

Hard Questions in Church History

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1840-1842—Baptism for Dead (D&C 124, 127-128); Death of Joseph Smith Sr., Nauvoo Charter and Persecution

Questions to Consider

- Did Early Christians perform vicarious baptism for their kindred dead?
- How Will Does Baptism for the Dead align with agency in heaven?
- Why are some ordinances needed to be saved?
- Why did the Nauvoo Charter include so much power?
- Why didn't Joseph discern John Bennett's hypocrisy and wickedness?

Timeline

1840		
	February	Joseph unsuccessfully finishes two-month effort seeking remuneration for Missouri losses in Washington DC, and begins return trip back to Nauvoo
	March 4	Joseph arrives in Nauvoo
	April	Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball arrive in England
	May	Missionaries in England publish first issue of the <i>Millennial Sta.</i>
	July	John Bennett requests baptism and offers to help Joseph
	Aug 15	Joseph teaches Baptism for the Dead at funeral of Seymour Brunson
	Sept 14	Joseph Sr. dies in Nauvoo
	Dec 16	Nauvoo Charter is signed
1841		
	Feb 1	Nauvoo Charter becomes effective & Joseph elected to the Nauvoo City Council
	April 6	Cornerstones laid for the Nauvoo Temple
	June 4	Joseph is arrested on old Missouri charges
	June 9-10	Joseph on trial in Monmouth, Illinois; released on a writ of habeas corpus because of defects in the arrest warrant used by the State of Missouri
	Nov 8	Joseph dedicates wooden baptismal font
	Dec-Jan	Joseph charged for murder and taken to Springville, IL to stand trial, and released

1840—Drain the Swamps

That first summer in Commerce / Nauvoo, Illinois brought 100 people to the swamp lands. After many were plagued with the “ague” or “swamp fever,” a plan to dig ditches to drain the wetlands began. The Saints began digging ditches in 1840, and 2,450 people moved to Nauvoo (Susan Eastman Black, “How Large was the Population of Nauvoo,” *BYU Studies*, 35, no. 2 [1995], 92). That year about two hundred and fifty houses stood on the Nauvoo bend in the Mississippi—mostly block houses with many more under construction. With the help of skilled laborers, craftsmen, and artisans the Saints drained the swamps, and reclaimed the wild lands. They built a progressive community and city from the Mississippi River to the bluffs.

Their city on a bend in the River became a light of the world for the Saints to gather for seven years. Although they had no way of knowing much about the geology beneath the marshy soil there, they managed to dig and create drainage channels in precisely the right places to cure the swamp problems, as modern hydrology attests. The drainage work was researched and recorded by Kyle M. Rollins, Richard D. Smith, M. Brett Borup and E. James Nelson, “Transforming Swampland into Nauvoo, the City

Beautiful: A Civil Engineering Perspective,” *BYU Studies*, 45, no. 3 (2006): 125-157 (<https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/transforming-swampland-into-nauvoo-the-city-beautiful-a-civil-engineering-perspective/>).

Other research examined the factors associated with death—including age and cause—in Nauvoo (and later in Winter Quarters). Evan L. Ivie and Douglas C. Heiner’s conclusions are published in the article: “Deaths in Early Nauvoo IL, 1839-46, and in Winter Quarters, Nebraska, 1846-48, *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009): 163-174. The finds are tragic and add greater perspective to the Saints health and privation.

Baptism for Dead (August 15, 1840)

On August 15, 1840, at the funeral of Colonel Seymour Brunson, the Prophet Joseph Smith announced the doctrine of baptism for the dead. Seymour was a high councilor and bodyguard to the Prophet Joseph. When he became ill, Joseph and Emma brought him into their home in hopes of nursing him back to health. What happened next was recorded in a letter shortly thereafter by Vilate Kimball:

Before he died, he told Joseph not to hold him any longer, I have seen David Patten [Deceased president of the Twelve] and he wants me and the Lord wants me and I want to go. They then gave him up. At one time as Joseph entered the room there was a light encircled him above the brightness of the sun. He exclaimed, the room is filled with angels. They have come to waft my spirit home. He then bid his family and friends farewell and sweetly fell asleep in Jesus” (Ferron A. Olson, *Seymour Brunson: Defender of the Faith*, 2nd ed. [SLC, UT: 1999], 142).

