

D&C 121-123

Lesson 27, Doctrine & Covenants, Adult Religion Class, Monday, 17 April 2017

David A. LeFevre

General Introduction

After the election day brawl in Gallatin, Daviess County, Missouri, in which Mormons who tried to vote were denied and a tussle broke out with some injuries, tensions quickly rose between Latter-day Saints in northwest Missouri and their neighbors.

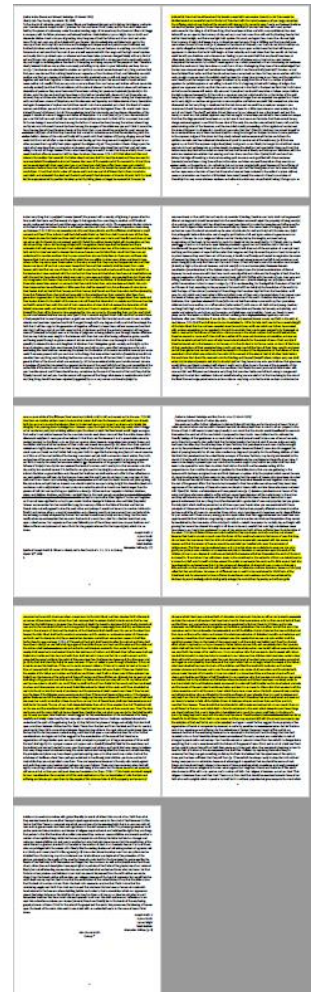
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With Alexander McRae doing most of the writing, assisted by Caleb Baldwin for just pages, Joseph Smith began dictating a twenty-eight page letter (or really, two letters) on Wednesday, 20 March 1839, addressed to Emma Smith, Edward Partridge, and the Church at large. It took at least two days of dictation to finish it, with the second letter probably done on 22 March. See the illustration at right of a typescript of the letters with the excerpts used in D&C 121-123 marked in yellow to represent the amount canonized.

Summary Chronology

- **Mon, 6 Aug 1838** – On election day, fighting broke out in Gallatin, Daviess County, Missouri, between Latter-day Saints trying to vote and Missourians trying to prevent it.
- **Sat, 27 Oct 1838** – Governor Lilburn W. Boggs issued an extermination order to drive the Mormons from the state of Missouri.
- **Tue, 30 Oct 1838** – The settlement at Haun’s Mill was attacked without warning, with seventeen dead and fourteen other Latter-day Saint men and boys wounded.

- **Wed, 31 Oct 1838** – Joseph Smith and other Church leaders arrested at Far West and sentenced to be shot.
- **Tue, 16 Apr 1839** – Joseph and the other Liberty Jail prisoners were allowed to leave Missouri and join their families in Illinois.



D&C 121 – title

Date and Location

Wednesday, 20 March 1839, at Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri

Setting

The setting is the same for all three sections in this lesson. Having been arrested on 31 October 1838, Joseph Smith and five other brethren finally landed in Liberty Jail, await-

ing a trial originally scheduled for March 1839 but then extended just prior to the writing of these texts (see General Introduction for more details). On 20 and about 22 March 1839, Joseph Smith dictated two letters directed to the Church overall but specifically to Bishop Edward Partridge, sent via his wife Emma to give her the first chance to read them. Though written on different days, the letters were combined when sent and have been assigned to 20-25 March 1839, though the exact date of the second letter is not known (the Joseph Smith Papers project dated is “circa 22 March 1839”).

Here is a list of the verses in these three sections and the corresponding letter pages from which the text comes. See also the accompanying text file of the two letters that has the canonized sections marked in yellow.

- 121:1-6 20 March, 3-4
- 121:7-25 20 March, 8-10
- 121:26-32 20 March, 13-14
- 121:33 20 March, 15
- 121:34-46 22 March, 2-3
- 122:1-9 22 March, 3-4
- 123:1-17 22 March, 5-7

Documents and Publication

The oldest copy is Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge (20 Mar 1839), 3-17. It was first published in the *Times and Seasons* (May and July 1840) then as Section 121 in 1876.

