

EARLY MORMON ADOPTION THEOLOGY AND THE MECHANICS OF SALVATION

Samuel M. Brown

A WELL-BORN SON OF PENNSYLVANIA landowners, John Milton Bernhisel (1799–1881) was an elegant gentleman, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania practicing medicine in New York City, when itinerant elders brought him the message of the Latter-day Saint gospel in the late 1830s. The middle-aged doctor converted and rapidly rose through Church leadership ranks. After a brief stint as the presiding elder of the Church’s interests in New York City, Bernhisel gathered to Nauvoo in 1843. A confirmed bachelor, he boarded with Joseph Smith’s family, providing political and medical advice, even delivering Smith’s child. That same year, eight months before Smith’s death, Bernhisel, still unmarried at age

SAMUEL M. BROWN {smb@samuelbrown.net} is a physician, medical researcher, and cultural historian. He is assistant professor of pulmonary and critical care medicine and associate in the Division of Medical Ethics and Humanities at the University of Utah School of Medicine. Samuel lives in Salt Lake City with his wife, Kate Holbrook, and children, who animate his intellectual and spiritual journey. This essay expands and supplements material in Samuel M. Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming January 2012), chap. 8, which is copyright © Oxford University Press. He thanks Jonathan A. Stapley, Matthew Bowman, Kate Holbrook, and William Smith for thoughtful input on drafts of this essay and Brett Dowdle for able research assistance.

forty-four, participated in a distinctive ritual that changed forever the esteemed convert's kinship.¹

An affidavit-like note placed retrospectively in Smith's official journal reported: "The following named deceased persons were sealed to me (John M. Bernhisel) on Oct 26th 1843, by President Joseph Smith: Maria Bernhisel, sister; Brother Samuel's wife, Catherine Kremer; Mary Shatto, (Aunt); Madalena Lupferd, (distant relative); Catherine Bernhisel, Aunt; Hannah Bower, Aunt; Elizabeth Sheively, Aunt; Hannah Bower, cousin; Maria Lawrence, (intimate friend); Sarah Crosby, intimate friend, /died May 11 1839/; Mary Ann Bloom, cousin."² In this curious transaction, Bernhisel became eternal husband, brother, or father to eleven deceased friends and relatives, including his sister, his brother's wife, and four aunts.

Bernhisel's family continued to expand in Nauvoo. On February 3, 1846, Bernhisel "came to the sacred Alt[a]r in the upper room of the 'House of the Lord' . . . and there upon gave himself to Prest. Joseph Smith (martyred) to become his son by the law of adoption and to become a legal heir to all the blessings bestowed upon Joseph Smith pertaining to exaltations even unto the eternal Godhead."³ In this rite, the now-dead Prophet became Bernhisel's sacerdotal father. The final phrase in this ritual adoption ceremony—one that would involve scores of Latter-day Saints through the nineteenth century—made clear that the ultimate destination of these familial connections was "exaltations" that would extend all the way to the "eternal Godhead" through a "legal heir[ship]." Although contemporary Protestants occasionally employed these terms, Latter-day Saints understood them quite differently. By the power of Smith's priesthood, this adoptive ritual integrated Bernhisel into a sacred scale of exaltation

¹Gwynn Barrett, "John M. Bernhisel: Mormon Elder in Congress," (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1968).

²Scott H. Faulring, *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1989), 424, October 26, 1843, in Robert Campbell's hand, with John Bernhisel's signature appended. See also Lyndon Cook, ed., *Nauvoo Marriages, Proxy Sealings, 1843-1846* (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book, 2004), 22-25.

³Devery S. Anderson and Gary James Bergera, eds., *The Nauvoo Endowment Companies, 1845-1846* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005), 566.

that ultimately encompassed God Himself.

Armed with this holy sonship, the doctor took his adopted father's widow, Melissa Lott, as a levirate wife that same year, briefly engaging in polygamy with live spouses before settling down with the youngest of his wives.⁴ In the 1860s, by then an earthly monogamist and prominent Utah politician, Bernhisel took another 106 deceased women as plural wives.⁵ Linked to Smith's sacerdotal family even as he was the patriarch of his own kindred, Bernhisel had the assurance of glory and security in the life to come. When he finally died, Bernhisel was the first-degree celestial relative of hundreds of people. In the heavily communal idiom of Mormon salvation, heaven for the loyal doctor had begun well before he closed his eyes in death.

Bernhisel's story emblemizes the distinctive ritual and theological system that Joseph Smith elaborated over the last decade of his life. The doctor was one of hundreds, then thousands, who entered Smith's celestial kindred through the rites of the temple *cultus*, a term I use in the neutral, academic sense of a system of interrelated beliefs and rituals. The resulting kindred, a sacerdotal genealogy extending backward past the Garden of Eden and forward to a glorious future beyond time, became the doctrinal and ritual core of Smith's legacy.⁶ Through this sacerdotal genealogy, all of humanity could be intercon-

⁴Cook, *Nauvoo Marriages*, 185, 214. On Mormon levirates (mimicking the ancient Hebrew custom of marrying a widowed sister-in-law), see Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 61, 154–56.

⁵Richard Van Wagoner and Steven Walker, *A Book of Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1982), 16. See also Historian's Office Journal, CR 100, 1, Vol. 30, p. 53, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah, in Richard E. Turley, ed., *Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2 vols., DVD (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, [December 2002], 1:17 (hereafter cited as *Selected Collections*).

⁶By sacerdotal genealogy, I mean a pedigree or family tree dependent upon priesthood rather than biology for its connections. See Samuel M. Brown, "Joseph Smith's Death Conquest: Sacerdotal Genealogy and the Great Chain of Being," *American Academy of Religion*, November 18, 2006, Washington, D.C. Douglas Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 2000), 146–47, terms a subset of this concept the "soteriological lineage."

nected in indissoluble connections; this sacerdotal kinship group represented the structure of heaven. Drawing on and responding to antecedents in evangelicalism, the diluted Swedenborgianism that contributed to the Protestant domestic heaven, the neoplatonic Chain of Being, and metaphysical Israelitism, the Mormon sacerdotal genealogy provided for the Latter-day Saints an eternal chain of belonging. Smith proposed a sacramental guarantee of salvation that was in its very essence communal.

The practices and theology of Smith's sacerdotal family contain many themes and tensions. Smith's family addressed or resolved the complex tensions among election, regeneration (the process or status of conversion), Arminianism, and the perseverance and scope of salvation. In doing so, though, Smith's family system sometimes pitted nuclear and biological families against extended and ecclesial communities. As Smith refracted, reformed, and translated several interwoven ritual and theological systems, his sacerdotal family developed in step with his temple liturgy, both situated firmly within other currents of early Mormonism. Beginning in the early 1830s with a "patriarchal" priesthood and associated patriarchal blessings, the sacerdotal family incorporated a new mode of Christian adoption (baptism for the dead) and a distinctive revival of the ancient practice of plural marriage, all in a novel genealogical reformation of the Great Chain of Being.

Throughout, Smith was struggling with fundamental questions: How big was the society of heaven? Who could and would join it—what did election mean? How would it be entered—what were the mechanics of salvation? What did the afterlife society have to do with salvation? What happened to one's offspring in the afterlife; could their salvation be guaranteed? What role did one's ancestors play in the salvation community? These questions proved to have multiple, complex, interwoven answers. Together, those answers constituted a sacerdotal kindred, a heaven protected from loneliness and heartache by the restoration of the divine family.

In this article, I consider what came to be called the law of adoption from its origins through the death of Joseph Smith in 1844. By considering Mormon adoption in its various contexts, I clarify distinctive aspects of Latter-day Saint soteriology and afterlife theology. As Jonathan A. Stapley clarifies in his companion article, after Smith's death the ritual adoption system came to connect unmarried kin and created novel social units within Mormonism as it evolved

during the exodus from Nauvoo and the settlement of Utah, generating unfortunate rivalries in an attempt to tie all humanity to their first parents and their youngest progeny. The later rituals of the law of adoption make sense only when we understand their roots in a distinctive reinterpretation of an old and prevalent Christian concept.

After reviewing spiritual adoption in antebellum America, I trace the development of adoption theology in Mormonism, from its roots in Christian belief to its early implementation in Nauvoo within the temple *cultus*. Finally, I trace the implications of this adoption theology, which serves as a window on the distinctive soteriology of Mormonism, a legacy that Smith's followers spent many decades attempting to understand and resolve.

SPIRITUAL ADOPTION IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

For most early American Protestants, the most important cultural antecedents were understood to derive from the Bible.⁷ The concept of spiritual adoption among most Protestants arose straightforwardly from the New Testament, where the term refers to a spiritualization of the Israelite covenant in the Pauline writings. Rather than national salvation bestowed on Abraham's offspring, the house of Israel, Paul proclaimed that Jesus had made salvation available to all believers. Through Christ, the Gentiles could join a spiritual house of Israel on equal footing with the Jews.⁸ Thus in the inspiring and potent language of Paul's letter to the Roman church:

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

⁷On the role of the Bible in early America, see the essays collected in Mark Noll and Nathan Hatch, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), and Paul Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999). See also the illuminating revisionist discussion of biblical authority and canon in David Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Paul appears to have been claiming that in Christ a prophecy of Hosea (1:10) had been fulfilled.

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ. (Rom. 8:14–17)⁹

A version of adoption patterned on Pauline theology circulated among early Christianities, culminating in an understanding of “supernatural adoption” in Catholicism.¹⁰ Later Protestant views derived from and modified such originals.

Many formal systems within Protestantism integrated “adoption” into the path from depravity to final salvation: Adoption generally came between justification—the initial forgiveness of sins—and sanctification—a higher level of purity and piety.¹¹ Throughout the history of Christian adoption, a tension existed between the individual and the corporate, between personal regeneration and formal entry into a community. Always, adoption described a gateway, whether to a higher stage of individual piety or into a community of Saints. From Puritans and their heirs, to Methodists and Baptists, to Anglicans, American Protestants embraced the Pauline vision of adoption across a spectrum from individual regeneration to formal establishment of community membership.

The congregational covenants of the New England Puritans cast

⁹The Greek term *huiiothesia* means “making a son.” See also Rom. 8:23, 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5. Of these passages, Smith modified only Romans 9 in his New Translation, replacing “pertaineth” with “are” after initially considering “belongeth.” The use of the copula in the New Translation seems significant. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2004), 491.

¹⁰For one of many discussions among Catholics, see Robert Wilberforce, *The Doctrine of the Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (London: John Murray, 1848), 12.

¹¹For two of many examples, see Isaac Watts, *Dr. Watts’s Plain and Easy Catechisms for Children: Shorter Catechism of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster* (Cambridge, Eng.: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1825), 24–25, and *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1839), 387–88. The shorter Westminster catechism defined adoption as “an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges, of the sons of God.” See also Joel R. Beeke, *Heirs with Christ: The Puritans on Adoption* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008).

a long shadow over the communities that derived from them, including the frontier societies of the Old Northwest in which Mormonism arose. For Puritans, salvation was inescapably corporate. Even as predestination and the omnipotent God of Calvinism ensured that the regenerate were saved by the inscrutable and irresistible grace of Christ, salvation for Puritans occurred federally. Puritan society, an interlocking collection of church covenants, carried God's seal of approval. Though critics called them theocrats, Puritans saw their society as intrinsically both secular and religious because it encompassed the entire community of the elect. This federal theology meant that the Massachusetts Bay Colony—and by extension pious New England and possibly the rest of North America—was itself elect. Puritans had high hopes for family integrity and at times attempted to merge election with family, as in the famous claim that God “cast the line of Election” by and large “through the loyns of godly parents.”¹² Unfortunately, however, the assurance that God would bless the commonwealth and save the regenerate in church covenants did not mean that biological families would necessarily stay together after death.¹³

Children often, notoriously, failed to live up to parental and societal expectations, and the requirement of a public account of regeneration before the congregation to effect membership in the covenant was a high bar. When children failed to make such a public proclamation of conversion, they lost hold on the federal salvation protecting their parents. The seemingly boundless potential for offspring to fall from the covenant caused great concern among loving family members. Opposite worried relatives stood ecclesial purists who saw the inclusion of unregenerate members in the church covenant as a mortal threat to the federal election that protected the regenerate. From this tension between the purity of a church community and the worry over the eternal fate of a community's children arose, at least tempo-

¹²E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 68, quoting Increase Mather.

