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Origin of the Baptism for the Dead Doctrine

Johnny Stephenson and H. Michael Marquardt

Introduction

WRITING OF baptism for the dead in 1990, Guy Bishop made this observation based upon his Nauvoo research:

We have been left with scant evidence of how Joseph Smith formulated the Mormon plan of baptism for the dead. But, by the time the beleaguered Saints had crossed the Mississippi River in 1839 and had begun to reestablish themselves in western Illinois, the Prophet apparently knew how the worthy dead were to meet the mandate for baptism.¹

What was the origin of the baptism for the dead doctrine that Joseph Smith preached in Nauvoo in the late summer of 1840? Newly discovered evidence and a re-examination of existing evidence may help us to answer this question. Baptism for the dead is based upon Smith's doctrine that the ordinance of baptism was necessary to obtain salvation in the afterlife and that a living individual could act as a proxy for the deceased person.

The Gospel Goes to England

In the summer of 1837, apostles Heber C. Kimball and Orson Hyde left America for a mission to preach about Mormonism in England. After arriving in Liverpool, they made their way north to Preston where they met with the relatives of some Canadian converts such as Joseph Fielding and John Taylor, who had joined the church due to the efforts of Parley P. Pratt in 1836. The relatives of these Canadian converts readily accepted the movement in England, and helped Kimball and Hyde to convert

1. Guy Bishop, "What Has Become of Our Fathers' Baptism for the Dead at Nauvoo," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 86.

many others including William Clayton,² who would be appointed second counselor to the British Mission president Willard Richards. By the end of 1837, nearly a hundred fifty converts had been baptized due to the efforts of these apostles.

A year later, another of the original Quorum of Twelve, David W. Patten, went on a mission in April 1838. But before he could fulfill it, he was wounded in the Battle of Crooked River³ in Ray County, Missouri, and died from his injuries on October 25, 1838.

On July 8, 1838, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, John E. Page, and Willard Richards were appointed to fill vacancies in the Quorum of Twelve. At the same time Joseph Smith instructed all twelve to leave Far West on April 26, 1839, and journey “over the great waters” to “promulgate my gospel.”⁴ In January 1839 Joseph’s cousin George A. Smith was appointed to a vacancy in the Twelve.

By April 1840 eight apostles had assembled together in the British Isles at Preston, England, where they ordained Willard Richards to their quorum. At a general conference held on April 15, 1840, the apostles announced that there were 1,671 members, 34 elders, 52 priests, 38 teachers, and 8 deacons in England and Scotland.⁵

The Mormons had their most successful gains among the English in what was called the British Northwest. Here was found the United Brethren, a splinter group of the Primitive Methodists who broke from them because they were too formal and worldly.⁶ As Stephen J. Fleming writes:

What got Wesleyan Methodism off the ground in the 1740s was the Wesleys’ encounter with and response to the demands of primary religion... Wesley rejected the Reformers’ claim that miracles were no longer necessary after the apostles: “The grand reason why the miraculous gifts were so soon withdrawn was not only that faith and holiness were well nigh lost, but that dry, formal, orthodox men began even then to ridicule whatever gifts they had not themselves, and to decry them all as with madness or imposture.”

2. William Clayton (1814–79) was baptized on October 21, 1837. He helped start a branch of the church in Manchester, England. James B. Allen explained that Ann Booth “received a remarkable vision foreshadowing the introduction of the doctrine of baptism for the dead.” According to Allen “Many of Clayton’s converts came from the Church of England, which claimed over half the people of Manchester who belonged to any religion. Others were from prominent dissenting groups, such as the Methodists and the United Brethren.” James B. Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear: the Story of William Clayton* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 12.

3. The Battle of Crooked River was a skirmish that took place on October 24, 1838, between Mormon settlers under the command of David W. Patten (codenamed “Captain Fearnought”) and a Missouri State Militia unit under the command of Samuel Bogart. See Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 137–42.

4. LDS D&C 118:4–6.

5. Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898*, typescript, 9 vols. (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983–85), April 15, 1840, 1:438.

6. Stephen J. Fleming, “The Religious Heritage of the British Northwest and the Rise of Mormonism,” *Church History* 77, no. 1 (March 2008): 73.

