

# The “Beautiful Death” in the Smith Family

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Despite thoughtful attempts by Douglas Davies to situate death at the center of the Mormon “culture of salvation,” the exploration of death in early Mormonism has been somewhat limited to date, particularly as it relates to the Smith family and the earliest years of Mormonism.<sup>1</sup> Against this relative silence stands the testimony of the Smiths themselves, who were deeply concerned with questions of mortality. Joseph Smith was unequivocal on this point during his 1843 funeral sermon for James Adams: “All men know that all men must die. What is the object of our coming into existence then dying and falling away to be here no more? This is a subject we ought to study more than any other, which we ought to study day and night. If we have any claim on our Heavenly Father for any thing it is for knowledge on this important subject.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. There are several treatments of the experience of death in Mormonism: Douglas Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000); Klaus J. Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 84–112; Lester Bush, *Health and Medicine among the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), chap. 1; Mary Ann Meyers, “Gates Ajar: Death in Mormon Thought and Practice,” in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 112–33; M. Guy Bishop, “To Overcome the ‘Last Enemy’: Early Mormon Perceptions of Death,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 3 (1986): 63–79; Truman G. Madsen, “Distinctions in the Mormon Approach to Death and Dying,” in *Deity and Death*, ed. Spencer J. Palmer (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 61–76; M. Guy Bishop, “Celestial Family: Early Mormon Thought on Life and Death, 1830–1846” (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University, 1981). Only Bishop, “Celestial Family,” has dealt directly with early Mormonism as opposed to a general survey.

2. Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 418.

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This work began as an exploration of the role of angelic messengers in the Restoration. As my pregnant wife and I, along with our daughter, made our way through the town cemetery in Camden, Maine, imagining the life stories behind the laconic engravings on worn grave markers, I was struck by the fact that these angels were not just visitors from heaven but also from beyond the grave. This recognition, coupled with my professional experience with life-threatening illness and death, fueled an expansion of the initial project into a broader view of Joseph Smith's vision of the complex interactions between the living and the dead.



Before I could comprehend Joseph Smith's formal revelations on death and the dead, I felt the need to understand the personal side of these experiences—how Joseph and his family would have understood and encountered death. The journey has drawn me through the increasingly rich literatures on death studies and American cultural history, as well as the personal writings of the Smith family. I have discovered a new mental and spiritual world, part of which I introduce in this essay.

As I document in detail in a book project nearing completion, by understanding the death culture of Joseph and his family, I have gained new insight into a variety of Joseph Smith's revelations, from the temple and the mission of Elijah to the teachings of the Book of Mormon on seership, to celestial marriage and the law of adoption. Above all, it has become clear to me that the family represented the key to Joseph Smith's conquest of death, that the eternity of family intimacy was a great secret of the Restoration. It is fitting that the story should begin with a grieving family assembled to bid farewell to a beloved son.

Many of Joseph’s teachings that centered on death were presented as funeral sermons (most famously those for Seymour Brunson and King Follett), and many of the rites he revealed held the keys to overcome death. Through these teachings, the Prophet provided knowledge of the afterlife, clarifying and correcting both the modern, domestic heaven of his peers and the more traditional, theocentric heaven of his predecessors.<sup>3</sup> Although the Restoration eventually provided potent means for understanding death, the Smith family still faced the bare facts of death in ways similar to antebellum Protestants inhabiting the American frontier. To borrow Joseph’s phrase, “many deaths” left “a melancholly reflection, but we cannot help it.”<sup>4</sup>

The project of this paper is to examine those bare facts of death, exploring the passings of Alvin and his father, Joseph Sr., contextualizing their deaths within antebellum American folkways to better understand how Lucy Smith and her family experienced mortality and bereavement. Understanding the cultural context of their bereavement behavior illuminates and challenges current proposals regarding the (patho)psychology of the Smiths, including Lucy’s reported suicidal depression. In addition, this contextualization explains previously obscure aspects of stories, such as the disinterment of Alvin. Finally, appreciating the Smiths’ cultural milieu clarifies the emotional valence of Joseph’s often death-emphatic ritual and doctrinal innovations.

### The “Beautiful Death”

The early American Republic was the era of the “beautiful death,” a cultural phenomenon that had evolved from medieval Christianity through the English Church and into the post-Puritan environment of antebellum Protestantism.<sup>5</sup> Well outlined by Philippe Ariès, Clare Gittings,

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3. Two main conceptions of heaven were most relevant to early Republican and antebellum Protestants. The theocentric view, most closely tied to traditional Christianity, including Calvinism, taught that God is so vastly superior to humanity that human preoccupations and relationships would be irrelevant, even blasphemous, in the afterlife. The rising domestic heaven of popular Protestantism claimed that heaven was much like the idealized Victorian hearth, in which family relationships persisted in the presence of God’s glory.

4. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 531.

5. The beautiful death is a phrase from the work of Philippe Ariès. His *Western Attitudes toward Death* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 55–82, is a reasonable summary of his seminal work published as *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Knopf, 1981). This culture was quite widespread, though

and others, the beautiful death included an intimacy with death that is unfamiliar to modern readers, born in part from the frequency of premature mortality. Death appeared omnipresent, both physically and intellectually, as evidenced by the much-repeated quotation, “In the midst of life we are in death.”<sup>6</sup>

This death culture negotiated rising threats to community integrity. As the individual became more significant in Western culture, the community was less able to absorb each loss. At the same time, the commitment to *avaritia*,<sup>7</sup> familiar and beloved elements of mortal life, was seeing a resurgence after a long rejection that was quite prominent in the medieval church. Community, loneliness, and the worth of the individual were major themes in this beautiful death culture, as were ritual elements that served ultimately to distinguish the living from the dying.

Participants in this culture hungered to have forewarning of their own death. When the time of death approached, the dying were required to maintain a perfect calm as a sign of their righteousness and faith in Providence; with this calm they generally instructed and exhorted their many visitors. The dying were not abandoned to a sterile corner of a hospital ward: the deathbed was surrounded by attendants, both mortal and immortal. Perhaps most importantly, the beautiful death emphatically focused on the family ties and friendships about to be dissolved, through both an expressive bereavement and the emphasis on the coherence of the community. After death both the integrity and the location of the corpse bore a significance that may strike modern-day readers as excessive.<sup>8</sup>

Although this death culture was maintained as an oral folkway, its contours were regulated by written guides. Almanacs, Bible dictionaries, newspapers, and published sermons all reinforced the details of the

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contemporary Unitarians and Deists had developed approaches to death that distinguished them from their peers in mainline and populist Protestantism. See James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 28–29, 33–34.

6. Burial service, Book of Common Prayer, used by the Church of England since 1549.

7. On *avaritia* in Christianity, see Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 130–31, 308–9. Though ultimately representing the deadly sin of avarice, at its base *avaritia* referred to attachments to this world.

8. Clare Gittings has traced the evolution of the beautiful death through English culture. See particularly Clare Gittings, “Expressions of Loss in Early Seventeenth-Century England: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal,” in *The Changing Face of Death*, ed. Peter C. Jupp and Glennys Howarth (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), 19–33; and Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

beautiful death. The sermons of the Anglican cleric James Hervey—widely published in antebellum America and known to have been in Joseph Smith’s possession—are emblematic of this merger of private and public, oral and written, in the traditions of Anglo-American death culture. Hervey’s compiled sermons are prefaced by a biographical sketch of which nearly a third is devoted to a protracted description of his deathbed scene. Visitors seemed to throng about him in his final days. Just three hours before his death, James Hervey made his statement to attendant friends, “urging the importance of his everlasting concerns as here is no abiding place.”<sup>9</sup> Critically, as he approached his final agony, he stated, “Mine eyes have seen thy precious salvation.” He then passed “without the least struggle.”<sup>10</sup> Friends marked his passing with their vocal, even florid bereavement. His biographer carefully recalled the interment of his remains in the cemetery Hervey had so affectionately conjured in his “Meditations among the Tombs.”

