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we send our respects to Fathers, Mothers, wives,  
 and children, Brothers, and sisters, we hold them in the  
 most sacred remembrance and that of the Lord. ~~the~~  
~~the first of the month we feel to inquire~~  
 after Eliza Rigdon if he has not forgotten us it has not  
 been signified to us by his presence. Another large is  
 Robinson also and Eliza Leavenworth we remember him but  
 quite that of his memory. ~~in the~~ ~~of the~~  
 and the two friends who mutually agreed to stand by each  
 other and perhaps it would not be amiss to mention in the  
 before a few anxious others, a word of consolation and a  
 blessing would not come amiss from any body while  
 we are being so much whipped by the Bair but we feel  
 to excuse every body and every thing, yes the more readily  
 when we contemplate that we are in the hands of a  
 than a Bair for the Bair would not pray upon a  
 dear carcass. Our respects and love and fellowship to  
 all the virtuous saints we are your Brothers and  
 Sisters in Christ, for the sake of the Lord, for the  
 sake of the Lord, for the sake of the Lord, for the  
 sake of the Lord, Amen

Joseph Smith  
 Hiram Johnson  
 George V. Pratt  
 Caleb B. Baskin  
 Alexander McLane

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As teachers come to recognize the means by which the Lord speaks to his servants, they can seek for the eyes to see how he is working with and through them to develop their capacity to bless their students.

# *Uncovering the Voice of the Lord: Analysis and Implications of Joseph Smith's Letter from Liberty Jail*

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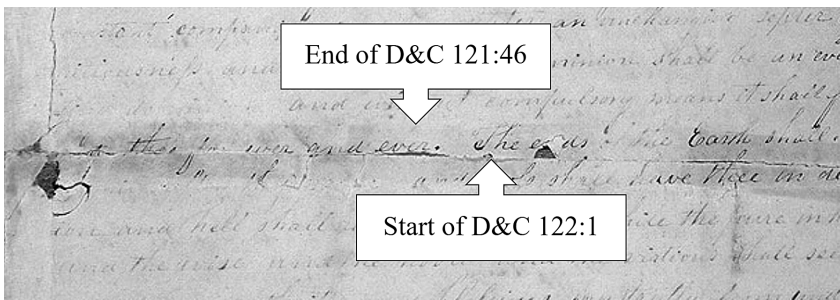
Joseph Smith's experience in Liberty Jail stands among the most faith-challenging, helpless, and discouraging moments of his life. His letters during this time are of such significance that portions have been canonized as scripture and are among the most cited sections by church leaders in general conference.<sup>1</sup> This paper provides an exegesis of portions of Joseph Smith's Liberty Jail letters with a specific focus on the transition in pronoun usage in his dictation of Doctrine and Covenants 121 and 122. Despite ample scholarly attention on these letters, there appears to be limited discussion regarding Joseph's change of language in the verses leading from section 121 to 122. It is our position that the use of formal pronouns consistently mirrors voice transitions between Joseph's voice and the Lord's. This study expands our understanding of Joseph's revelatory experience and has implications for the Saints and religious educators. For clarity, we recommend the reader refer to a copy of the Doctrine and Covenants as they read the article.

## Context and Background for the Letter and Canonization

Joseph and other close associates were held captive in Liberty Jail from December 1838 to April 1839. In March 1839, more than three months into their confinement and facing a potential death sentence, Joseph dictated two different letters addressed to Bishop Edward Partridge and the Saints.<sup>2</sup> The letters were likely sent together and therefore will be referred to by the designation, “the Liberty letter,”<sup>3</sup> unless specific dating assists with clarity.

Joseph did not claim that his letter from Liberty Jail was revelation as he did with other sections of the Doctrine and Covenants; therefore, the canonization of portions of the letter makes these sections unique.<sup>4</sup> Nearly 60 percent of the Liberty letter was not canonized.<sup>5</sup> An examination of the Liberty letter shows where the canonized portions of the text fall in relation to the other dictated text. The canonized text often omits large segments of the letter and places verses in sequence that were not originally connected.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, the text is separated by the placement of the section 122 heading. Figure 1 illustrates this textual phenomenon and shows how the concluding lines of section 121 and the beginning text of section 122 were originally connected.

