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Author(s): Kathleen Flake
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Joseph Smith's Letter from Liberty Jail: A Study in Canonization*

Kathleen Flake / *Nashville, Tennessee*

In honor of this occasion and as a form of deeply sincere flattery, let me invite you to consider a letter from prison: specifically, a letter written by Joseph Smith while incarcerated in Missouri during the winter of 1838–39. Like virtually all letters from prison, this one reveals the human soul in the grasp of dehumanized authority, or that abstraction we call "the state" and its disciplinary technologies. The technology applied to Smith and his five cohorts was very rudimentary: a below-ground, dungeon-like jail, with a ceiling too low to allow its prisoners to stand upright, and open slits too high in the wall to allow sight but always open to the cold. Smith spent four winter months in the inaptly named Liberty Jail, sleeping on stone, choking on a draftless fire in the dark, and fed tainted and sometimes poisoned food. Possibly most burdensome were the tales his jailers told of their participation in the mayhem that was driving the Latter-day Saints from Missouri.[1] For Smith, the jail was "hell surrounded with demonds" where he was "compeled to hear nothing but blasphemos oaths and witness a scen of blasphemy and drunkeness and hypocracy and debaucheries of evry description."[2]

* I thank Jared Halverson for his thoughtful suggestions and editorial assistance in the final version of this essay.

[1] Smith was incarcerated on charges of treason and other crimes following an armed conflict between Latter-day Saints (LDS) and non-LDS settlers. In October the governor of Missouri issued an extermination order that deployed the state militia and licensed what had been local vigilante action against the Latter-day Saints. The order made Latter-day Saints' actions against these attacks—whether defensive or retaliatory—grounds for charges of treason. The order provided that "the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State, if necessary, for the public good. Their outrages are beyond all description. If you can increase your force, you are authorized to do so to any extent you may think necessary." John P. Greene, *Facts Relative to the Expulsion of the Mormons or Latter-day Saints, from the State of Missouri, Under the "Exterminating Order"* (Cincinnati: R. P. Brooks, 1839), http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/JGreene-Missouri.html. For an analysis of the charges against Smith, see Stephen C. LeSueur, "'High Treason and Murder': The Examination of Mormon Prisoners at Richmond, Missouri, in November 1838," *Brigham Young University Studies* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 3–30.

[2] All quotations from the letter are taken from "[Letter] To the Church at Quincy, Illinois, 20 March 1839," in Dean C. Jessee, comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt

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In late winter, after hearing word of his family's escape to Illinois, Smith wrote a letter addressed "To the church of Latter-day saints at Quincy Illinois and scattered abroad." It filled nearly thirty pages and, indicative of its intensely personal sentiments and formal public instruction, was to be delivered first to his wife Emma and then to Mormonism's ordained priesthood of all believers, who were aggregating in a small town on the other side of the Missouri border, two hundred miles east of his jail cell. The letter displays the typical elements of the more interesting prison letters: a famous writer in a complex historical situation, forceful eloquence driven by intense personal suffering, and richly philosophical expressions of social protest and existential insight. I do not choose it for these attributes only, however, but rather for its distinction, at least in the modern era, of achieving canonical status—not in the literary but in the strictly religious sense.[3]

Thus, my essay attends to the "internal perspective" of the question before us and, at Clark Giplin's invitation, "considers the role of writing . . . in the shaping of a religious community's sense of its boundaries, history, and identity." My wager is that doing so will also say something about canon construction. How does a modern account of human misery and longing hold sway with the lamentations of Jeremiah and the epistles of first-century Christian witnesses? This is the question I briefly take up today in hopes of shedding light on the larger issue implicit in my assignment: What about writing—be it ancient or contemporary—makes it susceptible to designation as divinely inspired utterance and, more, religious law?

I will argue, first, that Smith's letter shows the role of writing in making sense of religious disappointment and suffering. Second, the letter illustrates the manner in which personal writing can through poetic function transcend its time and place and sustain corporate religious identity. In other words, I will argue that the Liberty Jail letter shows the power of writing to turn event into history. Third, the letter reveals the manner in which writing legislates a preventive boundary, a rule of praxis capable of directing subsequent believers away from past defeat and ever-present danger. In sum, I will attempt to demonstrate that Smith's letter from Liberty Jail was intended to "chart the path of 'the pilgrim's progress,'" as Clark put it in his invitation to speak today. And, taking that apt phrase one step further, I will argue that the letter

Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2002), 430–46. The full salutation of the letter was "To the church of Latterday saints at Quincy Illinois and scattered abroad and to Bishop Partridge in particular."

