

“It Maketh My Bones to Quake”: Teaching Doctrine and Covenants 85

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“Oh, Lord, deliver us in due time from the little, narrow prison, almost as it were, total darkness of paper, pen and ink;—and a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language.”¹

Revelation from the Lord to mortals requires a certain gift of tongues. In the preface to the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord explained how He gave the revelations to the early Saints “after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24). The Prophet Joseph Smith’s history says it was an “awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord,” presumably because the effects of the tower of Babel are never more regrettable than when dealing with the revealed word of God.² Poets and prophets have often struggled for words in which to appropriately clothe the “solemnities of eternity” (D&C 43:34).³ As the epigraph above shows, Joseph Smith felt keenly what the Lord called “weakness” in writing, which seems to be a characteristic shared by some if not all prophets (D&C 1:24; see also Ether 12:23–27).

The Prophet’s lament at being imprisoned by “imperfect language” concludes a letter he wrote from Kirtland, Ohio, to William W. Phelps in Independence, Missouri, on November 27, 1832. A portion of that letter is now contained in Doctrine & Covenants 85. Verses 7–8 of that text have confused many readers. They speak about “one mighty and strong” and also warn against steadying the ark. Perhaps because their meaning is not explicit, they have been misinterpreted by deceivers who

were intent on leading the faithful astray as well as by sincere believers. In 1905, the First Presidency wrote of verses 7–8, “Perhaps no other passage in the revelations of the Lord, in this dispensation, has given rise to so much speculation as this one.”⁴ Two years later, a reader of the Latter-day Saint periodical *Improvement Era* wrote the magazine “asking to know the meaning of the 7th and 8th verses of section 85 of the Doctrine and Covenants.”⁵ That remains a common inquiry made by students of the revelations at all levels. This article tries to accomplish two objectives by responding to the question in three ways. First, we will situate the revelation historically, then analyze its content, and lastly review prophetic interpretations of it. Our first objective is to teach Doctrine and Covenants 85:7–8 substantively by what we say. Our second objective is to teach the verses stylistically by the way we say it, modeling how we might teach this and other revelations.

Origin

An effective way to introduce a revelation is to give an accurate sense of its origin. Because all revelation is conditioned by the circumstances that call it from above, specific knowledge of its context makes it more intelligible and minimizes the likelihood of misinterpretation. The seldom-read Explanatory Introduction to the Doctrine and Covenants explains that the revelations “were received in answer to prayer, in times of need, and came out of real-life situations involving real people.” The more we can learn about those situations and people, the better access we have to the revelation. The origin of section 85 and others can be learned by our answering the following two questions: first, What concerns called it from above? and second, What situations and people did it address? The answers to those questions follow, put as accurately and thoroughly, yet succinctly, as historical records and our limitations allow.

The Lord established the location of Zion as Jackson County, Missouri, in 1831 and appointed Church leaders to move there and lay economic and spiritual foundations for the Holy City of New Jerusalem (see D&C 58:7). First among those called was Edward Partridge, the first bishop of the Church. In answer to his revealed call, Partridge left all his merchandise in Painseville, Ohio, where missionaries had found him just a few months earlier, and moved to Missouri to devote himself entirely to building the kingdom of God (see D&C 41). Specifically, the Lord commissioned Partridge to receive the consecrated properties of gathering Saints, to assign inheritances to them sufficient for their needs, and to use surplus to buy more property and “administer to those who have not” (see D&C 42:29–34).⁶

Among the other early converts called to Missouri to build Zion was William W. Phelps. Phelps was a New Jersey native who converted in June 1831. Prior to his conversion, he had edited a partisan newspaper in Canandaigua, New York, not far south of the Palmyra-Manchester area. As with Partridge, the Lord called Phelps to redirect his abilities to holier ends, "as a printer unto the church" (D&C 57:11). Both men, along with others, were commanded to "be planted in the land of Zion, as speedily as can be, with their families, to do those things even as I have spoken. And now concerning the gathering—Let the bishop and the agent make preparations for those families which have been commanded to come to this land, as soon as possible, and plant them in their inheritance" (D&C 57:14–15). Like Partridge, Phelps heeded the call and relocated to Independence, Missouri.