On August 10, 1840 he died just shy of his forty-second birthday. His funeral was held five days later, at the burial ground on the bluff overlooking Nauvoo.

At his funeral the Prophet Joseph presented the doctrine of baptism for the dead. Joseph’s funeral sermon was not recorded by him, but we have at least three journal entries of people who were there who recorded what happened. Simon Baker recorded:

I was present at a discourse that the prophet Joseph delivered on baptism for the dead 15 August 1840. He read the greater part of the 15th chapter of Corinthians and remarked that the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought glad tidings of great joy, and then remarked that he saw a widow in that congregation that had a son who died without being baptized, and this widow in reading the sayings of Jesus "except a man be born of water and of the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven," and that not one jot nor tittle of the Savior's words should pass away, but all should be fulfilled.

He then said that this widow should have glad tidings in that thing. He also Said the apostle was talking to a people who understood baptism for the dead, for it was practiced among them. He went on to say that people could now act for their friends who had departed this life, and that the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God. He went on and made a very beautiful discourse (*Journal History*, LDS Archives, August 15, 1840)

Historians suggest that Jane Nyman was the widow Joseph mentioned at the funeral. After the funeral she asked Brother Harvey Olmstead to baptize her in behalf of her deceased son, Cyrus Livingston Nyman. Her request was granted. Witnessing the first baptism for the dead in the latter days was Vienna Jacques. On horseback, she rode into the Mississippi River to hear and observe the ceremony. Although a horse would not be included as the second witness in today’s standards, Joseph Smith gave his approval of the baptismal ordinance in behalf of Cyrus Nyman.

From that time forward, Latter-day Saints from Nauvoo to Quincy, Illinois, and even as far away as Kirtland, Ohio, entered river waters to be baptized as proxy for departed loved ones. Aroet Hale wrote, "The Prophet set the pattern for the baptism of the dead. He went into the Mississippi River and baptized over 200. Then the apostles and other elders went into the river and continued the same ordinance. Hundreds were baptized there." (*Religious Educator*, vol. 3 no. 2, 2002)

As some apostles had already left for their mission to England, the Prophet Joseph wrote them a letter about this newly restored doctrine dated 15 December 1840:

The saints have the priviledge [*sic*] of being baptized for those of their relatives who are dead, who they feel to believe would have embraced the gospel if they had been priviledged [*sic*] with hearing it, and who have received the gospel in the spirit through the instrumentality of those who may have been commissioned to preach to them while in the prison. Without enlarging on the subject you will undoubtedly see its consistency [*sic*], and reasonableness, and presents the the [*sic*] gospel of Christ in probably a more enlarged scale than some have received it. But as the performance of this right is more particularly confined to this place it will not be necessary to enter into particulars, at the same time I allways [*sic*] feel glad to give all the information in my power, but my space will not allow me to do it. "Letter to Quorum of the Twelve, 15 December 1840," p. [6],<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-quorum-of-the-twelve-15-december-1840/6>).

In 1841, after Wilford Woodruff returned from his mission in Great Britain, he assisted with the ordinance. He recorded in his journal:

Joseph Smith himself . . . went into the Mississippi river one Sunday night after meeting, and baptized a hundred. I baptized another hundred. The next man, a few rods from me, baptized another hundred. We were strung up and down the Mississippi baptizing for our dead Why did we do it? Because of the feeling of joy that we had, to think that we in the flesh could stand and redeem our dead. . .

We attended to this ordinance without waiting to have a proper record made. Of course, we had to do the work over again. Nevertheless, that does not say the work was not of God (Wilford Woodruff, *Journal*, April 6, 1891. Church History Library; also see Aroet Hale Autobiography, typescript, 7-8. L. Tom Perry Special Collections. Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT).

Vicarious baptism is one of the most wonderful doctrines taught in Nauvoo. In contrast to the Christian misunderstanding of damning all who have not been baptized, this extension of the Savior's atonement made the restoration the most inclusive, inviting, ecumenical faiths of all Christianity. Beyond Christianity, it opens the way for all humans to accept their Savior either in this life or the next.

The Lord added more parameters the following year in 1841 when he taught more about the new temple to be built in Nauvoo (see D&C 127 and 128). After the first wave of zeal before knowledge, the saints learned that witnesses must be present, a record kept, women are baptized for women, and men for men (D&C 128:3, 8).