This is significant for scriptural understanding. When portions of the letter are placed sequentially and read out of the context of the full letter<sup>7</sup> or divided by section headings (as in Doctrine and Covenants 121:46 and 122:1), the author’s intent may be lost and alternative conclusions could be made.<sup>8</sup> Thus viewing the excerpts in context can enhance understanding, while dividing portions of the letters may cause natural flow and feeling to be lost.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 1.** March 22, 1839, letter showing the placement of the section break between Doctrine and Covenants 121 and 122. Joseph Smith Papers Project, © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. [www.josephsmithpapers.org](http://www.josephsmithpapers.org)

Section headings are study helps added to provide background information to assist readers in understanding the “divine revelations and inspired declarations” of the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>10</sup> In the 1876 edition, Orson Pratt wrote in the heading that section 121 contained, “A Prayer and Prophecies, written by Joseph, the Seer, while in Liberty jail, Clay County, Missouri, March 20, 1839.”<sup>11</sup> The heading for section 121 in each of the 1876, 1981, and 2013 editions retains Pratt’s declaration of the contents. Each edition also includes a heading for section 122, “The word of the Lord to Joseph Smith the Prophet,” again demonstrating reliance on Pratt’s placement and wording of the headings.<sup>12</sup> Since there was no break in the letter where the heading for section 122 was placed, we questioned when and where the section transitioned from “prayer and prophecies of Joseph Smith” for Edward Partridge and the Saints into “the word of the Lord to Joseph Smith,” and whether the letter itself supports Pratt’s suggestion of divine authorship.

### The Voice of the Lord or Joseph?

As one might expect in the letter, Joseph’s voice is dominant in the text. He shares his personal revelatory experiences, rails against the injustices inflicted upon the Saints, offers counsel applicable to their circumstances, and relays how they should move forward while he was a prisoner. He regularly speaks in first person informal pronouns (us, we, our) and second person informal pronouns (you, your) as he dictates his message, feelings, and insights to his scribes. However, in portions of the letter the voice of the Lord appears distinct, such as in Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–25, in which the text is addressed to “My son” and formal pronouns are used (thy, thine, thou, thee). Much of the scholarly work on sections 121–23 acknowledges, but does not focus or elaborate on, the change of voice reflected in the text. These transitions from Joseph to the voice of the Lord seem to appear throughout the letter and undergird the assertion that the Lord spoke through Joseph Smith. This will be shown by analyzing Joseph’s use of pronouns, identifying the transitional language used when the Lord speaks, looking for textual markers regarding

7 My son, “peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment;

8 And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes.

9 Thy friends do stand by thee, and they shall hail thee again with warm hearts and friendly hands.

10 Thou art not yet as Job; thy friends do not contend against thee; neither charge thee with transgression, as they did Job.

11 And they who do charge thee with transgression, their hope shall be blasted, and their prospects shall melt away as the hoar frost melteth before the burning rays of the rising sun;

12 And also that God hath set his hand and seal to change the times and seasons, and to blind their minds, that they may not understand his marvelous workings; that he may prove them also and take them in their own craftiness;

13 Also because their hearts are

**Figure 2.** Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–12 (2013 edition). Used with permission.



whether the transition was recognized, and validating the transition with biblical precedent.

Some may feel that analyzing the text to separate the Lord's voice from Joseph's is unnecessary or speculative; however, we propose that Pratt recognized something significant about the portion of the letter that became section 122 when he called it "the word of the Lord to Joseph." Performing this analysis in no way communicates that portions of these sections are not considered scripture or should in any way be discounted. As in other scriptures, the Lord's direct voice is significant.

### *Joseph's Voice*

In this analysis of the Liberty letter, Joseph's voice must first be recognized. In the original letter Joseph's voice is prominent in the noncanonized text immediately prior to Doctrine and Covenants 121:34 where he dictates, "We ought at all times to be verry carefull, that such high mindedness never have place in our hearts."<sup>13</sup> Joseph does not include the Lord in a collective "we," as a perfect God would not struggle with lack of care or high mindedness. Joseph's tone remains evident in Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–40, including phrases such as "when *we* undertake to cover *our* sins, or to gratify *our* pride, *our* vain ambition" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:37; emphasis added throughout), and "*we* have learned by sad experience" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:39). In these verses, the topic of being called and chosen is demarcated by textual bookends since the question in verse 34, "Why are they not chosen?" is answered when verse 40 concludes with "hence many are called, but few are chosen."

Joseph's voice appears to fade in the following portion of the letter contained in section 121:41 through 122:9. In this segment a transition occurs in which second person formal pronouns (thee, thou, thy, and thine) are used. This language continues throughout this portion of the letter. Some have acknowledged the use of second person formal pronouns in section 122, but did not analyze the shift into the use of these pronouns or view the use of formal pronouns in the larger context of the letter.<sup>14</sup> Others wrote of the transition between Joseph's voice and the Lord's voice from Doctrine and Covenants 121:6 to 121:7 and back to Joseph by 121:26. They also posit that Joseph's voice continues in verse 43;<sup>15</sup> however, they did not analyze the use of formal pronouns in Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–25 or 121:43–45.

