

# William W. Phelps: His Contributions to Understanding the Restoration

Bruce A. Van Orden

Bruce A. Van Orden is a professor emeritus of Church history and doctrine, Brigham Young University.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have long held a fascination for William W. Phelps (1792–1872) for primarily two reasons: his magnificent hymns of the Restoration and, after his apostasy, for being warmly received back into fellowship through the magnanimity of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Less well known are his calling as “printer unto the church” (D&C 57:11–13), his multiple leadership experiences in the infant Church, and his seemingly unending list of theological and historical writings that affected the onward glide of the Restoration of the gospel and the Church.<sup>1</sup> This paper will explore Phelps’s writings as they pertain to the Restoration.

## W. W. Phelps’s Entry into the Kingdom of God

William Wines Phelps was born 17 February 1792, in Dover, Hanover Township, Morris County, New Jersey, as the first child of Enon Phelps and Mehitable Goldsmith. His first name and curious middle name came from

a close friend of his parents, William Winds (earlier Wines), a famous general in the Revolution. Phelps spent the first eight years of his life in rural northern New Jersey and the rest of his youth in rural Cortland County in central New York. As an adult, Phelps displayed a vast array of knowledge of printing, surveying, languages, history, geography, topography, meteorology, climatology, rhetoric, and theology. He taught himself mostly through his many books, but he also was mentored by learned individuals and completed a printing office apprenticeship. Phelps always referred to himself as W. W. Phelps, although the Prophet often called him William.

At the end of the War of 1812, in which he participated, William married Sally Waterman, who also hailed from central New York. In 1815, Phelps started his printing and newspaper career in his native Cortland County. In 1820 he became an editor of a politically partisan newspaper in the city of Cortland. He verbally attacked his foes and they him. In 1827, Phelps helped found a religious/social/political movement called Anti-Masonry, a populist movement that accused Freemasons of secretly dominating elected and appointed political offices and of ruthlessly using elitism and favoritism. Anti-Masonry was determined to oust these members of Freemasonry from local and national political offices. W. W. Phelps became an Anti-Masonic editor of two newspapers in New York State (where Anti-Masonry was the strongest): the *Lake Light* in Trumansburg and later the *Ontario Phoenix* in Canandaigua. Phelps took some credit for electing many Anti-Masons to the New York legislature in 1828 and 1830. His name was held for good or ill in New York political and journalism circles.

By his own account, Phelps was a deeply religious person who studied the Bible devotedly, but who did not join any particular denomination. His curiosity led him to purchase several copies of the Book of Mormon (some of them to sell in his own printing office) on 9 April 1830. He and Sally read the book from start to finish within a few days and became converted to its truth. While investigating Mormonism, Phelps became acquainted personally with several key figures in the birth of the Latter-day Saint faith: Joseph Smith Jr., Joseph Smith Sr., Samuel H. Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Thomas B. Marsh. Because of his increasing interest in the Latter-day Saints, Phelps was mocked by other newspaper editors and was jailed for about ten days in Lyons, New York (on charges of not paying his debts to Anti-Masonic businessmen who underwrote the *Phoenix*). When he was finally released in

June 1831, Phelps resigned his editorship and took his family to join with the Mormons in Kirtland, Ohio. Phelps went to the doorstep of Joseph Smith and requested that the Prophet seek a revelation as to God's will for Phelps. The result was Doctrine and Covenants 55, which charged Phelps to be baptized and ordained an elder, to "preach repentance and remission of sins," to go with Joseph to locate the land of Zion in the west, to eventually plant his family in that land, to print Church literature, and to take a lead in educating children in the Church.

### Summary of Phelps's Service in the Church

The purpose of this chapter is *not* to provide a biography of W. W. Phelps. However, we do need a general grasp of his many contributions to the Church and to the Restoration generally. Further, we can neither understand nor appreciate the significance of his many published writings that also aided in the Restoration without a sketch of his work in the Church. The following is a brief recitation of his versatile contributions during each stage of the early Church's development.<sup>2</sup>

1. He aided Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Edward Partridge, and several other elders to identify the Land of Zion in Jackson County, Missouri, and the temple lot in Independence, and to dedicate these sites to the Lord.