Fiction, too, reinforced the nineteenth-century traditions of the beautiful death. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Little Eva St. Clare is considered quintessential, but she is accompanied by T. S. Arthur’s Little Mary Morgan, Mark Twain’s caricatured Emmeline Grangerford, and many others. In each of these sentimentalized scenes, the nature of the beautiful death shines through clearly.<sup>11</sup>

### The Smiths in Antebellum America

The Smiths, like their compatriots, were familiar with death. Many antebellum Americans, recognizing the high infant mortality, abstained from naming their children until they had survived infancy.<sup>12</sup> Survival to adulthood without bereavement was painfully uncertain. Statistically, the

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9. James Hervey, *Meditations and Contemplations*, 2 vols. in 1 (Essex, England: J&B Williams, 1836), 13. Smith donated a copy of the book to the Nauvoo library, as outlined in Kenneth W. Godfrey, “A Note on the Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute,” *BYU Studies* 14, no. 3 (1974): 386–89.

10. Hervey, *Meditations and Contemplations*, 14.

11. Little Eva is the daughter of the family that owns Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851–52). See Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799–1883* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 55–56. T. S. Arthur’s widely published *Ten Nights in a Bar Room and What I Saw There* describes the demise of the waifish Mary Morgan. Ariès adduces Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and the short story “Californian’s Tale.” *Western Attitudes toward Death*, 61, 67. See also Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 40.

12. Lewis O. Saum, *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1980), 88.

Smiths were probably better acquainted with premature death than their peers. Joseph's mother, Lucy, lost seven of her eleven children, while he lost six of his eleven (despite his own death in his late thirties).<sup>13</sup>

The Smith family faced death within cultural norms, with the help of their matriarch's guiding hand. Though corroborated by the writings of Joseph Smith and others close to the family, Lucy Mack Smith's family memoir is a central source of our understanding of the Smiths' experience with death.<sup>14</sup> The lack of additional source material limits the scope of this paper, and our insights into Smith family deathways are thus limited somewhat by Lucy's perspective, but the extent of these limitations is not disabling to the present analysis.

This memoir is not simply Lucy's creation—it is the culmination of decades of living with memories and seeking personal and cultural themes from them. Lucy's personality and beliefs, which she possessed as she raised Joseph and his siblings, permeate the memoir. These same attitudes and beliefs likely shaped, at least in part, the lives of her children, including Joseph's. The strength of the cultural milieu, combined with evidence from other sources, further confirms the representative nature of Lucy's memoir.

Though some regional and sectarian differences certainly existed, the core of the beautiful death was common to most of the early Republic. While the wealthy were able to comply with the dictates of this death culture with greater ostentation, the marginalized also shared the ideals and modes of the beautiful death. For the poor, impediments to their participation in certain portions of the beautiful death did not lessen their devotion to its precepts. Impoverished workers were known to sacrifice present comforts to secure a beautiful death and burial.<sup>15</sup>

Lucy's frequently expressed yearning for greater social status does not mean that her reports of deaths are a textual act of social climbing or

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13. Nicholas Marshall, "In the Midst of Life We Are in Death': Affliction and Religion in Antebellum New York," in *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, ed. Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 177. I have included the Murdock twins for Joseph Jr. and all stillborn children for both Joseph Jr. and Lucy.

14. I have primarily used the original manuscript as published in Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2001).

15. Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 36.

an attempt to reclaim her family's honor.<sup>16</sup> Her treatment of death does not so much elevate her to a higher social status as confirm her membership in American society. Although she may have amplified the tenets of the beautiful death, there is no reason to doubt that her children, including the dying Alvin and his prophet brother, participated in the same cultural milieu.

The formal nature of the deathbed scenes we shall examine derives from this very culture. Though skeptics may remark that the dying rarely have the presence of mind to interact meaningfully at the deathbed, this view belies the great cultural divide between current approaches to death and those of antebellum America. In the nineteenth century, both the living and the dying sought the death of the blessed. The importance of acting out the sacred deathbed drama was such that a dying person would have expended considerable energy to play his or her part, and the audience would have willingly filled in gaps for this person, understanding paragraphs of meaning from mere words or gestures. There is little cultural reason to discount Lucy's deathbed scenes; her depictions themselves participate in the required drama of death.

Even before becoming a parent, Lucy had experienced the death ritual of family members. She memorializes an episode with her mother in which most of the deathbed scene was carried out. After the final round of hortatory farewells, her mother "shortly recovered."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Lucy's sister Lovisa acted out her entire deathbed drama before being granted a miraculous, if temporary, reprieve, explaining that "I saw the Saviour, as through a veil, which appeared to me about as thick as a spider's web, and he told me that I must return again to warn the people to prepare for death." On the cusp of death, Lovisa sang Isaac Watts's arrangements of Psalms 30 and 116 as an extension of her ministry.<sup>18</sup> Near the time of Lovisa's dramatic recovery, Lovina—the sister who had nursed Lovisa through her probable tuberculosis—fell ill of the same disease. Lovina's gradual decline also followed the deathbed canon. Before dying, the placid teenager exhorted her assembled audience to greater piety as she calmly recited Isaac Watts's hymn "Death! 'tis a melancholy day."<sup>19</sup> Lucy mourned Lovina's passage with great vigor, reporting serious and dark thoughts

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16. Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992), 426–27.

17. Smith, *Lucy's Book*, 256.

18. Smith, *Lucy's Book*, 239–40.

19. Smith, *Lucy's Book*, 240–43. Lovina reportedly requested, "Mother I am going now and I wish you to call my young mates that I may speak to them again before I die."

that biographers employing a psychological interpretation have used as evidence of depression.

Lucy had practiced the death rituals by the time of the most affecting deathbed scene in her memoir, that of Alvin. As the first surviving child of Joseph and Lucy Smith, Alvin looms over the family narrative like a mythic hero.<sup>20</sup> Though various commentators (applying modern psychological interpretations of family and intrapersonal dynamics) have seen Alvin as the token of Smith family strife, nearly all agree that Alvin was much loved and respected in his family.<sup>21</sup>

But Alvin's time on earth was limited to a quarter century. His death arrived precipitously, the entire process occupying less than one week. According to Lucy's narrative, shortly after Alvin pledged to provide the family with land ownership and a sturdy home, he "came to the house in great distress," at "10 o'clock in the day." Alvin was "taken very sick . . . with the bilious cholick" and on arriving in the home "requested his Father to go for a physician." An unfamiliar physician from a neighboring village was summoned when the trusted Dr. Alexander McIntyre was absent. The substitute physician prescribed calomel, a toxic salt of mercury used as a cathartic, to treat the colic. Alvin rejected the medicine until "by much persuasion he was prevailed on" to take the purgative. When Doctor McIntyre was



Alvin Smith grave marker, Swift Cemetery, Palmyra, New York. The inscription reads, "In memory of Alvin, Son of Joseph and Lucy Smith who died Nov. 19, 1823, in the 25 year of his life." Courtesy Larry C. Porter.

20. Lucy and Joseph Sr. had a stillborn child in 1797. Alvin was their first child to survive infancy. See Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2004), 1:576, 578, 469 (including note 5). Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 42, describes Alvin as "auxiliary family head." See also Christopher Stafford's 1885 recollection in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:194.

21. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), xx–xxi. Jess Groesbeck makes the same argument in "The Smiths and Their Dreams," *Sunstone* 12 (March 1988): 22–30. Davies, *Mormon Culture of Salvation*, 86–90, also treated the centrality of Alvin and his death to the Restoration, as does William Morain in his Freudian analysis of Joseph Smith, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr., and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1998).



finally located, he decried the decision to prescribe calomel, but it was too late: "All the power [and] medicine which was afterwards prescribed by 4 skillful physicians could not remove it."<sup>22</sup> Alvin expired four days after he fell ill, probably of appendicitis or a toxic effect of the calomel.<sup>23</sup>

### The Gift of Foreknowledge

Despite the rapid pace of his illness, Alvin realized his impending death, which allowed him to initiate the beautiful deathbed. He announced to the assembled doctors, "The calomel is still lodged in the same place and you cannot move it consequently it must take my life." To Hyrum he said, "I must die," and to Joseph he said, "I am going to die now the distress which I suffer and the sensations that I have tell me my time is very short."<sup>24</sup> These were cues for his family to begin the ritual of the deathbed farewell.

