

I Saw the Hosts of the Dead

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*President Joseph F. Smith's vision in 1918
offered comfort to a grieving world and gives us
greater understanding of the plan of salvation.*

My soul is rent asunder. My heart is broken, and
flutters for life! O my sweet son, my joy, my
hope! . . . O God, help me!"¹

So President Joseph F. Smith wrote in his journal upon the death of his eldest son, Hyrum Mack Smith, the 45-year-old Apostle who succumbed in January 1918 to a ruptured appendix. Eight months later, on September 24, Hyrum's widow, Ida Bowman Smith, died of heart failure just a week after giving birth to a baby boy. The couple left behind five children. At the time, the First World War,

which began in 1914 while Hyrum was presiding over the European Mission, was still raging. It ended with the Armistice on November 11, 1918.

Death and the war were certainly on President Smith's mind that year. On October 3, 1918, less than two weeks after the death of his daughter-in-law, he sat in his room "pondering over the scriptures; and reflecting upon the great atoning sacrifice that was made by the Son of God, for the redemption of the world; and the great and wonderful love made manifest by the Father and the Son" (D&C 138:1-3). His mind turned to the account in 1 Peter 3-4 of Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison between the time of His Crucifixion and Resurrection. These chapters impressed President Smith as never before (see D&C 138:6). He said, "As I pondered over these things which are written, the eyes of my understanding were opened, and the Spirit of the Lord rested upon me, and I saw the hosts of

PHOTOGRAPH OF JOSEPH F. SMITH, COURTESY OF THE CHURCH HISTORY ARCHIVES; PAINTING, 3RD NEPHI, BY JERRY THOMPSON; PHOTOGRAPH OF AMERICAN SOLDIERS ON THE WESTERN FRONT, COURTESY OF BETTMAN/CORBIS; PAINTING, HYRUM MACK SMITH, BY JOHN HAYEN; FRONT PAGE, OCTOBER 4, 1918, OF THE DISCREET NEWS, COURTESY OF HAROLD B. LEE LIBRARY.



Insets below: A painting of Hyrum Mack Smith, by John Hafen. American soldiers fighting in Europe during World War I. The front page of the Deseret News from October 4, 1918. This page headlines activities in World War I but also highlights President Joseph F. Smith's general conference address on October 3, 1918, as well as reports of the flu pandemic in the United States.

the dead, both small and great” (D&C 138:11).

The vision that opened before him, which now comprises section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants, was one of consolation. Coming at a time of great worldwide and personal suffering, it testifies of Heavenly Father's love and of the incomparable compassion and comfort offered by the Atonement for the living and the dead.

No Stranger to Loss

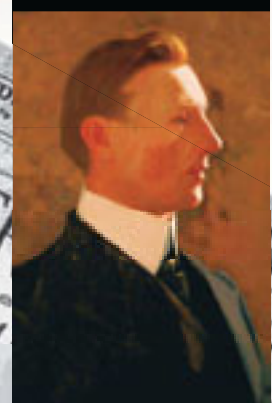
As heartbreaking as his son Hyrum's death was, it was not President Smith's first experience with the death of loved ones. He was just five when his father, the Patriarch Hyrum Smith, was slain with the Prophet Joseph Smith in Carthage Jail. His mother, Mary, died when he was 13. In 1915 his wife Sarah Richards Smith died, followed later that year by his 25-year-old daughter, Zina Smith Greenwell. By 1918 only one of his siblings had survived. Of his 44 children, 13 had died, many in their childhood. President Joseph F. Smith's expressions of grief over the death of each in his journal, letters, and commemorative poems are touching from first to last.

When his first child, Mercy Josephine, died before her third birthday, he wrote: “My heart is bruised and wrenched almost asunder. I am desolate, my home seems desolate.

. . . I look in vain, I listen, no sound, I wander through the rooms, all are vacant, lonely, desolate, deserted.

. . . No beaming little black eyes sparkling with love for papa; . . . but a vacant little chair.

. . . and only the one desolate thought forcing



In Flanders Fields

By John McCrae

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.
Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*



its crushing leaden weight upon my heart—she is not here, she is gone!”² Death had surrounded him throughout his life, and the longings these deaths awakened could not be fully soothed in mortality.