Outline

- Plea for suffering Saints (1-6)
- Peace from the Lord (7-10)
- Servants of sin (11-17)
- Curses against dissidents (18-25)
- All shall be revealed (26-32)
- Many called but few chosen (33-40)
- Power of the priesthood (41-46)

Commentary

Plea for suffering Saints (1-6)

1 *O God, where art thou?* D&C 121 doesn't represent a failing of Joseph's faith but rather a plea for the suffering members of the Church at large, who had lost home and property and been forced to cross the Mississippi from Missouri into Illinois in the dead of winter.

1 *where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?*

The "pavilion" of the Lord on the Old Testament is the structure over his throne, but also a place where the Lord could hide his servants during times of trouble (Psalm 18:11; 27:5; 31:20). The Prophet longed for the Lord to put the Church under his pavilion for safe keeping.

2 *How long shall thy hand be stayed.* One of the arguments of the dissenters during this time is that the Lord had not shown his power to save the Church in their times of troubles. Joseph trusted in the Lord, of course, but still wondered when the power of the Lord would be clearly manifest in their favor.

3 *thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them.*

Though other scriptures speak of bowels being filled with compassion (e.g, Mosiah 15:9; 3 Nephi 17:6; D&C 101:9),

here and v. 4 are the only scriptures using this phrase except for one in the romantic Song of Solomon where the woman hears her beloved putting her hand in the door to open it and her "bowels were moved for him," in romantic excitement. We use "bowels" to refer to the digestive system, but in earlier time it could refer to internal organs in general.

4 *the dark and benighted dominion of Sheol.* "Sheol" is the Hebrew name for the place under the earth where souls go when they die—hell.

5 *Let thine anger be kindled against our enemies.* Interestingly, in both the Bible and the Book of Mormon, the anger of the Lord is far more likely to be kindled against his unrighteous covenant people than against their enemies (e.g., Numbers 11:10; Isaiah 5:25; Helaman 13:30). But Psalm 7:6 is an example of a cry for the Lord to help his people against their enemies.

5 *with thy sword avenge us of our wrongs.* Compare Mormon 8:41 where the "blood of the saints" is avenged by the sword of the Lord.

6 *thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever.* Psalm 89:16 says, "In thy name shall they rejoice all the day."

Peace from the Lord (7-10)

7 *My son, peace be unto thy soul.* In the 20 March letter, there is much material between the plea of vv. 1-6 and the answer starting at v. 7, discussing the prisoners' attempted escape using an auger to bore holes in the walls, the tide of public opinion turning in their favor, the lack of support from their own attorneys, and the joy of getting letters and news from family and Church members. "When the hart [heart] is sufficiently contrite," the Prophet wrote, "the voice of inspiration steals along and whispers" the text starting in this verse.

7 *but a small moment.* In answer to the question, "How long?" (v. 2-3), the Lord said their afflictions would be short, "a small moment." But the afflictions had started directly in October 1838 and it was now March, nearly six months. Before that, other difficulties had been going on since August, and in the larger picture, Joseph had been suffering afflictions since 1820 in some form. His "small moment" turned out to be his entire adult life.

8 *if thou endure it well.* It's not enough just to endure; we must endure well, with faith and hope and confidence in the Lord—a most challenging request at various times in our lives. But the promise is stunning: "God shall exalt thee on high."

9 *Thy friends do stand by thee.* Though Joseph had developed many enemies over the years, true friends still supported him and stood with him, even as he was in prison. He wrote to Emma on the day between the two letters to

the Church (21 March 1839), “my Dear Emma, do you think that my being cast into prison by the mob of renders me less worthy of your friendship no I do not think so but when I was in prisn and ye visited me inasmuch as you have don it to the last <of> these you have don it to me these shall enter into life Eternal.”¹

10 ***Thou art not yet as Job.*** In his book, Job had everyone turn their back on him, including his wife and his ‘friends’ that came to comfort him but actually provided little comfort.

Some have cited this scripture as proof that Job was a real person and not just a literary creation. But the Lord can cite the legend and story of Job as an important lesson without speaking to the nature of his physical existence; the first doesn’t require the latter.