To an even greater extent than his son Alvin, Joseph Sr. had time to ensure that his own death would be beautiful: his terminal decline lasted almost a year. He experienced symptoms of tuberculosis, and his was the slow fate of the nineteenth-century consumptive: intermittently bloody coughing, fatigue, and breathlessness together with the relentless cachexia that gave tuberculosis its familiar name, consumption.

In Joseph Sr.'s case, this foreknowledge of his death, while critical, was made painful by the instability of his family's social situation. Lucy reports that during forced migrations, often separated from his beloved namesake son, her husband had been obsessed with the idea of having their children present at his deathbed.

[He] was very feeble his cough increased and he became so weak that I was often under the necessity of lifting from his bed[.] one night as I was raising him up he said Mother I do'nt know but I shall die here alone with you and perhaps in your arms while you are lifting me—Oh no Father said I you will not for when you die you will have all your children round you[.] I will said he if you say so in real earnest I believe it will be so.<sup>25</sup>

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22. Smith, *Lucy's Book*, 350–51.

23. Alvin's reported fear of calomel was both culturally appropriate and medically reasonable. See Guenter B. Risse, "Calomel and the American Medical Sects during the Nineteenth Century," *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* 48 (January 1973): 57–64.

24. Smith, *Lucy's Book*, 351–52.

25. Smith, *Lucy's Book*, 709.

Once the family had arrived in Nauvoo, Joseph Sr. asked his children to “stay with him, as much as they could consistently.” He was miserable when Joseph went to Washington, D.C., to plead for the Missouri reparations before President Martin Van Buren.<sup>26</sup> Though the mission was unsuccessful, the return from Washington was glorious to the two Josephs, who had lived to see each other once more. Joseph Sr. “having had a relapse was confined again to his bed,” and he “cried for joy at the thought of being spared to see his [son’s] face again.” Even at that time, Joseph Sr. “knew that he could live but a short time.”<sup>27</sup>

Such foreknowledge of death was vital to allow the dying to achieve the requisite calm in the face of death. The deathbed script could not be initiated without forewarning. Hervey, representing generation after generation, called an unanticipated death “most pitiable.”<sup>28</sup> Death was robbed of its beauty when the great bedside drama could not be staged.<sup>29</sup> In this respect, little seems to have changed from medieval cultural expectations.

### Community of the Deathbed

Advance warning also allowed for the assembly of the deathbed audience. In antebellum America, the deathbed was a communal locus. The audience was central to the beautiful death. At such a momentous occasion, even strangers may have been present, and Christians generally were exhorted to come in order to be edified by their encounter with the dying. In Hervey’s phrase, “The deathbed of the good man is a privileged spot.”<sup>30</sup> Presbyterian ministers were instructed to exploit such opportunities for instructing the living; mothers were even counseled to bring their children to the deathbed for instruction.<sup>31</sup> By modern standards, these scenes

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26. After the Mormon War in Missouri (1838–39), the Mormons hoped to receive payment for the lands they had forfeited to their opponents, including vigilantes and the state militia. Joseph made a trip to Washington, D.C., to speak directly with President Martin Van Buren, who argued that he did not have the authority to meddle in Missouri’s affairs.

27. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 714.

28. Hervey, *Meditations and Contemplations*, 30. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (1981), 394. Ariès traces this phenomenon to the Tame Death of medieval Christian chivalry.

29. Robert V. Wells, *Facing the “King of Terrors”: Death and Society in an American Community, 1750–1990* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 45.

30. Hervey, *Meditations and Contemplations*, 15.

31. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 38–39; Sheila M. Rothman, *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 94.

would appear crowded, but such was the desired norm: one of the greatest fears of Americans traveling westward was the thought that they would die without an audience.<sup>32</sup> These interactions cemented the hope of future reunions focusing on instruction and exhortation. Thus, the integrity of the community could be maintained. The Smiths were known, even by unfriendly neighbors, to have been tender and observant participants at deaths within their community.<sup>33</sup>

Those surrounding the deathbed were edified by the presence of the dying as much as by the words they spoke. The Prophet Joseph Smith, eulogizing Elder Lorenzo Barnes, emphasized the lessons that death could teach: “To . . . all the Saints who are mourning, this has been a warning voice to us all to be sober and diligent and lay aside mirth, vanity, and folly and be prepared to die tomorrow.”<sup>34</sup>

Alvin died, surrounded like Little Eva by his emotionally devastated family. As they awaited his every word, he gave each individual final instruction. Hyrum and Sophronia were told to look after their parents, as was young Lucy. To Joseph, Alvin urged fidelity to his new visions: “Do everything that lays in your power to obtain the records,” though in Lucy’s account Alvin closed this instruction with the same admonition to look after their parents.<sup>35</sup> The focus on the unity of the Smith family is nearly overwhelming in this scene; Lucy revisited it later when she noted that Alvin died with the fifth commandment on his lips.<sup>36</sup> Though Lucy’s emphasis may be on the tender love of a child for parents, crowding out other themes in her narrative, this was not simply filial affection: Alvin was stressing the continuity of the society of the bereaved—an act that echoed his grandfather Asael Smith’s request that his family meet together regularly after he died.<sup>37</sup> The unchurched Alvin expressed his religious

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32. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 448; Saum, *Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America*, 95.

33. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:103, 139, 156. For a description of the cultural implications of such interactions, see Wells, *Facing the “King of Terrors,”* 105.

34. Faulring, *American Prophet’s Record*, 367. The recommended deportment is clearly reminiscent of Joseph’s poetic depiction of Alvin’s deportment in the Book of the Law of the Lord. See Dean Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92), 2:440–41.

35. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 352–53.

36. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 435–36.

37. “If you cannot Meet, Send to and hear from each other yearly, and oftener if you can.” Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s New England Heritage: Influence of Grandfathers Solomon Mack and Asael Smith*, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: Deseret Book, 2003), 164. In fact, Asael explained his decision to write a memorial

faith in the admonition to his younger brother, the rising prophet. The rest of his energy was invested in maintaining the integrity of his family.

Alvin's father passed away in an even more prominent assembly of the deathbed community. Approximately a month after the vicarious baptism that sealed Alvin's place in celestial glory, Joseph Sr.'s tuberculosis resulted in fits of bloody coughing and worsened breathing. Aware that these hemorrhages could be harbingers of death, he wanted his children to be available for his imminent deathbed scene.

Lucy's narrative appears to telescope around a month, perhaps combining two dramatic episodes. She assembled all but one of "the children [Katharine] who did not live in the city." After blessing that daughter's husband, Joseph Sr. "called us . . . all round his bed" and began to combine the sealing of "patriarchal Blessing[s]" with his "dying blessing." He began with Hyrum, to whom he passed the patriarchal ordination, and bestowed general blessings of spiritual strength. Joseph Sr. then moved from son to son in descending age, highlighting their service to the Church, blessing them with strength and glory, and blessing their offspring. He next blessed daughters Sophronia and Katharine (in absentia) with peace and family blessings. Finally, he blessed his "darling" daughter Lucy in similar terms, before returning to his wife, Lucy. Joseph Sr. spoke directly about the mourning he knew would soon begin, warning her that she "must not desire to die when I do."<sup>38</sup>

A printed eulogy of Joseph Smith Sr. by Robert B. Thompson, who served as a scribe for the Prophet, confirms Lucy's depiction of the deathbed audience: "He has proved himself worthy of . . . such a family, by whom he had the happiness of being surrounded in his dying moments; most of whom had the satisfaction of receiving his dying benediction. . . . On Sunday he called his children and grand children around him, and like the ancient Patriarchs, gave them his final benediction."<sup>39</sup> Wilford Woodruff and Eliza R. Snow even hailed Father Smith as Jacob, Father Israel, emphasizing a biblical tradition for the deathbed assembly.<sup>40</sup>

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pamphlet by his insecurity about the likelihood of having sufficient warning to have his family gathered: "I know not what leisure I shall have at the hour of my death to speak unto you." Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 24.