2. He was called to be "printer unto the Church." In this capacity he directed the Church-owned "W. W. Phelps & Co." printing establishment in Independence. He edited Mormonism's first periodical, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, from June 1832 to July 1833, at which time the printing press was destroyed by an anti-Mormon mob. Along with Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer, Phelps prepared the type and printed off numerous sheets for the Book of Commandments, a compilation of sixty-five of the early revelations to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Phelps, Cowdery, and Whitmer were in the process of preparing thirteen additional revelations for inclusion in the Book of Commandments when the press was destroyed.

3. Along with six other high priests, Phelps presided over the Saints in Jackson County, and when they were forced out, in Clay County.

4. When Zion's Camp under Joseph Smith arrived in Missouri in 1834, Phelps was called as an "assistant president" in a new Missouri Church presidency. David Whitmer was the president and John Whitmer an additional

“assistant president.” Phelps was called with fifteen other Missouri elders to go to Kirtland, where the “House of the Lord,” or temple, was being constructed, to receive his endowment of “power from on high” (D&C 95:8).

5. As a member of the Missouri presidency, and because the president, David Whitmer, was absent most of the time, Phelps assumed the leading role of directing ecclesiastically the Church in Clay County from 1834 to 1836 and then in Caldwell County in 1837.

6. Phelps spent eleven months in Kirtland, from May 1835 to April 1836. His assignments were multiple and important: assist in the initial publication of the Doctrine and Covenants, coedit the *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*; sit in on many leadership council meetings with the other Church presidents from both Ohio and Missouri (the others were Joseph Smith Jr., Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams, Hyrum Smith, Joseph Smith Sr., David Whitmer, and John Whitmer); prepare the Church’s first hymnbook, *A Collection of Sacred Hymns*, for publication in 1836 (although it bears the date 1835), for which he wrote at least thirty-five of the ninety hymns; serve on the Kirtland Temple dedication committee; and participate in all the Kirtland endowment ceremonies that included solemn assemblies, sacred washings and anointings, and a mighty outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit as on the Day of Pentecost at the dedication services.

7. Back in Missouri, Phelps, along with John Whitmer, Edward Partridge, and John Corrill, identified a new and isolated location for an all-Mormon community: Far West, Caldwell County. He and these other leaders directed the gathering of the Saints to this new portion of Zion and guided Far West to become a thriving city. There Phelps identified a spot for a new “House of the Lord.” (Unfortunately, Phelps and most of the other original Missouri Church leaders left the Church in 1838 over disagreements over how to deal with complex leadership issues and jealousies.)

8. When he returned to the Church in Nauvoo in late 1841, Phelps became an indefatigable aide to Joseph Smith. With Willard Richards, Phelps helped compile the official *History of the Church*. He served on the city council and as clerk of the mayor’s court. Phelps became Joseph Smith’s chief political clerk and, as such, was the ghostwriter for Joseph’s principal political documents, including the platform for his presidential campaign. Most significantly, even though he was not the nominal editor, Phelps was the chief day-to-day administrator of the Nauvoo printing office in writing

editorials, presidential campaign pieces, and many doctrinal articles in the name of Joseph Smith.<sup>3</sup> Phelps was also among the Church leaders involved with the Prophet in receiving and administering the endowment of the holy priesthood prior to completing the temple. He also was selected as a key member of the Council of Fifty.

9. Phelps was intimately involved with the *Nauvoo Expositor* affair, the destruction of a press that published an issue critical of Mormon leaders. This destruction spiraled downward to the Prophet’s jailing and assassination in Carthage.

