

## Prologue

# The Spirit of Elijah

**I**n 1894, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly called the Mormon Church) founded the Genealogical Society of Utah. Genealogical research had been undertaken by many people for various reasons since ancient times, but it holds a unique spiritual meaning for Latter-day Saints. Impelled by what they refer to as the Spirit of Elijah, Church members seek to identify their ancestors and then perform sacred ordinances in their behalf in the temples. The Society was founded to help the Saints achieve that purpose. Since its modest beginnings, the Society, now officially known as the Family History Department of the Church, has extended its influence to all quarters of the globe, quietly amassing a treasure house of the world's ancestry and providing the information contained therein not only to Church members, but to all those interested in becoming acquainted with their heritage.

To understand the significance of the Society's history, one should know something of the historical setting in which the Society arose. This prologue will briefly review that setting as well as the essential doctrines that make genealogical work so vital to Latter-day Saints.

### Ancient Genealogies

The word *genealogy*, derived from Greek, refers to the study of family or race and to the identification of lines of descent.



Mormons believe that the family of Adam and Eve were the first genealogists, for LDS scripture says that Adam and Eve's family kept a "book of remembrance" and that "a genealogy was kept of the children of God" (Moses 6:5, 8). These records were kept for religious purposes, particularly to support claims to priesthood authority. The Hebrew patriarch Abraham, for example, possessed records dating from himself back "to the beginning of the creation;" these "records of the fathers" concerned the right of priesthood (Abr. 1:28, 31).

The Bible contains some of the earliest known genealogies. As was the case with the earlier records, one purpose was to ensure proper tracing of priesthood lineage. In ancient Israel, a priest had to prove himself a descendant of Aaron before he could claim his priestly office (Ezra 2:61-62; Neh. 7:63-64).<sup>1</sup> Another purpose for these records was to provide all Israelites with the means to see themselves as literal descendants of Jacob (Israel) and partakers of the special blessings of Abraham and Sarah.

Ancient peoples in various parts of the world were committed to keeping track of lineage. Ancient genealogies, including some of those in the Bible, were handed down by oral tradition and later recorded, sometimes by unusual methods. The Incas of Peru, for example, used a system of ropes and knots, while the New Zealand Maoris invented a complex system of beads. Most oral genealogies eventually were written down, but for several reasons they are often unreliable. European royal families, for example, sometimes corrupted an oral tradition in order to force it into biblical lines. Some genealogies in the Islamic world may have been altered to portray individuals as descendants of Mohammed. Similarly, the genealogies of the kings of Rome may have been distorted to satisfy national pride. The Roman emperor Vespasian (A.D. 69-79), for example, usually made fun of the magnificent pedigrees that his courtiers prepared for him, reminding them that he descended from humble farmers.<sup>2</sup>

Most early genealogical records were kept for the benefit of royal families. Their interest was natural and pragmatic: the records were essential in confirming one's right to the throne or other royal inheritance. One exception was in China, where the tradition of ancestor worship resulted in very long pedigrees



among nonroyal families. Indeed, some Chinese claim they can trace their lineage as far back as Confucius.

In Europe, records tracing the lineage of common folk were not created until the sixteenth century. English parish records, for example, which include baptismal, marriage, and burial dates, were begun in 1538. The creation of such records was partly related to the rise of national states, where monarchs needed accurate information about their subjects for purposes such as taxation and conscription.

### **The Mission of Elijah**

The Latter-day Saint commitment to genealogy has its roots in the Bible. The Old Testament concludes with two enigmatic verses in which God said to the prophet Malachi:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. (Mal. 4:5-6)

In the centuries that followed, the expectation that this prophecy would be fulfilled became so strong that when Jesus began his ministry he was sometimes mistaken for Elijah (Matt. 16:14; Mark 6:15; 8:28; John 1:21).<sup>3</sup> Even today, Jews leave a vacant seat at their tables at Passover in symbolic anticipation of Elijah's return. The exact nature of Elijah's mission was not clear in the Bible, but in the nineteenth century, the Latter-day Saints received enlightenment on the reason for his return. This can best be understood in the context of the Mormon concept of the restoration of the gospel.

According to LDS belief, Jesus established his Church during his ministry and left it in the hands of ordained apostles and prophets. Eventually, however, the Church fell into apostasy, altering certain essential truths and losing the priesthood, or the authority to act in the name of God. But New Testament prophets foresaw a day of restoration. Peter, for example, referred to the "times of restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21), while Paul told the Ephesians about the "dispensation of the fulness of times," in which the Lord would "gather together in one all things in



Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him" (Eph. 1:10).

Latter-day Saints believe the fulness of the gospel to have been restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith, as is explained in a revelation dated 1 November 1831:

Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments; . . . to lay the foundation of this church, and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness, the only true and living church upon the whole earth. (D&C 1:17, 30)<sup>4</sup>

Included in this restoration was the doctrine of salvation for the dead. As Joseph Smith explained, when Malachi foretold the return of Elijah, he "had his eye fixed on the restoration of the priesthood, the glories to be revealed in the last days, and in an especial manner this most glorious of all subjects belonging to the everlasting gospel, namely, the baptism [salvation] for the dead" (D&C 128:17).