[3] Several have noted the problem of generalizing the term "scripture" to apply to religiously privileged texts other than the Bible. See especially William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Given that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints understands its sacred texts to be in the historical tradition of the Bible and, in terms of their genre and authority, like the Bible in every respect, "scripture" is used here without qualification.

was a response to Latter-day Pliables who were wondering, as did Bunyan's original, "Is this the happiness you have told me of all this while?"[4]

FROM LETTER TO SCRIPTURE

In 1876, Smith's successor as church president, Brigham Young, assigned Mormonism's resident intellectual and ecclesiastical hierarch Orson Pratt the task of editing and presenting to the body of the church for its acceptance an updated version of its canonical texts.[5] Pratt's proposed revision added to Mormonism's already distinctively large corpus of scripture several of Smith's writings, including the 1839 Liberty Jail letter. In its canonized form, the letter constituted three new chapters or sections of the church's book of order, the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C). The longest and most philosophical chapter—denominated Section 121—was a composite of noncontiguous portions of the letter and is the focus of this analysis. The other canonized portions, Sections 122 and 123, were composed of contiguous paragraphs. Section 122 was set apart in its own chapter because it was deemed a reflection by Smith on his death, which would occur five years from the writing of the letter. Section 123 instructed the Saints to create a record of their losses in support of a petition for redress from, inter alia, the federal government, as discussed below.

It is tempting to assume that the scriptural authority granted Smith's letter arose necessarily from his already established status among the Latter-day Saints as prophet and president of the church. This was, no doubt, a significant and even necessary factor but of itself was an insufficient cause. Smith wrote other letters, many from jail—even this jail—that were not granted scriptural status. Thus, while the prophetic identity of the author may have been necessary as a threshold matter, it did not ensure the letter's canonization. Neither did canonization require acceptance of every word the prophet wrote. Only 40 percent of the letter's contents were deemed scriptural, thus

[4] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (London: Hurst, Robinson and Co., 1820), 9. "Then said PLIABLE, 'Ah! neighbour CHRISTIAN, where are you now?' 'Truly,' said CHRISTIAN, 'I do not know.' At that PLIABLE began to be offended, and angrily said to his fellow, 'Is this the happiness you have told me of all this while? If we have such ill speed at our first setting out, what may we expect 'twixt this and our journey's end? If I get out again with my life, you shall possess the brave country alone.' And with that he gave a desperate struggle or two, and got out of the mire on that side of the slough which was next to his own house: so away he went, and CHRISTIAN saw him no more."

[5] Prior to 1876, the LDS Church's canon consisted of the King James Version of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This last book contained revelations to, as well as letters and statements by Smith regarding, LDS Church order and teachings. Young's initiative added a fourth book called the Pearl of Great Price, which consisted of Smith's writings that resembled biblical narratives, such as the Book of Abraham, as well as an account of Smith's early revelatory experiences and some of his revisions to the Bible. Convenient access to LDS canonical texts in their current format is available at http://lds.org/scriptures/?lang=eng.

providing an opportunity for this analysis of the judgment at work in turning a letter into canonical rule.

Of course, nothing necessitates canon. Its formation is multidetermined and the result of a complex interplay of interests and authorities, both authorial and communal. It is, however, generally agreed that while prophets may write scripture, only believing communities can construct canon.[6] For its redactors and the church community at large, there was no question that a prophet had produced the letter. Although Smith had dictated it to two fellow prisoners who served as scribes, the original manuscript showed corrections in his own hand, as well as his signature. Readers were thus assured of the authoritative source for the letter's sentiments and ideas. Of course, even in 1876, many, including Young and Pratt, were knowledgeable of the events described in the letter, having lived through them or having heard survivors' stories firsthand. Many more would have been familiar with the letter's contents and would have assumed its significance from its having been printed three times in church newspapers between 1840 and 1854.[7] Missouri was a watershed experience for Mormonism's first generation, and Smith's reflections on it had always been a chief means of rationalizing their suffering. It was not the only means, however.