10. With Willard Richards, Phelps helped hold the Nauvoo Saints together in peace following the martyrdom until all the Apostles could return from their mission in the East. Phelps also gave Joseph Smith’s eulogy. In the aftermath of the martyrdom, he used his considerable influence in August and September 1844 to sustain the Twelve Apostles as leaders during the succession crisis. He assisted the Twelve in directing Nauvoo when enemies sought to drive the Saints out of Illinois; specifically, he helped Brigham Young and the Twelve conduct over five thousand Saints through their endowment ceremonies in the temple. Phelps also stayed behind in Nauvoo to perform necessary business after the main body of the Saints began their trek to the West.

11. In Deseret, Phelps continued his influence in the Church, but primarily as a senior statesman. He went to Boston to obtain a newfangled press, which the *Deseret News* ended up using for over forty years. Phelps was a founding member of the board of trustees for the University of Deseret, served as Speaker of the House in the Utah Territorial legislature, helped develop the Deseret Alphabet, served as Utah’s chief weatherman, published the Church’s official almanac, and wrote many articles and poems for the *Deseret News*.

### Publisher of Early Doctrines of the Restoration

W. W. Phelps promulgated all of the basic doctrines of the early Restoration through his printing and publishing work with *The Evening and the Morning Star*, the *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, the *Times and Seasons*, the *Wasp*, the *Nauvoo Neighbor*, and the *Deseret News*. He also contributed significantly to the publishing of God’s holy word: printing

numerous chapters from the Book of Mormon and of Joseph Smith's revelations in *The Evening and the Morning Star* (at a time when copies of the Book of Mormon were scarce and there were not yet any printed copies of the latter-day revelations); the Book of Commandments; two editions of the Doctrine and Covenants; the "Prophecy of Enoch" (Moses 5–7 in the Pearl of Great Price); the first hymnal *Sacred Hymns*; and the Book of Abraham. And in all of his writings, he worked hard to put forward the doctrines of the Restoration: he became one of the early Church's hymn writers, and he wrote extensive essays. His essays span across a myriad of gospel topics: on the importance of the Book of Mormon and all forms of scripture, the significance of revelations to Joseph Smith, the "gathering" of Israel, the building up of Zion, the signs of the times, preparing for Christ's Second Coming, living the gospel in purity, the importance of eternal marriage, the plan of salvation, the priesthood, the government of God, and all the gospel ordinances, including the ordinances in the "House of the Lord." This chapter will now highlight some of his published teachings, although time and space constrict a full appreciation of Phelps's multiple writings on Restoration themes.

### The Book of Mormon Is God's Holy Word

Throughout his lengthy publishing career, Phelps repeatedly emphasized how important the Book of Mormon is to the Restoration. He taught the Saints that the fullness of the gospel was contained therein. Writing to Oliver Cowdery, Phelps left his testimony of the book:

Whenever I have meditated upon the book of Mormon, and looked ahead at the glory which will be brought to pass by that, and the servants of God, I have been filled with hope; filled with light; filled with joy, and filled with satisfaction. What a wonderful volume! what a glorious treasure! By that book I learned the right way to God; by that book I received the fullness of the everlasting gospel; by that book I found the new covenant; by that book I learned when the Lord would gather scattered Israel; by that book I saw that the Lord had set his hand the second time to gather his people, and place them in

their own land; by that book I learned that the poor Indians of America were some of the remnants of Israel; by that book I learned that the new Jerusalem, even Zion was to be built up on this continent; by that book I found a key to the holy prophets; and by that book began to unfold the mysteries of God, and I was made glad.<sup>4</sup>

### Gathering of Israel

Establishing Zion was of prime importance in Phelps's voluminous writings, especially in *The Evening and the Morning Star*. In July 1833, Phelps exclaimed, "No one that believes in the revelations of the Lord can or will deny the gathering of the saints to holy places, in the last days." In order to establish Zion, he emphasized four forms of "gathering." First, Phelps referred to the gathering of righteous Saints to the land of Zion in western Missouri where they would live harmoniously together while striving to keep all the commandments of God. Second was the gathering of Lamanite remnants from the "tribe of Joseph," whom he basically identified as the Indians of North America, but who also would include all native tribes in the western hemisphere. The Indians would come to be near Zion and then would help build the New Jerusalem. Third was the return of the lost ten tribes from the lands of the North to their inheritance. Fourth was the gathering or the return of the Jews to the land of their inheritance in the Holy Land, or Palestine. This would be their Jerusalem, their Zion, and would correspond to the New Jerusalem and the latter-day Zion headquartered in Jackson County.