...Yet many of his followers had experiences beyond the inward manifestation of forgiveness: Methodists reported falling, trances, visions, prophesying, and even healings. The pinnacle experience ... was the vision of the Father or the Son or both. ... It was this supernaturalism, particularly in the form of miracles and revelation, that the Reformation suppressed and that popular movements like Methodism and Mormonism sought to recover. ...

Born in 1805, Joseph Smith was raised during Methodism's tremendous growth [in America] by its supernaturalism. Smith's parents were themselves avid practitioners of supernatural religion, with both manifesting high anxiety about their own salvation as well as practicing folk magic. With such a background, Smith soon found himself attracted to the Methodists...⁷

In March 1839 Joseph Smith explained to Isaac Galland:

we believe that we have a right to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another, when that truth is clearly demonstrated to our minds, and we have the highest degree of evidence of the same; we feel ourselves bound by the laws of God ... by any manifestation, whereof we know that it has come from God: and has application to us ... we believe that it is our privilege to reject all things, whatsoever is clearly manifested to us that they do not have a bearing upon us.⁸

The Vision of Ann Booth

One of those English Mormons converted by William Clayton was Ann Eastwood Booth, the wife of Robert Booth of Manchester.⁹ A month before the general conference was held in Preston, Ann reported that she had a vision on March 12, 1840, about the spirit world that subsequently came to the attention of Brigham Young. On May 27, 1840, Brigham wrote to his wife Mary Ann¹⁰ about the vision and included a copy of it in his letter. He mentioned that the vision concerned "David W. Patten's ministry in the world whare he has gon[e]." The original spelling and punctuation are retained, with words written above the line put on the line. The following are excerpts from Ann's vision:

7. *Ibid.*, 78–80.

8. "Copy of a letter from J. Smith jr. to Mr. Galland," Letter from Liberty Jail, Clay County, Missouri, to Isaac Galland, March 22, 1839; in *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 4 (February 1840): 54.

9. Ann Eastwood Booth (1794–1874) and Robert Booth (1785–1846) were married in Manchester, England in 1817. They immigrated to the United States in 1840 with William Clayton's company. Not much is known about Robert Booth. Ann Booth immigrated west with the Saints and died in Utah.

10. Mary Ann Angell Young (1803–82) was Brigham Young's second wife; his first wife had previously died. They were married on March 31, 1834.

on ariveing at the dore [door] of the upermost Prision I behe[l]d one of the 12 apostles of the Lamb who had be[e]n martered in America, standing at the dore of the Prison holding a key in his hand with which he opned unlocked the dore and went in and I fol[low]ed him. . . .

the Apostle then commecd to preached the Baptism of repentence for the remision of sins, and the gift of the Holy G[h]ost by the la[y]ing of hands when the hundreds of prisners gave a shout with aloud voice, saying Glory be to God for ever and ever. . . .

the Apostle then called to John Wesley by name who came fawrd [forward] quickley and both went down into t[he] water and the Apostle Baptized him and coming up out of the water he lade [laid] his hands upon him for the gift of the Holy G[h]ost, at the same time ordainedng him to the Preasthood of Aaron;

the Apostle then retired to the place ware he first sto[o]d. and John Wesley then proseded to Baptize a man by the [name] of Kilbham and next John Madison and Wm Scott. and John Tongue who ware [were] Methodest Pr[e]achers with whome I had be[e]n a quanted personally. . . . and after this he Baptized all the Prisoners amounting to menny [many] hundreds. after they ware all Baptized. the Apostle Lade his hands on them all and confermed [confirmed] them¹¹

Ann further indicated that she had not heard of the death of David Patten before her vision. A few months later, on July 2, 1840, Wilford Woodruff wrote in his journal that he “spent the day at 149 Oldham road in writing. I was informed of a remarkable vision of Sister Ann Booth which I have written on the following page.”¹² Woodruff wrote in his journal “A Remarkable Vision” of Ann Booth. There are some slight differences between the the copy of Brigham Young and that of Woodruff.

