

Section 123

Section 123 is in Joseph's voice, not the Lord's. It comes from a long letter composed in jail at Liberty, Missouri. It does not claim to be revelation, but it was nevertheless valuable counsel from the Prophet for the Saints to document the injustices and atrocities they endured in Missouri in order to assert their First Amendment rights to petition the government to redress grievances.

In section 123 Joseph repeatedly says that documenting what happened to the Saints in Missouri is “an imperative duty” they owed to God, angels, each other, those who were murdered, the rising generation, “and to all the pure in heart” (D&C 123:7, 9, 11). In powerful, metaphor-rich language, Joseph and his brethren urge the Saints to attend to this important matter. Joseph was not certain that the government would respond to the petitions, but he knew the Lord required the Saints to do all in their power, including this “last effort” to obtain justice, before He would “send forth the power of his mighty arm” (v. 6).

In response to Joseph's suggestion, 678 Latter-day Saints wrote or dictated sworn statements documenting the abuses they suffered and property they lost in Missouri. In the fall of 1839, having escaped from Missouri, Joseph took the documents to the president of the United States. He literally knocked on the door of the White House and asked to see Martin Van Buren, whom Joseph had supported. Joseph presented the petitions and Van Buren, facing an election year, responded, “What can I do? I can do nothing for you! If I do anything, I shall come in contact with the whole state of Missouri.” Joseph turned to the Illinois congressional delegation for help in appealing

to Congress. President Martin Van Buren pled impotence on the federalist doctrine of limited powers. He could not constitutionally intervene in a state matter, he said. The Senate referred the case to the Judiciary Committee, which, with pressure from Missouri, arrived at the same conclusion, knowing that the Saints had been driven for their religion. There would be no justice, no redress of grievances or guarantees of the free exercise of religious conscience.

The documentation of abuses “did have a long term effect on Mormonism’s public image. ... The accounts of the persecutions turned the expulsion from Missouri into an asset in the battle for popular support.” The redress petitions were turned over to the Library of Congress, where they remain to this day as a testimony of “diabolical rascality and nefarious and murderous impositions that have been practiced upon this people” (D&C 123:5).¹

¹ Clark V. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions: Documents of the 1833–1838 Missouri Conflict* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1992).