
Wondering at His Words

PETER'S INFLUENCE ON THE KNOWLEDGE OF SALVATION FOR THE DEAD

Scott C. Esplin

Scott C. Esplin is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

“You do not question what souls these are that suffer here before you?” the poet Virgil asked Dante as they encountered their first spirits while beginning their descent into the abyss of hell in *The Inferno*. “I wish you to know before you travel on that these were sinless,” Virgil continues. “And still their merits fail, for they lacked Baptism’s grace, which is the door of the true faith *you* were born to. Their birth fell before the age of the Christian mysteries, and so they did not worship God’s Trinity in fullest duty. I am one of these,” Virgil lamented. “For such defects are we lost, though spared the fire and suffering Hell in one affliction only: that without hope we live on in desire.”¹

This fate of souls lacking “Baptism’s grace” appears to have troubled Dante, as it has plagued many others who grapple with the Savior’s firm decree to Nicodemus, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).² Pained by the thought of the “many worthy souls” who suffer, Dante questioned if anything could be done for those whose “merits fail.” The poet continued, “Instruct me, Master and most noble Sir. . . . Has any, by his own or another’s merit, gone ever from this place to blessedness?” He sensed my inner question and answered it: ‘I was still new to this estate of tears when a Mighty

One descended here among us, crowned with the sign of His victorious years,” Virgil responded. “He took from us the shade of our first parent, of Abel, his pure son, of ancient Noah, of Moses, the bringer of law, the obedient. Father Abraham, David the King, Israel with his father and his children, Rachel, the holy vessel of His blessing, and many more He chose for elevation among the elect. And before these, you must know, no human soul had ever won salvation.”³

The truth that “a Mighty One descended” to the spirit world to interact with the righteous dead on a mission to save souls does not originate with the late medieval poet Dante. However fragmented his romanticized expression may appear, the motif of Christ reaching beyond the veil is a partially preserved verbalization of earlier Christian teachings, all of which are a heritage of the writings and ministry of the Apostle Peter. In 1 Peter 3:19, he taught that Christ “went and preached unto the spirits in prison.” Additionally, Peter both held and conferred priesthood keys relative to salvation. The influence of Peter’s participation in the restoration of God’s priesthood authority on earth today, coupled with the prompting of prophetic insight brought about by his teachings, have laid the groundwork for Latter-day Saint understanding of salvation for the dead. They remain a modern legacy of Peter, the chief Apostle.

New Testament Teachings on Christ’s Ministry in the Spirit World

Christian soteriology, or the study of salvation, is rooted in the teaching of Jesus Christ and the power granted at his hand to perform actions on earth that would impact one’s status in heaven. Jesus instructed Nicodemus that being born again, both of water and of Spirit, coupled with belief in him, are required for entrance into God’s kingdom and eternal life (see John 3:5, 15–16). Latter-day Saints connect an eternal reward to deeds done while in this life through Christ’s declaration “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have *done good*, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have *done evil*, unto the resurrection of damnation” (John 5:28–29; emphasis added).

Called to the apostleship, Peter was charged to “preach the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:2), including the doctrines of faith, repentance, and rebirth (see Acts 2:38; 3:19) necessary for salvation. Boldly declaring his personal witness that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16), Peter was promised “the keys of the kingdom,” including power that “whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (16:19).⁴ Six days later, the promise was

fulfilled. Matthew records, “Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them. . . . And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him,” the account continues, after which, Peter summarized, “Lord, it is good for us to be here” (17:1–4).⁵

While the New Testament record is unclear regarding all that occurred on the Mount of Transfiguration, Latter-day Saint scripture and prophetic teachings add important insight.⁶ The Doctrine and Covenants reveals that we “have not yet received” a full account of what occurred there (D&C 63:20–21). Later, Joseph Smith taught that “the Savior, Moses, and Elias gave the Keys to Peter, James and John on the Mount when they were transfigured before him.”⁷ From a Latter-day Saint perspective, these keys authorized the Apostles to administer the preaching of the gospel throughout the world and, for the sake of the topic at hand, perform ordinances that would have impact beyond the veil for both the living and the dead. Broadening the benefits of what occurred on the Mount of Transfiguration to those whom Peter would reach because of the experience, one Latter-day Saint scholar wrote, “We are persuaded . . . that the happenings on the Mount of Transfiguration are among the most important in the New Testament.”⁸ The events matter because Latter-day Saints believe that priesthood authority is essential.

Armed with the teachings of salvation and the power to make its ordinances efficacious beyond the grave, Peter boldly pursued his mission to lead the church and save the children of men following Christ’s Resurrection. The book of Acts records Peter’s powerful teachings, confident declarations, and prophetic guidance in a nearly two-decade-long Mediterranean ministry. Furthermore, his understanding of Christ’s postmortal ministry to the spirits in prison is preserved in the First Epistle General of Peter, likely authored in the early sixties AD to the Saints of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (see 1 Peter 1:1).⁹ In it, Peter revealed, “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water” (1 Peter 3:18–20). Speaking of the purposes for his Master’s ministry in the spirit world, Peter continued, “For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit” (1 Peter 4:6). In these passages, Peter adds additional insight to Christ’s earlier declaration, recorded in the Gospel of John: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now

is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live" (John 5:25).

