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Adam-ondi-Ahman

Robert J. Matthews

The site known today as “Adam-ondi-Ahman” is located at a bend of the Grand River in Daviess County, northern Missouri, about six miles north of the town of Gallatin. The immediate area probably looks pretty much the same today as it did in the early 1830s, although there are a few farm houses nearby and the valley is planted with field corn in the summer. There are no modern super-highways in the vicinity, few inhabitants, and no outward signs of the settlement that once was there.

The writer has visited Adam-ondi-Ahman in every season of the year and has been impressed with its solitude and quietness. It is a beautiful place with grassy, gently rolling hills partially covered with groves of trees, and bordered on three sides by a flat, level valley a mile or so in width. In the spring and summer the air is filled with the pleasant sounds of birds, squirrels and crickets. It is difficult to imagine a more peaceful, beautiful wilderness area.

Earliest Mention in This Dispensation

The earliest record we have of the name Adam-ondi-Ahman is a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith in March 1832 at Hiram, Ohio, now known as Doctrine and Covenants, Section 78. Verses 15 and 16 read in part as follows:

... saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Zion, who hath established the foundations of Adam-ondi-Ahman;

Who hath appointed Michael your prince, and established his feet, and set him upon high, and given unto him the keys of salvation under the counsel and direction of the Holy One, who is without beginning of days or end of life.¹

Adam-ondi-Ahman seems to have had reference at that early date to a general area rather than to a specific spot. If the Prophet Joseph Smith knew at that time (March 1832) of a specific location in Missouri to which the name also applied, he left us no written evidence of it.

A second reference came some thirty-six months later, on 28 March 1835: the “valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman” is specified in a revelation to the Prophet as the place where Adam met with his posterity three years prior to his death.² The passage also declares that the Lord appeared to this ancient gathering of patriarchs and high priests as follows:

Three years previous to the death of Adam, he called Seth, Enos, Cainan, Mahalaleel, Jared, Enoch, and Methuselah, who were all high priests, with the residue of his posterity who were righteous, into the valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman, and there bestowed upon them his last blessing.

And the Lord appeared unto them, and they rose up and blessed Adam, and called him Michael, the prince, the archangel.

And the Lord administered comfort unto Adam, and said unto him: I have set thee to be at the head; a multitude of nations shall come of thee, and thou art a prince over them forever.

And Adam stood up in the midst of the congregation; and, notwithstanding he was bowed down with age, being full of Holy Ghost, predicted whatsoever should befall his posterity unto the latest generation.

These things were all written in the book of Enoch, and are to be testified of in due time.³

Although this revelation, received in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835, makes a categorical statement of the meeting of Adam with his posterity in the valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman, it makes no reference to Missouri, or to the particular location of “the valley.”

The hymn, “Our Earth Was Once a Garden Place,” which was written by W. W. Phelps in 1832 or 1833, speaks of Adam-ondi-Ahman in language that suggest a large area rather than a localized valley and hill. This hymn was sung at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple on 27 March 1836. Likewise, the literature of the Church in the early 1830s seems to use the name *Adam-ondi-Ahman* to refer to a large area.⁴

However, in May 1838, the Prophet Joseph visited an area in northern Missouri where Lyman Wight and a few others had built their homes. This was about twenty-five miles north-east of Far West. The brethren had called the place “Spring Hill,” but the Prophet is credited with identifying the area at that time as “the place where Adam shall come to visit his people, or the Ancient of Days shall sit, as spoken of by Daniel the prophet.”⁵ Since this valley is designated as the place where Adam shall again visit his people, and is specifically named *Adam-ondi-Ahman*, it is thus understood to be the valley of the same name in which Adam blessed his posterity three years before his death, as already mentioned.⁶ The Prophet Joseph is also reported to have taught that the remains of an altar, used by Adam, were in this vicinity, as will be noted later.

Thus the term *Adam-ondi-Ahman* has been used to denote a relatively large geographical area of northern Missouri and also a particular valley and hill in that area.

Meaning of the Name

There are somewhat varied interpretations of the term *Adam-ondi-Ahman*. Likewise, there is variety in the legends and traditions that have developed about the area.