Servants of sin (11-17)

11 ***they who do charge thee with transgression.*** The most hurtful charges did not come from the state of Missouri, the mobs, or the governor. Rather, it came from those who had turned against the Church and the Prophet, some of whom had come out strongly against him, such as Thomas Marsh, Orson Hyde, William Phelps, and David Whitmer.

11 ***their prospects shall melt away as the hoar frost.*** “Hoar frost” is the early morning thing layer of white ice that melts away quickly as soon as the sun hits it. It was to this quickly melting frost that the Lord compared the hopes of those who had charged Joseph and the Saints with sins and crimes.

12 ***God hath set his hand and seal.*** Anciently, a decree would be dictated and caused to be written by the king, then sealed with the ring he wore on his hand or around his neck, certifying its source and authority. God has sealed “the times and seasons” (the source of the name of the Church newspaper later in Nauvoo; also 1 Thessalonians 5:1) that he will take the transgressors “in their own craftiness.”

13 ***love to have others suffer.*** The enemies of the Church appeared to have done what they did just to watch the Saints suffer. In some cases, that might be true as they sought for vengeance or some other result from their own perceived suffering, but very people are purely sadistic, wanting others to suffer for no apparent reason.

14 ***they may be disappointed also.*** Their enemies were likely quite happy with the current condition of the Church,

its leaders imprisoned and its members scattered and impoverished. But that condition would not last forever, taught the Lord, cutting off the hopes of the enemies.

15 ***not one of them is left to stand by the wall.*** This is a sanitized version of an Old Testament phrase, “any that pisseth against the wall” (1 Samuel 25:22, 34; also 1 Kings 14:10; 16:11; 21:21; 2 Kings 9:8), meaning any male.

16 ***cry they have sinned when they have not.*** Meaning, the enemies that accuse the Saints of sins they have not committed.

17 ***they are the servants of sin, and are the children of disobedience.*** Harsh condemnation of the enemies of the Church and the leaders there in Liberty Jail.

Curses against dissidents (18-25)

18 ***those who swear falsely.*** The dissidents who had left the Church when they knew better, received the strongest curses in the letters in these verses.

19 ***they shall be severed from the ordinances of mine house.*** These dissenters had received holy ordinances in Kirtland and were promised more with future temple. Their actions not only broke their existing covenants but disqualified them from future ordinances.

20 ***despised by those that flattered them.*** Not only would they not prosper, the Lord said, but those who encouraged them in their apostasy would eventually turn against them.

21 ***They shall not have right to the priesthood.*** Some dissenters claimed to have priesthood authority to start new churches or reorganize the one that Joseph Smith had started, but the Lord declared that their priesthood was powerless and could not be passed on to anyone.

22 ***better for them that a millstone had been hanged about their necks.*** This metaphor is found in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2). A millstone was a large, heavy stone. Wrapping it around someone’s neck and tossing them in the sea would result in certain death by drowning, with no escaping the massive weight.

23 ***those that discomfort my people.*** The term “discomfort” is only found here in all of scripture. It’s means to be a bother or nuisance or even a trial.

23 ***a generation of vipers shall not escape.*** Both John the Baptist (Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7) and Jesus (Matthew 12:34; 23:33) used this phrase to represent those who rejected the words of God.

¹ "Letter to Emma Smith, 21 March 1839," p. [3], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed 16 April 2017, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-emma-smith-21-march-1839/3>.

24 *a swift judgment in the season thereof*. Just as the time of the Saints' suffering was a "small moment" (v. 7), so the time of the judgment was "swift" but "in the season" of the Lord.

25 *there is a time appointed for every man*. The Lord is in charge and all will be brought to judgment in his time and according to each person's works.

All shall be revealed (26-32)

26 *give unto you knowledge by his Holy Spirit*. Shifting gears to the blessings of the righteous, this section was introduced in the letter by this phrase: "and now Bretheren after your tribulations if you do this—things, and exercise fervent prayer, and faith in the sight of God Always,..."

27 *with anxious expectation*. The full gift of the Holy Ghost had been missing from the world for many generations. By the restored priesthood, it was "revealed in the last times," something ancestors had anticipated and been "pointed to by the angels."