In his writings, W. W. Phelps identified the gathering spot for the latter-day Zion to be in what he and others called "the far west," that area in western Missouri that included Jackson County and was also in the center of the North American continent. He enthusiastically exclaimed:

When we consider that the land of Missouri is the land where the saints of the living God are to be gathered together and sanctified for the second coming of the Lord Jesus, we cannot help exclaiming with the prophet, O land be glad! and O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord: For Zion's sake will

I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name. Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God.<sup>6</sup>

Repeatedly, Phelps urged “the disciples in Zion” to be pure in heart, to keep all the commandments of God, and to give an example to the world by doing so.<sup>7</sup> Thus they would prove worthy to be part of the heavenly Zion.

W. W. Phelps frequently brought forward his ideas regarding the gathering of the seed of Joseph as represented by the American Indians. He believed that the gathering of Indians was under the supervision of God himself. The gathering was simultaneous to the arrival of the Saints in western Missouri. Strikingly, Phelps insisted that the Indian Removal Act of 1830 promoted by United States president Andrew Jackson was the means of doing God's will.<sup>8</sup> All Indian tribes were at that very moment being moved to lands owned by the United States but west of any of the then-existing states of Missouri and Arkansas. These places were in present-day Kansas and Oklahoma. That these locations were so near the land of Zion in Missouri, he believed, was according to God's providence. Phelps gladly stated:

It is not only gratifying, but almost marvelous, to witness the gathering of the Indians. The work has been going on for some time, and these remnants of Joseph gather by hundreds and settle west of the Missouri, and Arkansas. And is not this scripture fulfilling: Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock, through the instrumentality of the government of the United States? For it is written, Behold I will lift up my hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard to the people: and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders.<sup>9</sup>

Regularly, Phelps informed his readers of the latest removal of specific Indian tribes to nearby locations. Phelps also knew that many Indian tribes were beyond the Rocky Mountains and believed that they, in God's good

time, would also be gathered in. The same would be true, he surmised, for all native peoples in the western hemisphere, all of whom in his estimation were descended from Book of Mormon peoples.

The next gathering of note to connect with the Second Coming was that of the ten tribes. Phelps figured that since they were the first to be scattered, they could be the last to be gathered. He utilized multiple passages to make his case from Deuteronomy, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Ezra in the Old Testament and from present-day Jacob 5 and 3 Nephi 15 and 16 in the Book of Mormon. Phelps conceded that he didn't know where the ten tribes were lost, but he hypothesized that it might have been somewhere near the North Pole, because that region had not yet been explored by man. After all, the lost tribes went northward and would be called from the north to go back to their lands of inheritance. Phelps even went as far as to say that they would come back with great rejoicing when the voice of the Lord called them.<sup>10</sup>

The final gathering would be that of the Jews. “The assembling of the Jews at Jerusalem,” wrote Phelps in January 1833, is one of “the signs of the times” taking place right at that moment.<sup>11</sup> Often Phelps inserted news reports that he had received through the mail that showed an increasing interest from many European Jews to move to Jerusalem. He knew that the Book of Mormon prescribed the return of the Jews to the Holy Land as a necessary prelude to the Second Coming of Christ and his millennial reign. He excitedly wrote of the hearts of the Jews turning to the true God.<sup>12</sup>

### More on the Indians and Becoming “White and Delightful”

After the W. W. Phelps & Co. press in Independence was destroyed in July 1833, Phelps's doctrinal writings would have to wait until the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* began its run in October 1834 in Kirtland. He pursued the same general themes that he had emphasized in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, and his enthusiasm and pedantry were similar to his previous writings. He especially expanded upon the future role of the Indians.

Before he left Missouri for Kirtland, in the fall of 1834, Phelps visited Fort Leavenworth, located west of the Missouri River in present-day Kansas.

