

“Praise to the Man”

GORDON B. HINCKLEY

I would like to say first that it is a very genuine pleasure to be with you tonight. It is always an inspiration to come to these firesides. I do not know why we call them firesides. The word connotes a small group of friends sitting about the hearth where a warm fire burns, talking with one another in an informal way. Tonight you are numbered in the thousands, and we have neither hearth nor fire; but I hope we can speak together as friends, and in a rather informal manner. I seek the direction of the Holy Spirit, because I wish for nothing more than to say to you those things which will add to your faith as we are met together in a spirit of worship.

I am responsible for the singing of that first song by the congregation: “Praise to the Man.” I would like to say a word or two about that great hymn from the pen of W. W. Phelps.

Many years ago when at the age of twelve I was ordained a deacon, my father, who was president of our stake, took me to my first stake priesthood meeting. In those days these meetings were held on a week night. I recall that we went to the Tenth Ward building in Salt Lake City. He walked up to the stand, and I sat on the back row, feeling a little alone and uncomfortable in that hall filled with strong men who had been ordained to the priesthood

of God. The meeting was called to order, the opening song was announced, and—as was then the custom—we all stood to sing. There were perhaps as many as four hundred there, for it was a very large stake. Together these men lifted their strong voices, some with the accents of the European lands from which they had come as converts and all singing with a great spirit of conviction and testimony:

*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 the Man,” *Hymns*, no. 147]

They were singing of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and as they did so there came into my young heart a great surge of love for and belief in the mighty Prophet of this dispensation. In my childhood I had been taught much of him in meetings and classes in our ward as well as in our home; but my experience in that stake

Gordon B. Hinckley was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at BYU on 4 November 1979.

priesthood meeting was different. I knew then, by the power of the Holy Ghost, that Joseph Smith was indeed a prophet of God.

It is true that during the years which followed there were times when that testimony wavered somewhat, particularly in the seasons of my undergraduate university work—not at this university, but at another.

However, that conviction never left me entirely; and it has grown stronger through the years, partly because of the challenges of those days which compelled me to read and study and make certain for myself. I think that all of you go through similar experiences. President Lee once said that our testimonies need renewing every day. In harmony with that principle, I wish to say a few words tonight about Joseph Smith. Perhaps I shall not say anything that is new to you, but I hope and pray that the very repetition of matters with which you may be familiar will stir within you a renewal and strengthening of your testimony.

I am led to this subject by a letter, which I read only Friday, written by a New York evangelist who with diatribe and hate lashed out against the Prophet Joseph, calling him a wicked imposter, a fraud, a fake, and a deceiver and declaring that he was undertaking a national campaign to prove it. I do not know whether anything will come of his campaign; whatever happens, it will not be significant. It may topple a few of the weak, but it will only strengthen the strong. And long after this man and others of his kind have gone down to silence, the name of Joseph Smith will ring with honor and love in the hearts of an ever-growing band of Latter-day Saints in an ever-increasing number of nations of the earth.

Two weeks ago today I was in Nauvoo, the City of Joseph, with two of my brethren of the First Quorum of the Seventy and twelve mission presidents and their wives for a mission presidents' seminar. The touch of autumn was on the land—the leaves golden, a little haze in the air, the nights cool, the days warm. The

tourist season was over, and the old city was quiet and beautiful. We held our first meeting in the restored Seventies Hall, where in the 1840s men prepared themselves, through study and through teaching one another the doctrine of the Kingdom, to go out to declare the message of the gospel to the world. This was the forerunner of the Missionary Training Center. As we met in that and other homes and halls in Nauvoo, it was as if the figures of the past were with us—Joseph and Hyrum, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, the brothers Pratt—Orson and Parley—and a host of others.

This was indeed Joseph's city. He was the prophet who planned it, and his followers had built it. It became the largest and the most impressive in the state of Illinois. With sturdy brick homes, with halls for worship, instruction, and entertainment, and with the magnificent temple standing on the crest of the slope up from the river, this community on the Mississippi was put together as if its builders were to be there for a century or more.

