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A Fitting Tribute to the Prophet of the Restoration

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A Fitting Tribute to the Prophet of the Restoration

Steven L. Olsen

Review of Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, ed., *Joseph Smith: A Life Lived in Crescendo*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2024). 1,101 pgs., \$24.95 per vol. (softback), \$69.95 per vol. (hardback).

Abstract: *Joseph Smith: A Life Lived in Crescendo* is one of the most extensive and ambitious scholarly works on the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Its twenty-one essays address various issues relating to the culmination of the Prophet's ministry. They provide diverse and profound insights worthy of examination by serious students of the latter-day Restoration.

The project that resulted in *Joseph Smith: A Life Lived in Crescendo*¹ began in 2020 as a series of virtual firesides sponsored by The Interpreter Foundation to supplement the Church's Sunday School curriculum. Thereafter, the authors refined and expanded their presentations for publication. Rounding out the collection are several previously published and unpublished studies, one posthumously.

Contributors come from diverse disciplines—historical studies, legal studies, humanities, religious studies, cultural studies, medical studies, and technology studies—and represent a range of academic, professional, and technical careers. The essays are well written and target an educated but non-specialist audience. That is, they use the accepted rhetorical and analytical tools of their respective

1. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, ed., *Joseph Smith: A Life Lived in Crescendo*, 2 vols. (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2024).

fields but with minimal jargon. While authors are universally faithful to the restored gospel, none speaks officially and authoritatively for the Church of Jesus Christ.

Because authors speak for themselves, readers may question or disagree with some conclusions and perspectives—in several noteworthy cases, authors respectfully adopt contrasting perspectives with one another. In academic discourse, as in many other arenas of human inquiry, across-the-board agreement is not the prime objective of this publication, but rather informed dialogue, shared information, and the pursuit of understanding. Thus, readers will encounter much new information and many new insights to enrich their lives in and broaden their appreciation of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. To this end, the publication succeeds admirably.

Individual essays vary considerably in length, ranging from less than ten to nearly 140 pages, averaging about fifty pages, which is rather long for this genre of publication. Much of the length of the essays, however, is devoted to appendices, references, notes, and indexes. More than one-third of the 1,100 pages in these two volumes is devoted to metadata, enabling readers to “fact check” claims made by authors and confidently delve into areas that pique their interest. In short, besides being well written and full of new insights, the essays are thoroughly researched and documented. In addition, several are amply and appropriately illustrated with photographs, artworks, illustrations, maps, tables, and diagrams.

Students of Latter-day Saint history will recognize most authors by reputation, if not by personal acquaintance. Unfortunately, a few members of the most well-respected class of Nauvoo-period scholars are noticeably absent from the table of contents, and their “voices” are missed. However, readers may discover one or more previously unfamiliar authors whose contributions compensate for those not represented.

Essays in the collection address four key issues of the final years of the Prophet’s ministry. Volume 1 explores “Doctrinal Developments in Nauvoo” and “Temple, Priesthood, and the Relief Society,” while volume 2 takes up “The Martyrdom” and “Succession in Church Leadership.”

A summary of the individual essays in each volume follows.

Volume 1

Elder Kyle S. McKay honors his current assignment as Church Historian and Recorder by bearing an informed witness of Joseph Smith as the faithful mouthpiece of God to open the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times and to give his life for his sure testimony of the Savior (pp. 1–6).

Jeffrey M. Bradshaw offers four quite different scholarly perspectives of the Prophet of the Restoration:

- Reflecting on twelve crucial but diverse challenges that are inherent in students' efforts to interpret the extensive and now-accessible documentary record of Joseph Smith. These challenges will thus allow students to come to a more authentic and defensible assessment of his life and ministry. These twelve are representative of the host of challenges facing those who hope to draw responsible conclusions about the Prophet from a variety of academic and professional perspectives (pp. 7–44).
- Providing a deep dive into the doctrine of election that was featured in a public discourse of the Prophet given in the unfinished Nauvoo Temple on 21 May 1843. After summarizing writings on the doctrine of election by Christian theologians from antiquity onwards and referencing numerous treatments of the subject by the Prophet himself, Bradshaw reviews and comments on eleven salient phrases and concepts from the most reputable period accounts of the sermon (pp. 147–240).
- Tracing, with K-Lynn Paul, the emergence of temple-related doctrines and practices from Joseph Smith's extensive documentary record. The thesis of this study is: "temple themes are not merely present throughout every phase of Joseph Smith's ministry, but, further . . . they constitute a golden thread that weaves through every other doctrinal development from his earliest visions, translations, and revelations to the crowning culmination of his life's teachings in Nauvoo" (pp. 339–426; quote from p. 343).
- Curating and annotating a document dictated by Dennison Lott Harris in 1881 giving crucial details of the conspiracy against Joseph Smith's life and the transmission to the Twelve of the keys of the Kingdom of God just before his

martyrdom. Despite its delayed dictation, this document is significant in that Harris was a first-hand witness to these key events in Church history, some details of which are relayed in no other historical source (pp. 883–976).