The garrison was established both to protect arriving Indian tribes and to guard against a possible Indian uprising. It also protected the lucrative fur trade with Rocky Mountain Indians. William was definitely emotionally moved: “I saw a noble looking, portly Indian, dressed and harnessed in fine style for hunting, and for the life of me, I could not help composing the following lines” that he entitled “The Red Man.” The poem later became a hymn.

O stop and tell me, Red Man,  
 Who are ye? why you roam?  
 And how you get your living?  
 Have you no God;—no home?  
 With stature straight and portly,  
 And decked in native pride,  
 With feathers, paints, and broaches,  
 He willingly replied:—  
 “I once was *pleasant Ephraim*,  
 When Jacob for me pray’d;  
 But oh! how blessings vanish,  
 When man from God has stray’d;  
 Before your nation knew us,  
 Some thousand moons ago,  
 Our fathers fell in darkness,  
 And wander’d to and fro.  
 And long they’ve liv’d by hunting,  
 Instead of work and arts,  
 And so our race has dwindled  
 To idle Indian hearts.  
 Yet hope within us lingers,  
 As if the Spirit spoke:—  
 He’ll come for your redemption,  
 And break your Gentile yoke:  
 And all your captive brothers,  
 From every clime shall come,  
 And quit their savage customs,  
 To live with God at home.

Then joy will fill our bosoms,  
 And blessings crown our days,  
 To live in pure religion,  
 And sing our Maker’s praise.”<sup>13</sup>

Phelps was certain that the Indian races would be redeemed and likely in short order. Months after he had arrived in Kirtland, in October 1835, William declared emphatically, “The Indians are the people of the Lord; they are of the tribes of Israel; the blood of Joseph, with a small mixture of the royal blood of Judah, and the hour is nigh when they will come flocking into the kingdom of God, like doves to their windows; yea, as the book of Mormon foretells—they will soon become a white and delightful people.”<sup>14</sup> This latter point, that Lamanites would become “white and delightful” once converted to the true gospel, would persist as perceived Mormon doctrine for at least another century and a half.

Indeed, Phelps interpreted a darker skin color to be a curse:

God causes the saints, or people that fall away from his church to be cursed in time, with a black skin? Was or was not Cain, being marked, obliged to inherit the curse, he and his children, forever? And if so, as Ham, like other sons of God, might break the rule of God, by marrying out of the church, did or did he not, have a Canaanite wife, whereby some of the black seed was preserved through the flood, and his son, Canaan, after he laughed at his grand father’s nakedness, heired three curses: one from Cain for killing Abel; one from Ham for marrying a black wife, and one from Noah for ridiculing what God had respect for? Are or are not the Indians a sample of marking with blackness for rebellion against God’s holy word and holy order? And can or can we not observe in the countenances of almost all nations, except the Gentile, a dark, sallow hue, which tells the sons of God, without a line of history, that they have fallen or changed from the original beauty and grace of father Adam?<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, Phelps helped define a doctrine about a curse of black or dark skin that continued for many years in many parts of Mormonism.

## The Second Coming of the Savior Is Nigh

All the while that W. W. Phelps referred to the various aspects of the “gathering,” he boldly posited that the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ was quickly approaching. He laid out extensively from the biblical record what he considered to be the current “age of the world,” that is, from the creation of Adam and Eve to that particular moment in August 1832. Based on his mathematical calculations, Phelps concluded:

Set it down so, at 1832 [the year he wrote this piece], and, with the old and new eras, we have Five thousand nine hundred and ninety one years; leaving the world NINE years from the beginning of the seven thousandth year, or sabbath of creation: But as all have the privilege of ascertaining such facts for themselves, we ask no man to take our word for the age of the world; the word of the Lord is enough, and whether it be 160, or only 9 years to the morning of the Great Day, is not so much matter, as the solemn reality—Are we ready?<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, Phelps felt that great exertions needed to be made by the missionaries and the Saints to prepare quickly for what was to come, maybe even as early as 1841!

