

Mark H. Taylor

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JOHN TAYLOR: WITNESS TO
THE MARTYRDOM OF THE
PROPHET JOSEPH SMITH

ON June 27, 1844, at approximately 5:16 p.m., Joseph Smith Jr. and his brother Hyrum were murdered in Carthage Jail in Illinois by an armed mob. This event is singular in the history of the Church. Joseph's persecutors conceived that his demise would be the Church's demise and would immediately end "the Mormon question." Few Church members of Joseph's day, not to mention his persecutors, comprehended that over 160 years subsequent to Joseph's death the Church would "com[e] forth . . . out of the wilderness [of darkness, and shine forth] clear as the moon, fair as the sun" (Doctrine and Covenants 5:14) in nearly every nation on earth. Clearly Joseph's persecutors could not have anticipated the esteem with which he is now held in the minds of millions principally in—but also out of—the Church. Indeed,

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Joseph's name today is "had for good and evil among all nations" (Joseph Smith—History 1:33).

At the time of the Martyrdom, most of the Twelve were on political missions away from Nauvoo; however, two were in the vicinity. John Taylor, who was editor of the *Times and Seasons* periodical and the *Nauvoo Neighbor* newspaper, and Willard Richards, who was secretary to Joseph Smith, both accompanied Joseph and Hyrum to Carthage and witnessed the event. Richards escaped the assault virtually unscathed. But the mob's musketballs found their mark on Taylor, causing serious injury. Three balls lodged in his body. The ball in his left hand and another in his right thigh were removed shortly afterward without the benefit of anesthesia, but Taylor carried the ball lodged in his left knee to his grave. He endured an arduous recovery and lived another forty-three years. The purpose of this paper is to consider effects on Taylor's life brought about by his status as a witness to the Martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Taylor ultimately succeeded Brigham Young as President of the Church in 1877 and led the Church for another decade. Yet an abundance of information regarding his life and ministry is not widely available, notwithstanding his prominent experiences as witness to the last days, hours, and moments of Joseph Smith's life or his service as President of the Church.

At the time of the Martyrdom, Taylor was already known for his superb capabilities as a preeminent and skilled writer, editor, and publisher. Yet his experiences in the councils and interactions leading up to the Martyrdom, including his representation of the Church before Illinois governor Thomas Ford shortly before the incident, and most especially his survival of the Carthage foray, earned him moral authority both inside and outside the Church that changed his life forever. He penned the Church's official

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announcement of the Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith and later composed the record that served as the official account of the event for preparation of the official history of the Church in the Church Historian's Office. In addition, as the fame of his survival status grew, he attracted the curiosity of national and international personalities who desired to meet him. Combined with his superior abilities as a writer, editor, and defender of the Church, this interaction with the national press exponentially increased his audience.

As a result of his experiences in Carthage, John Taylor stood as a living witness and tangible connection between Joseph Smith and the members of the Church. This connection carried on for more than three times the duration of the Church's existence at the time of the Martyrdom.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. Section 1 reviews John Taylor's role in the Church's official announcement of the Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith and in documenting for the Church History Department what happened in Carthage. The second section addresses how his survival status fostered his reputation at the national and even international audience. The third section discusses his status as a tangible, living connection between the founder of the Church to its members for the next forty-three years. The final section provides concluding comments.

MARTYRDOM ANNOUNCEMENT
AND DOCUMENTATION

After the Martyrdom, the Twelve made their way back to Nauvoo while John Taylor began convalescing in his home. When the other members of the Twelve returned and began to hold councils, those councils were convened in the

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Taylor home until Taylor had sufficiently recovered from his wounds. Sometime during the weeks and months following the Martyrdom, Taylor composed what became the official announcement that Joseph and Hyrum Smith had been killed in Carthage Jail. That announcement was canonized as section 135 in the 1844 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants that was printed, interestingly, by Taylor in the fall of 1844.¹ Perhaps John Taylor was still wincing from the pain of his wounds as he composed the announcement; he underscored his injuries within the first two verses of section 135:

To seal the testimony of this book and the Book of Mormon, we announce the martyrdom of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and Hyrum Smith the Patriarch. They were shot in Carthage jail, on the 27th of June, 1844, about five o'clock p.m., by an armed mob—painted black—of from 150 to 200 persons. Hyrum was shot first and fell calmly, exclaiming: *I am a dead man!* Joseph leaped from the window, and was shot dead in the attempt, exclaiming: *O Lord my God!* They were both shot after they were dead, in a brutal manner, and both received four balls.