The Restoration began during the spring of 1820 in western New York state. In the midst of a series of religious revivals that swirled around him, Joseph Smith, then only fourteen years old, became dismayed at the confusion and bad feelings he saw among the various religious denominations. As he recalled in 1835, "I knew not who was right or who was wrong, but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be right."<sup>5</sup> Under these circumstances, young Joseph was deeply impressed when he read a biblical passage, James 1:5, that promised wisdom to those who would ask of God. "Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine," he wrote. "At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God" (JS-H 1:12-13).

This determination led Joseph to a grove of trees, where he knelt in fervent prayer. After a considerable spiritual struggle with forces that seemed to almost overwhelm him, he suddenly saw a pillar of light that shone "above the brightness of the sun at noon day." Within the light stood two persons. One called Joseph by name and, pointing to the other, announced, "This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" As the vision continued, Joseph was informed,



among other things, that he should join none of the existing churches, for God did not recognize the authority or teachings of those who led them.

Three years later, on the night of 21 September 1823, Joseph Smith received a second vision. A heavenly being named Moroni appeared and told him of the ancient records from which he would translate the Book of Mormon. Moroni also quoted Malachi's prophecy of Elijah, though with some significant modifications. Instead of saying, "I will send you Elijah," Moroni quoted Malachi 4:5 as: "I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet." The next verse was also modified: "And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming" (D&C 2).

Joseph Smith received more visions and revelations that eventually led to the organization of the Church. The visions included visits from other heavenly beings, who restored the priesthood. In 1829, John the Baptist appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and restored the priesthood of Aaron, which included the authority to baptize. Later, the Apostles Peter, James, and John restored the Melchizedek, or higher, Priesthood.

The Church was organized on 6 April 1830. Immediately, the handful of believers set out to gather new converts. Within a month, any question that might have lingered concerning the Church's exclusive authority to administer ordinances was settled by revelation. When converts who had been previously baptized in other churches wanted to join the restored Church without re-baptism, the Lord revealed the following through Joseph Smith:

Behold, I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this thing; and this is a new and an everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning. Wherefore, although a man should be baptized an hundred times it availeth him nothing, for you cannot enter in at the strait gate by the law of Moses, neither by your dead works. For it is because of your dead works that I have caused this last covenant and this church to be built up unto me, even as in days of old. (D&C 22:1-3)

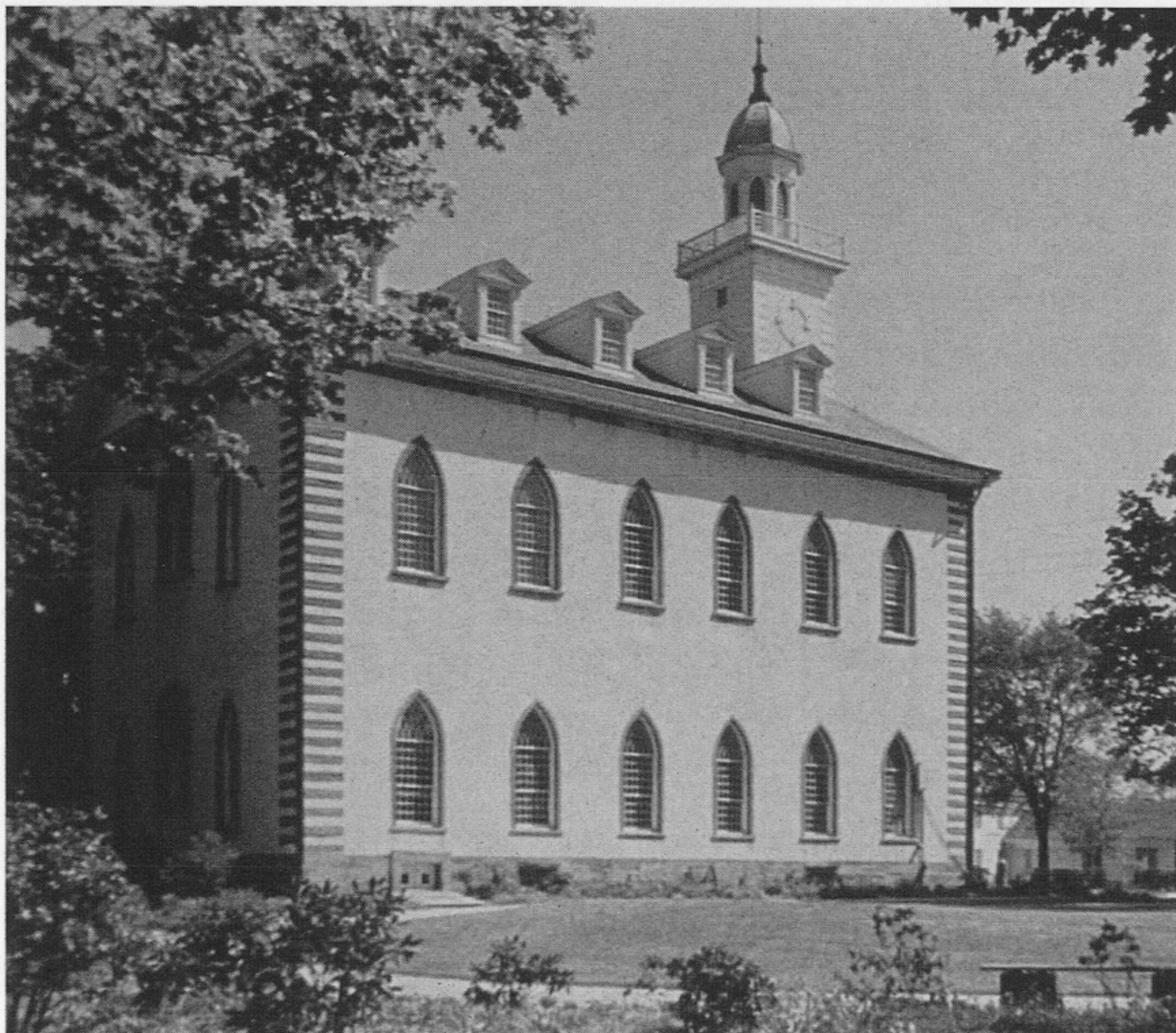
Because of religious harassment and the expectation of better acceptance in the West, Joseph Smith and his followers soon



moved to Kirtland, Ohio. There the Church grew dramatically, although Church members suffered economic troubles and continued to face persecution.