38. The eulogy and Lucy's account both cite the beginning of the scene as coincident with another episode of bleeding. Smith, *Lucy's Book*, 713–22.

39. "Nauvoo, Ill. Sept., 1840," *Times and Seasons* 1 (September 1840): 170–71.

40. Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898, Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–84), 2:451–52,

## Grace at the Deathbed

These grand farewell scenes were marked by the near-ataractic calm required of the dying. The offices of a graceful death were enjoined on all righteous Christians. According to an 1815 Bible dictionary: “It should be our daily petition to God, that he would enable us to perform this last act of our life with decency and constancy of mind, that neither our disease, nor our weakness, may destroy the firmness of our spirits, and cause us to be amazed with fear, or filled with peevishness.”<sup>41</sup>

James Hervey prefaced his “Meditations among the Tombs” with the exhortation that the righteous should “look forward upon their approaching exit without any *anxious apprehension*; and when the great change commences, may bid adieu to terrestrial things, with all the *calmness* of a cheerful resignation, with all the *comforts* of a well-grounded faith.”<sup>42</sup> In 1843 a Mormon eulogist for Elias Higbee noted approvingly that “he died perfectly resigned—perfectly calm and tranquil—to the last moment.”<sup>43</sup> Lewis Saum mentions other notable examples, from Melville (“To expire mild-eyed in one’s bed transcends the death of Epaminondas”) to a simple Missourian, worried he had missed his friend’s deathbed scene (“Gives me eas if he was perfectly resined to gow”).<sup>44</sup> Robert V. Wells adduces many such examples from Schenectady, New York, in the antebellum period.<sup>45</sup>

Many reports are emphatic about a lack of physical suffering, not simply an emotional calm. These descriptions of physical comfort and ease during the mortal passage seem to have been considered proof of a blessed moral state. Thus, Hervey died “without the least struggle,”<sup>46</sup> and Lucy’s sister Lovina Mack lapsed into eternal sleep as she completed her recitation of a hymn. Likewise, an early Native American minister, his death self-consciously modeled on a beautiful Christian death, “immediately dy’d when his Prayer ended.”<sup>47</sup>

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August 23, 1844; Eliza Snow, “The Venerable Lucy Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 6 (May 15, 1845): 911.

41. John Robinson, *A Theological, Biblical, and Ecclesiastical Dictionary* (London: Longman, 1815), s.v. “Death.”

42. Hervey, *Meditations and Contemplations*, 21; emphasis in original.

43. “Death of Elias Higbee,” *Times and Seasons* 4 (June 15, 1843): 233.

44. Saum, *Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America*, 98–99, citing Melville’s *Mardi: And a Voyage Thither* and an 1855 private letter. Epaminodas was a celebrated Greek military hero.

45. Wells, *Facing the “King of Terrors.”*

46. Hervey, *Meditations and Contemplations*, 14.

47. Laura M. Stevens, “The Christian Origins of the Vanishing Indian,” in Isenberg and Burstein, *Mortal Remains*, 25.

The Smiths were no exception. Lucy portrayed Alvin as being able to bid his family goodbye with perfect presence of mind and lack of fear. Her account of his final moment reports him as saying, “Father Mother brothers sisters farewell I can now brathe out my life as calm as a clock after which he immediately closed his eyes in death.”<sup>48</sup>

Lucy was even more explicit about her husband’s calm. Shortly after the patriarchal deathbed blessings were complete, Joseph Sr. had a perfect clarity of vision: “Pause—Why I can see and hear as well as ever I could—<2n> <I> have my senses <perfectly> well ... Pause I shall live 7 or 8 minutes—.” Lucy continues, “He then straightened him self and laid his hands together and began to breath shorter and shorter untill at last his breath stopped without a struggle or even a sigh.”<sup>49</sup> Thompson’s eulogy corroborates this account. “Although [Joseph Sr.’s] strength was far gone, and he was obliged to rest at intervals, yet his mind was clear, perfectly collected, and calm as the gentle zephyrs.”<sup>50</sup>

### Heavenly Community

The righteous calm of the dying was often rewarded by the presence of visitors beyond mortal kith and kin. Stressing the persistence of earthly ties after death, angels or spirits—often representing deceased ancestors—might be present as well.<sup>51</sup> The presence of angels that drew antebellum Christians to the next life echoed the martyrs who had crowded about the medieval deathbed, filling the same role.<sup>52</sup> In Philippe Ariès’s phrase, “In the beautiful death of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the room of the dying man is filled with disembodied friends and relatives who have come from the other world to assist and guide him in this first migration.”<sup>53</sup> A common nineteenth-century trope for the moment of death was this visit of an angel to guide the dying to heaven.<sup>54</sup> Generally,

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48. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 354.

49. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 723.

50. “Nauvoo, Ill. Sept., 1840,” 173.

51. See Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, 2d ed., rev. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 85–90, 104.

52. Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 16.

53. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 460.

54. Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*, 16, 34.

the person dying was the only one to see these spirits; survivors remained earthbound—the heavenly society was not yet theirs.<sup>55</sup>

In a Protestant culture fearful of malevolent interference from pretended angelic visitors, the deathbed remained a safe haven for true angelic visitations.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the presence of immortal beings at the most mortal of events was interpreted as a reassurance of the victory of God over the void of extinction and a reminder of the cohesiveness of human society, comprising both the living and the dead.

The Smiths also partook of this phenomenon. As Alvin passed on, “one present said Alvin is gone an angel has taken his spirit to Heaven.”<sup>57</sup> Joseph corroborated his mother’s statement in his dictation of the Book of the Law of the Lord entry of August 23, 1842, which underscored Alvin’s participation in the beautiful death: “When he died the angel of the Lord visited him in his last moments.”<sup>58</sup> Evidence does not suggest that the family directly observed this angel (which would have violated the canon), merely that the language of angelic guides deeply penetrated their understanding of Alvin’s final moments. Indeed, despite his many personal exposures to angels, the Prophet never identified Alvin’s guide by name.

Alvin’s place in the celestial kingdom had been vouchsafed by an 1836 revelation and through an 1840 vicarious baptism.<sup>59</sup> This assurance made Alvin the natural choice to escort his father heavenward from the

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55. For an observer to witness an angel was a deviation from the sacred script, more likely to be found in the hemi-Christianized Indian than in the practicing believer. Erik R. Seeman, “‘Reading Indians’ Deathbed Scenes: Ethnohistorical and Representational Approaches,” *The Journal of American History*, June 2001, <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/88.1/seeman.html>>.

56. Elizabeth Reis, “Immortal Messengers: Angels, Gender, and Power in Early America,” in Isenberg and Burstein, *Mortal Remains*, 163–64. Reis sees the deathbed as giving women access to these encounters, since an angelic visitation to a woman in any other setting was suspected to be Satanic. These are to be distinguished from the conversion theophanies that accompanied Evangelical revivalism. The Puritan leader Increase Mather summarized a common view that persisted well into the nineteenth century: “How easy then is it for *Daemons*, who have a perfect Understanding in *Opticks*, and in the Power of Nature to deceive the Eyes, and delude the Imaginations of Silly Mortals?” Reis, “Immortal Messengers,” 167, citing *Angelographia, or A Discourse concerning the Nature and Power of the Holy Angels, and the Great Benefit which the True Fearers of God Receive by Their Ministry* (Boston, 1696), 10.

57. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 354.

58. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:441.