Death of Joseph Smith Sr. (September 14, 1840)

The inherent sickness in the Mississippi swampland took its toll on hundreds of Latter-day Saints, including Father Smith, the Church Patriarch. Despite's Lucy's efforts to nurse her 69-year-old, 6 foot-2 inch, 200-pound husband back to health from mid-1839 through September 14, 1840, Joseph Sr. died. Lucy Mack Smith remembered:

When the heat of the ensuing [sic] summer came on, my husband's health began to decline more rapidly than before. This was perhaps caused, in part, by the renewal of the Missouri persecutions, for our sons were now demanded of the authorities of Illinois, as fugitives from justice. In consequence of which, they were compelled to absent themselves from the city, until the writs which were issued for their arrest, were returned ("Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845," p. 296, The Joseph Smith Papers).

In the evening of September 13, 1840, Father Smith vomited blood. Lucy sent immediately for Joseph and Hyrum to give him a blessing. The next day was a Sunday, and as the Smith children gathered at their father's bedside, "Joseph came in and told said Now Father I (am <I be> at liberty <Baptism for the dead > and I can stay with you as much as you wish." Father Smith then blessed each of his children (except Katherine who could not make it in time), and his wife, Lucy:

Do you <not> know that that you are one of the most singular women in the world— I said No I do not— Well said he I do— You have brought up my children for me by the fireside . . . We often wished that we might bothe die at the same time but you must not desire to die when I do for you must stay to comfort the children when I am gone so do not mourn but try to be comforted and your last days shall be your best days as to being driven for you shall have more power if over your enemies than you have had and now be comforted.

Immediately after this, he said in a tone of surprise,

"I can see and hear as well as ever I could.— Pause <and i have> my senses as <perfectly> well as ever &c Pause of some minutes— I see Alvin [Smith] Pause I shall live 7 or 8 minutes— he then straightened him self [sic] and laid his hands together and began to breathe shorter and shorter untill [sic] at last his breath stopped without a struggle or even a sigh (<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/225>).

John C. Bennett: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

When the Prophet Joseph returned from Washington DC in March 1840, he was inundated with work. With the apostles serving missions in the British Isles, and his father's illness and subsequent death, the founding of Nauvoo placed a great administrative burden on Joseph. In July 1840, John C. Bennett offered to help. He wrote to Joseph claiming to be a believing investigator and hoping to join the saints as a new convert. Joseph returned his letter welcoming him to "come and partake of the poverty of Nauvoo freely" (Smith, *History of the Church*, 4.178).

Bennett stepped in at the right time and offered his services to create a city. His resume was too good to be true. Blinded by needs, Joseph happily accepted his offer and assigned him to help with the Nauvoo Charter. But Joseph was deceived. Joseph's cousin George A. Smith later recorded that Joseph spoke on the need for the discerning of spirits more than any other topic—and Bennet's deception may have sparked part of the Prophet's interest in that spiritual gift.

Before and after John Bennett's two years in Nauvoo, he was a con artist. Historians remember him as a "fraud," one filled with "duplicity and deception," a "sullied reputation," and "no soul" (Susan Eastman Black, *Who' Who in the Doctrine and Covenants*, 13). Bennett's biographer summarized:

It is far more likely that Bennett recognized that the Mormons were "an untapped political potential in Illinois," which "he could exploit. . . for his own gain. He likely believed from the onset that Smith was a charlatan and Mormonism a fraud. Neither of these circumstances would have particularly mattered to him," since he had repeatedly resorted to lies and misrepresentation

for his own aggrandizement (Andrew F. Smith, *John C. Bennett, The History of the Saints, or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000]).

Joseph embraced him warmly—as he did all converts. Emma did not like him though. She saw through his pompous behavior when Joseph was not around; and when he was in Joseph’s presence, she thought Bennett tried too hard to please him (*Saints*).

Joseph entrusted him with the daunting task of preparing and securing the Nauvoo Charter. Looking back, we can see how many of the powers requested in the charter (i.e. private military legion) would have been very exciting to one seeking to gain power. Bennet became well known overnight and was elected mayor and a military leader. As the mayor, Bennett often acted as a political proxy for Joseph. He helped mainly with more secular issues and even performed a few weddings. Along with most converts, Joseph occasionally asked him to preach. In Bennett, Joseph had found the secular aide-de-camp he sought in vain from the high council.

