Was Joseph F. Smith Blessed by His Father Hyrum Smith in Liberty Jail?

Alexander L. Baugh

In discussions associated with some of the significant Liberty Jail events, the statement is sometimes made that Joseph F. Smith, eldest son of Hyrum and Mary Fielding Smith, was blessed by his father during his 1838–39 incarceration. Is there historical evidence to support this conclusion? Significantly, neither Hyrum nor Mary is known to have left any statements regarding such a blessing. Likewise, it appears from the existing sources associated with this episode that none of the other prisoners—Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Lyman Wight, Alexander McRae, or Caleb Baldwin—made any mention of it. During their confinement, the Mormon leaders were also visited by a number of Latter-day Saints, yet from those known to have visited the jail, no accounts about the blessing can be found. Even in the biography of Joseph F. Smith, written by his son Joseph Fielding Smith (one who would have been privy to many undocumented or unwritten incidents in his father’s life), the narrative is silent, suggesting that perhaps neither Joseph F. nor Joseph Fielding may have even been aware of the incident—if it indeed occurred.¹ Significantly, the only known statement by a contemporary of the period to indicate that Hyrum blessed his infant son in the jail comes from Edward Stevenson. In his reminiscences, Stevenson recorded, “Joseph F. Smith, with his mother, visited his father in this same jail, and although but an infant, received a blessing under his hands.”² Besides this statement, what other evidence is there to suggest that the blessing may have taken place?
On 29 January 1839, Mary Fielding Smith and Mercy Fielding Thompson, Mary’s sister, visited Liberty Jail and spent the night.3 On this occasion, Mary brought Joseph F. with her, he having been born on 13 November 1838 at Far West, Missouri, two weeks after Joseph’s and Hyrum’s arrest and incarceration. Mary’s health had not been good following the birth, and she had not been able to visit her husband in jail prior to this time. Therefore, this visit marked the first time that Hyrum had been privileged to see his newborn son. Given the circumstances—this being the first time Hyrum had seen his new son and the fact that Mary was making preparations to leave Missouri (suggesting that it might be some time before Hyrum would be reunited with her and the children)—it seems likely that Hyrum would use the occasion to give a blessing. Years later, Mercy left two separate recollections surrounding the visit:

In February [January] 1839, while Joseph and Hyrum Smith, with four other brethren were incarcerated in Liberty jail, I accompanied my sister Mary from Far West, to visit them. It would be beyond my power to describe my feelings when we were admitted into the jail by the keeper and the door was locked behind us. We could not help feeling a sense of horror on realizing that we were locked up in that dark and dismal den, fit only for criminals of the deepest dye; but there we beheld
Joseph, the Prophet, the man chosen of God, in the dispensation of the fullness of time to hold the keys of His kingdom on the earth, with power to bind and to loose as God should direct, confined in a loathsome prison for no other cause or reason than that he claimed to be inspired of God to establish His church among men. There also we found his noble brother, Hyrum, who, I believe was not charged with any other crime than that of being a friend to his brother Joseph. There were also four other brethren whose offenses were similar to that of Hyrum’s. The night was spent in fearful forebodings, owing to a false rumor having gone out that the prisoners contemplated making an attempt to escape, which greatly enraged the jailor and the guards.

Under these circumstances we were constrained to bid adieu to the Prophet and his brethren, and hasten our departure from Liberty. My sister was in very delicate health, having with her her babe only three month’s old, whom his father then saw for the first time.4

East side of the original Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri, 1904. The photograph was taken by John A. Califf of Carthage, Illinois, and is located in the Kibbe Hancock County Historical Museum in Carthage. Photograph courtesy of Alexander L. Baugh.

About the first of February [late January] 1839, by the request of her husband, my sister (Mary) was placed on a bed in a wagon and taken on a journey of about 40 miles to visit him [Hyrum] in prison, her infant son Joseph F. then being about eleven weeks old. I had to accompany her taking my own babe along, then near eight months old. The weather being extremely cold we suffered much on the journey.

We arrived at the prison in the evening. We were admitted and the doors closed upon us, a night never to be forgotten. A sleepless night. I nursed the darling babes and in the morning prepared to start for home with my afflicted sister, and as long as memory lasts will remain in my recollection the squeaking hinges of that door which closed upon the noblest men on earth. Who can imagine our feelings as we traveled homeward, but would I sell that honor bestowed upon me of being locked up in jail with such characters for good? No! No!5
Although Mercy makes no mention of Hyrum actually blessing eleven-week-old Joseph F. during her and Mary’s visit to the jail, this does not mean that it did not happen.