Editors of the Joseph Smith Papers Project also noted the multiple shifts in pronoun use when they wrote, “Like the 20 March 1839 epistle, the [22 March 1839] letter shifts between three rhetorical perspectives: the first person plural of all the prisoners, the first person singular of JS, and the voice of Deity directed to JS.”<sup>16</sup> Further, they recognized the transition from Joseph to the voice of Deity, but stated only generally that it occurred rather than identifying where in the text it occurred. They wrote, “The second epistle also contained an extended meditation on the righteous use of priesthood power; during the meditation, the perspective transitioned from the combined voice of JS and his companions addressing a general church audience to the voice of Deity addressing JS with regard to his future influence.”<sup>17</sup> The use of formal pronouns in this section seems to indicate that some transition takes place before section 122.

### *The Lord’s Voice*

Joseph’s voice is heard in Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–40; however, the subsequent verses present a challenge regarding who is speaking. There is a slight subject transition after verse 40, yet verses 41 and 42 have no pronouns and are not definitive on the issue of who is speaking. Scholars have noted the archaic nature of the word *betimes* (verse 43), used only a handful of times in the King James Version of the Old Testament and never used by Joseph in any other translation or revelation of scripture or speech.<sup>18</sup> Verse 43 is the only instance of the word in scripture revealed through Joseph. Additionally, mid-sentence, the next second person pronoun in verse 43 is “thou” instead of “you,” further marking a shift into the language of scripture—or as the section heading for 122 notes, into “the word of the Lord to Joseph Smith the Prophet.” These scholars acknowledge that Joseph Smith’s religious language is reminiscent of the King James translation of the Bible but did not address Joseph’s shift into this language by verse 43.<sup>19</sup>

The use of second person formal pronouns in the letter continues until the concluding lines of section 122:9. The

40 Hence many are called, but “few are chosen.

41 No “power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the <sup>b</sup>priesthood, only by <sup>c</sup>persuasion, by <sup>d</sup>long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

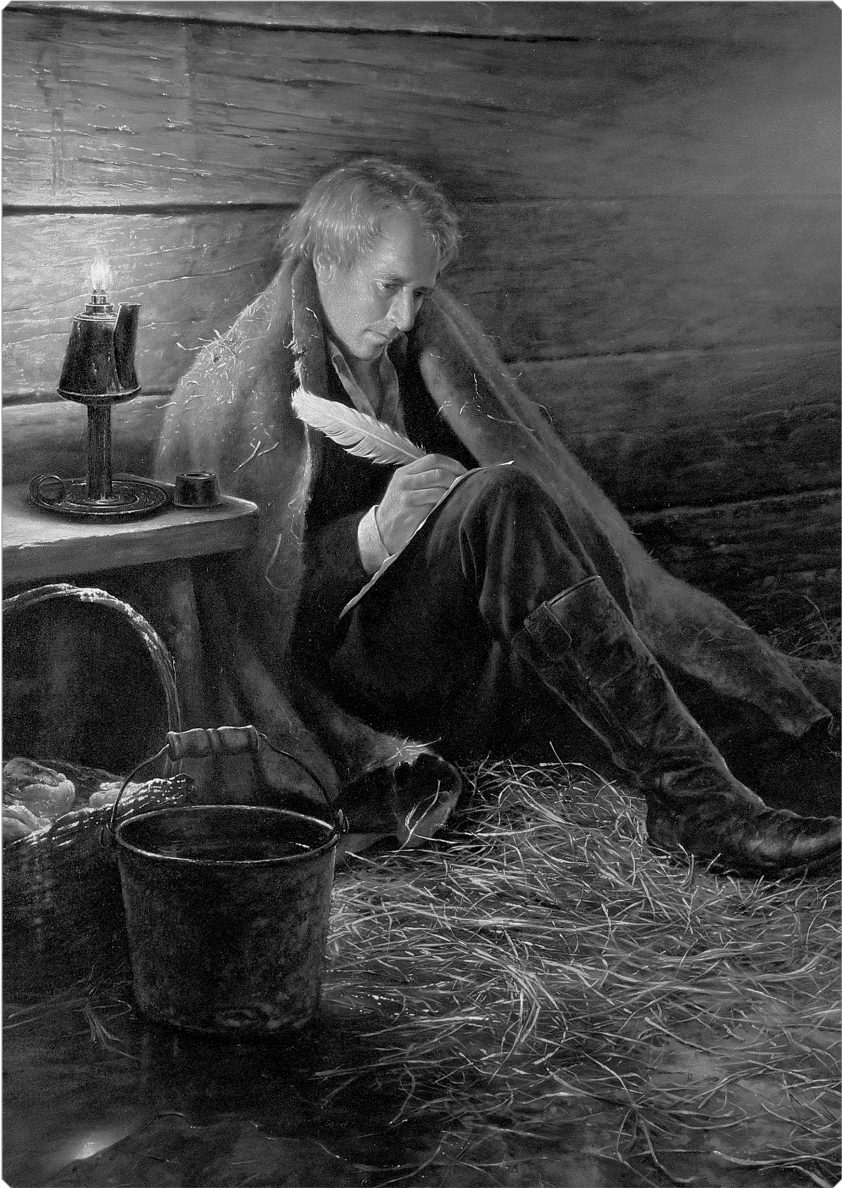
42 By <sup>a</sup>kindness, and pure <sup>b</sup>knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the <sup>c</sup>soul without <sup>d</sup>hypocrisy, and without <sup>e</sup>guile—