28 *A time to come in the which nothing shall be withheld*. That time was not Nauvoo or Salt Lake City or any other subsequent period of Church history or administration of a president. Rather, the real day when nothing is withheld is future, after the Second Coming, perhaps after the resurrection, when knowledge of all the mysteries of godliness are revealed to the faithful.

28 *whether there be one God or many gods*. Though Joseph Smith had translated some of the Book of Abraham and had learned many truths from his translation of the Bible, he had not had many opportunities to teach these great truths about God and man that he will develop in Nauvoo in a few years and teach publicly there for the first time. As the verse introduces, there is yet great doctrinal knowledge to be revealed.

29 *upon all who have endured valiantly for the gospel*. The greatest blessings of God will be given to those who not just endure but "who have endured valiantly" in their efforts to live and teach the restored gospel message.

30 *bounds set to the heavens or to the seas*. We understand much about the world on which we live and even some about the heavens all about us, but those who endure valiantly will be blessed to understand all those things and how they relate to Christ.

31 *revealed in the days of the dispensation of the fulness of times*. Not just information about the Lord but the very functioning of the universe he has created is part of the revelatory package promised to the faithful in the latter days.

32 *the Council of the Eternal God of all other gods*. The pre-earth council is well-known to Latter-day Saints today but was yet a promise of something to come among the faithful.

Many called but few chosen (33-40)

33 *How long can rolling waters remain impure?* This verse is by itself in the letter. The Prophet began by asking Church members to lay aside "ignorance supe[r]station and bigotry" and note that strong runoff from the mountains can turn the clearest water muddy for a time, until the flowing of the river brings clean water, then introduces this verse. Thus everyone who trusts God can expect the powers of heaven to be brought to bear in their behalf, bring divine knowledge to every Latter-day Saint.

34 *there are many called, but few are chosen*. This part is from the second letter, dated about 22 March. It begins with a section that discusses those dissidents who were faithful at some point but were now (1839) suffering from "high mindedness."

35 *their hearts are set so much upon the things of this world*. Though called to serve in the Church, whether in specific callings or just by virtue of their covenants, those called but not chosen have this in common: their hearts are focused elsewhere, on things of seemingly great importance to the world but of little actual eternal consequence, if any.

36 *the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven*. Priesthood ordination offers no power by itself. Priesthood power is only heavenly power and can only be exercised "upon the principles of righteousness." It does a person no good to 'hold the priesthood' if he is not willing to live by righteous principles. Without such a life, he might as well hold a counterfeit \$1,000,000 bill and wonder why he is poor.

37 *they may be conferred upon us, it is true*. Meaning, "the rights of the priesthood" in v. 36.

37 *when we undertake to cover our sins*. Righteous priesthood holders are busy confessing and repenting, always seeking to bring their lives more in line with the will of a loving heavenly Father.

37 *exercise control or dominion or compulsion*. Priesthood is about service; as soon as it becomes a claim of power over another, we have strayed from the principles of righteousness. The consequences are huge: the heavens and the Spirit pull away from us and priesthood authority exists no more for that person.

38 *to kick against the pricks, to persecute the saints*. Referring to the words of the risen Lord to Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:5), the letter likened by efforts by the enemies of the Church to a miserable ox who resists the strong hand of the Lord in his life, kicking instead against the ox goad whose only goal is to move him forward.

39 *a little authority, as they suppose*. No one on this earth has real authority but are all subject to the will of God. But

in the eyes of the world, they might seem to have some authority, and thus begin to act like they are important by virtue of their ordination or calling. But they are only supposing to have authority and are acting with “unrighteous dominion.”

40 **Hence many are called, but few are chosen.** In summary, priesthood holders are called with their ordinations but not everyone ends up chosen by the Lord to do his will. Those who fall aside do so by their own choices—they exercise dominion over others and resist the teachings of the Spirit which can lead them to truly being chosen through their humility.

Power of the priesthood (41-46)

41 **persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned.** Priesthood power is not based on authoritarian dictates or hierarchical dominance. Rather, it is by the gentle attributes of a servant-leader that influence is best achieved. This is how God himself maintains his own priesthood power and authority. These principles apply to all, men and women, ordained priesthood holder or not.