Taken literally, and when read through the lens of modern revelation (to be discussed later), the passages and the concept they convey appear to be clear: Christ went in spirit to preach to the spirits in prison. The implications of that interpretation, however, have led to a variety of readings, especially when considered without the help of modern scripture. Indeed, "the difficulty does not actually lie in the passage," observed Professor Catherine Thomas, "but in the minds of the interpreters who find a conflict here with their own views of the afterlife and the impossibility of progress or redemption there."¹⁰ For example, writing specifically of 1 Peter 3:19, Martin Luther declared, "That is as strange a text and as dark a saying as any in the New Testament, so that I am not yet sure what St. Peter intended."¹¹ New Testament scholar Paul Achtemeier summarized, "This verse is one of the shorter, but surely the most problematic, in this letter, if not in the [New Testament] canon as a whole, and eludes any agreement on its precise meaning." Expounding on the problems the passage creates, Achtemeier continues, "There are the questions of the identity of the spirits and the place of and reason for their imprisonment, the direction of Christ's journey (ascent or descent) and the time it occurred, and the content of his proclamation."¹² Importantly, many of these questions are answered in modern revelation sparked by a reading of 1 Peter.

Challenged by the notion of disembodied spirits in prison and post-death repentance, modern scholars have sought for other interpretations to the teachings of Peter regarding Christ's ministry to the disobedient dead. One option ties the preaching to the time of Noah, implying that "Christ preached by the Holy Spirit through the lips of Noah to the wicked generation that lived before the flood." Another applies the passage to speak of the power and reach of Christ, "demonstrating that if the crucified and risen Christ preached to them, evil as they were, then not even death can put the most egregious sinner beyond the reach of Christ's saving power. Such preaching to Noah's generation is thus an example of a larger truth," this reading concludes, "namely, that those who died in the time before Christ, or those who died without the chance for faith in him, are not beyond the reach of his salvation." A third interpretation is that Peter's message was a call to the Saints of his day to stand firm in their "fearless confession" and "have the courage to tell even the most resolute sinners what hope in Christ means," just as Christ did to the wicked from Noah's day. A fourth option links the passage to traditions about Enoch, noting that "Christ in this passage is, like Enoch, announcing to the imprisoned evil angels of the time of Noah their final doom, a doom assured by means of Christ's triumph

over them.” In this paralleling of Enoch, the message is “not of salvation to the dead but of [Christ’s] own triumph, as the result of his death and resurrection, over all rebellious spiritual forces.” Summarizing, scholars like Paul Achtemeier note that each line of interpretation is problematic, for one reason or another, and that “one’s understanding of the point of the passage will depend in large part on how one resolves those problems on context and meaning.”¹³

The content of 1 Peter 4:6 is likewise problematic for modern scholars. In an interpretation that ultimately resonates with modern scripture on the subject, Achtemeier continues, “There is no indication in this verse that Christ was the one doing the preaching; he is more likely to be the subject matter than the agent of the preaching mentioned in the verse.” Turning attention on the dead to whom the gospel was preached, some apply the passage to mean that the gospel is preached not to “those who have died physically but to those who were spiritually dead,” though again, this reconciliation is problematic, in part because of the context of final judgment implied in 1 Peter 4:5–6. Attempting to reconcile these inconsistencies, Achtemeier notes that “if they had died prior to hearing the gospel, it would have to mean the gospel was preached to them in the realm of the dead, yet any notion of disembodied souls in Hades is a view of the after-life quite absent from the [New Testament]. Further, it would clearly imply that there is a possibility of repentance and conversion after death, again an idea quite foreign to the [New Testament].”¹⁴ These possibilities run counter to traditional Christian thought. E. M. Blaiklock writes, “It is impossible . . . to support [repentance after this life] by any other passage of Scripture, and the whole weight of the New Testament is against the possibility that any who consciously reject Christ in this life have any opportunity to reconsider their choice in another. Peter himself would repudiate the idea.”¹⁵

Though confusing because of its doctrinal implications for Christianity today, the first-century teaching of Peter that Christ’s mission included literal service to those beyond the veil is perpetuated in early Christian thought. Among them, Irenaeus (AD 130–200) declared, “The Lord descended into the regions beneath the earth, preaching His advent there also, and [declaring] the remission of sins received by those who believe in Him.”¹⁶ Origen (AD 185–253) likewise taught, “We assert that not only while Jesus was in the body did He win over not a few persons merely . . . but also, that when He became a soul, without the covering of the body, He dwelt among those souls which were without bodily covering, converting such of them as were willing to Himself.”¹⁷

While this was “a teaching of the chief ancient Apostle, held strongly by major Christian teachers for some centuries,” the meaning of Peter’s teaching is “now

largely misunderstood.”¹⁸ It was into this void of understanding, “the mystery of this preresurrection ministry of Christ . . . [that] eludes explanation,” that the Restoration was born.¹⁹ Importantly, it was Peter and his teachings on Christ’s mission to the spirits in prison that sparked Latter-day Saint understanding of salvation for the dead.

