

INTERPRETER

— ∞ —
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 23 · 2017 · Pages 45-52

The Council of Fifty and Its Minutes: A Review

Stephen O. Smoot

Offprint Series

© 2016 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at MormonInterpreter.com

You may subscribe to this journal at MormonInterpreter.com/annual-print-subscription

THE COUNCIL OF FIFTY AND ITS MINUTES: A REVIEW

Stephen O. Smoot

Review of Matthew J. Grow et al., eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Administrative Records, Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2016). 525 pp. + introduction, appendixes, reference material, index, etc. \$59.95.

Abstract: The publication of the Council of Fifty minutes is a momentous occasion in modern studies of Mormon history. The minutes are invaluable in helping historians understand the last days of Joseph Smith and his project to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth. They offer an important glimpse into the religious and political mindset of early Latter-day Saint leaders and shed much light on events once obscured by lack of access to the minutes. The Joseph Smith Papers Project has outdone itself in its presentation of the minutes in the latest volume of the series. The minutes are essential reading for anyone interested in early Mormon history.

The Council of Fifty has maintained something of a mythic status in Mormon historical consciousness. Created by the Prophet Joseph Smith just months before his death in June 1844, the council served to fulfill a primarily twofold (but interlocking) mission: to secure the rights and safety of the Latter-day Saints and to prepare the world for the return of Jesus Christ by establishing a theocratic government that would anticipate His kingly reign.

By March of [1844], significant opposition was growing toward the Church in and around Nauvoo, in part because of the practice of plural marriage and the Saints' growing political power. Members of the Council of Fifty were drawn both to the possibility of relocating significant numbers of

Saints outside of the United States, where they could create their own government, and to the possibility of creating a better form of government within the United States.

Though council members generally used the term *theocracy* to describe what they viewed as an ideal form of government for the kingdom of God, their model also incorporated democratic elements. They believed that a “theodemocratic” government would protect the rights of all citizens, allow for dissent and free discussion, involve Latter-day Saints and others, and increase righteousness in preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.¹

Historians have long been aware of the council’s minutes kept by William Clayton but have been restricted in being able to view them (let alone publish and disseminate their contents). Without direct access to the council’s minutes themselves, those wishing to piece together the organization and aims of the council have been compelled to rely on reminiscences and journal entries from council members or other sources. While this has not proven to be an entirely vain endeavor, without the minutes themselves, discussions of the Council of Fifty have heretofore largely felt much like attending a Thanksgiving dinner with no turkey.

This is not to dismiss the treatments of past historians who have done tremendous work in shedding light on the Council of Fifty,² but rather to acknowledge what was once a burdensome handicap in our ability to understand the council’s history. Thankfully that handicap has been lifted with the full publication of the Council of Fifty minutes by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Announced in 2013 with the

1 R. Eric Smith and Matthew J. Grow, “Council of Fifty in Nauvoo, Illinois,” online at <https://history.lds.org/article/council-of-fifty-minutes-joseph-smith-papers?lang=eng>.

2 See e.g. Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967); D. Michael Quinn, “The Council of Fifty and Its Members, 1844 to 1945,” *BYU Studies* 20, no. 2 (1980): 163–97; Andrew F. Ehat, “‘It Seems Like Heaven Began on Earth’: Joseph Smith and the Constitution of the Kingdom of God,” *BYU Studies* 20, no. 3 (1980): 253–80; Kenneth W. Godfrey, “Council of Fifty,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:326–327; Jedediah S. Rogers, ed., *The Council of Fifty: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2014).

full backing of the First Presidency of the Church,³ the publication of the minutes is undoubtedly a watershed event in Mormon historical studies.

The publication of the Council of Fifty minutes was preceded by significant media fanfare. Besides a number of conferences held in 2016 that raised awareness of the soon-to-be published minutes, including the Mormon History Association and FairMormon conferences,⁴ the Church released several press reports, articles, and additional social media content to herald the momentous occasion.⁵ Nearly simultaneously with the publication of the minutes themselves, the Fall issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly* published an excerpt from the minutes and accompanying commentary by Ronald K. Esplin, one of the editors of the minutes.⁶ All of this goes to show that the Church has taken the publication of the minutes very seriously and has done an admirable job in raising public awareness of this occasion.

