

## REVELATIONS

IN CONTEXT

# The Center Place

D&amp;C 52, 57, 58



Jed Woodworth ✧ 26 December 2014



**A**cross the long span of Western history, Christians of all kinds have longed for a new heaven and a new earth. John the Revelator’s breathtaking vision of “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven,” preparing the way for the return of Jesus Christ as Lord and King, has stirred the hopes and the aspirations of many.<sup>1</sup> What was the New Jerusalem? Was it, as St. Augustine contended, a metaphor for the blessed “immortality and eternity of the saints”?<sup>2</sup> Or was it something more literal, as the 17th-century American Puritans believed when they imagined their colony as a source of religious regeneration, a “New” England?<sup>3</sup>

The restored Church of Jesus Christ was still in its infancy—not yet six months old—when Latter-day Saints began to envision the New Jerusalem in their own way.<sup>4</sup> Joseph Smith’s early revelations

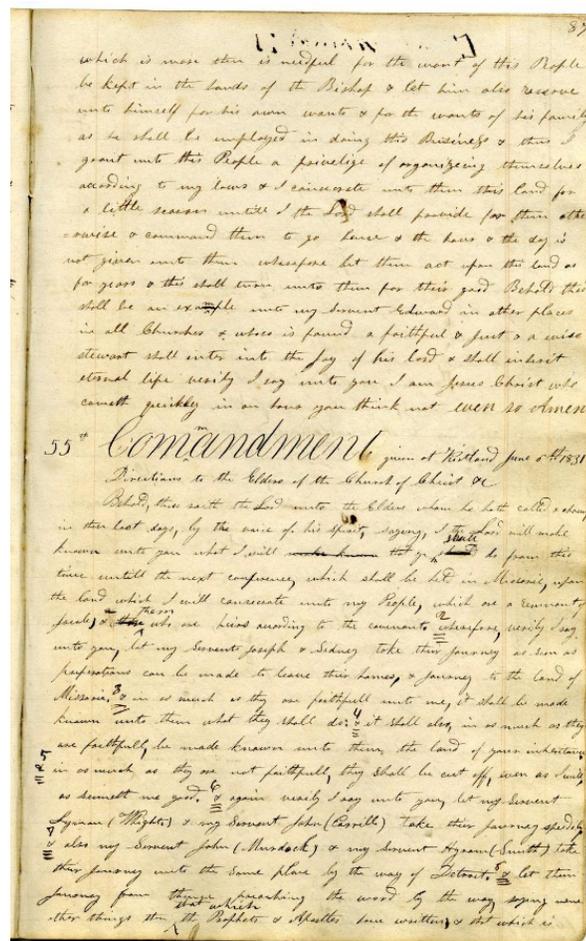
described this entity not as a metaphor or a colony. It was, rather, a city the Saints must build. The New Jerusalem, also called Zion, was to be a refuge, a place of peace, a "center place."<sup>5</sup>

Two questions came to mind immediately for the Saints. The first was where the Lord would have the New Jerusalem built. The second was who would be welcome in the city. A revelation given to Joseph Smith in August 1830 offered preliminary answers, directing Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, and several others to head west while preaching along the way. "You shall go unto the Lamanites," the Lord commanded, referring to the name the early Saints used for the American Indians, "and preach my gospel unto them . . . [and] cause my church to be established among them."<sup>6</sup> The site for the city, the revelations said, would be "among the Lamanites."<sup>7</sup>

Cowdery's group preached in and around Kirtland, Ohio, converting many there. They then traveled hundreds of miles south and west, ending up at the far western boundary of the United States, on the border between the state of Missouri and Indian Territory. They preached to several tribes but were soon ordered off the territory by federal agents charged with managing relations between whites and Indians.<sup>8</sup> This was discouraging news, but Joseph Smith was undaunted, backed as he was by the voice of God. In a revelation now known as Doctrine and Covenants 52, given in June 1831, the Lord commanded Joseph Smith to travel to Missouri, "the land which I will consecrate unto my people."<sup>9</sup> There the site for the city of Zion would be made known.

As He had done with the land of Canaan millennia before, God had identified the land as sacred before His covenant people settled there, and like Canaan before it, Missouri was not empty when the covenant people arrived.<sup>10</sup> The site where the Saints had been called to gather had a long and complicated history of occupancy.

