



# Excavating Early Mormon History:

## The 1878 History Fact-Finding Mission of Apostles Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt

On October 7, 1878, Mormon Apostles Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt addressed their fellow Latter-day Saints during a general conference session of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter referred to as the Church) in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. Elders Smith and Pratt reported on their recent Church history fact-finding mission to the Midwest and New England regions of the United States on behalf of the First Presidency. Elder Smith related to the packed congregation, “The chief object of their mission east, was to obtain, if possible, some dates and facts that pertained to the early history of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> Both men shared their experiences meeting with early Mormon luminaries, who included William E. McLellin and David Whitmer, and visiting sacred sites while touring Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, and New York. Neither Elder Smith nor Elder Pratt, however, divulged many details during the general conference session about their month-long mission. Perhaps their reticence stemmed from their own initial evaluation of their journey. Elder Smith related to the gathered Latter-day Saints that he and Pratt had “found no one who could give them any information, or who knew as much as ourselves on these matters.”<sup>2</sup> In hindsight, the Apostles’

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tentative self-deprecating assessment obscures the important contributions of their history-gathering mission, as described in this essay.

Joseph Fielding Smith (known as Joseph F. Smith to Latter-day Saints) was born on November 13, 1838, in Far West, Missouri, just weeks after his father, Hyrum Smith, and uncle Joseph Smith were taken as prisoners by the Missouri militia. “He commenced life in the midst of tribulation and dark persecution,” one biographer described.<sup>3</sup> When he was just five years old, Joseph F.’s father and prophet-uncle were murdered by an anti-Mormon mob in Carthage, Illinois. A few years later Joseph F. trekked west to Utah with his mother, Mary Fielding Smith, while a large portion of his extended Smith family remained in the Midwest. These Smith family members eventually affiliated themselves with the RLDS Church, which was led by his first cousin Joseph Smith III. While living in Utah as a young man, Joseph F. served two missions to the Hawaiian Islands and afterward labored in the Church Historian’s Office in downtown Salt Lake City with his cousin George A. Smith, who was then serving as an Apostle and Church Historian. In July 1866, President Brigham Young privately ordained Joseph F. to the apostleship, and during the April 1877 general conference he called him to preside over the European Mission. But the young Apostle returned from Great Britain that September when he learned of President Young’s death.

John Taylor, Brigham Young’s successor as President of the Church, called Joseph F. to join Elder Orson Pratt, then serving as Church Historian, on a history fact-finding mission to the cradles of the Restoration in the Midwest and New England. Orson Pratt, born in 1811, was Joseph F.’s senior by twenty-seven years. Parley P. Pratt baptized Orson, his younger brother, on September 19, 1830, just eighteen days after he himself was baptized by Oliver Cowdery. In December 1831, Orson moved to Hiram, Ohio, and was ordained a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in April 1835. He served various missions for the Church throughout his life. Orson even participated in the Camp of Israel (Zion’s Camp) in 1834. In 1842, while living in Nauvoo, Illinois, he became disaffected from the Church and was excommunicated in August. But not much time passed before he was rebaptized in January 1843 and reinstated to the apostleship. In 1847 Orson migrated west to Utah, and in 1848 he presided over the LDS mission in Great Britain. In 1874 he succeeded George A. Smith as Church Historian.<sup>4</sup>

On Monday, September 2, 1878, LDS leaders John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, George Q. Cannon, and Albert Carrington set apart Elders Smith and Pratt “to

take a mission to the States, to gather up records and data relative to the early history of the Church.”<sup>5</sup> Church leaders were seemingly interested in having these two Apostles, both working in the Church Historian’s Office, view the original manuscripts of Latter-day scripture then in the hands of the former Latter-day Saints and their families who did not come to Utah. This was during the time that the Church was preparing new editions of the Doctrine and Covenants, Book of Mormon, and Pearl of Great Price. The following day the two Apostles departed by railroad from Salt Lake City on their fact-finding mission, joined by Mormon emigration agent William C. Staines, who accompanied them as far east as Kansas City, Missouri. Over the next four weeks, they would travel the breadth of the United States and tour early Mormon history sites in Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, and New York, with Elder Smith returning to Utah on September 28 and Elder Pratt on October 3.

### **Visiting Church History Sites in Missouri**

Three days after leaving Salt Lake City by train, Elders Smith and Pratt arrived in Independence, Missouri. That Saturday morning, after washing and eating breakfast, the two Apostles walked to view the temple site, near where the Independence courthouse then stood.<sup>6</sup> Nearly five decades earlier, in July 1831, Elder Smith’s uncle, the Prophet Joseph Smith, traveled to the frontier lands of Missouri and there dictated a revelation that designated the location for the future temple in the region: “Behold, the place which is now called Independence is the center place; and a spot for the temple is lying westward, upon a lot which is not far from the courthouse” (Doctrine and Covenants 57:3). Although the fledgling Latter-day Saints were eager to establish a Zion community, the local Missourians did not share the Saints’ religious vision of communalism and overcoming individual poverty, so they became antagonistic toward the Mormon emigrants. In July 1833, just two years after the first Latter-day Saints arrived in the area, mobs destroyed the Mormon printing press and tarred and feathered the local leader, Bishop Edward Partridge. By November 12, 1833, armed mobs forced the Mormons to depart from Jackson County, Missouri. The Latter-day Saints and their leaders remained hopeful for decades that they would be able to return and build the prophesied Zion in Jackson County, but they were unable to gather in large numbers in Missouri until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, Latter-day Saints had viewed their experiences in Jackson County with sadness and frustration since the 1830s. As Elders Smith and Pratt looked

