
The Olive Leaf and the Family of Heaven

Samuel Morris Brown

In the days around New Year 1833, Joseph Smith received a revelation that he termed the “Olive leaf which we have plucked from the tree of Paradise, the Lords message of peace to us.”¹ Now Doctrine and Covenants 88, the Olive Leaf is a rich scripture with a complex history, both before and after its revelation. The Olive Leaf both directed the School of the Prophets toward the Kirtland Temple and its grand dedication in spring 1836 and provided important insight into the meaning of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the plan of salvation. In its basic structure, the Olive Leaf contains two interrelated themes: an expansion of the Vision of February 1832, and the revelatory foundations for the School of the Prophets.

In this essay I want to draw attention to the relevance of the Olive Leaf to the restored doctrine of the family of heaven. Specifically, I suggest that the Olive Leaf contained the kernels of the doctrines that constitute what I have termed the divine anthropology, in which God, humans, and angels are all members of the same family, the family of heaven.² Understanding this restored doctrine requires that we understand the ways the Prophet Joseph

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corrected and supplemented an ancient philosophical concept, the Great Chain of Being, as well as other fragments of truth scattered throughout Western religious and intellectual history.

After discussing the immediate context of the Olive Leaf, I consider briefly the history of the Chain of Being and then analyze the text of the revelation with an eye toward the ways Joseph Smith and the early Latter-day Saints integrated and modified fragments of truth from ancient traditions.

Historical Setting for the Olive Leaf

When the Olive Leaf arrived, the Church had moved from New York and Pennsylvania to Ohio and Missouri. Zion was slowly growing, and the miseries of the Missouri Mormon War were yet in the future. Hopeful expectation of the Second Coming of Christ coexisted with the brutal realities of life on the American frontier. In late 1832, Joseph and his close associates were just beginning the work of organizing the Church and restoring the temple. In a quest for knowledge and the respectability associated with it, the Saints founded a frontier seminary they called the School of the Prophets. As the Olive Leaf would clarify, the School of the Prophets was much more than a Protestant seminary, though. The school began the restoration of the temple ordinances, revised ancient understandings of the structure of the universe, and directed the priesthood organization of the Church.³

The Olive Leaf arrived as 1832 transitioned into 1833. Though we associate late December with Christmas, in early America many of the holidays we take for granted were not celebrated in the same way, if at all.⁴ For many early Americans, including the Saints, the beginning of a new year was a sober time to reflect on how quickly mortality passes. For the Prophet, such personal reflections often intersected with concerns over the fate of the entire earth. In the months leading up to the Olive Leaf, Joseph Smith received a revelation about the destruction of the earth and wrote a letter to a newspaper editor warning about the end of times.⁵ We must keep this immediate historical context in mind—a developing church with two centers of power, New Year reflections, a growing priesthood hierarchy, and the imminent end of the world—to understand the meanings of the Olive Leaf. More context is required, though, especially an understanding of the reigning scientific paradigm from Ancient Greece to the European Enlightenment.

The Great Chain of Being, a dominant philosophical system that organized all of creation into a single hierarchy, derived from Aristotle's interpretation of Plato. Based on the principles of plenitude (all things that could exist do exist), gradation (all types of things are unique and hierarchically ordered), and continuity (there are no gaps between adjacent types of creatures), the chain extended from the highest demigods through humans and animals to the lowliest particles of dust. This was a taxonomy of life that saw God's hand in the patterns of biological diversity. The chain stood largely undisputed in religion and science for over two millennia. Christian thinkers employed a version of this chain, also called the Scale of Nature (*Scala Naturae*), to explain the harmony of the universe as well as the importance of social hierarchies. Throughout its history, thinkers saw the Chain of Being as describing the hierarchies of celestial bodies—planets, stars, comets, and meteors followed perfectly their decreed orbits or trajectories. These celestial bodies were seen as parallel to the organization of beings on earth. The original Chain of Being had been a static system in which different types of beings stayed forever in their original state. By the late eighteenth century, various thinkers had proposed what historians have called the “temporal” Chain of Being. In this eternally progressive version, the hierarchical relationships among different types of beings never changed, but every individual's level of glory increased endlessly as the entire chain progressed in glory.⁶ While this new version had varied implications, many thinkers saw it as compatible with the eternal progression of humans. Reminding us of the dangerous corruptions that humans seem wont to impose on heavenly doctrines, the chain had been used to justify moral atrocities from the grinding of the face of the poor in Dickensian Britain to the genocide of native peoples in America to the brutal enslavement of Africans in the Atlantic world. Prior generations had seen in the Chain of Being support for social hierarchies that exploited and excluded vulnerable populations. As the British colonies became the American Republic, people tended to reject aristocracy and social hierarchy: the Chain of Being could not persist in the new nation in its original, static form.