## Contested Boundaries



D&C 52 on JosephSmithPapers.org

Once he arrived in Missouri, Joseph Smith learned through revelation that the site for the city of Zion was on land situated below a bend in the Missouri River, about 10 miles east of the Missouri-Indian territory line (currently the Missouri-Kansas border). For generations this area of western Missouri was home to Central Siouan tribes. As late as the 1600s, Indians from this language group migrated south from the Ohio River Valley, down the Mississippi River, and westward across the lower Missouri, settling on the rich and fertile bluffs between the woodlands on the east and the Great Plains on the west.<sup>11</sup>

Following a century of turbulence in which European diseases ravaged native peoples, the Central Siouan peoples reorganized into different tribes. The *Wah-haz-he* (“the upstream people”)—which the French abbreviated to Osage—emerged as the main residents of the lower Missouri River. Described as a “tall, robust, broad shouldered people resembling giants,” the Osage built permanent settlements between the Osage River in north central Missouri and the Missouri River near present-day Independence.<sup>12</sup> Their lodges, located on high bluffs overlooking the countryside, were constructed by bending saplings over ridgeposts to form the arch of a roof and sometimes measured 100 feet in length. This hunter-gatherer society with a complex sociopolitical structure and an elaborate kinship organization dominated the lower Missouri River region for centuries.<sup>13</sup>

The area near Independence, Missouri, was not the “center place” of Osage society, as it became for the Latter-day Saints. As late as 1800, the Osage controlled perhaps one-half of modern-day Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Kansas. The core of their empire was in south central Missouri, not the western border of the state.<sup>14</sup>

Other groups rivaled the Osage for the land the Mormons would later call New Jerusalem. The vast size of the North American wilderness fueled grandiose dreams of empire on the part of several European nations. The Spanish staked their claim on the entire interior of North America in 1539, and not to be outdone, the French claimed in 1682 all of North America between the Appalachian Mountains on the east and the Rocky Mountains on the west. These claims took little account of Indian tribes like the Osage, paying scant attention to the remote lands along the Missouri River near Independence.<sup>15</sup> Europe’s great interest was on the margins of their empires, in the places with lucrative industry and easy shipping access—along the Saint Lawrence River, in what would become Canada, and on the islands of the Caribbean.

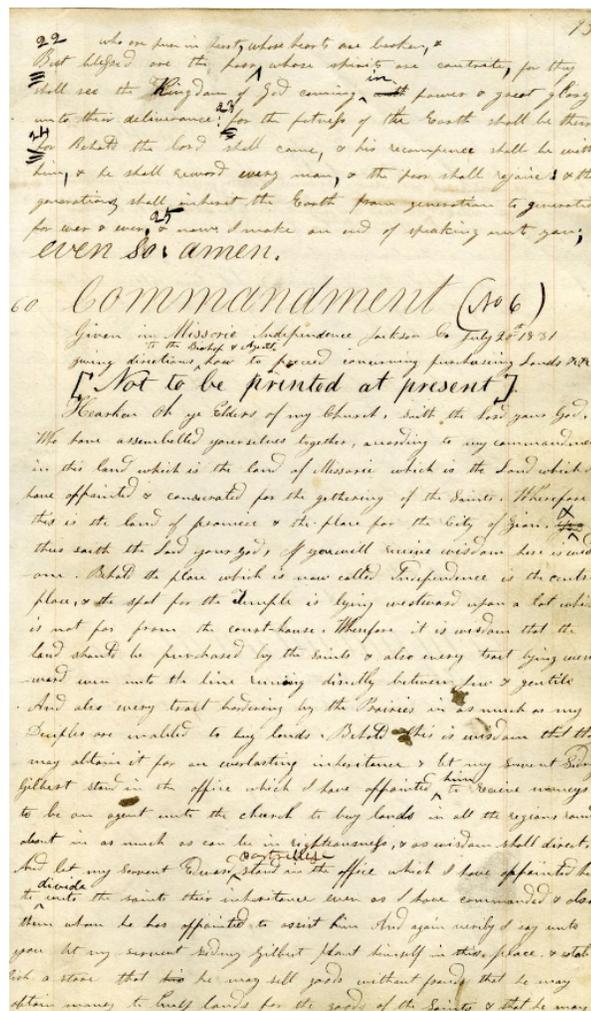
The French called the massive continental tract they staked for themselves Louisiana, after the French king. The land eventually passed into Spanish possession and then back to the French, who sold it to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. With that purchase came the future site for the city of Zion.

