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“Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord?” Sesquicentennial Reflections of a Sacred Day: 4 May 1842

Andrew F. Ehat, 4 May 1992

In December 1844, Apostle Willard Richards began again the writing of the “History of the Church.” Six months before, the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith and Patriarch Hyrum Smith interrupted this six-year-old project. During the lifetime of the Prophet, the “History” was completed to August of 1838—with Brother Richards’s year-and-a-half effort responsible for everything from 1831 to 1838. Now the mourning time was past. It was time to start again. It was time to write the history of the still-incomplete Nauvoo era. The home of Elder Richards became the make-do “Church Historian’s Office.” Many Saints supplied their journals, notes, and records: anything that might have the slightest historical significance for this monumental undertaking. For the first two months of the winter of 1844–45, he and the tireless Thomas Bullock assembled, analyzed, and sorted the disparate sources that would comprise the compilation. On 17 February 1845, Brother Bullock began copying the apostle’s final draft, starting with the entry for 6 August 1838. Two months later, after unprecedented progress, Elder Richards was ready to

write the history for May of 1842. It may have seemed like just another day of work on the draft manuscripts of what would become the *History of the Church*, but like many times before during this challenging compiling process, his task was to flesh out not merely the memory, but also the meaning and message of an event in Church history. This time, however, he had the formidable task of describing and explaining what had happened on 4 May 1842, the day our holy endowment was first administered as given in our temples today.¹

What did he have at hand? Nothing, save a scant entry from the "Book of the Law of the Lord," the only contemporary account of the events of that important day.² Why did none of the nine present write in their diaries of the events of this glorious day? The Prophet Joseph Smith had asked each participant *not* to record the specifics of what they had heard and seen that day. Six weeks later, in a letter to his fellow apostle Parley P. Pratt, Heber C. Kimball wrote that these favored few had received "some precious things through the Prophet on the priesthood that would cause your soul to rejoice." However, he added, "I cannot give them to you on paper for they are not to be written."³ They were just too sacred.

While Elder Richards may have had nothing more on paper to aid him in composing this entry, he did have it written in his heart (cf. Jeremiah 31:31–34). He had been one of the chosen individuals called by the Lord to receive these precious priesthood principles that day. And from the abundance of his heart, he put down in writing the single most sweeping and succinct explanation of the *meaning* of the endowment in our written literature.⁴

In the following reading, I have chosen to unmask Elder Richards's modesty and restore his account to a first-person

rendering of the events of 4 May 1842. As with many other diary entries that he so seamlessly included in the *History of the Church*, he humbly wrote the record as if it contained the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith. When he could find a diary containing information relating to the Prophet Joseph that was found nowhere else, he benignly revised and inserted into the *History* the words of others as if they were the Prophet's own. He knew Joseph did not have the time to record these things for himself.⁵ In fact, Elder Richards kept the personal diary of the Prophet for the last year-and-a-half of his life. But in the case of the endowment, Elder Richards had been an eyewitness of the events. So the words he would choose for this entry would reflect as much the impact of the events on himself as well as the enlarged understanding of the endowment he had personally gained in the ensuing three years. From the original account on file in the LDS Church Archives, written in his hand but now restored as his own words, you can read these words that are more than mere description:

4 Wednesday May 4— I spent the day in the upper part of [Joseph's Red Brick] Store (IE.) in the private office [of the Prophet Joseph Smith] (so called, because in that room [he] keeps [his] sacred writings, translate[s] ancient records, and receive[s] revelations) and [also] in [the] general business office, or Lodge room (IE) where the Masonic fraternity met occasionally for want of a better place), in council with Gen James Adams, of Springfield, Patriarch Hyrum Smith, Bishops Newel K. Whitney, & Geo. Miller, . . . ~~Wm Marks, Wm Law~~ & Prests Brigham Young Heber C. Kimball. [With these brethren, I was] instruct[ed by the Prophet Joseph Smith] in the principles and order of the priesthood, [and from him received my] washings & anointings, & endowments, and the communications of keys, pertaining to the Aaronic Priesthood, and so on to the highest order of the Melchisedec