3 R. Scott Lloyd, "Newest volume published for the Joseph Smith Papers Project," *Church News*, September 7, 2013, online at <http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/63917/Newest-volume-published-for-the-Joseph-Smith-Papers-Project.html>; "Council of Fifty minutes to be published in latest Joseph Smith Papers release," *Deseret News*, September 15, 2016, online at <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865662506/Council-of-Fifty-minutes-to-be-published-in-latest-Joseph-Smith-Papers-release.html?pg=all>.

4 Matthew J. Grow, "'We, the People of the Kingdom of God': Insights into the Minutes of the Council of Fifty, 1844-1846," FairMormon Conference, August 4, 2016, online at <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2016-fairmormon-conference/people-kingdom-god>; R. Scott Lloyd, "Joseph Smith apparently was not Josephine Lyon's father, Mormon History Association speaker says," *Deseret News*, June 13, 2016, online at <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865656112/Joseph-Smith-apparently-was-not-Josephine-Lyons-father-Mormon-History-Association-speaker-says.html?pg=all>.

5 R. Eric Smith and Matthew J. Grow, "Council of Fifty in Nauvoo, Illinois," online at <https://history.lds.org/article/council-of-fifty-minutes-joseph-smith-papers?lang=eng>; "Administrative Records, Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844-January 1846," online at <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/administrative-records-council-of-fifty-minutes>; "Council of Fifty Minutes Featured in New Joseph Smith Papers Volume," online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNkQQd9WLs4>; "Council of Fifty Minutes Featured in New Joseph Smith Papers Volume," Mormon Newsroom, September 9, 2016, online at <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/council-of-fifty-minutes-featured-new-joseph-smith-papers-volume>; R. Scott Lloyd, "Council of Fifty Minutes to Be Published in Joseph Smith Papers Release," *Church News*, September 20, 2016, online at <https://www.lds.org/church/news/council-of-fifty-minutes-to-be-published-in-joseph-smith-papers-release?lang=eng>.

6 Ronald K. Esplin, "Understanding the Council of Fifty and Its Minutes," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2016): 7-33.

The volume itself, edited by a team at the Joseph Smith Papers Project (Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esplin, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, and Jeffrey D. Mahas), is a masterful achievement in presentation. The minutes are divided into dated entries and organized into chronological groups (Part 1: March–June 1844; Part 2: February–May 1845; Part 3: September–October 1845; Part 4: January 1846). As one would expect from a Joseph Smith Papers volume, practically every page of the minutes is peppered with copious transcription and historical notes. Additionally, each entry and chronological grouping is prefaced with an overview of the contents and other helpful historical background to the events discussed therein. This is wonderfully useful in helping the reader navigate through the minutes, which touch on several crucial moments in early Mormon history at an almost whirlwind pace and introduce the reader to the *dramatis personae* that played roles in the council’s operations. All of this is in addition to introductory material, a detailed chronology, geographical and biographical glossaries, a bibliography, and an index.

Some of the accompanying commentary to the minutes is not only helpful in orienting the reader but is also remarkably candid. For instance, the council’s meeting on March 11, 1844, included council member Lucien Woodworth’s vow that “every member of [the council was] to be bound to eternal secrecy as to what passed here” (p. 42). This was in accord with Joseph Smith’s own injunction that the council was to keep its discussions entirely secret (p. 42 n. 74). To put a fine point on the seriousness of council members’ vow of secrecy, Woodworth swore that “the man who broke the rule ‘should lose his cursed head’ [sic]” (p. 42). The accompanying commentary by the editors notes, “Nearly all the men present belonged to the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge, and most had taken part in the Mormon endowment ceremony. Both the Freemasonry and endowment ceremonies included oaths of secrecy with associated penalties” (pp. 42–43 n. 75). As the editors go on to explain, these penalties found antecedents in English law, which stipulated decapitation for high treason. While there’s no evidence of any Council of Fifty member being executed in such a grisly manner (or at all, for that matter), presumably Joseph Smith approved such language, as there’s no indication he repudiated or corrected Woodworth.

