

Section 117

To understand section 117, you need to know about a revelation to Joseph Smith that is not in the Doctrine and Covenants. It came to him on January 12, 1838. That year began grimly as dissent from within and opposition from outside the Church pressured Joseph. The Saints' banking project had failed, and Joseph was mired in debt because of his efforts to turn Kirtland, Ohio, into a stake of Zion, including crowning it with a priceless but nevertheless expensive temple. Creditors, some of whom were Joseph's avowed enemies, hounded him. Some filed suits against him. Some of his associates and friends rejected his leadership. Dissenters started their own church.

In that context, Joseph sought direction and received the revelation mentioned above, telling him, his family, and faithful saints emphatically to flee Ohio or Missouri.¹ Joseph left immediately. His family and remaining members of the First Presidency followed him. The question remained whether his "faithful friends" would also. Would they "arise with their families also and get out of this place and gather themselves together unto Zion"?

Joseph moved to Far West, Missouri, and received a series of revelations that relocated, reorganized, and reoriented the Church, whose headquarters had been in

¹ "[Revelation, 12 January 1838–C](#)," p. [1], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 2, 2020.

Kirtland, Ohio, since 1831. One of the new revelations, section 115, declared Far West to be the new center of gathering for the Saints.

The First Presidency expected that William Marks, a bookseller who remained in Kirtland to preside over the Saints there, and Newel Whitney, the bishop in Kirtland, would obey the revelations to leave Kirtland and come to Far West. These men dragged their feet. Whitney was Kirtland's most prosperous merchant. He owned a store and a profitable ashery situated ideally near the main intersection through town. He was torn between material prosperity and the revelations.

Almost all the faithful Kirtland Saints left for Missouri in May. When neither Whitney nor Marks had arrived in Missouri by July, Joseph received section 117 about their situations and about what to do regarding his indebtedness and the bankruptcy of the First Presidency.

In direct and certain terms, the Lord commanded Newel Whitney and William Marks to relocate to Missouri before winter to continue serving in their respective callings, Marks to preside over the Saints in Far West and Whitney to serve as a bishop, which in the 1830s meant to manage the Church's material assets to build Zion and relieve poverty.

There is a fascinating dynamic to section 117. No other revelation, no other scriptures, in fact, use the words "saith the Lord" as often. Some Old Testament prophets use the phrase nearly as often, and sections 124 and 132 use it frequently too. But its high frequency in section 117 may tell us something about Joseph's awkward position.

Newel Whitney was his friend and benefactor. Newel and Elizabeth Ann Whitney welcomed the homeless Joseph and Emma to their own hearth when they first moved to Ohio. The Whitneys repeatedly housed Joseph and Emma, as well as Sidney Rigdon's family. Emma gave birth to Joseph III in the Whitney home. Emma and Elizabeth Ann Whitney were dear, close friends. Newel served ably as a bishop and tried to implement the law of consecration. He largely financed the United Firm as one of its charter members (see sections 72, 78, 82, and 104). He used his own

connections and resources to set Joseph up as a rival storekeeper in Kirtland.² Joseph loved and admired Bishop Whitney but acknowledged “the narrow mindedness of his heart and all his covetous desires that so easily besetteth him.”³

The Lord speaks directly to those desires in section 117. He speaks as the Creator and Owner of the earth with whom Newel had covenanted to consecrate and serve as a bishop. He commands Newel and William to “repent of all their sins, and of all their covetous desires, before me” (D&C 117:4). He points a series of penetrating questions at the two men who are still deciding whether to serve God or what section 98:20 called “all their detestable things.” The Lord paints a comparative picture, juxtaposing what Joseph called Newel’s “narrow mindedness,” his acquisition of a tiny telestial empire in Kirtland, Ohio, with the Lord’s expansiveness as the Creator. He evokes terms from the “pure language” to describe northern Missouri, where Newel is commanded to relocate and serve the Saints (D&C 117:8; see section 116 and Abraham 3:13).