Priesthood, setting forth the order pertaining to the Ancient of days & all those plans & principles by which any one is enabled to secure the fulness of those blessings which has been prepared for the church of the firstborn, and come up ~~into~~ and abide in the presence of ~~God~~ the Eloheim in the eternal worlds. [Joseph Smith] in this council instituted the Ancient order of things for the first time in these last days. And the communications I [received in] this Council were of things spiritual, and [are] to be received only by the spiritual minded: and there was nothing made known to [us by the Prophet] but [what] will be made known to all Saints, of the last days, so soon as they are prepared to receive, and a proper place is prepared to communicate them, even to the weakest of the Saints: therefore let the Saints be diligent in building the temple and all houses which they have been or shall hereafter be commanded of god to build, and wait their time with patience, in all meekness and faith, & perserverance unto the end. knowing assuredly that all these things referred to in this council are always governed by the principles of Revelation.⁶

This, Willard Richards’s draft for the Prophet’s “History” entry for 4 May 1842, is, as I indicated, actually the most comprehensive statement made by an original participant, providing us Joseph Smith’s explanation of the meaning of the endowment.

Especially note these words: “The communications I [received in] this Council were of things spiritual, and [are] to be received only by the spiritual minded: and there was nothing made known to [us by the Prophet] but [what] will be made known to all Saints, even to the weakest of the Saints of the last days, so soon as they are prepared to receive [them], and a proper place is prepared to communicate them, [in] . . . the temple.”⁷ I wish to focus our attention to these final words of entreaty, to the need for preparation,

in my reflections on this incredibly important event: the day the Ancient Order was first revealed in this last dispensation.

The Prophet Joseph Smith did many things publicly to prepare the Saints for the promised blessing of the endowment. Just the record of his public sermons would serve us well in the quest for preparation.⁸ Let us look at only one of these public sermons in which the Prophet Joseph refers to an ancient example of the sacred endowment.

Three days before first administering the endowment, the Prophet Joseph spoke to the assembled thousands in the grove on temple hill near the emerging Nauvoo Temple. There, in his Sunday sermon on 1 May 1842, he spoke of the endowment blessings to be poured out when the temple was completed. In this public sermon, he told them that the endowment would confer on them "the keys of the kingdom. . . . The keys are certain signs and words by which false spirits and personages may be detected from true, which cannot be revealed to the Elders till the Temple is completed. The rich can only get [the endowment keys] in the Temple, the poor may get them on the mountain top as did Moses."⁹

The one obvious question is, "Where is recorded and when did Moses receive his endowment?" Certainly, his experience recorded in Exodus 3, when he by foot ascended the mount and saw the fiery, burning bush, was a portion of an endowment. In fact, sacred experiences in the Spirit have an infinite spectrum of manifestations, all constituting a true endowment. Any true outpouring of the Spirit becomes a sacred trust, regardless of comparative intensity. But what we speak of here as Moses' endowment was the profound spiritual experience that occurred many years

later. The record of this endowment begins in Moses 1 in our Pearl of Great Price.

This chapter—a restored chapter not found in the traditional scriptures—gives us far greater insight into Genesis. From Moses 1 we learn that Genesis is not merely a general history written by Moses or a pseudepigraphic story of the Hebrews allegedly written in Moses' name. Instead Moses 1 sets Genesis up as a highly personal revelation to Moses—an essential endowment of knowledge and power given prior to his mission to Egypt to reclaim lost Israel (see verses 25–26). He did not compile history as Elder Richards did: he was shown the history. Moses 1 begins as each endowment begins, with heaven and earth joining. This time, Moses ascended, not by foot but by the transporting power of the Spirit.¹⁰ He was caught up into a mountain the name of which is not now known to us (see verse 42). There he spoke with God face to face. Once this outpouring of the abundance of the Spirit subsided, Moses found himself on his back for many hours. When he came to his strength again, he exclaimed, "Now . . . I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed" (verse 10). Think of him, reflect on the fact that for the first forty years of his life, he had been primed, pampered, and prepared as a prince, even to become a king in Egypt. For all he had known, he was a member of the royal family, even a god. He had access to the greatest knowledge and library in the world. And now, at age eighty, forty years after his experience at the burning bush, having received the fulness of the endowment for the first time, he realized that he had not been fully prepared for this endowment.