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upon the abandoned temple site that September, their perspective was a dreary one. “In 1831, or about 47 years ago, when Elder O[rson] Pratt visited the ground, it was covered with trees, but now there is not a tree nor even a stump standing, except on the portions surrounding the immediate Temple site, which are occupied by dwellings and orchards. The ground, at the time of our visit, was exceedingly dry and dusty, the season having been a very dry one,” they later described to LDS leaders.<sup>8</sup> That afternoon the two Apostles met William Eaton, who lived on the Temple Lot with his family. As it turned out, Eaton’s wife was the widow of John E. Page, a former Mormon Apostle and the man who had ordained Granville Hendrick as prophet of the Temple Lot church in July 1863. Eaton’s wife remembered Pratt from their earlier Church association in Missouri. Although Mrs. Eaton treated the Utah Apostles “cordially,” she struggled with “great difficulty to restrain the expression of her bitterness towards polygamy.” Even though Elders Smith and Pratt were both practicing plural marriage at this time, their visit ended on a friendly note. After visiting the Eatons, the two men “plucked a few sprigs struggling for existence on the dry parched, dusty summit” on the Temple Lot and then offered “an earnest prayer that God would hasten his work in its time.”<sup>9</sup>

Elders Smith and Pratt next visited William E. McLellin, an original member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who had served with Pratt. Born in Tennessee in the winter of 1806, McLellin initially received the message of the Restoration from Harvey Whitlock and David Whitmer in July 1831. It was on that occasion that McLellin first heard Whitmer’s testimony of the Book of Mormon, including his account of a “Holy Angel [Moroni] who had made known the truth of [the Book of Mormon] record to him.” Professing his early faith in Joseph Smith Jr. as God’s prophet, McLellin wrote the following to his family in the summer of 1832: “I can truly [*sic*] say I believe him to be a man of God. A Prophet, a Seer and Revelater to the church of christ.”<sup>10</sup> The Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris—ordained McLellin an Apostle in February 1835. Eventually, despite his apostolic calling, McLellin expressed distrust in Joseph Smith Jr. and other Mormon leaders. By May 1838, his testimony had faltered. During a Church disciplinary court called to discuss his transgressions, McLellin confessed that “he had no confidence in the heads of the Church” and claimed that he had learned, from some unstated source, that “they had transgressed,” so he “went his own way, and indulged himself in his lustfull [*sic*] desires.” Thereafter,

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McLellin and the Church parted ways since he was apparently “cut off . . . for unbelief and apostasy.”<sup>11</sup>

Between 1838 and 1878, just before Elders Smith and Pratt arrived at his doorstep, McLellin had floated between several Mormon schismatic groups, eventually settling down in Independence, Missouri. During those four decades, he put his spiritual thoughts to paper and produced several doctrinal treatises and personal reflections on his religious experiences. In 1872 McLellin prepared a lengthy manuscript discussing his beliefs and disbeliefs in “Mormonism,” including an unwavering affirmation of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and a pronounced ambivalence toward its translator, Joseph Smith Jr.<sup>12</sup> Elder Smith noted of their interview with McLellin that “while he claimed to hold to his faith in the Book of Mormon and its inspired translation by the Prophet Joseph, with the pertinacity of absolute knowledge, he denounced in toto, all the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants and the idea of the restoration of the priesthood of Melchisedek or of . . . Aaron to man, but believes in the Apostleship, which he thinks comprises everything, although he had no faith in the ordination of the first Twelve.” Smith observed of McLellin, “With one breath he would extol and reverence the memory of the prophet and with the next fling at him some slanderous accusation in the most spiteful manner, as if mentally writhing under some real or fancied wrongs.”<sup>13</sup> Though McLellin’s ideologies likely seem awkward to historians and some of the Mormon faithful, at times he was not alone. Some of his theories resemble those of David Whitmer, with whom McLellin remained in close contact for most of the latter portion of his life.

During the course of their interview with McLellin, Elders Smith and Pratt came to learn a number of McLellin’s spiritual feelings and religious beliefs. The three men also discussed a variety of issues, including Emma Smith’s knowledge of her husband Joseph’s practice of plural marriage during the Nauvoo period. According to McLellin, “Emma Smith told him that Joseph was both a polygamist and an adulterer and what was most strange to him [was] that she should joine [*sic*] in with her Son Joseph in his theory of Religion which holds up the Prophet as the founder of their faith.”<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Emma publicly denied her husband’s involvement in plural marriage following his assassination in June 1844, instead blaming the alternative marriage system on Brigham Young, her husband’s prophetic successor. McLellin also shared his doubts about the revelation concerning the Canadian Book of Mormon copyright. “Joseph had given a false revelation in

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1829, ordering O[liver] Cowdery to go to Canada and get out the copy right of the Book of Mormon, and after wards acknowledge it was false,” McLellin complained.<sup>15</sup> After the interview with McLellin came to an end, “it was with unmistakable regret” that he parted from Elders Smith and Pratt at the railroad station as they boarded the train bound for Richmond, Missouri.<sup>16</sup>

The two Mormon Apostles arrived in Richmond late in the evening of Friday, September 6.<sup>17</sup> Richmond was settled in 1827 as the seat of Clay County, Missouri. For a time it became a center of Mormon population growth and religious freedom. But when the Missouri militia captured Joseph Smith Jr. and other Mormon leaders in October 1838, General John B. Clark incarcerated them for a time in the Richmond Jail. After a good night’s rest, Elders Smith and Pratt surveyed the damage that a tornado had inflicted upon Richmond earlier that May. A local newspaper reported that “the havoc and desolation which then ensued are beyond our abilities to describe. Not a house is left to mark that once beautiful portion of the town. . . . Nor is there a single foundation that was not swept away.”<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, Elder Smith dedicated nearly six pages of his journal to describe the wreckage that he and Pratt witnessed.

