

Was Joseph F. Smith Blessed by His Father Hyrum Smith in Liberty Jail?

Alexander L. Baugh

In discussions associated with some of the significant Liberty Jail events, the statement is sometimes made that Joseph F. Smith, eldest son of Hyrum and Mary Fielding Smith, was blessed by his father during his 1838–39 incarceration. Is there historical evidence to support this conclusion? Significantly, neither Hyrum nor Mary is known to have left any statements regarding such a blessing. Likewise, it appears from the existing sources associated with this episode that none of the other prisoners—Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Lyman Wight, Alexander McRae, or Caleb Baldwin—made any mention of it. During their confinement, the Mormon leaders were also visited by a number of Latter-day Saints, yet from those known to have visited the jail, no accounts about the blessing can be found. Even in the biography of Joseph F. Smith, written by his son Joseph Fielding Smith (one who would have been privy to many undocumented or unwritten incidents in his father's life), the narrative is silent, suggesting that perhaps neither Joseph F. nor Joseph Fielding may have even been aware of the incident—if it indeed occurred.¹ Significantly, the only known statement by a contemporary of the period to indicate that Hyrum blessed his infant son in the jail comes from Edward Stevenson. In his reminiscences, Stevenson recorded, “Joseph F. Smith, with his mother, visited his father in this same jail, and although but an infant, received a blessing under his hands.”² Besides this statement, what other evidence is there to suggest that the blessing may have taken place?

ALEXANDER L. BAUGH received a B.S. in Family and Human Development in 1981 from Utah State University. He received an M.A. in 1986 and a Ph.D. in 1996 in American History from Brigham Young University. He is an associate professor in the Department of Church History and Doctrine at BYU. He also serves as associate editor of *Mormon Historical Studies* and is on the boards of the John Whitmer Historical Association and the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation.



Liberty Jail replica, Liberty, Missouri, date unknown. On 29-30 January 1839, Mary Fielding Smith, wife of Hyrum Smith, brought her eleven-week-old son, Joseph F. Smith, to the jail where they spent the night. Because they were visitors, they probably stayed on the upper floor. It was probably on this occasion that young Joseph F. was blessed by his father. Photograph by Larry Nicholson, Raytown, Missouri, courtesy of Alexander L. Baugh.

On 29 January 1839, Mary Fielding Smith and Mercy Fielding Thompson, Mary's sister, visited Liberty Jail and spent the night.³ On this occasion, Mary brought Joseph F. with her, he having been born on 13 November 1838 at Far West, Missouri, two weeks after Joseph's and Hyrum's arrest and incarceration. Mary's health had not been good following the birth, and she had not been able to visit her husband in jail prior to this time. Therefore, this visit marked the first time that Hyrum had been privileged to see his newborn son. Given the circumstances—this being the first time Hyrum had seen his new son and the fact that Mary was making preparations to leave Missouri (suggesting that it might be some time before Hyrum would be reunited with her and the children)—it seems likely that Hyrum would use the occasion to give a blessing. Years later, Mercy left two separate recollections surrounding the visit:

In February [January] 1839, while Joseph and Hyrum Smith, with four other brethren were incarcerated in Liberty jail, I accompanied my sister Mary from Far West, to visit them. It would be beyond my power to describe my feelings when we were admitted into the jail by the keeper and the door was locked behind us. We could not help feeling a sense of horror on realizing that we were locked up in that dark and dismal den, fit only for criminals of the deepest dye; but there we beheld

Joseph, the Prophet, the man chosen of God, in the dispensation of the fullness of time to hold the keys of His kingdom on the earth, with power to bind and to loose as God should direct, confined in a loathsome prison for no other cause or reason than that he claimed to be inspired of God to establish His church among men. There also we found his noble brother, Hyrum, who, I believe was not charged with any other crime than that of being a friend to his brother Joseph. There were also four other brethren whose offenses were similar to that of Hyrum's. The night was spent in fearful forebodings, owing to a false rumor having gone out that the prisoners contemplated making an attempt to escape, which greatly enraged the jailor and the guards. Under these circumstances we were constrained to bid adieu to the Prophet and his brethren, and hasten our departure from Liberty. My sister was in very delicate health, having with her her babe only three month's old, whom his father then saw for the first time.⁴



East side of the original Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri, 1904. The photograph was taken by John A. Califf of Carthage, Illinois, and is located in the Kibbe Kancock County Historical Museum in Carthage.