John Taylor and Willard Richards, two of the Twelve, were the only persons in the room at the time; the former was wounded in a savage manner with four balls, but has since recovered; the latter, through the providence of God, escaped without even a hole in his robe. (Doctrine and Covenants 135:1–2)

Although this announcement was made shortly after the Martyrdom occurred, official documentation of the event for the Church Historian's Office did not take place for over a decade, years after the migration to the Rocky Mountains and

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the Salt Lake Valley.² Finally in 1856, newly appointed assistant Church historian Wilford Woodruff, appalled that no official record of the Martyrdom had been completed, contacted the one remaining eyewitness—John Taylor—for assistance. Although the untimely death of Willard Richards in 1854 had renewed efforts to document the Martyrdom, the project had languished. Elder George A. Smith, to whom the task initially fell, found that the task of extracting and integrating pertinent information into a readable account was “long, tedious, and difficult.” He reported that even an hour’s work on the project resulted in a headache.³ His appointment to present a petition for Utah statehood to the U.S. Congress in 1856 pushed the assignment to Wilford Woodruff. Woodruff wasted no time in contacting Taylor, who was serving a literary mission in New York City as editor of the newspaper the *Mormon*. He wrote to Taylor on June 30, 1856: “We are very busy writing the history of the latter days of Joseph, and we have a great many conflicting statements on the subject, which renders it necessary for me to call in the aid of an eye and ear witness to enable me to do justice to it. You are the only person on earth who can render me this assistance.”⁴

Woodruff then set forth a series of questions regarding the event and stated, “I want you to describe the scenes in the jail with *great care and minuteness*; for as I said before you are the *only* man on earth who can do it.”⁵ Retreating from metropolitan New York, Taylor headed to the country, secluding himself at the Connecticut home of Westport branch president Ebenezer R. Young for the summer. He produced a sixty-nine page handwritten document, dated August 23, 1856. George A. Smith, who had assisted Taylor, updated Brigham Young in September regarding Taylor’s success: “[John Taylor] has made a rough draft, entirely from memory. . . . It will be the most complete

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account of the martyrdom of the Prophet yet produced, or that probably ever will be, as it comes from personal observation, & will read extremely well, as it is given in his natural style, plain & unvarnished.”⁶

Taylor’s manuscript clearly established his extensive role and sufferings and became the benchmark against which to measure the accuracy of the other sources available to the Church historians. His literary power, boldness, and genius shines through superbly, and he leaves the reader with no small impression of the emotions not only he experienced but also Joseph and others sensed as they encountered and confronted deadly enemies. Despite the fact that Taylor’s account is historical, it is also intensely personal. The reader experiences Taylor’s regard for Joseph and Hyrum Smith, his disgust and antipathy toward their persecutors, his agony and suffering from the effects of his wounds, and his deep loneliness and detachment associated with losing his prophet and his friend.

The first complete copy of Taylor’s manuscript appeared publicly via a book published in 1862 by Victorian Englishman and adventure traveler Sir Richard Burton. Burton visited Salt Lake City in 1860 and was so impressed with Taylor and his account of the Martyrdom that he included it in its entirety as an appendix to his book *The City of the Saints*, making the account accessible on a national scale.⁷ Daniel Tyler, in preparing a history of the Mormon Battalion in which he served, requested permission from Taylor for the manuscript to be included as an introductory chapter to the battalion history to provide context for the battalion’s 1846 mustering.⁸ Taylor agreed. Lundwall (1952) also included the manuscript in his *The Fate of the Persecutors of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.⁹

In editing the *History of the Church* for publication in its seven-volume format in the early 1900s, B. H. Roberts carefully

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studied Taylor's manuscript and included it in its entirety.¹⁰ Roberts makes the following assessment of Taylor's account: "[The manuscript] is a review and commentary of the period [of the Martyrdom] of highest value, a statesman-like paper, a document of highest historical value of the times; and one marvels at the high tone with which the document is planned. . . . In my study of historical documents . . . without exception I can say that I have examined *nothing* that is equal in spirit and justice to this review by [Apostle] Taylor. . . . It deserves to live *forever*."¹¹

More recently, I republished the manuscript (1999), making it more accessible and providing commentary to place the account in its proper context.¹² To this day, John Taylor's account serves as both the final word on the events leading up to and including the Martyrdom and as a testament to his involvement as a witness to the event.

NOTORIETY AND FAME ABROAD

As word circulated about his involvement in the Martyrdom and recovery from his severe wounds, John Taylor attracted the curiosity of national and international personalities, which paved the way for interactions with the press at a national level on issues of importance to the Church. This attraction, combined with his exceptional gifts of expression, provided him the foundation upon which to represent the Church on a scale that had the potential to reach a significantly larger audience outside the Church during a time when such opportunities were rare.