As Moses' case demonstrates, the actual endowment is not a mere representation but is the reality of coming into a heavenly presence and of being instructed in the things of

eternity. In temples, we have a staged representation of the step-by-step ascent into the presence of the Eternal while we are yet alive.¹¹ It is never suggested that we have died when we participate in these blessings. Rather, when we enter the celestial room, we pause to await the promptings and premonitions of the Comforter. And after a period of time, mostly of our own accord, we descend the stairs, and resume the clothing and walk of our earthly existence. But there should have been a change in us as there certainly was with Moses when he was caught up to celestial realms and saw and heard things unlawful to utter.

The book of Moses is what the Lord permitted him to write of his endowment experience. The scriptural recounting continues with his confrontation with the adversary. When it began, he did not have the keys to detect him. But upon calling on the Lord four times, finally, with sufficient faith, Moses was endowed with the power to cast out Satan. The Lord intervened again. He told Moses that his inquiry to know of all things in the universe could not then be completely fulfilled—that he could then only receive an account of the creation of this earth and its inhabitants. Nonetheless, the Lord gave Moses the grand gestalt of the universe as he explained his ultimate purpose: a purpose that transcends the boundaries of this earth and applies to all worlds: “This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). And then his endowment continued when he was given an account of the creation of our eternity and our earth. He saw the scenes of the Garden of Eden. He saw the encounter between Adam, Eve, and the great adversary. With this intelligence, and much more, he could return to Egypt with a new identity and power. Who can deny that in the ensuing months Moses proved he had been empowered from on

high? As Jehovah's instrument, he confounded the wizards of Egypt and led the children of Israel from bondage.¹²

Now, how prepared were the children of Israel for an endowment of power? When they were brought out of Egypt with a "stretched out arm," one explicit purpose was for them to assemble and offer sacrifice unto the Lord (see Exodus 3:18; 5:3, 17; 8:8, 27-29; 10:25). Three months after the Exodus, when they arrived at Sinai, at the request of the Lord, Moses ascended the hill again. There he was instructed to prepare Israel to receive their endowment three days later. He returned to the people. He charged them to wash themselves clean, to keep themselves pure, to not go in unto their wives for those three days: for it appears that once this charge was given, the Lord did not want anyone in Israel conceived before he came down with his presence on the holy mount to reveal his covenant (see Exodus 19).

Moses directed the administration of their preparatory cleansings. On the third day, each one heard the call to come to the foot of the mount. They had been charged not to come up into the mount or the Lord would break through and destroy them. Obeying the charge and avoiding the appointed penalty, they did not go further up the mount. However, unlike the dramatic display of Cecil B. DeMille's inaccurate but spectacular production, Moses was not alone, and the law was not first written in stone by the finger of the Lord. Rather, all Israel heard with their own ears God himself speak each of the words of the Ten Commandments. The trials of ensuing months and years would test whether those words were written in their hearts. But all that generation of Israel participated in that preparatory endowment (cf. Exodus 19:1-24:11 with Deuteronomy 5:22-27 [1-33]).

