress” or “to clothe someone.” *Enduo* can also have a figurative sense “of the taking on of characteristics, virtues, intentions, etc.” Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Trans. by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979; second edition), p. 264. [?](#)
20. Hymn #27. [?](#)