After observing the tornado destruction, the Utah Mormon representatives sought out David Whitmer, who “seemed somewhat surprised and delighted at seeing his old acquaintance Orson Pratt.”<sup>19</sup> Whitmer was born in January 1805 near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In his early childhood, his family moved to Ontario County, New York, where his family encountered the Restoration. Whitmer and his family learned of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith Jr. through a mutual acquaintance, Oliver Cowdery. During the translation process of the golden plates, Smith and Cowdery invited Whitmer to come to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to pick them up and take them to the Whitmer farm so they could finish the translation. Whitmer and his family believed in Joseph Smith’s message and prophetic gifts, and they were baptized in early 1829. Whitmer then became one of the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon and eventually held a number of important Church callings, including being named as the president of the fledgling church in Missouri in 1834. Four years later, Church leaders excommunicated Whitmer and his brother John, along with a number of other Missouri Church leaders, for apostasy. Owing to threats by the Mormon paramilitary organization known as the Danites, the Whitmer families and a number of other former Latter-day Saints moved to Richmond, where many of them

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remained for the rest of their lives. Not surprisingly, they had little desire to migrate west with Brigham Young's Mormon movement, and they harbored great animosity toward their Utah brothers and sisters.<sup>20</sup>

David Whitmer was willing to meet with the Utah Apostles, but he required that a friend remain near his side so that their ensuing conversation could be verified later. At one point, Whitmer turned to his colleague for advice on how to answer a particular question, indicating that distrust still ran high between the two Mormon groups. Although Elders Smith and Pratt felt uncomfortable not being able to meet with Whitmer in private, there was nothing they could do about the arrangement. So they began asking a series of questions about the foundational events of the Restoration, including Whitmer's role in what had transpired in those early days. During their interviews, Whitmer reaffirmed his earlier testimony of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, including the reality of the physical plates. "I heard the voice of the Lord as distinctly as I ever heard anything in my life, declaring that they were translated by the gift and power of God," Whitmer declared. He also claimed to possess the *original* manuscript of the Book of Mormon translation, and he allowed the Apostles to view his copy. But they would not be taking it back to Utah with them, as they hoped. When Elder Pratt tried to buy the manuscript on behalf of the Utah church, Whitmer rebuffed him, "No, Oliver [Cowdery] charged me to keep it and Joseph [Smith] said my Father's house should keep the records. . . . I consider these things sacred and would not barter them for money." Smith was likewise disappointed, noting in his journal: "What we most desired we have failed for the present to accomplish, to obtain the M.S.S. [manuscript] of the Book of Mormon and I must say I regret it."<sup>21</sup>

David Whitmer, however, was mistaken about which version of the Book of Mormon manuscript he had. He actually possessed the *printer's*—not the *original*—copy of the golden plates translation.<sup>22</sup> After establishing the terms of publication for the Book of Mormon with printer Egbert B. Grandin in Palmyra, New York, Joseph Smith Jr. instructed Oliver Cowdery to prepare a backup, or *printer's*, copy, lest the *original* manuscript be lost or stolen, as was the case with the 116 pages. Whitmer was clearly unaware of the existence of the primary transcription. Unbeknownst to Whitmer, Joseph Smith had deposited the *original* Book of Mormon manuscript in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House in October 1841. Lewis Bidamon, the widower of the late Emma Hale Smith, would not open the cornerstone and reveal the water-damaged manuscript until 1882, four years

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after this visit.<sup>23</sup> But Elder Smith was aware of the existence of the *printer's* copy: "Before the [Book of Mormon manuscript] was sent to the printers an exact copy was made and it is my belief that this [Whitmer's manuscript] is that copy and not the original or if it is the original then there is another copy." The Utah Apostle evinced some uncertainty when he wrote in his journal, "There is another copy, or was, and with that no doubt are the actual signatures of the eleven witnesses to their respective testimonies."<sup>24</sup>

Elder Smith's and Pratt's two-day visit with David Whitmer in Richmond came to a close on friendly terms. "There he stands," Smith wrote of Whitmer, "the one lone monument of the first myraculous [*sic*] manifestations of over 49 years ago at the rise of this church." Between interviews, the two men were led by some of Whitmer's associates to the location where the Richmond Jail once stood. "It was there," Smith noted, that Parley P. Pratt and other Church leaders "were so long and cruelly confined on account of their religion" while they waited for Judge Austin King's decision whether there was sufficient evidence to try the Prophet and his companions for treason. After several weeks in November 1838, the leaders were transferred to Liberty Jail in Clay County, where they arrived in early December. Before parting with his longtime friend, Whitmer told Elder Pratt, "I may never meet you again (in the flesh) so farewell."<sup>25</sup>

