

Hard Questions in Church History

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Questions to Consider:

- Why purport such dramatic change to the Afterlife in Christianity?
- Why does the Vision claim to save murders, etc.?
- Who can become a son of perdition?
- Why introduce the Holy Spirit of Promise then?
- What are the aspects of the Holy Spirit of Promise?

Timeline Associated with D&C 76

1830	
June	The Lord commands Joseph Smith Jr. to begin a new translation of the Bible
Dec 7	D&C 35:20: Sidney Rigdon called as scribe to help with new biblical translation
1831	
Feb 1	Joseph and Emma move to Kirtland, OH (expecting twins)
March 7, 18	D&C 45:60: Joseph is instructed to stop translating the OT (stopping after Gen 24) and to begin translating the NT—with Sidney continuing to scribe (he scribed most of the NT over 23 months)
Sept	Joseph, Emma, and four-month-old twins move to John and Elsa Johnson’s Farm in Hiram, OH. Sidney and Phebe Rigdon and their six children move into a log cabin on same farm
Nov 1-12	Elders Conference in Hiram, Ohio, Joseph discusses publication of The Book of Commandments; Oliver and John Whitmer leave for Missouri taking “Revelation Book 1.” W.W. Phelps buys press in Cleveland and transports it to Independence, Missouri for publishing.
1832	Joseph receives ten revelations now contained in the D&C during this year
Jan 26	Church Conference is held in Amherst, Ohio (D&C 75 received)
Feb 16	Joseph Smith translates through John 5:29, receives D&C 76 with scribe Sidney Rigdon
Mar 25	Joseph and Sidney tarred and feathered by a mob
Mar 29	At ten months, adopted twin Joseph Murdock Smith dies from exposure during measles
July	New recording system adopted for Joseph’s new Bible translation: scribes no longer record the full Bible text—only the changes
July 20	Fredrick G. Williams begins as scribe for Bible translation

Working on The “New Translation of the Bible” at John Johnson’s Farm in Hiram Ohio

In the very cold month of February 1832 (average high was ~29 F), the Prophet Joseph Smith and his scribe Sidney Rigdon turned their time to the “translation” of the New Testament. Their gracious hosts, Elsa and John Johnson, offered the most private spot available—an upstairs bedroom in their home—while downstairs, Emma worked with their nine-month-old twins and the other eight Johnsons living in the same home.

By February 16, 1832, Joseph and Sidney were in the fifth chapter of John’s Gospel. As mentioned previously, Joseph would slowly read from the King James Bible, while his scribe recorded each word (see CFM #16, April 12-18, 2021). The duo had been working through the Gospels, from Matthew to John, over the past eleven months. The slow pace of transcribing with a quill allowed them time to ponder. Joseph mentioned that he marveled as he thought on St. John’s description of the resurrection of the just and unjust. Joseph felt inspired to make a few changes in his “New Translation.”

John 5:29 KJV—JST

And shall come forth; they that who have done good, unto in the resurrection of ~~life~~ *the just*, and they ~~that~~ *who* have done evil, ~~unto~~ *in* the resurrection of ~~damnation~~ *the unjust*.

On the original manuscript, at the point where Sidney wrote the last letter in the word “unjust,” a visible ink blot is seen followed by a faint line as if his pen fell. This textual evidence appears to have come right at the time that the vision known as D&C 76 opened.

And while we meditated upon these things, the Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened, and the glory of the lord shone round about. And we beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness; And saw the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before his throne, worshiping God, and the Lamb, who worship him forever and ever (D&C 76:19-21).

The vision that unfolded lasted an hour and a half.

The Vision of the Degrees of Glory

Sidney and Joseph saw the same vision—and discussed out loud with each other what they saw throughout the long vision: “What do you see?” . . . “I see the same.” At intervals during the long vision, the Lord instructed Joseph and Sidney to stop and record what they had just seen (D&C 76:28, 49, 80, 113, 115). They refined their notes together that night. Section 76 is one of the most beautifully written and most profound and is novel among the revelations.

Several years later he recalled that the men could hear Joseph and Sidney’s description, but did not see the vision. This leads to more questions—did the other men enter the room while the revelation was received? Had they all gathered to watch Joseph and Sidney translate the Bible? Dibble said there was “not a sound nor motion made by anyone” in the room (www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/vision-16-february-1832-dc-76/2).

