

SECTION 110

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 2013 | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

Recorded on April 3, 1836, in the Kirtland Temple, this text describes a series of visions experienced by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery behind a dropped veil near the pulpit. First, the Lord Jehovah appears, standing upon the breastwork, describing Himself as the 'first and the last' and the 'advocate with the Father.' He declares forgiveness of sins to those present and accepts the temple as His house, contingent upon the people's obedience and purity. Following this, three ancient prophets appear in succession to restore specific 'keys' or authority: Moses commits the keys of the gathering of Israel; 'Elias' commits the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham; and Elijah commits the keys of turning the hearts of the fathers to the children, fulfilling Malachi's prophecy. This section is foundational to Mormon ecclesiology as it establishes the claim that Joseph Smith held the exclusive priesthood authority necessary to perform temple ordinances and seal families, marking the restoration of ancient dispensational powers.

KEY FIGURES

The Lord Jehovah (Jesus Christ), Moses, Elias, Elijah, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. RESTORATION OF PRIESTHOOD KEYS

Assertion: Specific authority (keys) must be physically transferred by ancient prophets to modern administrators to validate church ordinances.

"Moses appeared before us, and committed unto us the keys of the gathering of Israel... After this, Elias appeared... Elijah the prophet... committed the keys of this dispensation into your hands (vv. 11-16)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, Jesus Christ is the sole mediator and holds the keys of death and Hades (Revelation 1:18). Upon His ascension, He gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4) and authorized the entire church to make disciples (Matthew 28). There is no biblical category for 'keys' being held by dead prophets that must be transferred to living men to validate the gospel; the authority is in the Word and the Spirit. D&C 110 asserts that the 'gospel of Abraham' and the 'gathering of Israel' require specific, distinct authorizations separate from the finished work of Christ.

2. CONDITIONAL DIVINE PRESENCE

Assertion: God's acceptance of His temple and His presence therein is conditional upon the obedience and purity of the people.

"I will appear unto my servants... if my people will keep my commandments, and do not pollute this holy house. (v. 8)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text reverts to a Mosaic model of a physical temple where God's presence is localized and conditional upon the ritual and moral purity of the community ('do not pollute this holy house'). In contrast, the New Testament teaches that God no longer dwells in temples made with hands (Acts 17:24) and that believers are permanently indwelt by the Spirit through faith in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:19), with their standing secured by justification, not their own 'might' in building a house.

3. VICARIOUS WORK FOR THE DEAD (IMPLIED)

Assertion: The return of Elijah to 'turn the hearts' is the authorization for sealing families and genealogical work.

"To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers... keys of this dispensation are committed (v. 15-16)"

Evangelical Comparison: While the text quotes Malachi, LDS theology interprets 'turning hearts' as the mandate for proxy temple work for the dead. Evangelicalism rejects this based on Hebrews 9:27 ('appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment'). The Evangelical understanding of Malachi 4:6, interpreted by Jesus in Matthew 11:14, identifies the 'Elijah' figure as John the Baptist, whose ministry of repentance prepared the way for Christ, rather than a 19th-century restoration of sealing powers.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the sufficiency of Christ's atonement and the nature of the Church. D&C 110 posits that the work of Christ was insufficient to fully restore God's people, requiring the additional restoration of 'keys' from Moses, Elias, and Elijah. It shifts the locus of God's presence from the believer (Indwelling Spirit) back to a physical building (Temple), and shifts the basis of authority from the Word of God to a succession of priesthood keys. This effectively rebuilds the veil that Christ tore (Matthew 27:51), creating a system where access to the highest blessings of God is mediated through human priesthood holders and temple rituals.

Shared Values:

Divinity of Jesus Christ (Jehovah); Reality of Biblical Prophets (Moses, Elijah); Concept of forgiveness of sins; Expectation of the 'great and dreadful day of the Lord'

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – Implies Christ's work was incomplete without the subsequent restoration of keys by Moses and Elijah.
2. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Concentrates spiritual authority in a specific hierarchy (Smith/Cowdery) rather than the whole body of believers.
3. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Establishes doctrine (distinct Elias/Elijah, temple keys) based on vision rather than biblical exegesis.
4. [Major] Sola Fide – Conditions God's presence and acceptance on 'building with might' and 'not polluting' the house (works).