In December 1832, the Prophet received a revelation commanding the Saints to erect a sacred building that would become “a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God” (D&C 88:119). This was the Kirtland Temple, forerunner of many temples to be constructed by the Church.

The dedication of the Kirtland Temple on 27 March 1836, was accompanied by dramatic spiritual outpourings—the sounds of rushing winds, a shaft of light over the temple, speaking in



The Kirtland Temple. On the day of Passover, 3 April 1836, the prophet Elijah and other resurrected beings appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in this temple and committed to them the priesthood keys for directing ordinance work for the dead. Photograph by LaMar C. Berrett. Courtesy College of Religious Education, Brigham Young University.



tongues, and the visitation of angels.<sup>6</sup> Then, on 3 April, the day of the Passover that year,<sup>7</sup> Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery concluded a general meeting by retiring to the pulpit at the west end of the temple. After drawing a curtain to assure privacy and bowing themselves in solemn and silent prayer, they experienced a vision: "The veil was taken from our minds, and the eyes of our understanding were opened. We saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us" (D&C 110:1-2). The Lord spoke to them, accepted the temple, and foretold its influence among the Saints and throughout the world. Other visions were opened to their minds, and then, at last, the following was manifested:

After this vision had closed, another great and glorious vision burst upon us; for Elijah the prophet, who was taken to heaven without tasting death, stood before us, and said: Behold, the time has fully come, which was spoken of by the mouth of Malachi—testifying that he [Elijah] should be sent, before the great and dreadful day of the Lord come—To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, lest the whole earth be smitten with a curse—Therefore, the keys of this dispensation are committed into your hands; and by this ye may know that the great and dreadful day of the Lord is near, even at the doors. (D&C 110:13-16)<sup>8</sup>

Elijah had come, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi. The full meaning of his appearance would become clear a few years later, after Joseph Smith instituted the practice of performing proxy baptisms in behalf of deceased ancestors.

## **Proxy Ordinances**

The Saints believed that baptism, together with the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, was essential to salvation, but that these ordinances were invalid unless performed by priesthood authority. Many, therefore, wondered about the salvation of family members and friends who had died with no chance to accept the restored gospel or be baptized by someone holding the priesthood. The question may have arisen in Joseph Smith's mind in January 1836, when, in a remarkable vision, he saw his deceased brother Alvin inhabiting the celestial kingdom of God. As the Prophet wondered how this could be, since Alvin



had not been baptized, the voice of the Lord came to him with these words:

All who have died without a knowledge of the Gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God; also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom for I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts.<sup>9</sup>

Joseph Smith first preached the doctrine of baptism for the dead in August 1840. Two months later, he officially notified the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who were in England, of the new doctrine:

I presume the doctrine of "baptism for the dead" has ere this reached your ears, and may have raised some inquiries in your minds respecting the same. I cannot in this letter give you all the information you may desire on the subject; but aside from knowledge independent of the Bible, I would say that it was certainly practiced by the ancient churches; and St. Paul endeavors to prove the doctrine of the resurrection from the same, and says, "Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all: Why are they then baptized for the dead?" I first mentioned the doctrine in public when preaching the funeral sermon of Brother Seymour Brunson; and have since then given general instructions in the Church on the subject. The Saints have the privilege of being baptized for those of their relatives who are dead, whom they believe would have embraced the Gospel, if they had been privileged with hearing it, and who have received the Gospel in spirit, through the instrumentality of those who have been commissioned to preach to them while in prison.<sup>10</sup>

Brigham Young later recalled that he had thought about this concept even before it was taught in the Church. Therefore, he said:

It made me glad when I heard it was revealed through his servant Joseph, and that I could go forth and officiate for my fathers, for my mothers, and for my ancestors, of the earliest generation, who have not had the privilege of helping themselves; that they can yet arise to the state of glory and exaltation as we that live have a privilege of rising to ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

As Joseph Smith continued to preach on the subject, he emphasized the same theme:



This doctrine presents in a clear light the wisdom and mercy of God, in preparing an ordinance for the salvation of the dead, being baptized by proxy, their names recorded in heaven and they judged according to the deeds done in the body. This doctrine was the burden of the scriptures. Those Saints who neglect it in behalf of their deceased relatives, do it at the peril of their own salvation.<sup>12</sup>

In the fall of 1840, Church members began to perform proxy baptisms in the Mississippi River. That did not continue, however, for in January 1841, Joseph Smith received a revelation commanding the Saints to build a temple in Nauvoo where sacred ordinances, known as the endowment, would be administered. In addition, the revelation declared, this would be the proper place to perform vicarious baptisms:

For a baptismal font there is not upon the earth, that they, my saints, may be baptized for those who are dead—For this ordinance belongeth to my house, and cannot be acceptable to me, only in the days of your poverty, wherein ye are not able to build a house unto me. But I command you, all ye my saints, to build a house unto me; and I grant unto you a sufficient time to build a house unto me; and during this time your baptisms shall be acceptable unto me. (D&C 124:29–31)

In October 1841, Joseph Smith announced that no more baptisms for the dead should be conducted until they could be performed in the temple.<sup>13</sup> Only thirty-six days later, a temporary font was dedicated in the unfinished basement of the newly begun edifice. Constructed of tongued and grooved pine timber, it was oval shaped, measured sixteen feet long by twelve feet wide, had a basin four feet deep, and was trimmed with a molding of “beautiful carved work in antique style.”<sup>14</sup> The sides were paneled and a flight of stairs led into each end of the font. Reminiscent of the brazen sea in the temple of Solomon, it rested on the backs of twelve oxen (1 Kgs. 7:25). Carved by Elijah Fordham from pine planks glued together, these oxen were patterned after “the most beautiful five-year-old steer that could be found in the country.”<sup>15</sup> On 21 November, members began to perform baptisms for the dead in this remarkable font.

Church members eagerly performed baptisms in behalf of deceased relatives and friends. At first it mattered little to them whether men were being baptized for women or vice versa. The



important thing was to do the work: "I went and was baptized for all my friends, grandmothers, and aunts, as those of the male sex," recalled Wilford Woodruff. Then, commenting on the instructions later given to the Church, he added, "Why, by-and-by, it was revealed, through the servants of the Lord, that females should be baptized for females, and males for males; but the full particulars of this order was not revealed till after the days of Joseph; therefore this shows an advance in the building up of the kingdom."<sup>16</sup>

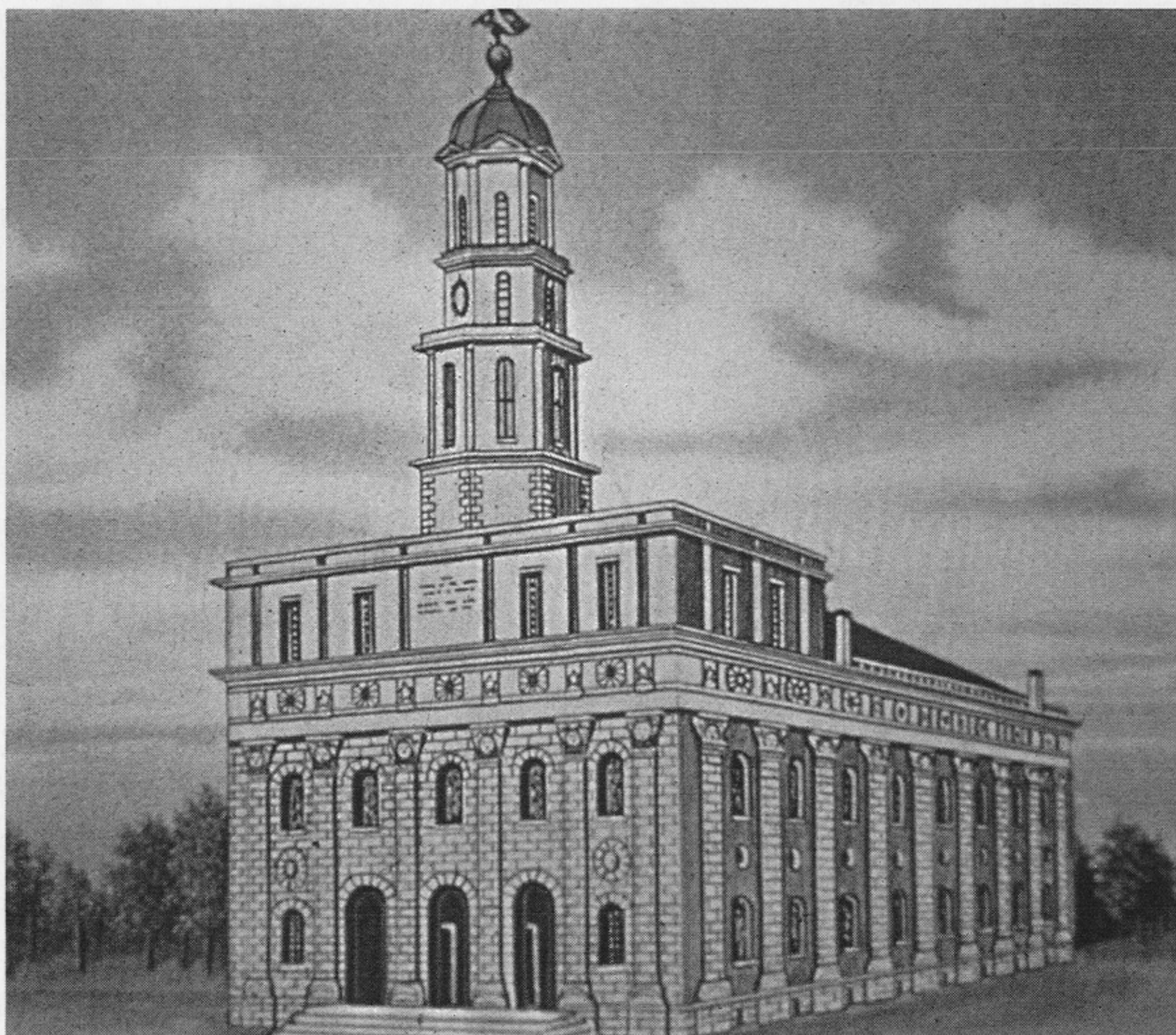
On 6 September 1842, Joseph Smith clarified further the significance of Elijah's mission. Explaining Malachi's assertion that without the coming of Elijah the earth would be smitten with a curse, the Prophet said:

It is sufficient to know, in this case, that the earth will be smitten with a curse unless there is a welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children, upon some subject or other—and behold what is that subject? It is the baptism for the dead. For we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect. . . . Let us, therefore, as a church and a people, and as Latter-day Saints, offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness; and let us present in his holy temple, when it is finished, a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptance. (D&C 128:18, 24)

Baptism was not the only temple ordinance instituted for the deceased. During the construction of the Nauvoo Temple, Joseph Smith began to prepare the Saints to receive the endowment: a series of symbolic representations, special instructions, and sacred covenants that would give them greater insight into their eternal origins and destinies as well as their earthly responsibilities.<sup>17</sup> Reserved only for worthy Church members, the endowment was to be administered exclusively in the temple and was necessary for the exaltation of the individual. In May 1842, Joseph Smith introduced the endowment ceremony to a small group of specially selected Saints, including members of the Quorum of the Twelve, in an upper room of his store in Nauvoo. Members of this group, which was gradually enlarged to include both men and women, were thus prepared to administer the endowment to other Church members once the temple was ready.<sup>18</sup>

The Prophet also taught the Saints the principle of eternal marriage. Family relationships were at the heart of the gospel





The Nauvoo Temple. Beginning 21 November 1841, proxy baptisms for deceased individuals were performed in a wooden font in a dedicated basement room of this temple while it was under construction. Courtesy College of Religious Education, Brigham Young University.

message, and it was the plan of the Lord that marriage bonds should be eternal (D&C 132:18, 19). A marriage performed by priesthood authority, therefore, would last through eternity, and the children produced from that marriage would be part of an eternal family union. The temple ordinances creating these eternal family bonds became known as sealings.

The Saints believed, however, that the endowment and sealing ceremonies were essential not only to their own salvation, but also to the salvation of their dead family members. Church members were taught that these ordinances were necessary in order to form connecting links within their families all the way back to Adam and Eve. For this reason, Joseph continued to preach about the urgency of concern for the dead. Less than three months



before his death, he explained again the very close connection between this world and eternity: "We are looked upon by God as though we were in eternity." Then, referring to the eternal responsibility of the Saints toward their ancestors, he proclaimed, "The greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us is to seek after our dead."<sup>19</sup>

After the death of Joseph Smith in June 1844, the Saints continued to work toward completion of the temple in Nauvoo, even though it became apparent that they must eventually leave that city. By the end of November 1845, the temple was far enough along that Brigham Young and other members of the Council of the Twelve Apostles could dedicate several finished rooms for the purpose of giving the endowment to Church members. The first endowments in the temple were administered on 10 December 1845. The Saints were so eager to receive their endowments that the ordinance work often went on around the clock. At the same time, many couples were married for eternity by the power of the priesthood. By the time they were forced to leave Nauvoo, over five thousand Church members had received the promised blessings.

The exodus from Nauvoo began in February 1846. The next year, Brigham Young led the vanguard pioneer company from Winter Quarters, Iowa, to the Great Basin, where the Church established a new gathering place for the Saints. One of Brigham Young's first acts after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley was to designate a spot for building another temple, and work commenced in 1853. Although the Salt Lake Temple was not dedicated until 1893, three other temples were completed in Utah prior to that date so the sacred temple ordinances could again be enjoyed by the Saints. In the meantime, some proxy baptisms and sealings, along with endowments of the living, were administered in places approved temporarily, including the Endowment House (1855-89) erected on Temple Square in Salt Lake City.

Proxy endowments, however, were delayed until the completion of the temple in St. George. Even though that temple was not officially dedicated until April 1877, baptisms in behalf of the dead were performed after a preliminary dedication on 9 January. The first to be baptized was Susa Young Gates, a daughter of Brigham Young. Two days later, the first endowments in behalf of the dead



were administered. That day Brigham Young, so afflicted with rheumatism that he had to be carried from place to place, stood proxy for his father.<sup>20</sup> President Young also addressed the group on the significance of what they were doing. With special reference to the dead, he remarked:

What do you suppose the fathers would say if they could speak from the dead? Would they not say: 'We have lain here thousands of years in this prison house, bound and fettered in the association of the filthy and corrupt.' If they had the power the very thunders of heaven would resound in our ears. All the angels in heaven are looking to this little handful of people. When I think upon this subject I want the tongue of seven thunders to awaken the people to action. When we closed the Endowment House many people of the north came to us crying. They begged the privilege to be baptized for their dead. They can now come here, do the work and bid the prisoners go free.<sup>21</sup>

This, then, was the Spirit of Elijah at work among the Saints. They were concerned with baptisms, endowments, and sealings not just for themselves, but also in behalf of the dead. They knew that the ultimate validity of their proxy work would depend on the righteousness of the deceased beneficiaries and their personal acceptance of the work. Nevertheless, it was the obligation of the living to do all they could for the dead by searching them out and then performing the necessary ordinances in their behalf.