Yet, as President Brigham Young once put it, had they

followed the teachings of Moses, it would not have been one year after the Exodus before they would have received their full endowment.¹³ As revealed in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, they rejected the higher law (see JST Exodus 34:1–2; D&C 84:19–25). Therefore, the holy order, and the ordinances thereof, were taken from among them. A beautiful, yet lesser order, the Levitical order of the priesthood, was introduced. Dutiful offerings of sacrifice would characterize this order, a service first in the tabernacle and later in the temple. To set themselves apart not only from the world, but from any other tribe of Israel not permitted to bear the priesthood, the Lord revealed special clothing they would wear only in the precincts of sacred space. As recorded in Exodus 28–30, the Lord gave to Moses in the mount the divine pattern of the sacred garments of the holy priesthood. In particular, Aaron and his successor sons had the privilege of wearing the beautiful garments of the priesthood that only the High Priest of ancient Israel could wear.

Let us briefly look at two other endowment occasions. First, the endowment of the disciples of Jesus: they who had been charged by the Savior on the night of the Resurrection to tarry in Jerusalem until they be endued with power from on high. Conventional Christianity mistakenly believes that the powerful outpouring on the day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2—the mighty rushing wind, the cloven tongues of fire over the heads of each of the disciples while they spoke in tongues—was all the endowment they were to receive. But, when read more closely, the scriptures reveal that the disciples' endowment took place in a house (probably an upper room) and was interrupted by a multitude of curious men (see Acts 2:1–6). The rude interference turned out well in the end: Peter gave his first sermon evidencing his own

anointing, a sermon that explained the last great mystery the Savior had posed to his detractors, a sermon instrumental in adding more than three thousand souls to the church that day.¹⁴

But their endowment pales in comparison with what the Savior from behind the veil and out of the heavens taught the Nephites of the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, that which the righteous received when the Lord appeared among them (see 3 Nephi 9 [cf. especially verses 19–20 with Helaman 5]; 3 Nephi 17; 3 Nephi 19:8–36). In fact, the Lord tactfully explained to the twelve Nephite apostles that there were none in Palestine then prepared to receive the endowment that the Nephite disciples received (see 3 Nephi 19:35–36; cf. 3 Nephi 15:14–16:4).

Throughout the ages, the endowment has been a difficult experience for which to prepare. No specific length of time assures proper preparation. Not until he was eighty years of age was Moses prepared enough to receive his endowment. The children of Israel, through four hundred and thirty years of conditioning, were ill-prepared to receive their endowment even though they had passed through three months of torturous travel in the desert and had benefited from the daily, visible protection of the glory of God! And even though Jesus' disciples had had the direct presence of the Lord during the three years of his personal ministry, the Lord allowed only his twelve apostles in Jerusalem to receive as much of an endowment as they were prepared to and did receive on the day of Pentecost. The Nephite faithful received the full endowment only after the trial of their faith. Even for some of the Kirtland Saints, the seemingly interminable five-year wait for the endowment was not enough. For many of the Nauvoo Saints, another five years was not enough.

In our day, instances of lack of preparation have been cited by our prophets. When the Los Angeles temple building program was commenced, President McKay called a meeting of the stake presidents of the temple district. During this meeting, President McKay took occasion to express his feelings about the holy endowment. He indicated how some years before, a niece of his had received her ordinances in the house of the Lord. He had learned that she only recently before that had received an initiation into a sorority at the local university. She had had the crassness to say that she found the sorority initiation superior in effect and meaning to her than the endowment. President McKay was open and frank with them about the experience of one in his own family with the endowment. He wasn't worried about their audible gasps. With characteristic aplomb, he paused, and then said, "Brothers and sisters, she was disappointed in the temple. Brothers and sisters, I was disappointed in the temple. And so were you." Then he said something incredibly important that should be engraven on all our souls. "There are few, even temple workers, who comprehend the full meaning and power of the temple endowment. Seen for what it is, it is the step-by-step ascent into the Eternal Presence." Then he added, "If our young people could but glimpse it, it would be the most powerful spiritual motivation of their lives!"¹⁵

Let me add to this the testimony of another modern prophet regarding the influence the endowment could have on the youth. I will never forget this statement made by President Spencer W. Kimball shortly after he became President of the Church. Speaking at a fireside held in the Tabernacle on Temple Square—a fireside deemed important enough to be broadcast live on TV—President Kimball spoke to the youth of the Church in the Salt Lake Valley. As I

listened to the fireside, I was awed by his assurance: “If you understood the ordinances of the House of the Lord, you would crawl on your hands and feet for thousands of miles in order to receive them!”

