JOSEPH SMITH:
PROPHET, PRIEST, AND KING

by

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This paper by a Latter-day Saint scholar whose specialty is Old Testament literature explores certain roles of Joseph Smith, first President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The ideas do not necessarily represent the views of the Historical Department of the Church.

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When Joseph Smith introduced to the world the "true religion" which had been taken from the earth many centuries before, he claimed to be restoring an ancient order as outlined in scripture. In this ancient order as presented in the Old Testament, three important positions were held by men: prophet, priest, and king. Some of the Israelite kings functioned as priests as well.\(^1\) In the Book of Mormon, a record of another people with an Old Testament heritage, kings were often prophets.\(^2\) Yet in all the writings Latter-day Saints acknowledged as scripture, only Jesus Christ, as presented in the New Testament, was credited with being simultaneously a prophet, a priest, and a king.\(^3\) Joseph Smith too claimed all three positions.

**Prophet**

The position by which he is best known is that of prophet. Latter-day Saints generally understood this position to be the most important in the Church, carrying the supreme authority, under God, over the religious and temporal aspects of their lives. Prophecy distinguished the Mormon religion, in the Mormon mind, from contemporary religions, being the symbol of the willingness of God to reveal His word and will to His people, and to personally direct their church as His church. Technically, according to Mormon theology, Joseph Smith was not just a prophet, but a seer, a role which subsumed prophecy:

\[\text{[A] seer is greater than a prophet... a seer is a revelator and a prophet also; and a gift which is greater can no man have, except he should possess the power of God which no man can. ... But a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed. ...}\]^4
In Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of the Bible, Joseph, son of Israel, relates that the Lord has told him of one of his descendants who will bear his name. He is repeatedly referred to as a seer, a choice seer, who will be to his people what Moses would be to the Israelites.

From these explanations, it would seem that Joseph Smith should have been known primarily as "seer" since that title included the functions of prophet and revelator also, but such was not the case. Unless someone had a specific reason to refer to him by any of his other titles, when his followers talked of him, he was usually called "the Prophet." The year after Joseph’s death, Brigham Young presented a motion before the general conference that they consider Joseph Smith as "Prophet, Seer and Revelator to the Church." The practice of sustaining the current president of the Church as "Prophet, Seer and Revelator," has continued to this day, but the precision of the distinct terms as given in Mosiah seems to apply no longer. Most Latter-day Saints then and now would assume that the terms, however redundant, are synonomous. Popular usage determined that Joseph’s primary title would be prophet.

Joseph Smith’s followers felt that their prophet was divinely commissioned:

Again the first principle of our cause and work is to understand that their [there] is a prophet in the Church and that he is at the head of the Church on Earth. Who called Joseph Smith to be a prophet? Did the people or God? God and not the people; he is accountable to God and the angel who committed the Gospel to him and not to any man on earth.

The prototype of this kind of prophetic leadership is Moses, and indeed, Joseph Smith was compared with Moses. Both led their people from place to place in a formidable land. Both set up the new worship of God, in a manner previously unknown to their people. Each was the vehicle by which the people’s God communicated with them, shaping his followers into a group with an identity as God’s special people.
Other aspects of Old Testament prophecy were apparent in Joseph Smith's history. Some of the prophets of Israel acted as diviners (roughly comparable to clairvoyants today). Samuel's initial prophetic reputation came from activities such as finding lost asses (1 Samuel 9), but he progressed from this to delivering the word of God. As the Israelites became more sophisticated, divining fell into disrepute; and those who practiced it won little respect as prophets of God. Joseph Smith in his youth, like Samuel, gained his prophetic reputation by using his spiritual sight for non-religious purposes. Though he too progressed beyond this, he earned the title of "money-digger" and a reputation he was unable to escape as long as he lived. 10 Those not inclined to believe in him as prophet found this sufficient reason to question his credibility.

But Joseph Smith grew to understand his larger prophetic obligation to serve God. The message he preached as a mature prophet was the same message that all genuine Israelite prophets proclaimed. They carried out their responsibility to reveal God's moral will to a people who seemed to have forgotten it. The teachings of the Israelite and Mormon prophets blur together, characterized by chastisement of insincere worship and by exhortation to their hearers to treat each other with compassion.

Joseph Smith earned the designation "prophet" as did the Old Testament prophets, in a dramatic moment of confrontation with God. For Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, there are recorded impressive visions of God, which included commissions to serve Him. Some had repeated visions with new instructions each time. Such was the case with the Mormon prophet. His first vision of the two personages of God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ was as dramatic as any other prophet's recorded encounter. None of these prophets sought their position, or applied for prophetic status. God
bestowed the gift upon them, presumably according to their talents and the needs of their contemporaries. None claimed to have appointed himself, or to have been appointed to prophetic status at the hands of any mortal or institution. Because of this they were independent, responsible for the spiritual condition and fate of their people, but answerable only to God.11

Prophets in the Old Testament frequently condemned religious officials for ignoring or perverting their duties in directing the worship of the people. They were egalitarian in their condemnation of lay people and rulers, friends and foes. They railed at the people for hollow worship and for abandoning God. The rich and the powerful were chastised for exploiting and oppressing their poorer brethren. Joseph Smith, likewise, felt a responsibility to keep his followers in line: "When a man is baptized and becomes a member of the Church, I have a right to talk about him, and reprove him in public or private, whenever it is necessary, or he deserves it."12 He did not spare anyone, family or friend, important official or common man. Some reproofs are recorded as scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants, including revelations condemning Joseph's own behavior and attitude.13 As the Lord's mouthpiece, he felt compelled to reveal the will of the Lord even when it was unflattering to himself. He claimed that, "I never told you I was perfect, but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught."14

In ancient Israel even kings received firm prophetic condemnation when they violated their positions of political responsibility. The most famous is David, who was confronted by Nathan with his sin in eliminating Uriah to get to Bathsheba; but others were chastened by prophets just as bold. After giving Jeroboam the Northern Kingdom, Ahijah prophesied that it would be ripped away because of his sin. Ahab was told by Elijah that he was cursed for violating Naboth's right to life and property. This same Ahab was also
the recipient of negative prophecy from Micaiah ben Imlah, who bravely prophesied the word of the Lord in spite of the unanimous voice of four hundred prophets who gave a conflicting message. 15

Clearly, Israelite prophets had tremendous political as well as religious influence, making history rather than merely watching and commenting on it. Joseph Smith was no less willing to condemn people in positions of political power, from legislators, to governors, to presidents, though his condemnations apparently made little difference in the lives of those he condemned. 16

Nor was he reluctant to put himself in positions of power in order to benefit his followers. In becoming mayor of Nauvoo and Lieutenant General of the Nauvoo Legion, he took upon himself the military and political as well as spiritual leadership of his people. On a larger scale he began implementing a plan to have himself elected President of the United States, mobilizing his church subordinates to campaign for him.

Joseph Smith felt that as prophet he had the right to present the word of God to the Mormons on any subject, religious or otherwise. A revelation recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants 29:34 explained that "all things unto me [God] are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal." If all aspects of life were properly the concern of God and God's servants, Joseph Smith was justified in speaking with prophetic authority on economic, political, and social issues. There were those who felt that in this he interpreted his powers too broadly, and should have confined his direction and guidance of the Church to religious affairs. The excommunication of Oliver Cowdery was due in part to their differences on this issue.

Many of the Old Testament prophets seemed reluctant to proclaim the word of God and otherwise fulfill their function as prophets. Had Jonah,
Jeremiah, and Elijah acted in their own best interests, they would have remained inconspicuous, not going out of their way to anger those who had the power to do them harm. They protested to God that they did not want to do what he said. In contrast, Joseph Smith relished performing his assigned role, thriving on the persecution he sometimes received as a result. "I should be a fish out of water if I were out of persecution.