The Prophet Joseph revealed a complex revision to the Chain of Being, one that drew on the temporal chain but made it genealogical. Joseph revealed that the Chain of Being, rather than representing social or ontological hierarchies, was in fact a family tree, a revision that I have called his Chain

of Belonging.⁷ This new chain was one of the most radical doctrines of the Restoration, and it had many repercussions. By transforming the Chain of Being into a heavenly family tree, the Prophet seems to have been clarifying the fact that human families parallel the structures of the universe, suggesting that what mattered most in the material and spiritual cosmos was the creation of family relationships.⁸ Hierarchy and equality are present simultaneously in this solution to the problems of the chain. Just as the child grows into the adult and becomes a parent herself or himself, so will we all become parents within the family of heaven. The bonds that define our place in the chain are the tender sentiments of a parent for a child, not an existential scale of merit or power. Any height of authority or power achieved by one will ultimately be achieved by all as the entire chain progresses. This doctrine became central to the Restoration as the Church progressed through the Nauvoo and Utah periods. As the Saints attempted to understand this revelation, they saw in the family connections between God and humans the possibility that they were of one species with angels and other divine intelligences. This doctrine, difficult to separate from the basic structure of the Chain of Belonging, represents the core of the divine anthropology. Though there were occasional clues beforehand, the restoration of the divine anthropology is first clearly visible in the revelations of 1832–33.

The first of these revelations was the Vision of February 1832. Now Doctrine and Covenants 76, this revelation to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon covered a staggering amount of ground, most famously the three degrees of heavenly glory. The Vision's discussion of degrees of glory was a revelatory clarification of Paul's sermon on the Resurrection in his first letter to the Church at Corinth, the scriptural passage used most consistently over the centuries to support the Chain of Being. In addition to many other sacred insights, the Vision highlighted the fact that human beings are the children of God in a literal way (specifically that saved Saints "are gods, even the sons of God"⁹) and that celestial bodies mirror the arcs of our lives and afterlives: heaven was divided into kingdoms based on the hierarchy of sun, moon, and stars. Almost a year later, the Olive Leaf returned to and clarified both of those themes from the Vision, employing a revelatory exegesis of Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard to that end.

The Text of the Olive Leaf¹⁰

The Olive Leaf began by addressing and praising the Saints “who [had] assembled” themselves “together to receive [God’s] will concerning” them (D&C 88:1). The Lord through Joseph then reassured those Saints that he was sending “another Comforter,” the “Holy Spirit of promise,” to guide and reassure faithful members (v. 3). The Olive Leaf continued to explain the close association between this second comforter and the “glory of the celestial kingdom” (v. 4), which encompassed a “light of Christ” (v. 7) that filled the “immensity of space” (v. 12), gave “life to all things” (v. 13), drove the planets in their orbits, and filled the minds of seekers with truth.¹¹ Christ is the “light of the sun, and the power thereof by which it was made” (v. 7). Explaining that each human soul would be “sanctified from all unrighteousness that it may be prepared for the celestial glory,” Joseph Smith foresaw that the righteous would be “crowned with glory” (vv. 18–19). Though he was not explicit on this point, Joseph seems to have meant by this light something like a merger of power and spirit and knowledge, though the “light of Christ” was also probably a self-conscious reference to an actual force within the universe. The souls of believers would “receive of the same, even a fulness” (v. 29), as resurrected bodies “quickened by a portion of the celestial glory” (v. 29)—a reference to the replacement of mortal blood by eternal spirit in the vessels of resurrected bodies that merged human bodies with the energies of the cosmos.