43 “Reproving betimes with <sup>b</sup>sharpness, when <sup>c</sup>moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an <sup>d</sup>increase of <sup>e</sup>love toward him whom <sup>f</sup>thou hast reproved, lest he esteem <sup>g</sup>thee to be his enemy;

44 That he may know that <sup>h</sup>thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of <sup>i</sup>“death.

45 Let <sup>j</sup>thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the

Figure 3. Doctrine and Covenants 121:40–45a, 2013 edition, used with permission.



*Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail, by Greg K. Olsen*

remainder of the extended letter uses second person informal pronouns without exception, which includes the later canonized portion that is now section 123. The text shows a transition point where it appears Joseph's language changes. Some scholars suggest that "the context of Doctrine and Covenants 121:43 makes it clear that the words are Joseph Smith's and not the Lord's."<sup>20</sup>

Yet noting the shift in pronoun use seems to point to a voice transition from Joseph to the Lord that starts at verse 43 rather than after verse 46 where the section heading was placed.

The only exceptions to formal pronoun usage from section 121:43 through section 122:9 may be quotations. When relating the experience of the son being torn away from his father, the son's words are given in second person informal pronouns, "My father, my father, why can't *you* stay with *us*? O, my father, what are the men going to do with *you*" (Doctrine and Covenants 122:6). This appears related to the experience of Joseph Smith III, who was thrust from his father at sword point prior to Joseph's incarceration in Liberty Jail.<sup>21</sup> After this brief interruption, the formal pronouns return in verse 7, even in the response from the Father to the son, "Know *thou*, my son, that all these things shall give *thee* experience, and shall be for *thy* good," until the end of Doctrine and Covenants 122 at verse 9.

The concluding words of section 122:9 include "God shall be with *you*," which may be a quotation of Genesis 48:21.<sup>22</sup> This scripture contains the patriarch Jacob's dying words to his son Joseph, who was previously sold into Egypt by his traitorous brothers and had experienced unjust imprisonment (see Genesis 37–39). Only five words from Genesis match Doctrine and Covenants 122:9, but they are exact in word choice and sequence. Two other references in the Old Testament contain variations of the sentiment "God shall be with you," though with slightly different wording and with less significant context.<sup>23</sup> This may suggest that Genesis 48 was either a recent reading of the prisoners or a divine reminder of a similar Joseph who experienced similar circumstances.<sup>24</sup> This reminder of the ancient Joseph's father is a fitting conclusion to this portion of the letter that records words from a father to his son.

### *Noticed or Unnoticed?*

The shift in language calls into question whether Joseph noticed and was aware of the language change. A comparison to a seemingly similar phenomenon in the beginning of the letter is revealing. When sharing his frustration and pleading with the Lord, Joseph used formal language indicating that he was speaking to Deity in prayer (Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–6). Prior to receiving an answer from the Lord (starting in 121:7), there was a lengthy interlude in the letter addressed to "Dearly and beloved Brethren."<sup>25</sup> This interlude is void of the formality of Joseph's prayer to God and indicates the



prisoners were languishing in fettered frustration until they received letters from Emma Smith, Don Carlos Smith, and Bishop Edward Partridge. Joseph described the impact of the letters as “breathing a kind and consoling spirit we were much gratified with there contence,” and “they were to our soles as the gentle air, refreshing but our joy was mingled with greaf because of the suffering of the poor and much injured saints.”<sup>26</sup> He then provided this interesting textual marker to indicate he recognized inspiration in this moment of combined comfort and grief: “and when the hart is sufficiently contrue and *the voice of inspiration steals along and whispers* my son pease be unto thy soul.”<sup>27</sup> This earlier revelatory experience was obvious to Joseph, and his letter shared what the voice of inspiration had whispered to him in his affliction, now recorded as section 121:7–25.