Meanwhile, general interest in genealogical research was growing. The Saints were delighted, for they saw it all as further evidence of the hand of God in history and of the outpouring of the Spirit of Elijah. In 1885 the editor of the Church-owned *Deseret News* wrote:

The same motive does not prompt the members of the various genealogical societies of New England and other places as urges the Saints to make similar researches; in fact, it might be difficult for many persons who have during recent years become so wonderfully exercised over genealogical matters that it amounts to a mania with them, to tell just why they are so affected. . . . And so the work of forming these societies and collecting and publishing genealogical data goes on in this and other countries; and thousands of men are laboring assiduously to prepare the way, though unconsciously, for the salvation of the dead.

In all this the Saints recognize the hand of the Lord, shaping the destiny of his work, and preparing the way for its accomplishment.



They have no difficulty in assigning a reason for the unusual interest in the subject referred to which now prevails in the world. It is a result of that power which will in time come to be made manifest in revealing to the Saints in sacred places those links in their ancestry which cannot be traced by human means, so that the saving work might be done for all who are worthy, and the chain of redemption through the power of the Gospel rendered complete all the way back to Father Adam.<sup>22</sup>

## **The American Setting**

Before 1844 there were no organized societies in the United States devoted primarily to genealogical research, but many Americans were nevertheless engaged in the quest for ancestral roots. Among them were prominent families who had long taken an interest in their lineage. Benjamin Franklin and George Washington were among the numerous illustrious Americans who collected and recorded their ancestral lines. In addition, genealogy was among the interests of the eleven state historical societies that existed prior to 1844, as well of as the American Antiquarian Society, founded in 1812.

Most people did not publish their findings, although the first published genealogy in America appeared in 1771. By 1915 only about 3,000 family histories had been published. After that, a flood tide seemed to hit; in less than thirty years, another sixteen thousand titles were added to the list.<sup>23</sup> The family histories and genealogies in print today probably number into the hundreds of thousands.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, genealogy still carried the aura of an aristocratic pastime. More common Americans, who deplored aristocratic tendencies, often ridiculed genealogical records and considered it bad taste even to speak of their ancestors. However, the organization of societies specifically dedicated to general genealogical research, not solely to compilations for the benefit of the rich and the wellborn, helped counter such disdain. The founders of the New England Historic Genealogical Society were convinced that all people should become acquainted with their progenitors. "They who care nothing for their ancestors," someone later said, "are wanting in respect for themselves and deserve only contempt by their posterity."<sup>24</sup>



A barely averted genealogical tragedy in 1844 ignited the spark that led to the organization of the first American genealogical society. A Boston merchant, William H. Montague, was horrified one cold day when he discovered a janitor about to stoke the fires of the Boston Custom House with the 1798 U.S. District Tax rolls for Massachusetts and Maine. He quickly intervened and saved some twenty folio volumes. Other Boston citizens were also concerned with the destruction of public documents and family papers. In October 1844, a small group met in Montague's home to discuss forming an organization to prevent such historical catastrophes. In December the New England Historic Genealogical Society was founded. The following March, the Massachusetts legislature approved the society's incorporation and granted it a charter "for the purpose of collecting, preserving and occasionally publishing genealogical and historic matter relating to New England." By April 1846, the society had nearly 150 members, including former U.S. president John Quincy Adams and distinguished historian George Bancroft. A hundred years later, the society boasted a membership of over 2,350 people and a library of 168,000 bound volumes and over 50,000 pamphlets and manuscripts.

The next major American organization, the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, was incorporated on 16 March 1869. By the time of its centennial in 1969, the society housed over 54,000 printed volumes and nearly 22,500 manuscripts at its New York City library.

Meanwhile, an emphasis by some Americans on their distinctive lineage led to the creation of various societies based on royal descent. Not concerned with proving a title, their members simply wanted the satisfaction derived from being part of a royal family. Royal societies formed in the United States included the Order of the Crown in America (1898), consisting of descendants of royalty; the Baronial Order of Magna Charta (1898); the National Society of Americans of Royal Descent (1908), in which membership is by invitation only; the Daughters of the Baron of Runnymede (1921); and the Descendants of Royal Bastards (1952). All these are exclusivist organizations in which at least one major motivation for keeping genealogical records is the prestige that comes from a hereditary attachment to royalty.



Other Americans became interested in genealogy because their ancestors belonged to distinctive groups other than royalty. This interest resulted in the organization of a number of hereditary and lineage societies. In general, these were also patriotic societies, devoted to promoting respect and reverence for the deeds of those who played a role in the great events of national history. The Society of the Cincinnati, for example, was founded in 1783 by officers of the American Continental Army, with George Washington as the first president. Membership remains strictly hereditary. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, such societies multiplied profusely. They included the Sons of the Revolution, the Sons of the American Revolution, the Union Veterans of the Civil War, the Society of Colonial Wars, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the National Society of Colonial Dames in America, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and the Society of the Mayflower Descendants. Societies limited to descendants of other American wars and many more such groups continued to multiply in the twentieth century. Some of these hereditary societies have made important contributions to genealogical research by preserving wills, notices of births, marriages and deaths, church records, and various private records.

