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Introduction

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Introduction

Because the history of the Kirtland Temple involves several religious faiths, a brief outline of these groups will aid in understanding the context of this study. In 1820, Joseph Smith Jr., a farm boy in upstate New York, received a vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ in response to a prayer for guidance as to which church he should join. Told to join none of the existing churches, Joseph received other heavenly communications, which eventually led in 1830 to the organization of the Church of Christ in Fayette, New York. Joseph and his companions believed this to be a restoration of the church organization that existed in Jesus' time. Following Joseph's inspired direction, the Church's organization soon included Apostles, seventies, elders, and other offices mentioned in the New Testament. The initial name of the Church was changed by a conference of elders on May 3, 1834, to the Church of the Latter-day Saints,¹ the name that was originally painted on the facade of the Kirtland Temple. The two names were combined in 1838, when the Church was designated The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (D&C 115:4).

One of the Church's basic tenets is that Joseph Smith was a prophet who received instructions from God. During his brief life, Joseph introduced beliefs that were unique among Christian churches. One of these was the doctrine of sealing families for eternity, an ordinance that was conducted in a temple. This doctrine was not practiced until the 1840s, when the Church was headquartered in Nauvoo, Illinois, and so was not part of the initial history of the Kirtland Temple. However, the sealing of families and the related doctrine of plural marriage have affected interpretations of the Kirtland Temple's significance.

After the murder of Joseph Smith in 1844, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, under the leadership of Brigham Young, continued administration of the Church. Brigham organized the exodus to the Rocky Mountains and in 1847 was sustained as the second President of the Church. Headquartered in Salt Lake City, this organization retains the 1838 name, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and is referred to in the text as the LDS Church. With almost ten million members at the time of this writing, this is the largest of the churches concerned with the Kirtland Temple.

Although the majority of Church members followed Brigham Young to Utah, a significant number never accepted him as a successor to Joseph Smith, and several small groups formed, each with its own leader. During their period of immigration to and colonization of the West, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had little to do with the Kirtland Temple. On the other hand, some of the groups that did not go to Utah congregated around places formerly settled by the Church, such as Kirtland, Ohio; Independence, Missouri; and Nauvoo, Illinois. In 1852, members of several smaller groups united as the “New Organization” of the Church; on April 6, 1860, at Amboy, Illinois, Joseph Smith Jr.’s son Joseph Smith III assumed leadership of what was then termed the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The RLDS Church rejects some of the doctrine taught by Joseph Smith Jr., especially that of the Nauvoo period. Currently headquartered in Independence, Missouri, the RLDS Church has approximately 250,000 members.

The RLDS Church gained legal ownership of the Kirtland Temple in 1880; since both the LDS and RLDS Churches stem from the religious group that constructed the building and since both organizations claim to be Christ’s restored church on earth, little theological room is left for sharing. While the temple ownership issue was a source of friction in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries,² LDS and RLDS relations have evolved in a very different direction in the late-twentieth century. The sense of competition to prove each’s legitimacy as the rightful heir to Joseph Smith’s leadership has been replaced with increasing cooperation regarding preservation of the two churches’ combined heritage. I hope this trend will continue.

Members of all branches of the Restoration have commonly been called “Mormons,” or even “Mormonites.” This term refers to their use of the Book of Mormon, which Joseph Smith translated from gold plates and which members of the Church believe to be a companion book of scripture to the Bible. Originally a term of derision, “Mormon” has been used so frequently that members of the LDS Church generally accept it without pejorative connotations, although the RLDS Church has distanced itself from the term in the past.³ In contrast, members of both the LDS and RLDS branches of the Mormon community have always referred to themselves as “Saints,” using the term in its New Testament context. I use it in this text because it is common to both groups in historic and contemporary usage.

This text also relies on the significant body of background information available on Joseph Smith and the church he restored. Beginning in the 1830s and continuing through the nineteenth century, the LDS Church went to great pains to document the often tragic events that marked its early history. Church members were encouraged to record their life histories. Several diaries and histories of early church leaders were published in an early periodical, the *Times and Seasons*. A large—but not comprehensive—portion of Joseph Smith’s diaries, along with pieces of his correspondence and other

papers, were published between 1842 and 1856 in Church periodicals. This documentary history of the Church was then edited and published by Church historian B. H. Roberts as a six-volume series in the early twentieth century. This history provides an invaluable guide to early Mormonism, although it should be noted that the editorial guidelines that were used occasionally distorted the sources.⁴ Although some later reminiscences may confuse specific dates and times, their writers exhibit no confusion regarding obstacles they faced and their feelings about the events they lived through. In order to preserve these sources, I have retained their original spellings, though I have brought down raised letters and interlinear words.

Many documents used in this study make reference to revelations or other divine communications received by Joseph Smith and others. Other authors who have written about the temple have varied in their approach to these sources. For example, Laurel Andrew takes a rather skeptical view of Joseph Smith's divine communication, consistent with her underlying thesis that LDS temple architecture, along with the LDS temple ceremony, was derived from Masonic sources. On the other hand, Roger Launius emphasizes the Kirtland Temple's role in the spiritual lives of those who worshipped there, fully accepting its divine foundation.⁵ This study likewise accepts the supernatural events surrounding the design and construction of the temple as reported by those who experienced them. Nevertheless, the building fabric of the Kirtland Temple does not prove or disprove the divinity of Joseph Smith's communications; in many ways, that determination is irrelevant to this study. What is important is that those who worked on the temple believed in Joseph Smith as a prophet of God and believed that in constructing this edifice they were following God's commandment. The building fabric of the Kirtland Temple is the record of this belief.

Notes

¹*History of the Church*, 2:62–63.

²For example, the establishment of the RLDS Utah mission must be viewed in this sense, notwithstanding the genuine concern individuals had for the spiritual welfare of their brothers and sisters (in terms of both brothers and sisters of the general human family and, in many cases, blood relations). In addition, the construction of the Auditorium in Independence, with its large domed hall and organ, can be understood in its competitive relationship to the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City.

³On the use of the term Mormon, see *History of the Church*, 2:254: "We thought no harm in advising the Latter-day Saints, or 'Mormons,' as they are reproachfully called." See also the short history written by Inez Smith, "approved by her father, Heman C. Smith, [RLDS] Church Historian," quoted by Upton, *History of the Western Reserve*, 1:128: "The Latter-Day Saints, erroneously called Mormons, a people whose history and doctrine have caused much comment in the historical world."

⁴Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:xxxix–xxxii.

⁵Andrew, *Early Temples of the Mormons*; Launius, *Kirtland Temple*.