David W. Patten the Martyr

Back in America, David W. Patten was being hailed as a martyr to Mormonism. In the *Times and Seasons* an account of his death in Missouri was printed in November 1839:

On the retreat of the mob from Daviess, I [Joseph Smith Jr.] returned to Caldwell [County], hoping to have some respite from our enemies, at least for a short time; but upon my arrival there, I was informed that a mob had commenced hostilities on the borders of that county, adjoining to Ray co. and that they had taken some of our brethren prisoners, burned some houses, and had committed depredations on the peaceable inhabitants. A company under the command of Capt. Patten, was ordered out by Lieutenant Col. Hinckle to go against them, and stop their depredations, and drive

11. Brigham Young, letter, Manchester and Lancashire [England] to Mary A. Young, Commerce, Illinois, May 26–27, 1840, MS 15616, Box 1, Folder 7, crossed out words omitted, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City. Letter published in Ronald O. Barney, “Letters of a Missionary Apostle to His Wife: Brigham Young to Mary Ann Angell Young, 1839–1841,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999):177–81.

12. Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, July 2, 1840, 1:475.

them out of the county. Upon the approach of our people, the mob fired upon them, and after discharging their pieces, fled with great precipitation, with the loss of one killed and several wounded. In the engagement Capt. Patten, (a man beloved by all who had the pleasure of his acquaintance,) was wounded and died shortly after.¹³

Six months earlier, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal:

Elder David W. Patten... was martyred in Missouri in 1838 for the word of God & the testimony of Jesus Christ. He was the first martyr of the quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints chosen to build up the kingdom of GOD & prepare for the coming of Christ.¹⁴

After his arrival in England, Woodruff wrote in November 1839:

I had a dream during the night & had an interview with Mrs Woodruff, But did not see [daughter] Sarah Emma. I travelled a distance with Judge [Elias] Higby in a hard storm in my dream. I also saw Br David Patten who was Martyred in Missouri.¹⁵

Though Ann Booth wrote that she never heard of the death of David W. Patten previous to having her vision in March 1840, Patten had become widely known and identified as a martyr soon after his death.

The Gospel in the Spirit World

Mary Ann Young had most likely received the copy of Ann Booth's vision from her husband Brigham Young in mid-summer 1840 and shared it with many in the Nauvoo community. The vision had excited and inspired many, including those apostles who had read it. The vision spoke of David W. Patten as performing an important mission in the spirit world, a place where many of the Mormons believed they too would be called to serve after death. Heber C. Kimball wrote "I hurd [heard] from brother Daivid a Short time a go he was preaching the gospel to the Spirrits in prison."¹⁶

When Joseph Smith was working on his Bible translation in 1830, his scribe Sidney Rigdon wrote about the wicked who had died in the days of Noah:

but behold these which thine eyes are upon shall perish in the floods and beho[ld] I will shut them up an a prison have I prepared for them and that which I have chosen [Jesus

13. "Extract, From the Private Journal of Joseph Smith Jr.," *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 1 (November 1839): 5, Commerce, Illinois.

14. Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, April 26, 1839, 1:328.

15. *Ibid.*, November 11, 1839, 1:368.

16. Heber C. Kimball to "My Dear Companion" [Vilate Kimball], July 9, 1840, Heber C. Kimball Collection, MS 12476, LDS Church History Library.

Christ] hath plead before my face wherefor[e] he suffereth for their sins inasmuch as they will repent in the day that my chosen shall return unto me and untill that day they shall be in torment¹⁷

A few years later Smith and Rigdon reported their own vision of the afterlife in which those who were locked up in this “spirit prison” would inherit a “lesser glory”:

And again we saw the Terrestrial world & behold & lo these are they who are of the Terrestrial whose glory differeth from that of the Church of the first born who have received of the fulness of the father even as that of the Moon differeth from the Sun of the firmament. Behold these are they who died without law & also they who are the spirits of men kept in prison whom the Son visited & preached the gospel unto them that they might be Judged according to men in the flesh who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh but afterwards received it these are they who are honorable men of the Earth who were blinded by the craftiness of men¹⁸

In January 1836, at Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph Smith reported another vision of the afterlife, one in which he saw:

father Adam, and Abraham and Michael and my father and mother, my brother Alvin that has long since slept and marvled how it was that he had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom, seeing that he had departed this life, before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time and had not been baptized for the remission of sins.

Smith would then proclaim a solution for this dilemma:

all who have died with[out] a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it, if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God— also all that shall die henceforth, without a knowledge of it, who would have received it, with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom, for I the Lord will judge all men according to their works according to the desire of their hearts

Joseph Smith “also beheld that all children who die before they arive to the years of accountability, are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven.”¹⁹ In 1838 in answer to a question about “those who have died since the days of the apostles,” he responded:

17. Old Testament Manuscript 1, 17, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri; LDS Pearl of Great Price, Moses 7:38–39.