Peter’s Role in Restoring the Keys of Salvation in the Latter Days

Peter’s role in shaping modern understanding of salvation for the dead is rooted in his participation in seminal events of the Restoration. For Joseph Smith, this connection to Peter was personal, as it was with others of his ancient prophetic counterparts. Describing the Prophet’s interaction with Peter and other scriptural luminaries, President John Taylor taught, “When Joseph Smith was raised up as a Prophet of God, Mormon, Moroni, Nephi and others of the ancient Prophets who formerly lived on this Continent, and Peter and John and others who lived on the Asiatic Continent, came to him and communicated to him certain principles pertaining to the Gospel of the Son of God. Why? Because they held the keys of the various dispensations, and conferred them upon him, and he upon us.”²⁰

The earliest recorded reference to Peter in this dispensation comes from an April 1829 revelation to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery when they inquired concerning the fate of John the Beloved, as described in the last chapter of the Gospel of John.²¹ Informed that John had tarried on the earth, the account turned to Peter, revealing that he would “minister for [John] and for thy brother James; and unto you three I will give this power and the keys of this ministry until I come” (D&C 7:7). A month later, Peter’s possessing the keys of salvation was reiterated in the account of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood when John the Baptist appeared, announcing “that he acted under the direction of Peter, James and John, who held the keys of the Priesthood of Melchizedek, which Priesthood, he said, would in due time be conferred” (Joseph Smith—History 1:72).²²

While no corresponding section exists chronicling the actual conferral of the Melchizedek Priesthood as one does for the Aaronic Priesthood (D&C 13), two later accounts testify to its occurrence. In a September 1830 revelation, the Lord spoke of Joseph Smith’s encounter “with Peter, and James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles, and especial witnesses of my name, and bear the keys of your ministry and of the same things which I revealed unto them” (D&C 27:12).²³ Continuing, the Lord emphasized the place of priesthood keys prominent in the experience, “Unto whom I have committed the keys of my kingdom, and

a dispensation of the gospel for the last times; and for the fulness of times, in the which I will gather together in one all things, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth” (D&C 27:13). More than a decade later, the Prophet himself gave a description of the experience, “And again, what do we hear? . . . The voice of Peter, James, and John in the wilderness between Harmony, Susquehanna county, and Colesville, Broome county, on the Susquehanna river, declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom, and of the dispensation of the fulness of times!” (D&C 128:20).

In addition to the passing of the keys of salvation, Peter was personally involved in the events that laid the groundwork for the exercising of those keys on behalf of the dead.²⁴ In his account of the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet recorded in his journal, “Presdt Williams also arose and testified that while Presdt Rigdon was making his first prayer an angel entered the window and seated himself between father Smith, and himself, and remained there during his prayer.”²⁵ Truman O. Angell later added, “When the afternoon meeting assembled, Joseph, feeling very much elated, arose the first thing and said the Personage who had appeared in the morning was the Angel Peter come to accept the dedication.”²⁶ President Heber C. Kimball even gave a description of Peter’s appearance. “They had a fair view of his person. He was a very tall personage, black eyes, white hair, and stoop shouldered; his garment was whole, extending to near his ankles; on his feet he had sandals. He was sent as a messenger to accept of the dedication.”²⁷ This and other experiences seem to be the basis for John Taylor’s praise of the Prophet: “If you were to ask Joseph what sort of a looking man Adam was, he would tell you at once; he would tell you his size and appearance and all about him. You might have asked him what sort of men Peter, James, and John were, and he could have told you. Why? Because he had seen them.”²⁸

Peter’s participation in the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood and the dedication of the Kirtland Temple were preparatory to the bestowal of priesthood keys on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple on April 3, 1836, a week following the building’s dedication. While there is no indication that Peter participated with the Savior, Moses, Elias, and Elijah on this occasion, the event certainly mirrored Peter’s own receipt of keys on the Mount of Transfiguration eighteen centuries earlier. “The similarity of the events on the Mount of Transfiguration with those of the Kirtland Temple,” wrote Robert Matthews, “seems to certify that the main accomplishment of the visitation of the holy beings on the mount was the bestowal of priesthood keys, in order to establish the dispensation of the meridian of time on a solid and complete foundation, with power to preach the gospel, perform the ordinances, call persons to the ministry, seal up the faithful to eternal life, and communicate all the gifts,

powers, and graces of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”²⁹ As they had been given to Peter anciently, these powers were likewise given through Peter and others of his ancient prophetic counterparts in the last days.

Shaping Influences of Peter’s Writings on Latter-day Understanding of Salvation

While Peter interacted with Joseph Smith and others of the early church in restoring the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood, the shaping influence of his writings have more recently impacted Latter-day Saint understanding of salvation for the dead. The Prophet Joseph Smith, for his part, had an appreciation for and affinity with the writings of Peter, as he once observed, “Peter penned the most sublime language of any of the Apostles.”³⁰ While Joseph Smith was drawn to the style of writing in 1 and 2 Peter, it was the Prophet’s nephew and sixth President of the Church, Joseph F. Smith, for whom Peter’s words were the springboard into an understanding of redemption for the dead.