In every issue of *The Evening and the Morning Star*, editor Phelps laid out prospects for the Second Coming and referred to “signs of the times” that were part of the current age. He pointed out that these signs were in fulfillment of ancient prophecies from both the Bible and the Book of Mormon. To amplify his point, Phelps quoted numerous articles from other newspapers to demonstrate how these signs in his estimation were being fulfilled. His exuberance for the subject is obvious from the following:

We live in a great time; one of the most eventful periods that has ever been: it is not only the time when the captivity of Jacob’s tents will return, but it is the time when the wicked and their works shall be destroyed; when the earth shall be restored to its former beauty and goodness, and shall yield its increase; when plagues shall be sent to humble the haughty, and bring them, if they will, to a knowledge of God: yea, it is a time when the wicked can not expect to see the next generation; yea, it is that

great time, when none shall live in the second generation unless they are pure in heart.<sup>17</sup>

Phelps strived to keep his readers informed that many calamities had already started to affect the earth. In this, he particularly emphasized the rapid spread of “the cholera.” Month after month, editor Phelps included stories of how the plague was spreading from city to city, from country to country. In September 1832, he vigorously commented:

Not since the flood, if we think right, has the Lord sent the same pestilence, or destruction, over the whole earth at once: But the Cholera, which has swept its thousands in Asia, Africa, Europe and America, gives a solemn token to a wondering world, that it will do so. Let the reader remember that all flesh is grass, but, that amidst all the judgments of the Lord, the righteous have never been forsaken. The spread of the Cholera, may be likened unto the ripple or wave, formed by casting a stone into a pond of water: ring follows ring till they meet the shore: It is said to be in nearly all the eastern cities. Well has Isaiah said, When the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.—From the time that it goeth forth it shall take you: for morning by morning shall it pass over, by day and by night.<sup>18</sup>

In January 1833 he published many articles from around the nation and the world that demonstrated that “plague, pestilence, famine and the sword” were bringing grief upon the world’s inhabitants.<sup>19</sup> In June 1833 Phelps again published multiple examples of grievous events in many locations, but observed, “All must come to pass, but the end is not yet.”<sup>20</sup>

Phelps also spread the fervor about the Second Coming in his hymns. For instance, the Christmas carol “Joy to the World,” by Isaac Watts, appeared in the Church’s original hymnbook. What is not normally realized is that Phelps altered the language of this song in the book to give it a distinct Second Coming flavor. He entitled it “The Second Coming of our Savior.” His changes or additions in the wording are noted in italics:

JOY to the world! the Lord *will* come!  
*And* earth receive her King;

Let ev'ry heart prepare him room,  
 And *saints* and angels sing.  
 Rejoice! rejoice! *when Jesus* reigns,  
 And *saints* their songs employ:  
 While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains,  
 Repeat the sounding joy.  
 No more *will* sin and sorrow grow,  
 Nor thorns infest the ground;  
 He'll come *and* make the blessing flow  
 Far as the curse was found.  
 Rejoice! Rejoice! *in the Most High*,  
 While *Israel* spreads abroad,  
 Like stars that glitter in the sky,  
 And ever worships God.<sup>21</sup>

### Rear Children in Righteousness

William W. Phelps urged his readers in *The Evening and the Morning Star* to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Repeatedly he gave tips to accomplish this. In an article entitled “Children,” he indicated that it was praiseworthy to teach children “science and learning.” However, he insisted, “How much more necessary is it, that the disciples of Jesus Christ should teach their children, not only in common learning to transact business among men, but in the knowledge of God, which points out their way to eternal life?” He urged the Saints to keep their children free from all forms of “vice and folly.” This would best be achieved, he thought, by keeping the Sabbath day holy and by the family as a whole uniting in petitioning God for his blessings. He wrote, “Here [in Sabbath services] they may grow up in righteousness, and be prepared to meet their Lord in peace, when he comes in his glory.”<sup>22</sup>