42 **pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul.** Someone who seeks “pure knowledge,” which we might equate with wisdom, empathy, understanding, knowledge that is designed to enhance service and love for others, will have their soul enlarged, if done without ulterior motive or deceptiveness, but transparently for the glory of God alone.

43 **Reproving betimes with sharpness.** “Betimes” means ‘as needed’ or ‘at the right time.’ Reproof can only come when called for by the Spirit and then only when followed by an “increase of love” for that person to bind the inspired reprover and the person reprovéd together.

44 **stronger than the cords of death.** Someone who speaks with reproof when directed by the Spirit and who shows

great love in doing so (v. 43) is a true friend, whose faithfulness to the Lord and to the relationship goes even beyond this life into the next.

45 **let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly.** We might think if garnish as an extra part of a meal that is just there to make it pretty. But it also has the meaning ‘to furnish’ or ‘to supply.’ If virtue is the supplier of our thoughts, then we will have greater charity.

45 **thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God.** The confidence the virtuous will enjoy in God’s presence is both the confidence to be there because of their application of the Atonement to cleanse their lives, and the confidence that God wants them there.

45 **the doctrine of the priesthood.** The doctrine of the priesthood is the knowledge of the plan of salvation for God’s children and our role in it. It is the knowledge of how to become like God in the eternities, which comes down upon our souls like gentle night dews, settling upon us and driving the direction of our lives.

46 **The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion.** We may have the gift of the Holy Ghost, given us at confirmation, but few of us enjoy as a “constant companion.” That is, nevertheless, one of the promises of those who live by the principles of priesthood power.

46 **without compulsory means.** Because priesthood power comes by persuasion and gentleness (v. 41), there is no compulsion, commanding, arm-twisting, or other unrighteous uses of power to coerce others to do right. That was Satan’s plan and it works no better today than it did in the pre-mortal existence.

Results

results

D&C 122 – title

Date and Location

About Friday, 22 March 1839, at Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri

Setting

See D&C 121 Setting above.

Documents and Publication

The oldest copy is Letter to Edward Partridge and the Church (about 22 Mar 1839), 3-4. It was first published in

the *Times and Seasons* (July 1840) then as Section 122 in 1876.

Commentary

1 **The ends of the earth shall inquire after thy name.** D&C 122 comes right after the final section of D&C 121 in the letter, with no break; it continues the thoughts about priesthood power and authority. In this case, the Lord made a bold promise to the Prophet Joseph Smith, that his name would be known throughout the earth. Quite a statement for someone lying in a small jail in Missouri with a handful of followers homeless and scattered in another state.

2 *seek counsel, and authority, and blessings*. In contrast to the “fools” of v. 1 that will rage, the wise and noble will “constantly” come to Joseph Smith for counsel and blessings.

3 *thy people shall never be turned against thee*. Those who stood with the Prophet would still stand by him and would not be persuaded by the testimony of Thomas Marsh, Orson Hyde, or others of similar ilk.

4 *their influence shall cast thee into trouble*. Indeed, it was mostly due to the testimony of people who left the Church and turned their back on Joseph Smith that caused him to be found behind “bars and walls.”

4 *thy God shall stand by thee forever*. A great promise of security and support from God himself.

5 *in perils*. Several examples of perils are listed, which were very real to the Prophet, as he had been among betrayers and robbers.

6 *with a drawn sword thine enemies tear thee from the bosom of thy wife, and of thine offspring*. This is a description of what happened in Far West as Joseph was allowed to briefly go home and collect a few things before being taken away to several months of prison.

7 *cast into the pit*. Again, a very accurate description of Liberty Jail, which was essentially a pit in the ground.

7 *cast into the deep*. Starting here, the descriptions of trials seem to become more metaphorical but nevertheless representative of how the brethren there in the jail must have felt suffering for those many weeks without no knowledge of when or how it would end.

7 *all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good*. These words have provided comfort to millions who have struggled with their own circumstances and challenges. For those who trust in the Lord, *all things* work together for their good in the end.