Adam-ondi-Ahman is interpreted by one to mean “the Valley of God,”⁷ by another as “Adam’s consecrated Land,”⁸ and by another, “Adam’s grave.”⁹

Elder Orson Pratt preserved a bit of information for us in one of his discourses delivered in Salt Lake City on 18 February 1855:

There is one revelation that this people are not generally acquainted with. I think it has never been published, but probably it will be in the Church History. It is given in questions and answers. The first question is, “What is the name of God in the pure language?” The answer says, “Ahman.” “What is the name of the Son of God?” Answer, “Son Ahman—the greatest of all the parts of God excepting Ahman.” “What is the name of men?” “Sons Ahman,” is the answer.¹⁰

Although Elder Pratt did not use the term *Adam-ondi-Ahman*, his discussion of the word *Ahman* is interesting.

Elder Alvin R. Dyer, who has amassed a great deal of information in his study of the history and significance of Adam-ondi-Ahman, interprets the name in relation to the priesthood and revelatory experiences of Adam in being the first man to hold the spiritual blessings of the gospel:

The very word itself speaks of the manner in which Adam has received the “Keys of Salvation” under the counsel and direction of the Holy One, who is Jesus Christ the Lord.

The word “Adam” refers directly to Adam. The word “ondi,” means nearby or connected with. The word “Ahman” means the Lord himself. Therefore a literal translation of the words “Adam-ondi-Ahman” means The Lord Jesus Christ, through Adam unto mankind.¹¹

Elder Dyer also has gathered reports of early brethren and residents of Daviess county which describe Adam-ondi-Ahman as the site of two ancient altars (neither of which is now to be seen) used by Adam. One of these, an “altar of prayer” he locates not far from the Lyman Wight house on Tower Hill. The other, an “altar of sacrifice,” is said to have been situated a mile or so away near the top of Spring Hill.¹²

In reading the literature available about the place now called Adam-ondi-Ahman, one finds a difference in the veneration that is held concerning it. The spectrum runs from an acceptance of the place as the very spot on which Adam dwelt to the opposite view that there is nothing particularly significant about the location either anciently, currently, or in the future. Not only do these two extremes have their advocates, but there are gradations in between. As might be expected concerning a site in which so much has been said so closely associated with the patriarch of the human family, several legends have grown up about what has happened and does happen there. Two of these are noted herein. The reader may judge their veracity for himself.

There is a report that a certain mound of rocks marks the spot of Adam’s grave. It is on a small spur jutting out from the larger Spring Hill,

and is called Tower Hill. The rocks are located under a tree. The story has it that on “certain Friday nights a light can be seen glowing over the rocks, and that upon these occasions Adam himself gets up and walks around.”¹³

In 1944 *Pathfinder Magazine* published an article under the caption: “Sold: The Garden of Eden.” Included with the article was a picture of a large tree, under which was a flat table-like stone labeled “Adam’s Council Table.”¹⁴ No documentation is given for the statement.

A City and Stake Planned in 1838–1839

As a result of serious conflicts between the Saints and the old settlers in Jackson County, the state legislature of Missouri established Daviess and Caldwell counties in northern Missouri as places for the Mormons to live. Far West, in Caldwell County, had the greater influx, but many of the Latter-day Saints settled in Daviess county in 1838.

Elder Lyman Wight, who was perhaps the first to build a home at Adam-ondi-Ahman, had arrived there about 1 February 1838. Others came later in the year, and it is estimated that the settlement eventually grew to 200 homes with an additional forty families living in wagons. Building was rapid and several homes were completed every day.¹⁵ There were perhaps 1,500 people at Adam-ondi-Ahman in 1838, at its greatest population.

Joseph Smith first came to the present site of Adam-ondi-Ahman on Saturday, 19 May 1838, from Far West, and in the next few weeks made many trips there. Of his first visit to the area he wrote:

Friday, 18th.—I left Far West, in company with Sidney Rigdon . . . and many others, for the purpose of visiting the north country, and laying off a stake of Zion. . . . We passed a beautiful country of land, a majority of which is prairie (untimbered land), and thickly covered with grass and weeds, among which is plenty of game; such as deer, turkey, hen, elk, etc. . . . We have nothing to fear in camping out, except the rattlesnake, which is natural to this country, though not very numerous.