Joseph F. Smith’s vision of the redemption of the dead was received on October 3, 1918, a day before the beginning of the eighty-eighth semiannual general conference of the church and a mere six weeks before President Smith’s own death.³¹ Scholars have carefully analyzed the historical context to Joseph F. Smith’s vision, acknowledging the influence of the terrible loss of life associated with both World War I and the worldwide flu epidemic that gripped global society at the time of its reception. In the Great War (1914–18), more than nine million soldiers “and countless legions of civilians perished in the battlefields, battleships, and bombed-out byways,” with another twenty-one million wounded.³² Overshadowing those lost to armed conflict, the worldwide influenza epidemic that erupted on the war’s heels claimed between twenty and one hundred million globally from 1918 to 1920, including nearly seven hundred thousand Americans. For the church, the outbreak led to the cancellation of President Smith’s public funeral service in November 1918 and the postponement of the April general conference the next year.³³

Authors have also connected the vision to the personal loss of life in President Smith’s own family, stretching back as far as his father, Hyrum Smith, who died when young Joseph was only five years old, and his mother, Mary Fielding Smith, who died when he was thirteen. They have discussed the loss of several of his children, from the passing of his firstborn, Mercy Josephine, who died in 1870 at the age of three, to, most immediately before the revelation, the sudden demise of his firstborn son, forty-five-year-old Apostle Hyrum Mack Smith, who died of complications from a ruptured appendix in January 1918,

nine months before the vision.³⁴ Speaking in a temple meeting just weeks after his son's death, President Smith summarized:

I ought certainly to have charity for others who suffer and who are tried; for I lost my father when I was but a child; I lost my mother, the sweetest soul that ever lived, when I was only a boy; I have buried one of the loveliest wives that ever blessed the lot of man, and I have buried thirteen of my more than forty children that the Lord gave me. And it has seemed to me that the most promising, the most hopeful, and, if possible, the sweetest and purest and the best have been the earliest called to rest. Surely I have been touched and humbled with all these things and others—the death of my kindred, brothers and sisters, the passing away of men that I loved with all my soul.³⁵

Indeed, “death had surrounded him throughout his life,” one author wrote, “and the longings these deaths awakened could not be fully soothed in mortality.”³⁶

Additionally, scholars have examined the proliferation of addresses by President Smith on the topic of life after death in the years leading up to his 1918 vision. Beginning with his April 1916 general conference address entitled “In the Presence of the Divine,” and including his February 1918 temple meeting address entitled “The Status of Little Children in the Resurrection,” President Smith experienced “an era of unusual spiritual enlightenment in which he delivered to the Church some of the most important and inspiring insights of this dispensation,” observed Robert Millet.³⁷ These experiences, reaching their climax immediately prior to the receiving of the October 1918 vision, may explain President Smith's own words as he addressed the assembled general conference audience in its opening session: “I will not, I dare not, attempt to enter upon many things that are resting upon my mind this morning, and I shall postpone until some future time, the Lord being willing, my attempt to tell you some of the things that are in my mind, and that dwell in my heart. I have not lived alone these five months. I have dwelt in the spirit of prayer, of supplication, of faith and of determination; and I have had my communications with the Spirit of the Lord continuously.”³⁸ These constellations of events and teachings led one commentator to summarize regarding the vision, “The stage was set: preparation of a lifetime and preparation of the moment were recompensed with a heavenly endowment.”³⁹

While all of these contextual details are important to appreciating Joseph F. Smith's vision, context “does not necessarily imply causality,” George Tate, one commentator on Smith's vision, wisely noted. “It is problematic,”

he continued, “when ‘context mistakenly gets treated as the determinant of [something]’ rather than as a framework.”⁴⁰ In this regard, President Smith’s declaration on his vision of the redemption of the dead importantly attributes causality to one thing, his pondering on the writings of the Apostle Peter. “On the third of October, in the year nineteen hundred and eighteen, I sat in my room pondering over the scriptures; and reflecting upon the great atoning sacrifice that was made by the Son of God, for the redemption of the world” (D&C 138:1–2), President Smith declared in a message written immediately following the church’s October general conference.⁴¹ Turning to the teachings of the chief Apostle, President Smith continued:

While I was thus engaged, my mind reverted to the writings of the apostle Peter, to the primitive saints scattered abroad throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and other parts of Asia, where the gospel had been preached after the crucifixion of the Lord.

I opened the Bible and read the third and fourth chapters of the first epistle of Peter, and as I read I was greatly impressed, more than I had ever been before, with the following passages:

“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:

“By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison;

“Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.” (1 Peter 3:18–20.)

“For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.” (1 Peter 4:6.) (D&C 138:5–10)

Summarizing the role Peter’s writings played as a gateway to the divine, Smith recounted, “As I pondered over these things which are written, the eyes of my understanding were opened, and the Spirit of the Lord rested upon me, and I saw the hosts of the dead, both small and great” (D&C 138:11).