Smith's letter from Liberty Jail had encouraged the refugees from Missouri to write their own accounts. He "sugjest[ed]" they record "the whole concatination of diabolicalil rascality and nefarious and murderous impositions . . . practised upon this people that we may not only publish to all the world but present them to the heads of the government in all there dark and hellish hugh." Making such a record was, he urged them, "an imperious duty that we owe to God to angels . . . and also to ourselves to our wives and our children who have been made to bow down with greaf sorrow and care."[8]

CALCULATING LOSSES

Wives, too, took up this "imperious duty." Newly widowed Philindia Myrick wrote her petition within a year of escaping: "The mob came a ponus in the after part of the day with Mr Cumstock at thare hed and commens fireing on helpless men womens and children and thare was fifteen killed and was burried in one hole the next day and others wounded sum mortally and amung whom was my husband Levi N. Myrick instantly killed and also a child

[6] See, e.g., Lieven Boeve, "Tradition, (De)Canonization, and the Challenge of Plurality," in *Canonization and Decanonization*, ed. Arie van der Kooij and Karel van der Toorn (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 371–80.

[7] For the letter's publication history, see Dean C. Jessee and John W. Welch, "Revelations in Context: Joseph Smith's Letter from Liberty Jail, March 20, 1839," *Brigham Young University Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 130.

[8] Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 443; cf. D&C 123:1, 5–7.

of mine mortaly wounded who died about 4 weeks after."[9] With license from the governor and the assistance of state arms, posses composed of recognizable neighbors such as "Mr Cumstock" freely commandeered land, looted and demolished homes, torched crops, and stole or destroyed domestic animals. Some atrocities were impossible to redress: men hunted like animals, women raped, and children shot at point-blank range. All lost something, many lost everything, and some lost their faith. Even their prophet was compelled to ask his god, "Where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?" Pratt chose this question from the Liberty Jail letter as the opening line for Section 121.[10]

As Talcott Parsons observed, "good fortune and suffering must always . . . be endowed with meaning. They cannot, except in limiting cases, be accepted as something that 'just happens.'"[11] However much this overstates the case generally, especially with respect to good fortune, it is very true with respect to bad fortune and most true of religious bad fortune. If God is, as the hymn says, "our help in ages past and hope for years to come," his failure to help in the present sunders the necessary sense of continuity of past and future that constitutes the identity of a chosen people. Today, I argue that those parts of Smith's letter preserved and canonized in Section 121 removed the "just happens" from Mormonism's greatest tragedy: the eight-year Mormon War in Missouri and the resultant Latter-day Saint failure to build a temple there, a temple in which God had promised to reveal himself.

The Latter-day Saints had come to Missouri in 1831 to build a heavenly city but soon found themselves in hell. Beginning in 1833, attacks on Mormon settlers had driven them from Independence, a small settlement on the edge of tribal lands and the Missouri-Kansas border. Most Americans thought of it as the far frontier, even a marchland devoid of civilization and sparsely settled, if at all, by southerners whose slaves constituted a third of the population.[12] To the Mormons, however, it was chosen land, site for a millennial Zion. While others spoke of Missouri's rich soil and plentiful water in figurative terms as a new Eden, the Mormons believed that through their temple-building aspirations, the state was to become literally the paradisiacal

[9] Affidavit of Philindia Myrick, in Clark V. Johnson, ed., *Mormon Redress Petitions: Documents of the 1833–1838 Missouri Conflict* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), xvii. These petitions were met with sympathy, but nothing more. "Your cause is just," President Van Buren is reputed to have said to Smith, "but I can do nothing for you; if I take up for you I shall lose the vote of Missouri." B. H. Roberts, ed., *The [Documentary] History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1974), 4:80.

[10] Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 431; D&C 121:1.

[11] Talcott Parsons, quoted by Martin Marty, "America's Iconic Book," in *Humanizing America's Iconic Book*, ed. Gene M. Tucker and Douglas A. Knight (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 6. I am indebted to Marty not only for the quotation but the application of it to religious text; in his case, to the Bible as having the capacity to "remove the 'just happening' dimension from human existence."