Here, before that tragic day at Carthage, the Prophet was at the zenith of his career. Standing the other day where he once stood, I thought of the events that had brought him there, reviewing in my mind his inheritance. I thought of his forebears who generations before had left the British Isles and come to Boston; of their lives in the New World, through five generations on his father's side and four on his mother's; of their labors in clearing the lands of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont to build farms and homes; of their distinguished service in the War of Independence; of the adversities and the failures they experienced in trying to wrest a living from the granite hills among which they lived. I thought of the little boy, born in Sharon in December of 1805, given his father's name. I reflected on that terrifying period of sickness when typhus fever struck the family and osteomyelitis, with great pain and

debilitating infection, settled in Joseph's leg. That was while the family lived in Lebanon, New Hampshire; and how remarkable it was that only a few miles away, at the academy in Hanover, was Dr. Nathan Smith, perhaps then the only surgeon in the United States—if not in the world—who had developed a procedure by which that infected leg might be saved.

But it was not to be accomplished without terrible suffering. In fact, today it is difficult to conceive of how the little boy stood it as his father held him in his arms and his mother walked and prayed among the trees of the farm to escape his screams while the surgeon made the long incision and with forceps broke off the portions of infected bone without benefit of anesthesia of any kind. Perhaps remembrance of that intense suffering made a little more bearable for Joseph Smith the later tarring and feathering at Kirtland, the foul jail at Liberty, and the shots of the mob at Carthage. In my looking back from Nauvoo the other day I thought of the forces that moved the Smith family from generations of life in New England to western New York, where they had to come if the foreordained purposes of God were to be accomplished. I thought of the loss of the family farm, of poor crops in that thin soil, of the great freeze of 1816 when a killing frost in July forced upon them the decision to look elsewhere; then of the move to Palmyra, of the purchase of a farm in Manchester, and of the revival preachers who stirred the people and so confused a boy that he determined to ask God for that wisdom so lacking in the contending revivalists.

That was the real beginning of it all, as you know—that spring day in the year 1820 when he knelt among the trees, opened his mouth in prayer, and beheld a glorious vision in which he spoke with God the Eternal Father and His Son, the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Then followed the years of instruction, the instructor an angel of God who on a dozen occasions taught,

rebuked, warned, and comforted the boy as he grew into the young man.

And so, while in Nauvoo the other day I reflected on the preparation for prophethood: I reflected on this amazing Joseph Smith. I cannot expect his detractors, including the writer of the letter I read on Friday, to know of his prophetic calling by the power of the Holy Ghost; but I can raise some questions for him and other critics to deal with before they can dismiss Joseph Smith as a false prophet. I have time for only three of many that might be asked: first, what do you do with the Book of Mormon? second, how do you explain his power to influence strong men to follow him, even unto death? and third, how do you rationalize the fulfillment of his prophecies?

Here is the Book of Mormon. I hold it in my hand. I read its words. I have read Joseph Smith's explanation of how it came to be. To the unbelieving it is a story difficult to accept, and critics by the score have worn out their lives writing books intended to refute that story and to offer explanations other than the one given by Joseph Smith. But their critical writing only has the effect of stimulating scholars to dig the deeper, and the more deeply they dig the greater the accumulation of evidence for the validity of the story.

For instance, I have been fascinated with the recent studies of Dr. Alvin C. Rencher of this campus and Dr. Wayne A. Larsen of the Eyring Research Center on the "wordprints" of different authors in the Book of Mormon. They and others have demonstrated that just as a man's fingerprints are peculiar to him alone, so each author has word patterns that are peculiarly his. Presumably, if Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Solomon Spaulding, or any other one man wrote the Book of Mormon its language style would be the same in all of its books. But now, with computer technology, these scholars are led to conclude that statistically "the odds against a single author for the Book of Mormon exceed 100 billion to one" (Marc Haddock,

“Computer Wordprints Track Writer’s Style,” *BYU Today*, November 1979, p. 1). Think of it. They further say: “All of our data point to one almost inescapable conclusion: No one man wrote the Book of Mormon. It seems impossible that Joseph Smith or any other writer, however brilliant, could have fabricated a work with 24 or more discernible wordprints.” (Wayne A. Larsen, Alvin C. Rencher, and Tim Layton, “Multiple Authorship of the Book of Mormon,” *New Era*, November 1979, p. 13.)