Similarly, on March 22, 1845, Brigham Young thundered,

If [Lilburn W.] Boggs and the ring leaders of the mob who exterminated the saints would come to Nauvoo and cast themselves at our feet, and say that they had sinned a sin unto death, and they are willing to submit to the law, let their heads be severed from their bodies, and let their hearts blood run and drench the earth, and then the Almighty would say they should finally be saved in some inferior kingdom. (p. 351)

The editors accompany these lines with the following:

Drawing from passages in the Old Testament, Young later made many statements similar to his comments here, teaching that some sins were so serious that the perpetrator's blood would have to be shed for the individual to receive forgiveness. This concept came to be known as "blood atonement." Preachers in various American Christian traditions had a long history of utilizing intimidating rhetoric in their sermons. Young's listeners probably understood his rhetoric as hyperbole; three years later, Young stated, "I av [have] feelings — I frequently sa[y] 'cut his infernal throat' I don't mean any such thing." (p. 351 n. 521)

As a final example there is the matter of Joseph Smith's being proclaimed a prophet, priest, and king by the council. As recorded in the minutes, on April 11, 1844, Erastus Snow "concluded by offering a motion that this honorable assembly receive from this time henceforth and forever, Joseph Smith, as our Prophet, Priest & King, and uphold him in that capacity in which God has anointed him" (pp. 95–96). Joseph Smith being upheld as a "king" among his followers has scandalized anti-Mormons and others. Thus Jerald and Sandra Tanner: "Toward the end of his life Joseph Smith seems to have become obsessed with a desire for power and fame. He set up a secret 'Council of Fifty' and had himself ordained to be a king."⁷

Thanks to the publication of the minutes, we need no longer look to later (and sometime hostile) reminiscences, as the Tanners did, to understand this affair.

This action dramatically demonstrates the council members' view of theodemocracy, under which the ecclesiastical leader

7 Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 455.

of the church (prophet and priest) would be chosen by them as a political leader (king). Council participants understood that this action would have no immediate political consequences, but it symbolized their desire to be prepared for the millennial kingdom of God. Joseph Smith and others in the council emphasized that leaders in the kingdom of God would govern by fostering free discussion, by respecting the people, and by serving as a conduit for revelation and God's law. (p. xxxviii)

The editors likewise remind us that "proclaiming Joseph Smith as a prophet, priest, and king also reflected the temple ceremonies that he had introduced among his closest followers beginning in May 1842" (p. xxxviii).

I share this not to shock the reader with anything lurid but rather to demonstrate just how serious the editors are at not flinching away from anything that might make their readers uncomfortable. Any accusation that the editors must have toned down or covered up shocking content in the minutes is simply not credible. They have gone to great lengths to be candid and transparent about the historical reality that is revealed in the minutes while avoiding any of the sensationalism to which lesser and more polemical authors might easily succumb.

Looking at the contents of the volume more broadly, readers will quickly discover the major topics that were of the most importance for the Council of Fifty: Joseph Smith's presidential campaign, the definition of the Kingdom of God and the nature of Christ's anticipated theocratic government, dealings with Native Americans and the United States government, exploring places of refuge for the Latter-day Saints, and the eventual evacuation of Nauvoo and westward migration of the Church. As any student of Mormon history will know, these topics were by no means unknown or mysterious before the Council of Fifty minutes were published. Indeed, the minutes themselves will not reveal anything especially surprising or heretofore completely unknown to seasoned historians of early Mormonism. Rather, they fill in some important gaps in our understanding of these topics and flesh out and further inform basically what we already knew.