59. M. Guy Bishop, “‘What Has Happened to Our Fathers?’: Baptism for the Dead at Nauvoo,” *Dialogue* 23 (Summer 1990): 92.

deathbed. Indeed, in his previously described moment of mortal clarity Joseph Sr. exclaimed, “I see Alvin.”<sup>60</sup>

Smith family culture preceded Alvin’s death. His mother’s father, Solomon Mack, receiving Lucy’s sister Lovisa during her miraculous recovery, “cried out in amazement Lovisa is dead and <Loe> her spirit has come to admonish me of my final exit.”<sup>61</sup> Though both participants in this strange encounter were alive, the message was clear: the dead guided the dying to the next life. One contemporary theologian interpreted Elijah’s grand chariot of fire as representing the angels that take the righteous to heaven,<sup>62</sup> while sermons of the day often anticipated deceased friends as guides to heaven.<sup>63</sup> This belief would be evident during the Civil War, as dying soldiers were reported to have seen their mothers (and other dear relatives) as they passed on.<sup>64</sup>

### The Bereaved Survivors

As the angel and his or her ward departed, the focus of the deathbed turned to the bereaved, whose “mourning was unfurled with an uncustomary degree of ostentation.”<sup>65</sup> Integral to the community of the beautiful death was this marked emphasis on mourning. Indeed, this may have been the chief role of the living at the scene. In a dramatic phrase from Ariès, “Emotion shook them, they cried, prayed, gesticulated. . . . These activities were described as if they had been invented for the first time, spontaneously, inspired by a passionate sorrow which is unique among sorrows.”<sup>66</sup> This sentiment, deeply rooted in Anglo-American culture, was widespread in antebellum America and was supported by (and in turn supported) a sentimental literature about the deathbed.<sup>67</sup>

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60. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 723.

61. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 238.

62. Robinson, *Theological, Biblical, and Ecclesiastical Dictionary*, s.v. “Elijah.”

63. Rothman, *Living in the Shadow of Death*, 126–27. Rothman provides an example from Dover, Massachusetts, in 1844. See also Wells, *Facing the “King of Terrors,”* 74.

64. Laderman, *Sacred Remains*, 135.

65. Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*, 67.

66. Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*, 59.

67. Marshall, “Affliction and Religion in Antebellum New York,” 182, 185. Marshall does not sufficiently appreciate the extent to which this “sentimental, if not maudlin, literary culture” was driven by a death culture. See also Ann Douglas, “Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830–1880,” in *Death in America*, ed. David Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 49–68.



The Smiths participated fully in this custom of bereavement. After the peaceful dignity of Alvin’s passage, the family began to mourn in earnest. Lucy reported that the family “wept with one accord [their] irretrievable loss.”<sup>68</sup> The effects of Alvin’s death were not limited to his immediate family. In retrospect, Lucy saw Alvin’s death not only as an overwhelming personal tragedy but also as a potent influence on all of Palmyra. She proclaimed that “the circumstance of this Death aroused the neighborhood to the subject of religion,” perhaps as a muted response to the insensitive eulogizing of Reverend Stockton.<sup>69</sup> The scope of her son’s influence was broad and long lasting. Lucy noted that Alvin’s fiancée “was rendered most desolate by his unexpected Death and as long as we knew her she never recovered her wonted animation and Good spirits.” Lucy saw Alvin’s shadow on Joseph’s decision to marry, reporting “Joseph called Mr Smith and myself aside and told us that he had felt so lonely ever since Alvin’s death that he had come to the conclusion of getting married if we had no objections.”<sup>70</sup> She also saw Joseph’s prophetic call as being closely tied to his older brother: “None were more engaged than the one whom we were doomed [to] part with for Alvin was never so happy as when he was contemplating the final success of his brother in obtaining the record.”<sup>71</sup>

For his part, the Prophet minced no words on his grief over Alvin’s passing: “Alvin my oldest brother, I remember well the pangs of sorrow that swelled my youthful bosom and almost burst my tender heart, when he died.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, as Joseph began to record the story of the Restoration, he and Hyrum carefully inscribed a mark of dedication, “In Memory of Alvin Smith,” and attached it to the manuscript of what would become the *History of the Church*.<sup>73</sup> Joseph later dictated a few lines of memorial poetry to his brother in the Book of the Law of the Lord, reverencing

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68. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 356. Vogel is open about his diagnosis of suicidality. Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, xx.

69. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 355. Stockton was the Palmyra Presbyterian who presided at Alvin’s funeral. According to William Smith, Stockton “preached my brother’s funeral sermon and intimated very strongly that he had gone to hell, for Alvin was not a church member.” Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:513. Such would have been a standard Presbyterian funeral, given their stated emphasis in such sermons on emphasizing preparation for death. See Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 40, citing *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, in the United States of America*, which was ratified in 1821.

70. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 362.

71. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 465.

72. Jesse, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:440.

73. This inscription is on a slip of paper attached to the front cover of the Manuscript History of the Church, probably in Hyrum Smith’s handwriting.

Alvin's memory: "In him there was no guile He lived without spot from the time he was a child From the time of his birth, he never knew mirth He was candid and sober and never would play and minded his father, and mother, in toiling all day."<sup>74</sup>

The family followed the same bereavement script for Joseph Sr.'s death. Joseph first addressed the impending fear of loss during an episode of illness in Kirtland in October 1835. Joseph's diary reads,

[I] visited my Father /again/ who was verry sick./ In secret prayer in the morning the Lord said, "My servant thy Father shall live."/ I waited on him all this day with my heart raised to God in the name of Jesus Christ that he would restore him to health again, that I might be blessed with his company and advise. Esteeming it one of the greatest earthly blessings, to be blessed with the society of Parents, whose mature years and experience renders them capable of administering the most whol[e]some advice.

When Joseph Sr. arose miraculously from his presumptive deathbed, Joseph and his brother William expressed their elation by singing "Songs of praise to the most High."<sup>75</sup>

However, Joseph Sr. would live only five more years. When he passed in September 1840, Lucy recalled that the family "felt so desolate that we could not endure to be separated more than could possibly be avoided." She continued,

I am convinced that no one but a widow can imagine the feelings of a widow but my situation was not such as is common in similar cases my beloved companion who had shared my joy and grief for 44 years lay before me a cold lifeless corpse and the cold hand which I held in mine returned the pressure of my own no longer. My Fatherless children stood around me gazing in agony upon those eyes which had until a few minutes previous always beamed upon them with the tenderest [blank line].<sup>76</sup>

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Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:55. See also the discussion in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:265–67.

74. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:440–41. Though not printed in poetic form, the entry is clearly in rhymed couplets with a disclaimer afterward, calling them "childish lines." Hicks has independently identified these lines as poetry, though he missed the fact that they represent memorial poetry. Hicks also identifies a similar memorial poem to Joseph Smith Sr. (also in the Book of the Law of the Lord), though he again does not recognize the genre. Michael Hicks, "Joseph Smith, W. W. Phelps, and the Poetic Paraphrase of 'The Vision,'" *Journal of Mormon History* 20 (Fall 1994): 63–84.

75. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:51.

76. Smith, *Lucy's Book*, 724.

Robert Thompson's eulogy supports Lucy's emphasis on the bereaved family and describes "the sorrowing widow, the disconsolate husband, the weeping children, the almost distracted and heart broken parent."<sup>77</sup>

The bereavement of the beautiful death was so intense that it bordered on the suicidal. Non-Mormon John Lewis, mourning his daughter's death in 1830 New York, "professed the further hope that . . . all the family would 'join the dear departed child in realms of endless bliss.'"<sup>78</sup> Epitaphs from the period, such as "I live to mourn her and to join her in the grave," corroborate Lewis's sentiment.<sup>79</sup> A grief so severe that it flirted with suicide powerfully affirmed the rent in the fabric of human existence occasioned by the death of a loved one.

In this context, Lucy's statement that the family was "mak[ing] speedy preparation to follow him," is not diagnostic of suicidal depression, as has been suggested by Dan Vogel, but rather is emblematic of culturally appropriate bereavement. Lucy's vocal and dramatic mourning for her departed sister Lovina, often quoted as evidence of instability, partakes of the same cultural milieu. To be "pensive and melancholy, and often [think] that life was not worth possessing" was an appropriate response within the script of the beautiful death.<sup>80</sup>

### Negotiating Sorrow and Providence

The intense bereavement of the survivors was at odds with the peaceful demeanor of the dying. The dying person was not allowed to publicly express grief because doubting the justice of God's plan and the propriety of one's own death could threaten salvation. This stark contrast in behavior may have served to further divide the living from the dead. From another perspective, mourning was the means to recognize and valorize the missing loved one. Each individual had to leave a void, or his or her identity amounted to very little. What the pious humility of the dying could not express, the loud tears of the bereaved demonstrated. An 1830s Latter-day Saint summarized the problem poignantly: "Perhaps we should be found

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77. "Nauvoo, Ill. Sept., 1840," 173.