The Louisiana Purchase brought new settlers as U.S. citizens moved into Missouri, which became a state in 1821.<sup>16</sup> The same forms of government found in other states were imported to Missouri. Citizens along the western border petitioned the Missouri legislature for county organization, and in 1827, the legislature created Jackson County. The newly settled town of Independence, located just south of the Missouri River along a trade road called the Santa Fe Trail, became the county seat.

Doctrine and Covenants 57, given soon after Joseph Smith arrived in western Missouri, oriented the Saints within this sociopolitical space. The “center place” for Zion, the revelation said, would be located at “the place which is now called Independence,” which at the time had no more than a few hundred residents.<sup>17</sup> White settlers at this time often squatted on land, imagining it unpossessed before later registering their claim in the county courthouse. The revelation mentioned this courthouse—a temple, the revelation said, should be built to the west of it. At the time the revelation was given, most of the land had already been claimed by settlers, requiring the Saints to negotiate with the land’s legal possessors. The revelation implied that the Latter-day Saints would not contend for the holy land by force as the Israelites had done in Canaan millennia before. “It is wisdom that the land should be purchased by the saints,” the Lord said.<sup>18</sup>

### Sacred Peoples

For generations, a small number of Europeans—mainly Spanish and French traders—lived among the Indians along the Missouri River, intermarried, and entered into commerce with them.<sup>19</sup> But as white families pushed westward, settling in lands then occupied by Indians, they overwhelmingly rejected these cultural exchanges. Whites demanded that all Indian tribes be removed from the state. Between 1824 and 1830, tribes who had lived within Missouri’s borders for centuries ceded virtually all of their territory. The mighty Osage sold their lands in 1825 and migrated further west to Kansas and Oklahoma.<sup>20</sup> By the time the Latter-day Saints arrived in Jackson County in 1831, Indians had vacated their settlements and evacuated beyond a newly established line dividing Indian and white territories.



D&C 57 on JosephSmithPapers.org

Doctrine and Covenants 57 observed the existence of this settlement line without endorsing it. The revelation noted that Zion should be built along “the line running directly between Jew and Gentile,” or the line separating the state of Missouri from Indian Territory to the west.<sup>21</sup> The revelation resisted the usual categories, however, primarily through its curious use of the terms *Jew* and *Gentile*. The standard terms then used by Americans—*white* and *Indian* or *white* and *red*—suggested a racial and cultural divide. The two groups were worlds apart, and white people often deployed the terminology to emphasize this incompatibility.<sup>22</sup>

The categories of Jew and Gentile, however, indicated a distinction between groups but not an incompatibility between them. According to the Book of Mormon, both Jew and Gentile had a vital role in God’s unfolding plan. God invited them to work together. The gospel in ancient times would go from the Jews, God’s ancient covenant people, unto the Gentiles, who would be grafted into the covenant. In the latter days the relationship would be reversed—the gospel would proceed from the Gentiles unto the Jews, who would come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>23</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 57 echoes this covenantal structure by designating Indians as Jews, in this way recognizing the group as part of God’s covenant people.<sup>24</sup> The Indians were of the house of Israel, chosen, beloved, and remembered by God.<sup>25</sup>

At the time when Indian removal—the separation of one race from another—had become a national policy of the U.S. government, Joseph Smith’s revelations moved in another direction.<sup>26</sup> Rather than marginalizing Indians, pushing them to the outskirts of civilization, the revelations brought Zion to them, putting God’s holy city in their midst. Zion was to be found between Jew and Gentile, between the races.<sup>27</sup> In this arrangement, people of multiple races could play an essential role in God’s work. People on every compass point of the center, if they were willing, could become “the pure in heart” and dwell in Zion in safety and peace.<sup>28</sup>