In anticipation of the impending Millennium, Latter-day Saints began to gather to Independence zealously but not always sincerely, for some came with little or no intention of deeding their possessions to Bishop Partridge and in return receiving from him an inheritance sufficient for their needs (see D&C 42:29–33, 55; 51; 58:36). William McLellan, for example, forsook a mission call to get to Independence early enough to buy two lots on Main Street.⁷ He circumvented the bishop and the revealed law of Zion to behave individually, a characteristic outlawed by revelation (see D&C 1:16; 56:8; and later, 136:19).

On November 27, 1832, Joseph Smith wrote from Ohio to William W. Phelps in Independence, Missouri. Joseph discerned the question that troubled Phelps and, presumably, other leaders in Zion: "What shall become of those who are essaying to come up unto Zion, in order to keep the commandments of God, and yet receive not their inheritance by consecrations, by order of deed from the Bishop, the man that God has appointed in a legal way, agreeably to the law given to organize and regulate the Church?"⁸ As the Prophet answered that question in the letter, words came powerfully to him by "the still small voice" to forewarn the Saints about potential temptations and contentions detrimental to Zion (D&C 85:6). This warning included verses 7–9 of section 85.

Content

"Let the Lord speak for Himself to you," wrote President Gordon B. Hinckley.⁹ Elder Neal A. Maxwell added, "If asked which book of scripture provides the most frequent chance to 'listen' to the Lord talking, most individuals would at first think of the New Testament. The New Testament is a marvelous collection of the deeds and many

of the doctrines of the Messiah. But in the Doctrine and Covenants we receive the voice as well as the word of the Lord. We can almost ‘hear’ him talking.”¹⁰ From its preface to its conclusion, from the first word to last, the Doctrine and Covenants commands us to “hearken” (seventy-one times) or “listen to the voice of Jesus Christ” (eighteen times) and to “give ear to him who laid the foundation of the earth” (D&C 45:1). No theme is more emphatic or commandment more frequent than the directive to listen to Jesus speak in His first-person voice (160 times). All who teach revelation should facilitate such listening and beware of methods that inhibit it.

Because teachers cannot possibly cover all the verses in a given scripture block during class, they are required to select which verses they will highlight and discuss with the students in the allotted time. One of the first challenges for teachers, then, is to select prayerfully the content that will best meet the spiritual needs of their students.

Sometimes the content of revelation can be overshadowed by the delivery; that is, *what* the scriptures say can be eclipsed by the *way* we say it. That is why one of the most potent ways to present revelation is to simply allow the Lord to speak for Himself. Scriptural language is condensed with the Spirit, and the meaning can be diluted by careless readings, intellectual curiosity, or excessive commentary. Teachers can facilitate the spiritual development of their students by training them to ponder carefully the text itself. As students are constantly redirected to the text for answers, the Lord individually assists them to discover truth for themselves.

In that light, read the following verses from section 85, paying careful attention to the elements of the Lord’s voice. What words does He choose? what imagery does He reflect? What does He emphasize and repeat? What rationale informs His statements?

Yea, thus saith the still small voice, which whispereth through and pierceth all things, and often times it maketh my bones to quake while it maketh manifest, saying:

And it shall come to pass that I, the Lord God, will send one mighty and strong, holding the scepter of power in his hand, clothed with light for a covering, whose mouth shall utter words, eternal words; while his bowels shall be a fountain of truth, to set in order the house of God, and to arrange by lot the inheritances of the Saints whose names are found, and the names of their fathers, and of their children, enrolled in the book of the law of God;

While that man, who was called of God and appointed, that putteth

forth his hand to steady the ark of God, shall fall by the shaft of death, like as a tree that is smitten by the vivid shaft of lightning. (D&C 85:6–8)

The Prophet Joseph wanted no doubt as to the source of these words. He concluded, "These things I say not of myself; therefore, as the Lord speaketh, he will also fulfill" (D&C 85:10). Whatever the meaning of these verses, we may know that they are authentic and that "the prophecies and promises which are in them shall all be fulfilled" (D&C 1:37) in the Lord's "own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will" (D&C 88:68).