Indeed, we must prepare spiritually for the powerful principles of the temple, for it is in proper preparation that we qualify for its promised blessings. Each one who receives these blessings is challenged to search into and contemplate the deep meaning of the eternal truths that constitute the endowment. No one ever comprehended them at first experience. The temple holds out an ideal that only time, experience, faith, and the will of the Lord can fulfill for mortals. So when—not if—a challenge surpasses our current spiritual level, we must return for further revelation. Because of the unique gift granted to us in this dispensation, the privilege of proxy service, many can return and refresh their spirits in that holy place. Yet to those barred from its physical precincts due to distance and expense, they too can also take solace in the Savior’s assurance: “[The Holy Spirit] shall teach you until ye come to me & my Father.”¹⁶ Regardless of our circumstance, we must make the effort while in the temple to sear and seal these sacred truths on our souls so the Spirit can teach and train us during private moments. To fathom its depths, to pursue its principles, to cherish its consistent call to come unto Christ, we must truly “dwell [upon] the house of the LORD for ever” (Psalm 23:6).

From the scriptural history of the endowment of this and past dispensations, may I conclude by suggesting seven prerequisite, *continuous* preparations required for those who seek these sacred blessings: (1) *Experience*, especially experience with the Spirit of the Lord; (2) *service*, as shown by a willingness to serve as a witness of the Savior, not simply

by the sacrifice of worldly, but also of other worthy yet less-important enjoyments; (3) *purity*, in body, in mind, in spirit; (4) *prayer and study*, particularly about the promises and previous outpourings of such blessings in this as well as in prior dispensations; (5) *obedience and repentance*, specifically in forsaking your own sins and in forgiving others'; (6) *humility, meekness, integrity through fasting*, expressed foremost in a willingness to receive and remain true to God's covenants and promises during succeeding trials of faith; and (7) *faith in coming unto Christ for new birth*, by prayer, by a broken heart, by boldly petitioning only from him the power revealed through his ordinances. As the Psalmist succinctly asked and answered the great questions of preparation, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? [Only] he that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive the blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation. This is the generation of them that seek him, that seek thy face" (Psalm 24:3-6).

Notes

1. This sketch is based on the detailed research of Dean C. Jessee reported in "The Writing of Joseph Smith's History," *Brigham Young University Studies* 11 (Spring 1971): 466-68, as well as by consulting the diaries of Willard Richards and Thomas Bullock, the journals of the Church Historian's Office, and the draft sheets of the *Manuscript History of the Church* (all found in the LDS Church Archives).

2. The brief entry in the "Law of the Lord" is as follows: "In council in the Presidents & General offices with Judge Adams. Hiram Smith Newel K. Whitney. William Marks, Wm Law. George Miller. Brigham Young. Heber C. Kimball & Willard Richards. [blank] & giving certain instructions concerning the priesthood. [blank] &c on the Aronic Priesthood to the first [blank] continuing through the day" (Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 2: Journal, 1832-1842* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992], 2:380, where [blank] refers to an erased word or words). Indicating that a priest-

hood bestowal of unprecedented importance was conferred that day is the equally important entry for the next day, 5 May 1842: “Judge Adams left for Springfield the others continued in Council as the day previous & Joseph & Hyrum were [blank]” (*Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:380). Only when new priesthood ordinances and powers were being bestowed would the persons who previously *bestowed* blessings, in turn, *receive* them back from them to whom they first administered the blessings. This was in accordance with the pattern established when John the Baptist commanded Joseph Smith to first baptize Oliver Cowdery, and then Oliver Cowdery to baptize Joseph Smith after they had been ordained by this heavenly messenger, 15 May 1829 (see Joseph Smith–History 1:70–72).