Photograph courtesy of Alexander L. Baugh.

About the first of February [late January] 1839, by the request of her husband, my sister (Mary) was placed on a bed in a wagon and taken on a journey of about 40 miles to visit him [Hyrum] in prison, her infant son Joseph F. then being about eleven weeks old. I had to accompany her taking my own babe along, then near eight months old. The weather being extremely cold we suffered much on the journey.

We arrived at the prison in the evening. We were admitted and the doors closed upon us, a night never to be forgotten. A sleepless night. I nursed the darling babes and in the morning prepared to start for home with my afflicted sister, and as long as memory lasts will remain in my recollection the squeaking hinges of that door which closed upon the noblest men on earth. Who can imagine our feelings as we traveled homeward, but would I sell that honor bestowed upon me of being locked up in jail with such characters for good? No! No!⁵

Although Mercy makes no mention of Hyrum actually blessing eleven-week-old Joseph F. during her and Mary's visit to the jail, this does not mean that it did not happen.

It is important to note that Emma Hale Smith visited Liberty Jail on three occasions: 8–9 December 1838, 20–22 December 1838, and 21 January 1839.⁶ On two of these visits, young Joseph III accompanied her. Years later, Joseph III recalled his father, Joseph Smith Jr., giving him a blessing during one of these two visits.⁷ Given this information, it seems likely that on the occasion of Mary's bringing Joseph F. to the jail in late January 1839, Hyrum would have followed the example of his brother Joseph and blessed his son.

Concerning the blessing Joseph Smith III received under the hand of his father, Emma's biographers, Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, place the blessing as having been given during Emma's and Joseph III's 21 January 1839 visit. The authors wrote: "Before the night was over Joseph had decided to give his son a blessing, perhaps because Hyrum blessed his new son."⁸ Significantly, however, Newell and Avery's narrative regarding that particular visit is incorrect concerning several important facts. First, the authors state that Mary Fielding Smith and Mercy Fielding Thompson accompanied Emma to the Liberty Jail on 21 January 1839, when in fact the only time the two sisters visited the jail was on 29–30 January, the week *after* Emma's visit. Second, Mary and Mercy never accompanied Emma to the jail on any of her visits. And finally, and most significantly, it was likely Joseph's blessing of Joseph III in December or January that inspired and prompted Hyrum to bless Joseph F. when Mary brought him to the jail on 29–30 January, not the other way around. In other words, Newell and Avery have the blessing incidents reversed.

In short, it is likely or highly probable that Joseph F. Smith was blessed by his father Hyrum in Liberty Jail on either 29 or 30 January 1839.

Notes

1. See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith, Sixth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 60. In a more recent biography of Joseph F. Smith, Francis M. Gibbons also made no mention of any blessing taking place. See Francis M. Gibbons, *Joseph F. Smith: Patriarch and Preacher, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 3–4.

2. Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph the Prophet, and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Published by the Author, 1893), 41. Stevenson noted that he "looked upon the jail in 1834, and again in 1838–39," suggesting that he never entered the jail but merely viewed the building from the outside. See Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph the Prophet*, 42. Since he did not go inside, he likely never visited the Mormon prisoners during their incarceration. In September 1888, at the age of sev-

enty-eight, Stevenson visited the jail in company with Andrew Jenson and Joseph S. Black as part of a historical fact-finding mission for the LDS Church. See Andrew Jenson, *Autobiography of Andrew Jenson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 163–65.

3. *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Volume 2, 1836–1844* (Independence, Missouri: Herald House, 1977), 315 (hereafter cited as *History of the Reorganized Church*).

4. Mercy F. Thompson, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27, no. 13 (1 July 1892): 398.

5. Mercy F. Thompson, “Letter to My Posterity,” cited in Pearson H. Corbett, *Hyrum Smith, Patriarch* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 201.

6. *History of the Reorganized Church*, 309, 315.

7. See Joseph Smith, “The Memoirs of President Joseph Smith (1832–1914),” *The Saints’ Herald* 81, no. 45 (6 November 1934): 1414–15. Lyman Wight recalled seeing Joseph “lay [his] hands on the head of a youth [Joseph III] and heard him cry aloud ‘You are my successor when I depart.’” Lyman Wight to Editor, *Northern Islander*, July 1855, Lyman Wight Letterbook, Community of Christ Library—Archives, Independence, Missouri; as cited in Roger D. Launius, *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Patriarch* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 10.

8. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984), 78.