... The Lord has constituted me so curiously that I glory in persecution; I am not near so humble as if I were not persecuted." Joseph Smith also made proclamations that frequently seemed to be in his own best interests. One of his revelations in 1831 directed his followers to build him a house in Kirtland so that he could continue his work. Another revelation commanded the reluctant editor of the Times and Seasons to sell his paper to the Church. Martin Harris was told that the Lord commanded him to give his property to pay for the printing of the Book of Mormon. Yet Joseph's reaction to the revelation on polygamy stood truly in the tradition of reluctant Old Testament prophets. Eliza Snow reported that he had great difficulty reconciling polygamy with his personal and cultural ethical stance. He never taught it publicly, and did not begin to teach it privately until "an angel of God stood by him with a drawn sword and told him that, unless he moved forward and established plural marriage, his priesthood would be taken from him and he would be destroyed." Because Latter-day Saints viewed God as a personal God, they also believed firmly in personal inspiration, all the righteous being entitled to divine communication. As head of his own family, any righteous Latter-day Saint could serve as prophet to his descendants, and every person could be a prophet, receiving divine witness of the truth for him-or herself. Brigham Young said that there could be millions of prophets. Heber C. Kimball preached:
Prophets! There is not a man or woman in this congregation, if they live their religion and have the Holy Ghost upon them, but what are prophets, every one of them... a certain class... complained to Moses of a certain person prophesying; and said he, "I wish to God they were all prophets." I wish to God you, brethren and sisters, were all prophets and prophetesses; you may be, if you live your religion; you cannot help yourselves.22

Clearly, one did not need to be a religious leader to be a prophet among the Mormons. Just as clearly though, Joseph Smith was unique among these potential prophets, having a relationship to God which none of them had, and a responsibility for them that they did not have for each other. Only he had the ability to receive revelation for the whole church:

Many suppose they must get direct revelation from God for themselves. Not so. He has a prophet, and he says the Church shall give heed to the words of the Prophet, as he is to hold the keys of the kingdom of God in this life and in the world to come. Then it is of much consequence that you give heed to his word.23

Priest

But the keys of the kingdom did not automatically belong to Joseph Smith because he was a prophet. He and other prophets could function in that capacity independent of priesthood ordination. Before he was given the priesthood, Joseph Smith never baptized anybody, nor attempted to lay on hands for the reception of the Holy Ghost; and, in fact, he never attempted, that we have any account of, to exercise any of the functions of the holy Priesthood. He was a prophet, it is true, but a man may be a prophet and yet not have authority to administer in the Priesthood. Joseph [Smith] had received the prophetic gift and he exercised it and he acted as such prior to his ordination.24

He did not exercise any of these priesthood functions when he was just a prophet because he could not. No man, not even a prophet, could perform priesthood ordinances, organize a church, or officiate at its head without the express authority to do so. Joseph Smith, in addition to being given a prophetic call, was given this priesthood and the commandment to organize and direct the Church.25 In spite of what the average Mormon might have
believed, the prophetic office was not necessarily the most important office in the Church; technically, being independent of the priesthood, it was not an office in the Church at all. But a prophet who was also President of the Church, holding all the keys of the kingdom, was the most important person in the Church.

The Old Testament shows no prophetic functions that are dependent upon priesthood power, and rarely shows priesthood and prophetic powers in the hands of one man. Because of their zealous condemnation of the priests who officiated in the corrupt worship of Israel, there is reason to believe that prophets in the Old Testament usually were not priests. The prophets acted as if they were independent of affiliations that would detract from their affiliation with God, or devide their loyalties. It is undeniable that the strident, balancing voice of independent prophets was essential in purifying and preserving the Israelite religion.

No such check was available in the Mormon religion because the man who acted as prophet also claimed to have as much priesthood power as any man on earth ever had. This compound role did have precedent in Mormon scripture. Enoch, of whom the Old Testament merely says, "he walked with God and he was not for God took him," was shown to be a prophet and a priest "after the order of the Only Begotten Son." He stood at the head of the Church of his day and founded a city, Zion, the prototype of the city to be built by the faithful Mormons. Alma in the Book of Mormon founded a church and officiated at its head as High Priest. He received the word of God and imparted that word to his people. Like the prophet Moses, Alma led his people out of bondage.

The Mormon explanation for this concentration of power was that the Melchizedek Priesthood, the highest order,
... is the channel through which all knowledge, doctrine, the plan of salvation and every important matter is revealed from heaven. ... It is the channel through which the almighty commenced revealing his glory at the beginning of the creation of this earth, and through which he had continued to reveal himself to the children of men to the present time, and through which he will make known his purposes to the end of time. 29

Nothing could be more logical than that the man who received important revelations received them by means of his priesthood. Mormon teachings showed a pattern of prophets belonging to this highest priesthood order.

Moses was the last to hold it in the normal line of succession, 30 but

Between the time of Moses and the coming of Jesus Christ, there were at various times, and perhaps at all times, holy men, prophets of the Lord, such as Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Elijah, and others, who received the Holy Priesthood as part of their special commissions in the service of the Lord. Elijah was the last prophet, before Christ, who held "the keys of the authority to administer in all the ordinances of the Priesthood." 31

The Mormon conception of priesthood was expansive. It was not merely the power by which Joseph Smith, his successors, and subordinates governed the Church, it was the government of God on earth and in heaven, governing, directing, and sustaining all things. 32 The Epistle to the Hebrews said that Jesus was the model High Priest. Mormons accepted this literally and understood it to mean that He possessed the Melchizedek Priesthood, its highest order. Someone with more authority than He would have to have appointed Him to that priesthood rank, and that could only have been God himself. 33 The power by which Deity acted was priesthood power.

God had again delegated to mankind, through Joseph Smith, His priesthood power. Man could be ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood, which encompassed all other priesthood orders. Joseph Smith's inspired translation of Hebrews 7:3 explained that "all those who are ordained unto this priesthood are made like unto the Son of God, abiding a priest continually." This probably meant that man would possess this priesthood eternally, but could also mean that with this priesthood, man could, in some way, be on a level of equality with the Son,
While the potential powers of one possessing this priesthood are staggering, the actual powers that most priesthood holders could use on earth were not. This earthly power was usually confined to directing the spiritual aspects of family life, performing ordinances, giving blessings, and healing by faith. This priesthood was surprisingly democratic, being available to any worthy male member of the Church. Men were rarely chosen by birth or lineage (except to the office of Patriarch), and social caste and class distinctions were not determining factors.

Joseph Smith claimed that like his gift of prophecy, this priesthood, and the presidency of the Church which it made possible, was bestowed upon him by a divine source. The Doctrine and Covenants records that others, too, were called by God and assigned to function in particular priesthood roles. All others who held priesthood offices in the Church were chosen to do so by Joseph Smith or by someone under him in the priesthood hierarchy. In the LDS Church it has been consistently true that "There is not a single officer . . . who has selected himself." Each officer had to be appointed by someone else with authority.