3. Heber C. Kimball to Parley P. Pratt, 17 June 1842, Heber C. Kimball Papers, LDS Church Archives.

4. In contradistinction to Elder Richards’s brief but comprehensive summary, Helen Mar Whitney, in her serial “Scenes in Nauvoo, and Incidents from H. C. Kimball’s Journal,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12 (1883): 10, 14, 26, 34, and 42, published excerpts from the four Sunday lectures given to new initiates in the Nauvoo Temple (7, 14, 21, and 28 December 1845). These lectures, even in their appropriately edited form, are the most beautiful and detailed explanations of the endowment services published. They are our best window on just what the Prophet Joseph Smith taught a favored few in sacred meetings held in his “Red Brick Store,” when he tutored and trained the first temple workers of our dispensation during the last two years of his life, especially from 28 September 1843 until his death in June of 1844.

5. See Jessee, “The Writing of Joseph Smith’s History,” 440, 470, 472–73.

6. Draft sheet of the *Manuscript History of the Church*, in the hand of Willard Richards, 4 May 1842, Historian’s Office Church Records Group. Canceled words, punctuation, and spelling have been retained as in the original, except noun and pronoun references have been modified to reflect Willard Richards’s authorship.

7. *Ibid.*

8. See 2 April, 16 April, 17 May, 11 June, 16, 23 July, 13, 27 August, 9 October 1843; 21 January, 10 March, 7 April, 16 June 1844 sermons as recorded in *WJS*, 168–73, 194–99, 202–4, 209–16, 232–36, 238–42, 243–47, 252–55, 317–19, 327–36, 340–62, 378–83.

9. See the “Law of the Lord” account of the 1 May 1842 sermon in *WJS*, 119–20 (cf. *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:379).

10. The temporary transporting of an individual into the presence of the Lord is a fundamental characteristic of the endowment (see

D&C 76:5–10, 114–19). For examples, see, in chronological order, Ether 3:13–20; Genesis 28:10–22; 35:6–15; Isaiah 6:1 (1–8); Ezekiel 37:1; 1 Nephi 1:8 (8–14); 11:1 (chapters 11–14), 2 Nephi 4:25; Helaman 5:44–50; Matthew 17:1–9 (cf. 2 Peter 1:16–18); 3 Nephi 28:13–16, 36–40 (cf. D&C 84:33); Acts 7:55–56; 2 Corinthians 12:1–4; Revelation 1:10, 4:1–2; D&C 88:63–69 (45–75); 93:1.

11. See the classic comment of Oliver Cowdery (but attributed to Joseph Smith) in *TPJS*, 51; and David O. McKay, cited by Truman G. Madsen, “House of Glory,” 10–Stake Fireside Address, March 1972, reprinted in *The Highest in Us* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), 103.

12. Moses 1:1–4:32 was received by Moses only a short while before his return to Egypt. Perhaps had Joseph Smith not been interrupted in the process of the translation of Genesis, its translation would clearly show that it was entirely revealed to Moses prior to the return to Egypt.

13. “If they had been sanctified and holy, the children of Israel would not have travelled one year with Moses before they would have received their endowments and the Melchisedec Priesthood. But they could not receive them, and never did. Moses left them and they did not receive the fulness of that Priesthood. . . . The Lord told Moses that he would show himself to the people; but they begged Moses to plead with the Lord not to do so” (Brigham Young, *JD*, 6:100–101).

14. The sermon is recorded in Acts 2:14–40. He gave the answer to the mysterious question of the Savior—the question that forever silenced his critics from asking questions again (see Matthew 22:41–46)—recounted in verses 25–36, especially verses 33–36. See Acts 2:41 for the number of converts added to the Church that day.

15. Madsen, “House of Glory,” 102–3.

16. *WJS*, 15.