Joseph Smith did not write the Book of Mormon. Rather, “by the gift and power of God” (Book of Mormon, title page) he translated the writings of many authors who wrote at different times and under various circumstances.

This “wordprint” evidence, made possible through the modern computer, is to me remarkable and greatly appreciated. It significantly supplements a great and growing body of evidence for the validity of this remarkable book and for the man who was the instrument in the hands of God in bringing it forth “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST” (Book of Mormon, title page).

As has been demonstrated for a hundred and fifty years, the truth of the book will not be determined by literary analysis or by scientific research, although these are reassuring and most welcome. The truth will be determined today and tomorrow, as it has been throughout the yesterdays, by the reading of it in a spirit of reverence and respect and prayer. I received a letter the other day from a father who said that, in response to the challenge I offered at general conference that we read the book again before next April, he and his family are going to read the first edition which touched so deeply so many strong and able men who read it when it first came from the press. I commended him but hastened to add that no one need look for a first edition to get the spirit of this remarkable volume. Every one of the million copies that will be printed this year carries that same spirit, includes that same marvelous promise,

and will yield the same result in testimony concerning the truth of the book.

To return to my first question to the critics: What do you do with the Book of Mormon? It is here to be handled and to be read with prayer and earnest inquiry. All of the work of all of the critics throughout the hundred and fifty years of its presence has lacked credibility in the cold light of fact and has been without effect on those who have prayerfully read the book and received by the power of the Holy Ghost a witness of its truth. If there were no other evidence for the divine mission of Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon would stand as an irrefutable witness of that fact. To think that anyone less than one inspired could bring forth a book which should have so profound an effect for good upon others is to imagine that which simply cannot be. The evidence for the truth of the Book of Mormon is found in the lives of the millions, living and gone, who have read it, prayed about it, and received a witness of its truth.

My second question to the critics: How do you explain Joseph’s power to influence strong men and women to follow him, even unto death? Anyone who has any doubt about Joseph Smith’s power of leadership need only look at the men who were attracted to him. They did not come for wealth. They did not come for political power. They were not drawn by dreams of military conquest. His offering to them was none of these; rather, it concerned only salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It involved persecution with its pains and losses, long and lonely missions, separation from family and friends, and in many cases death itself.

Take, for instance, Orson Hyde, whose name has been much in Church news of late because of President Kimball’s dedication of the memorial park on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Orson Hyde was a clerk in the village of Kirtland when he met Joseph Smith, the youthful prophet. It was to this unknown,

unpromising young seller of buttons and thread and calico that Joseph, speaking in the name of the Lord, said that he, Orson Hyde, was ordained “to proclaim the everlasting gospel, by the Spirit of the living God, from people to people, and from land to land, in the congregations of the wicked, in their synagogues, reasoning with and expounding all scriptures unto them” (D&C 68:1).

This young man, this clerk in a village store, under the inspiration of that prophetic call, walked two thousand miles on foot through Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine, and New York, “reasoning with and expounding all scriptures unto” all he met.

We were at the scene of his home in Nauvoo the other day, the comfortable home he left to travel to England and Germany and to visit Constantinople, Cairo, and Alexandria en route to Jerusalem where on October 24, 1841, he stood on the Mount of Olives and dedicated by the authority of the holy priesthood the land of Palestine for the return of the Jews. That was a quarter of a century before Herzl, the powerful exponent of Zionism, undertook the work of gathering the Jews to their homeland.