18. “A Vision of Joseph and Sidney,” Hiram Township, Portage County, Ohio, February 16, 1832, in Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations: Manuscript Revelation Books, Facsimile Edition* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 250–51, added punctuation marks omitted. Comparison with 1835 wording, see LDS D&C 76:71–75; Community of Christ D&C 76:6.

19. Joseph Smith Journal, 136–37, January 21, 1836, original spelling and punctuation retained, words written above the line put on the line, crossed out words omitted, LDS Church History Library; LDS D&C 137:5–10. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 1:167–68.

All those who have not had an opportunity of hearing the gospel, and being administered to by an inspired man in the flesh, must have it hereafter before they can be finally judged.²⁰

Joseph was claiming that all those who had died without exposure to the gospel would need to have it taught to them hereafter. He referenced the Bible in support:

For Christ also hath once suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison²¹

Sidney Rigdon wrote of this authority to administer the gospel: "For take the priesthood away by which the gospel was administered, and of what avail is the gospel? the answer is, it is of none; for the gospel is only of use to men, when there is somebody to administer it to them."²²

As far as the church and Smith were concerned, this settled the matter. But the question of baptism was left unanswered. Ann Booth's vision was innovative in that it spoke of these prisoners being both baptized and confirmed in this spirit world, after they had the gospel preached to them by one who had the authority to do so. This answered the apparent conundrum about baptism and confirmation for those who had not received these ordinances while they were alive.

The Death of Seymour Brunson

In July 1840, a few months after the vision of Ann Booth had made its way to Nauvoo, Seymour Brunson, a forty-year-old high councilman, friend, and body-guard of Joseph Smith, was taken with a severe sickness. His son Lewis later wrote,

my father having occasion to get up in the night to drive some cattle out of his lot, caught cold which brought on a severe sickness, which ultimately resulted in death. . . . Joseph Smith had previously had him removed to his house thinking the change might prove beneficial to my father's health, but he still continued to decline, and when Joseph understood that my father would rather go than stay, he and others visited him and bidding him goodby, remarked "Brother Brunson, since it is your desire to go, we shall not hold you by faith any longer." My father then called his family together, and after asking my mother if all the children were present, he bid us a last farewell, and shortly

20. "In obedience to our promise," *Elders' Journal of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 43, Far West, Missouri, answer to question 16. Whether or not Joseph meant ordinances here is ambiguous. He does not mention the need for ordinances in his January 1836 vision, but couples those who would have received the gospel "with all their hearts" and attain the celestial kingdom with children who die under the age of eight, who are not required to be baptized.

21. 1 Peter 3:18–19, King James Version.

22. "Elder O. Barr," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, 2, no. 5 (February 1836): 262, Kirtland, Ohio, letter of November 15, 1835.

after his spirit winged its flight from its earthly tenement to take its place amongst the spirits of the just.²³

John Smith wrote to his son George A. in England about Brunson's death on August 21, 1840:

there has been considerable sickness in Nauvoo & Commerce and many some deaths th[ough] I think not so many as last by any means according to the number of inhabitants I only mention Elder Brunson he Died very happy David Patton came after him he said with a convoy of Angels David wanted him and David[']s God wanted him and Joseph held him back but he must go.²⁴

In early September Vilate Kimball wrote to her husband, Heber, in England:

Semor Brunson is dead. every thing was done to save him that could be done, but the Lord had kneed of him a short time before he died he told Joseph not to hold him any longer, for sed [said] he, I have seen David Patten and he wants me and the Lord wants me, and I want to go. they then gave him up. at one time as Joseph entered the room, he told him there was a light incircled him above the brightness of the sun, he exclaimed the room is full of angels, they have come to waft my spirit home, he then bid his family farewell, and sweetly fell asleep in jesus. he requested President Smith to preach his funeral sermon which he did.²⁵

Phoebe Woodruff also wrote to her husband Wilford about recent deaths:

Seymour Brunson, he was buried under armes [arms] – he said that brother D. Patten was calling him and desired brother Joseph to let him go for he needed him . . . father Joseph Smith the patriarch a little previous to his death he called his children around him and blessed them and appointed Hiram [Smith] Patriarch in his stead."²⁶

From what Vilate and others wrote later, when Seymour Brunson was on his deathbed, he expressed a strong desire to go to that spirit world, saying that he had "seen David Patten," who wanted him to help with the work he was performing there on behalf of the dead. By this time, the vision of Ann Booth had probably influenced many about David Patten including Seymour Brunson. The obituary of Brunson read:

23. "Short Sketch of Seymour Brunson, Sr," by his son Lewis Brunson, submitted by Darlinda Gorley, in *Nauvoo Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 4.