¹³Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 2d ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), is a perceptive treatment of the clash between “theocentric” and “domestic” models of heaven, though it may overstate the extent to which Calvinists rejected family relationships in the afterlife. Compare Brown, *Early Mormon Conquest of Death*, chap. 1.

rarily, the Halfway Covenant, a system to allow children to derive at least some protection from the regenerate status of their parents or grandparents.¹⁴

Though formal church covenants weakened with disestablishment and the wane of Congregationalism, nineteenth-century Congregationalists still often saw adoption in terms of covenant.¹⁵ Some, like the Massachusetts divine Joseph Lathrop (1731–1820), emphasized to their listeners that they did not belong to God by nature but became children of God by the act of His divine choosing into the community of the elect.¹⁶

The populist denominations that overran Calvinist orthodoxies in the early Republic, primarily Methodists and Baptists, tended to emphasize a community of believers in ways distinct from Puritan covenants or election. Wary of excessive ecclesiastical power, these evangelicals saw adoption as entry into the body of Christ rather than the federal society of the elect. More frequently they emphasized adoption as a phase, related to the rite of baptism, in the believer's progress from justification to salvation.

The meaning of adoption as the experience of regeneration was perhaps most prominent among the Methodists.¹⁷ In a pair of sermons titled "Witness of the Spirit," John Wesley laid out his thinking on adoption and Christian experience.¹⁸ He spoke of the "spirit of adoption" of Romans 8 as the personal witness of God's love, "proof

¹⁴See Rex Eugene Cooper, *Promises Made to the Fathers: Mormon Covenant Organization* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), and Robert G. Pope, *The Halfway Covenant: Church Membership in New England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), for a general treatment.

¹⁵James R. Rohrer, *Keepers of the Covenant: Frontier Missions and the Decline of Congregationalism, 1774–1818* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁶"Adoption," in *Sermons on Various Subjects, Evangelical, Devotional, and Practical: Adapted to the Promotion of Christian Piety, Family Religion, and Youthful Virtue* (Worcester, Mass.: Isaiah Thomas, 1810), 3:49–59.

¹⁷Holifield, *Theology in America*, 269.

¹⁸See discussion of the sermon within the debates over religious experience and enthusiasm in Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 50–51. Some have designated the sermons #10 and #11.

that [the believer] is a child of God.” He distinguished it, as Paul had, from the “spirit of bondage,” the state of unregeneration. Among the sectarian Reformed Methodists, many believers claimed adoption as a “child of God” as synonymous with regeneration and distinct from the sanctification of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ With many Mormon founders coming from Methodist traditions, the spirit of adoption as regeneration of a believer is an important precedent for the later Mormon practice.²⁰ The other important group from which Mormons came was the sectarian Baptist tradition out of which the Campbellites arose. Alexander Campbell, summarizing his views on baptism toward the end of his career, termed adoption as “making a son of God out of a son of man.” Campbell was reluctant to endorse the formal model of adoption as sandwiched between justification and sanctification, emphasizing instead that those adopted were “born into the Divine family, enrolled in heaven.”²¹

The relationship between adoption and baptism was complex and often a casualty of the Protestant aversion to Catholic sacramentalism. Groups like the Reformed Methodists saw baptism as a “duty,” but the rite itself did not define adoption.²² Churches closer to Anglicanism, like the Protestant Episcopal, saw baptism as the “public rati-

¹⁹William Pitts, *The Gospel Witness* (Catskill, N.Y.: Junius S. Lewis and Co., 1818), 104.

²⁰Christopher C. Jones, “We Latter-day Saints Are Methodists’: The Influence of Methodism on Early Mormon Religiosity” (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 2009), and Christopher C. Jones, “The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 88–114.

²¹Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptism: With the Antecedents and Consequences* (Bethany, Va.: Alexander Campbell, 1852), 275–76. Campbell had presented this view as early as 1829. Robert Owen and Alexander Campbell, *Debate on the Evidences of Christianity; Containing an Examination of the “Social System,” and of All the Systems of Scepticism of Ancient and Modern Times*, 2 vols. (Bethany, Va.: Alexander Campbell, 1829), 2:106. See also Alexander Campbell, *A Debate on Christian Baptism, between the Rev. W. L. Maccalla, a Presbyterian Teacher, and Alexander Campbell* (Buffaloe, VA: Campbell and Sala, 1824), 16.

²²Pitts, *Gospel Witness*, 104.

fi[cation]” of the “adoption of sonship.”²³ Most Protestants acknowledged the tie between adoption and baptism but could not allow a sacrament to achieve excessive significance in their theology.

Not all adoption references were to the abbreviated stage of conversion between justification and sanctification. Some learned commentators sought to situate adoption within the culture in which Paul wrote. Charles Buck, author of the theological dictionary preferred by both Mormons and evangelicals, represented this literature when he argued for Roman legal precedent as the source of Paul’s comparison.²⁴ Adoption, according to Buck, “was much in use among the Romans in the apostles’ time” as a way for childless individuals who

were possessed of an estate, to prevent its being divided . . . to make choice of such who were agreeable to them, and beloved by them, whom they took into this political relation of children; obliging them to take their name upon them, and to pay respect to them as though they were their natural parents. . . . This new relation, founded in a mutual consent, is a bond of affection; and the privilege arising from thence is, that he who is in this sense a father, takes care of and provides for the person whom he adopts, as though he were his son by nature.

Buck continued by describing an early Christian practice of bestowing a “new name,” the name of Christ, on the believer undergoing adoption. Through such an adopting regeneration and the new identity it conferred, the convert achieved an “eternal glory” that was “perpetual as to its duration.”²⁵ In dramatic ways, each of these themes found expression in Mormon adoption theology.

The individualist and populist rhetoric associated with anti-Calvinism tended to emphasize the idea of adoption as a stage in regen-

²³Alonzo Bowen Chapin, “Protestant Episcopal,” in Israel Rupp, comp. and ed., *History of All Denominations*, 2d ed. (Harrisburg, Pa.: John Winebrenner, 1849), 251.

²⁴On the significance of Buck’s dictionary, see Matthew Bowman and Samuel M. Brown, “The Reverend Buck’s *Theological Dictionary* and the Struggle to Define American Evangelicalism, 1802–1851,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 441–73.

²⁵Charles Buck, *Theological Dictionary* (Philadelphia: Edwin T. Scott, 1823), 11–13. This concept, modulated through the teaching on secondary saviors outlined later in this article, may underlie the way Brigham Young understood the new names bestowed on temple-endowed Latter-day Saints. See Brown, *Early Mormon Conquest of Death*, chap. 7.

eration; and there has always been in adoption, as in Christianity more broadly, a tension between the individual and the corporate. Evangelicals and revivalists acutely perceived the community of believers, both in life and in death. By receiving regenerating grace with its promise of God's adoption, these Protestant believers knew that their souls were saved and that they would thereby be reunited with their regenerated friends after the final judgment. For a variety of antebellum evangelicals, the image of regeneration as adoption played naturally into an understanding of the afterlife community. English Methodist Bible commentator Adam Clarke, whom the Latter-day Saints occasionally quoted, described Christian adoption as "the redemption of our mystical body." In his exegesis of Galatians, Clarke further indicated rather typically that adoption "gives us our place in the heavenly family."²⁶

Evangelism provided clues as to how the individual and the corporate could coexist in adoption. Nancy Towle, the non-denominational if largely Baptist itinerant known best for her popular 1832 memoir *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, understood herself to be building a family of converts to bring with her to the throne of grace. These regenerated believers were adopted to Christ; and if they would stay faithful, they would be her "plentiful harvest" to present to God at final judgment. Towle used the language of Paul, maintaining that the conversion her preaching effected sealed²⁷ people in heaven as on earth, in recapitulation of the power given to the early apostles in the New Testament. Of one particularly devoted congregation she had assembled, Towle reflected that "many joined in covenant, to seek eternal life, at the loss of all things; and to meet me, in a better world." Because she was an itinerant, Towle's communities were almost always mental or spiritual rather than physical. At one emblematic parting with a group of new believers, Towle remarked, "Although, I could now expect to meet them on earth no more, I rejoiced that it was my privilege to bear their case to the throne of

²⁶Adam Clarke, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co., 1838), 51–53, commentary on Romans 8:15, 23; and 210, commentary on Galatians 4:5–7.

²⁷On Mormon ideas about the sealing power, see Gregory Prince, *Power from On High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 155–72, 226–27; Brown, *Mormon Conquest of Death*, chap. 6.

grace” in heaven “where parting can never come.”²⁸

Through evangelism such Protestants were creating communities of the saved that could endure the high mortality and geographical instability of the early American Republic.²⁹ Such communities were joining the family of God. The New Testament included images that came readily to hand for this evangelistic application of adoption. In Philemon 1:10, Paul employed the language of adoption of converts to describe his relationships with Onesimus, a man he had “begotten in my bonds.” Paul’s bondage to Christ allowed him to beget another in those same bonds. The vision of an evangelist collecting souls into the family of Christ proved important, in distinctive modification, to early Mormonism.

Such was the context for adoption when Joseph Smith began his religious career.³⁰ Adoption referred to the dual nature of conversion, the sense of an individual’s experiencing salvific regeneration

²⁸Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America*, 2d ed. (Portsmouth, N.H.: John Caldwell, 1833), 43–44, 60, 65, 67, 70, 75, 93, 159, 186, 283. On Towle and other female itinerants, see Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

²⁹See Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), on the various dislocations and innovations of the period.

³⁰Practices called “adoption” among Native groups and esoteric fraternal organizations are interesting but not immediately relevant to this article. On Native groups, see Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 159–61; Brett Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’: The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (October 2003): 777–808; John Tanner, *Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner, (U.S. Interpreter at the Saut De Ste. Marie.) During Thirty Years Residence among the Indians in the Interior of North America* (New York: G. & C. & H. Carvill, 1830); and James Axtell, “The White Indians of Colonial America” *William and Mary Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 1975): 55–88. On Freemasons, see Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 126; Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 69; Steven Bullock, *Revolutionary*

through communion with God, as well as the community of people similarly regenerated. From that starting point, Smith moved in dramatic and distinctive ways to a sacramental and sacerdotal system that transformed the concepts underlying Christian adoption.

EARLY MORMON ADOPTION

Mormons employed the evangelistic motifs of their peers in slowly diverging ways, even as they connected a fundamentally New Testament set of themes to complexly Old Testament images and practices. In this section, I trace Mormonism from its earliest scriptures to applications of adoption in the context of evangelism, through patriarchal blessings and the mystical priesthood that undergirded them, to the liturgical applications of adoption theology in early 1840s Nauvoo: baptism for the dead, temple endowment, and polygamy. Smith never practiced the precise rituals his followers implemented after his death. These rituals, as Jonathan Stapley eloquently demonstrates in his companion paper, were an attempt to come to terms with Smith's complex legacies and the diverse rites that supported the adoption theology during his life. The adoption theology and ritual during Joseph Smith's life were primarily concerned with the role of a special power and authority called priesthood in the establishment of relationships among believers and between believers and Christ. These relationships were believed to assure, even to define, both salvation and personal identity.

The initial Mormon description of adoption came in the 1830 Book of Mormon. The lost scripture of ancient America confirmed the understanding of adoption as conversion. The mighty evangelist Alma, the son of Alma, recovering from his own regenerating trance, announced to his peers that "the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of

Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730–1840 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 30–32, 86–89, 191–95. Clyde Forsberg, *Equal Rites: The Book of Mormon, Masonry, Gender, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 149, misapprehends Masonic adoption. For a better context for early "adoptive" Masonry, see David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century, 1590–1710* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

God, becoming his sons and daughters” (Mosiah 27:25). Another Book of Mormon encounter framed adoption in similar terms. In endorsement of the Christian covenant King Benjamin’s people had entered, he announced to them that “because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters: for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you.” Explaining Christ’s role as adoptive parent, Benjamin taught in straightforward terms that “ye are born of him and have become his sons, and his daughters.” Then invoking the power of the new name of those adopted into the covenant, he encouraged, “I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives” (Mosiah 5:7–8). Toward the end of the Book of Mormon narrative, Mormon, according to the posthumous reminiscence of his son Moroni, preached that, on converting, “by faith, they [believers] become the sons of God” (Moro. 7:26). In the same sermon, after an extended meditation on Paul, Mormon urged his audience to pray “that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him” (Moro. 7:48).³¹

The Book of Mormon also contained aspects of the more radical view of the later 1830s. One of the three main narrators, a prophet-king named Nephi, provided a royal-dynastic image of adoption. As his life drew to a close, Nephi “anointed” his replacement, then, at the urging of his people, bestowed his name on this successor and those who followed in the dynasty (Jacob 1:9–11). Though it would be a few years before Smith clarified the implications of adoption theology, the Book of Mormon contained the kernels of later teachings: adoption as salvation and entry into the family of God, the role of sacred names in adoption, the possibility that adoption might teach humans about their equivalence to God, and the royal or dynastic imagery that came to predominate in Nauvoo.