Saturday, 19th. . . . Grand River is a large, beautiful, deep and rapid stream, during the high waters of spring, and will undoubtedly admit of steamboat navigation and other water craft We pursued our course up the river, mostly in the timber, about eighteen miles, when we arrived at Colonel Lyman Wight’s, who lives at the foot of Tower Hill (a name I gave it in consequence of the remains of an Old Nephite altar or tower), where we camped for the Sabbath. In the afternoon I went up the river about half a mile to Wight’s Ferry, . . . for the purpose of selecting and laying claim to a city plat near said ferry in Daviess County, township 60, range 27 and 28, and sections 25, 36, 31, and 30, which the brethren call Spring Hill; but by the mouth of the Lord it was named Adam-ondi-Ahman, because, said he, it is the place where Adam shall come to visit his people, or the Ancient of Days shall sit, as spoken of by Daniel the Prophet.¹⁶

On 28 June 1838 a conference was held at Adam-ondi-Ahman for the purpose of organizing a stake of Zion. The Prophet Joseph was present, and the meeting was held near the house of Elder Lyman Wight. The Prophet's uncle, John Smith, was called to be the president, with Reynolds Cahoon and Lyman Wight as counselors. "After singing the well known hymn Adam-ondi-Ahman ["This Earth Was Once a Garden Place"], the meeting closed by prayer."¹⁷

A small compilation containing the legal description of many of the residences and plats at Adam-ondi-Ahman was made by H. G. Sherwood, an early Latter-day Saint living in the area. These descriptions plotted on an aerial photo suggest that most of the residences were located on the long, gentle western and southern slopes of what is known as Spring Hill.¹⁸ Had settlement not been interrupted by persecution, it seems probable that homes would have eventually been erected on all sides, for according to the plan, Spring Hill was to be in the center of the city.¹⁹

A Storehouse and a Temple Site

A red brick storehouse was erected part way up Spring Hill. Although it is grass-covered today and cattle graze there, remains of the bricks can still be found forming a slight rise or knoll on the surface of the ground. At the top of the hill, perhaps a mile from the storehouse, at a spot permitting a view of the surrounding country in every direction, a site was marked out and dedicated for a temple block. Elder Heber C. Kimball, who was present at the dedication, is credited with the following report of this event:

After hearing of the mobbing, burning and robbing in Gallatin, Daviess Co., and the region round about the brethren of Caldwell went directly to Adam-ondi-Ahman, which is on the west fork of Grand River. Thomas B. Marsh, David W. Patten, Brigham Young, myself, Parley P. Pratt and John Taylor amongst the number. When we arrived there we found the Prophet Joseph, Hyrum Smith and Sidney Rigdon, with hundreds of others of the Saints, preparing to defend themselves from the mob who were threatening the destruction of our people. . . .

While there we laid out a city on a high elevated piece of land, and set the stakes for the four corners of a temple block, which was dedicated, Brother Brigham Young being mouth; there were from three to five hundred men present on the occasion, under arms. This elevated spot was probably from two hundred and fifty to five hundred feet above the level of Grand River, so that one could look east, west, north and south, as far as the eye could reach; it was one of the most beautiful places I ever beheld.

The Prophet Joseph called upon Brother Brigham, myself and others, saying, "Brethren, come, go along with me, and I will show you something." He led us a short distance to a place where were the ruins of three altars built of stone, one above the other, and one standing a little back of the other, like unto the pulpits in the Kirtland Temple, representing the order of three grades

of Priesthood; "There," said Joseph, "is the place where Adam offered up sacrifice after he was cast out of the garden." The altar stood at the highest point of the bluff.²⁰

Although the "temple block" was dedicated, apparently no corner stones were laid, and no temple was built. Persecution soon forced the Saints to flee to Illinois, and thus the settlement had a short existence lasting only a few months, because by November 1838 the Saints were leaving their homes and abandoning Adam-ondi-Ahman.

Perhaps today we have little appreciation for the severity of the times and the difficulties endured by the Church in attempting to establish Zion, but we should contemplate the statement of the Prophet Joseph that the hardships and persecution suffered by the members of the Church in Missouri were as terrible as any that had ever been meted out to the Saints in the annals of history.²¹

Adam-ondi-Ahman Today

A walk through the area today reveals little of what once existed at Adam-ondi-Ahman. If one looks for it, he can find the remains of the brick storehouse, a few logs, and the stone foundation of the Lyman Wight house. The writer has also found what he believes to be a few leveled-out places on the hillside where homes were once built.

Little had been done with Adam-ondi-Ahman since 1839 until very recently. As described in the opening paragraph of this article, it is today something of a pleasant wilderness. In 1944 Elder Wilford Wood purchased approximately thirty acres of land at Adam-ondi-Ahman for the Church. This purchase included the site of Tower Hill and the Wight home. Since that time the Church has acquired several hundred acres of land through the industrious and careful stewardship of Elder Alvin R. Dyer. Included in the purchases are parts of the valley, Spring Hill (including the storehouse and temple sites), and surrounding areas.

