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## Recent Reflections While Partaking of the Sacrament

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## RECENT REFLECTIONS WHILE PARTAKING OF THE SACRAMENT

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Daniel C. Peterson

**Abstract:** *Sometimes, obedience to the principles of the Gospel and tending faithfully to our stewardships can seem — and can be — a burden. Moreover, we mortal humans are fallible and weak, and we're free. Accordingly, I'm convinced that the Father (a supremely masterful strategist and tactician) builds in redundancies so as to ensure that his purposes will be achieved even when his mortal servants falter. At the very heart of his plan, though, there could be no redundancy. Only one person could do what absolutely, desperately, needed to be done.*

I grew up in a religiously mixed home. My mother was a somewhat marginal though occasionally-attending member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who had been born and raised in southern Utah. My father was a non-communicant Lutheran, born on a farm in North Dakota to Scandinavian immigrant parents. In or just before my very early teens, however, I began to pay serious attention to the claims of the Restoration and to find them both intellectually and spiritually appealing.

I was never even remotely tempted to do drugs, and because of my growing commitment to the Church, I continued to live according to its teachings. However, this was California in the 1960s. I was very attracted to the music and to some of the other elements of the era's "counterculture."

Meanwhile, many of my friends were living lives quite different from mine, seemingly without the slightest pangs of guilt. By contrast, I began to feel remorse if I were even a few minutes late to Sunday School. And I sometimes asked myself, "How is this progress? Why do I feel regret for failing to meet high standards while at least some of my friends, having abandoned many of those standards, feel none at all?"

You might think, at this point, that I'm intending to raise the troublesome question of perfectionism and to discuss the difficult problem

of the depression and other maladies that can follow in its wake. But I'm not, and I've never been especially prone to depression, neither then nor now. Instead, I want to go a slightly different direction in this very brief essay.

Sometimes, the yoke of the gospel doesn't seem all that "easy." Sometimes, the burden doesn't seem exactly "light." And my adolescent meanderings are nothing at all compared to what some have undergone — for example, the martyrdoms, the grueling missionary journeys, the travails of the handcart pioneers — for the cause of the Lord.

It has periodically crossed my mind that, at least at certain points in his life — say, while being tarred and feathered in Hiram, Ohio; while languishing in Missouri's ironically named Liberty Jail; or while sweltering in Carthage Jail, anticipating his murder at the hands of a mob with painted faces — the Prophet Joseph Smith must have said to himself something along the lines of "All I really wanted was to know whether I should join the Methodists or the Presbyterians!"

I've occasionally speculated as to whether there might have been a backup for Joseph, somebody who would have picked up the torch had he dropped it. I have no real idea, of course. But these thoughts were triggered by thinking about my maternal ancestors Joseph Knight Sr. and Joseph Knight Jr.

Many will recognize the prophecy attributed by the Book of Mormon to the ancient biblical patriarch Joseph, which we recognize as pertaining to the modern prophet, Joseph Smith:

Yea, Joseph truly said: Thus saith the Lord unto me: A choice seer will I raise out of the fruit of thy loins; and he shall be esteemed highly among the fruit of thy loins. And unto him will I give commandment that he shall do a work for the fruit of thy loins, his brethren, which shall be of great worth unto them, even to the bringing of them to the knowledge of the covenants which I have made with thy fathers. ...

And he shall be great like unto Moses, whom I have said I would raise up unto you, to deliver my people, O house of Israel. ...

And his name shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father. (2 Nephi 3:7, 9, 15)

Joseph Knight Sr. and Joseph Knight Jr. obviously fulfill the scriptural requirement that the future prophet and his father share the same name. And it would probably be prudent, if they really were sent as potential substitutes, to send them just a bit later than the first picks. So it's unsurprising to note that, while Joseph Smith Sr. came to the earth in

1771, Joseph Knight Sr. came in 1772, and that, whereas Joseph Smith Jr. was born in 1805, Joseph Knight Jr. was born in 1808.