Early Mormon preaching tended to accord with the view outlined in the Book of Mormon. In a revelation shortly after the Church’s founding, Smith announced that “all those who receive my gospel are sons and daughters in my kingdom” (D&C 25:1).³² This was the traditional belief that adoption referred to conversion. In their first hymnal, the Saints echoed this understanding of Pauline

³¹The final phrase appears to be an exegesis of 1 John 3:2.

³²This phrase was added between 1833 and 1835. Curt A. Bench, ed.,

adoption, singing that God “owns me for his child, / I can no longer fear; / With confidence I now draw nigh; / And Father, Abba Father, cry.”³³ Though his thinking developed over the next decade, Joseph Smith affirmed a traditional definition of adoption in two sermons as late as 1841. In May, he lectured on Romans 9, a key New Testament passage on Pauline adoption. In that sermon, Smith posed his view of Abrahamic adoption as counter to Calvinist election.³⁴ Then in December, he preached that “whom the Lord loveth he Chasteneth & Scourgeth evry son & daughter whom He receiveth & if we do not receive chastizements then are we Bastards & not Sons.”³⁵

William W. Phelps, ever curious to solve theological mysteries, extended the Book of Mormon image of Christ as the father of the faithful. In a letter to his wife, Sally, in 1835, Phelps argued that man has “his agency given him” that “he might become a Son of the Lord Jesus, for Jesus was the Only Begotten of the Father.”³⁶ Jesus was the father of believers inasmuch as converts became His sons and daughters through adoption. Such rhetoric was not yet very far from the mainstreams of Protestantism, though by the 1840s this image had radically different implications for the status of the relationship between Christ and humanity.³⁷

Through the 1830s, the Latter-day Saints continued to employ

The Parallel Doctrine and Covenants: The 1832–1833, 1833, and 1835 Editions of Joseph Smith’s Revelations (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2009), 41; see also the terminology in D&C 11:30, 34:3, 35:2, 45:8, and 76:58.

³³Emma Smith, *A Collection of Sacred Hymns, for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Nauvoo, Ill.: E. Robinson, 1841), 79.

³⁴“To Those of Our Readers,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 15 (June 1, 1841): 430, reporting Smith’s May 16, 1841, discourse.

³⁵Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898*, Typescript, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–85), 2:142, December 19, 1841.

³⁶William W. Phelps, Letter to Sally Phelps, September 9, 1835, William Wine Phelps collection, VMSS 810, Box 1, fd. 1, item 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections and Manuscripts Division, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter Perry Special Collections).

³⁷On Mormon views of Trinity, see Thomas G. Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” *Sunstone* 10, no. 5 (May 1985): 8–19.

Protestant images of Christian adoption, though with increasing reliance on sacramentalism. In 1837, Parley P. Pratt, writing probably the most important noncanonical publication of the new Church, his *Voice of Warning to All People*, touched on the meaning of adoption. Describing the activity of the apostles in establishing God's "organized government on the earth," Pratt announced that the apostles "prepared to unlock the door of the kingdom, and to adopt strangers and foreigners into it as legal citizens, by administering certain laws and ordinances, which were invariably the laws of adoption; without which no man could ever become a citizen."³⁸ Emphasizing rising Mormon sacramentalism, Pratt taught that "there were no natural born subjects of that kingdom. . . . [N]one could be citizens without the law of adoption, and all that believed on the name of the king, had power to be adopted; but there was but one invariable rule or plan by which they were adopted," which he conflated with baptism into the Mormon Church. Pratt simultaneously looked beyond baptism, maintaining that "the Holy Spirit of promise was the seal of their adoption."³⁹ In this last phrase, Pratt nodded toward an evolving Mormon belief about seals and assured salvation that became closely tied in Nauvoo to adoption and the temple.

Other Saints emphasized a basically sacramental view of adoption. According to an 1841 proselytizing statement made by missionaries near Boston, believers "must be adopted in order to become citizens of his kingdom. Baptism of course then is the ordinance of adoption."⁴⁰ By the 1840s Mormon sacramentalism had confirmed adoption as a ritual, specifically believer's baptism by immersion, administered by one of the Mormon elders.⁴¹

On into the 1840s, traditional views of adoption persisted in Mormon discourse. The British editor of the *Millennial Star*, Thomas Ward, endorsed the traditional Christian reading of adoption in two related pieces disseminated through Church organs, calling it "the

³⁸Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People, Containing a Declaration of the Faith and Doctrine of the Church of the Latter-day Saints, Commonly Called Mormons* (New York: W. Sandford, 1837), 96, 99.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 103–5, 109–11.

⁴⁰Erastus Snow and Benjamin Winchester, "An Address to the Citizens of Salem," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 1 (November 1, 1841): 578.

⁴¹See also V. H. Bruce, "Water Baptism," *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 21 (January 15, 1846): 1095.

glorious law of adoption into the kingdom of God.”⁴² By 1843, when Smith reminded believers that they would need to “subscribe [to] the articles of adoption to enter” the kingdom of God, he meant something rather different, even while the language he used remained superficially the same.⁴³

Baptism and individual conversion were far from the limits of adoption. Adoption was also about relationships. Much like other Protestants, many Mormons saw adoption through an evangelistic lens. Early on, the notion of “adopting” one’s proselytes into the family of God played a prominent role. That baptism was the rite of adoption and that the evangelist performed or supervised the baptism only strengthened this association. Thus, Apostle Wilford Woodruff claimed of his British proselytes that “the first fruits of my ministry . . . are bound to me closer than the ties of consanguinity,” making explicit the inherent comparison between bloodlines, biological kinship, and the relationships evangelists created with converts.⁴⁴ Addison Pratt wrote in a similar vein from Tubuai in the South Pacific to tell his wife of “the six first persons I have adopted into the kingdom by baptism.”⁴⁵ Emphasizing the spiritual power that rested on a successful evangelist in early 1836, William Phelps looked forward to the “many stars” in his eternal “Crown in the day of rejoicing” if he continued to fulfill his evangelistic duties.⁴⁶ Something like this image was present in an 1829 revelation encouraging evangelism with the promise that an evangelist’s “joy” would be “great” in proportion to his proselytizing harvest (D&C 18:15–16).

The twin images of regeneration and evangelism underwent dramatic transformation as the Latter-day Saints, assiduous primi-

⁴²[Thomas Ward], “The Gathering,” *Millennial Star* 3, no. 12 (April 1843): 195, and [Thomas Ward], “The Law of Adoption,” *Millennial Star* 4, no. 2 (June 1843): 17–19.

⁴³Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauwoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 256, October 15, 1843.

⁴⁴Wilford Woodruff, “President O. Cowdery, Dear Brother,” *Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 3 (December 1836): 432.

⁴⁵Addison Pratt, “My Dear Wife,” *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 8 (May 1, 1845): 882.

⁴⁶William W. Phelps, Letter to Sally Phelps, January 3, 1836, Phelps Collection, VMSS 810, Box 1, fd. 1, item 8, Perry Special Collections.

tivists, tied adoption back to spirited reinterpretations of the Hebrew Bible. They first did so in the context of their appropriation of images of biblical patriarchs and their relationships to their offspring.

Orphans and Patriarchs

Shortly after the founding of the Church and concomitant with traditional Protestant rhetoric on adoption, Smith presented a distinctive merger of church and family, sacerdotal and biological genealogy. In 1833, the Mormon prophet announced that his father, Joseph Smith Sr., would be the modern patriarch Jacob to the Church of Christ. Though he did not integrate it consistently into his broader sacerdotal system, Smith made clear that his father exercised a patriarchal priesthood on behalf of the Church. Armed with this priesthood and in a self-conscious imitation of Jacob's deathbed blessings—one that echoed across the Book of Mormon in the person of Lehi (2 Ne. 1–3)—Joseph Sr. began to impart words of wisdom and promises of power to believing Saints.⁴⁷ These blessings reflected a combination of hopeful prayers directed at fellow worshippers and a distinctive exercise of metaphysical fatherhood.

In time, after the patriarch's own deathbed transfer of the patriarchal power to his oldest living son Hyrum, Joseph Jr. made clear that the patriarchal priesthood he had bestowed on his father represented the power given to the New Testament apostles, "that whatsoever he shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven."⁴⁸ "Binding" and "sealing" were synonyms for the power and scope of adoption as the theology developed. The relationship to Christ through adoption

⁴⁷The deathbed image was strongly present in early blessings, a point Orson Hyde advertised to the German people in 1842. Orson Hyde, *A Cry from the Wilderness, A Voice from the Dust: A Brief Sketch of the Origin and Doctrines of the "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints" in America, Known to Some as: "The Mormons,"* translated by Justus Ernst (Frankfurt, Germany: n.p., 1842), 62.

⁴⁸Lucy Mack Smith lingers in great detail over Joseph Sr.'s deathbed speeches. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 716–17; Samuel M. Brown, "The 'Beautiful Death' in the Smith Family," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 4 (2006): 121–50. On Hyrum's patriarchal power, see the 1841 revelation canonized as Doctrine and Covenants 124:93, 124, with some discussion in Irene Bates and E. Gary Smith, *Lost Legacy: The Office of*

bound or sealed believers to their ultimate salvation. Through patriarchal priesthood, Smith taught, the Latter-day Saints gained control over such sealing power.

Smith's patriarchal system was not without antecedents. Various American Protestants cherished opportunities to bless each other, formally and informally. Blessings from venerable old men were particularly prized, in gentle echoes of Old Testament exemplars.⁴⁹ In the hands of the elder and younger Joseph Smiths, this usually informal practice became a highly specific ritual embedded in a richly contoured conceptual system. In many early cases, the blessings were bestowed in communal meetings similar to Methodist agape love feasts.⁵⁰ This distinctive aspect of Mormon ecclesiology became widely known and pilloried outside the Church, critics maintaining that Joseph Sr. "mumble[d], with his eyes shut, over the heads of the orphan children of the church."⁵¹ Some seceders reprinted their blessings as signs of the credulity of their former co-religionists.⁵²

The scoffing of critics and seceders is not terribly surprising. Jo-

Presiding Patriarch (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 49–50. Matthew 16:19 describes such a power as the "keys of the kingdom." On seals, see Prince, *Power from on High*, and Brown, *Early Mormon Conquest of Death*, chap. 6.

⁴⁹See, e.g., David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 218, 231.

⁵⁰See, e.g., Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Vol. 1: 1832–1839*, in THE JOSEPH SMITH PAPERS, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 139, December 29, 1835; 146, January 7, 1836. See also William Phelps, Letter to Sally Phelps, December 18, 1835, Phelps Collection, VMSS 810, Box 1, fd. 1, item 7, Perry Special Collections, and Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 245.

⁵¹J. B. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages: or the Rise, Progress, and Causes of Mormonism* (New York: Platt & Peters, 1842), 245–47.

⁵²See, e.g., John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints; or, An Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842), 42–43, and William Swartzell, *Mormonism Exposed, Being a Journal of a Residence in Missouri from the 28th of May to the 20th of August, 1838* (Pekin, Ohio: Author, 1840), iv.

seph Sr.'s blessings promised amazing powers to recipients, from gifts of tongues to supernatural translocations, from willed immortality to interplanetary travel. Often Joseph Sr. announced to recipients that they were sealed to eternal life or that their names were written in the Lamb's Book of Life, emphasizing again the close relationships between sealing and the patriarchal priesthood.⁵³ Such dramatic elements are prone to divert attention from a central meaning of blessings bestowed in the 1830s and 1840s. In these patriarchal blessings, the image of a sacerdotal "priesthood" father wove in and out of the process of adoption into a sacred lineage.

Essentially all of the major themes understood under the rubric of adoption theology were present in the early patriarchal blessings. The blessings framed the fundamental human problem as orphanhood and the solution as adoption into the family of God. While the blessing could serve as proof of one's place among the seed of Abraham,⁵⁴ it could also identify the patriarch performing the blessing as a special kind of sacerdotal father. In a shift that most Protestants would find heretical, patriarchal blessings offered new fathers to desirable Saints. These blessings represent one of the first indications that early Mormons would introduce human extensions to Christ into the meaning of divine adoption.