The following morning, Monday, September 9, Elders Smith and Pratt awoke, ate breakfast, paid the hotel bill, and began their travels to Far West, Missouri.<sup>26</sup> Decades earlier, Church members William W. Phelps and John Whitmer purchased portions of what became Far West in 1836, as a location for the Latter-day Saints to gather and settle within the newly created Caldwell County. But Church leaders were unable to make Far West their headquarters for very long. In late October 1838, Missouri governor Lilburn W. Boggs signed an "extermination order" ordering the removal of all Mormons from the state of Missouri. On October 31, a Missouri militia group, under the command of General Samuel Lucas, arrested Joseph and Hyrum Smith, along with a number of other Mormon leaders, and incarcerated them in the Richmond Jail, as noted above. Within weeks, Missouri militia members and mobs drove the Latter-day Saints from the state of Missouri altogether. Joseph F. Smith was born during the Missouri Mormon War on November 13, 1838. "In the midst of tribulation, sorrow and distress, when the dark clouds of persecution hung low over the members of the Church with a pall of menacing hate of overwhelming proportions," his son Joseph Fielding Smith wrote,



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“there was born in the village of Far West, Caldwell County, Missouri, a man-child.” His birth occurred while his father, Hyrum, was incarcerated in Richmond.<sup>27</sup> Since being driven out of Missouri as an infant, Elder Smith had never returned to his birthplace in Far West.

Fresh from their pleasant visit with David Whitmer in Richmond, Elders Smith and Pratt arrived in Far West and called upon Jacob Whitmer and Sarah Johnson, two adult children of the late John Whitmer (David’s brother), who was one of the Eight Witnesses of the Book of Mormon plates and the second Church Historian. Elder Smith asked if Whitmer and Johnson would host him and Elder Pratt for an evening, to which they consented until they learned that the two visitors officially represented the Utah-based Church. Taken aback by their sudden coldness, Elder Smith still asked them if they might show him and Elder Pratt around town, in hopes of discovering his 1838 birthplace. But the Whitmer children again denied his request. As their conversation continued to deteriorate, Elder Pratt asked to see and purchase their father’s manuscript history, which Joseph Smith Jr. commanded John Whitmer to keep in March 1831 (Doctrine and Covenants 47). “We have got no history here, all Father’s papers have gone to Richmond long ago,” Jacob Whitmer replied. Elders Smith and Pratt were unaware that, when John Whitmer passed away earlier that July, his papers were given to his brother David, while his children inherited his Far West home. Elder Pratt responded that he and Elder Smith had just enjoyed two days of interviews and conversations with their uncle David but that he had “said nothing about having any other papers” but the Book of Mormon manuscript. “We’ve got no papers here,” Jacob Whitmer countered, ending the meeting. “At this point we concluded it was no use to try any further, the Spirit of the man was most contemptible and low, neither trying to Show us common courtesy [*sic*] or to conceal his disrespect and bigotry,” Elder Smith noted.<sup>28</sup>

Rejected, Elders Smith and Pratt bid John Whitmer’s children good-bye and made their way to the abandoned Mormon temple site in Far West. “I stood on the S[outh] E[ast] Cor[ner] Stone where Geo[orge] A. Smith and W[ilford] Woodruff were ordained Apostles 39 years ago,” Elder Smith related. Decades before, on July 8, 1838, Joseph Smith Jr. had dictated a revelation calling members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to evangelize in Great Britain. That same commandment directed the Apostles to leave for their European mission “on the twenty-sixth day of April next [1839],”<sup>29</sup> starting from the Far West Temple site. The revelation also

called four men to fill vacancies in the Quorum of the Twelve (see Doctrine and Covenants 118:4–6). Recall that in October 1838 the Latter-day Saints were forced from Missouri to neighboring Illinois. For the Apostles, fulfilling the revelation and commencing their overseas missions from Far West in 1839 seemed difficult at best. Nevertheless, these men returned to the specified temple site on April 26 as directed and ordained Wilford Woodruff and George A. Smith to the apostleship that evening.<sup>30</sup> After surveying the four cornerstones, the Elders Smith and Pratt continued their journey to Cameron, Missouri, where they planned to board a train headed to Plano, Illinois. They slept that evening at the Western House, eager to meet with Smith family members the following day.

### **Visiting Smith Family Members in Illinois**

The Mormon Apostles next traveled from Cameron, Missouri, to the homes of Smith family members in Illinois. On Wednesday, September 11, they passed through Cholchester, Illinois, where they visited Joseph F. Smith's paternal aunt and uncle, Lucy and Arthur Millikin. Lucy was the youngest sister of Hyrum and Joseph Smith Jr. Excited by their nephew's arrival from faraway Utah, they gathered their children and enjoyed "quite a family gathering." This spontaneous Smith family reunion brought great pleasure to Elder Smith, since most of his extended family had remained in the Midwest when he and his family crossed the plains in 1848 as part of the great Mormon westward migration. The extended Smith relatives happily discussed "family matters" for several hours until the two Utahns had to catch a train to Plano, Illinois.<sup>31</sup>

When the two Mormon Apostles arrived in Plano, they paid a visit to the home of Joseph Smith III, president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and Joseph F. Smith's first cousin. They were disappointed, however, to learn that President Smith was away attending the semiannual RLDS conference in Galland's Grove, Iowa.<sup>32</sup> Years earlier, on April 6, 1860, Joseph Smith III and his mother, Emma Hale Smith Bidamon, met with other Mormons who had remained in the Midwest rather than follow Brigham Young to Utah after Joseph Smith Jr.'s death. On this occasion he accepted the leadership of what became the RLDS Church. But Joseph III made it clear he would not take the role of prophet-president "to amass wealth out of it," nor did he plan to accept the Mormon practice of plural marriage. "There is but one principle taught by the leaders of any faction of this people that I hold in utter abhorrence; that is a principle taught by

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Brigham Young and those believing in him,” he declared. “I have been told that my father taught such doctrines. I have never believed it and never can believe it. If such things were done, then I believe they never were done by divine authority.”<sup>33</sup> Joseph III would lead the RLDS Church until his death in December 1914.