But how did a newcomer step into the First Presidency? He actually did not. Sidney Rigdon was Joseph’s counsellor in the First Presidency, but Sidney was frequently ill. So on April 8, 1841, Joseph announced that Bennett would act as an Assistant until Sidney was well again. Modern readers should be cautious in projecting the role of the current First Presidency on Joseph’s era. In the modern Church, the First Presidency is almost always composed of two apostles called to serve with the President and have extensive experience in ecclesiastical affairs. In Joseph’s day, this was not the case. Most of Joseph’s counsellors in the First Presidency were to betray his trust at one time or another, including Jesse Gause, Frederick G. Williams, Sidney Rigdon, William Law and John C. Bennett. While some of these counsellors received keys, Bennett did not.

Before the year was out, reports of his adultery surfaced. Women came forth with stories of his doctrine of “spiritual wifery,” as well as promises that if they were to conceive, he would perform an abortion as a medical doctor. When Joseph confronted him, he pled for forgiveness and promised repentance. But he was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The women he seduced by his immorality, came forward and Joseph protected the women and removed Bennett. He was convicted of adultery by the Nauvoo High Council, and on May 17, 1842 Joseph announced publicly that he was immoral and had deceived many. On May 19, Bennett was dismissed as Mayor of Nauvoo, and he left town. Joseph warned the Relief Society in particular, and completely removed Bennet from the church community. Joseph prophesied that “if he did not repent of his sins and sin no more, the curse of God Almighty would rest upon him, that he would die a vagabond upon the face of the earth, without friends to buy him” (Black, *Who’s Who*, 15).

Bennett immediately began to attack Joseph. He played a major role in organizing other dissenters against Joseph and plotted his martyrdom. Bennett wrote a book where he projected his behaviors onto Joseph and boasted that his role in the inner circle of the First Presidency “gave me access to all their secret lodges and societies, and enabled me to become perfectly familiar with the doings and designs of the whole Church” (John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* [Boston MA: Leland, 1842], 3). But Bennet and Sidney Rigdon never received the highest temple ordinances that Joseph introduced at that same time. Bennett’s own evidence demonstrates he knew very little about plural marriage, eternal marriage, and the endowment.

After Joseph’s martyrdom, Bennett moved on to attack the religion. He alleged that he had duped the “Mormons.” However, his new profession did not prosper long. Twenty-three years later he died a pauper, fulfilling Joseph’s prophecy pronounced in 1842.

Dec-Jan 1-5, 1843—Court in Springfield , Illinois

In December 1842 Joseph Smith submitted himself to court authorities to be tried in Springfield, Illinois as an accomplice to the assassination attempt on Lilburn W. Boggs (from May 6, 1842), former governor of Missouri. Joseph was acquitted on January 3, 1843.

The Prophet Joseph Smith faced alleged charges over forty times for murder, conspiracy, treason, fraud, and adultery. Yet he was always released. The year 1843 began as Joseph was in the Illinois state capital, Springfield. He was found innocent of the Missouri charges alleging that he had attempted to assassinate Boggs. The trial was judged by Illinois Judge Nathaniel Pope. He found Joseph not a “fugitive of the law” but of fugitive of justice (see "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 1, 21 December 1842–10 March 1843," p. 36, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 30, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-1-21-december-1842-10-march-1843/42>).

The defense attorney, Esq. Butterfield claimed: “If there is a difference between him and other men it is that this people believe in prophecy, and others do not; the old Prophets prophesied in poetry and the modern in prose”

On Jan 1, while at the state capital, Joseph received a call from “the Speaker of the House of Representatives” for the state of Illinois, saying he “might have the Hall for preaching.” Many people were interested in hearing and seeing “the prophet” including many political figures. Joseph recorded his answer to a question that an attorney, Mr. Butterfield, asked about the difference between the restored church and other Christians:

I stated that the most prominent point of difference in sentiment between the Latter Day Saints and Sectarians was, that ... [we] have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time— At the suggestion of the Company I explained the—— nature of a prophet, If any person should ask me if I were a prophet I should not deny it, as that would give me the lie; for according to John “the testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of Prophecy”; therefore if I profess to be a witness or teacher, and have not the spirit of prophecy, which is the testimony of Jesus, I must be a false witness: but if I be a true teacher and witness I must possess the Spirit of Prophecy and that constitutes a prophet, and any man who says he is a teacher, or preacher of righteousness, and denies the Spirit of Prophecy, is a liar (*History of the Church*, 5:215; [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/76](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/76); History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843], Page 1433).