[12] Craig S. Campbell, *Images of the New Jerusalem: Latter Day Saint Faction Interpretations of Independence, Missouri* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 26.

habitation of God. By revelation they had been told "the city New Jerusalem . . . shall be built beginning at the Temple lot which is appointed by the finger of the Lord" in Independence, Missouri. They had also been promised, "this generation shall not all pass away untill an house shall be built unto the Lord and . . . the glory of the Lord . . . shall fill the house."[13] Less than a year later, approximately twelve hundred Mormon residents were forcibly evicted from Independence and would never return.

Removal of the Mormons from Independence did not bring peace, however. Violence continued to mount in the counties to which the Saints were successively reassigned either by mob action or legislative intervention. In their new locales too, the Latter-day Saints gathered in even larger numbers and broke ground for a second temple. Some of the Saints fought back in not-so-saintly fashion. A few zealots earned the church a reputation for violence that it would never shake.[14] In addition, the Saints began to contend with one another. Even within the leadership, dissent led to threats of violence on both sides. Most foolishly, some made boastful, war-mongering threats to the Missourians. One Fourth of July orator announced, "We take God, and all the holy Angels to witness this day, that we warn all men, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come on us no more forever, for from this hour . . . that mob that comes on us to disturb us, it shall be between us and them a war of extermination, for we will follow them till the last drop of their blood is spilled, or else they will have to exterminate us."[15] Three months later, he got what he asked for. Missouri's governor issued an order that unleashed local militias and opportunistic neighbors against the Mormon settlements. "The Mormons," it proclaimed, "must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State."[16]

By the spring of 1839, the Mormons were routed and their leadership in disarray: some dead, others in jail, and many others in apostasy. Former bishop John Corrill broadcast his disillusionment in print: "Calculation after calculation has failed, and plan after plan has been overthrown, and our Prophet seemed not to know the event till too late." Smith was an especial disappointment: "If he said go up and prosper, still we did not prosper; but have labored and toiled, and waded through trials, difficulties, and

[13] Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile ed., vol. 1 of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman, Revelations and Translations series (Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historian's Press, 2009), 274–75; D&C 84:3–5 (September 22–23, 1832).

[14] For an important historiographic analysis of the source of the Danite critique in Mormon studies, see Dean C. Jessee and David J. Whittaker, eds., "The Last Months of Mormonism in Missouri: The Albert Perry Rockwood Journal," *Brigham Young University Studies* 28, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 36 n.19.

[15] Jedediah M. Grant, *A Collection of Facts Relative to the Course taken by Elder Sidney Rigdon. In the States of Ohio, Missouri, Illinois and Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking, & Guilbert, 1844), 11, http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/Grnt1844.htm.

[16] Greene, *Facts Relative to the Expulsion*, http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/JGreene-Missouri.html.

temptations, of various kinds, in hope of deliverance. But no deliverance came. The promises failed."[17] Meanwhile, those who still believed were scattered throughout the Midwest in search of shelter from winter and mob violence. While Smith was held as leverage on charges of treason to guarantee their exodus, at least eight thousand of his followers—including his own family—were fleeing Missouri at the point of a gun and with what little they had on their backs. Many died in the violence or from exposure. Elizabeth Barlow's letter to her cousin in the East admitted: "To look at our situation at this present time it would seem that Zion is all destroyed."[18]

MAKING SENSE OF SUFFERING

Smith knew the state of his followers and, in his own letter, described it less calmly than Barlow. "Oh! . . . the inhumanity and murderous disposition of this people," he exclaimed of the Missourians. "It shocks all nature it beggers and defies all discription. it is a tail of woa lamentable tail yea a sorrifull tail too much to tell too much for contemplation too much to think of for a moment to much for human beings . . . that a man should be mangled for sport women be . . . robed of all that they have their last morsel for subsistance and then be violated to gratify the hellish desires of the mob and finally left to perish with their helpless ofspring."[19] This emotional indictment of the Missourians did not, however, make the canonical cut. It and similar outbursts of pity and exasperation were excluded from Section 121. Neither did Smith's unqualified assertion of the Saints' innocence qualify for inclusion.[20] Rather, Section 121 omits the first two pages of the letter and begins, as mentioned, with Smith's lament: "O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?" This is joined to a petition: "Let thy hiding place no longer be covered; let thine ear be inclined; let thine heart be softened, and thy bowels moved with compassion toward us. Let thine anger be kindled against our enemies; and . . . remember thy suffering saints."[21] The redactor's choice of these sentences in preference to others that preceded them had two primary effects. It both elevated the tone from

[17] John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints (Commonly Called Mormons) . . . with Reasons of the Author for Leaving the Church* (St. Louis: John Corrill, 1839), 49.