The group best understood as requiring a sacerdotal father consisted of bona fide orphans. A number of Latter-day Saints received their blessings specifically "that thou mayest no longer be an orphan."⁵⁵ Joseph Sr. made clear to such orphans that the Church would provide the family structure they otherwise lacked—the Saints would thereby "have Fathers and Mothers in israel."⁵⁶ The Saints embraced Joseph Sr.'s role as father to the fatherless. In his 1840 eulogy

⁵³H. Michael Marquardt, comp. and ed., *Early Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2007), is the most convenient source for these early blessings. Unless otherwise noted, Joseph Smith Sr. pronounced all of the blessings cited in this section.

⁵⁴Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), and Bates and Smith, *Lost Legacy*, 7–8, 43.

⁵⁵Marquardt, *Early Patriarchal Blessings*, 40, blessing on Levi Jackman, August 27, 1835; see also 44, blessing on Frederick G. Williams, September 14, 1835; and 65, blessing on Charles Jameson, March 21, 1836.

to the dead patriarch, Robert B. Thompson, Joseph Jr.'s secretary, recalled that "the widow and the orphan have received his Patriarchal blessing."⁵⁷ In 1840 Heber Kimball continued to worry over the fatherless, as they required a duly ordained patriarch to care for them and bestow the required blessings.⁵⁸

In addition to literal orphans, Joseph Sr. and others revealed that a biological father, if "an idolator" (a self-conscious allusion to Abraham, whose father worshipped idols according to tradition), would need to be replaced by a spiritual father to ensure the recipient's place in the kingdom of heaven.⁵⁹ Joseph Sr. told one blessing recipient, David Elliot, that he would not be abandoned, in phrases that evoked seals, private fatherhood, and adoption as God's fatherhood: "I seal a father's blessing that thou mayest not be an orphan, but call God, thy father."⁶⁰ Stephen Post learned he was "an orphan as to the things of the kingdom, for thy natural father hath no power to bless thee," a void filled by the Mormon patriarch.⁶¹

For a controversial sect like the Latter-day Saints, conversion often meant estrangement from biological family. The practice of gathering to consecrated lands only intensified the threat Mormonism represented to traditional kinship ties. The patriarchal priesthood and its blessings presented one solution to the problem, a central one for the fledgling Church. The first patriarch recognized that his namesake son was constructing an ecclesial family that could come into sharp conflict with biological kindreds. In his blessings, Joseph Sr. reminded the Latter-day Saints of their sacrifices and the compensatory rewards. Joseph Sr. told Mary Smith in 1834, "Thou hast

⁵⁶Ibid., 187, blessing on Jesse Walker Johnstun, February 5, 1839.

⁵⁷Robert B. Thompson, "An Address Delivered at the Funeral of Joseph Smith Sen. Late Patriarch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, by R. B. Thompson, September 15th, 1840," *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 11 (September 1840): 172.

⁵⁸Kimball's comments are in Brigham Young, "From England: Preston, April 17th, 1840," *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 8 (June 1840): 121.

⁵⁹Jesse Hitchcock learned that his "father hath become an idolator." Marquardt, *Early Patriarchal Blessings*, 56, December 16, 1835. Abr. 1:5-7, 30; 2:5; Josh. 24:2.

⁶⁰Ibid., blessing on David Elliot, 70, May 5, 1836.

⁶¹Ibid., 67, March 26, 1836; see also blessing on Calvin W. Stoddard, 13, December 9, 1844.

left thy father's house, and thy near relatives for the gospel's sake," emphasizing her sacrifice.⁶² In other cases, Father Smith asserted, "Thou hast been united to Kindred blood," an attempt to minimize the social fracture of conversion and establish the Church community, with him as its patriarchal head and his priesthood as the power that made it possible.⁶³

Orphanhood could even extend to those whose parents were baptized Latter-day Saints. Joseph Sr. told David Elliot that his father is "not as yet perfected in the faith, yet if he will seal this blessing upon the head it shall be well, and it shall be called in his name."⁶⁴ Another believer learned that "if thy father also shall bless thee, then thou shalt receive a double blessing."⁶⁵ This dual approach provided flexibility for a natural father to become sufficiently righteous to complement the spiritual blessing bestowed by the Mormon patriarch. Even as the patriarch held open the possibility of a natural father's integration into the process, the tension between spiritual and natural relationships intruded. In a more obviously collaborative mode, Joseph Sr. and his brother John jointly pronounced a blessing on John's son George A., integrating John into the ranks of patriarchs.⁶⁶ At times Joseph Sr. urged evangelism to solve the problem, as when he instructed Emanuel Murphy to "preach to thy father and mother and bring them into the kingdom."⁶⁷ (Tensions related to differential merit, including competition between potential father figures, persisted both into polygamy and into the law of adoption, as Smith's followers implemented it in the latter 1840s.)

The blessing on Martha Jane Knowlton exemplifies the tension that animated the patriarchal project. Employing the language of evangelism as the adoption of converts, Joseph Sr. blessed Martha "by the consent of thy Father and the request of Br Page thy Spiritual Fa-

⁶²Ibid., 16, blessing on Mary [Bailey] Smith, December 9, 1834. She was married to Joseph's son, Samuel Harrison Smith.

⁶³Ibid., 175, blessing on Roxanna Freeman, December 5, 1837.

⁶⁴Ibid., 70, blessing on David Elliot, May 5, 1836.

⁶⁵Ibid., 64, blessing on Julian Moses, February 20, 1836.

⁶⁶Ibid., 30–31.

⁶⁷Ibid., 183, blessing on Emanuel Masters Murphy, September 30, 1838.

ther.”⁶⁸ Three father figures thus hovered over Martha’s head. The patriarch stood physically beside the figurative presence of her biological father and Elder John E. Page, the apostle who converted her. Each of these men had a claim on Martha, the first and last making their claims through the patriarchal and evangelistic interpretation of spiritual adoption.

Sometimes the role of the patriarch sounded dramatically like that of Jesus. To Margaret Johnstun, Joseph Sr. announced, “I will be wil[l]ing to acknowledge the[e] in the great day of the lord.”⁶⁹ This was the language Jesus used, the idea that taking Christ’s name meant that He would acknowledge the believer at the final judgment. This framing illustrates one central meaning of the early patriarchal priesthood, an act of creating relationships based on the Pauline image of adoption into Christ. In important ways, the patriarch stood in for Christ in this sacred transaction.

Some of the audacity of the substitution of patriarchs for Jesus likely derives from the Old Testament imagery that permeated the Mormon view of adoption. Employing Hebraic language of genealogy and created ethnicity, the patriarchs adopted believers into the nation of Israel. Joseph Sr. advised Roswell Blood that “thou art not of gentile blood but of the seed of Israel yet thy companion is a Gentile and goeth in the way of the Gentiles. But if she will repent and obey the gospel she shall become the seed of Abraham through the law of adoption.”⁷⁰ Even as Joseph Sr. declared Roswell’s righteous bloodline, his wife’s proved susceptible to correction. The notion that patriarchal blessings could identify and establish a sacred lineage became increasingly prominent with time.⁷¹ These beliefs need to be seen within British and American Israelism, as documented by several scholars. Anglo-American Israelism played an important role within Protestantism: Thinkers as eminently reasonable as Jonathan Ed-

⁶⁸Ibid., 188, blessing on Martha Jane Knowlton, January 21, 1840. She received this blessing before her marriage to Howard Coray.

⁶⁹Ibid., 187, blessing on Margaret Johnstun, February 5, 1839.

⁷⁰Ibid., 71, blessing on Roswell Blood, May 8, 1836.

⁷¹Cooper, *Mormon Covenant Organization*, 74. Hyrum Smith blessed Susanna White in 1841 “that you might have a Name in Israel, as Daughter of Abraham in the lineage of Joseph, in the tribe of Ephraim,” quoted in Bates and Smith, *Lost Legacy*, 67, September 8, 1841.

wards saw Israelite blood in white Christians.⁷² What distinguished the Latter-day Saints was that they acquired access to that lineage through patriarchal adoption.

Reflecting Smith's tendency to merge and integrate strands from diverse intellectual traditions, in Nauvoo's earliest months the Mormon prophet announced to his followers that "an Evangelist is a patriarch even the oldest man of the Blood of Joseph or of the seed of Abraham, wherever the Church of Christ is established in the earth, there should be a patriarch for the benefit of the posterity of the Saints as it was with Jacob in giving his patriarchal blessing unto his Sons."⁷³ Though on its face the definition sounds like an idiosyncratic attempt to ensure that Mormon priesthood offices covered all those presented in the New Testament, there is a poorly appreciated continuity. Evangelists brought souls to adoption and thereby gained a claim on the people they converted. The pure-blood patriarch was the Mormon evangelist *par excellence*—and he served as a New Testament precedent for the fundamentally Old Testament concept of a patriarch. This image of an apostle acquiring spiritual children animated many of the earliest patriarchal blessings. Joseph Sr. promised David Elliot "thou shalt bring thy thousands as seals of thy ministry."⁷⁴ Bringing "thousands" referred to the spiritual children a missionary brought to the throne of grace at the end of time, including family, friends, and strangers. Others received similar promises, emphasizing friendship networks much as Nancy Towle did in her descriptions of anticipated afterlife community. Joseph Sr. promised Wilford Woodruff's wife, Phebe, that "if thou wilt keep the commandments thou shalt have all of thy friends. They shall be members of the covenant."⁷⁵

Family particularly could be preserved by the patriarchal priesthood. The early patriarchs gave power to parents to save their own

⁷²Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 15–40; Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷³Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 6, June 27, 1839.

⁷⁴Marquardt, *Early Patriarchal Blessings*, 70, blessing on David Elliot, May 5, 1836. Jonathan Crosby learned that he would rise to meet Jesus at the second coming, "and thy thousands shall be with thee." *Ibid.*, 64, February 21, 1836.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 87, blessing on Phebe W. Carter Woodruff, November 10, 1836.

children.⁷⁶ Amos Fuller learned from Joseph Sr. that his was “a blessing which shall rest on thee and on thy seed.”⁷⁷ Clarissa Perry learned she would “have children in the covenant.”⁷⁸ Wielding this power, men could become patriarchs to their own biological kindred. Joseph Cooper learned he would “be a patriarch in thy family to seal blessings on thy children to the latest generation.”⁷⁹ Joseph Bosworth received “power to save thy family, even all so that none of them shall be lost.”⁸⁰ These blessings connect the vast expanse of sacred history—Father Israel and his sons—to the intimate and personal love of believers for their children and grandchildren. The theme of assured salvation for offspring continued to expand over the course of the next decade.

Recalling that adoption represented secure salvation for converted believers, seals and sealing appeared prominently in early patriarchal blessings. To Emanuel Murphy, Joseph Sr. announced, “I seal the seal of God upon thy forehead, and seal thee up unto eternal life.”⁸¹ To Marcellus McKown, Joseph Sr. pronounced “many blessings upon thy family, even to the sealing of them up unto eternal life.”⁸² The new relationships established in the evangelizing adoption prepared individuals and their kindreds for the Second Coming of Christ. Emphasizing the extent to which participation in the sacerdotal genealogy could save kindreds intact, Joseph Sr. promised Lorenzo Snow that “all thy kindred shall be brought into the kingdom

⁷⁶William Law critiqued Joseph Sr. as something of an automaton, issuing promises of plenteous and righteous offspring. Lyndon W. Cook, *William Law: Biographical Essay, Nauvoo Diary, Correspondence, Interview* (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book, 1994), 121.

⁷⁷Marquardt, *Early Patriarchal Blessings*, 76, blessing on Amos Fuller, June 17, 1836.

⁷⁸Ibid., 163, blessing on Clarissa Perry, May 27, 1837.

⁷⁹Ibid., 72, blessing on Joseph Cooper, May 14, 1836.

⁸⁰This would happen through transmission of patriarchal authority, as Bosworth would receive “power to bless thy children in due time, and give them power to bless their children.” Ibid., 104–5, Joseph Bosworth, probably 1836. See also 120, blessing on Allen Gray, probably 1836.

⁸¹Ibid., 183, blessing on Emanuel Masters Murphy, September 30, 1838.