24. John Smith, Lee County, Iowa to George A. Smith, London, England, August 21, 1840, MS 1322, Box 9, Folder 2, LDS Church History Library.

25. Vilate Kimball, Nauvoo, Illinois, to Heber C. Kimball, Liverpool, England, September 6, 1840, MS 3276, Folder 2, LDS Church History Library.

26. Phebe Woodruff, Lee County, Iowa Territory, to "My Dear Companion" [Wilford Woodruff], London, England, October 6–19, 1840, Wilford Woodruff Collection 1831–1905, MS 19509, Folder 36, LDS Church History Library.

In this place, Aug. 10th Leut. Col. Seymour Brunson, aged 40 years, 10 months and 23 days. Col. Brunson, was one among the first elders; he has always been a lively stone in the building of God; he was much respected by his friends and acquaintances; he died in the triumphs of faith, and in his dying moments bore testimony to the gospel he had embraced by which "life and immortality was bro't to light."²⁷

It is apparent that in 1840 church members were buried soon after they died. For example, Sarah Beeman died on August 29, 1840, and was buried the next day. Joseph Smith Sr. died on September 14, 1840, and the burial and funeral was on September 15. Seymour Brunson died on August 10, 1840, and he most likely had his funeral and burial the next day.

The Funeral of Seymour Brunson

Vilate Kimball in the same September letter to her husband wrote that Seymour Brunson's funeral:

was attended by thousands of people, he was buried under arms. the procession that marched to the grave was judged to be a mile long. a more solm [solemn] sight I never witnessed, and yet the day was joyful because of the light and glory which Joseph set forth; I can truly say my soul was lifted up.²⁸

On November 9, Heber Kimball conveyed to John Taylor the news of Brunson's death and funeral that Vilate had written to him about in September:

Semer Bronson is gon. David Paten came after him. the Ro[o]m was full of Angels that came after him to waft him home, he was burred under arms, the Procession, that went to the grave was judged to be one mile long, and a more joyfull Season She Ses She never Saw be fore on the account of the glory that Josph set forth²⁹

Seymour Brunson's comments to Joseph Smith about David Patten apparently had made an impression. In addition to those reports about preaching in the spirit prison, Smith noted that Patton also described performing baptisms and confirmations upon the spirits of the dead.

On December 15, 1840, Joseph wrote a letter to the Twelve in England, mentioning that he had spoken of baptism for the dead when he had preached the "funeral sermon" of Brunson. As was often the case when creating new doctrine, he referenced the Bible.

27. "Obituary," *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 11 (September 1840): 176, Nauvoo, Illinois.

28. Vilate Kimball, to Heber C. Kimball, September 6, 1840, MS 3276, Folder 2, LDS Church History Library.

29. Heber C. Kimball, Clitheroe, England to John Taylor, Liverpool, England, November 9, 1840, MS 24689, LDS Church History Library. This would be the information from Vilate's September 6 letter to Heber.

St Paul endeavors to prove the doctrine of the resurrection from the same, and says "else what shall they do who are baptized for the dead["] &c &c. I first mentioned the doctrine in public while preaching the funeral sermon of Bro Seymour Brunson, and have since then given general instructions to the Church on the subject. The saints have the privilege of being baptized for those of their relatives who are dead, who they feel to believe would have embraced the gospel if they had been privileged with hearing it, and who have received the gospel in the spirit through the instrumentality of those who may have been commissioned to preach to them while in the prison.³⁰

The First Baptisms for the Dead Performed in September 1840

In 1854, Jane Harper Neyman³¹ and Vienna Jacques³² stopped by the Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City and gave brief statements about their experiences concerning baptism for the dead in Nauvoo. The word "baptism" is spelled "baptism." The date "Aug 15th" was written in later.

