"What Has Become of Our Fathers?" Baptism for the Dead at Nauvoo

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Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead? (1 Cor. 15:29)

ALTHOUGH THE BIBLE briefly mentions vicarious baptism, the belief was not a part of mid-nineteenth-century American religions. Even such denominations as the Disciples of Christ (Campbellites), who professed to find the "law" for Christian life and worship spelled out within the New Testament, offered no response to the Apostle Paul's reference to baptism for the dead (Ahlstrom 1972, 447-49). It was left to Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to establish a doctrinal stance on the subject.

In an epistle to the early saints of Corinth, Paul mentioned vicarious baptism in relation to the resurrection and as a way to overcome humankind's "last enemy"—death. This final victory was also a great concern to the Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo. Many Saints had died in the Mormon War in Missouri during 1838 and in malaria-ridden

Nauvoo in the early 1840s. Finding a way to, in a sense, overcome death must have been a comfort to those constantly reminded of the frailties of mortality (Bishop 1986; Meyers 1975; Bishop, Lacey, and Wixon 1986). The Nauvoo *Times and Seasons* printed a 15 April 1842 essay on baptism for the dead which observed, "When speaking about the blessings pertaining to the gospel, and the consequences connected with disobedience to its requirements, we are frequently asked what has become of our fathers?" The Latter-day Saint belief that baptism by proper priesthood authority was a necessary prerequisite to admission to the highest of heavenly glories led to this intense concern about their deceased ancestors.

In 1836 the Prophet Joseph had reported a vision of his deceased brother, Alvin, in the celestial kingdom: "I saw Father Adam, Abraham, and Michael and my father and mother, [and] my brother Alvin that has long since slept. [I] marveled how it was that he had obtained an inheritance in that Kingdom Seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel . . . and had not been baptised for the remission of sins" (in Faulring 1989, 119; see also HC 2:380).

Four years earlier, the Prophet had pronounced that one "can never see the celestial kingdom of God without being born of the water and of the Spirit"; hence Alvin Smith's presence in that kingdom was a glaring contradiction. When Joseph sought divine clarification as to how his beloved brother could have inherited celestial glory, "the voice of the Lord" informed him, "All who have died without a knowledge of this Gospel, *who would have received it* if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God; . . . for I, the Lord, will judge all men according to the desires of their hearts" (HC 1:283; 2:380). This heavenly decree would be the genesis of the Mormon practice of baptism for the dead.

Mormon emphasis on following patterns outlined by heavenly decrees, including the law of baptism, left lingering questions in 1836 about *how* these worthy dead might literally fulfil this requirement. We have been left with scant evidence of how Joseph Smith formulated the Mormon plan of baptism for the dead. But, by the time the beleaguered Saints had crossed the Mississippi River in 1839 and had begun to reestablish themselves in western Illinois, the Prophet apparently knew how the worthy dead were to meet the mandate for baptism.

In August 1840, he preached the funeral sermon for Seymour Brunson, a respected and faithful Latter-day Saint. In the course of his remarks, Joseph made the first public mention of the doctrine of vicarious baptism. In a later epistle to the Twelve Apostles who were scattered doing missionary work, he wrote:

> I presume the doctrine of "baptism for the dead" has ere this reached your ears, and may have raised some inquiries in your mind respecting the same. I cannot in this letter give you all the information you may desire on the subject; but aside from knowledge *independent of the Bible,* I would say that it was certainly practiced by the ancient churches; and St. Paul endeavors to prove the doctrine of the resurrection from the same. (HC 4:179, 231; 1 Cor. 15:29)

This allusion to information independent of the Bible seems to indicate that the Prophet received supernal directives as well as scriptural input. Joseph Smith had contemplated and, indeed, expected a restoration of all things since early in his prophetic career. For him the vision of his brother Alvin in the celestial kingdom and the subsequent exploration may have served as another piece in the puzzle of the restored gospel he was trying to assemble. All of these fragments—the uniquely Mormon ideas of eternal progression, the potential of future godhood for the most faithful, priesthood sealings of marital relationships, as well as baptisms for the dead—ultimately came together at Nauvoo during the early 1840s in an outpouring of doctrinal development (Lyon 1975; CHC 2:90-92). While the very moment when the Prophet envisioned vicarious baptism as a doctrine to be instituted among the Illinois Saints may be historically cloudy, its place in the larger view of eternal salvation is quite clear.