Though Joseph Smith claimed that his priesthood and the specific ecclesiastical position he held were bestowed by God, as he functioned in this capacity, he had to answer to the people, as well as to God. (Israelite prophets who held no ecclesiastical position could and did function without regard to the wishes of the people to whom they spoke.) Church officers had to have their commission ratified by the Church membership:

The Church officers, in the exercise of their functions, are answerable to the Church. No officer, however exalted his position, is exempt from this law. All decisions, rulings, and conduct of officials are subject to investigation, correction, revision, and final rejection by the general assembly of the Priesthood of the Church, its final court of appeal. Even the President, its highest officer, is subject to these laws, and special provision is made for his trial, and if necessary, his deposition."
On one occasion, this provision of Church government inconvenienced Joseph Smith greatly. In the October conference of 1843, Joseph moved to have Sidney Rigdon removed as his counselor in the First Presidency. As Rigdon spoke ably in his own defense, "the sympathies of the congregation were highly excited." Hyrum Smith and a number of others also spoke for retaining Rigdon. The members voted in Rigdon's favor. Joseph, much displeased, responded, "I have thrown him off my shoulders, and you have again put him on me. You may carry him, but I will not."36 Joseph might have felt the decision was binding, or that it would be politically unwise to disregard the people's wishes. The people were free to vote as they felt, and Joseph acted in accord with their wishes, retaining Rigdon as counselor. But Joseph got around this distasteful arrangement by substantially ignoring Rigdon as he said he would, and turning to those more trusted for unofficial counsel.

Those who were governed in the Church could take comfort in the fact that in the eternities, they would govern worlds created by their own priesthood power, ruling over their own descendants. A certain priesthood ordinance, the second anointing, carried out in temples (or in places set apart for that purpose during periods when temples were not available) granted a man and his wife the promise that they would become kings and queens, priests and priestesses, in eternity. Exactly what this meant is difficult to determine, because though it was intended for all the righteous eventually, only a select, trusted few were given this ordinance before Joseph Smith died; those who were, were sworn to secrecy because of its sacred nature. The available sources are cryptic references in diaries and histories, or exposés of Mormon apostates who tried to discredit the church they left, and therefore must be read with caution. To receive this ordinance was to be
given the "fulness" of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Though "fulness" was used in more general ways by the initiated and the ignorant, in its specialized sense it was meaningful only to a few. In typical Mormon fashion Joseph Smith pointed to ancient precedent (for which there is no record): "If a man gets a fulness of the priesthood of God, he has to get it in the same way that Jesus Christ obtained it, and that was by keeping all the commandments and obeying all the ordinances of the house of the Lord."37

Available records do little to explain the duties of priests and priestesses in eternity. A twentieth-century Mormon apologist explained:

As a priest in the divine patriarchal order, each righteous man is a father over his children in the divine attributes and powers of eternal life. Having become a son of Jesus Christ by being born into the kingdom of God, each faithful man may grow up spiritually to become, in turn, a father under Christ within the divine patriarchal system.38

But this hardly distinguishes the function of a priest from that of a god or a king or a patriarch; and how one goes about being "a father over his children in the divine attributes and powers of eternal life" is not explained.

"Priest," when used by the initiated, meant that rank attained upon receiving the second anointing—a rank that gave one powers both on earth and in eternity. A very few references show the importance of the office, and the secrecy which surrounded it. On July 16, 1843, at a public meeting, Joseph Smith proposed that because it was Hyrum's birthright, he should hold the office of prophet to the Church. "The Saints must regard Hyrum, for he has the authority, that I might be a Priest of the Most High God. But on account of the unbelief of the people, I cannot reveal the fulness of these things at present."39 Apparently this speech caused great confusion for a number of reasons. As he said, he had not "revealed the fulness of
these things," and the people had no idea what he meant by Hyrum's
elevation or by his becoming a priest.  40 Prophets did not resign their
commission of their own accord. They spoke when moved to do so by God,
functioning at His discretion, not their own.  41 The records make no
mention of Joseph Smith saying that this personnel and policy change was
a result of inspiration of the Lord. This was highly irregular. Mormons
had come to expect that any change this far-reaching would be a matter of
revelation, and it was unlike Joseph not to give credit to the Lord when
it was due.  42 Men did not appoint each other to be prophets; a prophetic
 call was charismatic, and independent of birthright.

But to explain the incident assumes a seriousness which Joseph Smith
denied one week later:

It has gone abroad that I proclaimed myself no longer a prophet.
I said it last Sabbath ironically: I supposed you would all under-
stand. It was not that I would renounce the idea of being a prophet,
but that I had no disposition to proclaim myself such. But I do say
that I bear testimony of Jesus, which is the spirit of prophecy.  43

In essence, Joseph explained that he did not mean what he said, then
proceeded to give an explanation. It was out of character for Joseph to
say that he had no disposition to proclaim himself a prophet; the church he
set up was based upon his claims of just that, and the statement suggests
a humility concerning his ecclesiastical role that simply did not exist.

In his actual usage of the terms "prophet" and "prophecy," they meant much
more than merely bearing testimony of Jesus. He expected his audience to
understand something that he did not explain.

Subsequent events proved that the Saints did not understand at all.

Joseph preached:

Last Monday morning certain men came to me and said "Brother Joseph,
Hyrum is no prophet—he can't lead the church, you must lead the
church; if you resign all things will go wrong; you must not resign;
if you do the church will be scattered."

These worried followers understood him to mean that he intended to abandon
them and give them over to Hyrum's care. His response, on the surface, is a not-very-comforting non sequitur, and if his previous remarks confused this group, this could not have failed to increase their confusion:

I felt curious and said "have we not learned the Priesthood after the order of Melchisedek, which includes both Prophets, Priests and Kings: see Rev. 1 ch. 6 v. and I will advance your prophet to a Priest, and then to a King—not to the Kingdoms of this earth, but of the Most High God—see Rev. 5 ch. 10 v. 'Thou hast made us unto our God, Kings and Priests, and we shall reign on the earth." 44

Those to whom he spoke probably resigned themselves to their ignorance, content so long as the proposed change did not occur.

The incident is made even more bizarre by the subsequent denial of its occurrence by Brigham Young, who was not in Nauvoo during this period, but who was sent a letter from Willard Richards recording the event. 45

I have heard Joseph tell him [Hyrum] that if the Church was left to his leadership he would lead it directly to hell. He never appointed his brother Hyrum to be his successor; he never even thought of such a thing. . . .

It is a mistake with regard to Joseph ever saying that Hyrum would be his successor. He ordained him a prophet and Seer. There may be millions of prophets and seers and revealers, but none can hold the keys of the presidency over the Church and Kingdom of God in all the world without the Apostleship. They must hold the keys of the Apostleship to do this. 46

Brigham Young was ignoring historical fact to say that Joseph Smith never said Hyrum was to succeed him, because Joseph did declare publicly that Hyrum was to begin being prophet in his place. But Brigham had good reasons for believing that Joseph did not mean this seriously. Joseph was completely capable of saying such a thing in jest, as he claimed. Unfortunately, the scribal reports do not convey the tone in his voice or the expression on his face. But if the statement were serious, Brigham found it an expression of unacceptable theology. He knew that the apostleship was the highest office in the Church. Without being ordained to this office, which Hyrum had not been, a man could not have the necessary keys or authority to carry out the
the responsibilities of presidency over the Church. Revelations in the
Doctrine and Covenants 27:12-13 and 20:2-3, though not absolutely explicit,
support this understanding. 47

While Joseph did say that Hyrum was to be the new prophet, the records
say nothing about Joseph appointing Hyrum to be his successor in leading the
Church. In spite of the people's assumption that the prophet was at the head
of the Church, a prophet could be totally independent of any priesthood office,
including Church President. Nothing demanded that the same person who spoke
the words of God be in the position of heading the Church. Joseph's
response to the men who were alarmed at his apparent abdication implies that
he was not intending to slip away quietly, but instead was intending to
take on even greater positions of responsibility. It is highly unlikely
that anything short of complete rejection by his people or by his God could
have made Joseph Smith give up his positions of leadership, getting nothing
in return, for he loved his followers, and he thrived upon the various
roles he played.