Interpretation and Application

Teaching the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants includes helping students understand and apply them. Successful teachers are careful in interpreting what the Lord has said, lest by their authoritative position they mislead trusting students. One student became distraught upon learning that an idea taught in a seminary discussion of section 76 was false. The teacher had explained D&C 76:89—"the glory of the telestial, which surpasses all understanding"—by telling the students that Joseph Smith taught that one would commit suicide to gain admittance to the telestial kingdom. That is not what the revelation says, nor is it what Joseph Smith apparently said.¹¹ These methods evoke awe that is counterfeit to the profound reverence the revelations themselves generate when they are studied on their own terms. With such rich texts, teachers need not resort to anything less than carefully presented, authoritative information to help students understand and apply what the Lord has said. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said that

philosophies of men interlaced with a few scriptures and poems just won't do. Are we really nurturing our youth and our new members in a way that will sustain them when the stresses of life appear? Or are we giving them a kind of theological Twinkie—spiritually empty calories? President John Taylor once called such teaching "fried froth," the kind of thing you could eat all day and yet finish feeling totally unsatisfied. During a severe winter several years ago, President Boyd K. Packer noted that a goodly number of deer had died of starvation while their stomachs were full of hay. In an honest effort to assist, agencies had supplied the superficial when the substantial was what had been needed. Regrettably they had *fed* the deer but they had not *nourished* them.¹²

Over time, traditional interpretations of the revelations develop. They are frequently based in part on prophetic statements but are necessarily selective. As these interpretations are repeated orally and in print, they gain credibility but may lose touch with sensitive nuances of

the original statements. Such commentary becomes food but not nourishment. “Search these commandments,” the Lord said in His preface to the Doctrine and Covenants, “for they are true and faithful” (D&C 1:37; emphasis added). Following that instruction takes determined effort to plumb the depths of the revelations.

Although the primary tool the Lord has given us to understand His words is the Spirit (see John 16:13), informed commentaries are valuable resources that aid teachers in preparation and presentation. Successful teachers use commentary merely as a means to the end of searching the commandments themselves, looking carefully to prophets for guidance while feasting on the words of revelation. Commentaries can undermine “search[ing] these commandments” if they are used as an end rather than as a means.

Oliver Cowdery and William Phelps, the recipients of the letter in which the revelation being considered here was written, may have been the first to seek commentary on the meaning of what is now Doctrine and Covenants 85:7–8. The earliest prophetic commentary we have comes to us from Joseph Smith via Oliver Cowdery. Though hearsay, there is no reason to doubt its reliability. On January 1, 1834, Oliver Cowdery wrote from Ohio, where he worked closely with the Prophet, to John Whitmer in Missouri. Specifically addressing issues raised in Joseph’s November 1832 letter to Phelps, Cowdery clarified the need to keep accurate membership records, and then he added this: “Brother Joseph says, that the item in his letter that says, that the man that is called &c. and puts forth his hand to steady the ark of God, does not mean that any had at the time, but it was given for a caution to those in high standing to beware, lest they should fall by the vivid shaft of death as the Lord had said.”¹³ This crucial statement suggests an order of events that helps us understand the revelation better.