D&C 76

Joseph and Sidney’s written description of the vision describes three heavenly kingdoms in the afterlife: telestial, terrestrial, and the most glorious celestial. They learned that humans will receive afterlife experiences consistent with their desires, thoughts, and actions. Only the “sons of perdition” will not be glorified (D&C 76:32-38). The Lord explained that “all the rest shall be brought forth by the resurrection of the dead, through the triumph and the glory of the Lamb, who was slain, who was in the bosom of the Father before the worlds were made” (D&C 76:39). The Savior’s atonement will bless all with immortality and all with a chance to repent and come until Him. The three degrees are differentiated by the how valiantly each person there embraces their testimony of Jesus Christ.

The revelation meant so much to the prophet that he reworked it as a beautiful poem and included it in a letter to W. W. Phelps, with whom he shared correspondence often. The poem, entitled “The Vision,” was published in Nauvoo in 1843 (<http://mldb.byu.edu/jsmith1.htm>). Some who have studied its authorship suggest it was written by Phelps and sent to Joseph not the other way around.

Contrasting Nineteenth-Century Christian Thoughts about Heaven

According to United States records from 1800, 46% of children died before their fifth birthday. Death was a regular aspect of life for both young and old. The average lifespan was forty years (weighed down, in part, by high infant mortality). The regularity of death brought a keen interest in life after death. Death and the beyond were common topics in Christian sermons. Catholics taught that death is only of the body. Spirits then have three options: heaven for those righteous who have been baptized; hell and purgatory for the others.

In the early 19th century, most Protestant American ministers taught that those who were elect (or “the righteous”) would go to heaven, and the rest were damned. In 2 Corinthians 3:4, Paul’s reference to a “third heaven” led to a few other ideas as variations on his theme. Examples from three ministers who built on Paul’s idea of a third heaven follow:

- 1) The Universalist Church (the earlier faith of Joseph’s father’s and grandfather’s families): Christ will redeem all people after a period of punishing sinners.
- 2) Alexander Campbell (the previous faith of Parley P. Pratt, Sidney Rigdon, and many of the Ohio converts): Three kingdoms refer to the Kingdom of Law, the Kingdom of Favor, and the Kingdom of Glory. “Campbell’s Kingdoms of Law and Favor, however, could be experienced during mortal life, and only the Kingdom of Glory was reserved for the afterlife. In describing these three kingdoms, Campbell wrote that the first was entered through birth, the second through baptism, and the third through good works. One differed from the next, Campbell declared, “as the sun excelled a star” (www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/vision-16-february-1832-dc-76/2#historical-intro):
- 3) Emanuel Swedenborg: (18th century Swede) proposed a heaven with three levels—celestial, spiritual, and natural. He visited London but was never in the United States.

Contrasting 1 Corinthians 15:40-42 with D&C 76

The vision known as D&C 76 discusses the afterlife utilizing biblical vocabulary and ideas. Here, the Lord restored different definitions to the biblical words and elaborated on the purpose of the afterlife. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15, we read one of the most beautiful descriptions of the resurrection in the Bible. Paul’s epistle includes the words “terrestrial” and “celestial” as he describes the afterlife.

There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption (1 Corinthians 15:40-42).

Joseph uses two of the same biblical words for two of the three degrees of glory, yet they take on new meanings. No one in Joseph’s generation thought about the afterlife as recorded in D&C 76. Joseph adds approximately 2,700 words in over 100 verses to reveal the mysteries of the afterlife and developed portions of God’s plan of Salvation. The Lord revealed that God will honor all humans with a glorified state that is individually dependent on their effort and loyalty to the Savior as their Redeemer.

In addition to information about the kingdoms of glory, the Lord restored another piece to the puzzle of the Plan of Salvation in the same revelation—with a new definition for the biblical phrase, “Holy Spirit of Promise.”

D&C 76: Holy Spirit of Promise as Used by General Christianity

The Lord restored a new definition to the biblical phrase “the Holy Spirit of Promise.” The five-word idiom is mentioned only once in the Bible and was interpreted very differently than we find in D&C 76.

Ephesians 1:13 (KJV)

“After that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise.”

In my reading of many biblical commentaries, sermons, and pamphlets from the century of the Restoration, the phrase “the Holy Spirit of Promise” is most often interpreted as the promise of the Spirit. Rarely did preachers or writers use the complete five-word phrase because it was not seen a title. Sometimes, it was intertwined with the process of regeneration, sanctification, adoption, or redemption.¹ Yet, when the Lord taught Joseph about “the Holy Spirit of Promise,” it referred to a special assignment of the Holy Spirit to oversee our covenants in this life for the life hereafter.