[18] Elizabeth Haven Barlow, Quincy, IL, to Elizabeth Howe Bullard, Holliston, MA (February 25, 1839), in *Women's Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints 1830–1900*, by Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1982), 108. Elizabeth was not among the discouraged, however. The letter assures her cousin that "it is not so; the work of the Lord is on the march."

[19] Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 431.

[20] The Liberty Jail letter contained the following assertion, not included in the canonized version: "If the inhabitance of the state of Missouri had let the saints alone and had been as desirable of peace as they ware there would have been nothing but peace and quiatude in this state unto this day we should not have been in this hell surrounded with demonds." Ibid., 430–31.

[21] D&C 121:1, 4–6; cf. Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 431–32.

invective to petition and removed the limits of historical particularity. This allowed readers who did not share the event to nevertheless identify with the canonical message. It did so, however, without losing the sentiment of grief and indignation so central to Smith's original text. In addition, Pratt's chosen first sentences framed the text as a prophet's invocation of divine manifestation and report of God's response.

After these introductory six sentences, the canonical text does not return to the original for another five pages. The point of reentry is a section of the letter marked by a dramatic shift in voice: "My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment."[22] In the original letter, this shift was preceded by Smith's description of the softening effects on him of correspondence from his wife, his brother, and a close friend and church leader responsible for aiding the Mormon refugees in Quincy. These letters were, he said, "to our souls as the gentle air . . . call[ing] into action evry simpathetick feeling . . . [which] sesses [seizes] the presant with a vivasity of lighting [and] . . . grasps after the future with the fearsness of a tiger . . . untill finally all enmity . . . be slain victoms at the feet of hope and when the hart is sufficiently contrite then the voice of inspiration steals along and whispers my son peace be unto thy soal."[23] Though, by omitting these words, the scriptural redactor truncated the emotional journey described in them and lost the poetry in Smith's revelatory process, the canonized version remained true to and reassured the scriptural reader of the letter's claim to a divine response to Smith's petition.

That response was twofold. Neither aspect is surprising to those who study religious disappointment. First came assurances that, notwithstanding God's absence, the refugees were still his people. Though predictable to us, this assurance was made in terms particularly definitive of the Latter-day Saints; namely, the promise of further revelation. Specifically, former promises of theophany, with its attendant knowledge and power, were generously restated. "How long can rowling watters remain impure what power shall stay the heavens," wrote Smith, "as well might man streach forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri River . . . as to hinder the Almighty from *pooring down knoledge from heaven* upon the heads of the Latter day saints."[24] This sentence, which the redactor included in his version, carried good and bad news. On the one hand, the breach between present and past was healed by reinstitution of the feared lost promise of theophany. But with the assurance came the judgment that the church, like "rowling watter," had been thrashed in Missouri because of its impurities. This is the second unsurprising aspect of the answer to Smith's petition: God had absented himself because of the sins of

[22] D&C 121:7; cf. Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 434.
[23] Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 433–34.
[24] Ibid., 437 (emphasis added); cf. D&C 121:33.

the Latter-day Saints.[25] The kind of sin they were accused of, however, is surprising. The Saints were guilty of abusing power.

Usually when abuses of power are noted in this particular moment in American religious history, they concern the governor's extermination order or the mobs that harassed the Mormons until the militia succeeded in driving them from the state. But Smith was not inclined to give the mobocrats full credit for the mayhem, if only because it would also give these civil servants of the devil all the power. Neither were the Saints "sinners in the hands of an angry God." Rather, they had fallen out of God's hands; they had lost their connection to saving power by abusing it. This was not merely a convenient fiction to rationalize bad fortune. As indicated above, the historical record shows the Mormon experience in Missouri was fraught with internal contention, even coercive excommunications and threats of retaliation among their leadership. Moreover, some had attempted to recover property lost to mobs in the same manner in which it had been taken from them: forcibly and violently.