Sept 13th 1840

Jane Neymon States that at the funeral of Col Seymour Brunson that Joseph Preach[e]d Seymour Brunsons funeral sermon & then first Introduced the Subject of Bap[t]ism of the Dead & said to the People I have laid the Subject of Bap[t]ism for the Dead before you you may Receive or Reject it as you choose. Sept 13th (Aug 15th)

She then went & was bap[t]ized for her son Cyrus Livingston Neymon by Harvey Olmstead. Joseph on hearing of it at Table in the evening asked what he said on his Telling what the Ceremony was it proved that father Olmstead had it Right

Vaenna Jaques witnessed the same by Riding Into the River on horseback to get close so as to hear what the ceremony would be

These statements given by Jane Neymon & Vienna Jaques in history office GSL City Nov 29th 1854 ½ past 10 o'clock AM³³

To clarify, this document states that according to Jane Neyman, Joseph first introduced the subject of baptism for the dead at Seymour Brunson's funeral, claiming that he laid the subject before the congregation and that it was up to them to receive or reject it. Then on September 13 Jane was baptized for her son Cyrus with Harvey Olmstead presiding and with Joseph's later approval. Vienna Jacques testifies that

30. Joseph Smith, letter, Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Council of the Twelve, England, December 15, 1840, Joseph Smith Collection, MS 155, Letters Sent, Box 2, Folder 4, LDS Church History Library.

31. Jane Harper Neyman (1792–1880) was baptized in 1838 and moved to Nauvoo in 1840. "Obituaries," *Woman's Exponent* 9, no. 1 (June 1, 1880): 4–5.

32. Vienna Jacques (1787–1884) was baptized by Emer Harris on July 12, 1831. She married Daniel Shearer in 1839 in Missouri and moved to Nauvoo by 1840.

33. Jane Neyman Statements, November 29, 1854, Joseph Smith History Documents 1839–1860, CR 100 396, Box 1, Folder 45, LDS Church History Library.

she witnessed the ceremony when she rode her horse into the water to hear the ceremony.

A second document gives the death date of her husband William, September 10, 1840, and mentions she first heard Smith preach about this subject after his (William's) death:

Mrs Jane Neymon States that her husband Wm Neymon Died at nauvoo on the 10th day of Sept – they had frequently conversed together concerning their Son who had Died before they heard the Gospel on hearing Joseph Sermon which was Delivered the Sab[b]ath after her husbands Death She Immediately applied to the Elders for bap[tism] they hesitated, but finally Elder Harvey Olmstead consented³⁴

The document explains that a sermon given by Joseph Smith in September after the funeral of her husband was the impetus for Jane to act as proxy for her dead son.

What appears to have transpired is that the vision of Ann Booth had been circulated among the members in Nauvoo after being sent from overseas by Brigham Young to his wife Mary Ann. This evidently inspired those like Seymour Brunson, who would become ill about the time the vision was first being discussed around the area. Through Seymour Brunson or perhaps Mary Ann Young, Joseph learned of Booth's vision and made reference to it at Brunson's funeral, although those attending did not mention anything later about hearing of baptism for the dead. With further reference to First Corinthians, Smith preached a more comprehensive sermon on the subject on September 13, 1840, following which Jane Neyman and others immediately began acting as proxies for their dead relatives and friends.

Importance of the Doctrine

According to Joseph Smith, he did indeed mention baptism for the dead at Brunson's funeral, evidently on August 11, the day after his death, and later at the church conference in October. The vision of Ann Booth may have influenced Joseph Smith in addressing some of the questions at the funeral, such as correcting the notion that spirits can be baptized in the spirit world. Pondering over the ambiguous passage about baptism for the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29, Smith's conclusion was that the ordinance of water baptism is required for those who have died without the gospel (such as his brother Alvin) and that they can receive the saving ordinance by proxy through immersion by someone in mortality. If they received the gospel in the spirit prison, the baptism would serve as though they had accepted the gospel in mortality.

Joseph Smith Sr. became very ill in September 1840 and sent for his sons Joseph and Hyrum. Joseph conversed with his father and informed him that it was "the priv-

34. Ibid.

ilege of the Saints to be baptized for the dead,” and his father requested that Joseph “should be baptized for Alvin immediately.”³⁵ The elder Smith died on September 14 and his funeral was held the next day.