At the commencement of the Restoration, the Knight family were living in Colesville, New York, about 150 miles to the southeast of the Hill Cumorah and the Sacred Grove. They were far enough away not to interfere, as it were, but close enough to be within “striking distance” should the need arise. And their home was fewer than twenty miles to the north of Harmony, Pennsylvania, where Joseph Smith eventually commenced the translation of the Book of Mormon, where the priesthood was restored, and where the first modern baptisms were performed.

Perhaps the most salient detail, however, is the fact that they were, as they have often been called, the “second family of the Restoration.”<sup>1</sup> Outside of the Smith family itself, for example, the Knights were among the very first to hear the news of Moroni and the golden plates. Joseph Knight Jr. recalled the event later when, speaking at first of his father, he recounted that

in 1827 [1826] he hired Joseph Smith; Joseph and I worked and slept together. My Father said Joseph was the best hand he ever hired, we found him a boy of truth, he was about 21 years of age. I think it was in November he made known to my father and I, that he had seen a vision, that a personage had appeared to him and told him where there was a gold book of ancient date buried and if he would follow the directions of the angel he would get it. We were told it in secret; I being the youngest son, my two elder brothers [Nahum and Newel] did not believe in such things; my Father and I believed what he told us.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, it was Joseph Knight Sr.’s wagon that Joseph Smith used to retrieve the plates from the Hill Cumorah. Brother Knight also helped to support the Prophet and his scribes during the translation of the Book of Mormon, supplying them with food and paper. Newel Knight soon also came to believe in Joseph Smith’s claims, and he was baptized in May 1830, shortly after the foundation of the Church itself. He was

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1. On them, see (among other things) Larry C. Porter, “The Colesville Branch and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10, no.3 (1970): 365-85; William G. Hartley, *Stand By My Servant Joseph; The Story of the Joseph Knight Family and the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003); Michael Hubbard MacKay and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Rise of the Latter-day Saints: The Journals and Histories of Newel Knight* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2019).

2. As cited in Porter, “The Colesville Branch and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” 369.

also the first recipient of a miracle in the history of the Restoration; and several years later, on 24 November 1835, when Newel married Lydia Goldthwaite Bailey at Kirtland, Ohio, his was the first marriage ever performed by Joseph Smith.

In July 1830, after Newel's parents and siblings had also been baptized, the Prophet personally founded the Colesville Branch. This little branch — essentially the Knights — was one of the earliest organized units in the history of the Church, and its members were among the first company of Latter-day Saints called to settle in Zion, in Jackson County, Missouri.

On 22 August 1842, Joseph Smith penned a tribute to three members of the Knight family:

I am now recording in the Book of the Law of the Lord, — of such as have stood by me in every hour of peril, for these fifteen long years past, — say, for instance, my aged and beloved brother, Joseph Knight, Sen., who was among the number of the first to administer to my necessities, while I was laboring in the commencement of the bringing forth of the work of the Lord, and of laying the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For fifteen years he has been faithful and true, and even-handed and exemplary, and virtuous and kind, never deviating to the right hand or to the left. Behold he is a righteous man, may God Almighty lengthen out the old man's days; and may his trembling, tortured, and broken body be renewed, and in the vigor of health turn upon him, if it be Thy will, consistently, O God; and it shall be said of him, by the sons of Zion, while there is one of them remaining, that this man was a faithful man in Israel; therefore, his name shall never be forgotten.

There are his sons, Newel Knight and Joseph Knight, Jun., whose names I record in the Book of the Law of the Lord with unspeakable delight, for they are my friends.

My speculations about the possible role of Joseph Knight Sr. and Joseph Knight Jr. and the other Knights as something of a prophetic “Team B” are, of course, worth no more than the electrons I'm using to write them out. Whether my hypothesis is or is not true, however, the historical fact is that they were not needed. Joseph Smith fulfilled his prophetic mission, and the Knights went on to live lives of relative but respectable obscurity in the subsequent history of the Church.

In the words of Joseph Smith’s friend W. W. Phelps, written just days or weeks after Joseph’s martyrdom at Carthage, Illinois,

Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah!  
Jesus anointed that Prophet and Seer,  
Blessed to open the last dispensation,  
Kings shall extol him, and nations revere.  
Praise to his mem’ry, he died as a martyr;  
Honored and blest be his ever great name!  
Long shall his blood, which was shed by assassins,  
Plead unto heav’n while the earth lauds his fame.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Smith was faithful to his calling. He did what he had been called to do.