Semantic Warnings:

"Elias"

In Text: A specific ancient prophet distinct from Elijah, who committed the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham.

Evangelical: The Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name Elijah (or occasionally John the Baptist acting in the spirit of Elijah).

Example: *In the NT, Elijah appears on the Mount of Transfiguration and is called Elias (Matt 17:3). In D&C 110, Elias and Elijah are two different people appearing sequentially.*

"Keys"

In Text: Authoritative permission/power granted to church leaders to govern the priesthood and validate ordinances.

Evangelical: Metaphor for the authority of the Gospel message to open the kingdom of heaven to believers (Matt 16:19).

Example: *In D&C 110, keys are specific metaphysical objects of authority transferred from Moses to Joseph. In Evangelicalism, keys are the proclamation of the Gospel.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implicitly defined here as access to the 'blessings' and 'endowment' of the temple, and forgiveness of sins.

How Attained: Through the intercession of the Advocate (v. 4) but contingent on obedience, temple building (v. 6), and priesthood keys (v. 11-16).

Basis of Assurance: Visual confirmation (vision) and the authoritative pronouncement 'your sins are forgiven you' (v. 5).

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text links forgiveness to the 'might' with which they built the house (v. 6), suggesting a merit-based or works-integrated view of justification, contrary to Romans 3:28.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Lift up your heads and rejoice (v. 5)
2. Keep my commandments (v. 8)

3. Do not pollute this holy house (v. 8)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept the authority of Joseph Smith as the holder of the keys of Moses, Elias, and Elijah
2. Participate in the 'gathering of Israel'
3. Engage in the work of the 'dispensation of the gospel of Abraham'

Ritual Requirements:

1. Building and maintaining physical temples
2. Endowment ceremonies (referenced in v. 9)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 12, Elias appears, and in verse 13, Elijah appears. Since 'Elias' is just the Greek name for Elijah in the New Testament (like James/Jacob), why do you think they appear as two separate people here?
2. The text says God accepts the house 'if' the people do not pollute it (v. 8). How does this compare to the New Testament promise that ~~*we*~~ are the temple and Christ will never leave us (Hebrews 13:5)?
3. If Jesus is our Advocate (v. 4) and has all authority (Matt 28:18), why was it necessary for Moses to come back to give keys for the gathering of Israel?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Advocate – This title is a beautiful biblical truth. We can agree that we need an advocate. The Good News is that His advocacy is based on His finished propitiation, not our temple building. [1 John 2:1-2]
2. Turning Hearts – The desire for family connection and healing is universal. The Gospel heals families by reconciling individuals to God first, creating spiritual unity that transcends death without needing ritual sealings. [Ephesians 2:19]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Conditional Acceptance [Moderate] – The adherent is burdened with the knowledge that God's presence in their 'house' (and by extension their life) is conditional on them not 'polluting' it. This creates a cycle of fear regarding worthiness.
2. Dependency on Hierarchy [Severe] – Believers are cut off from direct access to the 'gathering' or 'blessings' unless they submit to the specific priesthood key-holders, creating a spiritual dependency on men.
3. Genealogical Burden [Severe] – The mandate of Elijah to turn hearts (interpreted as temple work) places the salvation of ancestors on the shoulders of the living, a massive and impossible burden.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Mystical/Visionary experience ('The veil was taken from our minds, and the eyes of our understanding were opened', v. 1).

Verification Method: Reliance on the testimony of the two witnesses (Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery) and subsequent spiritual confirmation.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology grounds truth in the objective, written Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16) and the historical resurrection of Jesus. D&C 110 relies on a private, subjective vision behind a curtain ('veils being dropped') which cannot be historically verified, contrasting with the public nature of Christ's post-resurrection appearances (1 Corinthians 15:6).

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Vision occurred April 3, 1836. Not included in the Doctrine and Covenants until the 1876 edition.

Authorship: Joseph Smith (recorded in his journal by Warren Cowdery, later canonized).

Textual Issues: The 'Elias' vs. 'Elijah' distinction is the most significant critical issue. Since Elias is the Greek form of Elijah, the text describes the same biblical person appearing twice as two different people with different dispensations.