The vocabulary given to Joseph in the revelations is often biblical. Phrases or titles used in the restored church often have their origin in the Bible—yet, more often than not, they have a unique definition. For example, Joseph identified “the Gift of the Holy Ghost” and “the Holy Spirit of Promise” differently than did his Christian peers at the time. We see the same biblical phrases used in modern scripture, but with different definitions. For example, the ideas from D&C 76 on the three degrees of glory share words, but not interpretation from Paul’s third heaven. Also Joseph’s definitions of—sacrament, Melchizedek priesthood, a more sure word of prophecy, and calling and election made sure—do not agree with standard biblical interpretation at the time (D&C 131:5; 53:1; Heb 7; 2 Peter 1:10; etc.).

Holy Spirit of Promise Cited in Canonized Revelations

In each of the seven uses of the phrase “the Holy Spirit of Promise” in the Doctrine and Covenants, it is a title for of the Spirit’s power to seal ordinances. The ratification depends on the recipient’s faithfulness. The Holy Spirit of Promise performs two related sealings—one conditional, the other permanent.

- Conditionally, it ratifies ordinances when carried out with proper authority and proper commitment but the Spirit could remove the sealing if the recipient breaks his or her covenant. In this preliminary role, the Holy Spirit of Promise acts like an on-off switch to seal covenants between God and mortals. The conditional seal of baptism or any other ordinance-bound covenants on earth and in heaven will be made permanent only if the person has maintained a pure and repentant heart. The seal is turned off or dissolved if one breaks his covenant.
- As a permanent sealing, Joseph believed that the Holy Spirit of Promise ensured exaltation in the highest heaven after one met the needed trials in life with complete obedience to

God. The permanent sealing or ratification of ordinances is referred to in most of the scriptural references.

The following list—the seven citations of “the Holy Spirit of Promise” in the Doctrine and Covenants—demonstrates the phrase’s unique meaning in the restoration. The verses also include the requirements for the blessings of the sealing in both their conditional and permanent forms:

1. In conjunction with degrees of glory, D&C 76 teaches the need for the sealing of the Holy Spirit of Promise for those who qualified for the celestial kingdom—

They are they who received the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial, . . . That by keeping the commandments . . . overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true, They are they who are the church of the Firstborn. They are they into whose hands the Father has given all things—They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory (D&C 76:51-56, emphasis added).

2. The following year, on December 27 and 28, the Prophet Joseph received another revelation that referred to the celestial kingdom. Joseph referred to it as the Lord’s “olive leaf,” as it was a message of peace:

I now send upon you another Comforter, even upon you my friends, that it may abide in your hearts, even the Holy Spirit of promise; which other Comforter is the same that I promised unto my disciples, as is recorded in the testimony of John. This Comforter is the promise which I give unto you of eternal life, even the glory of the celestial kingdom; Which glory is that of the church of the Firstborn, even of God, the holiest of all, through Jesus Christ his Son (D&C 88:3-5).

3. On January 19, 1841, the Prophet received his first canonized revelation in Nauvoo. It was a year before Joseph gave the endowment and organized the Relief Society that Joseph said would become “a kingdom of priests an [as?] in Enoch’s day” (www.josephsmithpapers.org, Relief Society Minute book, 31 March 1842). This is in preparation for the highest Temple ordinances.

I give unto you Hyrum Smith . . .to hold the sealing blessings of my church, even the Holy Spirit of promise, whereby ye are sealed up unto the day of redemption, that ye may not fall notwithstanding the hour of temptation that may come upon you (D&C 124:124).

4. The Holy Spirit of Promise is mentioned four times in the revelation known as section 132 (verses 7, 18-19, 26).

All covenants . . . that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, of him who is anointed, . . . (and I have appointed unto my servant Joseph to hold this power in the last days, and there is never but one on the earth at a time on whom this power and the keys of this priesthood are

conferred), are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead . . .” (D&C 132:7).

5. “If a man marry a wife, and make a covenant with her for time and for all eternity . . . and is not sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise . . . then it is not valid neither of force when they are out of the world” (D&C 132:18).
6. “If a man marry a wife by my word, . . . and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise, by him who is anointed, unto whom I have appointed this power and the keys of this priesthood; and it shall be said unto them—Ye shall come forth in the first resurrection; and if it be after the first resurrection, in the next resurrection; and shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths—then shall it be written in the Lamb’s Book of Life” (D&C 132:19).
7. “If a man marry a wife according to my word, and they are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, . . . and if they commit no murder wherein they shed innocent blood, yet they shall come forth in the first resurrection, and enter into their exaltation; but they shall be destroyed in the flesh, and shall be delivered unto the buffetings of Satan unto the day of redemption, saith the Lord God” (D&C 132:26).