⁸²Ibid., 56, blessing on Marcellus McKown, December 9, 1835; 56, blessing on Applia Dow, December 17, 1835.

and have a Celestial Glory” through his patriarchal blessing.⁸³ The desire to fill the space once occupied by the Halfway Covenant is particularly clear in the blessing on Jacob Chapman: “Great grace shall flow unto thee through the covenant which thou hast received, and by which thy blessings shall descend down and reach thy posterity that they may be numbered with the children of Abraham and receive an inheritance with their brethren and enjoy all the privileges of the kingdom on earth.”⁸⁴

Priesthood and the Legal Heirs of God

Patriarchal blessings were a ritual window on a rich set of interconnected beliefs. These beliefs—a cluster of priesthood, heirship, and birthrights—merge several important threads in early Mormonism. A power called priesthood made possible the adoptive promises of the patriarchal blessings. This authority made sacred adoption “legal” and established the Latter-day Saints as definitive heirs who possessed a birthright to this adopting priesthood.

In attempting to explain what it meant for his father to be the Church’s patriarch and to come to terms with Hebrew Bible exemplars of priestly and cultic power, Joseph Jr. spent most of his religious career elaborating a sacerdotal system for the Mormon Church, a system he denoted with the semantically complex term “priesthood.” Smith’s persistent fascination with priesthood is much commented on but still relatively poorly understood.⁸⁵ From early on, Smith intended that the Church be heavily sacerdotal, announcing a tiered priesthood system with one stratum based on the “Aaronic” priesthood of the Hebrews, another transiently identified with Abraham, and the most elevated named for the mysterious biblical figure Melchizedek. Ultimately absorbed into the Melchizedek Priesthood, in the 1830s and 1840s the patriarchal priesthood of Abraham proved central to adoption theology.

Abraham’s patriarchal priesthood made available to believers powers once held to be identical with Christ, as if extending the Christological imagery of the book of Hebrews. This extension made possible the dual sense of sealing as an individual’s assured salvation

⁸³Ibid., 95, blessing on Lorenzo Snow, December 15, 1836.

⁸⁴Ibid., 108, blessing on Jacob Kimble Chapman, probably 1836.

⁸⁵Prince, *Power from On High*, is the best treatment to date. Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People*, provides additional insight into Ohio-period priesthood developments.

and direct connection to other human beings. Simultaneously priesthood represented legal authority, a way of establishing those who were citizens of the kingdom of God. In ways that the early Latter-day Saints and Joseph Smith never fully worked out, this priesthood functioned in the spirit of the genealogical ties and birthrights of Hebrew scripture. In certain respects, Mormons believed with some other Christians that they were literal descendants of the ancient Hebrews. But what nourished their belief was the conviction that their priesthood could *make* them Israel. Biological ties could be unreliable; sacerdotal ties were secure. Priesthood offered a metaphysical substitute for blood, a power that defined and transformed human beings and their relationships (D&C 84:33–34).

Smith experimented with images of priesthood lineality early on, particularly in a collection of revelations merged for the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, in which Smith persistently left open the possibility that a “literal descendant of Aaron” might claim a leadership position in the Church outside normal appointment channels.⁸⁶ Though no one ever received Church office on the basis of such a descent from Aaron, this policy served as a reminder of the close association between lineality and priesthood.

Images of royal and priesthood lineages expanded further when Joseph Smith and William Phelps began a sustained exploration of a collection of funerary papyri in June 1835. For each hieroglyph on the papyri, they supplied a transliteration and definition in a collection of manuscripts now called the Kirtland Egyptian Papers. In this exploration, Smith and Phelps amplified their ideas about lineality and heirship.⁸⁷ As they struggled to interpret glyphs on the papyri, these sacred linguists espied pictograms that traced sacred power “from Abraham back to his father and from Abraham’s father back to his father and so on back through the line of his progenitors.”⁸⁸

Smith and Phelps interpreted one glyph that they understood to represent the Hebrew letter *resh*, “head,” as referring to “Patriarchal

⁸⁶D&C 107:17, 69, 73, 76. See discussion in Prince, *Power from On High*, 66.

⁸⁷For an interpretation of the meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, see Samuel M. Brown, “Joseph (Smith) in Egypt: Babel, Hieroglyphs, and the Pure Language of Eden,” *Church History* 78, no. 1 (March 2009): 26–65. On lineality, see *ibid.*, 27–28, 40, 59–61.

⁸⁸“The Grammar and A[l]phabet of the Egyptian Language,”

government, or authority; a land governed according to the pattern or order given to the patriarchs or fathers, rules and laws of a gover[n]-ment administered by the direction of Heaven or God . . . a priestly government; a government administered by the authority of the priesthood less or under the patriarchal.”⁸⁹ Another glyph, which they called *Phah ho e oop*, described a sacred “king who has universal dominion over all the earth,” who ruled by “power” that could be “exten[ded . . .] by marriage or by ordination.”⁹⁰

The Book of Abraham that resulted from the encounter with the papyri followed those same themes of a heritable power and authority. Its opening verses describe Abraham’s desire to obtain “the blessings of the fathers” by which he could become “rightful heir” of a power that “came down from the fathers.” He was, in prescient terms, a “prince of peace,” an early and pregnant reference to Christ applied to human priestly authorities. The patriarch Abraham “sought for mine appointment unto the Priesthood according to the appointment of God unto the fathers concerning the seed.” Later in the first chapter, Abraham announced that God would “put upon thee my name.” The second chapter reflected more clearly the relationships between biology and priesthood. Abraham’s “seed” was to carry the “priesthood” to the nations. Abraham was an adoptive father to those who would follow. Summarizing, God told Abraham “in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and in thy seed (that is, thy Priesthood), for I give unto thee a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body)” (Abr. 1:2–4, 18, 20, 31; 2:9–11). The striking parentheticals suggest the complex relationships between ideas about physical or biological, what the Mormon scripture called “literal,” and sacerdotal rights and inheritances.

Language about priesthood as establishing legal claims to au-

Kirtland Egyptian Papers, MS 1295, fd. 1, p. 18, LDS Church History Library. Following Brian Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Study, Brigham Young University, 2010), 7, I will refer to this manuscript as GAEL.

⁸⁹GAEL, 5–6; H. Michael Marquardt, comp., *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papers* (Cullman, Ala.: Printing Service, 1981), 13–16; Moses Stuart, *Grammar of the Hebrew Language* (Andover, Mass.: Flagg and Gould, 1831), 2.

⁹⁰GAEL 3, 9.

thority or power extended more broadly than the Egyptian project. Priesthood was the legal authority by which adoption could take place.⁹¹ An editorialist, presumably John Taylor, describing Smith's higher priesthood, explained that "previous to the introduction of the gospel and Melchisedec priesthood, it was impossible for a person to become a son of God, (they might be a servant but not a son)."⁹² Adoption, according to Taylor, could happen only through the special priesthood Smith unveiled. The Hebrew Bible explained the Christian Bible. Joseph Fielding, a British convert in Nauvoo, reflected on the same message: "I had thought much on the subject of the redemption of those who died under the broken covenant, it is plain they could not come forth in the kingdom of God, as they had not been adopted, legally into it."⁹³ These questions about legal status pointed to the Mormon interpretation of another key term in Paul's adoption theology, "heir."

The Latter-day Saints interpreted Paul's "heirs of God" and "joint-heirs with Christ" in terms that again merged Old and New Testaments. Paul's letter to Galatians (3:29) broadened heirship into the Hebrew Bible model by telling believers that "if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." This passage underscored the association between Abraham and priesthood authority. Other Protestants tended to read heirship less literally, as involvement in the community of Christ. In generally spiritual terms, being an heir usually meant salvation—going to heaven.⁹⁴

Latter-day Saints emphasized the "lawful" nature of their inheritance, language they used to associate heirship with Smith's priest-

⁹¹This is the central point of Pratt, *Voice of Warning*, 105ff.

⁹²"The Melchisedec Priesthood," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 1 (November 15, 1842): 10.

⁹³Joseph Fielding, "Dear Br. Robinson," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 5 (January 1, 1842): 649.

⁹⁴See, e.g., John Brown, *A Dictionary of the Holy Bible: Containing an Historical Account of the Persons, a Geographical Account of the Places, a Literal, Critical, and Systematical Description of Other Objects* (Pittsburgh: Cramer, Spear, and Eichbaum, 1811), s.v. "heir"; William Burkitt, *Expository Notes with Practical Observations, on the New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (London: James Dinnis, 1832), 69. Thomas Watson, on the other hand, in *A Body of Practical Divinity* (Glasgow: John Hall, 1759), 384, provides a view rather similar to Mormonism, in which joint-heirship signified

hood (D&C 86:9). As the Saints experimented with communalism in Missouri, the phrase “legal heir to the Kingdom of Zion” referred specifically to someone who had committed fully and formally to the Church covenants regulating their economic affairs.⁹⁵ When Wilford Woodruff committed himself to economic communalism in 1830s Kirtland, he indicated that he did so “that I may be a lawful heir to the Kingdom of God.”⁹⁶ When Joseph Sr.’s brother John began giving patriarchal blessings in the 1840s, he emphasized that recipients were identified as “lawful heirs” of the kingdom, as did other patriarchs.⁹⁷

THE MORMON CHAIN OF BELONGING

While the details are more complex than can be presented in this essay, Joseph Smith Jr. reformulated the neoplatonic Great Chain of Being into a genealogical network of salvation, thereby producing what I have termed the Mormon Chain of Belonging.⁹⁸ The original Chain of Being, a dominant philosophical system that organized all existence into a single hierarchy, derived from Aristotle’s interpretation of Plato. Based on the principles of plenitude, continuity, and gradation (all things that could exist do exist, and all types of thing are unique and hierarchically ordered without intervening gap), the chain extended from the highest demigods to the lowliest particles of

an ontological status possibly superior to angels.

⁹⁵See, e.g., Joseph Smith et al., “Letter to the Brethren in Zion,” June 25, 1833, LDS Church History Library.

⁹⁶Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 1:16, December 31, 1834, a New Year’s pledge.

⁹⁷See, e.g., the blessings of Bathsheba B. Smith and George A. Smith in October 1844; George A. Smith, *Diary*, October 1, 1844, MS 1322, Box 1, fd. 4, in *Selected Collections*, 1:32. For another example, see John D. Lee and William W. Bishop, *Mormonism Unveiled: or, the Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop, John D. Lee; (Written by Himself), Embracing a History of Mormonism from Its Inception Down to the Present Time, with an Exposition of the Secret History, Signs, Symbols and Crimes of the Mormon Church* (St Louis: Bryan, Brand & Company, 1877), 95. See Stapley, “Ritual Adoption,” on the efflorescence of legal heirship in later Mormonism.

⁹⁸This section summarizes the arguments of Samuel M. Brown, “Early Mormon Chain of Belonging,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 1–52, while situating the chain within adoption theology.

dust. At several points, Christian thinkers employed a version of this chain, also called the Scale of Nature (*Scala Naturae*), to justify human hierarchies and to discern the hand (and mind) of God in biological diversity.⁹⁹ Though the original Chain of Being had been a static organizational principle in which different entities stayed forever in their decreed state, by the late eighteenth century various thinkers had propounded what Arthur Lovejoy, its best-known scholar, has called the “temporal” Chain of Being.¹⁰⁰ In this eternally progressive version, relationships remained immutable and hierarchically ordered, but every individual’s level of glory increased endlessly as the entire chain progressed in glory.

By transforming the Chain of Being into a heavenly family tree, Smith seems to have been making the argument that human families paralleled the structures of the cosmos in a mystically powerful way, an echo of the metaphysical law of correspondence.¹⁰¹ Adoption theology served as an important link between, on the one hand, traditional Christian teachings about adoption as regeneration and assuming the name of Christ and, on the other hand, more metaphysical ideas about human nature and destiny. Adoption was the mechan-

⁹⁹Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 4th ed. (New York rpt.; London: Whittaker, Treacher & Co., 1832), 253, is emblematic of the continuing social relevance of the chain to transatlantic arguments about social hierarchy. This visiting British littérateur complained of Thomas Jefferson’s philosophy as “too palpable to a people, each individual of whom would rather derive his importance from believing that none are above him, than from the consciousness that in his station he makes part of a noble whole.” See also Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 8, 54; Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 152–56, 166; Alden Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 26–28; Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man’s Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 197–98.

¹⁰⁰Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948), esp. 76, 252.