8 *The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Are thou greater than he?* None of us can answer this question in the positive, because no one has suffered as he has, and for nothing that he had done. Even more importantly, perhaps, is that his suffering gave him endless and eternal understanding, so when we are in despair, we know that Jesus will always understand and show us love in our distress.

9 *Therefore, hold on thy way*. Armed with that knowledge, we can “hold on” and know that the end of suffering is “set” and our own “days are known” to the Lord. Don’t fear what man can do, only trust the Lord.

Results

results

D&C 123 – title

Date and Location

About Friday, 22 March 1839, at Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri

Setting

See D&C 121 Setting above.

Documents and Publication

The oldest copy is Letter to Edward Partridge and the Church (about 22 Mar 1839), 5-7. It was first published in the *Times and Seasons* (July 1840) then as Section 123 in 1876.

Outline

- Collect records of persecutions (1-6)
- Behind the persecution (7-10)
- Many will receive the truth (11-17)

Commentary

Collect records of persecutions (1-6)

1 *we would suggest for your consideration*. The leaders of the Saints scattered from Missouri were actively trying to find a place for them to live. After giving some thoughts in that regard, the Prophet’s letter went on to talk about the legal recourse they were going to take to try and receive some justice for their loss of land, property, and life in Missouri.

1 *all the facts, and sufferings and abuses*. The effort to document all the wrongs inflicted upon the Saints was huge but a necessary step to take legal action.

2 *all the property and amount of damages*. Many Saints worked to document each item they had lost of its value, putting no price but documenting loss of life as well.

3 *the names of all persons that have had a hand in their oppressions*. Their difficulties should not be subscribed to “the mob” in general but the names of those who acted against them listed as well.

4 **a committee can be appointed.** To make the effort organized and centralized, a committee of leaders was suggested to gather up the affidavits and testimonies and collect them for presentation to the various government officials, as needed.

5 **the whole concatenation of diabolical rascality and nefarious and murderous impositions.** Strong words to describe all that had been inflicted in the Saints in Missouri in 1833-1839, much of which was documented in newspapers, magazines, and even books published in those and subsequent years.

6 **that the whole nation may be left without excuse.** The country stood by and watched the Latter-day Saints suffer these illegal afflictions, and government leaders and judges, if they acted at all, acted out of false or imperfect information. The documentation the Prophet was suggesting would make the Saints' stories accessible to all, where government or public, and give them full claim to whatever law might work in their favor.

Behind the persecution (7-10)

7 **the creeds of the fathers.** The people who persecuted the Saints were, in many cases, religious themselves. Later in the letter, Joseph wrote "that the Mormons as well as the presbyterians and those of every other class and description have equal rights to partake of the fruit of the great tree of our national liberty."

8 **chains, and shackles, and fetters.** Naturally, his language expresses his current condition, in prison, bound with chains and shackles.

9 **an imperative duty that we owe.** This effort to gather up testimonies and make their full case before the country was a duty to those who had suffered and died.

10 **make hell itself shudder.** The persecutions of the members of the Church was enough to make even the devil tremble, metaphorically.

Many will receive the truth (11-17)

11 **we owe to all the rising generation.** Changing the topic from the collection of a legal body of records, the Prophet looked ahead to missionary work and the continued spreading of the gospel to the world.

12 **they know not where to find it.** What an optimistic perspective, especially given the circumstances. And indeed, there are millions who are anxious and willing to hear the truth if they even knew it existed.

13 **waste and wear out our lives.** Not just give it a good effort, not just share the gospel when you have the opportunity, but wear ourselves out sharing it!

15 **much lieth in futurity.** No handwringing or wondering if the Church had a future with Joseph—his vision of the future was inspired by his mission and his calling, and his certainty that God would help them accomplish it.

16 **a very large ship is benefited very much by a very small helm.** In the midst of a storm, a large ship is controlled by a small tiller or helm that can direct it into the waves in a way to bring it through the gale. So it is with the Church—the Lord will direct it through the storm by small means, such as obedience, repentance, humility, and love.

17 **cheerfully do all things that lie in our power.** Moving forward with faith and with even cheerfulness, doing all that we can, give us "the utmost assurance" that God is with us.