At the writing of the revelation in November 1832, the Lord was warning against the tendency to be officious. He did not, apparently, intend to condemn past behavior of Edward Partridge or William Phelps, which had apparently been repented of, but wanted to forewarn them against potential weakness.¹⁴ The Lord foresaw that Partridge and others might succumb to the temptation to steady the ark by tinkering with the Lord’s revealed will for establishing Zion. Later, in 1868, Orson Pratt emphasized the future tense of what is now Doctrine and Covenants 85:8: “He will send one ordained to this purpose, and to fulfill this particular duty, that the saints may receive their inheritances after they have consecrated everything in their possession. Then we can build up a city that will be a city of perfection.”¹⁵ Orson Pratt also

taught that the "one mighty and strong" would be an "immortal personage,—one that is clothed upon with light as with a garment."¹⁶ He believed that the prophecy referred to a time following the resurrection when the "earth will be given to the Saints of the Most High for an inheritance to be divided among them."¹⁷

By 1905, speculation had surged through the Church as to who would fulfill the prophecy of the "one mighty and strong"—a role some assumed for themselves. An official explanation of verses 7 and 8 seemed necessary. Accordingly, the First Presidency published a letter in the *Deseret Evening News* on November 11, 1905, undersigned by Presidents Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund. The First Presidency chose to examine critically the verses by using historical and deductive methods. Though authoritative, their treatment acknowledged that "all are capable of receiving larger information, and more and more light respecting the things which God reveals."¹⁸

The 1905 First Presidency letter first addressed the problem of those "who have so far proclaimed themselves as being the 'one mighty and strong,'" censoring them for "having manifested the utmost ignorance of the things of God and the order of the Church."¹⁹ The Presidency concluded that "when the man who shall be called upon to divide unto the Saints their inheritances comes, he will be designated by the inspiration of the Lord to the proper authorities of the Church, appointed and sustained according to the order provided for the government of the Church."²⁰ By so saying, the Presidency affirmed the well-established article of faith that a man must be called of God and properly appointed by those already in authority in the Church.

Because the prophecy of "one mighty and strong" lent itself to deceivers who aspired to become prophets, the Presidency clarified that verse 7 referred specifically to the office of bishop because in 1832 it was the bishop's duty to "arrange by lot the inheritances of the saints" in Zion (D&C 85:7). At the time of the revelation, Edward Partridge shouldered this responsibility of dividing the inheritances among the faithful in Jackson County, Missouri. Partridge became a key figure in the First Presidency's analysis of section 85, in which their treatment of verse 7 yielded two alternative interpretations. The first interpretation made verse 7 contingent upon Bishop Partridge's faithfulness; in other words, *if* Edward Partridge failed in his duties and fell into transgression, *then* the Lord would call "one mighty and strong" to replace him (see D&C 42:10). The second interpretation held that the prophecy may yet be fulfilled in the future. The Presidency seemed to prefer the former but allowed for the possibility of the latter interpretation. "If

. . . there are those who will still insist that the prophecy concerning the coming of ‘one mighty and strong’ is still to be regarded as to the future, let the Latter-day Saints know that he will be a future bishop of the church who will be with the Saints in Zion. . . . This future bishop will also be called and appointed of God as Aaron of old, and as Edward Partridge was. He will be designated by the inspiration of the Lord, and will be accepted and sustained by the whole Church.”²¹

The second issue discussed in the letter was the matter of steadying the ark in Doctrine and Covenants 85:8. In ancient Israel, a man named Uzza “put forth his hand to hold the ark; for the oxen stumbled” (1 Chronicles 13:9). The Lord smote Uzza and he died, illustrating the fate of those who seek to manage the affairs of God without authority. The First Presidency reviewed the historical circumstances surrounding Joseph’s missive to William W. Phelps and concluded that Edward Partridge was “that man, who was called of God and appointed, that putteth forth his hand to steady the ark of God” (D&C 85:8). Joseph Smith had reproved Edward Partridge in March 1832.²² But Cowdery clarified that Joseph did not consider anyone guilty of ark steadying as of November 1832. However, a March 30, 1834, letter from Joseph to Edward Partridge and William Phelps specifically rebuked them, stating that “men should not attempt to steady the ark of God!”²³ Edward Partridge repented for presuming too much. The First Presidency stated that the Lord “forgave [him] his sins, and withheld the execution of the judgment pronounced against him.”²⁴ Bishop Partridge thus avoided being punished “like as a tree that is smitten by the vivid shaft of lightning” (D&C 85:8).

