

# Section 86

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With Christianity in apostasy and no living prophets, Protestant reformers retreated to the relative safety of the Bible, the known word of God. Some went so far as to declare, though the Bible never does, that it was all-sufficient and sufficient alone for salvation. Joseph faced the same fears and frustrations resulting from apostasy, but he took a different approach to the Bible. He “reflected again and again” on its often-repeated injunction to ask and receive, seek and find, knock and the door will open (Joseph Smith—History 1:12).

Joseph continually worked at understanding the Bible better and better—and making it possible for us to do so too. He had been over the parables in Matthew 13 in the spring of 1831, but he revised his own revision a year and a half later. His journal for December 6, 1832, says he spent the day “translating and received a revelation explaining the Parable [of] the wheat and the tares.”<sup>1</sup>

Section 86 defines and evokes powerful symbols to explain a parable about how the gospel spread, how apostasy followed and “drove the church into the wilderness” (D&C 86:3), and how the Lord nevertheless protected and preserved his people and will cause the gospel to flourish again. The main analogy of the parable is a field in which the apostles have planted wheat, but Satan has sewn tares.

The question for Joseph Smith and Latter-day Saints is, how should the field be harvested? The version in Matthew 13 says to let the wheat and the tares “grow

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<sup>1</sup> “[Journal, 1832–1834](#),” p. 4, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 7, 2020.

together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn” (Matthew 13:30). Section 86 importantly reverses the order of the harvest: “Let the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest is fully ripe; then ye shall first gather out the wheat from among the tares, and after the gathering of the wheat, behold and lo, the tares are bound in bundles, and the field remaineth to be burned” (D&C 86:7, emphasis added; cross-reference D&C 64:24). In his new translation, Joseph revised Matthew 13 according to what he learned from the revelation (JST Matthew 13:29).

All of that is preliminary to the Lord’s main point in section 86. His intent in the revelation is to explain how, despite apostasy, the priesthood has returned to its lawful heirs, and they are commissioned to harvest the wheat planted by the original apostles. Notice how the Lord develops this point with the four consecutive *Therefore’s* that begin verses 7, 8, 10, and 11.

The difference between Joseph’s way of reading the Bible and the dominant way of his time and place is crucial. For many people, the Bible is “a sealed book,” as a popular Methodist preacher of Joseph’s day described it, lamenting that he did not live “in the days of the prophets or apostles, that I could have sure guides.”<sup>2</sup> Joseph’s revelations open the Bible. Consider how profound it is that in section 86 the Lord explains his own parable to Latter-day Saints. Is there any reason why he would not? Could not?

Section 86 revises and expands the biblical record. The fact that it came as Joseph was revising his previous revision is, itself, revealing. Joseph never felt finished with the work of unlocking the scriptures. One of his great contributions to us is his example of reading for and receiving revelations.

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<sup>2</sup> Lorenzo Dow, *The Dealings of God, Man, and the Devil as Exemplified in the Life, Experience, and Travels of Lorenzo Dow* (New York: Cornish, Lamport & Company, 1850), 10.