

JOSEPH SMITH—MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY

On March 7, 1831, Joseph Smith received the revelation that is now canonized as the forty-fifth section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Embedded in this lengthy revelation is a recitation of and expansion on Jesus’s Olivet Discourse as recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 (Doctrine and Covenants 45:15–59). This section is prefaced with the Lord’s declaration that He “will speak unto you and prophesy, as unto men in days of old” and would otherwise “show it plainly as I showed it unto my disciples as I stood before them in the flesh” (45:15–16). After rehearsing this material—consisting of Jesus’s prophecy of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, the scattering of the Jews, and the signs of His return as the glorified Son of Man—the Lord instructed the Prophet to commence translating the New Testament as part of his inspired revision of the Bible (now called the Joseph Smith Translation) that he had begun that previous summer (45:60–61). With Sidney Rigdon as his scribe, Joseph began producing his “Translation of the New Testament translated by the power of God” (so designated in the head to the original manuscript) the next day, March 8, 1831, leaving off where he had reached in his revision of the Old Testament (Genesis 24:41).

It is not known precisely when Joseph Smith reached Matthew 24 in this “new translation” of the Bible (as he himself called it), but it certainly would not have been much longer after he began revising the New Testament on March 8. As with his translation of the opening chapters of Genesis that is now canonized as the book of Moses, the Prophet originally dictated his revision of Matthew 24 to Sidney Rigdon, who captured the dictation in what is now commonly designated New Testament Manuscript 1 (NT1, which covers Matthew 1:1–26:71). Shortly after this initial translation work, on April 4, 1831, Church historian and recorder John Whitmer began producing a copy

of this manuscript that served as the working draft for the rest of the revision of the New Testament. This manuscript, commonly designated New Testament Manuscript 2 (NT2), underwent additional revisions as the Prophet refined the project, including the material that had been previously produced with Rigdon in NT1.

As with his translation of the content in the book of Genesis that is now the book of Moses, early Latter-day Saints quickly recognized the significance of the Prophet's revision to Matthew 24. In the mid-1830s, what is now designated Joseph Smith—Matthew appeared in print and circulated in the form of a standalone “broadsheet” (a handbill), which was subsequently recopied in other contemporary publications such as John Corrill's 1839 *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* and the first edition of the Pearl of Great Price, prepared by Elder Franklin D. Richards in 1851. There it appeared as “An Extract from a Translation of the Bible” alongside the extracted material from Joseph Smith's revision of Genesis (also circulating in print during the Prophet's lifetime), and it has appeared in each subsequent edition of the Pearl of Great Price.

STRUCTURE

Although Joseph Smith—Matthew is commonly referred to as a translation or revision of Matthew 24, it in fact begins at Matthew 23:39 with a brief narrative that frames the discourse. Following the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph Smith—Matthew narrates Jesus finishing His lamentations over Jerusalem, leaving the city and crossing the Kidron valley, and delivering the discourse on the Mount of Olives (see, respectively, Matthew 23:37–39 and Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:1; Matthew 24:1–2 and Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:2; Matthew 24:3 and Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:4). As also with Matthew, Joseph Smith—Matthew presents this discourse as a response to the disciples' inquiring of Jesus concerning the signs of His coming (Matthew 24:3; Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:4).

One of the most pronounced revisions Joseph Smith—Matthew makes on the biblical version of this discourse is to more clearly present Jesus as addressing two separate, consecutive events: (1) the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and the scattering of the Jews; (2) His return as the triumphant Son of Man. The pivot appears at around Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:21, although it is still not entirely clear where to precisely demarcate when Jesus is prophesying events in the first century AD and when He is prophesying events related to His Second Coming. Blurring this even more is the repetition of some events or themes in both timelines, such as the desecrating sacrilege (the “abomination of desolation” mentioned at 1:12, 32), or the rise of false Christs (1:6, 22), or the spread of iniquity (1:10, 30). Nevertheless, it is clear from other passages such as 1:34 that some events in the biblical

account that appear as expected to unfold in the first century in fact are yet to be fulfilled (see Matthew 24:34).

Jesus employs four parables in this discourse to illustrate the principles He wishes to impress upon His disciples. The first, the parable of the carcass and eagles (or vultures) at Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:27, concerns the gathering of the elect. The second, the parable of the fig tree at 1:38–39, emphasizes the need to be watchful for the signs of Jesus’s return. The third, the parable of the thief in the night at 1:47–48, warns that the disciples must ever be on their guard lest they be caught unprepared at their Lord’s return. The fourth and final parable (at 1:49–55) provides contrasting portraits of good and evil servants and their respective rewards at the Lord’s coming. In each case the parable is followed by additional instruction that develops the respective intent. Quotations of or allusions to texts from the Hebrew Bible are also peppered throughout this discourse, reinforcing the prophetic implications of these passages.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR LATTER-DAY SAINTS

The Latter-day Saint concern for eschatology, or the theology of the last days and the final destiny of humanity, arose early in the restored Church of Jesus Christ. Several of Joseph Smith’s canonized revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants (for example, sections 1, 29, 43, 45, 84) elaborate on the signs and events leading up to the return of Jesus Christ to the earth, the Millennium, and related doctrines. The millenarian worldview of the early Saints was greatly informed both by the Prophet’s revelations and also by his revising of biblical prophecies, including those recorded in Matthew 24.

Although the Lord’s warnings to His disciples in the Olivet Discourse are grave, their intention is not to frighten but rather to inform and, ultimately, encourage. The promise extended to faithful, watchful Saints in the last days is that their diligence and precaution will be rewarded with their joining the Lord at His coming and their triumph over the wicked (see Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:37, 55). Read in this light, Joseph Smith’s revisions to the Olivet Discourse ultimately reaffirm the relevance of the Lord’s promises to His ancient disciples and to modern Saints: that once the earth finds its millennial rest, He “shall be in their midst, and his glory shall be upon them, and he will be their king and their lawgiver” (Doctrine and Covenants 45:59).

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ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviated designations for Joseph Smith—Matthew manuscripts used in this study edition follow Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004). They have been correlated with the designations used on the Joseph Smith Papers Project website.

NT1 = New Testament Manuscript 1 = New Testament Revision 1

NT2 = New Testament Manuscript 2 = New Testament Revision 2