¹⁰¹On correspondence, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. 8–9, 23, 72, 155–72.

ism by which believers entered the Chain of Belonging in all its ritual and conceptual richness.

In April 1844, Joseph Smith delivered what is known as the King Follett Discourse, probably his first public, explicit characterization of God as a divinized being, a core doctrine of his divine anthropology.¹⁰² About a month later, he delivered a second sermon, the Sermon in the Grove, in which he incorporated several elements of his adoption theology into the divine anthropology. The meeting opened with Samuel Medley's hymn "Mortals, Awake! with Angels Join," in which Medley termed Jesus "Redeemer, Brother, Friend!" Smith then began using a familiar metaphor and a creative misreading of Revelation 1:6 to show that, just as Jesus had a Divine Father, so God Himself also had a Divine Father. He then returned to the Egyptian project to secure logical and scriptural support for the Chain of Belonging. After clarifying that the "intelligences" who had a place in the Chain of Belonging would be called "kings and priests," Smith quoted from and amplified the Book of Abraham (Abr. 3:18), explaining that there "may exist two men on the earth—one wiser than the other—wo[ul]d. shew that an[o]t[he]r. who is wiser than the wisest may exist—intelligences exist one above anot[he]r. that there is no end to it."¹⁰³ This argument exemplified the chain's principle of gradation, expressed in terms of a cosmic hierarchy. Using the philosophical construct of the chain, Smith explained how the Latter-day Saints could be like Jesus ontologically. Just as God taught Jesus who He was, so Jesus taught humans who they were. The gradations of the chain's hierarchy were of degree rather than of essence. The notion that humans could stand in relation to Jesus as Jesus stood in relation to God became clear in Smith's elaboration of the concept of "saviors on Mount Zion" (discussed below).

While adoption theology provided a conceptual framework for understanding the possibility that Saints could become members of God's family in new ways, rituals were required to effect this transfor-

¹⁰²On divine anthropology—my term to describe the conspecificity of humans, angels, and gods in Smith's theology—see Brown, *Early Mormon Conquest of Death*, chap. 9.

¹⁰³The sermon, to the extent it is recorded, is printed in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 380–82. Despite the sparse documentation, the meanings of the sermon are relatively clear in the context of Smith's thought in 1844.

mation. The concept could have become a theological dead end, littering Mormonism's past; but Joseph Smith built upon the concept, centering it in the liturgical developments that became the most important Mormon developments of the 1840s. In these rites, the implications of the Chain of Belonging became clear, a marvelous divine future for the Latter-day Saints.

Baptism for the Dead

Adoption theology formally entered Mormon ritual life in the early 1840s. Addressing bereaved followers at the 1840 funeral of Seymour Brunson, a loyal follower, Smith revealed that the Saints could perform baptisms—what they understood as the New Testament rite of adoption—for their deceased ancestors. Mormon apologists often invoked this practice as a solution to the apparent injustice of the Calvinist system, in which those who die without hearing the gospel are damned, what evangelicals term the “scandal of particularity.” At an even deeper level, however, baptism for the dead allowed the Latter-day Saints to craft permanent, sacerdotal associations with their dead.

The Saints embraced the opportunity with great gusto.¹⁰⁴ Descending beneath the earth into the liquid grave, the Latter-day Saints rescued their departed kin from the obliterating silence of the tomb. In the complex, overlapping meanings of early Mormonism, the Saints thereby adopted their ancestors to themselves. Baptism for the dead drew on and amplified various images and symbols within the Mormon movement and its environment. Explaining the practice in a newspaper editorial a few months after its announcement, Smith called on ancient Christian precedent. Quoting Chrysostom on the Marcionites as filtered through Charles Buck, Smith announced: “After any catechumen was dead, they hid a living man under the bed of

¹⁰⁴For general histories of baptism for the dead, none of which describe the grounding of the rite in adoption theology, see M. Guy Bishop, “‘What Has Become of Our Fathers?’: Baptism for the Dead at Nauvoo,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 85–97; Alexander L. Baugh, “‘For This Ordinance Belongeth to My House’: The Practice of Baptism for the Dead Outside the Nauvoo Temple,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 47–58; Alexander L. Baugh, “‘Blessed Is the First Man Baptized in This Font’: Reuben McBride, First Proxy to Be Baptized for the Dead in the Nauvoo Temple,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 253–61.

the deceased; then coming to the dead man, they asked him whether he would receive baptism; and he making no answer, the other answered for him, and said that he would be baptized in his stead; and so they baptized the living for the dead.”¹⁰⁵

Smith editorialized his borrowing from Buck by explaining that “the church of course at that time was degenerate, and the particular form might be incorrect, but the thing is sufficiently plain in the scriptures.”¹⁰⁶ Three years later, after the amplification of the concepts behind baptism for the dead in the temple endowment ceremony, Smith reiterated the close association between adoption theology and baptism for the dead. In a sermon on “the resurrection of the dead,” Smith detailed the role baptism for the dead played in preparing friends and relatives for a grand reunion on Mount Zion.¹⁰⁷

In the act of lineal reversal subsumed by baptism for the dead, Mormon believers served as surrogate saviors—as “Saviors on Mount Zion,” according to Smith, of their dead kin. Where the patriarchal blessings and the priesthood associated with such blessings had identified a lineage deep in Israel’s past, baptism for the dead began to assemble the individual links into a “chain” that ran back to Adam. Smith tied baptism for the dead to an exegesis of Malachi’s prophecy of Elijah’s return (Mal. 4).¹⁰⁸ In 1844 Smith explained that Malachi’s reference to Elijah’s “turn[ing]” hearts should have been translated “bind” or “seal,” a statement that made explicit how closely Smith tied adoption to baptism for the dead and the temple project.¹⁰⁹ A little over six months after Smith’s death, Young preached in strong terms that “baptism for the dead” was the mechanism by which secondary priesthood saviors could “hold them [their dead relatives] . . . in spite of all Earth and hell.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 44, s.v. “baptism for the dead.”

¹⁰⁶[Joseph Smith], “Baptism for the Dead,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 12 (April 15, 1842): 760–61.

¹⁰⁷Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 367–68, May 12, 1844.

¹⁰⁸See Samuel M. Brown, “The Prophet Elias Puzzle,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 1–17.

¹⁰⁹Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 318, January 21, 1844; cf. Mal. 4.

¹¹⁰Brigham Young and Willard Richards Family Meeting Minutes,

Temple Liturgy and Plural Marriage

From the theological foundation of baptism for the dead, Joseph Smith pushed forward during his last two years of life to create a richly textured ritual system he associated with the new temple. Through highly symbolic rites that purified believers and prepared them for their postmortal journeys by situating them with the world's first parents in the Garden of Eden, Smith began to clarify the ways that the sacramental and sacerdotal would combine in his solution to the problem of election (discussed below).¹¹¹ Employing images of royal and priestly power from the New Testament book of Revelation, Smith informed Latter-day Saints that they would become "Kings and Priests" (and, by extensions, queens and priestesses) in the kingdom of God, roles they assumed with great enthusiasm. Participants in the temple liturgy gained a power, mediated by Smith's priesthood, that allowed them to seal their offspring to themselves just as they sealed their ancestors to salvation.¹¹² In the temple rites, Smith had captured the sacramental power necessary to make real the promise of the Mormon Elijah. The sacred lineage of the patriarchal priesthood came to fruition as the Latter-day Saints discovered that they were not just descendants of Bible patriarchs—they were the sacred royalty anticipated by the book of Revelation.

Through the temple *cultus* the Latter-day Saints acquired new names of great power by which they gained access to heavenly powers. These names echoed the images of seals as adoption. Seals represented God's ownership of humans, the bestowal of His name upon them. When the Saints acquired parallel names in the temple liturgy, they experimented with similar power. In addition, Smith anointed and sealed men and women, the parental couples who would engage in formal adoption rituals after Smith's death. These rituals were

January 8, 1845, 5, General Church Minutes, 1839–77, *Selected Collections*, 1:18.

¹¹¹On the significance of the temple, see Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 39–40, 92, and Brown, *Early Mormon Death Conquest*, chaps. 6–7.

¹¹²See George Laub, "Reminiscences and Journal," MS 9628, LDS Church History Library, 101–3, for one example of ways rank-and-file Mormons understood adoption and the temple liturgy. Mormons later incorporated explicit parent-child sealings to reify the suggestion in Smith's liturgy that the sealings of couple included their children within its salvific power.

closely related to the establishment of novel family structures. In Smith's attack on proto-Victorian culture, the promise of sealing and adoption expanded in a surprising recapitulation of the most controversial aspect of Hebrew patriarchal family life—polygamy.

The vast scope of adoption theology, generally stretched vertically through the generations of time, in polygamy stretched horizontally through the contemporary world. Though the first steps dated to the 1830s, by the early 1840s Smith had begun to expound a marital/sexual system scholars have termed proto-polygamy and which early Latter-day Saints denominated “plural” or “celestial” marriage.¹¹³ In several important respects, polygamy is the marital amplification and application of adoption theology. “Plural” not only indicated that there would be multiple wives for each man but that such ritual marriages would unite worshippers as part of the celestial plurality of Smith's heaven family. In the words of a revelation, the righteous “shall be crowned upon your heads with honor and immortality and eternal life to all your house both old and young because of the lineage of my Preasthood saith the Lord it shall be upon you and upon your Children after you from generation to generation By virtue of the Holy promise which I now make unto you.”¹¹⁴

The adoption theology, particularly as it was expressed through the temple liturgy, explains how Smith could claim that plural marriage was a sacrament that vouchsafed salvation.¹¹⁵ The notion that salvation depended on relationships, though, was much broader than polygamy. As he came to elaborate the rationale for polygamy, particularly in the revelation announcing the practice that Smith dictated on July 12, 1843, he used language that was already familiar to the Saints from the rite of baptism for the dead and the analogy from patriarchal priesthood and its blessings. In his polygamy revelation, Smith warned that, if individuals could not be brought into the sacerdotal family, they could not be saved; they would instead live “sepa-

¹¹³Kathryn M. Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840–1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 31, coined the apt term “proto-polygamy” to describe the Nauvoo experience.

¹¹⁴Revelation, July 27, 1842, MS 4583, Box 1, fd. 104, in *Selected Collections*, 1:19.

¹¹⁵Davies, *Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 155.

rately and singly, without exaltation.”¹¹⁶ Four days after dictating the revelation on plurality, Smith preached a sermon on July 16 that referred to polygamy in coded terms. In it, he emphasized that those who failed to participate in the sacerdotal family through polygamy would “never becom Sons of God,” an explicit equation of adoption and polygamy.¹¹⁷ The scandalous sexuality associated with polygamy has distracted peers and scholars from a central component of Smith’s protest against the Victorian family, polygamy’s deeply biblical and communal reflections on the meaning of salvation.

As with the rest of adoption theology, polygamy contained complex contradictions and tensions that predicted fracture lines for the future. Just as orphans could find a new father in Israel, so inadequately married women could find a celestial patriarchal husband. Much has been made of Smith’s early pattern in Nauvoo of marrying the wives of his followers, a practice that accounted for most of the early plural marriages. This practice was not polyandry, despite a common practice in Mormon studies of employing that term.¹¹⁸ The women to whom Smith become a second living husband are probably best considered “dual” wives, participating in two marital companionships: one polygamous, the other monogamous; one legal, the other sacerdotal.¹¹⁹ Their status calls to mind immediately the ecclesiastical orphans whose fathers were inadequate to the task of spiritual adoption. The presence of dual wives in Nauvoo suggests two things: the sacerdotal family would disrupt proto-Victorian norms, and there would be a hierarchy within the Mormon Chain of Belonging.

¹¹⁶Revelation, July 12, 1843, Revelations Collection, MS 4583, Box 1, fd. 75, in *Selected Collections*, 1:19 [D&C 132:17].

¹¹⁷Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 232.

¹¹⁸Polyandry is a rare marital system in which a woman becomes wife to several men, usually brothers or other close kin. It generally occurs in materially impoverished societies. On the problems with using “polyandry” to describe Nauvoo Mormonism, see Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 165. Foster has proposed that “proxy wives” replace the overuse of “polyandry” in Mormon studies, but Foster’s term misapprehends this aspect of proto-polygamy.

¹¹⁹For the stories of these dual wives, see Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 71–144, 171–253.