Samuel Eliot Morison has called the period from 1870 to 1900 the era of "the American joiner," in which a variety of needs and interests led growing numbers of Americans, especially among the rising urban middle class, to look for new social outlets and new sources of fellowship. Societies based on ancestry were among those they eagerly joined.<sup>25</sup> All this interest provided a tremendous boost to genealogical research in America. Genealogical and ancestral societies helped create wider interest in family history and promote more responsible record keeping and gathering on the part of churches as well as government.<sup>26</sup> Forty years after its founding, the president of the New England society reported that its library was being used widely by people from all over the United States. Members of the society, he said, had awakened the interest of many others "till at the present time a spirit of genealogical inquiry pervades the whole country." In addition, the society had been influential in bringing about the preservation and collection of many priceless manuscripts.<sup>27</sup>



As the twentieth century progressed, genealogical societies appeared in state after state. "A tidal wave of ancestry-searching has swept over the country," reported one genealogist in 1911. "Libraries and the custodians of public records bear record to this great movement. . . . So onerous has become the work of handing out historical and genealogical books that in some large libraries such works have been gathered into alcoves which are thrown open to the public, where the ancestry-hunter may help himself."<sup>28</sup>

The significance of this tidal wave was not lost upon the Latter-day Saints. Long before their own genealogical society was formed, many Church members were eagerly engaged in the ancestor search. They were quick to take advantage of the opportunities being created by others. In 1877, Benjamin F. Cummings, one of the earliest professional genealogists among the Mormons, visited the library of the New England society in Boston. He was surprised at the vastness of its program and was especially pleased with the skill and knowledge of John Ward Dean, the librarian. "It seemed that all I had to do was to tell him the name of the family concerning which I desired information and he could readily tell me whether its history and genealogy had ever been written or arranged, and if so, who by, and where I could get more information."<sup>29</sup> "How gratifying . . . it must be," the Church newspaper editorialized, for the Saints "to learn that others as well as themselves are aroused to the necessity of searching the misty records of the past and tracing the history of families as to remote a period as possible."<sup>30</sup> "Surely," wrote Benjamin Cummings, "it must be the Spirit of God at work among the people that causes them to thus seek out a knowledge of their ancestry and arrange the same with such care and precision."<sup>31</sup>

As the organization of genealogical societies and the publications of journals, genealogies, and family histories accelerated, many genealogists began to feel the need for better coordination on a national scale. Most local and state organizations seemingly could provide little help outside their own areas or libraries. Providing such aid was one of the purposes of the National Genealogical Society, organized in 1903. It welcomed genealogical inquiries, kept a record of the families on which its members were working, and willingly sent to inquirers the names and addresses of others



working on the same families. In 1912 it began publishing *The National Genealogical Society Quarterly*. The society did not do genealogical research itself, but was devoted to assisting its members in research and to collecting and preserving genealogical data. The National Genealogical Society now has the largest membership of any such society in the United States.

In recent years, the interest in genealogical research has gone far beyond the search for pedigrees and other traditional family information. Historians who were once disdainful of genealogy as a discipline are now using it for a variety of professional purposes. As social history, demography, and family studies have become more prominent within the profession, historians have turned to genealogical and family records to help create a better understanding of the past. "In fact," wrote one prominent scholar, "the frequently expressed disdain by historians concerning the usefulness of these records, often allowed to decay by neglect, borders on archival irresponsibility."<sup>32</sup> The same historian made an eloquent plea for greater cooperation:

When the social historian begins to work with family history and to focus on a broader network of kinship relationships over time, and the genealogist begins to spend time and effort in indexing the same manuscript census returns that historians use, it is time for the two groups to examine their common ground.<sup>33</sup>

In that spirit, some history professors have even begun to have their students write their own family histories, placed and interpreted in historic context, for three or four generations back.

### **New Revelation and the Continuing LDS Challenge**

For Church members, the growing interest in genealogy and family history, the formation of so many genealogical and historical societies, and the expanding availability of family history sources were all evidence of the outpouring of the Spirit of Elijah.<sup>34</sup> That feeling was enhanced in 1918 when a revelation to President Joseph F. Smith provided the Saints with a significant new insight into the spirit world and how the dead could receive the gospel.

Church members already understood that preaching the gospel to the dead was begun by the Savior himself during the three days his body lay in the tomb. During that time, the Apostle Peter



taught, “he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing” (1 Pet. 3:19–20). Peter also reminded the New Testament Saints that “for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit” (1 Pet. 4:6). But Church president Joseph F. Smith wondered how the Savior could have preached to all the dead in so short a time. While he was pondering the question on 3 October 1918, a vision was opened to his mind. He beheld the Savior in the spirit world and saw him organize missionary work among the spirits of the dead:

I perceived that the Lord went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth, to teach them; But behold, from among the righteous, he organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness . . . and thus was the gospel preached to the dead. (D&C 138:29–30)

Since then, the Saints have understood that missionary work continues in the spirit world. The responsibility for genealogical research and the opportunity for temple worship connected with it are both virtually unlimited—at least for the time being. Recently temple building has expanded into many nations, spurring genealogical research worldwide. In 1977, President Spencer W. Kimball explained the responsibility of the Saints:

We do not know how many millions of spirits are involved. We know that many have passed away in wars, pestilence, and various accidents. We know that the spirit world is filled with the spirits of men who are waiting for you and me to get busy. . . . We wonder about our progenitors—grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, etc. What do they think of you and me? We are their offspring. We have the responsibility to do their temple work. . . . We have a grave responsibility that we cannot avoid, and may stand in jeopardy if we fail to do this important work.<sup>35</sup>

The coming of Elijah on 3 April 1836 ushered in the distinctive efforts of Latter-day Saints to seek out their ancestors and perform saving ordinances in their behalf. What follows is the story of their organized efforts to achieve that goal. The Genealogical



Society of Utah, succeeded by the Family History Department of the Church, has contributed in a most fundamental way to turning the hearts of the children to the fathers.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Today, a literal descendant of Aaron, if otherwise worthy, can claim the office of bishop in the LDS Church (D&C 68:15-20; 107:16, 69-70).