As noted, Sir Richard Burton visited Salt Lake City in the summer of 1860. He stayed for about three weeks, mingling with Church leaders. Among all the writers who visited Salt Lake City, Burton took a unique interest in John Taylor and his history.

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Knowing that Taylor was severely wounded in Carthage and learning that he was also a native of England, Burton desired to meet him. Their initial encounter occurred somewhat by chance, and Burton conversed with Taylor several minutes before realizing who he was. Burton's description of that introduction and the interchange that occurred between them is amusing. The exchange ultimately resulted in Taylor's inviting Burton to accompany him on Church business to the Sugar House Ward, offering further opportunity for the two to continue their exchange. To provide a glimpse of the interaction between Taylor and Burton, I include excerpts of Burton's account (along with his own footnote and original spellings) of the chance meeting:

On the evening of the 3rd September, whilst sauntering about the square in which a train of twenty-three wagons had just bivouacked: amongst the many others to whom Mr. S. introduced me, was the Apostle John Taylor, the "Champion of Rights," Speaker in the House, and whilome editor. I had heard of him from the best authorities as a man so morose and averse to Gentiles, "who made the healing virtue depart out of him," that it would be advisable to avoid his "fierceness." The *véridique* Mr. Austin Ward, describes him as "an old man deformed and crippled," and Mrs. Ferris as a "heavy dark-coloured beetle-browed man." Of course, I could not recognise him from these descriptions;—a stout, good-looking somewhat elderly personage, with a kindly grey eye, pleasant expression, and a forehead of the superior order; he talked of Westmoreland his birthplace, and of his European travels for a time, till the subject of Carthage coming upon the *tapis*, I suspected who my interlocutor was.¹³ Mr. S. burst out laughing when he heard my mistake, and I explained the

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reason to the Apostle, who laughed as heartily. Wishing to see more of him, I accompanied him in the carriage to the Sugar House Ward, where he was bound on business, and *chemin faisant* we had a long talk. . . . On our return, we resumed the subject of the massacre at Carthage, in which it will be remembered, Mr. John Taylor was severely wounded and escaped by a miracle as it were. I told him openly that there must have been some cause for the furious proceedings of the people in Illinois, Missouri, and other places against the Latter-Day Saints; that even those who had extended hospitality to them ended by hating and expelling them, and accusing them of all possible iniquities, especially of horse-thieving, forgery, larceny, and offences against property which on the borders are never pardoned—was this smoke quite without fire? He heard me courteously and in perfect temper, replied that no one claimed immaculateness for the Mormons; that the net cast into the sea brought forth evil as well as good fish, and that the Prophet was one of the labourers sent into the vineyard at the eleventh hour. At the same time that when the New Faith was stoutly struggling into existence, it was the object of detraction, odium, persecution—so, said Mr. Taylor. . . . He quoted the Mormon rules: —1. Worship what you like. 2. Leave your neighbour alone. 3. Vote for whom you please, . . . Mr. Taylor remarked that the Saints had been treated by the United States as the colonies had been treated by the Crown. . . . I heard for the first time this view of the question, and subsequently obtained from the Apostle a manuscript account, written *in extenso*, of his experience and his sufferings. It has been transferred in its integrity to Appendix No. 3.—the length forbidding its insertion in the text: a tone of candour, simplicity and honesty, renders it highly attractive.¹⁴

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This publicity break must have been great news for John Taylor. By this time he was entrenched as a Mormon spokesman and “Champion of Liberty” from having published the *Times and Seasons*, the *Nauvoo Neighbor*, the *Mormon* in New York City, and also the Book of Mormon in both French and German. Burton’s including the account of the Martyrdom in *The City of the Saints* underscored his respect for Taylor, provided Taylor additional credibility, and gave him access to a national audience to tell the story.

Taylor’s credibility—resulting from his moral authority as a legendary survivor of Carthage—combined with his profound skill with the pen were put to excellent use when he engaged vice president Schuyler Colfax in an important debate in 1869. When Colfax visited Utah to persuade Church leaders to concede to public opinion regarding the practice of plural families, Taylor responded to his criticisms. Subsequently Colfax derided the Saints for placing God’s laws higher than the laws of the land, stabbing sharply at Brigham Young’s authority. Serving a brief mission in Boston at the time, Taylor penned a reply that was published in the *New York Tribune* and Salt Lake City’s *Deseret News*. He mocked Colfax, suggesting that he should attend to the ills of society (crime, divorces, infanticide, prostitution, and so forth) before attempting to save the Mormons. The public reaction was so well received that when Taylor returned to Salt Lake City, he was the “lion of the valley.”¹⁵ Perhaps never before had the position of the Church been so masterfully presented and defended. The national publicity that Taylor’s reply received stung Colfax deeply enough to motivate a retort. Taylor, however, responded with a series of five letters to the *New York Herald* that persuasively outlined the Church’s side of the conflict with the federal government. They provided extensive detail of the abuses