This revelatory moment shows that for portions of his answer, Joseph noticed the shift from his own thoughts to the voice of the Lord, which he recorded to the recipients. This appears intentional and appears to be the word of the Lord to him since he noted his heart had to be sufficiently contrue to receive it.<sup>28</sup> Second person formal pronouns were used in verses 7–11. Verses 12–25 do not contain second person formal pronouns because the Lord transitioned to third person while speaking about those working against the Saints. However, this portion is unique since it contains the declaratory statements “saith the Lord” multiple times throughout, demonstrating that in this moment Joseph recognized divine authorship.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of what is now section 121, Joseph gives no indication he is speaking in the name of the Lord as he had done in the March 20 letter (Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–25). Neither is there direct language revealing this was a prompting, impression, or whisper of the Spirit, as had been indicated earlier. Though no change of scribe occurred in the final version of the letter, it is not known whether there was a change of scribe or pause in the dictation in the original draft that may have caused him to alter pronoun use as he resumed dictation.<sup>30</sup> Regardless, the final draft preserved the change in pronouns.

Of note are two edits to the pronouns on page 4 of the March 22 letter (Doctrine and Covenants 122:7 and 9). In verse 7, “thee” was inserted between “open the mouth wide after” and “know thou.” This could be accounted for as a scribal omission from transcribing the rough draft to the final draft, or a scribal addition as the final draft was reviewed and the pronoun needed. Either way, it demonstrates a deliberate use of a second person

formal pronoun in this portion of the letter.<sup>31</sup> In the edit of Doctrine and Covenants 122:9, the scribe originally wrote “thee days” but the double *e*’s were written over with a *y* to become “thy days.” Again, the use of a second person formal pronoun was preserved in the editing process.

This analysis appears to support Pratt’s assertion that the words are the Lord’s, makes the transition from Joseph’s words to the Lord’s words more distinct, identifies consistency in the Lord’s tone in the Liberty letter, and may aid the reader in recognizing the Lord’s words in Joseph’s writings. The analysis also clarifies an alternative break between the topics of sections 121 and 122, supporting what has been described as “one continuous thought.”<sup>32</sup>

### *Biblical Precedent*

There is biblical precedent for this vacillation between personal voice and inspired voice. One example is Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament. Paul left textual markers indicating when he spoke his own counsel versus when he spoke with the authority of his calling. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:6 Paul stated, “But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment.” A few verses later he noted, “And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord” (7:10), indicating that the commandment he taught next carried the full weight of the divine. Again, Paul later reverted to “now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful” (7:25). He concluded this section about marital relationships with some ambiguity on the subject of authority when he wrote, “But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God” (7:40). In the Liberty letter Joseph follows this same pattern of addressing the concerns of the Saints in his own voice and sometimes adding the authority of heaven to the situation.

### **Intent, Audience, and Interpretation**

The results of this analysis carry implications regarding the intent, audience, and alternative interpretations of the text. Some of these implications support the conclusions of the scholars cited, while others suggest alternative conclusions.

Some suggest the “interesting possibility” that the message in Doctrine and Covenants 121:45–122:7 is intended for Edward Partridge and the Saints.<sup>33</sup> If so, it demonstrates the care, sorrow, and pleading of a prophet for

the Saints. It is a precedent for what Russell M. Nelson, current president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, described concerning the aftermath of a 2015 Church policy regarding children of LGBT parents: “The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have continued to seek the Lord’s guidance and to plead with Him in behalf of His children who were affected by the 2015 policy. We knew that this policy created concern and confusion for some and heartache for others. That grieved us. Whenever the sons and daughters of God weep—for whatever reasons—we weep. So our supplications to the Lord continued.”<sup>34</sup>

Prophets experience sorrow and concern as the Saints experience trials and hardship. This sorrow may be general or intensely personal. Is there a specific message of comfort from Joseph Smith for his son Joseph Smith III in the words “know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (Doctrine and Covenants 122:7)? If the phrase “my son” is in answer to the child’s plea “my Father” in Doctrine and Covenants 122:6, then it may be Joseph reassuring his own son of these things. While this personal application could be especially meaningful for Joseph’s immediate family, it seems less likely (as a specific intention) than a more general application since the “if thou” statements begin in verse 5 and seem to apply to a wider audience.

To expand this application even further, if it is the Lord’s voice in this portion of the letter, instead of Joseph’s, other insights emerge. It may be that Joseph related his counsel and understanding of the righteous exercise of priesthood authority in Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–40, and then the Lord added instructions and promises from heaven in 121:41–122:4. If so, then the promises in Doctrine and Covenants 122:1–4 are attached to the principles in 121:41–46 and are thereby the words of the Lord to all of his Saints— not only to Joseph Smith.<sup>35</sup> All holders of priesthood authority need these instructions so that “thy people shall never be turned against thee by the testimony of traitors” (122:3).