**IMPLICATIONS: ELECTION, SECONDARY SAVIORS,
AND THE MECHANICS OF SALVATION**

Mormon adoption theology was fundamentally a story about salvation. Framed explicitly as a response to Calvinist election, Mormon adoption theology confronted and overwhelmed the vexing problem of the uncertainty of salvation in antebellum Protestantism. Smith's solution to election came, though, at the expense of the famed individualism of the early Republic. Smith was advancing a claim about both the ineluctably communal nature of salvation and the remarkable role other humans could play in the salvation drama.

Certain Election

There should be no doubt that Joseph Smith presented a solution to the problem of election, a project central to the folk anti-Calvinism that was coming to dominate American Protestantism. Election was the theological assertion that God, in his perfect wisdom, chose who would be saved and who damned. For centuries, this concept had stood in for much of the rest of Reformed theology, even though reading God's mind on the topic was notoriously difficult. Repeatedly Smith made clear that his Restoration solved the problem of the inscrutable and seemingly arbitrary decrees of the God whom critics attributed to Calvin and his American heirs. Mormons would be assured of their salvation through the relationships created by the exercise of restored priesthood, validated by God. Their capacity to create eternal seals was central to the Mormon assault on the Calvinist God, whom Smith generally presented in caricature.¹²⁰ In his sermon on Elijah, he proclaimed, "If you have power to seal on earth & in heaven then we should be crafty. . . . Go & seal on earth your sons & daughters unto yourself & yourself unto your fathers in eternal glory. . . . Use a little Craftiness & seal all you can & when you get to heaven tell your father that what you seal on earth should be sealed in heaven. I will walk through the gate of heaven and Claim what I seal & those that follow me & my Council."¹²¹

These instructions—an idiosyncratic combination of folk wit, biblical allusion, perfectionism, and a complex challenge to Calvin-

¹²⁰Brown, "The Prophet Elias Puzzle."

¹²¹Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 2:364. All extant sources for the sermon are published in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 327–36, 389–92. Eulogies and accounts of the funeral are printed as "Com-

ism—thrilled early Latter-day Saints. Smith’s use of “crafty” (revised to “wise” for the official history) probably meant “resourceful” rather than “conniving,” though the latter reading is not unreasonable.¹²² In this call to seize power over a parody of the Calvinist God, Smith made two points clear: Mormons would not languish uncertainly over their ultimate election, and the pathway to salvation was a mystically charged process by which believers created novel relationships with each other. Smith rejected pietistic reasoning, both in its Calvinist and Arminian versions, and strongly endorsed sacerdotal sacramentalism in his solution of the problem of election.

On May 9, 1841, Smith used Romans 9 to bring out the connection between election and adoption.¹²³ He preached again on May 16 on the same scriptural text, making it clear that he understood election as a kind of physical status coterminous with being the seed of Abraham. Smith employed the pregnant phrase “to them belonged the adoption, and the covenants &c.” to refer to Abraham’s seed. He continued by stating: “All the election that can be found in the scripture is according to the flesh and pertaining to the priesthood,” using the intertwined images of biology and priesthood. Bringing ancient scripture to bear on the modern Latter-day Saints, Smith announced that “the election of the promised seed still continues,” by

municated,” *Nauvoo Neighbor* 1, no. 47 (March 20, 1844): 2. I treat this sermon and its implications in similar terms in “Early Mormon Chain of Belonging,” 1–3.

¹²²*History of the Church*, 6:253. The term “crafty” had primarily negative connotations but could be used in a positive sense then as now. I do not believe that “crafty” was a veiled reference to Masonry, although “crafty” was occasionally used in specific reference to a “craft” (generally priestcraft, but occasionally magic). For other uses of “crafty” by Latter-day Saints, generally in the negative but not particularly mystical sense, see, e.g., Orson Pratt to Oliver Cowdery, November 18, 1835, *Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 2 (November 1835): 223–24; W. A. Cowdery, “Valedictory,” *Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 12 (September 1837): 570–71; Joseph Smith, “The Globe,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 8 (April 15, 1844): 508; “For President, Gen. Joseph Smith, Nauvoo, Illinois,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 9 (May 1, 1844): 519; “For President, Gen. Joseph Smith, Nauvoo, Illinois,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 10 (May 15, 1844): 535.

¹²³Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 71, May 9, 1841.

which he meant adoption through the Mormon priesthood.¹²⁴

In 1843, Joseph Jr., provided to Joseph Kingsbury “a Patriarchal and Sealing Blessing” informing Kingsbury that “thy companion Caroline, who is now dead, thou shalt have, for I seal thee up for and in her behalf, to come forth in the first resurrection unto eternal life, (and it shall be as though she was present herself) and thou shalt hail her, and she shall be thine, and no one shall have power to take her from thee, and you both shall be crowned and enthroned to dwell together in a Kingdom.”¹²⁵ In this blessing, Smith wielded his patriarchal authority to assure the salvation of both Kingsbury and his dead wife, even as Smith made clear how familial this salvation would be.

Smith visited the same themes in his 1843 memorial to Judge Elias Higbee, who was “sealed unto the throne.” In this memorial, Smith continued to affirm that the “doctrine of Election” was “sealing the father & children together,” a process designed “to effect their mutual salvation.” The individual continued to coexist with the corporate. Invoking the language of Revelation, Smith looked forward to “seal[ing] the servants of our God in their foreheads,” which he explained was to “seal the blessing on their heads meaning the everlasting covenant thereby making their calling and election sure.”¹²⁶ Two weeks later Smith reiterated that the adoptive associations, “seal[ing] the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers” would be operationalized through the temple rituals of “anointing & sealing.” Their exercise would ensure that the Saints were “called elected and made sure.”¹²⁷

This power over election meant Mormons could save their children, reliably and durably. This development of the adoption theology eliminated the specter of families broken apart by the later iniquity of a child. This Mormon solution, more powerful than the Halfway Covenant, had been a goal for the Latter-day Saints for years. In October 1835, Church elders prayed “that he will also pre-

¹²⁴Ibid., 74, May 16, 1841.

¹²⁵Marquardt, *Early Patriarchal Blessings*, 216, Joseph Smith Jr., blessing on Joseph C. Kingsbury, March 23, 1843, presented for recording on April 14, 1860.

¹²⁶Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 239–41, August 13, 1843.

¹²⁷Ibid., 244, August 27, 1843.

serve our posterity, that none of them fall even to the end of time.”¹²⁸ By 1842 Smith had made clear that the full-fledged adoption theology was adequate to secure the salvation of children. In his famous Elijah sermon, he preached that “a measure of this sealing is to confirm upon their head in common with Elijah the doctrine of election or the covenant with Abraham—which when a Father & mother of a family have entered into[,] their children who have not transgressed are secured by the seal where with the Parents have been sealed.”¹²⁹ William Clayton’s account of the sermon confirmed that when parents make “their calling and election sure . . . a seal is put on the father and mother [securing] their posterity so that they cannot be lost but will be saved by virtue of the covenant of their father.”¹³⁰

About nine months later and only six weeks before his death, Smith preached again, “In order for you to receive your children to yourself, you must have a promise, some ordinance some blessing in order to ascend above principalities or else it [the child] may be an angel.”¹³¹ Several elements are present in this announcement: the “promise” of certain election, the threat of falling out of the hierarchy of the heaven-family in the absence of a seal (the child would be condemned to eternal life as a mere angel, following the language of the 1843 polygamy revelation), and the prospect of progression beyond the angelic hierarchies, represented in this case by “principalities,” a code word in Christianity for higher orders of angels that the Latter-day Saints used to describe the royal scope of their afterlife.¹³² (Though many modern readers see the New Testament words “dominions” and “principalities” as references to kingdoms or royal domains, in New Testament and at least partly in earliest Mormon us-

¹²⁸Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journal*, 1:111, October 23, 1835 (placed after the November 27 entry).

¹²⁹Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 238–42, August 13, 1843. The reference to “transgression” probably meant the same thing it had meant in Doctrine and Covenants 132:26.

¹³⁰George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 115–16, August 13, 1843.

¹³¹Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 369, May 12, 1844.

¹³²D&C 132:16–17 denominates unattached individuals as mere “angels” in the afterlife.

age, these were references to specific angelic hierarchies.¹³³) This sermon tied Smith's adoption theology back to his Chain of Belonging with its language of ascent, via temple rites, to a secure and glorious place in the eternal hierarchy.

In solving the problem of election, the adoption theology was sufficiently flexible to explain the mechanics of salvation and the nature of human identity, the early Mormon divine anthropology. In this system, human beings were of the same species as divine beings, and their organization was based on relationships within a sacerdotal genealogy.¹³⁴

Secondary Saviors and the Divine Anthropology

The adoption theology, with its novel Chain of Belonging and its temple liturgy, made clear that people could recruit others into the family of God. Such proselytizing Saints were called "saviors on Mount Zion," a reappropriation of an obscure prophecy in Obadiah 1:21. In elevating his people to the status of secondary saviors, Joseph Smith used adoption as a template for his radical conception of humans as divine beings. By conceptualizing the Saints as secondary saviors, Smith also provided the connection between sealing to eternal life and sealing to another person.

Smith referred to secondary saviors publicly in May 1841, when he preached on the "election of the promised seed." When this seed acquired the patriarchal priesthood, they would become "Saviors on the mount Zion."¹³⁵ In October 1841, Smith announced that baptism for the dead was the ritual through which the Saints could become saviors on Mount Zion, thereby "bringing multitudes

¹³³The textual basis for the highly durable tradition of equating "principalities" with orders of angels is in Ephesians 3:10, 6:12; Colossians 1:16. See John Reynolds, *Inquiries Concerning the State and Economy of the Angelical Worlds* (London: John Clark, 1723), for an emblematic treatment of the tradition. Charles Buck used Reynolds in his treatment of angels.

¹³⁴Samuel M. Brown, "William Phelps's 'Paracletes': An Early Witness to Joseph Smith's Divine Anthropology," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 62–81.

¹³⁵Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 74, May 16, 1841. Smith tied the surrogate saviors to the reference in Isaiah 61:6 to the "ministers of our God."

of their kin into the Kingdom of God.”¹³⁶

Smith’s language about secondary saviors accorded with images of the patriarchal priesthood of the 1830s. Joseph Kingsbury learned that he would “be a Saviour on mount Zion with Power to Save all thy Dead friends with many if not all thy living ones and a grate Multitude of Others.”¹³⁷ John Smith blessed Susannah Bigler that she would “redeem thy dead friends and bring them up in the first resurrection.”¹³⁸ These later images drew on prior images that explored the power of an adoptive father. In 1838, Isaac Morley had blessed John D. Lee that “Kings and Princes shall acknowledge thee to be their father in the new and everlasting covenant.”¹³⁹

The early Mormons had a very specific image in mind when they referred to Mount Zion. Mount Zion was the place where the dead would gather in heaven, the place of the great reunion at the end of time. Hebrews 12:22 called it “the city of the living God,” inhabited by “an innumerable company of angels.”¹⁴⁰ The Latter-day Saints, like many Protestants, had in mind the joyful reunion of the blessed at the time of Christ’s return or final judgment.¹⁴¹ Smith’s journal entry for January 7, 1836, described a patriarchal blessing meeting that participants saw as a foretaste of the “Joys that will be poured upon the head of the Saints w[h]en they are gathered to-

¹³⁶Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 77, October 3, 1841.

¹³⁷Joseph C. Kingsbury, *Diary*, 18, August 2, 1844, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

¹³⁸John Smith, Patriarchal Blessing to Susannah Bigler, February 10, 1844, Nauvoo, in George A. Smith, *Journal*, ca. 1835–47, MS 1322, Box 1, fd. 4, *Selected Collections*, 1:32.

¹³⁹Lee and Bishop, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 95.

¹⁴⁰See, e.g., “The Resurrection of the Just,” *Evening and Morning Star* 1, no. 7 (December 1832): 51; “The Church of Christ,” *Evening and Morning Star* 1, no. 10 (March 1833): 74; “Millennium,” *Evening and Morning Star* 2, no. 20 (May 1834): 154–55; “Millennium,” *Evening and Morning Star* 2, no. 21 (June 1834): 161, and “The Beauty of the Writings of the Prophet Esdras,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1841): 464; “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 8 (April 15, 1844): 498.