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heaped upon the Church by local federal officials—“petty lords of misrule”¹⁶—and restated the Saints’ rights in a way the many readers in the nation could understand, if not appreciate and empathize with. B. H. Roberts wrote that “taking it all in all, this [public exchange] is doubtless the most important discussion in the history of the Church.”¹⁷ Clearly Taylor’s skill as a writer and fearless defender of the Church opened the door to such opportunities as this debate with Colfax, and his status as a witness and survivor of the Martyrdom of Joseph Smith provided fundamental credibility to his audiences.

TANGIBLE CONNECTION TO JOSEPH SMITH

During the forty-three years that followed his experiences with Joseph and Hyrum Smith in the Carthage Jail, John Taylor stood as a living witness and tangible connection between Joseph Smith and members of the Church. Beyond the public memory of the Martyrdom brought to mind by his public appearances, he made specific reference on numerous occasions to his wounds and sufferings in his writings and discourses. During a mission to France in 1855, Taylor conducted a number of public debates. In Boulougne-Sur-Mer (before he had completed his account of the Martyrdom), in giving a survey of his contact and connection with Joseph Smith, he stated, “I was with him living, and with him when he died, when he was murdered in Carthage jail by a ruthless mob . . . with their faces painted. I was there and was myself wounded; I at that time received four balls in my body.”¹⁸

This is a theme to which he returned throughout his life. During his presidency many years later, for example, at the Bowery in Salt Lake City, June 18, 1883, Taylor stated: “Joseph Smith never had many months of peace after he received the

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truth, and finally he was murdered in Carthage jail. I was with him on that occasion, and therefore know a little about it. And as I told this young man whose life had been attempted in Georgia; said I, ‘Brother Alexander, they shot at you and did’nt [*sic*] hit you, but when they shot at me they hit me; so that you got off a little easier than I did.’”¹⁹

On the afternoon of Sunday, February 10, 1884, one year before he slipped into hiding, Taylor delivered an address in the Assembly Hall on Temple Square and reminded the audience again of the role he played in Carthage:

I expected when I came into this Church, that I should be persecuted and proscribed. . . . But I believed that God had spoken, that the eternal principles of truth had been revealed, and that God had a work to accomplish which was in opposition to the ideas, views, and notions of men, and I did not know but it would cost me my life before I got through. It came pretty near it at one time; . . . I have had to ‘stand the racket’ in a way that many of you folks don’t know much about. . . . But I was in a worse scrape at Carthage jail, when Joseph and Hyrum were killed—penned up in a room and attacked by a blackened mob. I had to stand at the door and ward off the guns while they were trying to shoot us, and we without arms, . . . and I myself received four balls in my person; but then I am here yet.²⁰

These represent only a few of the numerous occasions in which Taylor made specific mention of his experiences in Carthage where he witnessed the final events in the life of Joseph Smith. He used his status in this regard to his advantage, leveraging the experience to defend the Church, engage outsiders, and preach the gospel.

CONCLUSION

Taylor stood as a witness to the Martyrdom of Joseph Smith for forty-three years and as sole eyewitness for thirty-three years, his colleague Willard Richards having passed away in 1854. As the fame of his having been seriously wounded but surviving the incident spread, international people took the time to interact with Taylor and further opened the way for him to engage outsiders in the national press, which further allowed him to use his literary abilities to reach hundreds of thousands, if not millions, during a time when such opportunities were almost unknown. Finally, he stood as a living witness and tangible connection between Joseph Smith and the members of the Church, which carried on for more than three times the duration of the Church's existence at the time of the Martyrdom. The record is clear that what he experienced on June 27, 1844, defined his persona in a significant respect for the remainder of his life.

To welcome his return to Nauvoo from Carthage and bolster his spirits after the tragedy, Eliza R. Snow penned the following lines in his honor. Her verses appeared in the August 1, 1844, edition of the *Times and Seasons*:

To Elder John Taylor

Thou Chieftain of Zion! henceforward thy name
Will be class'd with the martyrs and share in their fame;
Thro' ages eternal, of thee will be said,
'WITH THE GREATEST OF PROPHETS HE SUFFER'D AND BLED.

When the shafts of injustice were pointed at HIM—
When the cup of his suff'ring was fill'd to the brim—
When his innocent blood was inhumanly shed,
You shar'd his afflictions and with him you BLED.