In addition to these revelations, Joseph delved further into the restored doctrine on the Holy Spirit of Promise. He shared his insights in at least six sermons from 1839 to 1844.²

Joseph’s Use of “The Holy Spirit of Promise” in Nauvoo Sermons

On June 27, 1839, in the Prophet Joseph’s first recorded sermon in Nauvoo, he connected one’s calling and election with the permanent sealing of the Holy Spirit of Promise: “St. Paul exhorts us to make our calling and election sure. This is the sealing power spoken of by Paul in other places . . . How is this to be done? It is to be done by this sealing power, and the other Comforter spoken of, which will be manifest by revelation.”³ Joseph referred to the permanent sealing of the Holy Spirit of Promise as “made sure” or receiving one’s “calling and election.”⁴

In a later sermon, on May 21, 1843), the prophet returned to discuss election and the Holy Spirit of Promise by quoting 1 Peter 1:2-4. People are “elect according to . . . sanctification of the spirit” and that their election is an “an inheritance incorruptible . . . in heaven for you.” The prophet included “three grand keys” to further understand the work of the Holy Spirit of Promise in accordance with election. His scribe recorded his spontaneous delivery as follows:

There are three grand Keys to unlock the whole subject. First what is the knowledge of God, Second what is it to make our calling and election sure. Third and last is how to make our calling and election sure. Ans [sic], it is to obtain a promise from God for myself that I shall have Eternal life that is the more sure word of prophycy [sic]. Peter was writeing [sic] to those of like precious faith with them the Apostles First to be sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.⁵

Joseph referenced several biblical passages (2 Peter 1:17, 19 and John 3:3, 5) as part of his restoration of the doctrine of “election.” He linked together the meaning of being sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise or to make one’s calling and election sure with “a more sure word of prophecy.” This was not the sense of election used by other Christians.

Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon Cook, editors of Joseph Smith’s sermons, explained:

In a certain limited sense, a sense Joseph Smith used many times, the phrase “Holy Spirit of Promise” has reference to the concept of “making your calling and election sure” or “being sealed up unto eternal life” (D&C 88:3-5). Thus, when the Holy Spirit (who was the one appointed by the Father to give final sanctioning authority for all priesthood blessings) receives authorization from Jesus Christ to unmistakably “seal” the promise of eternal life on a worthy individual, he is placing the seals on the highest gospel ordinances in his office as Holy Spirit of Promise (D&C 132:7).⁶

Joseph referred to the Holy Spirit of Promise in his sermons as a spiritual confirmation of priesthood blessing.

Joseph (and later prophets) administered this permanent sealing as an ordinance to commendable married couples.⁷ Only the prophet “who is anointed . . . [with] power and the keys of this priesthood” (D&C 132:7) can administer this permanent sealing to couples. Furthermore, vicarious sealings allow all couples the opportunity to learn and follow Christ and receive an ordinance that permanently sealed them through the Holy Spirit of Promise as elected heirs with Christ—whether in this life or the next.

Joseph’s Use of “The Holy Spirit of Promise” in the Joseph Smith Translation

In addition to his revelations and sermons, Joseph also used the five-word title “the Holy Spirit of Promise” in his Bible translation of 1 John 3:9 (which came after receiving D&C 76).

KJV 1 John 3:9	JST 1 John 3:9
Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for <i>his seed</i> remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God	Whosoever is born of God doth not <i>continue in sin</i> ; for <i>the Spirit of God</i> remaineth in him; and he cannot <i>continue in sin</i> , because he is born of God, <i>having received that holy Spirit of promise</i>

Joseph changed “commit sin” to “continue in sin.” This important difference focuses on the cleansing power of the Gift of the Holy Ghost that purifies repentant hearts so that one does not “continue in sin.” Yet, Joseph believed that each individual’s agency is required to make that choice. Then the cleansing power of the Gift of the Holy Ghost functions so that the Holy Spirit of Promise can ratify ordinances for all confirmed repentant sinners.

Theology of the Holy Spirit of Promise: Choose to be Chosen

From Joseph’s perspective, the sealing performed by the Holy Spirit of Promise requires a synergistic effort between God and humans. When taking a closer look, it is clear that this sealing entails several elements on each side of that equation: God’s will, God’s Grace through the Atonement, the Spirit’s endorsement, priesthood authority, restored ordinances, human desires, and daily actions. Through the synergy of humans working with God, we can choose to be chosen through obedience to God’s commandments and ordinances which are sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise.