It is important to note that Emma Hale Smith visited Liberty Jail on three occasions: 8–9 December 1838, 20–22 December 1838, and 21 January 1839. On two of these visits, young Joseph III accompanied her. Years later, Joseph III recalled his father, Joseph Smith Jr., giving him a blessing during one of these two visits. Given this information, it seems likely that on the occasion of Mary’s bringing Joseph F. to the jail in late January 1839, Hyrum would have followed the example of his brother Joseph and blessed his son.

Concerning the blessing Joseph Smith III received under the hand of his father, Emma’s biographers, Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, place the blessing as having been given during Emma’s and Joseph III’s 21 January 1839 visit. The authors wrote: “Before the night was over Joseph had decided to give his son a blessing, perhaps because Hyrum blessed his new son.” Significantly, however, Newell and Avery’s narrative regarding that particular visit is incorrect concerning several important facts. First, the authors state that Mary Fielding Smith and Mercy Fielding Thompson accompanied Emma to the Liberty Jail on 21 January 1839, when in fact the only time the two sisters visited the jail was on 29–30 January, the week after Emma’s visit. Second, Mary and Mercy never accompanied Emma to the jail on any of her visits. And finally, and most significantly, it was likely Joseph’s blessing of Joseph III in December or January that inspired and prompted Hyrum to bless Joseph F. when Mary brought him to the jail on 29–30 January, not the other way around. In other words, Newell and Avery have the blessing incidents reversed.

In short, it is likely or highly probable that Joseph F. Smith was blessed by his father Hyrum in Liberty Jail on either 29 or 30 January 1839.

Notes


2. Edward Stevenson, Reminiscences of Joseph the Prophet, and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Published by the Author, 1893), 41. Stevenson noted that he “looked upon the jail in 1834, and again in 1838–39,” suggesting that he never entered the jail but merely viewed the building from the outside. See Stevenson, Reminiscences of Joseph the Prophet, 42. Since he did not go inside, he likely never visited the Mormon prisoners during their incarceration. In September 1888, at the age of sev-
enty-eight, Stevenson visited the jail in company with Andrew Jenson and Joseph S. Black as part of a historical fact-finding mission for the LDS Church. See Andrew Jenson, Autobiography of Andrew Jenson (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 163–65.


6. History of the Reorganized Church, 309, 315.


8. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984), 78.
After his uncle Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, and his father, Hyrum Smith, were murdered in Carthage, Ill., in 1844, he and his mother fled with the majority of the Mormons to Utah. Made an apostle of the church in 1866, Smith advanced within the hierarchy to the office of president in 1901. He also served on the city council of Salt Lake City and in the territorial legislature (1865–74, 1880, 1882). Smith had six wives, but he accepted the decision to give up polygamy reached by church leaders in 1890 and testified before a United States Senate committee that Mormons no longer ac Hyrum, his father, was later released from custody during a transfer from Liberty Jail and joined his family in Nauvoo. Joseph said he remembered Nauvoo, and could recall his uncle, Joseph Smith. Joseph was only five years old when his father and uncle were killed in Carthage, Illinois, on June 27, 1844.[2][3][4]. At the age of nine, Joseph drove the family wagon all the way to the Salt Lake Valley.[5]. Soon after his 15th birthday, Joseph F. Smith was ordained an elder and called to serve a three-year mission in Hawaii. During his mission he overcame fatigue, severe illness, and material loss "...Smith was the son of Patriarch Hyrum Smith and his second wife Mary Fielding, a British convert to the Church who married Hyrum after the death of his first wife, Jerusha Barden Smith. In addition to her two children, Mary Fielding Smith raised the five children from the union of Hyrum and Jerusha..." "...he would have been no more than five and a half when on June 27, 1844, Joseph's uncle and father were killed by a mob in Carthage, Illinois..."Â Born in Far West, Missouri while his father was imprisoned in Liberty Jail, at the age of five his father was murdered, at the age of seven he drove the family wagon all the way to the Salt Lake Valley, at the age of fifteen he was called on a mission to the Sandwich Islands, and at the age of twenty-seven he. David Hyrum Smith. Came to Utah to reclaim the Brighamites and had a debate with Joseph F. Smith where he was convinced Brigham had the truth. Went back to Nauvoo to get family, against counsel of BY was put into mental institution by his mother and others for saying Brigham had the truth. He died there.Â Gone to see Joseph in Liberty Jail and Joseph told him to find a place between Far West temple site and Kirtland temple. Chooses state of Illinois and city he chooses is Quincy. Brigham Young.