This switch was to take place so that Joseph "might be a Priest to
the Most High God." In Willard Richards' letter to Brigham Young recounting
the story, he put in parentheses "(did not tell them he was going to be a
priest now, or a king by and by;"
48 as if there were something very
secret and important about that omission, and with the assumption that
Brigham Young would understand the significance of the remark.

Because the references to being a priest are usually references to
being a king and a priest, the roles are quite difficult to differentiate.
The exalted nature of these ranks is implied in the explanation of the
Melchizedek order which Melchizedek, Abraham, and Jesus Christ possessed.
It was "not the power of a Prophet nor apostle nor Patriarch only but of
King and Priest to God to open the windows of Heaven and pour out the peace
and Law of endless Life to man." With this priesthood men would have "joint
heirship with Jesus Christ."49

The appointment of priests and kings seems initially to have been an
appointment of potentiality that became actualized later. The account of the
incident of Joseph proposing Hyrum to be a prophet in the History of the
Church said that he did so, "that I might be a Priest," implying that
he was not a priest at that time. In August of 1843, a month later,
Brigham Young said that "if any in the Church had it he did not know it,
for any person to have the fulness of that priesthood must be a king and
a priest. . . . A person may be anointed king and priest before they
receive their kingdom &c."50 The full ceremonies to grant this responsibility
of priest and king were performed shortly after this time. In February
of 1844, Joseph Smith met with the council sending an expedition to examine
the merits of emigration to Oregon. He explained that he wanted "every
man that goes to be a King and priest. When he gets on the mountains he
may want to talk with his God."51 It seems that at this point, being a
priest was a reality for Joseph Smith and others as well.

An explication of the separate roles of kings and priests was given in
1853 by Orson Pratt:

The kingly authority is not separate and distinct from the Priesthood,
but merely a branch or portion of the same. The Priestly authority
is universal, having power over all things; the Kingly authority until
perfected is limited to the kingdoms placed under its jurisdiction:
the former appoints and ordains the latter; but the latter never
appoints and ordains the former: the first controls the laws of
nature, and exercises jurisdiction over the elements, as well as
over men; the last controls man only, and administers just and righ-
teous laws for their government. Where the two are combined and the
individual perfected, he has almighty power both as a King and as
a Priest, both offices are then merged into one. . . . The distinctions
of title are only expressive of the conditions of things prior to the
glorification and perfection of the persons who hold the Priesthood;
for when they are perfected, they will have power to act in every branch of authority by virtue of the great, and almighty and eternal Priesthood which they hold.  

But men on earth were not perfected and were not ready to have all power. The man ordained to the priesthood did not automatically become wise and righteous. He remained mortal—as capable of making mistakes as of acting wisely. Scripture gave the needed guidelines for the proper use of this gift. "No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by longsuffering, gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness, and pure knowledge, and without guile." There was a natural check on the use of this power, in that the power would be nullified when one tried to use it unrighteously:

[When we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion ... the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man.]

Priesthood holders were warned of the result of abusing their positions of authority. Thomas Ward pointed out in the Millennial Star that the possession of the priesthood did not make a man infallible, and that as a man did evil or good he was answerable to the Church. Any member of the Church had a right to appeal against erroneous teaching or conduct on the part of anyone of any rank in the priesthood. Brigham Young emphasized this by declaring that the Church had never curtailed the privilege of speaking one's mind. "No man has ever been injured, either in person, property, or character, for openly expressing ... his objections to any man holding authority in this Church."

This sentiment was generous, but Church practice was not always in accord with it. At the April conference of 1843, probably in response to criticism which had been spreading about him, Joseph Smith suggested to the congregation that they either support him as President of the Church or
find another Presidency. He invited any with complaints "to come forward and tell me of it. If any one has any objection to me, I want you to come boldly forward and frankly tell me of it; and if not, ever after hold your peace." 57 It is likely that he meant what he said, that he was willing to hear any complaints from any bold enough to voice them in that public setting. It is also likely that this was the one time he would be willing; "let's ventilate the criticisms and then get on with the job," he seemed to be saying. He was sustained as President.

Criticism was often checked, as when Joseph said, "That man who rises up to condemn others, finding fault with the Church, saying that they are out of the way, while he himself is righteous, then know assuredly, that that man is on the high road to apostasy; and if he does not repent, will apostatize, as God lives." 58 This was accurate prophecy in some cases; some who condemned the Church while praising themselves did eventually apostatize. But it must have stifled well-meant criticism from those who valued their church membership and did not want to appear as apostates by expressing criticism. It was inappropriate to complain about Joseph's leadership because he pointed out that God had called him to lead the church and he would lead it right. 59 Criticism of those chosen of God could be seen as evidence of either wickedness or ignorance. 60

The most drastic check on criticism was found in the Doctrine and Covenants, section 121. The skeptic could see it as another revelation which conveniently served Joseph Smith's own interests. It reads:

Cursed are all those that shall lift up the heel against mine anointed, saith the Lord, and cry they have sinned when they have not sinned before me, saith the Lord, but have done that which was meat in mine eyes, and which I commanded them. But those who cry transgression do it because they are the servants of sin, and are the children of disobedience themselves. And those who swear falsely against my servants, that they might bring them into bondage and death—wo unto them; because they have offended my little ones they shall be
severed from the ordinances of mine house. . . . They shall not have right to the priesthood, nor their posterity after them from generation to generation. It had been better for them that a millstone had been hanged about their necks, and they drowned in the depth of the sea. In true Old Testament style the curse applied to the guilty and to their children after them for generations. Reapplying a New Testament metaphor concerning those who offend children who are believers in Christ, it warned that critics who accused the Mormon Church hierarchy of sin would face a better future if they were weighted down and drowned.

The combined roles of Joseph made a Catch 22 possible. In his ecclesiastical role as President of the Church, Joseph’s position was dependent upon acceptance by the body of the Church. But in his prophetic role he spoke for God. When Joseph told his followers they were not to criticise him, from what role did he speak? If he spoke as prophet, as in the revelation of the curse just quoted from the Doctrine and Covenants, then his people had to give Joseph Smith, the President, their support because Joseph Smith, the prophet, told them to.

King

There were roles to play in another sphere of existence. As mentioned earlier, there was a special temple ceremony performed for a select few, in which they were promised that they might be priests and priestesses, kings and queens in eternity. Just as prophetic and priesthood roles could be democratically given to all the righteous, so could the role of king. Each husband and wife could expect to be king and queen in eternity, ruling over their posterity, which in heaven would be eternally increasing.

The New Testament provided the proof-texts for this idea of democratic kingship. A letter from the Elders in Kirtland to their brethren abroad contained a lengthy sermon on the subject (Smith, History, II, 5-22).
The Father's plan of atonement would "bring men back into the presence of the King of heaven, crowning them in celestial glory, and making them heirs with the Son to that inheritance which is incorruptible, undefiled, and which fadeth not away." The apostle Paul wrote of his expectation to receive a crown of righteousness from the hand of Christ. This led the elders to ask, "If the Saints are not to reign, for what purposes are they crowned?" John in Revelation recorded this promise of Christ: "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." Inheriting crowns and thrones had to mean inheriting kingship and kingdoms.

But Latter-day Saints had more evidence than just logic applied to ancient scripture. There was the assurance from the Doctrine and Covenants, section 104, that "I, the Lord, have promised unto you a crown of glory at my right hand." The revelation on plural marriage contained a similar promise. Those who entered into celestial marriage would "inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths. . . . Then shall they be gods, because they have all power." (Doctrine and Covenants 132:19-20). These must have been heady promises to a humbly situated people, who by society's standards were middle to lower class. For Mormon literalists, there was little allowance for metaphor or poetics, so there was no way to read these promises except at face value. The Bible and the Doctrine and Covenants promised crowns and thrones and kingdoms in the hereafter, and the Saints who were privy to this knowledge firmly believed this gift awaited them.