The U.S. Government has proposed an earthfill dam and a reclamation project on the Grant River, which will no doubt have a tremendous effect on the area in the near future. To be known as the "Pattonsburg Dam," it will be visible from the hill and the valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman and will create a sizable body of water in the immediate vicinity. Electrical power will be produced and new highways and bridges will be built to give access to the area. The reservoir of water will probably also stimulate a recreation and tourist trade. This will create a different scene for Adam-ondi-Ahman.

The Church will surely meet the challenge of this changing situation by establishing a visitor's center and other modernizations and improvements to the land—and Adam-ondi-Ahman may soon again be a place of activity.

Dr. Matthews, assistant professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, is also a specialist in early Church history.

1. For the convenience of the reader, citations are given for both LDS and RLDS (Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) sources. In the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants (1970 edition) this reference is 77:3e, f (The source cited first is the one from which information is taken directly; the other source is essentially the same, though it may differ somewhat in wording. Hereafter, the Doctrine and Covenants for each will be abbreviated D & C.)

2. LDS D&C 107:53–55; RLDS D&C 104:28a, b, c.

3. Leaders of the RLDS church have explicitly stated that they do not necessarily regard northern Missouri, or anywhere on the North American continent, as the geographical location in which Adam lived upon the earth. They do not, however, deny the possibility, but declare that they take no stand on the matter due to lack of evidence. See a signed article by Joseph Smith III, *Saints Herald* 51 (1904):827. Also see articles by other prominent RLDS authors, *Saints Herald* 96 (1949):569; 102 (1955):669; 110 (1963):18,752.

4. See Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), pp. 19–21.

5. LDS D&C 116:1. This item is not found in the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants, but is presented in the church's official publication, *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1967), 2:153–54, as quoted from the *Millennial Star*, 16 (1854):152–53. (Hereafter, this reference is cited as RLDS History.)

6. The present article postulates that the multiple meanings of Adam-ondi-Ahman were made known gradually in this dispensation. The writer is aware that in the 1938 compilation called *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, page 38, there is an account of a blessing given by the Prophet to his father, dated 18 December 1833, in which mention is made of Adam gathering his posterity in the valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman three years previous to his (Adam's) death. This is given in the exact phraseology as the passage in LDS D&C 107:53–55. If this published account in the *Teachings* is correct, then it is certain that the Prophet knew of this event at least 16 months before it occurs in LDS D&C 107, dated March 1835.

However, the source for the quotation in *Teachings* is not clear. It is given as the "Manuscript History of the Church," but the Manuscript History in the Library of the Historical Department of the LDS Church in Salt Lake City does not contain the passage under consideration. An account of the blessing was also printed in the *Times and Seasons*, 6:947–48, but this publication does not contain the information in question. It is possible that the account in the *Teaching* is an edited version containing information that was not actually given at the time of the 1833 blessing.

7. Orson Pratt in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1855–86), 16:48.

8. Public Signboard of the Missouri State Historical Society on the courthouse square, Gallatin, Missouri. John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* (St. Louis, 11 February 1839), page 28, identifies the term as meaning "Valley of God in which Adam blessed his Children."

9. Heman C. Smith, ed. *Journal of History* [RLDS], 18 vols. (Independence, Mo.: Herald House), 9:140. Also recorded on a public signboard of the Missouri State Historical Society.

10. *Journal of Discourses*, 2:342.

11. *The Lord Speaketh* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1964), p. 216.

12. Alvin R. Dyer, *The Refiner's Fire* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1968), pp. 166, 171–72.
13. Heman C. Smith 9:140. It should be noted that the RLDS writer was not advocating this legend as authentic; he cited it only as an example of what has been said.
14. *Pathfinder Magazine*, 31 July 1944.
15. Dyer, *The Refiner's Fire*, pp. 163, 164.
16. RLDS History, 2:153–54. See also Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1948), 3:34–35. (Hereafter cited as DHC.)
17. DHC, 3:38–39. See also RLDS History, 2:156–57.
18. This compilation is in the Library of the Historical Department of the LDS Church, Salt Lake City, Utah.
19. Dyer, *The Refiner's Fire*, p. 164.
20. Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1945), pp. 208–9.
21. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938), p. 126.