On Thursday, September 12, Elders Smith and Pratt again called on President Smith’s family and met with his wife, Bertha, and their children.<sup>34</sup> The Mormon Apostles then made their way to the Herald Office, where RLDS editors prepared the *True Latter Day Saints’ Herald*, their church’s official periodical. There they met with John Scott, Mr. Cooper, and Harvey Dillie and discussed the extant manuscript of Joseph Smith Jr.’s New Translation of the Bible, or the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) as LDS Church membership would come to call it. Beginning in 1831, Joseph Smith Jr. began his inspired revisions of the Old and New Testaments. He considered this undertaking a “branch” of his prophetic calling. Although the Mormon founder did seemingly complete his corrections to the biblical texts, he was murdered before its publication. His New Translation manuscripts, together with his marked-up Phinney Bible, remained in the possession of his widow Emma.<sup>35</sup>

Two decades later, Emma granted an RLDS scripture committee access to both the manuscripts and Bible as they prepared an edition of the translation at the request of her son, Joseph Smith III. It was published as the Inspired Version (IV) in 1867. A year later, President Joseph Smith III sent a copy of this scriptural edition to Elder Orson Pratt in Utah.<sup>36</sup> His gift, on behalf of the RLDS Church, would have an impact on LDS scripture. In 1878 Orson Pratt was preparing the first American edition of Elder Franklin D. Richards’s British edition of the Pearl of Great Price (1851), a selected compilation of Joseph Smith Jr.’s dictated revelations and translated ancient texts, for publication in Salt Lake City.<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that Elder Pratt based the biblical texts of his American edition on his gifted copy of the 1867 RLDS Inspired Version and not on Elder Richards’s 1851 LDS text.<sup>38</sup>

Elders Smith and Pratt were understandably eager to see the original manuscripts and the Phinney Bible while visiting Plano, so they sent the still-absent President Smith a telegram of explanation: “Jos[eph] F. Smith and Orson Pratt here, wish to examine M.S.S. [manuscript] new translation, when can you return, is M.S.S. here[?] answer.”<sup>39</sup> President Smith promptly sent a telegram in response, but it was delayed.<sup>40</sup> Disappointed that a response was not forthcoming, Elders

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Smith and Pratt purchased a few RLDS missionary tracts and departed from the Herald House. They returned a few hours later but were again disheartened to learn that no telegram had arrived from President Smith.

That same afternoon, Mr. Cooper invited the Mormon Apostles to attend an RLDS prayer meeting that evening. Both men were uncomfortable but finally accepted the offer. When they arrived at the meeting, the presiding RLDS leader, Harvey Dille, asked them to address the congregation. Elder Smith hesitated, but Elder Pratt took the podium and discoursed on the doctrine and history of plural marriage, the most contested difference between the two Mormon factions and a huge concern for the United States government. Elder Pratt testified that “Joseph Smith the Prophet revealed the principle of plural marriage and practiced it before B[righam] Young . . . and gave facts in proof.” He also related an experience that Lyman Johnson, a former member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, had related to him when they served together as Apostles. “Joseph [Smith] had told [Lyman Johnson] that God had revealed to him that plural marriage was a divine and correct principle and would be again practiced but the time had not yet come. This was as early as 1832 or 1831.” Elder Smith then made a few remarks of his own. He reported that by the end of the meeting, the entire RLDS congregation was discussing plural marriage, a doctrine that Joseph Smith III claimed his father never implemented. He also recorded that several members in attendance acknowledged that they were aware that Joseph Smith Jr. actually had practiced plural marriage. Others allegedly contended that “the polygamy revelation [Doctrine and Covenants 132] and the Book of Mormon could not both be true.” Still others expressed ignorance on the subject and wished not to discuss it further.<sup>41</sup>

### **Visiting Church History Sites in Ohio and New York**

By Friday, September 13, Elders Smith and Pratt had yet to hear from President Smith, so they traveled by train through Chicago and Cleveland en route to Kirtland, Ohio.<sup>42</sup> In September 1830, while living in upstate New York, Joseph Smith Jr. had dictated a revelation to Oliver Cowdery that called him on a mission “unto the Lamanites” and commanded him to “preach my gospel unto them” (Doctrine and Covenants 28:8). Interpreting “Lamanites” to mean the American Indians then living on the western frontier of the United States, Cowdery and three missionary companions set off to share the Restoration message with the natives that October. Cowdery and Parley P. Pratt stopped in Mentor, Ohio, on

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October 29, 1830, and gave a Book of Mormon to Sidney Rigdon. Before leaving the area weeks later, the Mormon elders had baptized over thirty individuals in and around Mentor and Kirtland. That December, Joseph Smith Jr. received a revelation directing the Church to “assemble together at the Ohio” (Doctrine and Covenants 37:3). From February 1831, when the Prophet arrived in Kirtland, to January 1838, when dissenters forced him from town, Kirtland served as one of the headquarters of the Church; a second headquarters was in Missouri. During the Kirtland period, Joseph Smith Jr. received thirty-seven revelations—more than he received in any other locale during his life—that were later canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants. Many of those revelations served as key doctrinal and theological guides for the growing church. Additionally, it was in Kirtland that early Mormons built their first temple.