With respect to Hyrum Mack’s death, how comforting it must have been to the prophet to behold “that the faithful elders of this dispensation, when they depart from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel of repentance . . . in the great world of the spirits of the dead” (D&C 138:57). Among the noble and great ones President Smith also saw his father, Hyrum (see D&C 138:53), after whom he had named his son and after whom his newly orphaned grandson was also named.

The First World War and Pervasive Grief

President Smith received the vision that is section 138 the day before October 1918 general conference, and his son Joseph Fielding Smith took it in dictation shortly thereafter. It was approved by President Smith’s counselors, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and the Church Patriarch on October 31. (It was added to the scriptures in 1976 and became section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1979.) Because President Smith had been ill for some time, he was not expected to attend the conference. In the opening session, he spoke only

briefly. He referred to his illness and said, “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 communications with the Spirit of the Lord continuously.”³ The front page of the *Deseret News* for October 4 reported this session, but it is the First World War that dominated the rest of the page.

From its beginning in 1914, President Smith had watched the war from afar with concern and sadness. In a Christmas message in December 1914, the First Presidency wrote, “While rejoicing over the birth of the Incomparable One, the light of our gladness is overshadowed with the war clouds that have darkened the skies of Europe, and our songs and salutations of joy and good will are rendered sadly discordant by the thunders of artillery and the groans of the wounded and dying, echoing from afar, but harrowing to our souls as the awful tidings come sounding o’er the sea.”⁴

What many thought would be a short war, over by Christmas, soon settled into a long slaughter, facilitated by new technology: the machine gun, long-range high-explosive artillery, airplanes, tanks, submarines, and gas. The loss of life was unparalleled. At Verdun, France, for example, there were nearly a million casualties between February and December 1916. To take

pressure off Verdun, the French appealed to the British to launch an offensive on the river Somme. By the time that battle ended in November 1916, it had claimed almost a million casualties as well. Seeing what lay about them, and imagining their own fate, soldier poets sometimes adopted

the perspective of the dead, speaking from graves. Perhaps the best-known example is Canadian John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields."⁵

In the end, 70 million men from all over the world took up arms. There were over 30 million military casualties, including 9 million dead, half of whom have no known graves. These latter are often commemorated on memorials to the missing, such as the one at Thiepval on the Somme, on which are inscribed the names of over 73,000 British soldiers whose graves are not known. Such memorials are related to a theme of the period—that of absence. This idea governs, for example, the most famous British memorial of all, the Cenotaph, or empty tomb, in London's Whitehall, which has been the focal point of mourning and remembrance since it was erected.

Death itself was an absorbing absence for the bereaved. Some were mourning loved ones who were among the missing or were buried in distant graves in foreign fields. In most cases families were denied the usual rituals of closure. And the sheer, overwhelming quantity of death awakened individual and communal grief on an unprecedented scale. With loss came questions: What is the fate of the dead? Do they continue to exist? Is there life after death? Will I see my loved ones again? The world was dense with loss and, as soldier journalist Stephen Graham wrote, "There is a pull from the other world, a drag on the heart and spirit."⁶

The Flu Pandemic of 1918

Many more deaths were soon to follow, unrelated to battle. There were so many, in fact, that the horrific losses of the previous four years of war would be multiplied several times within a short period by the pandemic of 1918.

The new killer was a flu virus more virulent than any ever known, the cause of the pandemic of 1918. In the United States alone, the month of October 1918—the period between the vision of October 3 and its formal acceptance on October 31—was the deadliest month in the nation's history.

The same front page of the *Deseret News* that had reported on President Smith's conference remarks and was dominated by news of the war devoted a column to the burgeoning flu epidemic. Hardest hit were large eastern U.S. cities like Philadelphia and New York. Surprisingly, the most vulnerable age group was 21–34. In military camps and on troop ships they perished at an astonishing rate. Of the American soldiers who died during this period, more than half were casualties of the flu pandemic.⁷ Although Utah was less devastated than were the larger urban areas, by October 9 cases of the flu had grown so alarmingly that the order was given to cease all public gatherings.