That being said, there are a number of things in the minutes that may appear rather extraordinary to the average Latter-day Saint. One prominent example is the council's discussion on the nature of the Kingdom of God. Especially in the early meetings of the council under Joseph Smith, there was considerable theological discussion on the scriptural prophecies of God's kingdom being established in the last

days. The *locus classicus* for these discussions was Daniel 2 in the Old Testament.

Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet *that were* of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. (Daniel 2:34–35; cf. 44–45)

Several entries in the minutes make it clear that, at least at the end of his life and prophetic career, Joseph Smith (and his associates in the Council of Fifty) understood the “stone cut without hands” that filled the earth to be the ascent of the theocratic Kingdom of God he was then establishing to anticipate Christ’s return. The minutes for the meeting held on March 19, 1844, wherein many Church leaders affirmed the fulfilment of Daniel’s prophecy as being in the establishment of Joseph’s proposed theocratic government, make this especially clear (pp. 50–54; cf. pp. 121–129, 278, 285). “There is a distinction between the Church of God and the kingdom of God,” Joseph Smith taught the council on April 18, 1844. “The laws of the kingdom are not designed to effect [sic] our salvation hereafter. It is an entire, distinct and separate government. The church is a spiritual matter and a spiritual kingdom; but the kingdom which Daniel saw was not a spiritual kingdom. . . . The literal kingdom of God, and the church of God are two distinct things” (p. 128).

This would appear remarkable to many (if not most) Latter-day Saints today given that modern theological discourse in the Church has shifted away from theocratic aspirations and instead has focused on equating the Church with the Kingdom of God. At the Church’s October 2016 General Conference, for instance, Elder Neil L. Andersen of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles affirmed that Daniel’s prophecy pertained to the growth of the Church of Jesus Christ: “The number of members of the Church in the latter days would be relatively few, as Nephi prophesied, but they would be upon all the face of the earth, and the power and ordinances of the priesthood would be available to all who desired them, filling the earth as Daniel foretold.”⁸ Those interested in the development

⁸ Neil L. Andersen, “A Witness of God,” *Ensign*, November 2016, online at <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2016/11/saturday-morning-session/a-witness-of-god?lang=eng>.

of Mormon theological thought would therefore find great benefit in the Council of Fifty minutes, as they pertain not only to historical issues but theological matters as well.

This review has quickly mentioned only a few things in the minutes that are worthy of our attention. There are many other things raised in the minutes that time and space do not permit me to delve into now. Other reviewers have highlighted these additional features of the minutes and have offered some insightful comments on their significance in shaping our understanding of early Mormon history.⁹ What I can say for now is that the Council of Fifty minutes are absolutely essential for anyone interested in Mormon history and especially for those interested in the history of Nauvoo and the end of Joseph Smith's life. The editors of the latest volume of the Joseph Smith Papers should be commended for their outstanding work. Their labor to present the Council of Fifty minutes to the world deserves all the praise it may and should receive. If I may indulge in a familiar Mormon motif, it is truly a blessing finally to see the Council of Fifty minutes come forth out of darkness and into light.

Stephen O. Smoot *graduated cum laude from Brigham Young University with Bachelor of Arts degrees in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and German Studies. His areas of academic interest include the Hebrew Bible, ancient Egyptian history and religion, Mormon studies, and German Romanticism. He blogs on Latter-day Saint and other topics at www.plonialmonimormon.com.*

9 See for instance Brian Whitney, "Council of Fifty minutes: anti-American sentiment, theocratic aspirations, and institutional transparency," *Worlds Without End*, online at <http://www.withoutend.org/council-fifty-minutes-anti-american-sentiment-theocratic-aspirations-institutional-transparency/>; Benjamin E. Park, "The Mormon Council of Fifty: What Joseph Smith's Secret Records Reveal," *Religion and Politics*, online at <http://religionandpolitics.org/2016/09/09/the-mormon-council-of-fifty-what-joseph-smiths-secret-records-reveal/>.