Not long after the Brunson funeral, Nauvoo Mormons began to act upon this new revelation. On 12 September 1840, Jane Neyman walked into the Mississippi River and was baptized for her deceased son, Cyrus. In successive baptisms for the dead performed at Nauvoo, many women acted on behalf of male relations or friends, and vice versa. Gender distinctions between proxy and heir were not made until after the Prophet's 1844 martyrdom, when Brigham Young assumed leadership of the majority of the Saints. Young stated in 1845 that "a female should not be baptized for her male relations," since such was deemed to be inconsistent with the laws of heaven. Wilford Woodruff later noted, "When that [baptism for the dead] was first revealed . . . a man would be baptized for both male and female [but] afterward we obtained more light upon the subject and President Young taught the people that men should attend to those ordinances for the male portion of their dead friends and females for females" (JH 9 April 1857; Nauvoo Baptisms 1841; Whitney n.d.).

During the first two years of its practice at Nauvoo, baptism for the dead was not closely circumscribed. Faithful Saints simply identified their deceased relatives for whom they wished to be baptized and then performed the rite. Local congregations were granted much latitude in the performance of vicarious baptisms. The Quincy Branch, for exam-

ple, met in November 1840 and appointed two brethren, James M. Flake and Melvin Wilbur, to officiate in all of the branch's proxy baptisms (Quincy 1840). This lack of institutional control over the ordinance was to be short lived.

In January 1841 Joseph Smith announced a revelation calling upon the Nauvoo Saints to erect a temple. The sacred sanctuary would provide for, and seemingly allow greater institutional control of, baptisms for the dead. "For a baptismal font there is not upon the earth," the revelation noted, "that they, my Saints, may be baptized for those who are dead; For this ordinance belongeth to my house, and cannot be acceptable to me, only in the days of your poverty, wherein ye are not able to build a house unto me . . . after you have had sufficient time to build a house unto me, wherein the ordinance of baptizing for the dead belongeth, . . . [Y]our baptisms for your dead cannot be acceptable unto me" (HC 4:277). The rite was further institutionalized in August 1842 when Joseph Smith decreed that "all persons baptized for the dead must have a recorder present, that he might be an eyewitness to record and testify of the truth and validity of this record [of baptisms for the dead]" (HC 4:277). Recorders were admonished to take care in their duties, for any errors in the record might be, the Prophet speculated, "at the expense of our friends, they may not come forth [in the first resurrection]" (HC 5:141).

The work of these recorders shows that baptism for the dead was a major religious activity for many Nauvoo Saints. It became necessary in 1843 for Nauvoo Stake President William Marks to convene a special conference to appoint recorders to keep track of all the baptisms for the dead (Faulring 1989, 400-1). During 1841, for example, 6,818 ordinances were performed (see Table 1) by an adult population that could not have exceeded four thousand persons (Flanders 1965, 1).

Approximately 55 percent of the proxies were male and 45 percent female. Most ordinance work was performed in behalf of aunts and uncles, including great-aunts and great-uncles, followed closely by grandparents and great-grandparents. Together these relationships accounted for almost 48 percent of the baptisms performed in 1841. Proxy baptisms for parents and siblings (including step-brothers and sisters) were also a significant proportion. Other relationships included in-laws, friends, spouses, children, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren. Interestingly, 43.9 percent (2,937) of the baptisms performed in 1841 were the cross-gender ordinances that Brigham Young later opposed. This may explain why a large number of the proxy baptisms from the Nauvoo years were redone in Utah.

