

Section 38

Early in 1831 Joseph Smith gathered the fledgling Church of Jesus Christ, not yet a year old, for general conference in Fayette, New York. Newel Knight remembered that “it was at this conference that we were instructed as a people, to begin the gathering of Israel, and a revelation was given to the prophet on this subject.”¹

Joseph announced section 37’s command for them to move to Ohio right away. The Saints wanted “somewhat more” explanation. Joseph asked the Lord during the meeting and received section 38.²

Unlike the terse command to move to Ohio in section 37, this time the Lord gives a detailed rationale for the commandment. The situation is bleak. All flesh is corrupted, the powers of darkness prevail, eternity is pained (D&C 38:11–12). The enemy, presumably Satan, plots the Saints’ destruction. The Lord paints a vivid, apocalyptic picture of the different destinies awaiting those who believe and obey the revelation, compared to those “who will not hear my voice but harden their hearts, and wo, wo, wo is their doom” (D&C 38:1–6).

The January 1831 revelation compelled the Saints to decide whether to serve themselves or the Lord. It provided them a way out of the world. It envisioned an

¹ “Newel Knight Autobiography,” in Dan Vogel, editor, *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2002): 4:64.

² “[John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847](#),” p. 6, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 25, 2020.

alternative society. It came in the voice of the Lord, who took “the Zion of Enoch into mine own bosom . . . by the virtue of the blood which I have spilt” (D&C 38:4). It foretold evil designs to destroy the Saints “in process of time” (D&C 38:4, 13).

Those were the same words recently revealed to Joseph to describe how Enoch’s Zion made it safely out of this world (Moses 7:21). Their eerie similarity to the New York Saints living in “Babylon” suggests that a creeping, cultural evil posed a great threat to the spiritual welfare of the New York Saints, though, like the proverbially slow-boiled frog, they could hardly discern it themselves.

The revelation brought the crisis to the Saints’ attention, compelling them to choose (for it described an either-or proposition) to begin the “process” of becoming like Enoch’s Zion or continue the “process” toward “destruction” (D&C 38:13). To be saved, the New York Saints must move to Ohio (D&C 38:10–13).

The choice to escape was also a choice to acknowledge the Lord as the source of authority, the maker of worlds as well as laws, and Joseph Smith as his spokesman (D&C 21:1–8). “Hear my voice and follow me,” the Lord commanded unequivocally (D&C 38:22). The revelation required the Saints to relieve poverty, esteem everyone equally, and to “be one” (D&C 38:27). To those at the conference, the revelation shouted objections to the cultural messages they received every day to be partisan, to be covetous, and to “possess that which is above another.” “like the Nephites of old” (D&C 49:20; 38:39). It seemed calculated to test the integrity of covenant-makers by compelling them to choose either the “the things of this world” or “the things of a better” (D&C 25:10; 38:17–20, 25–26, 39). The revelation was starkly indifferent to the Saints’ carnal security. “They that have farms that cannot be sold, let them be left or rented as seemeth them good” (D&C 38:37). The irrelevance of property contrasts sharply with the revelation’s emphasis on the welfare of souls. There is a sense of urgency that the Saints might make it safely out of a fallen world. “That you might escape the power of the enemy, and be gathered unto me a righteous people, without spot and blameless: wherefore for this cause I gave unto you the commandment that ye should go to the Ohio” (D&C 38:31–32).

The revelation caused an initial shock and division among the Saints. Some who were comfortable in New York did not want to obey it. Some projected their own selfishness onto the prophet, claiming he had invented the revelation to get gain himself. “This,”

John Whitmer noted, “was because, their hearts were not right in the sight of the Lord.”³

That is not the most remarkable part. Given the individualistic attitude of the society in which these Saints lived, the remarkable fact is not that “one or two” chafed at the “monumental sacrifice” of the command to gather in Ohio but the stunning degree of obedience and sacrifice in response to section 38.⁴ “The Lord had manifested his will to his people,” John noted. “Therefore they made preparations to Journey to the Ohio, with their wives, and children and all that they possessed, to obey the commandment of the Lord.”⁵

Newel Knight wrote, “As might be expected, we were obliged to make great sacrifices of our property.”⁶ By keeping the command to pull up telestial roots and forsake telestial concerns, the New York Saints were yielding up their *selves* to God.⁷ They were making a bold, counter-cultural declaration.⁸ By so doing they prepared themselves to receive the law of consecration the Lord promised to give them when they gathered to Ohio. They were self-selecting to be “endowed with power from on high” (D&C 38:32).

³ “[John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847](#),” p. 9, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 25, 2020.

⁴ William G. Hartley, *Stand by My Servant Joseph* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2003), 103.

⁵ Book of John Whitmer, chapter 1, Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri.

⁶ “Newel Knight Autobiography,” 4:64.

⁷ “We tend to think of consecration only as yielding up, when divinely directed, our material possessions. But ultimate consecration is the yielding up of oneself to God.” Neal A. Maxwell, *Ensign*, November 2002, 36.

⁸ Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught the same principle in our time: “Pay your tithing as a declaration that possession of material goods and the accumulation of worldly wealth are not the uppermost goals of your existence. As one young husband and father, living on a student budget, recently told me,

Perhaps our most pivotal moments as Latter-day Saints come when we have to swim directly against the current of the culture in which we live. Tithing provides just such a moment. Living in a world that emphasizes material acquisition and cultivates distrust for anyone or anything that has designs on our money, we shed that self-absorption to give freely, trustingly, and generously. By this act, we say—indeed—we are different, that we are God’s peculiar people. In a society that tells us money is our most important asset, we declare emphatically it is not.

Jeffrey R. Holland, “Like a Watered Garden,” *Ensign*, November 2001, 33.