On September 14, 1878, Elders Smith and Pratt arrived in Kirtland and immediately made their way to the landmark Kirtland Temple. Elder Smith devoted five pages of his journal to a description of the sacred edifice. He made a careful comparison to its earlier state in the 1830s, obviously relying on the memory of his traveling companion, since he was not born until 1838, months after the Latter-day Saints had abandoned Kirtland as their Church headquarters. While touring the “House of the Lord,” Elders Smith and Pratt met former Latter-day Saint James McDowell, who shared his opinion that “Hyrum Smith was a good man,” expressed regret that the early Church had splintered following the Martyrdom, and lamented that the various Mormon factions could not come to a unity of the faith. The two Apostles also encountered Electra Stratton, an elderly woman who had joined the Church when Joseph and Hyrum Smith lived in Kirtland but who remained in the area while the majority of the Latter-day Saints moved to the West. She noted that the tone of Joseph F. Smith’s voice matched his father’s but that he looked more like his mother, Mary Fielding. Following their temple experience, Elders Smith and Pratt visited a number of other Mormon historical sites in Kirtland, including the store of Newel K. Whitney and A. Sidney Gilbert. They then traveled on to Painesville, Ohio, where they purchased rail tickets to Buffalo, New York.<sup>43</sup>

The two Apostles arrived in Buffalo and noted that it seemed to be a center of spiritual activity. “I judge this must be a religious place by the [number] of church goers,” Elder Smith recorded in his journal. Before leaving Buffalo en route to Rochester and Palmyra, New York, he sent a telegram home to Utah and another to William Staines, who had accompanied them on the first leg of their

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trip to Kansas City, Missouri, notifying him that they would “be in New York city Tuesday or Wednesday.” The two men passed through Rochester and finally arrived in Palmyra on the evening of September 15. Palmyra is recognized as the birthplace of the Mormon faith. It was here that Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith settled with their children in 1816 after a few years of crop failure in Vermont and New England. When their son Joseph Jr. discussed a “war of words and tumult of opinions” in his 1838 history, he was referring to the conditions of the religious excitement in Palmyra and other nearby villages and townships. It was on his father’s farm a mile or so south of Palmyra that Joseph experienced his first theophany in the spring of 1820. Just a few miles farther south lay the hill that Latter-day Saints today commonly call Cumorah. Elders Smith and Pratt were highly aware of such history, and they were not about to let the opportunity of seeing these sites go to waste.

Of the churches in this area, Elder Smith’s uncle Joseph wrote: “There was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country. Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). Elder Smith described in his journal a visit he and Elder Pratt made to this area: “The point where the Cananda[i]gua Road crosses the main street at right angles, the main street running east & west, are 4 protestant churches at each corner. On the South west corner the Baptists, on the north west the Methodists, on the north east the Presbyterians, and on the South east the Episcopalians. Just north of these is the Catholic Church.”<sup>44</sup>

The following day (September 16), Elders Smith and Pratt made their way to the south end of the Hill Cumorah, which was then owned by a man named Parker, and which still had many trees. It was on this hill that Joseph Smith Jr. met once a year for four years with the angel Moroni, and received the plates from which he translated the Book of Mormon in 1827. Elder Smith commented on the physical condition of the hill, including a mention of the lack of trees, since previous owners had cleared the hillside for agricultural use. Near the southern end, where the hill flattens and widens a bit, the two Apostles knelt down in prayer. Elder Pratt prayed “long and fervently for all Israel and for all the interests of Zion for the hastening of the time when the records now concealed in this hill shall come forth.” Elder

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Smith followed, offering his solemn prayer by “thanking, praising and beseeching God.” Elder Pratt next laid his hands on Elder Smith and blessed him, “pronouncing many provisions and asking for great gifts to rest upon me.” In return, Elder Smith pronounced a blessing on Elder Pratt and “blessed him the Spirit of the Lord giving me utterance.” The two men then continued to explore the hill and took a few sticks as keepsakes for the experience. They also “spent several hours meditating and praising God,” and Elder Smith recorded that his “heart was filled even to tears, and [he] rejoiced.” Such an experience must have been enlightening, and it seemed to spiritually strengthen the two Apostles.<sup>45</sup>

### **Return to Utah via Illinois**

On Tuesday morning, September 17, after “another sleepless night” for Elder Smith, the two Apostles awoke and departed for New York City. While in the city, they decided to spend some time on their own attending to personal business. That Wednesday, however, they drafted their report of their fact-finding mission to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The report was subsequently published in the *Deseret News* in Utah and was reprinted in the *Millennial Star* in England.<sup>46</sup> At this point, Mormon emigration agent William Staines purchased railroad tickets for Elder Smith’s return to Utah, since Elder Pratt chose to remain in New York City a few days longer. “This makes me a free pass clear home, for which I am very thankful,” Elder Smith noted.<sup>47</sup> On Friday, September 20, Elder Smith sent a final telegram to President Joseph Smith III in Illinois: “Start home tomorrow evening, can I see manuscripts? Answer. Stevens House N.Y.” The next day, Elder Smith received the following reply from his RLDS cousin: “Cannot tell till I see you,” to which he vented in his journal, “This leaves me where I was before.” Unsure if a return trip to the RLDS headquarters warranted his effort, Smith consulted with his LDS brethren, who encouraged him to shoulder the risk in hopes of seeing the manuscript of Joseph Smith Jr.’s New Translation of the Bible. After much vacillation, Smith finally agreed with Staines and made preparations to return to Plano: “I feel as tho[ugh] it was my duty as Pres. [John] Taylor seemed particularly anxious about this matter.”<sup>48</sup>

Three days later, on Tuesday, September 24, Elder Smith arrived in Plano to finally visit with President Smith face-to-face. After breakfast and conversation with Smith family members, the two cousins made their way to President Smith’s office, where Elder Smith eagerly asked to see the JST manuscripts,