The most palatable way to understand Mormon kingship is in the framework mentioned above, as a role to be assumed by the righteous in the afterlife. Brigham Young explained the kingship in light of a patriarchal order:
We understand that we are to be made kings and priests unto God; now if I be made the king and lawgiver to my family, and if I have many sons, I shall become the father of many fathers, or the king of many kings. This will constitute every man a prince, king, lord, or whatever the Father sees fit to confer upon us. In this way we can become King of kings, and Lord of lords, or Father of fathers, or Prince of princes, and this is the only course, for another man is not going to raise up a kingdom for you.\(^62\)

This would not be the only kind of kingship the Saints could anticipate. They were taught that they would be officials in the kingdom on earth which would usher in the Millennium. The millennial kingdom to come would be "a kingdom of Priests and kings to God and the Lamb forever."\(^63\) The king of the millennial kingdom would be Christ, but serving under him would be the Mormon priesthood holders. This government would be centered in Zion, where the Saints were promised an inheritance, and would have jurisdiction over all the inhabitants of the earth.

It was typical of Mormon theorizing that democracy was sustained, not by leveling all to the rank of the lowest, but by raising all to the rank of the highest, and then raising some higher still. Many of the important officers in the Church belonged to the Council of Fifty. The men in this semi-secret group were not only those who held important positions in the Church, but those who in addition had proven themselves to be especially trustworthy. This group was to have political and governmental responsibility for the Church, and eventually the world (though in Joseph Smith's lifetime the Council never governed). Consonant with this, its members were organized to become princes in the millennial kingdom of God.\(^64\)

The assignment of roles to priesthood holders was not so democratic as it might have appeared to those who were not aware of this special call of these select brethren. But since Mormon theology applied order not only to this life, but also to the Millennium and the eternities, it was completely consistent to expect that there would always be a hierarchy of authority.
Some Mormon priesthood holders would have higher rank than others, and Joseph Smith would have a higher rank than all the rest. This hierarchy was headed by Christ, to whom Joseph Smith was subordinante. He was followed by the princes of the Council of Fifty, who in turn were followed by the rest of the Mormons.⁶⁵

Some Mormons forgot, or did not clearly understand, the Church's projected millennial time scheme. They expected that their inheritance of land, kingdom, and kingship were all very near:

In proportion as the members felt the world was ripe for destruction and the millennial reign near at hand, they also tended to think in terms of the Government of God embarking immediately upon its large role of ruling the nations. . . . The Saints seemed willing at times to seek (or at least look for) a revolutionary establishment of the Kingdom, forgetting in their trials that only by stages would the world (and the Church) be prepared.⁶⁶

By 1864, twenty years after Joseph Smith's death, it was apparent that this expected millennial kingdom had not yet come about, and showed no signs of coming soon. Hopes for an imminent Millennium were growing more dim. Brigham Young reinterpreted previous teachings, just as Old Testament prophets were wont to do, and made a definite statement that the Saints were not to look for a kingdom in this life:

We have not yet received our kingdoms, neither will we, until we have finished our work on the earth, passed through the ordeals, are brought up by the power of the resurrection, and are crowned with glory and eternal lives. Then he that has overcome and is found worthy will be made a king of kings, and lord of lords over his own posterity, or in other words: A father of fathers.⁶⁷

Joseph Smith would be a king in eternity over his descendants just as the rest of the righteous Mormons might be. But he had another kingly role to play that his people did not share. As religious leader of the Mormons, he was also their king. In a speech at the April conference in 1844 Joseph said that he would not preach but would let the elder whom he had instructed deliver his message. "God made Aaron to be their mouthpiece and made me to
be their K[ing] and their God, and if you don't like it you must lump it."68

One group who did not like it, nor did they intend to lump it, got together to publish the Nauvoo Expositor to denounce Joseph Smith. Their series of resolutions rejecting those Church teachings which they considered false included, "That we will not acknowledge any man as king or lawgiver to the church; for Christ is our only king and lawgiver."69

There was good scriptural precedent for rejecting any king but God or Christ. 2 Nephi 10:14 in the Book of Mormon recorded the words of the Lord concerning the last days: "He that raiseth up a king against me shall perish, for I the Lord, the king of heaven, will be their king, and I will be a light unto them forever, that hear my words." One of the basic components of Mormonism of the early period was that the last days were already here. What need then was there for Joseph Smith to be king if the Lord would be king? When the Israelites clamored before Samuel for a king to rule them, the Lord told Samuel not to feel affronted but to "hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." (1 Samuel 8:7.) A revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants 38:21 told the people that during mortality, "ye shall have no king nor ruler for I will be your king and watch over you."

Scripture told of righteous men refusing to be king even at the request of their people. When Gideon's people wanted to make him king because he had saved them from Midian, he refused, saying, "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you." (Judges 8:22-23.) Neither Nephi nor Alma in the Book of Mormon accepted the offer of their people to make them king. Alma said that it was not expedient that the people should have a king. His advice to his people was
to "trust no man to be a king over you." 70 Mosiah's sons were also unwilling to be made king (Mosiah 29). There is no evidence that anyone ever clamored to make Joseph Smith king. He was not drafted by his people as were these people in scripture. Joseph Smith, presumably at God's direction, introduced the idea himself.

The Bible did not condemn kings outright, but the kind of kingship it presented was not very similar to that which Joseph Smith instituted. In the Old Testament, though kings were often called or appointed by God through His prophets, they generally had little to do with directing the religion of their people. There was no evidence that the king ever served as the highest religious leader, or the High Priest. The righteous were well aware that ultimately, the Lord alone was king in Israel. The temporal king was a man like other men, not an object of worship, and he was not to abuse the rights of his people. Because the power was divided among at least three men at all times during the United and Divided Monarchies, there was a system of checks and balances, and all those in power had to answer to someone.

Kings in the Book of Mormon had roles more similar to those of Joseph Smith. Power was concentrated in the hands of some of the kings who served as temporal and religious leaders simultaneously. The most striking example of a king who led his people in all aspects of life was King Benjamin. He serves as the prototype of the righteous king. His farewell speech is a beautiful explication of righteous kingship:

I have not commanded you to come up hither that ye should fear me, or that ye should think that I of myself am more than a mortal man. But I am like as yourselves, subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind; yet I have been chosen by this people, and consecrated by my father, and was suffered by the hand of the Lord that I should be a ruler and a king over this people: and have been kept and preserved by his matchless power, to serve you with all the might, mind and strength which the Lord hath granted unto me. I say unto you
that as I have been suffered to spend my days in your service, even up to this time, and have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches of you, and even I, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, that ye should not be laden with taxes, and that there should nothing come upon you which was grievous to be borne—Behold, ye have called me your king; and if I, who ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought not ye to labor to serve one another? And behold also, if I, whom ye call your king, who has spent his days in your service, and yet has been in the service of God, do merit any thanks from you, O how you ought to thank your heavenly King.\textsuperscript{71}

The idea that runs throughout the speech is that King Benjamin saw his role as king to be one of service. His speech gives no hint of a feeling of superiority or elect status. It says that he took great pains to make sure that nothing he did would burden his people, and that the only reason for him to be a king was to work for their betterment.