As he explicated the Light of Christ, Joseph Smith returned to the celestial bodies and kingdoms of the vision. Christ’s light animated the sun, the moon, and the stars. Joseph then extended the connection to celestial bodies by mentioning “the earth also, and the power thereof” (v. 10). The Lord in the Olive Leaf then reminded the Saints that it was “the earth upon which you stand” (v. 10), drawing attention to the close association between humans and the celestial body on which they lived. Joseph Smith then turned to the resurrection of the earth and the dead, by which the earth would acquire celestial glory. Joseph thereby tied the three kingdoms of the Vision of February 1832 to earth and the Light of Christ. After connecting laws of celestial order and human salvation, Joseph referred to the “many kingdoms” of heaven and then made an explicit reference to the chain, invoking plenitude and continuity: “there is no space in the which there is no kingdom; and there is no kingdom in which there is no space, either a greater or a lesser kingdom” (v. 37).

Joseph Smith then recalled images from the astronomical Chain of Being and juxtaposed them with Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard. In the New Testament parable, poor agricultural workers start their labors at different times of day but ultimately receive the same wage, a denarius. Readers have interpreted the parable in many different ways over the centuries. Some have seen the reassurance that Gentiles could share in the same salvation as natural-born Israelites; others have seen the promise of heavenly reward to all who believe in Christ; still others have seen the absolute equality of the saved. In most interpretations, this parable recalls that of the prodigal son, emphasizing the power Christ had to save all, however lost or fallen. Even the worker who does not begin work until the very last hour, even the son who has squandered his inheritance, can find a place through Christ in the kingdom of God.

Joseph and the early Saints were open to all these interpretations, but the Olive Leaf opened a vista on a broader, if somewhat paradoxical, view of the parable. All would be saved in the family of heaven, but the "time" one began to labor in the vineyard represented one's place in that family. According to the parable, each different agricultural worker had a specific "time" or "season" (see v. 42), echoes of the planetary orbits that defined such seasons and times, to receive the Light of Christ. In this revelatory exegesis, the person who was called early in the morning was assigned that time as a reflection of his place in the process of sacred history. The times and seasons of the Olive Leaf's reading of the parable brought to mind the passage of generations; the relationships between ancestors, present individuals, and descendants far in the future; and the sense that each generation entered the world at a particular time for a particular purpose. When the Prophet Joseph brought the seven angels and seals of Revelation into conversation with the reinterpreted parable of the laborers, he drew attention to the role that angelic beings had in marking out sacred history. Those dispensational angels too were called at different points in the day, at different periods of human history. Those angelic beings, in their divine order, pointed toward a great final integration of humans into divine history, of human beings into divine beings. At the appearance of the seventh and final angel, Joseph Smith declared, "the saints shall be filled with his glory, and receive their inheritance and be made equal with him [God]" (v. 107).¹²

The early revelations to the Church often had a strong missionary focus. One central way that the family of heaven would be formed—the way that

the Chain of Belonging would be created—was through preaching the gospel. One immediate meaning of the Olive Leaf's explanation of the parable of the laborers was that some missionaries, the "first laborers in this last kingdom," would be called to initiate the work in a new dispensation while others would follow in their footsteps. The dispensations of sacred time, marked by the seven seals and angels, mirrored the kingdoms of heaven, which themselves mirrored the order of celestial bodies.¹³ We should not forget, however, that for the early Saints, the sealing of converts to salvation mirrored the connections among family members within the Church. Early Latter-day Saints understood that binding relationships could be created within the Chain of Belonging through sharing the gospel, through biological associations, or through both. The relationship between missionary and convert stood in for the relationship between parent and child.¹⁴

Joseph Smith took a parable that was generally understood as describing the complete lack of hierarchy, and he used it to highlight the revised chain. In doing so, Joseph emphasized the paradox at the center of the restored Chain of Belonging. Because the family of heaven was endless in extent, all would ultimately be equal; all would be the spiritual progenitors of a numberless kindred. The Chain of Belonging was a hierarchy of equality, a network of connection among equals, all sealed by the sacred tie of missionary and convert, parent and child. The head of that family was God. Understanding the temporal component of the Chain of Belonging is important. Because the chain was a family tree and members of it all advanced together, eventually everyone would pass through the phase of glory once associated with divine beings, such as God. The point of the parable of the laborers was that even though all had different times when they were called to act or arrive, they would all be a part of the kingdom and the chain. This meant that they would participate in the eternal progression that the Chain of Belonging promised. When the Olive Leaf revealed that humans would ultimately be "equal" with God, it did not mean that they would replace God or be the same as God. It meant that through the progress of the Chain of Belonging, they would one day be as mature as God had been at some time in the distant past. They would never catch up to or supplant God—they would always be his children. But they would have children of their own and would enjoy their own advanced forms of celestial glory.