The 1918 vision of President Smith was not the first time he referenced the writings of Peter in public discourse. For example, *Journal of Discourses* contains at least seven different sermons by Joseph F. Smith where he references 1 Peter 3:18–20 or 1 Peter 4:6, the earliest from 1875, more than forty years before the vision.⁴² “Jesus himself preached the Gospel to the spirits in prison,”⁴³ Smith

repeatedly emphasized in the addresses, “while his body slept in the tomb,” themes that were later expanded upon and clarified in D&C 138.⁴⁴ As President of the Church, Smith turned to the text in a 1912 funeral sermon for Sister Mary A. Freeze, a leader in the church’s Mutual Improvement Association. On that occasion, he announced:

I have always believed, and still do believe with all my soul, that such men as Peter and James, and the twelve disciples chosen of the Savior in His time, have been engaged all the centuries that have passed since their martyrdom for the testimony of Jesus Christ, in proclaiming liberty to the captives in the spirit world and in opening their prison doors. I do not believe that they could be employed in any greater work. Their mission is to save men. Their special calling and anointing of the Lord Himself was to save the world, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison doors to those that were bound in chains of darkness, superstition, and ignorance.⁴⁵

Expanding the thought to include those of his own dispensation, Smith continued, “I believe that the disciples who have passed away in this dispensation—Joseph, the Prophet, and his brother Hyrum, and Brigham and Heber, and Willard, and Daniel and John, and Wilford, and all the rest of the prophets that have lived in this dispensation, and that have been intimately associated with the work of redemption and the other ordinances of the Gospel of the Son of God in this world are preaching that same Gospel that they lived and preached here to those who are in darkness in the spirit-world and who had not the knowledge before they went.”⁴⁶ Both beliefs were confirmed in President Smith’s later vision.

The vision of the redemption of the dead, as section 138 has come to be known, answered questions long presented by Peter’s earlier writings on the subject while both corroborating and expanding President Smith’s earlier teachings. One of the fundamental questions it answers is whom the Savior visited. President Smith noted that he saw assembled “an innumerable company of the spirits of the just, who had been faithful in the testimony of Jesus while they lived in mortality; and who had offered sacrifice in the similitude of the great sacrifice of the Son of God, and had suffered tribulation in their Redeemer’s name. All these had departed the mortal life, firm in the hope of a glorious resurrection, through the grace of God the Father and his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ” (D&C 138:12–14). The description of a visit to the just and faithful dead who had departed mortality firm in their faith stands in stark contrast to Peter’s initial description, which noted that Christ “went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were

disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah” (1 Peter 3:19–20).

Peter’s version of the visit creates potential questions in the minds of those who read it literally. Why would Christ choose to visit spirits in prison and, among them, specifically the disobedient from the days of Noah? Smith’s vision helps with these questions in at least two ways. First, it acknowledges that even among the most righteous spirits, which included the likes of Adam, Eve, Abel, Seth, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Elias, Malachi, and “prophets who dwelt among the Nephites” (see D&C 138:38–49), there was need for deliverance. “The dead had looked upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage,” Smith wrote (D&C 138:50), satisfying in one sense Peter’s description that Christ went to the spirits in a prison. According to this view, spirits must long for “the spirit and the body to be united never again to be divided, that they might receive a fulness of joy” (D&C 138:17).

Secondly, the vision of the redemption of the dead clarifies that “unto the wicked [Christ] did not go, and among the ungodly and unrepentant who had defiled themselves while in the flesh, his voice was not raised” (D&C 138:20). Wondering at the words of Peter, “wherein he said that the Son of God preached unto the spirits in prison, who sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah—and how it was possible for him to preach to those spirits and perform the necessary labor among them in so short a time,” President Smith learned that rather than ministering “in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth,” the Lord instead “organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men; and thus was the gospel preached to the dead” (D&C 138:28–30). In this way, Christ evidenced a “depth of concern . . . so great that even the generation that rejected Noah was taught,” but did so through the ministry of faithful Saints commissioned to represent him.⁴⁷

The idea that individuals other than Christ ministered among the wicked in the spirit world was an important addition to Peter’s teachings, clarifying commonly held understandings among Latter-day Saints at the time as well as President Smith’s own earlier teachings. For example, in his classic *Jesus the Christ*, published a mere three years before the vision was received, James E. Talmage wrote, “While divested of His body Christ ministered among the departed, both in paradise and in the prison realm where dwelt in a state of duration the spirits of the disobedient.” Commenting specifically on Peter’s reference to the disobedient of Noah’s day, Talmage surmised, “We are not to assume from Peter’s illustrative mention

of the disobedient antediluvians that they alone were included in the blessed opportunities offered through Christ's ministry in the spirit realm; on the contrary, we conclude in reason and consistency that all whose wickedness in the flesh had brought their spirits into the prison house were sharers in the possibilities of expiation, repentance, and release."⁴⁸ While the vision clearly states that the latter is true, namely that spirits in prison have the possibility of "expiation, repentance, and release," the knowledge regarding which individuals deliver the message changes because of Joseph F. Smith's vision.

The vision of the redemption of the dead also expands upon a slight Joseph Smith Translation change in one of the verses from 1 Peter. While the King James Version of 1 Peter 4:6 reports, "For this cause *was* the gospel preached also to them that are dead" (emphasis added), Joseph Smith's translation of the same verse modifies it to read, "Because of this, *is* the gospel preached to them who are dead" (Joseph Smith Translation, 1 Peter 4:6; emphasis added). The changing of the preaching to the dead from the past "was" to the present "is" receives explanation in the latter-day vision. It was "made known that our Redeemer spent his time during his sojourn in the world of spirits," Joseph F. Smith taught, "instructing and preparing the faithful spirits of the prophets who had testified of him in the flesh; That they might carry the message of redemption unto all the dead, unto whom he could not go personally, because of their rebellion and transgression, that they through the ministration of his servants might also hear his words" (D&C 138:36–37). Presumably, the teaching by prophets among the rebellious occurred after the brief time of preparation conducted by the Savior and continues today. Transitioning to work in the spirit world during his own time, President Smith wrote, "I beheld that the faithful elders of this dispensation, when they depart from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel of repentance and redemption, through the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God, among those who are in darkness and under the bondage of sin in the great world of the spirits of the dead" (D&C 138:57).