Klaus Hansen accepts the accusation of Joseph Smith’s detractors, that Joseph Smith saw his kingship in a far different light from that outlined by King Benjamin:

The scriptures indicated that Christ would rule as king over the kingdom of God. Smith took this idea quite literally and thought it only logical that he, as predecessor of the Savior, should enjoy certain prerogatives of royalty. Consequently, shortly before his death, the prophet apparently had himself ordained as "King on earth."\textsuperscript{72}

Hansen assumed that Joseph Smith was motivated by logic, rather than inspiration or revelation, to proclaim himself a king. He assumed that Joseph saw kingship as "enjoying certain prerogatives of royalty," as honor for himself rather than service to those he would rule. This interpretation has some support in statements that indicate that Joseph felt great pride in his roles, and felt a sense of superiority to others as a result of them. But he was also humble, grateful to those who gave their unfailling help, and he desired the best for his people. In August of 1842, while he was avoiding the sheriff, he was aided by a group of friends. He blessed them in turn, then said:
My heart would have been harder than an adamantine stone, if I had
not prayed for them with anxious and fervent desire. I did so,
and the still small voice whispered to my soul: These, that share
your toils with such faithful hearts, shall reign with you in the
kingdom of their God... I hope I shall see them again, that I may
toil for them, and administer to their comfort also. They shall not
want a friend while I live; my heart shall toil for those who love and
toil for me, and shall ever be found faithful to my friends.73

Sidney Rigdon apparently understood kingship in the way that Hansen says
Joseph understood it. In the April conference just before Joseph's
death, Sidney Rigdon spoke for an inexplicable amount of time, discoursing
upon kingship. It is odd that Joseph allowed him so much time, because he
had stipulated repeatedly that "the mysteries," of which the kingship
was one, were not for general public consumption, but were to be taught
cautiously by someone with authority to someone ready for the new doctrine.
What Rigdon said was doctrinally inaccurate and must have annoyed and
confused his listeners:

I want to be a King—one of God Almighty's own making that I may be a
king and a Priest unto my God and all ye kings Rulers Princes if you
do not attend to it I will seal you up to the d—of hell.

I am determined to let it out if the wind blew all the trees down
or if there is a legion of devils round about—I want to be a King
and will not do without it.74

There was a notable lack of humility in Rigdon's attitude. Nothing he
said suggested that he perceived of kingship as service. While he spoke of
his own kingship as future, he addressed his fellow Mormons as "Kings
Rulers and Princes," but he talked as if he had power greater than all of
them, power to seal them up to hell.

I have a right to proclaim myself a king and priest unto the most
High God, yet I will not transgress your laws.... I don't want any
office in this government for I am determined to be a King in the
Kingdom of God; what, be king in heaven and quarrel about the office
of constable on earth?75

I don't know that the time is far distant when I shall proclaim myself
a king and a priest of the most High God and if you don't obey me you
shall go down to hell.
Don't want any office in this government. I am determined to be a king.

Clearly he intended to crown himself rather than receive his crown from another. This is an unusual approach because so far as kingship was connected with the temple ordinance, it was not something that a man could take upon himself. He could not proclaim himself a king, but was given the right to be a king when someone in authority over him decided that he should receive it. Legally, Rigdon could not have taken kingship upon himself as he implied he would do, but could only receive it at Joseph's discretion.

Sidney's understanding of the identity of those over whom he should rule does not correspond with other teachings on kingship. Mormon doctrine outlined that worthy Mormon men could look forward to kingship in the eternities, ruling over their posterity. There is nothing explicit or implied about mortal subjects of the Mormon kings. When records referred to Mormon men who had gone through the special ordinance currently living as kings, the reference is probably to a special spiritual quality they possessed because of their eternal potential rather than to any kingly authority they might be entitled to exercise on earth.

As in the episode when Joseph bequeathed the role of prophet to Hyrum, it would be helpful here to be able to see beyond the recorded text of the speech to the inflection in the voice and the response of the audience. Rigdon's remarks seem inordinately hostile if directed to an average conference congregation, unless he were truly desperate. In the spring of 1844 he was desperate, having lost the confidence of Joseph Smith and much of the respect of the people. In this conference he was probably trying, with characteristic exaggeration, to persuade the crowd of his own importance. Perhaps there was some negative interaction between speaker and audience that
angered Rigdon, causing him to threaten in such an ugly way, and to imply his superiority to his listeners. These statements must reflect his emotional state as much as his understanding of doctrine.

Rigdon obviously had some knowledge, because he freely uses the key words "priest and king," and the concept he proposed was similar to what Joseph Smith taught on the subject. But he was only nominally trusted and taught in this period, and this discourse reflects a distorted and incomplete understanding. However, the doctrine of the fulness, providing that men may become priests and kings, was not laid out in any contemporary source. What we know of it is by reconstructing, which may grant the doctrine more consistency than it actually had in Joseph's teaching about it.

Consistent or not, its content lent itself to misinterpretation. Rigdon was not the only one to understand kingship as self-aggrandizement. People with some knowledge of Mormon kingship often accused Joseph Smith of having grand designs for political power. There is a possibility that the sentiments in this speech were projected onto Joseph. Just as anything done by Joseph would eventually reflect upon all his Mormon contemporaries, anything done by any of them inevitably reflected upon him. Rigdon's public views had before been construed to represent the views of all the Saints, including Joseph. But Joseph did not understand kingship as Rigdon did.

Joseph Smith's kingship was different from that which any other righteous Mormon could expect to attain. There are accounts of Joseph Smith having a coronation ceremony. Governor Ford of Illinois wrote that "He caused himself to be crowned and anointed King and Priest, far above the rest; and he prescribed an oath of allegiance to himself, which he administered to his principal followers," implying that his kingdom was his Mormons and
that his rule was temporal. George Davis gives more detail:

That the authority with which God had clothed him, being "Jure Divino," extended over all mankind, and was paramount and superior to any human authority. Joe further stated, that God had revealed to him, that the Indians and the Latter Day Saints, under Joe as their King and Ruler, were to conquer the Gentiles, and that their subjection to this authority was to be obtained by the sword! From this revelation, he enforced upon them that it was necessary he should be crowned King and they, believing in the gross imposition, yielded to his edict. Joe was accordingly crowned KING under God, over the immediate house of Israel. This ceremony was performed in 1842, by a council of fifty in number denominated the "ANCIENT OF DAYS." 79

This account claims that Joseph Smith taught that as king, he had greater power than any other mortal; that his kingdom would extend over the gentiles whom he would subjugate by force. But Mormon teaching stressed that the kingdom would not progress on the strength of the Saint's aggression. Even when Joseph Smith claimed that he would help revolutionize the world, he said, "It will not be by the sword or gun that this kingdom will roll on." 80 Davis is mistaken in saying that Joseph was crowned in the Council of Fifty in 1842, for the council was not organized until 1844. While this does not discredit all that Davis alleged, it does suggest that he may have been wrong on other details too. However, there is other attestation that Joseph Smith was crowned King over the house of Israel:

He secretly organized a Council of 50 men, which he denominated "The Grand Council, and Living Constitution of the Kingdom of God." By then he was acknowledged to be the Shepherd and Stone of Israel. And he suffered himself to be ordained, anointed and coronated a king, who by his royal line was to reign upon the throne of David, over the house of Israel for ever. 81

There are other reports which claim a still different domain for him. Joseph is said to have preached that the kingdom referred to in Daniel 2:44, "the kingdom which shall never be destroyed" and which "shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms," "was already set up and that he was king over it." 82 This is not necessarily the house of Israel, over which
other sources claimed he was calling himself king. George Miller, who was probably an eyewitness to the ceremony, if one occurred, said that Joseph was ordained "King on Earth."33 Joseph claimed that God had "made me to be their king and their God" (emphasis added), presumably talking about the Mormon people.