Three BYU scholars—R. Devan Jensen, Michael A. Goodman, and Barbara Morgan Gardner—distill the emergence of the doctrine and practice of sealing extended families together in Joseph Smith’s revelations and public discourses. Specifically, their audience for this study is those entrusted to educate the “rising generations” (Doctrine and Covenants 69:8) of Latter-day Saints (pp. 45–74).

Terryl L. Givens illustrates the latter-day restoration of the doctrine of pre-mortal existence by thoroughly comparing relevant writings by early Christian theologians with those by Joseph Smith, his successors, and other Latter-day Saint thought leaders. As we have come to expect from Givens, this study is a scholarly *tour de force* (pp. 75–122).

Alexander L. Baugh’s study fills a crucial gap in our understanding of the early history of temple ordinances by documenting the origins of the doctrine and authorized practice of proxy baptisms and confirmations outside the Nauvoo Temple and before temples in Utah were dedicated (pp. 123–46).

James E. Faulconer and Susannah Morrison address the cultural significance of Joseph Smith’s 7 April 1844 funeral sermon for King Follett, based on subsequent reconstructions by editors from contemporary accounts of the sermon. Rather than examining what the Prophet may have meant by the sermon’s eight (by their measure) main doctrines, the authors trace the historical trajectory of (perhaps) the five most enigmatic of these doctrines. They do this to assess the enduring significance of the sermon for Latter-day Saints (pp. 241–63).

John S. Thompson distills several earlier presentations and publications to make an important contribution to the on-going scholarly conversation about how Latter-day Saints, especially Joseph Smith, understood priesthood—its orders, divisions, authorities, and spheres of operation—in the early Church (pp. 267–338).

Brian C. Hales contributes to his abundant scholarship on plural marriage in the Nauvoo period with a focus on the provenance, contents, and role of Doctrine and Covenants 132. In support of the widely held thesis that the text of the revelation was an “amalgamation”² of at

2. Danel W. Bachman, “New Light on an Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Eternal Marriage,” *Journal of Mormon History* 5 (1978), 26,

least three previously unpublished revelations to Joseph Smith, Hales addresses with considerable insight several abiding issues in the literature on the subject (pp. 427–56).

Rachel Cope and Lisa Olsen Tait provide separate but complementary reflections on the relationship of the priesthood and Relief Society in the development of Joseph Smith's understanding of gender in the Kingdom of God. For her part, Cope illustrates how four past general presidents of the Relief Society — Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow, Emmaline B. Wells, and Julie B. Beck — encouraged the preservation of its history in view of its enduring significance for the Church of Jesus Christ and women in their efforts to live the gospel of Jesus Christ (pp. 457–70). By contrast, Tait traces the changing relationship of Relief Society (female) and priesthood (male) organizations in the Church of Jesus Christ through six historical periods — 1840s, 1850–1900, 1900–1940, 1960s, 1970–2000, and twenty-first century — using four analytical criteria — individual/institutional dynamics, formal/informal power relations, ecclesiastical (church)/ritual (temple) programs, and language as a symbol of self-identification (pp. 471–506).

Jacob D. Hawkins and Matthew J. Grow summarize the spiritual significance of historical events that occurred in Joseph Smith's Red Brick Store in Nauvoo, including translating the Book of Abraham, organizing the Relief Society, administering Church and community business, introducing sacred practices whose performance eventually became restricted to the House of the Lord, holding early meetings of the Council of Fifty, and hosting Joseph's "last charge" to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Personally, I welcome and especially appreciate a contribution to this publication that focuses on one of the sacred historical sites of the Restoration.

Volume 2

Acknowledging the complex legal, political, social, and religious context of 1840s Nauvoo — Joseph I. Bentley offers a detailed and insightful assessment of under-appreciated legal cases against Joseph Smith in May–June 1844 that led to his incarceration and martyrdom in Carthage Jail. His analysis benefits from superb training and experience in the law and the extensive database of the Joseph Smith Papers legal series. Of particular interest to many students of

Latter-day Saint history will be Bentley's reassessment of the case involving the destruction of the Nauvoo *Expositor* (pp. 539–624).