Most dramatically, Sidney Rigdon's aforementioned Fourth of July threat of "a war of extermination" against any "mob that comes on us" proved to be an invitation.[26] His speech, wrote a contemporary, "fanned into a flame the burning wrath of the mobocratic portion of the Missourians. . . . Death and carnage, marched through the land, in their most terrific forms."[27] Left in a dungeon to reflect on these events, Smith concluded, "We have learned by sad experiance that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men as soon as they get a little authority as they suppose they will imediatly begin to exercise unritious dominion hence many are called, but few are chosen."[28] Smith's reflection on chosenness and dominion is the longest single canonized excerpt from the Liberty Jail letter. It turns Section 121 into a discourse on the abuse of ecclesial authority or "priesthood," the effect of such abuse, and a prescription for priesthood's proper exercise.

The original text shows Smith working his way tentatively toward a definition of what went wrong in Missouri—what caused the Saints, particularly their leadership, to fail at their calling: "I beg leave to say unto you Brethren that ignorance superstition and bigotry placing itself where it ought not is

[25] Certainly, those who caused the Saints' afflictions were given their due in Smith's letter and the redactor's edit of it. "Cursed are all those that shall lift up the heal against mine anointed. . . . Wo unto all those that discomfort my people and drive and murder and testify against them . . . a generation of vipers shall not escape the damnation of hell" (Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 434–35; cf. D&C 121:16, 23) But, again, the historical detail in Smith's letter is lost in the scripture. Instead, the retaliatory sentiment of the original is elevated and authorized by the redactor's preferring those portions of the letter that rely on biblical, not personal, invective.

[26] Grant, *Collection of Facts*, 11.

[27] Ibid., 11–12.

[28] Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 441; cf. D&C 121:39–40.

often times in the way of the prosperity of this church."[29] The next day when finishing the letter, his voice assumed that more authoritative tone noted above, and here the redactor takes up the letter again for canonization. The scriptural note is struck with an imperative assertion: "The rights of priesthood are inseperably connected with the powers of heaven and . . . may be confered upon us it is true but when we undertake to cover our sins or to gratify our pride or vaine ambition or to exercise controle or dominion or compulsion . . . in any degree of unritiousness behold the heavens with draw themselves the spirit of the Lord is grieved and when it has withdrawn amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man."[30] This was, for Smith, the "amen" heard in Missouri when God withdrew himself, entered that "pavilion" that covered His "hiding place," and left the now disconnected Saints without power to defend themselves "against the whole concatination of diabolicalil rascality and nefarious and murderous impositions." In other words, according to the letter from Liberty Jail, the Saints not only bore the brunt of the mayhem in Missouri; they bore also some of the responsibility for it. Still, naming the Saints' sin was not the only significance of Smith's letter. It introduced also a rule of faith.

CANONICAL LEGISLATION

Canonization denotes legislation, not just memorialization or even explanation. Smith's redactor chose to make Smith's promulgation of law the turning point in the letter's narrative of suffering, sin, and redemption. Here we see the final shift in the letter's function as scriptural canon. Having made sense of suffering and rewoven the Saints' narrative of chosenness with the renewed promise of theophany, Smith's next words stated a rule of praxis. They stipulated the standard by which power was to be judged as good or evil and established the rule of future practice by the community. First, the standard was stated, as we have seen, in negative terms: covering sin, gratifying ambition, and exercising coercive dominion. Ideally, however, religious lawmaking results in more than a proscription. A positive rule of faith, a prescriptive aspiration if you will, is provided also.