The Armistice was declared on November 11. A few days later, on November 19, just after his 80th birthday, President Smith died. Because of the pandemic, no public funeral services were held. A month later, with the flu still raging, Church leaders designated December 22 as a day of fasting "for the arrest and speedy suppression by Divine Power of the desolating scourge that is passing over the earth."⁸ Shortly thereafter the pandemic seemed to have passed its crest, and the decision was

Left: The Cenotaph, or empty tomb, a British memorial to soldiers who died during World War I and whose graves are not known.

The image depicts the day it was dedicated in 1920, when millions of people visited the site. Below: A depiction of Jesus Christ visiting the spirits in prison.



JAN 23: HYRUM MACK SMITH DIES.

SEPT 18: HYRUM MACK SMITH JR. IS BORN.

SEPT 24: HYRUM MACK SMITH'S WIFE, IDA BOWMAN SMITH, DIES.

OCT 3: JOSEPH F. SMITH RECEIVES THE REVELATION NOW KNOWN AS D&C 138.

OCT 4: AFTER MONTHS OF ILLNESS, JOSEPH F. SMITH SURPRISES THE CHURCH BY ATTENDING CONFERENCE.

OCT 9: CHURCHES AND OTHER PUBLIC PLACES ARE CLOSED IN UTAH.

OCT 31: THE REVELATION ON THE DEAD IS APPROVED BY THE FIRST PRESIDENCY AND THE QUORUM OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES.

NOV 11: THE ARMISTICE ENDS THE FIGHTING IN WWI.



The Hyrum Mack Smith family: Geraldine, Hyrum Mack Smith, Margaret, Joseph F. Smith, Ida Bowman Smith, and Maxine Smith.



An emergency Army hospital in Kansas for soldiers stricken by the flu pandemic.



American soldiers in 1918.

made to resume church services on January 5. But a further wave of the epidemic in the spring caused the April general conference to be postponed until June.

In the United States, the average life expectancy dropped by 12 years between 1917 and 1918. Worldwide, the death toll was staggering: at least 50 million.⁹ According to historian Alfred Crosby, “Nothing else—no infection, no war, no famine—has ever killed so many in as short a period.”¹⁰

Timely and Timeless: “A Document without Parallel”

The vision given to President Joseph F. Smith on October 3, 1918, came at the very point where these two great death-making events—the war and the flu pandemic—intersect. The war was not yet over; nor had the developing epidemic reached its full, pandemic power. But the more I have studied events surrounding this extraordinary vision, the more my appreciation for its timeliness has grown. A few days after President Smith’s death, the revelation was published in the pages of a general circulation newspaper, the *Deseret News*, making its transcendent truths available to comfort not only Latter-day Saints who mourned but also all those whose suffering might open their hearts to the Holy Ghost.

The vision proceeds from and affirms the great and wonderful love of God, as it is expressed through the Atonement of Christ. This Atonement is universal and is proffered to all who have ever lived or died. The vision is

rich in consolation, renewing for the modern world Isaiah’s prophecy of binding up the brokenhearted and declaring liberty to the captives (see D&C 138:42; see also Isaiah 61:1).

The vision brings hope and affirms the foundations of faith in a world where the faith of so many was shattered by the great calamities they had witnessed and experienced. It declares to all the world through the mouth of the Lord’s anointed that the Father and the Son live and are still earnestly engaged in the ongoing work of salvation for all God’s children.

Section 138 shows that death is not oblivion, as so many feared, but that each individual spirit continues in the next life. And in an age so painfully preoccupied with absence, especially where the bodies of loved ones had irretrievably vanished, the vision, with its promise of resurrection, affirms the central and eternal importance of the body in vivid terms: “For the dead had looked upon the long absence of their spirits from their bodies as a bondage” (D&C 138:50). The revelation affirms that “their sleeping dust was to be restored unto its perfect frame, bone to his bone, and the sinews and the flesh upon them, the spirit and the body to be united never again to be divided, that they might receive a fulness of joy” (D&C 138:17).

The vision shows how the work of redemption was and is organized among the dead, how the Lord’s servants “carry the message of redemption unto all the dead”

DEC

NOV 19:
PRESIDENT
JOSEPH F.
SMITH DIES
SURROUNDED
BY HIS FAMILY.