This application makes the contents more of a direct promise to all, like the oath and covenant of the priesthood in section 84, instead of an indirect promise tied to a specific person and likened to other believers. This also mirrors a pattern throughout Joseph’s ministry as he sought to expand his personal experiences with God to everyone, demonstrated by teachings such as the temple endowment for men and women and having one’s calling and election made sure. In this interpretation, *the Lord’s* care for his people

becomes clear and provides comfort. There is some indication that Doctrine and Covenants 122:4–9 is an elaboration of the answer Joseph received in 121:7–25.<sup>36</sup> Both passages are addressed to “my son” (121:7 and 122:9), both discuss the suffering of the Saints lasting “a small moment” (121:7 and 122:4), and both confirm that the sufferers are not alone, having both friends and God who still “stand by thee” (121:10 and 122:4). Additionally, Joseph’s use of cosmic imagery in 121:4 (e.g., heaven, earth, seas, the devil, Sheol) to call down God’s power over all creation to avenge the Saints is reprised in 122:7 but in a significantly different way. Instead of God asserting his power over the cosmos to afflict their enemies (as Joseph requested), the message of this verse is that even if all those elements come against *the Saints*, it is for their experience and good. Jesus submitted himself beneath them all, and the Saints are not greater than he.

These parallels support Pratt’s section heading that these are the words of the Lord. This also supports a connection between the suffering of Joseph, the Saints, and the Savior. Just as Joseph prayed for an end of the suffering, so did Jesus, even three times (Matthew 26:39–44). Joseph was weighed down by the suffering of the Saints and even faced death. In his personal suffering, Jesus was also “sore amazed, and . . . very heavy” (Mark 14:33); his soul felt sorrow even unto death (see Mark 14:34). While Joseph described the letters from his friends and family as “breathing a kind and consoling spirit,”<sup>37</sup> God also sent “an angel unto [Jesus] from heaven, strengthening him” (Luke 22:43). The Saints were set upon by a mob, betrayed by people once counted among them.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Jesus was betrayed by one closest to him who brought a mob against him (John 18:2–3). Joseph sought the Lord with the words, “Where art thou?” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:1), and Jesus cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). The parallels between the suffering of the Son and the sufferings of the Saints are an indication that they had truly taken up the cross in their efforts to follow him. Even still, “The Son of Man hath descended below them all” (Doctrine and Covenants 122:8).

### Implications for the Saints

To apply God’s reminder of his Son in these moments of deepest despair, a suffering Saint may observe and do what Jesus did in his darkest hour. Several examples from the New Testament are offered here, although many additional examples are available throughout the scriptures.



When Jesus's prayers for the suffering in Gethsemane to end seemed immediately unanswered, he intoned, "Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39). When the weight seemed unbearable and caused him to fall on the ground, he continued to pray and to invite his friends (perhaps ministering brothers or sisters today) to "watch ye and pray" (see Mark 14:32, 38). When he was in agony even after the angel's strengthening appearance, "He prayed more earnestly" (Luke 22:44). When he was betrayed and surrounded by a mob, he stood before them, submitted himself to them, and requested reprieve for those who were with him (John 18:4–8). Perhaps God responded to Jesus, who felt forsaken, with words similar to "know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (Doctrine and Covenants 122:7).

Alma prophesied of the Lord's experience and resultant good when he said, "He will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:12). The experience the Lord gained was (or is) contained in our experiences. The good that came from his suffering is our access to his comfort and consolation. Joseph pled for divine intervention so that "thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:6). Ammon observed, "Behold, how many thousands of our brethren has he loosed from the pains of hell; and they are brought to sing redeeming love, and this because of the power of his word which is in us, therefore have we not great reason to rejoice? Yea, we have reason to praise him forever, for he is the Most High God, and has loosed our brethren from the chains of hell" (Alma 26:13–14).

### **Implications for Religious Educators**

The additional understanding resulting from Joseph's revelatory experience in Liberty Jail has implications for gospel instructors. Some of these are explored below to highlight principles that will bless teachers and students.

