

Introduction

The Grand Tapestry of the Restoration

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The recorded history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints documents the opening of the heavens and the ongoing dissemination of divine light. “These were days never to be forgotten,” recalled Oliver Cowdery, one early witness to the translation of the Book of Mormon and to angelic visitations (Joseph Smith—History 1:71, note). Later, in 1836, the Prophet Joseph Smith himself added, “The occurrences of this day shall be handed down upon the pages of sacred history to all generations.”¹ Writing to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat* in 1842, the Prophet further declared that a “standard of truth has been erected.”² This standard called on all people to “hearken . . . [to] the voice of the Lord” through “the mouths of [his] disciples, whom [he had] chosen in these last days” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:1–2, 4).

The history of the establishment of the Church and the teachings that emerged from the Lord through these disciples are essential to the faith today. While Latter-day Saints believe in being honest, virtuous, and in doing good (see Articles of Faith 1:13), the theology of the Church is more than a collection of moral teachings. It is rooted in historical accounts of divine dealings in the latter days. Professors Douglas Tobler

and George Ellsworth summarized, “History plays a vital role in [Latter-day Saint] thought, where it joins with theology and practical religion to answer many of life’s questions and to make daily life meaningful, intelligible, and worthwhile. . . . The foundations of the Church are grounded in a series of historic events, without which the Restoration would be incomprehensible and impotent.”³ For Latter-day Saints, the historical events of the Church, especially those during its earliest decades, are foundational to building faith.

Raising the Standard of Truth explores the events and teachings of the early years of the restoration of the Church. Designed as a companion to personal and family study of the Doctrine and Covenants and Church history, the book is a collection of writings by experts from Brigham Young University, the Church History Department, and the Joseph Smith Papers and also by independent scholars and writers, compiled from materials produced by the Religious Studies Center at BYU. This collection represents some of the center’s most frequently requested publications, including seminal works on the history of the Church. The conclusion of each section contains lists of additional resources available at rsc.byu.edu, home to hundreds of books and articles on Latter-day Saint history and doctrine.

The Religious Studies Center was founded in 1975 by Jeffrey R. Holland, then dean of Religious Instruction. Its mission is to encourage, sponsor, and publish serious, faithful, gospel-related materials. In its four decades of existence, the press has produced more than two hundred books and one thousand articles examining the scripture, doctrine, and history of the Church in a scholarly way and from a position of faith. On the occasion of its fortieth anniversary, Elder Holland commented on the Center’s future: “I would like this to become known as the scholarly voice of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on matters that would normally be considered as ‘religious studies.’ When people think, ‘Where do I look to see the real heartbeat of intellectual life and academic contribution for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,’ I want them to think BYU, and at BYU, when the issue is religious scholarship, I want them to think of the Religious Studies Center. . . . I would like it to dive down vertically and really put out first-rate, foundational products, which it seems to me we are beginning to do.”⁴

True to that charge, *Raising the Standard of Truth* seeks to present some of these “first-rate, foundational products” on the history of the Church that have been written over the last several years. The volume begins with events in New York and Pennsylvania in the 1820s. Professor Steven C. Harper of Brigham Young University examines Joseph Smith’s accounts

of his First Vision, demonstrating how a perspective of faith can assist a seeker in responding to criticisms of that pivotal event. Turning attention to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, fellow professors and Joseph Smith Papers scholars Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat carefully examine eyewitness accounts of the translation process. Professors Amy Easton-Flake and Rachel Cope add the crucial perspectives of female witnesses, and Professor Anthony Sweat describes the witnessing power of the Book of Mormon relics. Together, these articles argue that future studies of the translation of the Book of Mormon should be grounded in the “well-documented religious experience given in the words of those who experienced it.” Shining light on one of the most painful episodes early in the Restoration, associate dean of Religious Education J. B. Haws narrates what we know, don’t know, and even might know about the loss of 116 pages of Book of Mormon manuscript. Concluding this section of the book, Ronald Barney, retired historian and archivist for the history department of the Church and former associate editor of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, traces the gradual unfolding of the gospel and priesthood authority at the hands of angelic ministers including John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John. He outlines a story that is “far more complex and impressive in scope than is generally recognized.”

The book’s second section follows the Church as it moves west from New York, with members dividing among Church centers in Ohio and Missouri throughout the 1830s. Here membership expanded while practical applications of gospel teachings began to take root. These include locating and attempting to establish Zion as well as implementing the law of consecration, topics explored by scholars Casey Griffiths and Taunalyne Rutherford. Steven Harper writes of the revelatory process employed by the Prophet, especially as it relates to the numerous revelations in the current Doctrine and Covenants that emerged in this era. Among these revelations are soaring visions of celestial worlds and profound truths regarding redemption available through Jesus Christ, themes explored by Jennifer C. Lane, dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University–Hawaii. This section of the text concludes with chapters on one of the Church’s highest highs, the dedication of the first temple in this dispensation in Kirtland, Ohio, followed by one of its lowest lows, the imprisonment of Latter-day Saint leaders in Liberty Jail and the expulsion of the Church from Missouri.

Following the harrowing experiences of the winter of 1838–39, members and leaders sought refuge in Nauvoo, Illinois, the era discussed

in the third section of *Raising the Standard of Truth*. In the City of Joseph, the Church's theology deepened as the Prophet felt an urgency to convey eternal truth even while a temple slowly rose on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River. Professor and Joseph Smith Papers editor Alexander L. Baugh recounts the teaching and practice of baptism for the dead in Nauvoo, while Rachel Cope challenges us to reclaim the early history of the Relief Society. "If we teach younger generations of students to consider the importance of Relief Society history—to value God's salvific work as engaged in by women," Professor Cope argues, "remembering will inevitably follow." In this section, RSC executive editor Devan Jensen and Professors Michael Goodman and Barbara Morgan Gardner also examine the Saints' growing understanding of the eternity of the family relationship, while Joseph Smith Papers editor and associate dean of Religious Education Andrew H. Hedges discusses the extension of that understanding to the controversial practice of plural marriage. Exploring the animosity this practice created among enemies of the Church, Professor Hedges concludes the Nauvoo section of the volume by probing the antagonists and events that led to the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith.