### Interpreter of Nauvoo Doctrine in Nauvoo and Salt Lake City

When W. W. Phelps returned to the fold of Christ in 1841, he spent several hours virtually every day at Joseph Smith’s side. He learned firsthand of the

exciting and new doctrines that had been revealed to the Prophet in Liberty Jail and in Nauvoo. Phelps would then go to the Nauvoo printing office to promote these doctrines. These came in the form of editorials, some of them even ghostwritten in the name of Joseph Smith. Others were simply commentary on the signs of the times and of new discoveries in the Americas that appeared to validate the Book of Mormon. After Joseph’s martyrdom, Phelps continued to advocate the Prophet’s teachings, both in prose and in poetry, on the nature of God, the Saints’ quest for eternal life and exaltation, and the glory of eternity in the celestial realm. This was also true in Salt Lake City as Phelps continued to write multiple pieces of poetry for the *Deseret News* and the Church’s annual almanac. The most famous and doctrinally rich of these was “There Is No End,” later called “If You Could Hie to Kolob,” which he wrote for Brigham Young in 1856.

If you could hie to Kolob in the twinkling of an eye,  
 And then continue onward with that same speed to fly,  
 Do you think that you could ever, through all eternity,  
 Find out the generation where Gods began to be?  
 Or see the grand beginning, where space did not extend?  
 Or view the last creation, where Gods and matter end?  
 Methinks the Spirit whispers, “No man has found ‘pure  
 space,’  
 Nor seen the outside curtains, where nothing has a place.”  
 The works of God continue, and worlds and lives abound;  
 Improvement and progression have one eternal round.  
 There is no end to matter; there is no end to space;  
 There is no end to spirit; there is no end to race.  
 There is no end to virtue; there is no end to might;  
 There is no end to wisdom; there is no end to light;  
 There is no end to union; there is no end to youth;  
 There is no end to priesthood; there is no end to truth.  
 There is no end to glory; there is no end to love;  
 There is no end to being; there is no death above.  
 There is no end to glory; there is no end to love;  
 There is no end to being; there is no death above.<sup>23</sup>



## Summary

In my research for my biography of Phelps, I have concluded that this unusual man contributed more to the understanding of Latter-day Saint doctrines of the Restoration in Joseph Smith's lifetime than nearly any other preacher of righteousness other than the Prophet himself. His contributions came primarily from his writings in early Latter-day Saint periodicals at a time when most Mormons learned their doctrine from these publications. I hasten to add that Phelps's devoted love of the Restoration was founded entirely on the fact that God had called anew a prophet for the last days even as he had in previous dispensations and had granted this prophet revelations that brought together all the revelations of the past into one great understanding of eternity. While it is true that others like Sidney Rigdon and Oliver Cowdery contributed mightily to doctrinal understanding, they did not do so until the 1830s. It is also true that individuals from the apostleship like Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, Heber C. Kimball, John Taylor, and Wilford Woodruff carried on the mantle of explaining the Restoration's foundations through Joseph Smith, but their doctrinal impact did not begin until the 1840s.

Most of W. W. Phelps's teachings have survived the test of time, albeit with modifications. One only needs to review the beauty and richness of the wording in his hymns to appreciate his influence. Ponder carefully the wording of his hymns the next time you sing each of them in Church and realize how much participants in the Kingdom of God in these last days have been affected by them. These include "The Spirit of God (like a Fire Is Burning)," "Redeemer of Israel," "Now Let Us Rejoice (in the Day of Salvation)," "Praise to the Man (Who Communed with Jehovah)," "O God, the Eternal Father," "Gently Raise the Sacred Strain," "Adam-ondi-Ahman," and "If You Could Hie to Kolob."

It's true that Phelps's enthusiasm for the Second Coming of the Savior in his lifetime was somewhat misguided from what we know now. So, too, were his predictions that the Indians would be redeemed rather quickly. However, nearly every disciple in the 1830s and early 1840s believed the same things, even Joseph Smith most of the time. In addition, Phelps's interpretation of the curse of a dark skin has been repudiated by revelation in recent decades, but he was not alone in this thinking at the time. For writings like this, we

know that Phelps was a product of his historical moment—and it does not diminish our appreciation for his fervor and dedication to the early Church.

