

Section 129

Section 129 is esoteric. It can only be understood by people with temple knowledge. It is also euphemistic. It's no more about handshaking than "kicking the bucket" is about actually kicking a bucket.

In January 1838 Joseph received a revelation. It cursed the Saints who had become his enemies, said his work in Kirtland was done, and told him and the faithful Saints to gather to Zion in Missouri.¹ That night Joseph counseled with Church leaders and concluded, "Well, brethren I do not recollect anything more; but one thing, brethren, is certain; I shall see you again, let what will happen; for I have a promise of life five years, and they cannot kill me until that time has expired."²

No one could kill Joseph during that time. He had to get the fullness of temple blessings restored first. But people sure made his life miserable in the meantime. He escaped from his persecutors in spring 1839. As soon as he could, knowing that his days were numbered and he had none to spare, Joseph gathered several of the apostles on June 27, 1839, exactly five years before his violent death at the hands of a murderous mob, and taught the apostles what he had learned a decade earlier from Michael about "detecting the devil when he appeared as an angel of light" (D&C 128:20).

Wilford Woodruff drew tiny, symbolic keys in his journal, where he wrote what he learned about the "keys of the Kingdom of God Joseph presented ... in order to detect

¹ "Revelation, 12 January 1838–C," [1], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 4, 2019.

² "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845," 241, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 4, 2019.

the devel when he transforms himself nigh unto an angel of light.”³ In December 1840 Joseph taught these keys to William Clayton, a trusted convert recently arrived from England. In April 1842 Joseph introduced the principles in section 129 to the Relief Society, and in May he gave the Saints a temple preparation sermon, including the explanation that there are “certain signs & words by which false spirits & personages may be detected from true—which cannot be revealed to the Elders till the Temple is completed.”⁴ A few days later Joseph endowed a few Church leaders in a temporary temple in the attic story of his Nauvoo store. Heber Kimball was there and subsequently wrote to fellow apostle Parley Pratt, who remained in England to preside over the mission. “We have received some pressious things through the Prophet on the preasthood that would cause your soul to rejoice,” Heber wrote. “I can not give them to you on paper fore they are not to be riten. So you must come and get them for your Self.”⁵

Parley arrived in Nauvoo early in 1843, eager to be taught by Joseph. At a February 9 meeting, Joseph instructed him in the keys he had learned from Michael and had subsequently taught to Wilford, Heber, and a few others. The entry in Joseph’s journal for that day is the source for section 129.

The rough journal entry captures only some of the teaching that took place. It reads

Parley Pratt & other come in—Joseph explained the following. There are 3 administrater: Angels, Spirits, Devils one class in heaven. Angels the spirits of just men made perfect—innumerable co of angels and spirits of Just men made perfect. An angel appears to you how will you prove him. Ask him to shake hands. If he has flesh & bones he is an Angel “spirit hath not flesh and bones.” Spirit of a just man made perfect. Person in its tabernacle could hide its glory. If David Patten or the Devil come. How would you determine should you take hold of his hand you would not feel it. If it was a false

³ Wilford Woodruff, *Journal*, June 27, 1839, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁴ “[Discourse, 1 May 1842, as Reported by Willard Richards](#),” 94, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 8, 2020.

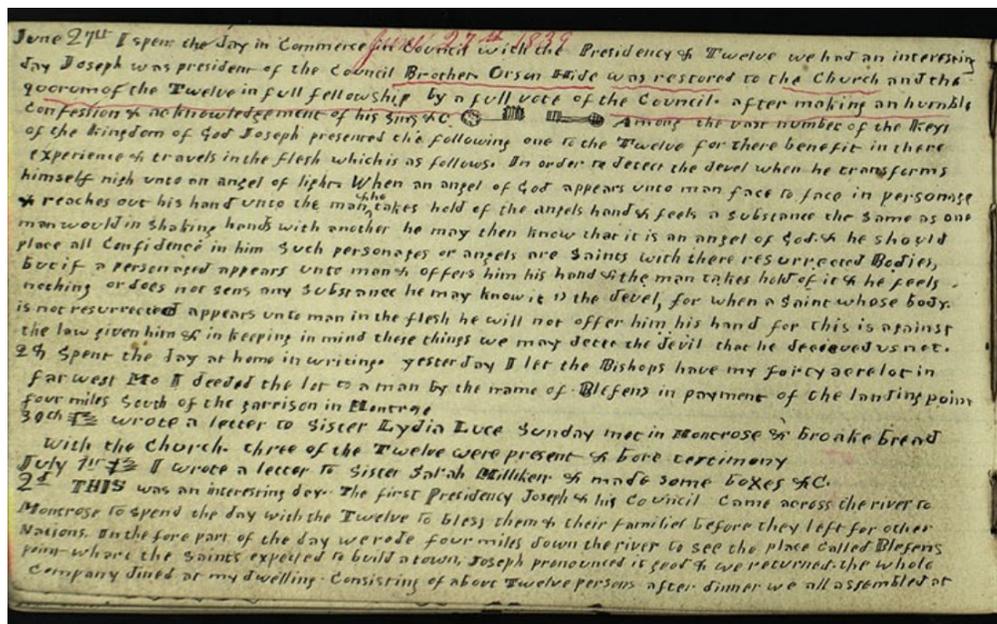
⁵ Heber Kimball to Parley Pratt, June 17, 1842, Pratt Papers, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

administrator he would not do it. True spirit will not give his hand the Devil will. 3 keys.⁶

Clearly there was more said on this occasion than what got cryptically recorded.

In its polished form, section 129 is more clear but still vague. In heaven there are resurrected beings and spirits who are not yet resurrected. Either kind can be sent as messengers. Satan or his angels can counterfeit this kind of revelation. But there are keys to discern such imposters, as explained in verses 5–9. It is not safe to draw the conclusion that Satan does not know these keys. It seems more likely, as Joseph taught, that there are boundaries to Satan’s power to deceive.

Part of being endowed with God’s power is the ability to discern true from false messengers (D&C 128:20). As Joseph taught, if Satan could appear in the guise of an angel without our having any ability to know better, “we would not be free agents.”⁷



June 1839 discourse on keys, recorded by Wilford Woodruff. Note the drawing of two keys at the beginning of the discourse. Image via Joseph Smith Papers.

⁶ “Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 1, 21 December 1842–10 March 1843,” [174], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 8, 2020.

⁷ “Account of Meeting, circa 16 March 1841, as Reported by William P. McIntire,” [16], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 8, 2020.

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Journal entry of Joseph Smith, February 9, 1843. Image by Joseph Smith Papers.