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which he assumed were housed in Plano. President Smith informed him, however, that the manuscripts had been returned to the care of his mother, Emma Hale Smith Bidamon, but that during her recent illness they had been entrusted to her other son, Alexander Smith, who was then living in Nauvoo. Anticipating Elder Smith's return visit, President Smith had written a letter to his brother Alexander asking that the manuscripts be brought to Plano, but Alexander did not want to ship their father's translation papers until they were certain that Elder Smith would be coming back. So by the time Elder Smith was passing through Plano for the second time, the papers had not yet arrived. Moreover, it is unclear if Elder Smith would have been permitted to see the manuscript even if the papers were in Plano.<sup>49</sup>

President Smith informed Elder Smith that he required a signed written request from the President of the LDS Church, John Taylor, before he would let any Latter-day Saint, including members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, view the JST papers. "The manuscripts can be seen whenever a duly authorized commission possessing proper credentials shall come and sit down with a commission duly appointed by the Reorganized church to examine [the materials] and not till then," a dejected Elder Smith noted. There was seemingly more at stake than he was aware. His cousin was worried about the image of the RLDS Church, over which he presided. "We are perfectly willing," President Smith clarified, according to Elder Smith, that "the [manuscript] and the bible should be compared, but the decision will be for or against us, and our credit is involved in the matter."<sup>50</sup>

Recall that the RLDS Church published the Inspired Version of the Bible in 1867. President Smith and his fellow leaders were concerned that an LDS representative, if left alone with the original manuscripts, might attempt to discredit the RLDS publication committee's work and thereby discredit the RLDS Church in general. By requesting "duly authorized" representatives from both Mormon churches to be present to view the manuscripts, President Smith was safeguarding the reputation and image of his faith and followers. Pressed for time, Elder Smith felt this arrangement was unnecessary and should be side-stepped. This proved to be a moot point, however, since the manuscripts were still not in Plano and Elder Smith needed to continue his return trip to Utah. President Smith gave Elder Smith a copy of the Inspired Version of the Bible as a parting gift.<sup>51</sup>



## Conclusion

Rebuffed by his RLDS cousin in his attempt to see the JST, Elder Smith left Plano, Illinois, and on September 24 traveled to Chicago, where he made preparations to return to Utah by railcar. He finally arrived in Salt Lake City on Saturday, September 28. Two days later he met alone with President John Taylor and shared the report that he and Elder Pratt had drafted while in New York City.<sup>52</sup> Elder Pratt did not return to Utah until October 3.<sup>53</sup> The following week, Elders Smith and Pratt reported on their fact-finding mission to the membership of the Church during October general conference in the Tabernacle on Temple Square.

While speaking at the Tabernacle, Elder Smith said he “was well satisfied that the [Inspired Version] so published [by the RLDS Church] is only a partial translation by the Prophet, and merely contains the translation of King James, with some changes in the first chapter of Genesis and the 24th chapter of Matthew, which had been published by this Church, in the Pearl of Great Price, many years ago.”<sup>54</sup> He made no mention according to the report published in the *Deseret News*, which stated that the Inspired Version’s Matthew 24 differed from the version published in the Pearl of Great Price in 1851. This may have been an attempt on Elder Smith’s part to downplay the importance of the Inspired Version. By stating this, Elder Smith may have also been trying to make the point that the Pearl of Great Price was all that would be needed in order to understand Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible.

All in all, Elders Smith’s and Pratt’s month-long journey to the East enriched the historical record because of the Elders’ efforts to interview multiple individuals and learn more about extant manuscripts containing historical information about the Church. The personal and corporate records they kept about this trip have become an important source in sorting out some of the evidences and episodes of early Mormon history. Elder Pratt, an adult member of the LDS Church since 1831, knew much of this history. The journey was more formative for Elder Smith’s historical consciousness, however. Smith eventually served as Church President and was a driving force behind the beginnings of the Church’s historical sites program, including initiating and overseeing the construction of the 1905 monument at the birthplace of Joseph Smith Jr. in Sharon, Vermont.

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### Notes

1. Joseph F. Smith, "Semi-Annual Conference," *Deseret News*, October 9, 1878, 572. Their conference report was reprinted in the *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, October 28, 1878, 676–77.
2. Smith, "Semi-Annual Conference," 572.
3. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith: Sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 3.
4. See Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1985).
5. Joseph F. Smith, journal, September 2, 1878, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
6. Smith, journal, September 6, 1878.
7. For a history of the Temple Lot, see R. Jean Addams, "The Church of Christ (Temple Lot) and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: 130 Years of Crossroads and Controversies," *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 2 (2010): 54–127.
8. "Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith," *Deseret News*, November 27, 1878, 674. Elders Pratt and Smith wrote this report in New York City on September 17, 1878, prior to their return to Salt Lake City.
9. Smith, journal, September 6, 1878.
10. Jan Shippo and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, Brigham Young University; Urbana and Chicago and University of Illinois Press, 1994), 29, 82; original spelling and capitalization preserved throughout this paper.
11. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 268; spelling in original. "History of William E. McLellin," *Deseret News*, May 12, 1858, 49.
12. Mitchell Schaefer, ed., *William E. McLellin's Lost Manuscript* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2012). See also Mitchell Schaefer, "'The Testimony of Men': William E. McLellin and the Book of Mormon Witnesses," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 101. Accounts from people like McLellin who were present in early Church history, some of whom even witnessed the miraculous events that now stand as spiritual pillars to adherents of the Church, add color and variety to the historical record.
13. "Report of Elders," 674.
14. Smith, journal, September 6, 1878.
15. Smith, journal, September 6, 1878; spelling in original. For a more complete explanation of the Canadian Book of Mormon copyright, see Stephen Ehat, "'Securing' the Prophet's Copyright in the Book of Mormon: Historical and Legal Context for the So-Called Canadian Copyright Revelation," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 2 (2011): 5–70.
16. "Report of Elders," 674.
17. Smith, journal, September 6, 1878.
18. "The Town of Richmond, Mo., visited by a Tornado," *Phelps County New Era*, June 8, 1878.
19. Smith, journal, September 7, 1878.
20. See Erin B. Jennings, "Whitmer Family Beliefs and Their Church of Christ," in *Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism*, ed. Newell G. Bringham and John C. Hamer (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2007), 25–45.