We, like W. W. Phelps, can sing in appreciation for the Prophet of the Restoration, Joseph Smith Jr. In Phelps's words:

Now we'll sing with one accord, for a prophet of the Lord,  
Bringing forth his precious word, cheers the Saints as  
anciently.

When the world in darkness lay, Lo! He sought the better  
way,

And he heard the Savior say, "Go and prune my vineyard,  
son!"

And an angel surely then, for a blessing unto men,  
Brought the priesthood back again in its ancient purity.  
Even Joseph he inspired; yea, his heart he truly fired  
With the light that he desired for the work of righteousness.

And the Book of Mormon true, with its cov'nant ever new,  
For the Gentile and the Jew, he translated sacredly.  
God's commandments to mankind, for believing Saints  
designed,

And to bless the seeking mind, came to him from Jesus  
Christ.

Precious are the years to come, while the righteous gather  
home

For the great millennium, when they'll rest in blessedness.  
Prudent in this world of woes, they will triumph o'er their  
foes,

While the realm of Zion grows purer for eternity.<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

1. I am presently completing a biography of W. W. Phelps. See also a recent biographical essay I published: "We'll Sing and We'll Shout: Who Is the Real William W. Phelps?," *Mormon Historical Studies* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 1–77.

2. For readers interested in more details of W. W. Phelps's various contributions to the Church, please contact me.

3. My conclusions about Phelps's Nauvoo contributions are not yet widely known. The following peer-reviewed articles refer to his ghostwriting: Bruce A. Van

Orden, "William W. Phelps's Service in Nauvoo as Joseph Smith's Political Clerk," *BYU Studies* 32, nos. 1–2 (Winter/Spring 1992): 81–94; Michael Hicks, "Joseph Smith, W. W. Phelps, and the Poetic Paraphrase of 'The Vision,'" *Journal of Mormon History* 20, no. 2 (1994): 63–84; and Samuel Brown, "The Translator and the Ghostwriter: Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps," *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 26–62. According to my careful analysis, I have added even more to the list of ghost-written articles by Phelps in chapter 23 of my forthcoming biography.

4. "Letter No. 10," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 (September 1835): 177–78.

5. "The Gathering, &c," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 2 (July 1833): 2 [106]; punctuation standardized. In the original printing, this newspaper did not have page numbers until the June 1833 issue. I have given the page number according to each monthly issue for this and subsequent footnotes.

6. "The Far West," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (October 1832): 5

7. An example of such an admonition is also found in "The Far West," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (October 1832): 5. Other prime examples are found in "Zion," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (December 1832): 6, and "Let Every Man Learn His Duty," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (January 1833): 5.

8. See, for example, "The New-Year," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (January 1833): 7.

9. "The Indians," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (December 1832): 6.

10. Phelps waxed eloquent in "Ten Tribes," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (October 1832): 1–2.

11. "Signs of the Times," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (January 1833): 6.

12. For examples of articles on the Jews, see "Restoration of the Jews," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (August 1832): 5; "The Book of Mormon," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (January 1833): 3; "The Book of Mormon," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (February 1833): 3.

13. "The Red Man," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 (December 1834): 34, emphasis added. See also *Sacred Hymns*, 83–84.

14. "Letter No. 11," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 2 (October 1835): 194.

15. "Letter No. V," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 (March 1835): 82.

16. "Present Age of the World," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (August 1832): 6. The capitalization of the word *nine* is in the original.

17. "The Last Days," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (February 1833): 1.

18. "The Cholera," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (September 1832): 1.

19. "In These Last Days!," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (January 1833): 8.

20. *The Evening and the Morning Star* 2 (June 1833): 7–8.

21. "The Second Coming of the Savior," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (December 1832): 8, emphasis added.

22. "Children," *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (May 1833): 5–6.

23. "If You Could Hie to Kolob," *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 284.

24. "Now We'll Sing with One Accord," *Hymns*, no. 25.