

Section 135

It was “a deliberate political assassination, committed or condoned by some of the leading citizens of Hancock County.”¹ That’s how law professor Dallin H. Oaks and co-author Marvin S. Hill described the murder of Joseph Smith, who was butchered with his brother Hyrum on June 27, 1844.

Apostles John Taylor and Willard Richards were voluntarily with Joseph and Hyrum in jail when they were murdered on June 27, 1844. They survived as witnesses of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, the Prophet Joseph Smith who restored it, and his brutal martyrdom. Their witness is declared in section 135

Section 135 is a eulogy of the Prophet and an indictment of the state and nation that allowed him to be slain. As such, its tone is a rich mixture of reverence and disdain, praise and contempt. Attributed to John Taylor, who was himself shot repeatedly in the massacre, the document has an apostolic air. It declares a witness in certain terms. It announces Joseph Smith’s significance to mankind, his translation of the Book of Mormon and spreading of the gospel, his receipt of revelations, the gathering of Israel, the founding of Nauvoo, and, with Hyrum, the sealing of his testimony with his life.

Though critics have knowingly manipulated the language of verse 3 to make it sound as if Latter-day Saints value Joseph Smith more than Jesus Christ, the text does not

¹ Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy: The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith* (Urbana, 1975), 6, 214.

say that, nor do Latter-day Saints believe it. Rather, they praise Joseph Smith because he revealed Jesus Christ, which no one had done for more than a millennium. Section 135 testifies that Joseph and Hyrum died innocent and that their deaths put their testaments in full force. It testifies that the Lord will avenge their deaths and that the honest-hearted in all nations will be touched by their testimony of Jesus Christ.

Section 135 emphasizes the enduring significance of Joseph Smith and his testimony. Joseph regarded himself as “obscure,” a “boy of no consequence” (Joseph Smith—History 1:23), but at age seventeen he received from an angel named Moroni the improbable news that “my name should be had for good and evil among all nations” (v. 33). In his own lifetime his name became known for good and evil in Nauvoo, in Illinois, in the United States, and now globally. However unlikely, Moroni’s prophecy has been fulfilled. Bostonian Josiah Quincy visited Joseph shortly before he went to Carthage. Quincy wrote that Joseph Smith was “born in the lowest ranks of poverty” and came of age “without book-learning and with the homeliest of all human names” and that by the end of his shortened life he had become “a power on earth.”²

It is not remarkable that a flawed teenage Joseph sought forgiveness in the woods and at his bedside, nor that he had to repent relentlessly and grow into his demanding calling, nor that he often felt frustrated at both himself and the Saints, nor that his testimony deeply touched the hearts of some and antagonized others, nor that it continues to do so. The remarkable thing about Joseph Smith, as section 135 emphasizes, is what he did. Who else has brought forth the equivalent of the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants? Who else restored the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ? “He left a fame and a name,” no matter how plain, “that cannot be slain” (D&C 135:3). In every way he gave his life for the Lord’s work. What a life!

“Fanatics and imposters are living and dying every day,” Josiah Quincy wrote,

and their memory is buried with them; but the wonderful influence which this founder of a religion exerted and still exerts throws him into relief before us, not as a rogue to be criminated, but as a phenomenon to be explained. The most vital questions Americans

² Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past From the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1883), 337.

are asking each other today have to do with this man and what he has left us.³

That is Joseph Smith's significance and his appeal: he revealed the answers to the ultimate questions: Why am I here? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Is there purpose in life? What is the nature of people? Are individuals free agents or determined? What is the nature of the Savior's atonement? Does it reach those who do not hear the gospel in mortality? And perhaps above all, what is the nature of God?

"If I am so fortunate as to be the man to comprehend God, and explain or convey the principles to your hearts, so that the Spirit seals them upon you," Joseph taught just a few weeks before he was murdered, "then let every man and woman henceforth sit in silence, put their hands on their mouths, and never lift their hands or voices, or say any thing against the man of God, or the servants of God again."⁴ Joseph answered the ultimate questions as a witness. He beheld angels, translated by the power of God, received visions and revelations. He knew God and Christ. He thus died as a testator—a witness. Section 135 announces that a testator had been killed, but his testimony endures forever.

³ Quincy, *Figures of the Past*, 317.

⁴ "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]," 1969, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed December 8, 2020.