

Section 136

Of all the would-be successors to Joseph Smith, only Brigham Young understood what was at stake. He explained that no one could lead the Church without the keys of the holy priesthood which Joseph had received from ministering angels. Joseph had conferred those keys on Brigham and eight other apostles.

Joseph had gathered them three months before his death and said,

It may be that my enemies will kill me, and in case they should, and the keys and power which rest on me not be imparted to you, they will be lost from the earth; but if I can only succeed in placing them upon your heads, then let me fall a victim to murderous hands if God will suffer it, and I can go with all pleasure and satisfaction, knowing that my work is done, and the foundation laid on which the kingdom of God is to be reared in this dispensation of the fullness of times. Upon the shoulders of the Twelve must the responsibility of leading this church hence forth rest until you shall appoint others to succeed you. ... Thus can this power and these keys be perpetuated in the Earth.

Joseph and his brother Hyrum then confirmed the ordinations of each of the apostles who were present, and Joseph gave them a final charge. “I roll the burthen and responsibility of leading this church off from my shoulders on to yours,” he declared.

“Now, round up your shoulders and stand under it like men; for the Lord is going to let me rest.”¹

As president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Brigham Young explained these principles to the Saints on August 8, 1844. Many, including Martha Tuttle Gardner, received a confirming witness from the Lord. She testified that Brigham Young “told the people that although Joseph was dead, Joseph had left behind the keys of the Kingdom and had conferred the same power & authority that he himself possessed upon the Twelve Apostles and the Church would not be left without a leader and a guide.”

Martha had written reverently of witnessing the (capital *P*) Prophet Joseph Smith, and she now confidently transferred that designation to “the Prophet Brigham Young.” She wrote that he “had the Nauvoo Temple finished” and endowed her with power there early in 1845. Then, under Brigham’s leadership, she and many other Saints fled Nauvoo for peace and safety somewhere in the West.²

President Young led them across Iowa Territory, and they camped for the winter on the banks of the Missouri River. There, in a January 1847 council meeting, the Prophet Brigham Young asked the Lord to reveal “the best manner of organizing companies for emigration.” The Lord answered. “President Young commenced to give the Word and Will of God concerning the emigration of the Saints,” section 136.³ It is concerned with three basic issues: governing authority, camp organization, and individual behavior.⁴

The key words in the early verses of section 136 are *organized* and *covenant*. The Saints were to be organized into companies “under the direction of the Twelve Apostles” (D&C 136:3). “And this shall be our covenant—that we will walk in all the ordinances of the Lord” (v. 4). Like Martha, many of them had recently made temple covenants in Nauvoo. Section 136 tells them how to consecrate their lives to Zion. It

¹ Declaration of the apostles, circa September 1844 to March 1845, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

² Testimony written by Martha Tuttle Gardner, in possession of the author.

³ “At 4:30 PM the council adjourned. At seven, the Twelve met at Elder Benson’s. President Young continued to dictate the word and will of the Lord. Council adjourned at ten P.M., when President Young retired with Dr. Richards to the Octagon and finished writing the same.” Journal History of the Church, January 14, 1847, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁴ Richard E. Bennett, *We’ll Find the Place: The Mormon Exodus 1846–1848* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1997), 70.

reiterates the principles of consecration that pervade so many of Joseph Smith's revelations. The first principle is agency. Section 136 tells the Saints how to act relative to organization, preparation, property, contention, the commandments to not covet and or take the Lord's name in vain, alcohol, fear, sorrow, and ignorance. The Lord prescribes specific behaviors for each of these.

Another principle of consecration is stewardship. Free agents act upon stewardships, or what the Lord gives them to act upon. "Thou shalt be diligent in preserving what thou hast," he commands in verse 27, "that thou mayest be a wise steward; for it is the free gift of the Lord thy God, and thou art his steward." Section 136 gives commands that tell the Saints how to act relative to stewardships that include draft animals, seeds, farming tools, widows, orphans, the families of the men who have joined the United States Army, houses, fields, and the Saints who will follow in later waves of migration. He adds instructions for the use of "influence and property" (D&C 136:10) and even for borrowed and lost property.

Another principle of consecration is accountability. Verse 19 declares the consequence of failing to keep one's covenant to walk in the ordinances of the Lord: "And if any man shall seek to build himself up, and seeketh not my counsel, he shall have no *power*, and his folly shall be made manifest," suggesting that one's endowment of *power* is dependent on keeping the covenants made in the endowment ordinance (D&C 136:4, 19; emphasis added).

The motif of pilgrims in search of a promised land, of exodus as a sanctifying precondition to finding and becoming Zion, is common in scripture and the backbone of section 136. It casts the Saints as a modern Camp of Israel (D&C 136:1), following the "God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob" as they are led through the wilderness by a modern Moses in search of a promised land (vv. 21–22). They are wanderers, exiles even from the United States, upon which the Lord prophesies an imminent punishment for rejecting the Saints' testimony and killing the prophets "that were sent unto them" (vv. 34–36). In these ways section 136 includes the Latter-day Saints with all the former faithful of past dispensations, those section 45 describes as "pilgrims on the earth" who wandered in search of Zion and "obtained a promise that they should find it" (D&C 45:12–14).

Finally, section 136 explains Joseph Smith's martyrdom from the Lord's perspective. "Many have marveled because of his death," the Lord omnisciently knows, "but it was

needful that he should seal his testimony with his blood, that he might be honored and the wicked might be condemned” (D&C 136:39). From the Lord’s vantage, allowing Joseph to die as a testator was a wise move that left an enduring witness of His name even as it delivered the Saints, including Joseph, from their enemies (v. 40). The revelation ends with a poetic covenant in verse 42, promising deliverance on the condition that the Saints choose to diligently keep commandments.

Section 136 resulted in the best organized and executed overland emigration in American history. However, it may be more important for the way it established Brigham Young as a revelator. Saints exercised faith to see in him their (capital *P*) Prophet, and it required personal sacrifice. Section 136 confirmed the correctness of their choice. There was much outspoken criticism of Brigham before and after section 136. The Saints had other options besides him.⁵

Apostle Heber Kimball noted in his journal that section 136 was the first revelation “penned since Joseph was killed. ... The Lord has given it through the President for the good of this people as they are traveling to the west.”⁶ Jedediah Grant voiced what many Saints felt. “Since the death of Joseph, [I] have believed that the keys of revelation were in the Church. When I heard that [section 136] read I felt a light and joy and satisfied that the Holy Ghost had dictated the words within.”⁷

For Saints who had covenanted to literally “walk in all the ordinances of the Lord” up and over the Rocky Mountains as outcasts, section 136 would sustain them in the heat of the day (D&C 136:4). Joseph was gone, but the Prophet Brigham Young was just as much a Moses (D&C 28:3).

⁵ Bennett, *We'll Find the Place*, 69.

⁶ Heber C. Kimball, Journal, January 19, 1847, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁷ As quoted by Willard Richards, Journal, January 15, 1847, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.