In verse 11 the Lord associates Newel Whitney with a Nicolatane band, by which He means to accuse him of aiding and abetting the enemy. Nicolatans were followers of Nicholas of Antioch, an early Christian called and ordained to look after the “business” of ministering to widows (Acts 6:1–8). Nicholas apostatized, however, and led a faction that tried to justify their covetous and lustful impulses.⁴ Verse 11 is the Lord’s potent way of conveying to Newel how evil the Lord finds the Kirtland apostates and how near Newel is himself to committing their sins.

Consider the possibility that Joseph may have been discomforted by the Lord’s straightforwardness to Bishop Whitney, who had been so generous with Joseph. There is no way to know for sure, but it may be that Joseph wanted Newel to be sure that the rebuke came from Jesus, not Joseph. That could account for the striking repetition of “saith the Lord” in section 117.

Beginning in verse 12, the Lord commends and commissions Oliver Granger with the job of redeeming the credit of the First Presidency back in Ohio before returning to

² Mark L. Staker, “‘Thou Art the Man’: Newel K. Whitney in Ohio,” *BYU Studies* 42:1 (2003): 75–138, especially page 113.

³ “*Journal, 1835–1836*,” 6, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 2, 2020.

⁴ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans, 1887), 439.

Missouri as a merchant for Zion. The Lord does not promise Oliver success in this labor, only that his repeated efforts and sacrifice will be sanctifying for him and that his name will be sacredly remembered (D&C 117:13).

Oliver Granger returned from Missouri to Kirtland to obey his part of section 117 by representing the First Presidency in selling some property and settling some debts. One Saint on the scene noted Oliver's "strict integrity" and testified that his "management in the arrangement of the unfinished business of people that have moved to the Far West, in redeeming their pledges and thereby sustaining their integrity, has been truly praiseworthy, and has entitled him to my highest esteem and ever grateful recollection."⁵ Still, "there was not much chance that he could succeed," Elder Boyd K. Packer taught. He emphasized that section 117 does not praise Oliver for his success but for his efforts, for earnestly contending at personal sacrifice. Thus, for efforts with which Oliver himself may not have been entirely satisfied, his name and example have been remembered.⁶

When Oliver returned from Ohio ready to fulfill the instructions in 117:14, the First Presidency wrote him a letter of commendation.⁷ Meanwhile, Oliver delivered section 117, together with a letter from the First Presidency, to Newel Whitney and William Marks. The revelation and the related letter put Newel and William in the position of the rich ruler of Luke 18 who kept all of the commandments except the full measure of consecration required to enter the kingdom of God. As Jesus counseled the rich man, so He counsels Newel and William in section 117 to sell what they have, distribute unto the poor; come (in their case, literally) to Missouri, and choose "treasure in heaven" instead of the comparatively tiny though highly coveted "drop" (D&C 117:8; Luke 18:18–25).

⁵ Horace Kingsbury to all persons that are or may be interested, Painesville, Ohio, October 26, 1838, Joseph Smith, Letterbook 2, 40, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁶ Boyd K. Packer, "The Least of These," *Ensign* (November 2004), 86; Howard W. Hunter, "No Less Serviceable," *Ensign* (April 1992), 64.

⁷ "[Authorization for Oliver Granger, 13 May 1839](#)," 45, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 2, 2020.

The First Presidency's letter to Newel and William said, "You will understand the will of the Lord concerning you."⁸ Knowing the revelation compelled the brethren to act—either in obedience or disobedience. They could not remain indecisive about obeying Jesus Christ. The First Presidency was confident that they would "doubtless act accordingly," and they did. Newel Whitney and his family left Kirtland in the fall of 1838, too late to join with the Saints in Missouri (being driven from the state) but soon enough to continue serving as a bishop in Nauvoo, Illinois. William Marks obeyed also and became the Nauvoo stake president.

Section 117 powerfully motivated Newel Whitney, William Marks, and Oliver Granger. Each of them believed it was indeed a revelation from the Lord and sacrificed selfish interests in order to obey it.

⁸ "[Letter to William Marks and Newel K. Whitney, 8 July 1838](#)," p. [1], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 2, 2020.