
Letter from Liberty Jail

D&C 121: Introduction

From November 12–29, 1838, Judge Austin A. King listened as alleged evidence was presented against Mormon prisoners in a “court of inquiry” held in Richmond, Missouri. At the end of what Hyrum Smith referred to as the “pretended court,”¹ Judge King found probable cause of treason against Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Caleb Baldwin, Alexander McRae, and Lyman Wight for acts committed in Daviess County, principally the act of burning and robbery of the Jacob Stolling store in Gallatin and the burning of the William Penniston home near Gallatin. Judge King found probable cause of treason against Sidney Rigdon for acts committed in Caldwell County, based on two speeches given by Rigdon at Far West. The judge ordered the men so charged to be confined in Liberty Jail in Liberty, Missouri, and referred over to a grand jury for trial.

On November 29, Judge King wrote to the “Keeper of the Jail of Clay County,” Samuel Hadley, jailor, and Samuel Tillery, deputy jailor, directing them to receive the Mormon prisoners “into your custody ... there to remain until they be delivered therefrom by due course of law.”² Of the prisoners received in Liberty Jail, Sidney Rigdon was incarcerated for 67 days and the other five prisoners for 127 days.

After the Prophet Joseph Smith had been in Liberty Jail for 110 days, he began to dictate a two-part, twenty-nine page letter addressed to “the church of Latter day saints at Quincy Illinois and scattered aboard and to Bishop Partridge.” Prisoner Alexander McRae scribed twenty-seven pages of the letter and prisoner Caleb Baldwin, two. Portions of the letter were later published as Doctrine and Covenants 121–123. More than half of the letter is not included in the Doctrine and Covenants. Each part of the March 20–25 letter was signed by the five prisoners.

¹ “Hyrum Smith Sworn,” *Times and Seasons*, July 1, 1843, 254.

² “History of Joseph Smith,” *Millennial Star*, September 9, 1854, 566.

Although the letter was addressed to Bishop Edward Partridge and the Church, it was sent to Emma Smith with instructions that family members read the letter and share it with Church members. In an attached letter to his wife Emma, Joseph wrote, "I have sent an Epistle to the church directed to you because I wanted you to have the first reading of it and then I want Father and Mother to have a copy of it, keep the original yourself as I dictated the matter myself and shall send another as soon as possible." In the letter Joseph asked,

May the grace of God the Father, and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, rest upon you all, and abide with you forever. May knowledge be multiplied unto you by the mercy of God. And may faith and virtue, and knowledge and temperance, and patience and godliness, and brotherly kindness and charity be in you and abound, that you may not be barren in anything, nor unfruitful.³

In the March 21–25 letter, Joseph cries, "O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place? How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?" (D&C 121:1–2). In response to the pleas of his servant, the Lord answers, "My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes" (vv. 7–8).

³ Letter to Emma Smith, 21 March 1839. Joseph Smith Papers.