At the same meeting, Elder Orson Hyde, preached on Malachi 3, and Elder John Taylor from Revelations 14 chapter 6 and 7 verses on the first principles of the Gospel. Joseph recorded, “there was a respectable congregation who listened with good attention, notwithstanding the great anxiety to ‘see the Prophet’” (ibid.).

On Jan 5, after the court adjourned to 10 o clock, Joseph recorded that he received an invitation to meet privately with Judge Pope.

I accepted an invitation to see Judge Pope in his room and spent an hour in conversation with his honor, in which I explained to him that I did not profess to be a prophet more than every man ought [Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:231] who professes to be a preacher of righteousness, and that the testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of Prophecy, and gave the judge a brief but general view of my principles—

Esq^{re} Butterfield asked me “to prophesy how many inhabitants would come to Nauvoo” I said I will not tell how many— inhabitants will come to Nauvoo, but when I went to Commerce, I told

the people I would build up a City, and the old inhabitants replied “we will be damd if you can” So I prophesied that I would build up a City, and the Inhabitants prophesied I could not, and we have now about 12,000 Inhabitants. I will prophesy we will build up a great city, for we have the Stakes and have only to fill up the interstices. The Judge was very attentive and agreeable, and requested of me that my Secretary D^r [Willard] Richards would furnish him a copy of his decision for the press— dined at Judge Adams.

The next day, Friday January 5, Joseph received damages to the total of \$460, and then received a document verifying his innocence from the governor of Illinois. Joseph described their conversation:

. . . waited on Governor Ford for his certified thereto, after which he offered me a little advice, which was that I “should refrain from all political electioneering.” I told him that I always had acted on that principle, and proved it by General [Wilson] Law and D^r Richards, and that the “Mormons” were driven to union in their elections by persecution, and not by my influence, and that the “Mormons” acted on the most perfect principle of liberty in all their movements— During the day I had considerable conversation in the [HC 5:232] Court Room with the Lawyers &c on various topics, and particularly on Religion. Judge Pope’s son wished me well, and hoped I should “not be persecuted any more” and I blessed him. M^r Butterfield said I must deposit my discharge, and all my papers in the Archives of the Temple when it is completed— My discharge here referred to commenced with my Petition for Habeas Corpus, and closed with the Certificate of Thomas Ford, Governor of Illinois, including all the documents relating to my trial, on separate sheets of paper, attached by a blue ribbon, and secured by the seal of the Court . . . (<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/87>).

Joseph felt that he was treated fairly at the state capital.

Publicity and Curiosity and Misunderstandings Grow About the Prophet Joseph Smith

When Joseph was in Springville, IL, he may also have a conversation with a well-known Methodist minister, Peter Cartwright. The minister claimed to have had a conversation with Joseph once in Springfield. According to Cartwright their conversation was about the gifts of the Spirit:

On a certain occasion I fell in with Joe Smith . . . we soon fell into a free conversation on the subject of religion and Mormonism in particular. I found him to be a very illiterate and impudent desperado in morals, but, at the same time, he had a vast fund of low cunning. . . . He expressed great and almost unbounded pleasure in the high privilege of becoming acquainted with me, one of whom he had heard so many great and 0.25", and that the saints can drink any deadly poison and it will not hurt them;" and closed by saying, “the idle stories you hear about us are nothing but sheer persecution” (*Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1986), 225-226).

Cartwright’s recollection sounds exaggerated as he concludes the whole experience was “presumptuous and blasphemous nonsense.” He ended his dialogue by denouncing Joseph Smith and his followers: “‘Yes,’ said I, ‘Uncle Joe; but my Bible tells me, ‘the bloody and deceitful man shall not live out half his days;’ and I expect the Lord will send the devil after you some of these days, and take you out of the way” (*Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, 227).

Cartwright and others, believed themselves justified in exposing Joseph as a “false prophet.” People like Bennett and Cartwright spread deceitful lies that helped stir the fire of malcontents which intimately led to Joseph and his brother Hyrum Smith’s martyrdom.