Statement of Simon Baker

At some unknown date, probably in the 1850s, Simon Baker gave a speech (“15 August 1840,” according to a handwritten summary). The talk spoke of a widow whose son had died without baptism. The widow was Jane Neyman whose husband William had died in September 1840. So this discourse, like the recollection of Jane Neyman, had Joseph Smith speaking in September 1840 and not in August. The following was recorded, omitting the added date:

I was present at a discourse that the prophet Joseph delivered on Baptism for the dead. He read the greater part of the 15 Chap of Cor. and remarked that the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought glad tidings of great joy, and then remarked that he saw a widow in that congregation that had a son who died without being Baptized, and this widow in reading the sayings of Jesus - ‘except a man be born of water and of the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven,[’] and that not one jot nor tittle of the savior[’]s words should pass away, but all should be fulfilled. He then said that this widow should have glad tidings in that thing. He also said the apostle was talking to a people who understood Baptism for the dead, for it was practiced among them. He went on to say that people could now act for there [their] friends who had departed this life, and that the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God. He went on and made a very beautiful discourse³⁶

After Joseph spoke to the assembled members in September 1840, the new widow Jane Neyman applied to the elders to baptize her as a proxy for her son Cyrus, and Harvey Olmstead performed the ceremony with Joseph Smith’s later approval.

October 1840 Conference

On October 3, 1840, it was reported that the president of the conference, Joseph Smith, “spoke of the necessity of building a ‘House of the Lord’ in this place.” The next day, Sunday, October 4, he again addressed the members on baptism for the dead, this time at some length. The General Conference minutes taken by Robert B. Thompson reported, “President Joseph Smith jr. then arose and delivered a discourse on the subject of baptism for the dead, which, was listened to with considerable in-

35. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 714.

36. Joseph Smith Collection, MS 155, Box 4, Folder 4, Addresses, “15 Aug. 1840 Minutes of recollection of Joseph Smith’s sermon on baptism for the dead,” LDS Church History Library. The addresses in this folder are copies of discourses. The Baker statement has no date of when it was spoken or copied. Simon Baker died in 1863.

terest, by the vast multitude assembled.”³⁷ According to Vilate Kimball, who wrote to her husband Heber in England a few days after the October Conference:

President Smith has open[e]d a new and glorious subject of late which has caused quite a revival in the church. that is, being baptised for the dead. Paul speaks of it, in first Corinthians 15th chapter 29th vers[e]. Joseph has received a more full explanation of it by Revelation. he says it is the privilege of this church to be baptised for all their kinsfolks that have died before this Gospel came forth; even back to their great Gran[d]father and Mother if they have be[e]n personally acquainted with them. by so doing we act as agents for them, and give them the privilege of comeing forth in the first resurrection. he says they [the dead] will have the Gospel preached [to] them in Prison, but there is no such thing as spirrits [spirits] being baptised. he doesnot wholly [wholly] discard sisters Booths Vishon [Vision]; says it was to show her the neces[s]ity of being Baptised.³⁸

She added “Since this order has be[e]n preached here, the waters have be[e]n continually troubled. During conference there were sometimes from eight to ten Elders in the river at a time baptiseing.” Vilate then wrote of her own need to redeem her dead, writing that, “I want to be baptised for my Mother.” Phoebe Woodruff also wrote to her husband about Smith’s sermon:

Now a few words from brother Joseph sermon on the living’s being baptized for the dead that they may be judged according to men in the flesh; he has learned by revelation that those in this church may be baptized for any of their relatives who are dead and had not a ~~privalege~~ privilege [privilege] of hearing it this gospel even for their children, parents, b[r]others, sisters grand parents, uncles & aunts,— but not for acquaintances unless they send a ministering spirit to their friends on earth,— this doctrine is cordially received by the church.³⁹

Robert B. Thompson penned a letter to Heber C. Kimball the next month about what he termed as “the old doctrine of Baptism for the Dead”:

You will have heard ere this of the death of our beloved Bishop Partridg[e] Bro Seymour Brunson and the patriarch of the Church Joseph Smith Senr. You will likewise probably have heard of the old doctrine of Baptism for the Dead which has been introduced by President Joseph Smith Jr. So that the Saints have the priviledge [privilege] of being baptized for their relatives and friends who have not had the priviledge of hearing the gospel while in the flesh but who probably receive it while in the spirit in prison. so that they can claim them at the ressurection of the just. this is certainly a glorious doctrine and shews forth the gracious purposes of our God, and the grandeur of that scheme

37. “Minutes of the general conference,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 12 (October 1840): 186.