Joseph taught that although God was in control, God did not control humans. The Spirit had the power and authority to seal because the Spirit knew one’s heart and assessed the sincerity of the believer. Joseph saw no saving grace in a baptism that was followed by a hypocritical life of sin. Instead, he believed all covenants and ordinances were only efficacious when humans lived worthily: God will not accept the vow of an unrepentant or insincere sinner. This is where Joseph saw the Holy Spirit of Promise as invaluable. With perfect knowledge, the Spirit cannot be deceived, and therefore acts as

the judge and sealer of ordinances. After “the Lord has thoroughly proved [a person], and finds that the [person] is determined to serve Him at all hazards, then the [person] will find his calling and his [/her] election made sure.”⁸ The permanent sealing of the Holy Spirit of Promise became the ultimate ordinance in Joseph’s restoration as we will discuss in the Nauvoo.

¹ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Robert Carter, 1878), 64; “It indicates those who belong to him; and it renders their salvation certain. This sealing is *by the Holy Spirit of Promise*. That is, by the Spirit who was promised; or who comes in virtue of the promise. This promise was given frequently through the ancient prophets, who predicted that when the Messiah came and in virtue of his mediation, God would pour his Spirit on all flesh. Christ when on earth frequently repeated this promise; assuring his disciples that when he had gone to the Father, he would send them the Comforter.” Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1870), 36-37. Campbell condemned the need for infant sprinkling and then quoted Eph 1:13 and summarized the Holy Spirit of promise to mean “1. That all believers, after believing the gospel, are sealed by the Holy Spirit. 2. That this seal or impression of the Spirit is their sole earnest or pledge until they enter into the enjoyment of the inheritance of the saints. 3. That this seal is a sufficient guarantee and earnest, and requires not any external ordinance to perfect it. This testimony is further confirmed by the same apostle and the same epistle (Eph iv.30): ‘Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.’” Campbell elsewhere explained, “‘having put on Christ,’ it now became his duty and his happiness to ‘walk in him,’ and to bring forth in life and conduct the fruits of that Holy Spirit of promise which he received upon the obedience of faith. Thus the gospel was discovered to be of so simple a nature as to be perfectly adapted to the understanding of every creature” (quoted in Richardson, *Memoirs of Campbell*, 224). The link between regeneration and the Holy Spirit of promise is made in the *Christian Baptist* in an article endorsed by Campbell, though written by Mr. Brantly: “It is believed amongst us that there is a Holy Spirit of promise, by which Christians are sealed after they may have come to the exercise of faith; this same Spirit presides over, and produces every instance of regeneration which occurs in the world; and that he ordinarily employs the Word of God as the instrumental action in regeneration” (660).

² Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook, eds. *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Smith* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University–Religious Studies Center, 1990), 4, 15, 190, 209, 284, 335.

³ Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1844; Reprint Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1980), 3.379-380; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph*, 4-5. The quote continues, “This principle ought (in its proper place) to be taught, for God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them.” Joseph defined what the “other Comforter” later in the same sermon: “There are two Comforters spoken of. . . . The other Comforter spoken of is a subject of great interest, and perhaps understood by few of this generation. After a person has faith in Christ, repents of his sins, and is baptized for the remission of his sins and receives the Holy Ghost, (by the laying on of hands), which is the first Comforter, then let him continue to humble himself before God, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and living by every word of God, and the Lord will soon say unto him, Son, thou shalt be exalted. When the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds that the man is determined to serve Him at all hazards, then the man will find his calling and his election made sure, then it will be his privilege to receive the other Comforter, which the Lord hath promised the Saints, as is recorded in the testimony of St. John, in the 14th chapter, from the 12th to the 27th verses” (3.380-381).

⁴ Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph*, 307 – 308; D&C 132:19-20.

⁵ Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph*, 209 (emphasis added), James Burgess notebook. The quote continues: “. . . Second how is he to get that Holy Spirit; Ans [*sic*] except a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God . Ques. [*sic*] What is it for a man to obtain salvation Ans, It is to triumph over every foe or ascend far above all enemies for the last enemy [*sic*] to conquer is death and untill [*sic*] that is done you have not obtained salvation.”

⁶ Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph*, 26.

⁷ Smith, *History*, 3.380.

⁸ Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism 4 vol.* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1.248; also see Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph*, 5.