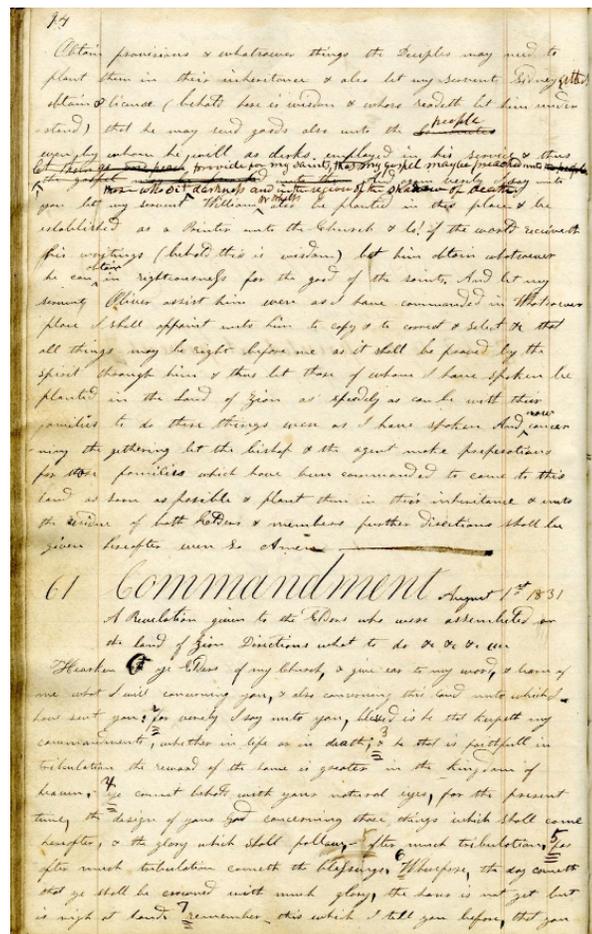
Doctrine and Covenants 58, given while Joseph Smith was still in Missouri, conveyed the breadth of this vision. The revelation said nothing about Indians and whites. Not even Jews and Gentiles were mentioned this time. Instead, the revelation spoke of “the inhabitants of the earth,” putting all of God’s children together.<sup>29</sup> Zion, the revelation explained, was a place where “all nations shall be invited.”<sup>30</sup>

The word *nations* would have resonated with readers in the 1830s, for it was the word both Indians and whites used to describe the largest unit of their political organization. The revelation went on to speak of Zion including “the rich and the learned, the wise and the noble”—people with political and social power. But it was also to include people who had traditionally lacked

such power, those who had been traditionally forgotten and marginalized: “the poor, the lame, and the blind, and the deaf.”<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, all of God’s children were to have a seat at the same table. Bound in covenant relation, all were to share in God’s sacred space.

## Conclusion

Within two years of these Jackson County revelations, Zion was in flames, its inhabitants on the run from persecutors. The Saints retreated from Jackson County, but not from the task of creating Zion along the line between Jew and Gentile, first in Nauvoo and then later in the deserts of the Great Basin. Wherever the Saints settled, they invited people everywhere to join with them.<sup>32</sup> Even today the vision of a Zion society where “all nations shall be invited” to live in refuge and peace inspires Latter-day Saints. The aspiration, promise, and hope of the early Missouri revelations live on.



D&C 58 on JosephSmithPapers.org

## Footnotes

[1] [Revelation 21:2–5, 7](#).

[2] For this and other conceptions, see David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), “New Jerusalem,” 546–48.

[3] John Winthrop, “Model of Christian Charity” [1630], *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 7 (1838), 47; spelling modernized; Francis J. Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem: John Davenport, a Puritan in Three Worlds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 174–79.

[4] The New Jerusalem was mentioned in the Book of Mormon, and revelations began talking about a specific location as early as February 1831 (see [3 Nephi 21:23–24](#); [Ether 13:3–6](#); [Doctrine and Covenants 42:35, 62](#)).

[5] [Doctrine and Covenants 45:66–71](#); [57:3](#).

[6] [Doctrine and Covenants 28:8](#); see also Ronald E. Romig, “The Lamanite Mission,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, vol. 14 (1994), 25–33.

[7] “[Revelation, September 1830–B \[D&C 28\]](#),” in Revelation Book 1, 41, josephsmithpapers.org. The passage was later revised to read “on the borders by the Lamanites” (see [Book of Commandments \[1833\] 30:9](#) [[Doctrine and Covenants 28:9](#)]).