In summary, the 1905 First Presidency letter became the definitive statement on the meaning of verses 7 and 8 and later formed the bedrock for all future commentary written upon the subject. The letter was aimed at apostates who claimed to be the “one mighty and strong,” concluding that either Edward Partridge’s repentance abolished the need for the “one” or that the “one” would serve at some future day as a bishop in Zion. Finally, the letter identified Bishop Partridge as a man who had attempted to steady the ark. The Presidency did not believe, however, that their analysis of verses 7 and 8 was either comprehensive or final.²⁵

The twentieth century witnessed a blossoming of scriptural commentary and scholarship. During this period of doctrinal refinement and intellectual enlightenment, Elder Hyrum M. Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and Janne M. Sjodahl published their significant commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants in 1919. In their treatment of section 85, they quoted extensively from the First Presidency

letter and reiterated the Presidency's conclusions. Although Smith and Sjodahl did not enlarge upon the Presidency's analysis, their work widely disseminated the 1905 letter and became the standard for all future commentaries on section 85.

In 1960, Sidney B. Sperry took up the torch in his *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium*. Referring to verses 7 and 8, he said, "In my humble opinion, the vigorous discussions in the past—and even at present—on these two questions were—and are—veritable tempests in a teapot."²⁶ Sperry quoted the same two paragraphs of the First Presidency letter as Smith and Sjodahl earlier. The edited version of the 1905 letter, quoted now in two of the most respected commentaries, thus passed to another generation.

Since 1960, dozens of commentaries have benefited scholars and students alike in their study of the Doctrine and Covenants. Although it is impossible to list them all here, it is not surprising to find that each has repeated or paraphrased the contents of the First Presidency letter. Through the years, the general integrity of the First Presidency's analysis has been preserved. Modern commentaries declare that Edward Partridge was "that man" who steadied the ark. Yet it may be more accurate to say that Partridge was among the men forewarned by the revelation not to steady the ark, which he and others subsequently did, and that they then repented after Joseph rebuked their behavior.²⁷ As for the "one mighty and strong," alternative interpretations posited by the First Presidency in 1905 are reflected in the commentaries published since. Some scholars still leave open the possibility of a future role for the "one," whereas others decisively declare that "all that was written by revelation in the letter was contingent upon the unfaithfulness of the bishop," and therefore Edward Partridge's repentance nullified the need for the "one."²⁸

It is interesting to note that the last paragraph of the Presidency letter is usually not included in the commentaries, which is surprising because introductions and conclusions are often the most carefully crafted. The Presidency stated that "men of exceptional talents and abilities . . . will be called of the Lord through the appointed agencies of the Priesthood . . . just as Edward Partridge was called and accepted, and just as the 'one mighty and strong' will be called and accepted when the time comes for his services."²⁹ This, together with the First Presidency's declaration that there is yet "more light respecting the things which God reveals," should keep teachers of modern revelation from waxing too dogmatic when interpreting Doctrine and Covenants 85:7–8.

Conclusion

For those who study and teach the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, a key to understanding each one is knowledge of its subtext. Historical records cannot infallibly provide this, and a superficial historical background may actually distort our understanding of a revelation. Even so, the Lord's words become more meaningful as we understand the environment in which they were spoken.

Our testimony is that accurate historical information unflinchingly confirms that the Lord's words are more prescient, penetrating, and powerful than we might have previously recognized. Moreover, prophetic statements help us interpret and apply revelations. Still, the most important thing we can teach is the revelation itself. The Lord has a distinct voice that profoundly influences all who listen to Him intently. Teachers and students should appreciate the revelations of Jesus Christ enough to spend the bulk of their time letting the Lord speak for Himself. If He needs an interpreter, His living revelators will furnish further light from time to time, always acknowledging the first rule of revelation—namely, there is more to come. ■■

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948), 1:299.

2. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:226.

3. Despite mortal limitations in language, the Lord speaks unto His children “that [they] may naturally understand” (D&C 29:33). The Doctrine and Covenants is, among other things, evidence of the Lord's ongoing effort to instruct His people “more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand” (D&C 88:78).

4. Joseph F. Smith and others, “One Mighty and Strong,” *Deseret Evening News*, November 11, 1905, 4.

5. “One Mighty and Strong,” *Improvement Era*, October 1907, 929–43. The *Improvement Era* reproduction of the 1905 First Presidency letter gives the wrong date for that letter's publication in the *Deseret Evening News*. For the correct date, see note 4.

6. Scott H. Partridge, “Edward Partridge in Painesville, Ohio,” *BYU Studies* 42, no.1 (2003): 50–71.

7. Steven C. Harper, “Drawing Lessons from a Life: William McLellin, 1831–1832,” in *Lives of the Saints*, ed. Jill Mulvay Derr (Provo, UT: Joseph F. Smith Institute for LDS History, 2002), 77–82.

8. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, in Dean C. Jessee, comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 284–87.

9. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Improvement Era*, June 1966, 531; see also Gordon B. Hinckley, "Words of the Prophet: Search the Scriptures," *New Era*, April 2000, 4.
10. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Doctrine and Covenants: The Voice of the Lord," *Ensign*, December 1978.
11. In 1900, Lorin Farr reported having heard Joseph Smith say something like, "If we knew the condition of the spirits in the spirit world, thousands would commit suicide to get there" (Weber Stake High Priests Quorum Minute Book, 1896–1929, series 13, vol. 1, October 27, 1900, 110). Charles Lowell Walker heard Wilford Woodruff refer to Joseph teaching "that if the People knew what was behind the veil, they would try by every means to commit suicide that they might get there, but the Lord in his wisdom had implanted the fear of death in every person that they might cling to life and thus accomplish the designs of their creator" (A. Karl Larson and Katherine M. Larson, eds., *The Diary of Charles Lowell Walker* [Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1980], 1:465–66).
12. Jeffrey R. Holland, "A Teacher Come from God," *Ensign*, May 1998, 25.
13. Oliver Cowdery to John Whitmer, January 1, 1834, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
14. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 40–42, 45; see also D&C 60:10; 64:17.
15. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 12:316–23.
16. Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:146–54.
17. Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:146–54.
18. "One Mighty and Strong," *Improvement Era*, 931.
19. "One Mighty and Strong," *Improvement Era*, 930.
20. "One Mighty and Strong," *Improvement Era*, 930.
21. "One Mighty and Strong," *Improvement Era*, 940–41.
22. "Bro Edward [Partridge] it is very dangerous for men who have received the light he has to be seeking after a sign. . . . Remember Ananias & Sapphira" (Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, July 31, 1832, in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 273); Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:226.
23. Joseph Smith to Edward Partridge, William Phelps, and others, in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 337; Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:226.
24. "One Mighty and Strong," *Improvement Era*, 940.
25. "One Mighty and Strong," *Improvement Era*, 931.
26. Sidney B. Sperry, *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 411.
27. In 1879, John Taylor reported hearing Joseph rebuke Bishop Partridge sometime between 1837 and 1840. According to Taylor, Partridge "was a splendid good man, as Bishop Hunter is. But he got some crooked ideas into his head; he thought he ought to manage some things irrespective of Joseph, which caused Joseph to speak rather sharply to him. Joseph said, I wish you to understand that I am President of this Church, and I am your president, and I preside over you and all your affairs" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:36).
28. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1946), 2:114.
29. "One Mighty and Strong," *Improvement Era*, 942–43