78. Marshall, "Affliction and Religion in Antebellum New York," 176, citing John Lewis Diary for February 1830.

79. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 529.

80. Vogel, *Making of a Prophet*, xx, 4. This is not to say that Lucy could not have been depressed, nor do I want to partake in the stigmatization implicit in pathopsychologic analyses of the Smiths. I merely wish to indicate that statements of florid bereavement are not useful evidence of clinical depression given the cultural context.

wanting in feelings of respect and friendship, were we not to notice the departure of our beloved brother the loss of whom we view as an afflicting, though just providence.”<sup>81</sup>

Providence and the hand of God in mortal events have a vital, if complex, history in the inner life of Anglo-American Christians, and death was the supreme event in need of providential interpretation.<sup>82</sup> The prescribed calm of the dying on the deathbed signified the acceptance of Providence. But for mourners, this path of calm was as hard to negotiate as the mind of God was difficult to ascertain, and antebellum Americans searched their souls for the cause of mortality.<sup>83</sup> Because death was often painful, it was common to seek sin as an underlying cause.

For Puritans and their heirs, premature death could be seen as an indication of moral laxness or of sinful attachment to the present world. In one of the paradoxes surrounding death, the bereaved might worry that his or her mourning represented a punishable distraction from the glory of God. Among American Puritans, Cotton Mather wrote that the death of his daughter Jerusha would be a sacrifice “to glorify God,” believing that his excessive fondness was likely responsible for her illness. Later, as his son Samuel languished near death, Mather “bewayled the Sins, by which the Life . . . of this desirable Child [would be] forfeited.”<sup>84</sup> Mather’s predecessor Thomas Shepard, dealing with a shipboard illness of his oldest child, identified the cause in the “immoderate love of creatures and of my child especially.”<sup>85</sup> In the next century, a Protestant minister, possibly Jonathan Edwards, saw high child mortality as “a Testimony against our Immoderate Love to, and Doating upon our Children.”<sup>86</sup> A contemporary to the Smiths wrote to his bereaved siblings of the practical implications

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81. “Obituary,” *The Evening and the Morning Star* 2 (December 1833): 117.

82. Lewis Saum details the transition in providential thinking that occurred around the time of the Civil War in *Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America* and *The Popular Mood of America, 1860–1890* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1990). On the robust Evangelical view of the Providence behind death, see Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death*, 37–38.

83. Nineteenth-century tuberculosis narratives are fraught with the tension of this quest. Rothman, *Living in the Shadow of Death*, 228.

84. Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 30–31, citing *Diary of Cotton Mather*.

85. Greven, *Protestant Temperament*, 30, citing *God’s Plot: The Paradoxes of Puritan Piety Being the Autobiography and Journal of Thomas Shepard*.

86. Greven, *Protestant Temperament*, 34, citing a 1738 entry in the record book of the Hampshire Association of Ministers. Though the attribution is not certain, it seems likely that this was Jonathan Edwards.

of excessive love for children: “If we do not in some degree turn our affections away from them we sharpen the arrow that is to pierce our vitals.”<sup>87</sup> Joseph Smith expressed a similar sentiment in his eulogy for Ephraim Marks. “When we lose a near and dear friend, upon whom we have set our hearts, it should be a caution unto us not to set our affections too firmly upon others, knowing that they may in like manner be taken from us. Our affections should be placed upon God and His work, more intensely than upon our fellow beings.”<sup>88</sup>

Like other families, the Smiths had to develop explanations for suffering and death. An extreme example is the attribution of the Zion’s Camp cholera outbreak (with its associated deaths) to sin and infidelity.<sup>89</sup> A disavowal of *avaritia* was often found in eulogies and musings on death, though Lucy demonstrates little acceptance of such a view. Persecution represented her explanatory framework, such that even deaths from natural causes may have qualified as martyrdom.<sup>90</sup> Reporting her daughter-in-law’s death (which she attributes to the Missouri persecutions) in the closing paragraphs of her memoir, Lucy states, “The sum of martyrs in our family [is] no less than six in number.”<sup>91</sup> While Hyrum and Joseph were the only family members clearly murdered by enemies, Lucy and her family also saw the others as martyrs. Joseph Sr.’s death from tuberculosis—the omnipresent scourge of the era—was “brought upon him through

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87. Saum, *Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America*, 88, citing the private letter of R. Owen, Carrolton, Alabama, April 22, 1836.

88. *History of the Church*, 4:587. Wilford Woodruff’s notes for the sermon leave off the final sentence, though the sentiment is culturally implicit in his comments and thus seems an appropriate emendation or correction (*Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 2:168, April 9, 1842).

89. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:80, 106. See also Roger D. Launius, *Zion’s Camp: Expedition to Missouri, 1834* (Independence, Mo.: Herald, 1984), 145–46, 151–52; Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, 93–96. Attributing cholera to sin during the initial American epidemic (1832–34) was common, as outlined in Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 30–34.

90. There is some evidence that stillbirths may have been attributed to sin, as with the lost firstborns of Father Smith and Joseph. See Vogel, *Making of a Prophet*, 5, 125. Joseph Murdock’s death from measles was considered a martyrdom of sorts, as were many Latter-day Saint deaths after infancy.

91. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 752 n. 125. Anderson believes the martyrs are Joseph Sr., Joseph Jr., Hyrum, Samuel, Caroline Grant, and Mary Bailey. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 9, substitutes Don Carlos for Mary Bailey. Wilford Woodruff’s reference to his visit with Lucy in August 1844 (*Wilford Woodruff’s Journal* 2: 450) clearly specifies “Don Carlos” as a martyr, confirming Bushman’s list.

suffering by the hands of ruthless mobs.”<sup>92</sup> Son Don Carlos died in 1841 from a probable pneumonia, but Lucy apparently believed that he contracted his fatal disease because persecutions had forced him to recover the Church’s printing press in unhealthy conditions (“an underground room through which a spring was constantly flowing”) to publish the *Times and Seasons*.<sup>93</sup> Samuel died from an uncertain illness, perhaps pneumonia, approximately a month after his brothers’ murders in 1844. Lucy reports that “his spirit forsook its earthly tabernacle, and went to join his brothers, and the ancient martyrs, in the Paradise of God.”<sup>94</sup>

Lucy appears to have thought of Alvin differently, perhaps because his death preceded the founding of the Church. Though she does not explicitly apply the title of martyr to Alvin, she is adamant that his death was not from natural causes, reflecting an undercurrent of persecution even at that early stage. In her words, “Alvin was murdered by a quack physician.”<sup>95</sup>

Her explanations of death should be recognized as distinct from, or at least a special case of, the sense of persecution that attends the first century of the Restoration. She was not simply reporting the family’s nobility in the face of adversity. Martyrdom, as a special case of the Providential death, represented a death caused by the martyr’s righteousness. God was not displeased with the family for their failure to live divine principles or for their excessive devotion to earthly relationships; he was displeased with the enemies of the Church. Lucy presided over a family of martyrs, torn from her one after the other by the wicked.

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92. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:439; Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 493.

93. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 763–65, 767. The Don Carlos material is appended to the end of the memoir, as discussed in *Lucy’s Book*, 752–53. William Smith’s late reminiscence (Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:488) notes that “Don Carlos died of chills & fevers.” See also the death announcement in *Times and Seasons* 2 (August 16, 1841): 503–4.

94. On Samuel Smith, see Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 265, 750–51. Pneumonia or pneumothorax seem possible given his complaints of a pain in his side, though a diagnosis is by no means certain. Even Lavina Anderson accepts the idea of Samuel’s martyrdom in her Smith family chronology. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 207. Samuel’s nephew, Joseph F. Smith, later reported that “the rupture of some blood vessel” was the direct result of fleeing the mob, and this resulted in his death. Joseph F. Smith, “Joseph Smith, the Prophet,” *Collected Discourses*, ed. Brian H. Stuy, 5 vols. (Burbank, Calif.: B. H. S. Publishing, 1987–92) 5:343. This explanation seems medically unlikely.

95. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 493.

## The Corpse

The scene of the beautiful death extended beyond the deathbed and well into the grave. For participants in this death culture, the remains of the dead continued to wield power. The corpse was consummately liminal, neither dead nor alive, while being both simultaneously.

The power of Alvin's corpse is underscored by a heartrending scene recorded in his mother's memoir. Alvin's sister Lucy "would run out of the house and drag in a board and lay beside [Alvin's] corpse then take a white cloth and wrap herself in it and lay down on the board by his side."<sup>96</sup>

This liminality framed and amplified the corpse's power.<sup>97</sup> Further, Christians believed that the body was essential to immortality. The remains of the beloved were to be closely guarded against artificial dissolution, and cremation was considered sacrilegious.<sup>98</sup> The integrity of the body between death and resurrection was of immense importance.

Foreign to twenty-first-century readers is the overwhelming fear of body snatching. The appropriation of corpses by surgical anatomists was initially a punishment for the most heinous of capital crimes and was seen as a fate worse than death.<sup>99</sup> In response to the exigencies of a limited supply of executed felons, a group of protocapitalists labeled resurrectionists arose, supplying anatomists and surgeons with purloined cadavers for dissection. Despite a flurry of legislation against body snatching in the second decade of the nineteenth century, the practice of stealing fresh corpses overrode the imagination of all castes of society, though the resurrectionists tended to steal the bodies of the poor and dispossessed.<sup>100</sup>

Ten months after Alvin was interred in the Palmyra cemetery, rumors caused the family to feel anxious about his resting place. This led Joseph Sr.

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96. Smith, *Lucy's Book*, 354. The entire passage has been crossed out in the original manuscript. The published version replaces this material with a note that young Lucy "manifest[ed] such mingled feelings of both terror and affection at the scene before her, as are seldom witnessed."

97. The notion of liminality is prominent in the anthropological literature and has been expounded by Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), and later expanded by Victor Turner and Edmund Leach. See Metcalf and Huntington, *Celebrations of Death*, 115.

98. Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 78–80.

99. Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 13. Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 28–29, 36, 54, 97. Richardson treats the English side of the problem.

100. Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 102–4.

to perform an unenviable task. The only firsthand report of the incident is an advertisement repeated for six straight weeks in the town newspaper.

Whereas reports have been industriously put in circulation, that my son *Alvin* has been removed from the place of his interment and dissected; which reports, every person possessed of human sensibility must know, are peculiarly calculated to harrow up the mind of a parent and deeply wound the feelings of relations . . . —therefore, for the purpose of ascertaining the truth of such reports I, with some of my neighbors, this morning repaired to the grave, and removing the earth, found the body which had not been disturbed.<sup>101</sup>

While Dale Morgan dismissively groups the disinterment with popular ridicule of the Smiths' treasure seeking, and some critics believe Alvin's father and brother sought talismans from dismembered limbs, the exhumation of Alvin's remains was neither unimaginable for a poor New Englander nor consciously associated with money digging.<sup>102</sup> The dissection mentioned in the newspaper advertisement above referred to the predations of the anatomists rather than the craft of the necromancer or the toiling of the treasure seeker. Independent of these proposed associations, the claims of dissection would have been extremely denigrating, placing the Smith family in the company of the dispossessed "as people who were unable to protect their dead, whose dead deserved no protection."<sup>103</sup>

A misplaced corpse was seen as a nidus for hauntings and other calamities, so the Smiths' fear of the doubled loss of their beloved son is

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101. *Wayne Sentinel*, September 29 to November 3, 1824, reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:217–18.

102. John Phillip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 239. The physical relic theory is prominent in anti-Mormon discussions, though it has not been advanced in scholarly contexts. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 160–61, stops short of claiming a necromantic exhumation, though he believes the village rumors were grounded in beliefs about Smith necromancy. Morain, *Sword of Laban*, 147, sees the exhumation as evidence of Joseph Sr.'s emotional instability.

103. Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 113. One anonymous reviewer wondered whether the rumors might have indicated that the Smiths were so poor that they sold Alvin's corpse to a resurrectionist, and the disinterment was to prove this rumor wrong. Sale of a loved one's corpse was an exceedingly rare event, and such a rumor seems unlikely, even recognizing the dislike of many neighbors for the Smith family. However, had that rumor circulated, this would further confirm the great stigma associated with mistreatment of the corpse.



not surprising.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, riots related to the suspicion of empty graves occasionally broke out against medical institutions, and other disinterments from the period have been described.<sup>105</sup> Any implication that Joseph Sr. violated New York laws on disinterment betrays a poor understanding of contemporary popular and legal culture: state laws against body snatching were designed to protect kindred remains from the resurrectionists. Disinterring one’s own son was a private act consistent with the spirit of those laws.<sup>106</sup>

Knowing that Alvin remained safe in the ground, ready to join the family in the Resurrection, was imperative for the grief-stricken Smiths. The fact that this exhumation occurred around the time of Joseph’s annual visit with Moroni could simply reflect how strongly the family (and their neighbors) associated Alvin with his younger brother’s sacred mission.<sup>107</sup> Late in her memoir, Lucy makes one cryptic reference to the exhumation, which supports the nonmagical interpretation: “Alvin was murdered by a quack physician; but still he lay at peace.”<sup>108</sup> The emphasis, both at the time and in retrospect, was on the sanctity of Alvin’s resting place and the sacred obligation of the family to protect their dead. Relief at the security of Alvin’s remains may have outweighed the shock of seeing his body in the later stages of decay, contrary to the assertion that the disinterment itself was a second major dissociating trauma for young Joseph.<sup>109</sup> Though the

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104. R. C. Finucane, *Ghosts: Appearances of the Dead and Cultural Transformation* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1996). Finucane provides an excellent treatment of the cultural context of Anglo-American hauntings.

105. Sappol, *Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 106, reports riots in 1824 (New Haven and Hartford) and 1830 (Pittsfield, Mass.; Woodstock, Vt.; Castleton, Vt.). Sappol reports an alleged disinterment motivated by rumors of body snatching (108).

106. Morain, *Sword of Laban*, 147. (See Steven G. Barnett, “The Canes of the Martyrdom,” *BYU Studies* 21, no. 2 [1981], 206.)

107. Though the culture of reverence for the corpse would make necromantic goals for the exhumation a possibility, I do not see compelling evidence for that interpretation when the act fits so well in another explanatory context. Alvin’s relevance to Joseph’s mission is amply documented in accounts from Father Smith and Joseph Knight Sr. as well as in statements from Philastus Hurlbut’s and William and Edmund Kelley’s collections. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:460; 2:67, 131, 159; 4:13.

108. Smith, *Lucy’s Book*, 493.

109. Morain, *Sword of Laban*, 137–47. Some of Smith’s followers would reverently handle his corpse at a later stage of decay, taking some of his hair during a reinterment. Some of Smith’s followers would reverently handle his corpse at a later stage of decay, taking some of his hair during a reinterment.