Finally, the vision of the redemption of the dead clarifies the message taught in the world of spirits. Earlier, Peter merely declared that the teaching would include "the gospel" (1 Peter 4:6). To that brief summary, President Smith adds, "These were taught faith in God, repentance from sin, vicarious baptism for the remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, And all other principles of the gospel that were necessary for them to know in order to qualify themselves that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit" (D&C 138:33–34). Therefore, the vision held out hope for redemption on conditions of repentance, even among the dead. "The dead who repent will be redeemed,

through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God,” President Smith wrote, concluding the vision. “And after they have paid the penalty of their transgressions, and are washed clean, shall receive a reward according to their works, for they are heirs of salvation” (D&C 138:58–59). In this sense, President Smith’s vision adds important insight. Not only is the gospel preached to those who “died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth” (D&C 138:32). It is also preached to those “in transgression, having rejected the prophets” (D&C 138:32), offering both groups a means for redemption. Commenting on these verses, President James E. Faust noted the careful wording of the passages and their doctrinal implications. “Mercy will not rob justice, and the sealing power of faithful parents will claim wayward children only on the condition of their repentance and Christ’s Atonement. Repentant wayward children will enjoy salvation and all the blessings that go with it, but exaltation is much more. It must be fully earned. The question as to who will be exalted must be left to the Lord in His mercy.”⁴⁹ For this reason, in addition to clarifying misinterpretations of the past, President Smith’s message, drawn from the words of Peter, stands as a supreme message of hope.

Conclusion

If Peter was pleased at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, one can only wonder how he must feel about the influence he has had on the Latter-day Saint understanding of salvation for the dead. Anciently, his teachings influenced early Christian thought regarding a postmortal ministry of Christ in the spirit world. In our day, his restoring of priesthood authority paved the way for these teachings on salvation for the dead to be applied. Furthermore, Peter’s sublime words led Joseph F. Smith, one of the greatest doctrinal teachers of this dispensation, to ponder and receive additional light. President Harold B. Lee once remarked, “When I want to seek for a more clear definition of doctrinal subjects, I have usually turned to the writings and sermons of President Joseph F. Smith.”⁵⁰ Interestingly, when President Smith wanted further light regarding the reach of Christ’s Atonement beyond the veil, he turned to the writings of Peter, the chief Apostle. These writings, as well as the humble fisherman who authored them, have guided thinking across dispensations, opening the door for soul-satisfying answers about redemption for the human family. Paying tribute to Peter, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland once aptly wrote, “Through the mighty work of the Melchizedek Priesthood that has gone forth to all the world from that day to this, the ‘shadow of Peter’ is still passing by and healing them, ‘every one.’”⁵¹ Because of his teachings on salvation for the dead, Peter also casts a healing shadow through the veil.

Notes

1. Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1954), canto IV, lines 31–42; emphasis in original. I am grateful for the excellent article on the redemption of the dead by Catherine Thomas, who begins her examination of the topic with a portion of this selection from *Inferno*. See M. Catherine Thomas, “Visions of Christ in the Spirit World and the Dead Redeemed,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The New Testament*, ed. Frank F. Judd Jr. and Gaye Strathearn (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 354.

2. For a thorough examination of Christian thought regarding the fate of the unevangelized dead, see David L. Paulsen, Roger D. Cook, and Kendel J. Christensen, “The Harrowing of Hell: Salvation for the Dead in Early Christianity,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 56–77. Additional essays by Paulsen and his colleagues expand their analysis to baptism for the dead in early Christianity and the application of the doctrines regarding redemption of the dead in the Restoration. See David L. Paulsen and Brock M. Mason, “Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 2 (2010): 22–49; David L. Paulsen, Kendel J. Christensen, and Martin Pulido, “Redeeming the Dead: Tender Mercies, Turning of Hearts, and Restoration of Authority,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 1 (2011): 28–51; and David L. Paulsen, Judson Burton, Kendel J. Christensen, and Martin Pulido, “Redemption of the Dead: Continuing Revelation after Joseph Smith,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 2 (2011): 52–69. Importantly, not all Christian readings interpret being born of water and Spirit, described in John 3:5, to be baptism and receiving the Holy Ghost, as Latter-day Saint interpretations generally do. For various interpretations of this passage, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 29 of The Anchor Bible Series (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 138–44.

3. Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, canto IV, lines 43–63.

4. For differing interpretations of the concept of binding and loosing, see Shon D. Hopkin’s chapter in this volume.

5. Elias identified in Matthew 17:3 was the prophet Elijah.

6. D&C 63:21 notes that in addition to witnessing Christ in a transfigured form as he conversed with Moses and Elijah, Peter and his companions beheld the earth itself in “the pattern” of its future transfigured state. Furthermore, Joseph Fielding Smith offered the opinion that “these three men . . . I believe received their endowments on the mount.” Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 2:165. Bruce R. McConkie added “that it was while on the mount that they received the more sure word of prophecy, it then being revealed to them that they were sealed up unto eternal life.” Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 1:400. For these reasons, “so far as the establishment of the kingdom of God is concerned,” Robert Matthews wrote, “the bestowal of keys upon the Twelve appears to be the single most important event in the ministry of the Savior between his baptism and the Garden of Gethsemane.” Robert J. Matthews, “Tradition, Testimony, Transfiguration,

and Keys,” in *Studies in Scripture*, vol. 5: *The Gospels*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 305–6.