John W. Welch contributes significantly to our understanding of Joseph's motivation to cross the Mississippi River four days before his martyrdom. Welch's thesis is that a principal reason for the crossing was to secure legal counsel for his upcoming trial in Carthage. Supporting this claim is the existence of correspondence between the Prophet and prominent lawyers in Iowa Territory with whom he was familiar. Welch expertly articulates the previously under-appreciated legal purpose of the well-known crossing (pp. 625–84).

R. Jean Addams contributes two different but insightful studies of the conclusion of Joseph Smith's prophetic ministry:

- A detailed chronology of the Prophet's final weeks in mortality, including his martyrdom in Carthage Jail. Addams concludes his narrative with four tributes to the Prophet, one by Joseph himself (an excerpt from the King Follet discourse), two by faithful contemporary associates of the Prophet, and the fourth by Hugh B. Brown, a later Apostle and counselor to President Spencer W. Kimball (pp. 685–741).
- A systematic inventory of the major "expressions" of Joseph Smith's religious legacy that are distinguished by respective doctrines, practices, authorities, and leadership styles. If not *the* best, this article is certainly one of the best summaries of the various traditions that trace their pedigrees to Joseph Smith (pp. 977–1050).

Ronald K. Esplin enlarges and refines an earlier study of the succession of leadership in the Church of Jesus Christ following the premature death of Joseph Smith. He reframes the "succession crisis" based on a thorough review of all relevant historical documents and traces step-by-step its complex but certain development from the martyrdom to the leadership of Brigham Young as President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Esplin's essay is historical scholarship at its best: thoroughly researched, well documented, and reasonably concluded (pp. 745–882).

Hugh W. Nibley completes the collection with insightful reflections on the enduring legacy of Joseph Smith's prophetic ministry. This tribute, undated and previously unpublished, was recovered from a typescript copy in the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University and prepared for publication in this volume. In typical Nibley-esque

fashion, he forecasts a tribute to the Prophet in three areas of his prophetic legacy: scriptural, institutional, and doctrinal; however, Nibley's rhapsody on the first area is so eloquent and poetic that the other two receive short-shrift. Nevertheless, Nibley's is a fitting conclusion to a collection of tributes that begins with the testimony of the current Church Historian and Recorder of the man "who communed with Jehovah" (pp. 1051–76).

I found all essays worthy of perusal, if not in-depth examination. I found some more compelling than others, but mostly for personal reasons. Other readers will likely have different preferences. The publication's diverse perspectives and broad appeal are strengths. I hope this worthy work finds its way onto the physical or virtual bookshelves of many students of Latter-day Saint history.

Concluding Thoughts

By way of conclusion, I reflect on the title of the publication. Its front-matter indicates that the phrase, "a life in crescendo," was coined by Elder B. H. Roberts in his introduction to a published edition of the seven-volume *History of the Church*.³ The term *crescendo* especially characterizes Joseph Smith's Nauvoo-period ministry. While fewer sections of the Doctrine and Covenants (ten) were issued in 1839–44 than any other comparable era of his ministry, these and temple-related revelations (also received in Nauvoo) are as sublime and far-reaching as he or any other prophet has ever uttered. They provide a capstone to the gospel's restoration by introducing the doctrines and establishing the method whereby all mankind can avail themselves of the blessing of life eternal, "the greatest of all the gifts of God" (Doctrine and Covenants 14:7).

In its literal sense, *crescendo* describes the gradual increase of volume and intensity of a particular theme of music.⁴ Metaphorically, the term refers to the apex of other processes or developments. Some synonyms include *pinnacle*, *zenith*, *climax*, *summit* and, as a verb, *escalate*.⁵ *Crescendo* is an apt word to describe Joseph's life, ministry, teachings, and initiatives, all gradually emerging "out of obscurity

3. See *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, vol. 6 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), xlii.

4. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), seventeenth printing, s.v., "crescendo."

5. *Merriam-Webster Thesaurus*, s.v., "crescendo," merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/crescendo.

and out of darkness” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30) in view of extending the blessing of the gospel of Jesus Christ to “all the families of the earth” (Abraham 2:11).

Joseph’s Nauvoo revelations use a term that relates to *crescendo* and defines the unique Latter-day Saint plan of eternal life. In this connotation, *exaltation* appears a dozen times in Doctrine and Covenants 124 and 132 but nowhere else in the Church’s Standard Works.⁶ Thus, as a possible synonym for *exaltation*, *crescendo* is a fitting word to title a publication that honors the prophet Joseph Smith and his earthly ministry that was completed in Nauvoo.



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6. R. Gary Shapiro, comp., *An Exhaustive Concordance to the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes Publishing, 1977), s.v., “exaltation”; James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance to the Bible*, thirty-first printing (Nashville: Abington Press, 1973), s.v., “exaltation.”

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