¹⁴¹These images were also eschatological, as witnessed in George Laub’s use of them, “Reminiscences and Journal,” 28–29.

gether on Mount Zion to enjoy each other's society forever more."¹⁴² When Phelps poetically reworked the 1832 Vision for publication over Smith's signature in 1843, he described the ascent of Mount Zion as occurring with the "trump of the first resurrection."¹⁴³ In his Book of the Law of the Lord, Smith prayed on August 23, 1842, "May the God . . . save me . . . that on Mount Zion I may stand and with my father crown me eternally there."¹⁴⁴

For the early Latter-day Saints, a savior on Mount Zion was an individual responsible for ensuring a place for his adoptive kindred in the society of the blessed at the time of final judgment. The Saints were human extensions of Christ. In a May 1844 sermon, Smith tied the understanding of saviors on Mount Zion strongly to the temple liturgy and its power to create adoptive relationships: "Those who are baptised for their dead are the Saviours on mount Zion & they must receive their washings and their anointings for their dead, the same as for themselves, till they are connected to the ones in the dispensation before us and trace their leniage to connect the priesthood again."¹⁴⁵ By performing endowment rituals, these secondary saviors managed to fill any conceivable gaps in the Mormon Chain of Belonging. According to Smith, the temple work of the secondary saviors "is the chain that binds the hearts of the fathers to the children & the children to the Fathers *which fulfills the mission of Elijah*."¹⁴⁶ Connecting the priesthood meant ensuring there were no missing links in the chain. In the Mormon chain, just as in the neoplatonic chain, a single missing link invali-

¹⁴²Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journal*, 1:146.

¹⁴³Joseph Smith [William Phelps], "The Answer," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 6 (February 1, 1843): 84.

¹⁴⁴Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 1:175. See also the illuminating hymns: [Joseph Murdock], "Come Listen," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 21 (September 15, 1843): 335; Hymn 29, "The Towers of Zion," and 52, "Adieu, My Dear Brethren" in Emma Smith, *A Collection of Sacred Hymns, for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Nauvoo, Ill.: E. Robinson, 1841), 39, 68–69.

¹⁴⁵Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 370, May 12, 1844; see also Eugene England, ed., "George Laub's Nauvoo Journal," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 174.

¹⁴⁶Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 2:341–43, January 21, 1844; emphasis mine.

dated the harmony of the entire structure.¹⁴⁷

Surrogate fathers included not only living Saints but their dead ancestors as well. In a striking use of the plural, Smith preached in March 1844 that “the spirit of Elijah” is “that we redeem our dead & connect ourselves with our fathers which are in heaven.”¹⁴⁸ The familial framing of the genealogical Chain of Belonging provided a natural infrastructure for moving from the “Father in Heaven” of prevailing Protestantism to the “fathers in heaven” of the Mormon Chain of Belonging.

Accompanying these secondary saviors came the logic necessary to understand how the seals of salvation could refer to specific interpersonal relationships. When a sacerdotal father adopted a loved one, that loved one received the seal of the adopting father, a secondary savior. The fact that the seal came through another person rather than from Jesus directly meant that the seal could describe relationships between people rather than just between people and Christ.

The power that saviors on Mount Zion wielded was astounding. Just as the chief Savior, Jesus, had demonstrated, the Saints could effect the salvation of their friends. In his January 1844 sermon on Elijah, Smith taught (in Wilford Woodruff’s account) that “any man that has a friend in eternity can save him if he has not commit[ed] the unpardonable sin.”¹⁴⁹ Thomas Bullock remembered essentially the same thing, that “every Sp[irit] in the Et[ernal] world can be ferreted out & saved unless he has com[mitte]d that Sin which cant be rem[itted] to him.”¹⁵⁰ Striking out both at Calvinism and Arminianism, Smith’s theology radically revised growing American sensibilities about the meaning of human agency and free will. The promise of salvation vouchsafed by the temple’s adopting power required significant revisions to Protestant theology and ideology that would prove difficult for Joseph Smith’s followers as they struggled to understand and adapt his legacy over the next century and a half.

Various aspects of the adoption theology led to the same stunning conclusion: humans and Gods were of one species. Smith’s view of anthropology departed radically from the main streams of Chris-

¹⁴⁷Lovejoy, *Chain of Being*, 76, 232–35; W. W. Phelps, “Despise Not Propheysings,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 7 (February 1, 1841): 299.

¹⁴⁸Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 2:361–64, March 10, 1844.

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 2:341–42, January 21, 1844.

¹⁵⁰Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 353, April 7, 1844.

tianity. Whereas adoption in American Christianity represented the chance for a depraved creature to become a child of God, adoption for the Latter-day Saints was a way for a child of God to create sacerdotal relationships to other children of God, all of them divine beings.

The Chain of Belonging in its genealogical version required such a view. In George Laub's striking memory of Smith's King Follett Discourse, "We are to goe from glory to glory and as one is raised to a higher so the next under him may take his degree and so to take the Exaltation through the regular chanel and when we get to where Jesus is he will be just as far ahead of us again in Exaltation."¹⁵¹ This canonical invocation of the temporal Chain of Being reminded believers that, because they were Christ's through adoption, they could become links in the chain that included him. As the entire chain progressed, they would one day achieve the glory that Jesus had once possessed.

The dramatic sermons in late spring 1844 were not the first time Smith had used adoption theology and the Chain of Belonging to demonstrate that humans were conspecific with God. Language about heirship and adoption integrated naturally into the divine anthropology. In 1843, during a public reinterpretation of Hebrews 7, Smith had announced, "What was the design of the Almighty in making man, it was to exalt him to be as God, the scripture says ye are Gods and it cannot be broken, heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ equal with him possessing all power &c."¹⁵² George Laub captured the equivalence perfectly when he looked forward to the millennial time when "the antians shall come and rede[e]m [the as yet unredeemed dead] in their glory. then Saviours or in other words gods will come on mount Zion."¹⁵³ The saviors on Mount Zion who adopted their kith and kin into the Chain of Belonging were gods in the calculus of the divine anthropology.

In his Sermon in the Grove, Smith read Paul's letter on resurrection as reflecting the metaphysical law of correspondence: "that which is Earthly is in likeness of that which is Heavenly." He then announced, following the logic of his King Follett Discourse, that Jesus did only "what he seeth the Father do." In the kind of simultaneously

¹⁵¹Laub, "Reminiscences and Journal," 18.

¹⁵²Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 247, August 27, 1843. See also Psalm 82:6, with exposition in John 10.

¹⁵³Laub, "Reminiscences and Journal," 29.

literal and creative readings of the Bible that the Latter-day Saints engaged in, Smith explained John 5:19 (“The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do”) as indicating that God Himself had taken a body, died, and been exalted. Jesus provided the clue, in this exegesis, to understanding God’s nature. Through the adoption theology, and in a subsequent exegesis of 1 John 3, Joseph argued that Jesus showed the Latter-day Saints their nature. As Jesus became the father to adoptive believers, He stood in the same relationship to them that God the Father did with Jesus. He showed them who they were and where they were headed, both as individuals and as constituent members of the Chain of Belonging.

Communal Salvation against Jacksonian Individualism

Mormon adoption theology arose in very specific cultural and social contexts. The early nineteenth century witnessed dramatic changes in urbanization and the scale of commerce, the shape of families, and the relationship to the land.¹⁵⁴ A variety of individuals, movements, and ideologies resisted the social changes. Smith and Mormonism can be understood productively in this milieu.

Early in his career, Joseph Smith was influenced by utopian, communitarian experiments, as historian Mark Staker has recently described in some detail.¹⁵⁵ He was also influenced by an abiding nostalgia for an older family model that was under great stress during the early decades of the new Republic. Simultaneously Smith was resisting the intense personalization and desacramentalization of salvation that Protestant Christianity advocated. As Smith saw it, election was not a story about any individual’s regeneration or piety, not really even a story about sins confessed or absolved. Election was also, radically, not a story about a Creator and his creation. These two Mormon departures from Christian orthodoxies—the rejection of piety and the collapse of the ontological space between God and humanity—are related. When he placed humans beside God, Smith was also positioning humans durably with other humans.

Some observers have sought to locate Smith’s divine anthropology within the cult of the common man, a movement they see as tied

¹⁵⁴Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, is the current standard for this period. Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), is rather dated.

¹⁵⁵Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People*, 45–47.

to the rise of Jackson and the Democratic Party. To be sure, some such individuals were drawn to the Mormon banner in its early decades, intrigued by the promise of lay priesthood. But the divine anthropology and the adoption theology were more a statement about relationships than about individuals. Believers could be secondary saviors, not just because the American Republic was increasingly uncomfortable with Calvinist beliefs about human depravity, but because Christ had shown the way to atonement, reconciliation, and formal entry into the family of God.

Smith knew well how radical his adoption theology sounded in antebellum America. "To becom[e] a joint heir of the heirship of the son," he preached in the fall of 1843, a believer "must put away all his traditions."¹⁵⁶ These traditions were the ideas that made sense to early American Protestants, notions about the ontological separation of God from creation, of the depravity of humanity, and of the individual nature of salvation. According to Joseph Smith, these traditions were malignant and needed to be abandoned.

Smith's followers discovered hazards and controversies as they attempted to come to terms with communal salvation in the decades after his death.¹⁵⁷ Whereas individual regeneration relied primarily on an individual's beliefs about self, personal worth, and ultimate fate, the notion of communal salvation could be harder to maintain. Smith never taught his followers what the inevitable squabbles of communal living meant. Apostasy from the movement was one of the rare sins that could condemn a person to eternal perdition, but what did it mean to bear a grudge, raise one's voice in anger, tell a lie to another Saint, or misappropriate the property of a co-religionist? If salvation was communal, could it be lost in a feud with another member of the community? What did it mean that Smith's relationship with his first wife was strained, in large part because of his rejection of the proto-Victorian domestic nucleus? These were difficult problems that Smith's followers would spend decades trying to resolve.

The myth of Jacksonian individualism is, of course, just that—a myth. Many counterexamples resist the general trend toward what

¹⁵⁶Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 244, August 27, 1843.

¹⁵⁷Davies, *Culture of Salvation*, esp., 67, 145, has written perceptively on communalism in Mormon salvation.

Alexis de Tocqueville called American “individualism.”¹⁵⁸ The great fraternal organization of Freemasonry that had cemented late colonial American political culture was returning to social prominence in the mid-1840s when Smith joined it and translated elements of its rites to enrich his temple liturgy. The capacity of Freemasonry to resist the new nuclear family structure of early Victorian culture may have been part of the reason Smith embraced Masonry the way he did.¹⁵⁹ Fruitful research could address the evolution of Smith’s communal model of salvation through his various successors, particularly through the course of the Utah period among the main body of the Church. In many respects, the conflicts between individual and communal salvation continue to be worked out through the present day.

CONCLUSION

By the time Joseph Smith died in June 1844, he had revealed an intricate and profound theology and liturgy to replace the election of Calvinism and regeneration of the Arminians. This sacramental and sacerdotal system had set his people on a long voyage of separation from even the radical Protestants among whom many of them had developed their religious sensibilities. He had not, however, systematized his teachings or carried them through to their ultimate ramifications.

The system he proposed was also explosive; indeed, it was the extremes of his new system that contributed to his ultimate death at the hands of a vigilante mob. Smith proposed a radical rejection of the proto-Victorian family, a new human ontology, a rigorously humanized vision of cosmos and its ultimate Creator, who was literally a Heavenly Father.

Smith left to his followers the difficult problems of understanding what the theology and liturgy meant and how to reconcile the intense otherworldliness of his teachings with the this-worldly stress they experienced. Having received from Smith both a biological and a sacerdotal understanding of lineage and eternal power, Smith’s fol-

¹⁵⁸Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, 3d ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Sever and Francis, 1863), 2:119–21.

¹⁵⁹On Mormon Masonry, see Brown, *Early Mormon Conquest of Death*, chap. 7.

lowers were soon forced to choose between his biological family—represented by his widow, his sole surviving brother, his mother, and his young sons as the heirs apparent—and the sacerdotal family created by temple rites—represented by Brigham Young and the Twelve Apostles he presided over.

The story of the adoption theology took new turns as Smith's largest group of followers began the process of creating an independent kingdom in Mexico (soon to become U.S. territory), while the second largest group of followers resolved the problem by suppressing the sacerdotal family. In many respects, the course of the adoption theology in the church that Brigham Young led is a story about the ways a community comes to terms with competing interests in the integrity of biological units and the mutual commitment required by a religious tradition that may run against and over preexisting family relationships. Even without the second half of the story of the adoption theology, though, this set of interconnected ideas, doctrines, and rituals demonstrates some of the impressive, even astounding, ways that Joseph Smith reformulated intellectual and religious material in the religions that surrounded him and his Church community.

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