38. Vilate Kimball, Nauvoo, Illinois to Heber C. Kimball, London, England, October 11–13, 1840, MS 18732, Folder 1, LDS Church History Library.

39. Phebe Woodruff to “My Dear Companion” [Wilford Woodruff], October 6–19, 1840, Wilford Woodruff Collection 1831–1905, MS 19509, Folder 36, LDS Church History Library.

which is to raise mankind from the ruins of the fall. Hundreds have already Gone forth and been baptized for their friends who are deceased.⁴⁰

Also at the October conference Robert B. Thompson read a thesis on priesthood that Joseph Smith had prepared. The essay stated that it was *through the priesthood* that “all knowledge, doctrine, the plan of salvation and every important matter is revealed from heaven.”⁴¹ This may possibly have been in answer to questions raised about Ann Booth’s vision.

As such, Booth’s vision may be recognized as a principal impetus for Smith to introduce proxy baptisms for the dead. But instead of baptisms taking place in the spirit world, as was the case in her vision, Joseph would proclaim that they were to be performed by the priesthood on earth.

When Joseph first explained the doctrine of baptism for the dead in the fall of 1840, he simply claimed that men and women could act as agents for their dead by being baptized for them. Anyone could be baptized for any deceased relative or friend. According to her 1854 statement, Jane Neyman was baptized for her dead son Cyrus in September 1840. Thereafter, thousands of baptisms were performed in the Mississippi River until November 1841 when a baptismal font was constructed for use in the Nauvoo Temple. Over fifteen thousand proxy baptisms were performed during this period.⁴²

Joseph Smith would not proclaim any formal revelation on baptism for the dead until January 19, 1841, when he called for a new temple to be built, saying:

I command you, all ye my saints to build a house unto me, and I grant unto you a sufficien[t] time to build a house unto me, and during this time your baptisms shall be acceptable unto me. But behold, at the end of this appointment, your baptisms for your dead, shall not be acceptable unto me, and if you do not these things, at the end of the appointment, ye shall be rejected as a church, with your dead, saith the Lord your God.⁴³

Smith’s same proclamation mentions David W. Patten “who is with me at this time,” and later declaring of Patten that, “behold his priesthood no man taketh from him.” Joseph Smith Sr. was said to be sitting “with Abraham at his right hand, and

40. Robert B. Thompson, letter, Nauvoo, Illinois, to Heber C. Kimball, London, England, November 5, 1840, Heber C. Kimball Collection, MS 12476, Box 1, Folder 2, LDS Church History Library.

41. “An Investigation of the Priesthood from the Scriptures,” October 5, 1840, Joseph Smith Collection, MS 155, LDS Church History Library. Also in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comp. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 38.

42. Susan Easton Black and Harvey Bischoff Black, comp., *Annotated Record of Baptisms for the Dead, 1840–1845, Nauvoo, Hancock County, Illinois*, 7 vols. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 1:vi.

43. “Book of the Law of the Lord,” 5, MS 22507, LDS Church History Library; LDS D&C 124:31–32.

blessed and holy is he, for he is mine." Also "Seymour Brunson I have taken unto myself, no man taketh his priesthood."⁴⁴

Proxy baptisms went on for almost two years before Smith set more stringent parameters for how they were to be performed.⁴⁵ But even with these further instructions, outlined in two letters in September 1842, Joseph still did not forbid men being baptized for women or women for men.

The origin of the baptism for the dead doctrine appears to have had its genesis in the wake of the vision of an early English convert, a woman who has fallen into relative obscurity. This vision of Ann Booth inspired many to feel concern for their dead friends and relatives and to perform work targeted toward the afterlife. The questions arising from Ann's vision apparently intrigued and inspired Joseph Smith to further explore how those like his brother Alvin could obtain the fullest eternal status.

The original impetus for the measure arose over the Smith family's concern over Alvin's unbaptized state at the time of his 1823 death. The ordinance that would bring that unease to an end would be performed in the Mississippi River in 1840. And Ann Booth's vision would have played a most important role in that resolution.

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44. "Book of the Law of the Lord," 4, 13, MS 22507, LDS Church History Library; LDS D&C 124:19, 130, 132.

45. See Alexander L. Baugh, "For This Ordinance Belongeth to My House': The Practice of Baptism for the Dead Outside the Nauvoo Temple," *Mormon Historical Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 47–58.