NOV 30: THE
REVELATION
IS PUBLISHED
IN THE
DESERET
NEWS.



President Joseph F. Smith died on November 19, 1918. A public funeral was not held due to the flu pandemic.

DEC 22:
THE ENTIRE
CHURCH
FASTS TO
END THE
"SCOURGE
OF DEATH."

JAN

JAN 5:
CHURCH
SERVICES
ARE HELD
AGAIN.

JAN 6:
TEMPLE
SERVICES
RESUME.

JAN:
THE REVELATION
WE CALL
D&C 138 IS
PUBLISHED.

APR

GENERAL
CONFERENCE
POSTPONED
DUE TO
ANOTHER BUT
MILDER FLU
OUTBREAK.



A celebration on November 11, 1918, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to celebrate the Armistice.



President Heber J. Grant and his counselors Charles W. Penrose and Anthon H. Lund announced a churchwide fast on December 22, 1918, to ask God to stop the scourge of death raging over the earth. The Great Flu Pandemic seemed to have crested shortly thereafter. Left: Notice in the Deseret News announcing the fast.

(D&C 138:37). It shows that a way has been provided for all to receive the saving ordinances, reconfirming the connection of temple work to the redemption of the dead (see D&C 138:48, 54). And it invites us, the living, to actively participate, through seeking after the dead by performing vicarious ordinances (see D&C 138:33), and in so doing drawing the two worlds together.

This remarkable vision of the redemption of the dead is more than a doctrinal clarification that when Christ visited the spirits in prison (see 1 Peter 3–4), He did not go Himself among the wicked but “organized his forces” and “commissioned them” (D&C 138:30) to go forth on His behalf. Nor is its audience limited only to members of the Church. It is, as President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) said, “a document without parallel. . . . There is nothing quite like it in all our sacred literature.”¹¹ In its grandeur and scope, it is the capstone of all teachings on the work of salvation among the dead.

But it is more than this. Addressed to the entire world through the living prophet in the last weeks of his life, the vision came at a time of great worldwide need. Such widespread death; such universal and unresolved grief, particularly where loved ones had vanished without a trace; such pervasive hunger to know the fate of the dead—all these things give a special resonance to Doctrine and Covenants 138, the Vision of the Redemption of the Dead, with its

great concourses of the dead, its assurance of divine love and of the unparalleled comfort of the Atonement, the blessings of which extend to all mankind, both the living and the dead. Timely and timeless, the vision spoke directly and compassionately to an agonized world in 1918, as it still speaks to us today and will continue to speak in future ages. ■

This article was prepared based on material by the author published in BYU Studies Vol. 46 Number 1 (2007).

NOTES

1. *The Life of Joseph F. Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (1938), 474. For fuller treatment and documentation of the materials discussed in this article, see 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): 4–40.
2. *The Life of Joseph F. Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (1938), 455–56.
3. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, Oct. 1918, 2.
4. *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (1965–75), 4:319.
5. John McCrae, “In Flanders Fields,” in *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. Jon Silkin (1996), 85.
6. Stephen Graham, *The Challenge of the Dead* (1921), 36.
7. One such flu casualty was Stanford Hinckley, Gordon B. Hinckley’s older brother, who died on October 19, 1918, at a training camp near Bordeaux, France, attended by his chaplain, B. H. Roberts. Stanford Hinckley left behind a widow and a six-month-old son and now lies buried at Suresnes, overlooking Paris.
8. *Deseret Evening News*, Dec. 20, 1918, 4.
9. Niall P. A. S. Johnson and Juergen Mueller, “Updating the Accounts: Global Mortality of the 1918–1920 ‘Spanish’ Influenza Pandemic,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 76, no. 1 (2002): 105–15; the authors caution that “even this vast figure [of 50 million] may be substantially lower than the real toll, perhaps as much as 100 percent understated” (115).
10. Alfred W. Crosby, *America’s Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918* (1989), 311.
11. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Remarks at the Dedication of the Joseph F. Smith Building at Brigham Young University,” Sept. 20, 2005, 4; available at speeches.byu.edu.