- [8] These tribes included the Shawnee and the Delaware, who had been displaced from the east. See *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 288–94.
- [9] [Doctrine and Covenants 52:2–3](#).
- [10] [Numbers 33:53; 34:2](#).
- [11] Tanis C. Thorne, *The Many Hands of My Relations: French and Indians on the Lower Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 13–14, 16–17, 20; Louis F. Burns, *A History of the Osage People* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 3, 22.
- [12] William E. Parrish, Charles T. Jones, and Lawrence O. Christensen, *Missouri: The Heart of the Nation*, 3rd ed. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2004), 13.
- [13] Willard H. Rollings, *The Osage: An Ethnohistorical Study of Hegemony on the Prairie-Plains* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 23–26, 45–66; Gilbert C. Din and A. P. Nasatir, *The Imperial Osages: Spanish-Indian Diplomacy in the Mississippi Valley* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 11–14.
- [14] Burns, *History of the Osage People*, 25–28, 30, 46.
- [15] The Independence area was neither named nor noticed on 18th-century maps. See Din and Nasatir, *The Imperial Osages*, 40–41, 64, 288–89, 338–39.
- [16] The name *Missouri* dates to the 1670s, when the French missionary Jacques Marquette sketched a map with the name *Ou-Missouri* near the river that bears its name, his transliteration of the tribe who lived along the river. The Osage generally took the land to the south of the river, the Missouri the lands to the north.
- [17] [Doctrine and Covenants 57:3](#).
- [18] [Doctrine and Covenants 57:4](#). The courthouse was the highest point in the area. By locating the temple nearby, the revelation implicitly compared the temple of New Jerusalem to the temple of Jerusalem, which was also located on a high point. Mark Roscoe Ashurst-McGee, "Zion Rising: Joseph Smith's Early Social and Political Thought" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2008), 233.
- [19] Thorne, *Many Hands*, 76–86, 96–97, 135–76.
- [20] These tribes included, besides the Osage, the Missouri, Sac, Fox, Ioway, Delaware, and Shawnee, among others. The Missouri did not cede the last of their lands in the state until 1854. See Billy J. McMahon, "'Humane and Considerate Attention': Indian Removal from Missouri, 1803–1838" (master's thesis, Northwest Missouri State University, 2013), 7–8, 75–83; John P. Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers: Eastern Indians in the Trans-Mississippi West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Charles J. Kappler, comp., *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 217–21.
- [21] [Doctrine and Covenants 57:4](#).
- [22] See, for example, Nancy Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- [23] [1 Nephi 15:13–17; 22:8–9; 3 Nephi 21:2–5](#).

[24] The revelations elsewhere spoke of “the Jew, of whom the Lamanites are a remnant” (Doctrine and Covenants 19:27). On the multiple meanings of the term *Jew* in modern scripture, see Victor L. Ludlow, “Jew(s),” in Dennis L. Largey, ed., *Book of Mormon Reference Companion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 463–64; Thomas R. Valetta, “Jew(s),” in Dennis L. Largey and Larry E. Dahl, eds., *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 315–16.

[25] At least as early as Thomas Thorowgood’s *Jewes in America* (1650), English and American Puritans had postulated that the Indians were descended from the lost tribes of Israel. Such conceptual schemes tended to be short-lived. Joseph Smith’s revelations overturned the standard 19th-century narrative about indigenous peoples as a “vanishing” people by giving “the remnant of Jacob” a saving role in the latter days of earth’s history. See Jared Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” *American Literature*, vol. 86, no. 3 (Sept. 2014), 429–61; see also Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 110.

[26] Under the Indian Removal Act, Indian removal became a federal policy in 1830. See Ronald N. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

[27] [Doctrine and Covenants 57:4](#).

[28] [Doctrine and Covenants 97:21](#).

[29] [Doctrine and Covenants 58:48](#).

[30] [Doctrine and Covenants 58:9](#).

[31] [Doctrine and Covenants 58:8, 10–11](#). The passage reinterpreted Jesus’s parable of the marriage of the king’s son (see [Matthew 22:1–14](#)) in a modern context.

[32] Although the Latter-day Saints did not always live up to their ideals in their interactions with Indians, the unique role given to native peoples in the revelations often tempered the ways white Latter-day Saints treated Indians. See Ronald W. Walker, “Seeking the ‘Remnant’: The Native American During the Joseph Smith Period,” *Journal of Mormon History*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1993), 1–33; “[Peace and Violence among 19th-Century Latter-day Saints](#),” Gospel Topics, [topics.lds.org](#).