
DOCTRINE & COVENANTS 138

CHRONOLOGY

A helpful article that elucidates some of the context for this section is available freely online:

George S. Tate, "["The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead': Death, the Great War, and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic as Context for Doctrine and Covenants 138,"](#) *BYU Studies* 46, no. 1 (2007): 5-40.

- **1918** – World War I and the Spanish Flu pandemic.
- **January 23, 1818** – Apostle Hyrum Mack Smith, JFS's oldest son, died at the age of 45.
- **September 24, 1918** – Ida Bowman Smith (Hyrum's widow) died days after giving birth to a child.
- **October 3, 1918** - Vision of the Redemption of the dead.
- **October 4, 1918** - JFS speaks in conference. After conference dictates revelation to his son, JFS II, **D&C 138**.
- **October 31, 1918** - Vision text presented to meeting of the FP, Q12, and Presiding Patriarch and accepted.
- **November 19, 1918** - Vision published in the *Deseret Evening News*.
- **November 11, 1918** - Armistice Day.
- **November 19, 1918** – JFS died.
- **December, 1918** – Vision published in the *Improvement Era*.

DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 138, VISION, OCTOBER 3, 1918

SETTING

JFS was well acquainted with death and suffered greatly with each member of his family who passed away (see article above). Moreover, 1918 was a time of massive and widespread mortality across the world. JFS was on his deathbed in the fall of 1918, and was not expected to attend October General Conference. Nevertheless, he arrived and spoke:

I will not, I dare not, attempt to enter upon many things that are resting upon my mind this morning, and I shall postpone until some future time, the Lord being willing, my attempt to tell you some of the things that are in my mind, and that dwell in my heart. I have not lived alone these five months. I have dwelt in the spirit of prayer, of supplication, of faith and of determination; and I have had my communication with the Spirit of the Lord continuously; and I am glad to say to you, my brethren and sisters, that it is a happy meeting this morning for me to have the privilege of joining with you in the opening of this eighty-ninth Semi-annual Conference of the Church.¹

¹ JFS, *Conference Report*, (October, 1918): 2.

The day before this talk, the Church President had been pondering on the scriptures and he beheld a vision of the spirit world. After the conference, he dictated an account of the vision to his son, Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith.

Several weeks passed before the vision account was sent to the governing quorums. On October 21, 1918, the regular meeting of FP, Q12 and Presiding Patriarch received the vision text and upheld it. James Talmage wrote in his diary:

Attended meeting of the First Presidency and the Twelve. today President Smith, who is still confined to his home by illness, sent to the Brethren the account of a vision through which, as he states, were revealed to him important facts relating to the work of the disembodied Savior in the realm of the departed spirits, and of the missionary work in progress on the other side of the veil. By united action the Council of the Twelve, with the Counsellors in the First Presidency, and the Presiding Patriarch accepted and enforced the revelation as the Word of the Lord.²

Note that there are some interesting similarities between this document and the *Descensus ad Infernos* or "Harrowing of Hell" as described in the apocryphal "Gospel of Nicodemus."

COMMENTS

1. "sat in my room pondering over the scriptures." Pondering, people. JFS didn't just put in his 20 minutes a day. He engaged in a pattern that we see all over the scriptures. See 1 Nephi 11:1; D&C 76:15-19.

2. Remember that it was JFS, 28 years earlier, who first articulated the content of the eventual revelation regarding the end of the "Law of Adoption" as it was called and extended the priesthood chain to all of our dead.

5-6. JFS thinks of something, so he looks it up.

11. Pondered again. See notes above for 1.

12. A group of the just who had died.

13. They had offered Sacrifice, which should give us an understanding of the time frame.

15. Why did the just who had died need deliverance?

16-17. Well here is the answer.

18. The Son of God appears!

20. Jesus did not visit everyone.

22. There has been a difference of opinion whether there is a geographical or ontological separation between paradise or spirit prison and hell. GAs have come down on this in different ways. Personally, I go for ontological separation. See for example vs. 23 where the righteous are described as being bound by the chains of hell.

² James Talmage, Diary, quoted in Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 307.

26-28. This is a great example of thinking things through. JFS, thought about what he had read and it simply didn't make sense. So he gets a vision. Not bad.

29-31. The answer to JFS's question: The Hell Mission.

32-34. Not a bad list of what missionaries should be preaching, albeit for the living.

38-54. So, who was there? Note that Moses is listed. Was he dead? John the Baptist isn't listed. That seems odd...unless vs. 45...

47-48. It appears that this is a description of Elijah's mission, not an indicator that he was there.

50. Honestly, I don't know what this means, but I believe it.

53-54. Team Restoration.

55-56. Note that everyone can't fall under the description of this verse, as much as we might want to tell our kids that they do belong.

57. This is a description, not a theodicy. I caution against the use of this verse as theodicy.

60. Sealed with a witness of the dying Church President.