There is no available source which conclusively proves that Joseph Smith was crowned king. However, there is a growing body of evidence, albeit from unfriendly sources, which suggests that some ceremony actually took place in which kingship was conferred upon Joseph Smith. But these references contradict each other in explaining the temporal consequences of Joseph Smith’s kingship, and whether he would exercise his kingly authority then or in the future. Unfortunately, new sources coming to light which mention the temporal kingship do little to clarify the doctrine. They too are so varied and inconsistent that their details generally increase the confusion rather than dispel it. This very inconsistency and confusion makes the kingship less threatening than it might have appeared to those who had familiarity with only one explanation. Given all the accounts, one would not know whether to anticipate Joseph Smith’s becoming king of the Mormons, the world, the house of Israel, or the kingdom of Daniel 2. If instead of conflicting fragments of explanations, there were a well-outlined, step-by-step plan by which he would become king, it would seem more realizable, or at least something which he might have tried to attain in a systematic, purposeful fashion.

There was no evidence that Joseph Smith had a kingdom on earth. Although it is likely that he was crowned, very few Mormons or non-Mormons knew that he was king. Fewer still knew what his kingdom was. Technically, Joseph Smith never reigned as king, because one of the necessities of reigning
as king is to have a subject people. It is absurd to view Joseph Smith as functioning as a king during his lifetime in any literal sense because he had no subjects who were aware they were subjects.

The focus of his kingship was not temporal. What Joseph taught his small collection of trusted followers, was that he would be their king in eternity. Joseph Smith would reign, under Christ, as king of all the people born in the latter-day dispensation. He shared this status, secondary only to Christ, with selected ancients, for example, Adam, Enoch, Abraham, and Noah, who would serve as kings in eternity over the people of their respective generations. Mormon theology demanded that in all spheres a hierarchy was essential to preserve order. This hierarchy, with selected men having the power to judge other men, was not intended to detract from the role of Christ. Mormon theology was still very much Christian, teaching that only through Christ's suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection and resurrection was salvation possible. Still, as king of this dispensation, like the kings of the other dispensations, Joseph Smith would have an important role to play in the resurrection and judgment in eternity.

Combined Powers

Give all these roles, in whatever way they were understood by Joseph Smith, his followers, and his detractors, he had a phenomenal amount of power. As ecclesiastical leader, Joseph had to have the support of his church to function, but as prophet he could command that support. For a short time he was also Lieutenant General of the Nauvoo Legion, and Mayor of Nauvoo, positions which gave him political control. Being able to command the voting loyalties of his followers, for a time he held the balance of power for the state of Illinois in his hands. Some dismayed ex-followers printed their objection: "The spectacle presented in Smith's case of a civil, ecclesiastical and military leader, united in one and the same person, with the
power over life and liberty, can never find favor in the minds of sound and
thinking republicans."86 This group saw his running for president of the
United States in a negative light and accused him of violating his prophetic
responsibility as he tried "to Christianize the world by political schemes
and intrigue."87

But even with all the powers of his combined roles, Joseph Smith could
not have been the despot some accused him of being. His political power
was short-lived and much less effective than that anticipated by both the
hopeful and the wary. He had almost no control over any who did not
consent to be governed by him. As prophet, his only weapon was words. As
highest priesthood officer, he could only order a trial for excommunication
effectively putting people beyond his control. As charismatic leader, he
could induce, persuade, and direct only to the extent that people allowed
themselves to be influenced.

But many trusted him, allowing themselves to be influenced and led.
They felt that as God’s anointed, he could not have too much power. They
were comfortable with his claim that "I have had sealed upon my head every
key, every power, every principle of life and salvation that God has
even given to any man who ever lived upon the face of the earth."88 Brigham
Young concurred with this assessment and explained:

[N]ho is the Author of this work and gathering? Joseph Smith the
Prophet of God as an instrument in the hands of God is the author
of it. He is the greatest man on earth. No other man of this age
has power to assemble such a great people from all the Nations of
the earth with all their varied dispositions as [and] assimilate them
and cement them together so that they will be subject to rule and order. 89

Joseph was human enough to be proud of the status he had achieved,
and he had tremendous faith in his ability to possess power without its
corrupting him. Others were not so sure, as this dialogue between Josiah
Quincy and Joseph Smith reveals. Quincy remarked, "It seems to me, General, that you have too much power to be safely trusted to one man." 'In your hands or that of any other person, so much power would, no doubt be dangerous,' Joseph Smith replied. 'I am the only man in the world whom it would be safe to trust with it. Remember, I am a prophet!'\textsuperscript{90}

In light of Joseph's comments on his own power, and the theology he outlined for his Church, it is not surprising that some would see him as a sufferer of delusions of grandeur, who was potentially dangerous. Non-Mormons were understandably wary of a church whose leader professed to be the greatest man on earth, and whose membership accepted him as such. He and his people again and again proved to be unwanted neighbors, partly because of the prejudices of the gentiles, but more because they were perceived as being a serious threat. The Nauvoo Expositor warned that Joseph Smith was "a sycophant, whose attempt for power finds no parallel in history... He is already boasting that he is beyond your reach." (p. 3.)

Joseph claimed:

I have more to boast of than ever any man had. I am the only man that ever has been able to keep a whole church together since the days of Adam—a large majority of the whole have stood by me; neither Paul, Joyn, Peter, nor Jesus ever did it. I boast that no man ever did such a work as me—the followers of Jesus ran away from him, the Latter Day Saints never ran away from me yet.\textsuperscript{91}

Taken at face value, out of context, this boast appears blasphemous. Joseph claims to have been successful where Jesus was not. Yet the whole speech was intended to show dissenters that Mormonism had some merits. It was painfully obvious that the Saints had experienced many set-backs. A harsh interpreter might try to prove that this Kingdom of God, rather than expanding and flourishing, was struggling, perhaps even sinking. Joseph here tried to persuade his audience, and probably himself, that their efforts were bringing positive results. He typically spoke forcefully, with primary
concern for the immediate effect his words would produce, not for their interpretation by later readers. It was accurate to observe that Christ had not held His church together while Joseph Smith had, and his audience was probably suitably impressed. But statements such as this one, without the background of the speech and the times, left Joseph Smith vulnerable to those who chose to view him negatively.

Joseph Smith was an imperfect mortal rather than the near-deity many expected him to be. He believed that he and his people had been given special roles to play to bring about the salvation of mankind. But the roles he played brought him as much pain and sorrow as glory and praise. It is hard to imagine that anyone would voluntarily set himself up for the trials and dangers that he continually experienced. If we understand him as he would have chosen to be understood, he acted as prophet, priest, and king because he loved God. While he enjoyed his power, he was motivated by a sense of responsibility, rather than self-aggrandizement. His mission and that of his church was to aid mankind in attaining salvation:

I realize in some measure my responsibility and the need I have of support from above, and Wisdom from on high; that I may be able to teach this people, which have now become a great people, the principles of righteousness, and lead them agreeably to the will of heaven, so that they may be perfected and prepared to meet the Lord Jesus Christ, when he shall appear in great glory. Can I rely upon your prayers to your heavenly father in my behalf?

Joseph Smith held the offices of prophet, priest, and king. To the disillusioned and anti-Mormons of his time, he was a pretender. They felt he had no legitimate claim to the positions he amassed, which with all their collective power could have been formidable. His intimates knew him as prophet, priest, and king, and accepted him on those terms. Those who understood less but believed as fervently looked to him as prophet. He was
their temporal and spiritual leader, who had the right and the duty to
direct them according to the wishes of God. Because of the powers this
position gave him, other titles were superfluous. Latter-day Saints
today, in much the same position, believe in him in the same way.

The Jewish Nobel Laureate, Isaac Bashevis Singer, speaking of success,
asked, "Was Abraham a success? Was Jacob? Was Jesus? We don't know
yet." Believers will believe they were, nonbelievers will not. The
cautious and the undecided reserve judgment. The legitimacy of Joseph
Smith's claims to these titles must be answered in the same way. Be-
lievers will believe they were, nonbelievers will not. The cautious and
the undecided will reserve judgment.
NOTES

1Psalm 110; 1 Kings 3:4.

