
Sylvester Smith

1806–1880

D&C 75:34; 102:3, 34

Sylvester moved to Amherst, Ohio, in 1815. In that small agrarian community, he was a farmer, carpenter, lawyer, and land entrepreneur. His religious leanings weren't obvious until missionaries shared with him the message of the Restoration. Sylvester eagerly entered baptismal waters. By June 1831 he was ordained an elder and, by October 1831, a high priest by Oliver Cowdery. He was called by revelation to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ with Gideon Carter (see D&C 75:34). Sylvester fulfilled that mission and wrote, "I have traveled about five hundred miles in about six weeks, and held fifteen meetings and I trust that I shall continue to receive the grace of God to support me even to the end."¹

In 1834 Sylvester moved his family to Kirtland. Before marching with Zion's Camp to Missouri, he served on the Kirtland High Council. On the march of Zion's Camp, Sylvester criticized leaders for failing to prepare for the journey and complained of men and teams being required to pull heavy wagons. The Prophet Joseph Smith learned of his complaints and expressed concern that Sylvester was "sowing the seed of discord." Sylvester replied, "If Joseph was a prophet he was not afraid and would contradict him in the face of all present."²

Historian James L. Bradley wrote that contention between Sylvester and the Prophet Joseph began when Sylvester and his company were marching to the tune of a fife and—

the Prophet's bulldog rushed toward the marching men. Fortunately, [the] Prophet Joseph Smith called off the dog before he bit Sylvester Smith, or caused bodily harm to the other men. The rush of the attacking

¹ History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], 322. Joseph Smith Papers.

² Levi Ward Hancock Autobiography and Wilford Woodruff Journal, as cited in James L. Bradley, *Zion's Camp 1834: Prelude to the Civil War* (Logan, UT: James L Bradley, 1990), 62–63.

dog enraged Sylvester Smith. . . . [His] verbal attack was of such a nature that Joseph Smith recorded it as “the first outbreak of any importance since the beginning of the journey.”³

According to George A. Smith, “Joseph reproved [Sylvester] sharply, showing him that such a spirit would not conquer or control the human family, that he must get rid of it, and predicted that if he did not get rid of it, the day would come when a dog would gnaw his flesh, and he not have the power to resist it.”⁴ Sylvester yelled, “You are prophesying lies in the name of the Lord.”⁵

Sylvester continued to rail against the Prophet when he returned to Kirtland. “I was met in the face and eyes, as soon as I had got home, with a catalogue of charges as black as the author of lies himself,” wrote Joseph, “and the cry was Tyrant—Pope—King—Usurper—Abuser of men—Angel—False Prophet—Prophesying lies in the name of the Lord—Taking consecrated monies—and every other lie to fill up and complete the catalogue.”⁶ The issue was not resolved until a Church judicial proceeding was held. At the proceeding, Sylvester admitted his error, confessed his faults, and retained his membership.

In 1835 Sylvester was called to be a president of the First Quorum of the Seventy. In the weeks preceding the Kirtland Temple dedication, the Prophet Joseph wrote, “The heavens were opened unto Elder Sylvester Smith, and he, leaping up, exclaimed, ‘The horsemen of Israel and the chariots thereof.’”⁷ A few days later, Sylvester “saw a pillar of fire rest down and abide upon the heads of the quorum [of the Seventy].”⁸

Although Sylvester held an important leadership position in the Church and had received spiritual manifestations, he never rid himself of a quarrelsome spirit. He was released from the Presidency of the Seventy on April 6, 1837. In 1838 he withdrew from Church fellowship. In 1853 Sylvester moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa. In that outpost community, he was elected a school commissioner and a justice of the peace. Sylvester died on February 22, 1880, in Council Bluffs at age seventy-four.

³ Bradley, *Zion's Camp 1834*, 128.

⁴ George A. Smith, “Historical Discourse,” *Journal of Discourses*, 11:7.

⁵ George A. Smith Journal, quoted in Bradley, *Zion's Camp 1834*, 129.

⁶ Letter Book 1, 84. Joseph Smith Papers.

⁷ History, 1838–1856, volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838], 697. Joseph Smith Papers

⁸ Journal, 1835–1836, 143. Joseph Smith Papers.