#### *Representing the Savior*

This change of voice may indicate that these words are not Joseph's but that he is representing the Lord to the Saints. He was the Lord's representative both by ordination and by speaking under the direction and inspiration of heaven. Whether teachers are called by local priesthood leaders or approved

by the Church Board of Education, they seek to live, teach, and administer like the Savior and do so when they yield to his influence. Though the classroom situations may vary and student receptibility changes, when speaking under the direction of heaven, teachers represent Jesus Christ and speak the words he would utter if present. Joseph's experience and that of modern teachers can be an attestation of President Boyd K. Packer's statement, "I believe that to the degree you perform, according to the challenge and charge which you have, the image of Christ does become engraved upon your countenances. And for all practical purposes, in that classroom at that time and in that expression and with that inspiration, you are He and He is you."<sup>39</sup>

### *Conduit of Revelation*

This study suggests that Joseph was a conduit of revelation consciously and perhaps at other times subconsciously. Some revelatory experiences are obvious and powerful, while others can be subtle and may even come without recognition.<sup>40</sup> The transition in Joseph's language may be a model for teachers and students of what Elder Neal A. Maxwell referred to as "quiet moments of spiritual significance."<sup>41</sup> The Spirit can work through gospel teachers as they act on promptings, pause for moments of deeper spiritual reflection, ask inspired questions, and invite students to act, listen, share experiences, observe, and testify. As part of being a conduit, teachers have the opportunity to help students learn the process of deepening their spiritual understanding<sup>42</sup> and recognize when they are "moved upon by the Holy Ghost" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:43). Joseph described revelation when he stated, "A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas . . . and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation, until you become perfect in Christ Jesus."<sup>43</sup>

### *Edification for Teacher and Student*

Revelation promotes deeper spiritual understanding and can happen for both teachers and students. Both Joseph and the Saints had the opportunity to be edified by what the Lord taught Joseph: (1) to love those he had to rebuke (Doctrine and Covenants 121:43), (2) to show charity for all men (121:45), (3) to be confident in the presence of God (121:45), (4) to have the Holy

Ghost as his “constant companion” (121:46), (5) to understand the eternal nature of God’s support (122:4), (6) to know that all experiences would “be for [his] good” (122:7), (7) to learn about the depth of the Savior’s condescension (122:8), and (8) to be promised that he would be preserved until he finished his work (122:9). Gospel instructors can also receive counsel, have their spiritual needs met, and experience the Savior’s promised edification in the process of classroom instruction (see Doctrine and Covenants 50:17–24). President Marion G. Romney said, “I always know when I am speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost because I always learn something from what I’ve said.”<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Identifying the Lord’s words in the consistent use of formal pronouns in this letter expands our understanding of his compassion, lovingkindness, and guidance while also providing additional depth to the messages of his prophet. As teachers come to recognize the means by which the Lord speaks to his servants, they can seek for the eyes to see how he is working with and through them to develop their capacity to bless their students. Years before his incarceration in Liberty Jail, Joseph dictated the words of the Lord in the statement, “Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:63). These words were fulfilled with divine eloquence in a dingy dungeon and continue to be fulfilled in the refining fires that sanctify his people. Just as Paul once wrote to the Saints using his judgment to draw them to God, so did Joseph Smith— and we think also that he had the Spirit of God.

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## Notes

1. Stephen W. Liddle and Richard C. Galbraith, “Scripture Citation Index,” <https://scriptures.byu.edu/#12e::c12e>. The following sections of the Doctrine and Covenants are among the most cited. The number of citations follows the section number: section 121 (846), 122 (159), and 123 (104) for a combined total of 1,109 citations.

2. Justin R. Bray, “Within the Walls of Liberty Jail,” in *Revelations in Context*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 256.