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When around you like hailstones the rifle balls flew—
When the passage of death opened wide to your view—
When the prophet's freed spirit, thro' martyrdom fled,
In your gore you lay welt'ring—with the martyrs you BLED.

All the scars from your WOUNDS, like the trophies of yore
Shall be ensigns of honor till you are no more;
And by all generations, of thee shall be said,
'WITH THE BEST OF THE PROPHETS, IN PRISON HE BLED.

July 27, 1844²¹

As President of the Twelve, John Taylor succeeded Brigham Young as leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on Young's passing in 1877, and was sustained as President of the Church in 1880. During his administration, the pressure from federal authorities over plural families became so severe that rather than face interrogation and possible incarceration, he went into hiding in February of 1885, soon after his last public address. The rigors of that life took their toll on his health; he passed away quietly on July 28, 1887, at the age of seventy-nine. In announcing President Taylor's passing, his counselors George Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith reiterated his persona as witness to the Martyrdom:

By the miraculous power of God, President John Taylor escaped the death which the assassins of Carthage jail assigned for him. His blood was then mingled with the blood of the martyred Prophet and Patriarch. He has stood since *as a living martyr* for the truth. But today he occupies the place of a double martyr. President Taylor has been killed by the cruelty of officials who have, in this Territory, misrepresented the Government of the United States. There is not room to doubt that if he had been

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permitted to enjoy the comforts of home, the ministrations of his family, the exercise to which he had been accustomed, but of which he was deprived, he might have lived for many years yet.²²

John Taylor, using his gifts as a writer and orator, wielded a far-reaching influence both as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and as President of the Church. Matthias F. Cowley, reflecting on John Taylor's life and works, expressed the following: "I have heard Prest. Taylor speak in public many times, and it seemed to me that he enjoyed such power that he could drive his words down into your soul more effectively than any man to whom I ever listened. He was a power in the rebuke of iniquity and hypocrisy. The enemies of Truth fairly cringed under his scathing arraignment of their corruptions. . . . I can truly say that in thought and word and deed, he was the embodiment of purity, nobility and righteousness."²³

Taylor's contributions were monumental in his day and were bolstered by his status as witness to the Martyrdom. The special status he earned through his experiences in an obscure jail in Illinois on June 27, 1844, continues to the present day. Indeed, John Taylor is remembered as a survivor of the carnage of Carthage, and that experience defines to an important degree his reputation and prominence both inside and outside the Church.

NOTES

1. Robert J. Woodford, "The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1974).
2. For a comprehensive analysis of documenting the Martyrdom, see Dean C. Jessee, "Return to Carthage: Writing the History of Joseph Smith's Martyrdom," *Journal of Mormon History* 8, no. 8 (1981): 3–19.

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3. George A. Smith to C. C. Waller, July 31, 1855, and also George A. Smith to John Lyman [Smith], September 30, 1855, Historian's Office Letterbook 1, 264, and Historian Office Journal, August 26, 1854.
4. Wilford Woodruff to John Taylor, June 30, 1856, Historian's Office Letterbook 1, 315–20.
5. Woodruff to Taylor, June 30, 1856; emphasis added.
6. George A. Smith to Brigham Young, September 19, 1856, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
7. Richard F. Burton, *The City of the Saints: And Across the Rocky Mountains to California* (London: Harper and Brothers, 1862), appendix 3.
8. Daniel Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War: 1846–1848* (Salt Lake City, 1881), 10–64.
9. N. B. Lundwall, *The Fate of the Persecutors of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 167–212.
10. B. H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period 2: Apostolic Interregnum*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1957), 7:55–126.
11. Roberts, *History of the Church*, 7:xxii; emphasis added.
12. Mark H. Taylor, *Witness to the Martyrdom: John Taylor's Personal Account of the Last Days of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999).
13. John Taylor was in the jail at Carthage with Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum when they were killed. Taylor was himself hit five times, but survived (Burton's footnote).
14. Burton, *The City of the Saints*, 298–300.
15. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 375.
16. Mr. Fishback, "On the Pacific Road," *Indianapolis Journal*, October 12, 1871; cited in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930), 5:400.

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17. B. H. Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1892), 309.
18. John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), 355.
19. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1884), 24:198.
20. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 25:91–92.
21. Eliza R. Snow, "To Elder John Taylor," *Times and Seasons*, August 1, 1844, 5:607.
22. Roberts, *Life of John Taylor*, 413–14; emphasis added.
23. Matthias F. Cowley, "Reminiscences of Prest. John Taylor," MSS 1572, folder 2, Church History Library.