Participating in baptisms for the dead must have brought great per-

TABLE 1

NAUVOO BAPTISMS FOR THE DEAD, 1841

Sex of Proxy	Number	Percentage
Male	3,715	54.48
Female	3,027	44.39
Undetermined	76	1.11
Total	6,818	
Cross-gender Baptisms	2,937	43.10
Relationship of Deceased to Proxy		
Uncle/Aunt	1,667	24.45
Grandparent	1,580	23.17
Parent	1,015	14.89
Sibling	969	14.21
Cousin	714	10.47
In-law	251	3.68
Friend	203	2.98
Spouse	116	1.70
Child	106	1.56
Niece/Nephew	92	0.35
Grandchild	16	0.23
Undetermined	89	1.31
Total	6,818	

Source: Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead, Book A, 1841. Microfilm, Family History Center, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

sonal joy to the Nauvoo Saints. In 1841, for instance, Joseph Grafton Hovey was baptized for his grandfather, Ebenezer Hovey, and grandmother, Elizabeth Lever; William Aldridge for his wife, Agnes; Josiah Arnold for his wife, Martha, and daughter, Mariette; George Scholes for both of his deceased parents, a dead brother and a sister; and John Bleazard for his grandparents, mother and father, five uncles, one aunt, a cousin, a brother, and a sister—a total of thirteen deceased family members! Imagine the joy of these faithful Saints, who had been admonished by their prophet, "The greatest responsibility in this world [which] God has laid upon us, is to seek after our dead" (Smith n.d.). Not only were the Nauvoo Mormons fulfilling this charge through vicarious baptisms,

but they must have felt deeply satisfied opening the door to the celestial kingdom for their relations and friends.

The most active proxy in 1841 was an unheralded Saint by the name of Nehemiah Brush, who was baptized for over one hundred deceased relatives and friends (see Table 2). Brush acted in behalf of cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and others. Listed among the four "friends" for whom he was baptized were western explorer Zebulon Pike and Revolutionary War general Anthony Wayne. James Adams, a trusted associate of the Prophet, performed the second most baptisms—sixty-seven performed mainly in behalf of friends. One of Adams's more noteworthy friends was the "late president" John Adams. During 1841 the most baptized woman at Nauvoo was Sarah M. Cleveland, who became a counselor to Emma Smith in the presidency of the first Relief Society as well as an eternity-only plural wife to Joseph Smith. Sarah acted as proxy for forty deceased individuals, including Martha Washington, listed as a "friend" (Nauvoo Baptisms 1841).

Baptisms for deceased friends often reflected personal reverence for historical figures. In addition to the previously mentioned noted historical figures, other Saints showed a fascination with saving the greats of bygone generations such as Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, James Monroe, William Henry Harrison, and "Gen'l. Montgomery [who] fell at Quebec," for whom John Harrington was proxy. Also Stephen Jones was baptized for Thomas Jefferson and the Marquis de LaFayette. The greater the historical reputation, the more times proxy baptisms were performed. In 1841 alone, George Washington, for example, benefited from proxy baptisms done by Don Carlos Smith, Stephen Jones, and John Harrington. Many of these eminent men from the past, including most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and former U.S. presidents, as well as several noted women, were again baptized in the St. George Temple in 1877 (Kenney 1985 7:568-69; Arrington 1985).