The Olive Leaf's promise of equality was heady stuff. Critics promptly dismissed it as heresy,¹⁵ while Parley P. Pratt enthusiastically embraced it in his *Voice of Warning*.¹⁶ When Methodist polemicist La Roy Sunderland called the Olive Leaf "nonsense and blasphemy," Pratt responded strongly, identifying a variety of texts to suggest that scriptural promises to know "all truth" or to be able to do "all things" required eventual human "equality" with God.¹⁷

President Lorenzo Snow reported that the Olive Leaf's clarification of the parable of the laborers merged in his mind with a promise made by Joseph Smith Sr. "at a blessing meeting in the Kirtland Temple." From this flash of "inspiration," Snow recorded a couplet that now summarizes the divine anthropology for many observers: "As man now is, God once was; / As God now is, man may be."¹⁸ According to President Snow, no matter where a believer joined the genealogical Chain of Belonging, he or she would eventually, through the progress of the entire chain, achieve a form of godhood. President Snow's language may sound somewhat odd to modern audiences, but he was pointing toward the fundamental unity of the family of heaven, which comprised God, angels, and humans, progressing within a family structure.

Conclusion

In the revelations of 1832, particularly the Olive Leaf, the Prophet Joseph sowed the seeds of the doctrines of the divine anthropology. He revealed that the Saints could join a Chain of Belonging and that their membership in that chain, which encompassed God himself, reflected a literal kinship with the Heavenly Father. As millenarian and evangelistic images merged with family images over the next few years, it became clear that the parental was the relationship of eternity, and the relationship of parent to child—the very relationship highlighted in Christ's status as Begotten Son—provided the key to a network of interconnection that was at once hierarchical and egalitarian.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith to William Phelps, January 11, 1833, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. The "olive leaf" is an allusion to Genesis 8:11, in which a dove brings evidence to Noah that the floodwaters have begun to recede. The first manuscript copy of the revelation is available in Robin

Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition, vol. 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009), (hereafter *JSP R1*), 292–311.

2. On “divine anthropology,” see Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 9.

3. On the School of the Prophets and the restoration of the temple, see Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth*, chapter 6.

4. On the history of American holidays, see especially Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

5. Robert J. Woodford, “The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 1093–95.

6. The best treatment of the Chain of Being is Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, 1933 William James Lectures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948). A detailed discussion of Joseph Smith’s repair of the Chain of Being is presented in Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth*, chapters 8–9.

7. Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth*, 208.

8. This idea mirrored traditions about metaphysical correspondence. On 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.

9. *JSP R1*, 249 [D&C 76:58].

10. Compare the text of Doctrine and Covenants 88, cited here, to that in *JSP R1*, 292–311.

11. Joseph expanded this theme several months later in the revelation that became D&C 93 (see *JSP R1*, 332–39).

12. Compare Matthew 20:1–16.

13. Joseph’s brother Samuel, for example, understood the parable in precisely those terms: Woodford, “Doctrine and Covenants,” 1128.

14. On the close connection between missionaries and parents within the priesthood, see Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth*, chapter 8; and Samuel Morris Brown, “Early Mormon Adoption Theology and the Mechanics of Salvation,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37 no. 3 (Summer 2011): 3–52.

15. A probably ghostwritten early attack on Campbellites decried Campbellite leaders for “exalting themselves to the stations of gods”: Joseph Smith [possibly Sidney Rigdon], “Dear Brother,” *Evening and Morning Star*, September 1834, 192.

16. Parley Pratt, *A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People* (New York: W. Sandford, 1837), 145.

17. Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled: Zion’s Watchman Unmasked, and Its Editor, Mr. L. R. Sunderland, Exposed: Truth Vindicated: The Devil Mad, and Priestcraft in Danger!* (New York: printed by author, 1838), 26–27; compare La Roy Sunderland, *Mormonism Exposed and Refuted* (New York: Piercy & Reed, 1838), 35.

18. Eliza R. Snow (Smith), *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow: One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884), 10, 46. Snow may have been following Orson Pratt, whose 1844 “Mormon Creed” asked “What is his [humanity’s] final destiny? To be like God. What has God been? Like man.” Orson Pratt, *Prophetic Almanac for 1845* (New York: printed by author, 1845), 5.