2Mosiah 3:4; Omni 20.

3See Hebrews 2:17; 4:14; 5:6; John 1:45, 49; 7:40; Matthew 21:5, 11; Acts 3:20, 22, 24. The first and all subsequent LDS hymnbooks included the Protestant hymn by Samuel Medley, "I Know That My Redeemer Lives," with the line "He lives, my prophet, priest and king."

4Mosiah 8:15-17.

5Genesis 50 in Joseph Smith's inspired translation. Also 2 Nephi 3.

6Examples of this reference are abundant in Joseph Smith, History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1950).


8Statement of Brigham Young as recorded in Wilford Woodruff Diary, 29 July 1843, MS, Wilford Woodruff Papers, LDS Church Archives.

9Genesis 50:29-36 in Joseph Smith inspired translation; 2 Nephi 3; Brigham Young and Willard Richards to the First Presidency, 5 Sept 1840, MS, LDS Church Archives.


12Smith, History, VI (7 March 1844), 238.

13In the D&C 3; 5:21-22; 35:18; 64:7; and 93:47, Joseph Smith is chastised or threatened with removal.

14General Minutes Collection, 12 May 1844, Thomas Bullock rept., MS, LDS Church Archives.

152 Samuel 12; 1 Kings 11:29-39; 14:7-11; 21:17-24; 22; see also 1 Samuel 15:19ff; 2 Chronicles 12:5-7; 1 Kings 16:1-4; and Mosiah 12:25-37 in the Book of Mormon.

16Joseph Smith Diary, 16 Dec. 1843, MS, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives: "I prophesy by virtue of the Holy Priesthood vested in me in the name of Jesus Christ, that if Congress will not hear our petition, and grant us protection, they shall be broken up as a government, and God shall damn them. And there shall nothing be left of them, not even[n] a grease spot."
17 Kings 19; Jeremiah 15:10-18; 20:7-9; Jonah.

18 Joseph Smith, Leo Hawkins Minutes, 26 May 1844, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives.


20 Eliza R. Snow, Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Co. Printers, 1884), pp. 69-70.

21 Brigham Young, "Remarks at Semi-annual Conference, Great Salt Lake City," 8 Oct. 1866, p. 5, typescript, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.


23 (Orson Pratt) Smith, History, VI (9 Sept. 1843), pp. 22-23.

24 (George Q. Cannon), JD XIII (5 Dec. 1869), p. 47.


26 (Wilford Woodruff) JD XVI, 267; also Henry W. Richards, A Reply to the Church of the Firstborn of the Fulness of Times (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1965), p. 44, and Ruth May Fox Diary, 8 March 1896, LDS Church Archives.

27 Genesis 14:25-40 in Joseph Smith's inspired translation; D&C 76:56-57; Pearl of Great Price, Moses 6:27-7:69. Mormons often taught using the Bible as precedent. However, when they referred to the Bible, it was almost always the Bible as amended by peculiarly Mormon scripture, or current prophetic declaration, or Mormons' apologetic logic.


29 Robert B. Thompson, draft, 5 Oct. 1840, Joseph Smith Collection, LDS Church Archives.

30 Exodus 34:1-2 in Joseph Smith's inspired translation.


33 Pratt, The Seer, I (Oct. 1853), p. 145-46, which is a fine example of Mormon apologetic logic.
34 Widtsoe, Priesthood, p. 63, quoting Harriner W. Merrill, Conference Report, 1897, p. 4.

35 Widtsoe, Priesthood, p. 258.

36 Smith, History, VI (Oct., 1834), 47-49.


38 Andrus, Principles, p. 311.

39 Smith, History, V, 510. Also Joseph Smith Diary kept by Willard Richards, 16 July 1843, MS, Joseph Smith papers, LDS Church Archives.

40 Smith, History, V, 512, explains in parentheses that he did not explain his statement.

41 Jeremiah 20, Jonah.

42 Flanders, Nauvoo, p. 243.

43 Smith, History, V (23 July 1843), 516.

44 Joseph Smith address 23 July 1843, William Clayton reprint, microfilm, LDS Church Archives. Also Manuscript History of the Church, and record of Willard Richards, Joseph Smith Papers, saying essentially the same thing. The official version in Smith, History, V, 17-18 reads: "Last Monday morning certain brethren came to me and said they could hardly consent to receive Hyrum as prophet, and for me to resign. But I told them, "I only said it to try your faith; and it is strange, brethren, that you have been in the church so long, and yet not understood the Melchisedek Priesthood."

45 Smith, History, V, 512.

46 Brigham Young, "Remarks," pp. 1, 2, 5.

47 Also Richards, Reply, p. 44, and Wilford Woodruff to Heber J. Grant, 28 March 1887, LDS Church Archives, recording Joseph Smith giving the complete keys for the direction of the Church to the Twelve Apostles.

48 Smith, History, V, 512.

49 (Joseph Smith) "Scriptural Items," ("Words of the Prophets"), 27 Aug. 1843, d4409, LDS Church Archives.

50 Wilford Woodruff Diary, 6 August 1843.

51 Joseph Smith Diary, 23 Feb 1844, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives.

52 Pratt, The Seer, p. 145.

53 D&C 121:41-42.

54 D&C 121:37.
55 Millennial Star, II (Feb. 1842), 157-58.
56 JD VII, 227.
57 Smith, History, V (6 April 1843), 328.
58 Smith, History, III, 385.
59 Smith, History, IV, 604.
61 P&G 121:16-22.
62 JD, III, 265-66.
63 Smith, History, IV, 493.
64 Flanders, Nauvoo, p. 292, quoting George Miller.
65 Flanders, Nauvoo, p. 292. This has little attestation and must be taken cautiously.
67 JD, X, 355.
68 General Minutes Collection, 8 April 1844, LDS Church Archives.
69 Nauvoo Expositor, 11 June 1844, p. 2.
70 2 Nephi 5:17-18, Mosiah 23:6-13
71 Mosiah 2:10-19
72 Klaus Hansen, The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History: Quest for Empire (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), p. 66.
73 Smith, History, VI, 411-12.
74 General Minutes Collection, 6 April 1844, Thomas Bullock rept., LDS Church Archives.
75 Wilford Woodruff Diary, 6 April 1844, NS, Wilford Woodruff Papers, LDS Church Archives.
76 General Minutes Collection, 6 April 1844.


Hansen, _Quest for Empire_, p. 155.

_General Minutes Collection, 12 May 1844, Thomas Bullock rept._

"Epistle from William Marks," _Zion's Harbinger and Baneemy's Organ_, January 1852, p. 3.

Smith, _History_, VI, 566-69. Cf. _General Minutes Collection, 12 May 1844, Thomas Bullock, rept._: "God will always protect me until my mission is fulfilled. I calculate to be one of the Instruments of setting up the Kingdom of Daniel, by the word of the Lord, and I intend to lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world."

Hill, _Joseph Smith_, p. 368, quoting MS of John Zahnd on Mormons, MS and Archives Div., NY Public Library.


_Andrus, Principles of Perfection_, pp. 310, 313, 318; _Doctrines of the Kingdom_, pp. 50, 540, 541, 556.

_Nauvoo Expositor_, 11 June 1844, p. 4.

_Nauvoo Expositor_, 11 June 1844, p. 2.

_Richards, Reply_, p. 44.

_Wilford Woodruff Diary, 30 July 1843._

_Josiah Quincy, Figures of the Past_ (Boston, 1883), p. 397.

Joseph Smith, _Leo Hawkins Minutes, 26 May 1844_. Also Smith, _History_, VI, 408-9.