While the participation of Nehemiah Brush, Joseph Grafton Hovey, and George Scholes is of interest, how involved were the leading Saints in Nauvoo? Since performing proxy ordinances would seem to indicate acceptance of the practice, did the Church hierarchy respond whole-heartedly, or was baptism for the dead a ritual offered up to benefit and increase the commitment of Nauvoo's lower echelon Saints while the more influential members were busy with the emerging ordinances of sealing and plural marriage? The Nauvoo Baptism for the Dead records clearly demonstrate that it was a rite of the people but that the more prominent Saints participated as well. During the early 1840s, baptisms for dead relations and friends were performed by Wilford Woodruff, Ezra T. Benson, William Marks, Vilate Kimball, Eliza R. Snow, Charles Rich,

TABLE 2

INDIVIDUAL CASE STUDIES BY PROXY NAUVOO BAPTISMS FOR THE DEAD

Nehemiah Brush	*Number*	*Percentage*
Cross-gender	48	43.24
Parent	1	0.90
Grandparent	10	9.00
Uncle/Aunt	37	33.33
Sibling	3	2.70
Cousin	43	38.74
In-law	7	6.31
Friend	4	3.60
Niece/Nephew	6	5.41
Total	111	

James Adams		
Cross-gender	27	40.29
Parent	2	2.98
Grandparent	3	4.48
Uncle/Aunt	10	14.92
Cousin	6	8.96
In-law	4	5.97
Friend	33	49.25
Niece/Nephew	6	8.96
Total		67

Sarah Cleveland		
Cross-gender	23	57.5
Spouse	1	2.5
Parent	1	2.5
Grandparent	1	27.5
Grandparent	11	27.5
Uncle/Aunt	16	40.0
Sibling	1	2.5
In-law	3	7.5
Friend	7	17.5
Total		40

Source: Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead, Book A, 1841. Microfilm, Family History Center, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

and other prominent Saints. Even William and Wilson Law, who would one day become bitter enemies of Joseph Smith over the issue of plural marriage, engaged in vicarious baptisms (Allen and Leonard 1976, 191, 199; Flanders 1965, 274).

Members of the Prophet's immediate family were active participants, too. His wife, Emma Smith, was baptized in behalf of her father, Isaac Hale; Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph's mother, performed the ordinance for her parents, Solomon and Lydia Mack, and for her sister, Louisa Tuttle; Joseph's brother Samuel was baptized for Uncle David Mack; and Hyrum Smith acted as proxy for his brother Alvin, whose earlier vision to Joseph had initiated baptisms for the dead. Interestingly, Joseph Smith's name never appears on the Nauvoo records as a proxy. Elder G. Homer Durham, however, noted that the Prophet officiated on at least one occasion when he performed the baptisms for 105 persons in the Mississippi River (Durham 1977).[1]

At the Church's October 1841 general conference, Joseph Smith shocked the gathered congregation by stating, "There shall be no more baptisms for the dead, until the ordinance can be attended to in the Lord's House" (HC 4:426). The Nauvoo Temple project had been announced the previous January, but little progress had been made. In this instance Joseph Smith may have suspended the baptisms to motivate the Saints to press forward with the temple since it was just one month later that the baptismal font in the temple's basement was finished and dedicated. The oval-shaped wooden font was to be temporary until it could be replaced with one of cut stone (Colvin 1962), but must have seemed elegant. Built of pine timber, it was sixteen feet long, twelve feet wide, and stood seven feet high. Resting on the backs of twelve carved oxen, modeled after "the most beautiful five-year-old steer that could be found in the country," this temple font now became the desired location for performing vicarious baptisms (HC 4:446).

In December 1841 the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, headed by Brigham Young, used the appeal of the baptism for the dead doctrine and the new temple font to encourage the ongoing "gathering" to Church headquarters at Nauvoo. "For while many are thus engaged in laboring and watching and praying for this all important object [the completion of the temple]," an 1841 ecclesiastical letter from the Twelve to the Saints abroad noted, "there are many, very many more who do not thus come up to their privilege and their duty in this thing"

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[1] Although Elder Durham identified his source as Joseph Smith's journal, I have been unable to locate it, and the occasion is not mentioned in the History of the Church or other published documents.