I turn now, though, to the incomparable person and role of Jesus of Nazareth.

In my late teens or thereabouts, I read the controversial 1955 novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, by Nikos Kazantzakis. (In the original Greek, which I have not read, the title of the book is simply *The Last Temptation* [Ο Τελευταίος Πειρασμός, Ο Teleftéos Pirasmós].) I can certainly understand why many regard it as blasphemous, and although I’ve tried to reread it a couple of times in recent years, I’ve been unable thus far to complete it.

But the novel has stuck in my mind ever since that first reading.

The “last temptation” of the book’s title is a vision that comes to Christ on the cross. In it, he sees himself married, an old man surrounded by a loving family. It’s a pleasant scene, a dream of domestic happiness, and — in important respects very faithful to the Hebrew ideal — is certainly in no way immoral. Still, in order to fulfill his own personal mission, to be faithful to his particular divine assignment, he must reject it and press forward with what Latter-day Saints recognize as the Atonement.

Scripturally, we know that Jesus had asked that he might be released from going through with the horrific experience that he knew lay before him. Perhaps, as in the case of Abraham and Isaac, the completely sincere willingness was sufficient?<sup>4</sup>

“O my Father,” he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou

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3. “Praise to the Man,” *Hymns*, no. 27.

4. See Genesis 22:1-18.



wilt” (Matthew 26:39). “Father,” we sing in his voice, in a sacrament hymn by Eliza R. Snow, “from me remove this cup. Yet, if thou wilt, I’ll drink it up.”<sup>5</sup>

But, unlike the story of Abraham and Isaac, there was no ram caught in the thicket as a substitute for Jesus. There was no backup team. There was, even if my hypothesis were to be true regarding the modern Restoration, no ancient equivalent of Joseph Knight Sr. and Joseph Knight Jr.

Jesus was and is the Only Begotten Son of the Father. There was and there is no alternative, “for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). He had to die. Otherwise, in the words of another hymn from W. W. Phelps, “all was lost.”<sup>6</sup>

Everything hinged on Christ’s willingness. Nothing else would serve. And since, like us, Jesus was and is free to choose, all of heaven held its breath.

“Here’s love and grief beyond degree,” wrote Isaac Watts, “The Lord of glory died for men.”<sup>7</sup> “We love him,” said the ancient apostle John, “because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). In the words of Charles H. Gabriel,

I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me,  
Confused at the grace that so fully he proffers me.  
I tremble to know that for me he was crucified,  
That for me, a sinner, he suffered, he bled and died.  
Oh, it is wonderful that he should care for me  
Enough to die for me! Oh, it is wonderful, wonderful to me!  
I marvel that he would descend from his throne divine  
To rescue a soul so rebellious and proud as mine,  
That he should extend his great love unto such as I,  
Sufficient to own, to redeem, and to justify.<sup>8</sup>

“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). As the lyrics of Cecil Frances Alexander put it,

There was no other good enough  
To pay the price of sin.  
He only could unlock the gate  
Of heav’n and let us in.<sup>9</sup>

The Prophet Joseph Smith, important though his own role was, suffered from no confusion on this point. He recognized the pivotal, indispensable part played by Jesus of Nazareth in the most important

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5. “Behold the Great Redeemer Die,” *Hymns*, 191.

6. “O God, The Eternal Father,” *Hymns*, 175.

7. “He Died! The Great Redeemer Died,” *Hymns*, 192.

8. “I Stand All Amazed,” *Hymns*, 193.

9. “There is a Green Hill Far Away,” *Hymns*, 194.

event at the very turning point of human history. “The fundamental principles of our religion,” he declared,

are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.<sup>10</sup>

This is why “we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ” (2 Nephi 25:26). This is why the Church is and must be named after him, and him alone. This is why we can leave no doubt about the object of our loyalty, “looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2).

**Daniel C. Peterson** (*Ph.D., University of California at Los Angeles*) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University’s Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur’an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).

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10. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, ed. George Albert Smith (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book Company, 1948), 3:30.