As another example, take Willard Richards—educated, refined, a doctor of medicine. When Joseph and Hyrum surrendered themselves to the governor of Illinois and were placed in Carthage Jail, a handful of the brethren went with them. By the afternoon of June 27, 1844, most had left to take care of certain matters of business, leaving only John Taylor and Willard Richards with the Prophet and his brother Hyrum. That afternoon following dinner the jailer, knowing of the mob outside, suggested that they would be safer in the cell of the jail. Turning to Willard Richards, Joseph asked, “If we go into the cell will you go with us?” To this Elder Richards responded:

Brother Joseph, you did not ask me to cross the river with you — you did not ask me to come to

Carthage— you did not ask me to come to jail with you — and do you think I would forsake you now? But I will tell you what I will do; if you are condemned to be hung for ‘treason,’ I will be hung in your stead, and you shall go free. [B.H. Roberts, A Comprehensive History of the Church, 2:283]

Strong and intelligent men do not demonstrate that kind of love for a charlatan or a fraud. That kind of love comes of God and the recognition of integrity in men. It is an expression of the spirit and example of the Savior, who gave his life for all men and who declared, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

If there were time we might speak of the others, so many of them—the Youngs, the Kimballs, the Taylors, the Snows, the Pratts, and their kind—who when they first met Joseph Smith were ordinary and unpromising in their appearance and ways, but who under his matchless energizing power became giants in achievement and immortal through their service to others.

Question three to the critics: What of his prophecies? There were more than a few, and they were fulfilled. Among the most notable was the revelation of the Civil War. You are familiar with it; it was spoken on Christmas Day, 1832. There were many high-minded men and women who deplored the institution of slavery then common in the South, and there was much talk of abolition. But who but a prophet of God would have dared to say, thirty-nine years before it was to happen that “war [would] be poured out upon all nations beginning at the rebellion of South Carolina” and that “the Southern States [would] be divided against the Northern States”? (D&C 87:1–3.) That remarkable prediction saw its fulfillment with the firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in 1861. How could Joseph Smith have possibly foreseen with such accuracy the event that was to come thirty-nine years after he spoke of it. Only by the spirit of prophecy which was in him.

Or again, consider the equally remarkable prophecy concerning the movement of our people to these mountain valleys. The Saints were then living in Nauvoo and its sister community across the Mississippi and were enjoying a prosperity they had not previously known. They were building a temple and other substantial structures. Their new homes were of brick, constructed to endure. And yet one day in August of 1842, while visiting in Montrose, Joseph

prophesied that the Saints would continue to suffer much affliction and would be driven to the Rocky Mountains, many would apostatize, others would be put to death by our persecutors or lose their lives in consequence of exposure or disease, and [speaking to those who were present] some of you will live to go and assist in making settlements and build cities and see the Saints become a mighty people in the midst of the Rocky Mountains. [History of the Church, 5:85–86]

Viewed in the context of the time and circumstances, this statement is nothing less than remarkable. Only a man speaking with a knowledge beyond his own could have uttered words which would be so literally fulfilled, as your presence here tonight attests.

Great was his vision. It encompassed all the peoples of mankind, wherever they live, and all generations who have walked the earth and passed on. How can his critics, past or present, speak against him except out of ignorance?

They have not tasted of his words; they have not pondered him and prayed about him. As one who has done these things, I can echo the words of John Taylor who was with him at Carthage Jail when he was killed and who in his account of that tragedy wrote this appraisal: "Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it" (D&C 135:3).

To these I add my own words of testimony that he was and is a prophet of God, raised up as an instrument in the hands of the Almighty to usher in a new and final gospel dispensation. May I leave you with this quotation:

When a man gives his life for the cause he has advocated, he meets the highest test of his honesty and sincerity that his own or any future generation can in fairness ask. When he dies for the testimony he has borne, all malicious tongues should ever after be silent, and all voices hushed in reverence before a sacrifice so complete. [Ezra Dalby, speech given December 12, 1926]

*Great is his glory and endless his priesthood:
Ever and ever the keys he will hold.
Faithful and true, he will enter his kingdom,
Crowned in the midst of the prophets of old.
["Praise to the Man," Hymns, no.147]*

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.