(HC 4:472). Those who failed to relocate to Nauvoo were said to be missing, among other things, the chance to redeem their dead. Baptism for the dead not only offered the Saints a means to save their worthy dead, but gave the Church a way to motivate those who were slow to do their duty.

With the completion of the temple font, vicarious baptism became more organized and structured. On some occasions, however, as when Wilford Woodruff and his wife, Phoebe, went to the Mississippi River in August 1844 "to be baptized for some of our dead friends," the river was still used as an alternate site (Kenney 1985, 2:455). This may have been because the new stone font was under construction in the temple or because the turmoil surrounding the June 1844 deaths of Joseph and Hyrum had suspended normal procedures.

At any rate, after November 1841 the temple font was the desig-nated place for performing the ordinance. Access to the font was granted only to those who complied with Church dictates. William Clayton, as recorder of the Nauvoo Temple, issued signed receipts veri-fying that the bearer was a full tithepayer and thus was entitled to use the baptismal font.[2] Apostle John Taylor stated that, "A man who has not paid his tithing is unfit to be baptized for his dead" (JH 6 Oct. 1844). In this respect, baptism for the dead at Nauvoo set a lasting precedent, requiring verified worthiness for participation in temple rites.

The emergence of baptism for the dead as a vital component of the Mormon plan of salvation heralded an ongoing fascination among the Saints with genealogy. Family history took on added significance when viewed in the light of Joseph Smith's teachings. Responding to prophetic urgings to save the dead, letters to distant relatives flowed out of Nauvoo. Jonah Ball, for example, wrote to his kin in 1843, "I want you to send me a list of fathers relations his parents & Uncles & their names, also Mothers. I am determined to do all I can to redeem those I am permitted to." The following year Sally Carlisle Randall beseeched a relative to "write me the given names of all our connections that are dead as far back as grandfathers and grandmothers at any rate. I expect you will think this [baptism for the dead] is strange doctrine but you will find it is true."

Many Saints proceeded with the ordinance work without worrying whether or not their beliefs seemed strange. British convert Ellen Douglas informed her parents and sister, who were still in England, that "God has appointed means whereby those who have not the priveledge

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[2] For an example of a Nauvoo Temple receipt, see Frederick Kesler, Papers, Box 3, Folder 8, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

of obeying the Gospel not having heard it" could be vicariously baptized. It was her intention, she said, to enter the waters of baptism for her deceased brother-in-law in order to give him the opportunity to accept Mormonism in the spirit world. Ellen Douglas then urged her sister to prepare herself so that *she* might meet her spouse after death (Parker 1843).

In Nauvoo, baptisms for the dead were both practiced often and defended often in theory. In several instances, the *Times and Seasons* rallied to support the doctrine. On 1 May 1841 the newspaper reviewed Mormon salvation theology and observed that vicarious baptism was the approved manner by which the sting of death might be destroyed. "What about the dead?" the paper asked. "God has been pleased to answer our inquiry and disclose a truth, once well understood and practised upon, that [a] believing kinsman may step forth in [a deceased person's] behalf and be baptized for the remission of sins." The article cited the Apostle Paul's epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:29) and argued that he well understood this principle.

In a Sunday sermon delivered in March 1842, Joseph Smith gave some "edifying remarks" on baptism for the dead. Perhaps responding to questions about the biblical significance of the practice, the Prophet contended that the New Testament supported the belief. Wilford Woodruff followed Joseph Smith, noting that the singular mention of baptism for the dead was unimportant since, "If there is one word of the Lord that supports the doctrine [then] it is enough to make it a true doctrine" (Kenney 1985, 2:165). Opponents had spoken out against the precept since shortly after its introduction, but their reaction did not concern the Nauvoo Saints. "We are not surprised that this doctrine should meet with the bitterest opposition in the sectarian world," the 1 May 1841 *Times and Seasons* essay declared. "The devil will no doubt oppose this doctrine with all his hosts [because] it enters his dark dominions, bursts the prison doors, proclaims liberty to the captive spirits, and sets them free."