7. Manuscript History of the Church, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842], 11 addenda, josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842?locale=eng&p=546. Of the bestowal of keys, Richard Neitzel Holzapfel notes, “The New Testament implicitly reveals that the promise given by Jesus to Peter about ‘the keys of the kingdom,’ the power to ‘bind [and loose] on earth’ (Matthew 16:19), was at some point fulfilled (see Matthew 18:18). The fact that Elijah was known to have the power to ‘seal’ the heavens (see 1 Kings 17:1) and appeared to Peter, James, and John on the mount between the time of the promise (Matthew 16:19) and Jesus’ indication that the Twelve had the power to bind (Matthew 18:18) suggests the setting in Matthew 17 as the most likely time when that power was received under the hands of Elijah, who had held the power before.” Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, “The Transfiguration,” in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ: From the Transfiguration through the Triumphal Entry*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 68 n. 46.

8. Robert J. Matthews, “Tradition, Testimony, Transfiguration, and Keys,” 308.

9. Richard L. Anderson, “Peter’s Letters: Progression for the Living and the Dead,” *Ensign*, October 1991, 7.

10. Thomas, “Visions of Christ in the Spirit World and the Dead Redeemed,” 356. Regarding the differing interpretations of 1 Peter, Richard L. Anderson opined, “The problem is both lack of faith and the rigidity of a traditional faith which insists that at death ‘man’s destiny is sealed, and the period of grace and repentance has ended.” Anderson, “Peter’s Letters,” 10, citing Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and of the Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 143.

11. Martin Luther, in Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, in the series *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 252 n. 146.

12. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 252. For a detailed examination of these questions, see 254–62.

13. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 244–45. For a full, book-length examination of 1 Peter 3:19, see Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism: A Study of 1 Peter 3:19 and Its Context* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1946).

14. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 289.

15. E. M. Blaiklock, *First Peter* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977), 87–88.

16. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” 4.27.2, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 1:499.

17. Origen, “Against Celsus,” 2.43, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:448.

18. Anderson, “Peter’s Letters,” 10. Catherine Thomas summarized, “For Augustine (AD 354–430), Bede (AD 673–735), Aquinas (AD 1225–74), and others, the difficulties in accepting the plain sense of 1 Peter 3:19 were insuperable.” Thomas, “Visions of Christ in the Spirit World and the Dead Redeemed,” 359.

19. Blaiklock, *First Peter*, 87.

20. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 17:374–75.

21. For an examination of this passage, see Frank F. Judd Jr. and Terry L. Szink, “John the Beloved in Latter-day Scripture (D&C 7),” in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 90–107.

22. For a discussion of the documentary evidence regarding priesthood restoration, see Michael Hubbard MacKay et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2009), xxxvii–xxxix; Brian Q. Cannon, “Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch with Erick B. Carlson (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 215–63.

23. The first four verses of D&C 27, together with portions of verses 5, 14, and 18, were received in August 1830. Joseph Smith indicated that the remaining portion, including the part referring to Peter, was written the following September. See MacKay et al., *Documents, Volume 1*, 165.

24. For Peter’s participation in the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, see Lyndon W. Cook, “The Apostle Peter and the Kirtland Temple,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1975): 550–52.

25. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 210–11.

26. Truman O. Angell, “His Journal,” in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, comp. Kate B. Carter (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1967), 10:198.

27. Orson F. Whitney, *The Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 91.

28. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 18:326.

29. Robert J. Matthews, *Behold the Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 244.

30. Manuscript History of the Church, 1838–1856, volume D-1, 1552.

31. The fragility of President Smith’s health is evident in the journal of Apostle James E. Talmage. Describing the opening session of the October 1918 general conference, Talmage wrote, “To the surprise and joy of the people President Joseph F. Smith was present. He made brief address.” James E. Talmage, October 4, 1918, James E. Talmage diary, in James Edward Talmage Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT. On the subsequent days of the conference, Talmage continued to note both President Smith’s presence and, when necessary, his absence. See James E. Talmage, October 5–7, 1918. A month later, on November 13, 1918, Talmage recorded, “President Joseph F. Smith completes his 80th year today. We all regret that he is in a very precarious state of ill health. I called at the Beehive House to express my greetings on his birthday, bearing a note of congratulation and hope as I hesitated to even ask to see him.” Two days later, Talmage added, “We cannot be oblivious to the fact that the condition of President Joseph F. Smith grows more serious and alarming every day. I have called daily of late and sometimes several times in a day, and each time I see him I realize that he is weaker than before” (November 15, 1918). The next day, he penned, “President Joseph F. Smith has been in a state of intense suffering.