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21. Smith, journal, September 7, 1878. For descriptions and transcripts of the Smith-Pratt-Whitmer interview, see Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991); and “Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith,” *Deseret News*, November 27, 1878, 674. Pratt seemingly did not keep a journal during the 1878 mission, but he did draft an account of the interview in a letter to his wife. See Orson Pratt to Marian Pratt, September 18, 1878, correspondence, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
22. Smith, journal, September 7, 1878. David Whitmer later gave the printer’s manuscript to his grandson George W. Schweich, who sold it to the RLDS Church (Community of Christ since 2001) in 1903. Today it is housed in the Community of Christ Archives in Independence, Missouri. See Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS at Brigham Young University, 2001), 4.
23. “Relics of the Old Nauvoo House,” *Deseret News*, October 4, 1882, 577. Lewis Bidamon gifted portions of the original manuscript to visitors, and today most, if not all, of the extant document is housed at the LDS Church History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah. See Dean C. Jessee, “The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript,” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (1970): 1–15.
24. Smith, journal, September 8, 1878.
25. Smith, journal, September 8, 1878.
26. Smith, journal, September 9, 1878.
27. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 117.
28. Smith, journal, September 9, 1878. See also Scott C. Esplin, “A History of All the Important Things’ (D&C 69:3): John Whitmer’s Record of Church History,” in *Preserving the History of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Richard E. Turley Jr. and Steven C. Harper (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2010), 57.
29. Smith, journal, September 9, 1878.
30. The Apostles’ courage remained a staple in the Mormon lore, making it understandable that Elders Smith and Pratt were eager to see the site.
31. Smith, journal, September 11, 1878.
32. Smith, journal, September 11, 1878; see also “General Conference Minutes,” *Saints’ Herald*, October 1, 1878, 289.
33. Joseph Smith III, *The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III (1832–1914)*, ed. Richard Howard (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1979), 463.
34. Smith, journal, September 12, 1878.
35. See Robert J. Matthews, “Joseph Smith’s Efforts to Publish His Bible ‘Translation,’” *Ensign*, January 1983, 57–64.
36. Joseph Smith III traveled through Salt Lake City after Elder Orson Pratt’s death and held a brief interview with Sarah Pratt, Orson’s first wife and then widow. According to his recollection of the event, during the interview he asked Mrs. Pratt “if she remembered her husband’s having received a copy of the *New Inspired Translation* of the Scriptures.” She replied in the affirmative and said that when Orson finally had an opportunity to sit down and read through the book “he laid the book aside with a sigh, and said: ‘Sarah, these men have done their work honestly! This translation is just as it was left by the Prophet Joseph in 1833. I could quickly have detected it had they tampered with or altered what he wrote. I am delighted with it, and I thank God that I have received this copy!’” Smith III, *Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III*, 32–33.

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37. His resulting 1878 version was canonized as LDS Church scripture in October 1880.
38. Robert J. Matthews, *“A Plainer Translation:” Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 225–29; Kent P. Jackson, *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), 21, 34.
39. Smith, journal, September 12, 1878.
40. Shortly thereafter, he wrote his cousin Joseph F. Smith, who was now in New York City, a note of explanation: “I received the telegram sent me apprising me of your visit to Plano, and sent a reply to the Telegram Office; but through the thoughtlessness of the messenger it was delayed too long, and so failed to reach you. . . . I left Conference ground as soon as feasible and reached home Tuesday at 2.15 P.M; and expect to remain at home for some time. Any communication you may wish to make will receive consideration.” Joseph Smith III to Joseph F. Smith, September 19, 1878, correspondence, Joseph F. Smith Papers, Salt Lake City, Church History Library.
41. Smith, journal, September 12, 1878.
42. Smith, journal, September 13–14, 1878.
43. Smith, journal, September 14, 1878.
44. Smith, journal, September 15, 1878. It is possible that Elder Smith was mistaken about the location of two of the churches. Today the Western Presbyterian Church sits on the northwest corner of the intersection, and the First Methodist Church resides on the northeast corner. Otherwise, according to his account, the congregations mentioned by Elder Smith still own edifices dedicated to regular worship services in those respective locations today. But it is important to note that none of these churches were there at the time of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in 1820.
45. Smith, journal, September 16, 1878.
46. “Report of Elders,” 674–75; and December 4, 1878, 690; “Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, December 9, 1878, 769–74, and December 16, 1878, 785–89.
47. Smith, journal, September 18, 1878.
48. Smith, journal, September 21, 1878.
49. Smith, journal, September 24, 1878.
50. Smith, journal, September 24, 1878.
51. Smith, journal, September 24, 1878.
52. Smith, journal, September 30, 1878.
53. Smith, journal, October 3, 1878.
54. Smith, “Semi-Annual Conference,” 572.