Results

results

Images

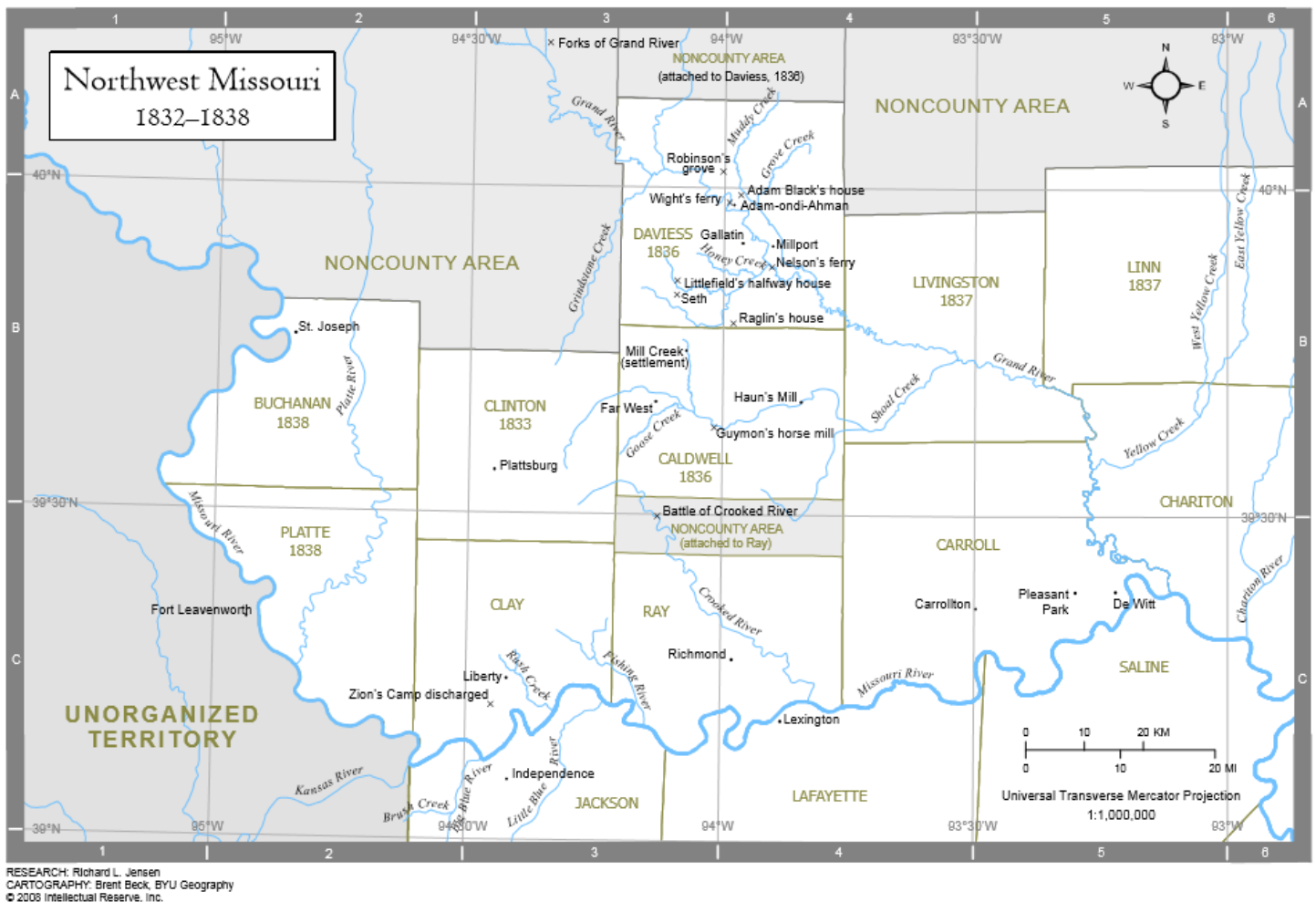


Image #1: Important Latter-day Saint sites in northwest Missouri; from Joseph Smith Papers website.

Works Consulted

For text and publication notes:

RB1 – Revelation Book 1, from *JSP*, MRB:8-405.

RB2 – Revelation Book 2, from *JSP*, MRB:407-665.

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