Though the Prophet and Patriarch were gone, no unhallowed hand could stop the work from progressing. The final section of *Raising the Standard of Truth* follows the leadership of Brigham Young in resolving the succession crisis and organizing an orderly exodus across the plains of America. Chad M. Orton, a specialist for the Church History Department, demonstrates not only that the revelations guiding the westward migration provided answers to the Saints' immediate questions, but also that the lessons learned "regarding the importance of keeping sacred covenants and obeying the revealed word of the Lord remain relevant today." Once the Saints were settled in the West, however, opposition continued to rage. Eric Perkins and Mary Jane Woodger discuss John Taylor's leadership of the Church from "the underground" through the tumultuous antipolygamy crusade. Turning to the twentieth century, Professor Richard E. Bennett examines the context for President Joseph F. Smith's profound vision of "the hosts of the dead, both small and great" (Doctrine and Covenants 138:11), including the work of redemption that occurs among them. Continuing the theme of how the work of salvation is expanding on both sides of the veil, historian W. Paul Reeve concludes the volume, examining the challenging story of priesthood and temple restrictions due to race. He argues that President Spencer W. Kimball's 1978 revelation authorizing

blessings of the priesthood and the temple for all of God's children was a return to the some of the Church's earliest universalistic roots.

While readers will note that many articles explore well-known episodes from our history in new and insightful ways, the volume examines difficult topics as well. Authors present ways they grapple with some of the challenging aspects of our history in the context of faith. This coincides with what President M. Russell Ballard called “extraordinary efforts” on the part of the Church “to provide accurate context and understanding of the teachings of the Restoration.” In fact, he charged gospel teachers, including those featured in this volume, to “be among the first—outside students’ own families—to introduce authoritative sources on topics that may be less well-known or controversial so that students will measure whatever they hear or read later against what they have already been taught.” Calling this process a “spiritual inoculation,” President Ballard continued: “Inoculate them by providing faithful, thoughtful, and accurate interpretation of gospel doctrine, the scriptures, our history, and those topics that are sometimes misunderstood. To name a few such topics that are less known or controversial, I’m talking about plural marriage, seer stones, different accounts of the First Vision, the process of translation of the Book of Mormon or the book of Abraham, gender issues, race and the priesthood, and a Heavenly Mother.” It is likely that all readers, at one time or another, have experienced the reality that encountering new information can be initially unsettling. However, chapters in this collection discuss many of these topics because, as President Ballard concluded, “the effort for gospel transparency and spiritual inoculation through a thoughtful study of doctrine and history, coupled with a burning testimony, is the best antidote we have to help students avoid and deal with questions, doubt, or faith crises they may face in this information age.”⁵

Through studying early history and teachings in greater depth, Latter-day Saint readers will witness what President Russell M. Nelson called the seeds of “a process of restoration” that continues to expand around the globe.⁶ It is a “magnificent tapestry,” President Gordon B. Hinckley likewise declared. Strands of suffering and sacrifice entwine with threads of revelation and redemption to form a pattern that persists today. “Weave beautifully your small thread in the grand tapestry, the pattern for which was laid out for us by the God of heaven,” President Hinckley charged. “Hold high the standard under which we walk. Be diligent, be true, be virtuous, be faithful, that there may be no flaw in that banner.”⁷ Indeed, against that

banner, “persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished and the great Jehovah shall say the work is done.”⁸

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As a collection of articles by two dozen scholars and other professionals, this book would not be possible without the help of many people. First, I thank the authors who generously cooperated to share their scholarship and, where necessary, to update portions of its content. Their work is supported by dozens of peers who reviewed these manuscripts before their previous printing and by four additional reviewers who helped select from among our considerable collection what to ultimately include in the volume. The staff of the BYU Religious Studies Center, including managing editor Don Brugger, student editing intern Myla Parke, and lead designer Emily Strong, worked tirelessly to prepare the book for publication. They were assisted by RSC publications coordinator Joany Pinegar, business and production supervisor Brent Nordgren, dean of Religious Education Daniel K Judd, and associate deans J. B. Haws and Andrew Hedges, as well as the staff of Deseret Book Company, with whom we are grateful to partner. In addition to publishing important and impactful content, one of the great joys of working at the Religious Studies Center is to associate with so many people who love and live the message of the Restoration.

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, Journal, 1835–1836, in *The Joseph Smith Papers, Journals*, 1:216.
2. Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842, 709.
3. Douglas F. Tobler and S. George Ellsworth, “History, Significance to Latter-day Saints,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:595–96.
4. Quoted in Thomas A. Wayment, “The RSC Turns Forty: A Conversation with Elder Jeffrey R. Holland,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 3.
5. M. Russell Ballard, “By Study and by Faith,” *Ensign*, December 2016, 25–26.
6. Russell M. Nelson, in “Interview with President Nelson and Elder Stevenson in Chile,” Church Newsroom, YouTube video, October 30, 2018, 5:09–6:28, [youtube.com/watch?v=hOc2R2lpK7w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOc2R2lpK7w).
7. Gordon B. Hinckley, “An Ensign to the Nations,” *Ensign*, November 1989, 53–54.
8. Smith, “Church History,” 709.