At least that is the case with Smith's letter, the canonized version of which climaxes in a description of righteous dominion that leverages biblical phrases to legislate boundaries of ecclesial power. "No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, 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." Admitting that it may be necessary to "reprov[e] betimes with sharpness," the letter limits reproof to such

[29] Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 437.
[30] Ibid., 440; cf. D&C 121:36–37.

occasions "when moved upon by the Holy Ghost" and requires the demonstration "afterwards [of] an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy." If obeyed, this rule would ensure "that he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death." Thus, it would ensure also the proper exercise of authority between Saints requiring "reproof" and those holding them accountable, but not between them only: "Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith."[31] In sum, all priestly action was to be prompted by revelation as "moved" by the Spirit and be both guided by and productive of love. Any other exercise of authority was a self-executing nullity—it was the "amen to the authority of that man." Worse, on a collective level, it threatened a reprise of the Missouri experience, forever afterward the object lesson of powerlessness for a church whose raison d'être was the mediation of divine power.

From his earliest sense of prophetic mission, Smith had unapologetically claimed that the religions of his day "teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof."[32] Thus, while other antebellum restorationists were intent on replicating the primitive Christian church, Smith was intent on reception of divine power, "that every man might Speak in the name of God the Lord."[33] If Mormonism was, as Emerson quipped, the "after clap of Puritanism," its particular sound was John Winthrop's worst, antinomian nightmare.[34] In Missouri, it became a nightmare for Joseph Smith as well. The Liberty Jail letter was an attempt to wake up, to rationalize how the power had failed him and his followers, and to find a way back to their originating vision. The answer found in Liberty Jail enunciated that way back. Because their powerlessness was caused by their abuse of power, the solution was within reach, even comfortable reach through the familiar processes of repentance. Thus, for the refugees who waited in Quincy, Illinois, for the release of their prophet, his letter offered the possibility of a restored sense of continuity with their origins and its claim of divine power. It provided the rule of praxis whereby they could imagine a future out of the disappointments of the present. Finally, it described the path to a future characterized by divine presence and sanctifying power: "then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presants of God and the doctrines of the priesthood destell upon thy soul as the dews from heaven

[31] D&C 121:41–45; cf. Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 441.

[32] Joseph Smith, "History of the Church," vol. A-1, Joseph Smith Papers, http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1839%e2%80%931856-volume-a-1*f*3 (accessed September 16, 2011). For the canonized text of these words, see, in the Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith—History 1:19; cf. 2 Tim. 3:5.

[33] Jensen, Woodford, and Harper, *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 224–25; D&C 1:20.

[34] Ralph Waldo Emerson, as quoted in James Bradley Thayer, *A Western Journey with Mr. Emerson* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1844), repr. in William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, eds., *Among the Mormons: Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 384.

the Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion and thy septer an unchanging septer of ritiousness and truth and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee for eve[r] and ever."[35] With this prescription and promise, the canonized version of Smith's letter ends.

So, what does this tell us about how and why personal writings become religiously authoritative? Why, forty years later, did the now established community of Utah Saints canonize Smith's letter from Liberty Jail? As stated above, the letter honored in its day and memorialized for future generations a watershed experience of personal suffering and collective loss, made sense of a colossal failure related to core aspects of the church's mission, and authoritatively legislated a rule of faith that gave hope of overcoming that failure.

In addition, however, contemporary historical circumstances invited canonization of Smith's emotion-laden, sense-making, and hope-giving letter. In 1876, the Utah Saints were in another power struggle, internally and externally. Federal antipolygamy legislation was wrenching the fabric of their self-government, destabilizing their family structure, and infringing upon their personal and civil liberties. Dissenting movements were causing internal friction, including on questions of ecclesial authority.[36] Mormonism's first generation was passing. Brigham Young would die in 1877, a year after the lessons of Missouri were canonized, and redactor Orson Pratt died three years later. Why did they submit this letter in this form to the church for canonization, an act that would bind generations to come? Ultimately, because in it the community recognized itself—both what it was and what it wished to become. Or, to return to the words of my teacher, whom we honor today, the Liberty Jail letter was canonized because it succeeded in reweaving and forwarding a "grand narrative, enfolding individuals and congregations within larger historical structures of inclusion and exclusion and charting the path of 'the pilgrim's progress.'"

[35] Jessee, *Personal Writings*, 441; cf. D&C 121:45–46.

[36] For the history of federal antipolygamy legislation, see, e.g., Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). For an example of dissent, see Ronald W. Walker, *Wayward Saints: The Social and Religious Protests of the Godbeites against Brigham Young* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Studies/Brigham Young University Press, 2009).