<sup>2</sup>Much of this and the following paragraph is based on L. G. Price, "Genealogy," in *Collier's Encyclopedia* (New York: Crowell, Collier, and Macmillan, 1967), 1613-16.

<sup>3</sup>These verses use the name Elias, which is the New Testament form of Elijah.

<sup>4</sup>For further insight into the LDS concept of the apostasy and restoration of the gospel, see Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Restoration of All Things* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1945). In particular, see chapter 1, "The Dispensation of the Fulness of Times"; chapter 8, "The Church Restored"; and chapters 18 and 19, both of which deal with the coming of Elijah. See also James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909); B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century One*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1930), 1: introduction.

<sup>5</sup>For Joseph Smith's full statement on his early visions and revelations and the origin of the Church, see Joseph Smith—History, in the Pearl of Great Price. See Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9 (Spring 1969): 275-94, for photographic reproductions of other statements by Joseph Smith concerning his first vision. The quotation above is from the 1835 account. The best recent history of the years before the Church was organized is Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984). For an overview of the history of the Church, see James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2d ed., rev. and enl. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Smith Jr., *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 2:428 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

<sup>7</sup>Stephen D. Ricks, "The Appearance of Elijah and Moses in the Kirtland Temple and the Jewish Passover," *BYU Studies* 23 (Fall 1983): 483-86.

<sup>8</sup>For an authoritative statement by an LDS Church leader on the mission of Elijah, see Joseph Fielding Smith, *Elijah the Prophet and His Mission* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957).

<sup>9</sup>*History of the Church* 2:380. See also D&C 138, which is an account of Joseph F. Smith's vision of the celestial kingdom.

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Smith, to the Traveling High Council and Elders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Great Britain, 19 October 1840, *History of the Church* 4:231. See also D&C 138, which is an account of Joseph F. Smith's vision of the celestial kingdom.

<sup>11</sup>Speech delivered by Brigham Young in Nauvoo, 6 April 1845, as reported in *Millennial Star* 6 (1 October 1845): 119-22.



<sup>12</sup>*History of the Church* 4:426.

<sup>13</sup>*History of the Church* 4:426.

<sup>14</sup>*History of the Church* 4:426.

<sup>15</sup>*History of the Church* 4:446.

<sup>16</sup>Brigham Young and others, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855-86), 5:85 (9 April 1857).

<sup>17</sup>For authoritative statements on the nature of temples and temple work, see James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1912); Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980).

<sup>18</sup>See D. Michael Quinn, "Latter-day Saint Prayer Circles," *BYU Studies* 19 (Fall 1978): 79-105.

<sup>19</sup>*History of the Church* 6:313.

<sup>20</sup>Relief Society lesson on "Testimony and Genealogy," *Relief Society Magazine* 7 (October 1920): 600. See also Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff: History of His Life and Labors as Recorded in His Daily Journals* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 491-95.

<sup>21</sup>Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff*, 494-95.

<sup>22</sup>"Genealogical Matters," *Deseret News Weekly*, 1 April 1885, 174.

<sup>23</sup>Frederick Adams Virkus, *The Handbook of American Genealogy* 4 (Chicago: Institute of American Genealogy, 1943): preface.

<sup>24</sup>As quoted by Kenneth Scott, "Genealogical Societies: Introduction, General Description and Brief History," in the Report on the World Conference on Records and Genealogical Seminar, vol. 2, Salt Lake City, 1969.

<sup>25</sup>Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 787.

<sup>26</sup>*Deseret Evening News*, 5 November 1875.

<sup>27</sup>Address reported in *Deseret News Weekly*, 1 April 1885.

<sup>28</sup>Frank Allaben, "Concerning Genealogies," *The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* 2 (April 1911): 96 (hereafter cited as *UGHM*).

<sup>29</sup>B. F. Cummings Jr., to the *Deseret News*, 7 May 1877, in *Deseret News*, 6 June 1877.

<sup>30</sup>*Deseret News Weekly*, 1 April 1885.

<sup>31</sup>Cummings to *Deseret News*, 7 May 1877.

<sup>32</sup>Samuel P. Hays, "History and Genealogy: Patterns of Change and Prospects for Cooperation," *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives* 7 (Spring 1975): 40.

<sup>33</sup>Hays, "History and Genealogy," 39.

<sup>34</sup>When the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Society Magazine* published a 1913 article on eugenics and genealogy, the Mormon editor added the following comment: "To the many reasons for the study of genealogy which the author of the following article so interestingly sets forth, the Latter-day Saints will add another, more far-reaching and fraught with vastly more good to the human race than any other—that of salvation for the dead. 'The Spirit of Elijah' actuates the 'New Genealogy,' though the world, as yet, may not recognize the fact." Editor's note at head of Charles K. Bolton, "The New Genealogy," *UGHM* 4 (July 1913): 126-29, reprinted from the *Boston Transcript*, 23 October 1909.

<sup>35</sup>Spencer W. Kimball, "The Things of Eternity—Stand We in Jeopardy?" *Ensign* 7 (January 1977): 5.