As late as 1843, Joseph Smith and Wilford Woodruff were still actively combating charges that vicarious baptism was of no biblical importance. According to Woodruff, the Prophet taught the Saints that the "doctrin of Baptism for the dead is clearly shown in the New Testament. And if the doctrin is not good then throw away the New Testament. But if it is the word of God then let the doctrin be acknowledged" (Kenney 1985, 2:240). An editorial in the 15 April 1842 *Times and Seasons*, probably written by Joseph Smith, sought to turn the tables on Mormonism's critics with a latter-day parable. "Two men who have been equally wicked [were] taken sick at the same time," the tale read.

The first sinner was visited by a "praying man" (a priest or minister) who converted him just before death. The other wrongdoer's final visitors were a tailor, a cobbler, and a tinsmith. Hence, he died without religion. "Why," asked the narrator, "is the first saved but the second is damned?"

The Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead records after 1841 appear less reliable since the records seem less complete, and, therefore, we must view with some reservations conclusions drawn for the ensuing years. Yet, this early Mormon dedication to the practice continued for the duration of the Saints' stay on the banks of the Mississippi River. There is no available data for 1842, but in 1843 at least 1,329 proxy baptisms were performed. The 1844 record shows a renewed effort to redeem the dead with 3,359 ordinances taking place. In June 1844 Joseph and Hyrum Smith were murdered at Carthage, Illinois, but their deaths had little discernable impact upon the practice—baptisms for the dead apparently were suspended for just two weeks. In 1845, for no clear reason, only twenty-four baptisms were registered. The record did record one particularly noteworthy event, however. For the first time a woman, Melissa Lott, was listed as a witness (Nauvoo Baptisms, Book C). We can only speculate about the reasons for this sparse number of baptisms. The anti-Mormon activities in Hancock County had increased by this time, the Church had not yet emerged with a clear successor to Joseph Smith, and the majority of Saints were preparing to evacuate Nauvoo. A large number of Saints were also working hard that year to complete the temple (Bennett 1987).

Charlotte Haven, a non-Mormon visitor to Nauvoo in the early 1840s, left her observations of the practice of baptism for the dead. One cold day in May 1843 she and a friend were walking along the river when they witnessed the ordinance.

> We followed the bank toward town, and rounding a little point covered with willows and cottonwoods, we spied quite a crowd of people, and soon perceived there was a baptism. Two elders stood knee-deep in the icy water, and immersed one after another as fast as they could come down the bank. We soon observed that some of them went in and were plunged several times. We were told that they were baptized for the dead who had not had the opportunity of adopting the doctrines of the Latter Day Saints. So these poor mortals in ice-cold water were releasing their ancestors and relatives from purgatory!

Drawing a little nearer, these critical onlookers were surprised to hear the name of George Washington called. "So," Miss Haven sarcastically observed, "after these fifty years he is out of purgatory and on his way to the 'celestial' heaven!" (Haven 1890, 630).

Baptism for the dead emerged as a significant part of the religious

life of mid-nineteenth century Latter-day Saints. While other Nauvoo-era doctrinal developments such as the endowment, the concepts of eternal progression and potential godhood for the most righteous, and plural marriage have held the historical and theological limelight in Mormon *studies*, baptism for the dead occupied a prominent place in the sacred *activities* of the community. When contrasted with sealings and the plurality of wives, baptism for the dead was Nauvoo's universal ordinance. Without a doubt, any devout Latter-day Saint who wished to be baptized on behalf of deceased relations and friends could do so. Gender discrimination was nonexistent from the beginning, as women and men shared equally in vicarious baptisms. And no "Quorum of the Anointed" dominated this rite as was the case with the introduction of other sacred rituals at Nauvoo (Allen 1987; Ehat 1982). To their own satisfaction, Nauvoo Saints had resolved the question, "What has become of our fathers?"

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