3. Ryan J. Wessel, “The Textual Context of Doctrine and Covenants 121–123,” *Religious Educator* 13, no. 1 (2012): 103.

4. For a comprehensive treatment of the canonization of sections 121–23, see Kathleen Flake, “Joseph Smith’s Letter from Liberty Jail: A Study in Canonization,” *Journal of Religion* 92, no. 4 (October 2012): 515–26. The Liberty letter resembles a biblical pattern of canonization. Not only did the text of the letter resemble the writings of Paul, but the process of canonization did as well. A letter authored by one with apostolic authority to distant saints, containing earthly and heavenly counsel that would later be elevated to scripture, could apply as readily to this letter as to many of the Pauline epistles. See also Bray, “Within the Walls of Liberty Jail,” 260; and Wessel, “Textual Context,” 104.
5. Flake, “Joseph Smith’s Letter,” 517.
6. For example, in the original letter more than three handwritten pages appear between Doctrine and Covenants 121:6 and 121:7, and more than three pages appear between 121:25 and 121:26.
7. The following verses appear sequentially in the canonized text; however, there were often significant portions of text between verses in the original letter: Doctrine and Covenants 121:6–7, 25–26, 32–33, 33–34; and 122:9–123:1.
8. Wessel, “Textual Context,” 105. Wessel discussed the proximity of the prophet’s plea and the Lord’s response. An erroneous conclusion due to proximity of current text could be that the Lord’s response was instantaneous. Current text fails to capture that the Lord delivered peace through the letters of Emma Smith and others.
9. Flake, “Joseph Smith’s Letter,” 522.
10. “Introduction,” in *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), v.
11. Section 121 heading, in the *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1876), 383.
12. Section 122 heading, Doctrine and Covenants (1876 ed.), 388.
13. “Letter to Edward Partridge and the Church, circa 22 March 1839,” 2. The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-edward-partridge-and-the-church-circa-22-march-1839/2>. In all JSP citations, spelling and grammar are preserved. Hereafter cited as Letter, March 22, 1839, JSP.
14. Dean C. Jessee and John W. Welch, “Revelations in Context: Joseph Smith’s Letter from Liberty Jail, March 20, 1839,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 129.
15. Kent P. Jackson and Robert D. Hunt, “Reprove, Betimes, and Sharpness in the Vocabulary of Joseph Smith,” *Religious Educator* 6, no. 2 (2005): 97.
16. Historical Introduction to Letter, 22 March 1839, JSP, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-edward-partridge-and-the-church-circa-22-march-1839/1#historical-intro>.
17. Historical Introduction to Letter, March 22, 1839, JSP.
18. Jackson and Hunt, “Reprove,” 100.
19. Jackson and Hunt, “Reprove,” 98.
20. Jackson and Hunt, “Reprove,” 97.
21. *Saints*, vol. 1: *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 366.
22. See Letter, March 22, 1839, 4n44, JSP, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-edward-partridge-and-the-church-circa-22-march-1839/4>.
23. There are similarities in the KJV phrases from Exodus 18:19, “God shall be with thee,” and from Amos 5:14, “and so the Lord, the God of hosts, shall be with you.” The



reference in Amos is not a strong match given the different title for God, the way the punctuation breaks up the phrase, and the context of the chapter that has little to do with Smith's circumstance in Liberty Jail, though verse 15 states "the Lord God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph." The phrasing in the verse from Exodus is closer but ironically ends with a second person formal pronoun instead of the second person informal pronoun used in Genesis 48:21. The context of Exodus is Jethro recommending that Moses establish lower judges to assist with the affairs of the Israelites. This is not as close of a match as the context in Genesis 48.

24. There is precedent for a link between Joseph Smith Jr. and Joseph who was sold into Egypt in 2 Nephi 3.

25. "Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge, 20 March 1839," 4, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-and-edward-partridge-20-march-1839/4>. Hereafter Letter, 20 March 1839, JSP.

26. Letter, 20 March 1839, JSP, 7, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-and-edward-partridge-20-march-1839/7>.

27. Letter, 20 March 1839, JSP, 8, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-and-edward-partridge-20-march-1839/8>; emphasis added.

28. Letter, 20 March 1839, JSP, 8, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-and-edward-partridge-20-march-1839/8>.

29. See Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–25, especially verses 7–10, 16, 23.

30. Historical Introduction to Letter, 22 March 1839, JSP. The editors note that the rough draft is extant; however, only the fair copy is currently published.

31. Letter, 22 March 1839, JSP, 4, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-edward-partridge-and-the-church-circa-22-march-1839/4>.

32. Wessel, "Textual Context," 108–9.

33. Jessee and Welch, "Revelations in Context," 128–29.

34. Russell M. Nelson, "The Love and Laws of God," *BYU Speeches*, September 17, 2019, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/russell-m-nelson/love-laws-god/>.

35. Jessee and Welch, "Revelations in Context," 128–29; see also supporting Wessel's assertion in "Textual Context," 108–9.

36. Letter, 20 March 1839, JSP, 16, "We shall continue to offer further reflections in our next epistle." This answer is also referenced in the Historical Introduction to Letter, 22 March 1839, JSP.

37. Letter, 20 March 1839, JSP, 7, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-and-edward-partridge-20-march-1839/7>.

38. *Saints*, 346.

39. Boyd K. Packer, "The Ideal Teacher" (address to seminary and institute faculty, June 28, 1962), 5–6, as quoted in *Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, The Gospel Teaching and Learning Handbook: A Handbook for Teachers and Leaders in Seminaries and Institutes of Religion* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), 78–79.

40. David A. Bednar, "Spirit of Revelation," *Ensign*, May 2011, 88. Elder Bednar suggests revelation more commonly comes as a gradual process of increasing light. Ronald A. Rasband, "Let the Holy Spirit Guide," *Ensign*, May 2017, 93–96. In this talk Elder Rasband emphasizes the importance of recognizing the Holy Ghost and teaches several ways to develop this ability.

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41. Neal A. Maxwell, “Teaching by the Spirit—The Language of Inspiration,” in Church Educational System, *Teaching Seminary: Preservice Readings* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 35.

42. Kim B. Clark, “Apply Your Hearts to Understanding” (Evening with a General Authority Broadcast, February 8, 2019.)

43. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 132.

44. Quoted in Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 304.