Nauvoo resident George Cannon cast plaster masks of Joseph and Hyrum Smith as their bodies lay in state after their murders in June 1844. Relics were important to nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, and the tradition of collecting artifacts continues to this day. Courtesy Val Brinkerhoff.

dead are dramatically present in early Mormonism, there is no need to propose Alvin's disinterment as the cause of imagined visits from Moroni.<sup>110</sup>

Respect for the corpse was further expressed in a minor cult of relics, including posthumous portraits, photographs, death masks, and preservation of locks of hair and various personal effects.<sup>111</sup> Hair had replaced the (embalmed) heart as an incorruptible memento of the corpse in the eighteenth century, as it also partook of the obdurate immortality of the skeleton.<sup>112</sup> This cult of relics was embraced by Latter-day Saints. Wilford Woodruff gave as a New Year's present "some Hair from the Heads of Joseph Smith the Prophet And all the Smith family of Male members also Mother Smith And from most all the quorum of the Twelve Also A peace of Joseph Smith Handkerchief."<sup>113</sup> Death masks of the martyred brothers were cast and preserved, and the first coffins in which their bodies were returned from Carthage to Nauvoo were later crafted into canes that were distributed among the family and their close friends.<sup>114</sup>

110. Morain, *Sword of Laban*, 137, 145–46.

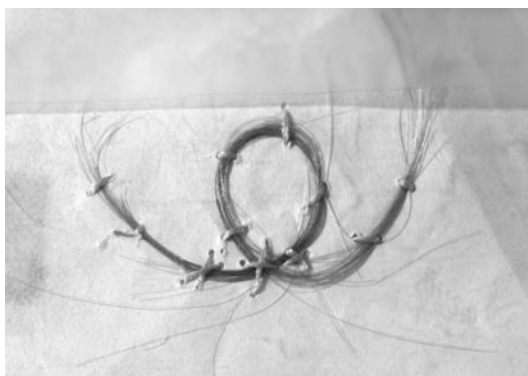
111. Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), is an excellent history of posthumous portraiture in America. On hair, death masks, and other relics, see Laderman, *Sacred Remains*, 76, 132, 150.

112. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 388. Though there is no taxonomic link, the preservation of hair of the deceased has a worldwide distribution. See Metcalf and Huntington, *Celebrations of Death*, 63.

113. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 3:3, January 1, 1846. The gift was sent to Elder Samuel Downing. At least two of Joseph's widows kept locketts of his hair. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997), 371; Roger Launius, *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 39.

114. Barnett, "The Canes of the Martyrdom," 205–11. See also Jennifer Reeder, "Eliza R. Snow and the Prophet's Gold Watch: Time Keeper as Relic," *Journal of*

Lock of Joseph Smith’s hair. This lock was given to Henrietta K. Whitney in Nauvoo, Illinois, as a memento not long before the Prophet was killed. An inscription reads, “Lock of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s hair cut off by Mrs. Mary Ann Smith-Stratton just before he was taken prisoner.” Courtesy Val Brinkerhoff.



Christians anticipated that their community would not be undone and that their dead would rise together at the day of the Resurrection. To have disturbed or moved the remains that would be revived was a mark of great disrespect and a possible cause of damnation. The fear was that a body removed from its sacred resting place would not be able to partake of the Resurrection. The thought that a loved one’s body could go missing, however theologically inept, was very real.<sup>115</sup>

The community of corpses, originally in churches and family estates, then in cemeteries, underscored both the importance of the remains and the necessity of being buried in the correct place. From the medieval practice of burial *ad sanctos* (“near the tombs of the martyrs”) to the nineteenth-century rural cemetery movement,<sup>116</sup> the location of kindred remains has been considered of utmost importance both for human community and

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*Mormon History* 31 (Spring 2005): 120–21, and Glen Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 402–3.

115. Regarding a Christian belief that the mishandled corpse could not rise, see Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 31–33. Regarding the idea that cursing could result from mishandling corpses, see Laderman, *Sacred Remains*, 68.

116. Because of rapidly increasing population, the old churchyards and burial grounds became so crowded they were often offensive to visitors and presented public health hazards. Changes in cemetery layout began in New England with an effort to make cemeteries places of peacefulness surrounded by nature. Hills and trees became part of the cemetery landscape, and roads followed the contours of the land. These cemeteries resembled beautiful parks rather than overcrowded graveyards. Mount Auburn Cemetery, established in 1831 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is recognized as the first rural cemetery in America. For more information, see Stanley French, “The Cemetery as Cultural Institution: The Establishment of Mount Auburn and the ‘Rural Cemetery’ Movement,” in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 69–91.



Cane made from blood-stained wood of the coffin used to transport Joseph Smith from Carthage to Nauvoo, with the hair of Joseph and Hyrum Smith braided and encased in glass in the cane's handle. Courtesy Val Brinkerhoff.

for salvation.<sup>117</sup> Thus, one father of a Civil War soldier reports that “all my care and toil was nothing, compared with the satisfaction of knowing that [my son’s] remains had been taken up from a grave in an enemy’s land, and had been safely transported to the land of his birth, and peacefully buried in our family cemetery.”<sup>118</sup> Joseph Smith preached that “the place where a man is buried is sacred to me. This subject is made mention of in the Book of Mormon and other scriptures. Even to the aborigines of this land, the burying places of their fathers are more sacred than anything else.”<sup>119</sup> In fulfillment of his mandate, he built in Nauvoo a family tomb, the “Tomb of Joseph,” in which he hoped to bury his entire family.<sup>120</sup>

## Conclusion

Several historical aspects of the early Restoration are clarified by the contextualization of the Smiths’ deathbed scenes. What has been identified as Lucy’s extremely despondent bereavement following the death of

117. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 31–33, 41. See also Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death*, 22.

118. Laderman, *Sacred Remains*, 152. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington and the Whitehall cenotaph in London memorialize the misplaced corpse in our current era. See Mike Parker Pearson, *Archaeology of Death and Burial* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 55.

119. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:361.

120. Susan Easton Black, “The Tomb of Joseph,” in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and others (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 61–86. Ultimately, only one sister-in-law was interred there, and the precise location is not firmly established, though there is no doubt of its existence. See also Joseph D. Johnston, “‘To Lay in Yonder Tomb’: The Tomb and Burial of Joseph Smith,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 5 (Fall 2005): 2.

loved ones possesses a different significance when situated within the antebellum American culture of the beautiful death. Though it is tempting to interpret her melodramatic grief as evidence of mental illness, her reaction is a better indication of the cultural divide between the Smiths and modern skeptics than an index of actual illness.

The reason for the stylized deathbed renditions also comes into clear focus when placed within antebellum culture. Rather than demonstrating fanciful dreams of an ideal farewell with her child, Lucy's formal deathbed depictions affirm the part that the dying was expected to play in the mortal drama. By presenting Alvin's fulfillment of religious obligations on his deathbed, her account had an impact similar to Joseph's 1836 vision of the celestial kingdom and Hyrum's 1840 baptism on Alvin's behalf; all affirmed Alvin's proper place in heaven. Whatever words were exchanged, great spiritual communication occurred around Alvin's deathbed, and Alvin likely understood the role he was to play. Lucy's retelling of that sacred event was a memorial, even ritual, act on behalf of her departed son.

In addition, placing Alvin's death in its historical context modulates the significance of Alvin, suggesting that he and his death were more emblematic of deep cultural currents than they were cause for his brother's prophetic mission. While profoundly significant for the Smith family, including the future prophet, I suspect that Alvin's death created emotional valence for future revelations more than it defined them.

The cultural context of the Smith family deathbeds also clarifies the emotional and spiritual impact of the rites and doctrines revealed by the Prophet. These were no theoretical doctrines; they spoke to some of the deepest emotions held by early nineteenth-century Americans.<sup>121</sup> In Lucy's deathbed portrayals, readers catch a glimpse of the new theology that her son Joseph was revealing. The transaction of grace between the living and the dying is cast in decidedly patriarchal terms, particularly in the case of Joseph Sr. Where other antebellum Christians exchanged pious aphorisms and exhorted greater Christian faith, the Smiths saw Joseph Sr. as the patriarch Jacob dispensing prophetic blessings. The history of Israel was recapitulated on the Smith deathbeds, just as that history was being relived by members of the early Church.

In the end, I believe that the significance of this research lies in our capacity to better understand the family at the center of the Restoration. Knowing what death and bereavement signified for the Smiths is both

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121. See, for instance, D&C 42: 44–47.

illuminating in our study of their personalities and compelling for our own modern-day experience of these same significant events. Through these deathbed scenes we witness the incredible intimacy of church and family, the overlapping boundaries that would be further developed in the redemption of the dead, celestial marriage, and other distinctive Latter-day Saint doctrines and practices. They are all at home in the intimate community of the beautiful death.

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