Added to his former ailments, pleurisy is now developing. The brethren of the Council, by spontaneous and individual effort, continue to exercise their faith in his behalf; but we realize that physically he is near the border of the shadows” (November 16, 1918). The next day, Sunday, Talmage interestingly records, “In the evening the members of our family assembled in a brief and informal though I believe impressive and profitable religious service, in which our united prayers were addressed to the Lord in behalf of President Smith. . . . At this little gathering I read the ‘Vision of the Redemption of the Dead’ given to President Joseph F. Smith October 3rd, and soon to be published to the Church” (November 17, 1918). Two days later, early in the morning of November 19, 1918, President Smith passed away.

32. Richard E. Bennett, “And I Saw the Hosts of the Dead, Both Small and Great: Joseph F. Smith, World War I, and His Visions of the Dead,” *Religious Educator* 2, no. 1 (2001): 106. The specter of war loomed over the very general conference proceedings that overlapped with the vision’s receipt. On the same day that he recorded the events of conference, Talmage skeptically commented in his journal on rumors that the German Chancellor was making overtures for peace. He also recounted special mass meetings held in conjunction with conference to encourage the purchase of Liberty Bonds as well as a vote by church membership sustaining the procurement of additional bonds by the church itself. James E. Talmage, diary, October 5–6, 1918.

33. George S. Tate, “‘The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead’: Death, the Great War, and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic as Context for Doctrine and Covenants 138,” *BYU Studies* 46, no. 1 (2007): 33. On October 10, 1918, James E. Talmage reported in his journal, “Yesterday an order was promulgated by the State Board of Health, effective this morning, directing the suspension of all public gatherings owing to the continued spread of the malady known as the Spanish influenza. The Salt Lake Temple was closed at noon today, and instructions were issued that all the Temples be closed and all Church meetings be suspended. This is probably the first time in the history of the Church that such radical and general action has had to be taken.” James E. Talmage, diary, October 10, 1918. Following up in his journal six days later, Talmage continued, “The influenza epidemic is claiming an increasing toll of lives all over the country. Surely a desolating scourge and sickness is sweeping the land. The mandate of the State Board of Health regarding public gatherings in Utah is rigidly enforced. House parties, public funerals, except in the open air, and wedding receptions are specifically forbidden. The exigency seems to fully warrant this drastic action.” James E. Talmage, October 16, 1918. Talmage’s journal documents well the “unusual circumstances” of President Smith’s funeral “entailed by the ban placed upon public assemblies.” James E. Talmage, November 22, 1918.

34. Tate, “The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead,” 10.

35. Joseph F. Smith, “Status of Children in the Resurrection,” *Improvement Era*, May 1918, 568.

36. Tate, “The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead,” 12.

37. Robert L. Millet, “Latter-day Insights into the Life Beyond,” in *The Capstone of Our Religion: Insights into the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Larry E. Dahl (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 206.

38. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1918, 2.

39. Millet, “Latter-day Insights into the Life Beyond,” 208.

40. Tate, "The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead," 5, 7.
41. On October 31, 1918, Talmage recorded in his journal, "Attended meeting of the First Presidency and the Twelve. Today President Smith, who is still confined to his home by illness, sent to the Brethren the account of a vision through which, as he states, were revealed to him important facts relating to the work of the disembodied Savior in the realm of departed spirits, and of the missionary work in progress on the other side of the veil. By united action the Council of the Twelve, with the Counselors in the First Presidency, and the Presiding Patriarch accepted and endorsed the revelation as the Word of the Lord. President Smith's signed statement will be published in the next issue (December) of the Improvement Era, which is the organ of the Priesthood quorums of the Church." James E. Talmage, diary, October 31, 1918. For a complete analysis of the recording, dissemination, and eventual canonization of President Smith's vision, see Mary Jane Woodger, "From Obscurity to Scripture: Joseph F. Smith's Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 234–54.
42. Joseph F. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 18:92, 18:274, 19:264, 20:30, 22:43, 23:171–72, 24:78. Addresses by Joseph F. Smith are also common in *Collected Discourse*, a five-volume compilation of addresses by church leaders from 1886 to 1898, but Smith does not appear to make an explicit reference to the passages from 1 Peter 3 and 4 in any of these sermons. An analysis of Conference Reports from 1897 to 1918 also reveals no explicit reference to the particular verses by President Smith.
43. Joseph F. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 18:92.
44. Joseph F. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:30.
45. Joseph F. Smith, "Address of President Joseph F. Smith. Delivered at the Funeral Services of Sister Mary A. Freeze," *Young Woman's Journal*, March 1912, 130.
46. Joseph F. Smith, "Address of President Joseph F. Smith," 130.
47. Anderson, "Peter's Letters," 9.
48. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 624–25.
49. James E. Faust, in Conference Report, April 2003, 68. On another occasion, citing this passage, President Faust further counseled regarding our obligation towards the dead and their chances for salvation, "It is not likely that you will find any horse thieves in your ancestral line. But if you do, it is important that their temple work be done because we believe in repentance for the dead also." Faust, in Conference Report, October 2003, 59. Recently, Elder David A. Bednar clarified some related misunderstandings regarding repentance by wayward children. See David A. Bednar, "Faithful Parents and Wayward Children: Sustaining Hope While Overcoming Misunderstanding," *Ensign*, March 2014, 28–33; see also D&C 76:73–78.
50. Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, October 1972, 18.
51. Jeffrey R. Holland, *However Long and Hard the Road* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 98.

