

SECTION 121

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

OVERVIEW

Written in March 1839 from Liberty Jail, Missouri, this text captures Joseph Smith at a moment of acute crisis. The first half (verses 1-25) is a raw, imprecatory prayer asking God where He is hiding and demanding vengeance upon the 'enemies' of the church who have imprisoned the leadership and driven the Saints. It reflects a deep sense of persecution and a demand for divine justice. The second half (verses 26-46) shifts tone dramatically, offering a theological treatise on the nature of revelation, the 'Council of the Eternal God,' and the principles of Priesthood authority. It famously reinterprets the biblical phrase 'many are called, but few are chosen' to refer to Priesthood holders who lose their spiritual power due to pride or 'unrighteous dominion.' The text culminates in a high ethical standard for leadership—requiring persuasion, long-suffering, and gentleness—while simultaneously introducing the distinct Mormon doctrine that Priesthood authority is the mechanism for exaltation and is contingent upon the holder's internal virtue.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, The Lord (God), The Enemies (Missourians/Apostates), Suffering Saints, Job

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. PLURALITY OF GODS (HENOTHEISM/POLYTHEISM)

Assertion: The text asserts the existence of a 'Council of the Eternal God of all other gods' and promises revelation regarding 'one God or many gods.'

"According to that which was ordained in the midst of the Council of the Eternal God of all other gods before this world was... (D&C 121:32)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical Christianity adheres to strict Monotheism (Deuteronomy 6:4, Isaiah 43:10), affirming one God in three persons. D&C 121:28-32 explicitly opens the theological door to a plurality of gods, referring to a pre-mortal 'Council' involving 'all other gods.' This marks a significant departure from biblical Trinitarianism, moving toward the henotheistic or polytheistic cosmology fully developed in Joseph Smith's later King Follett Discourse.

2. CONDITIONAL PRIESTHOOD POWER

Assertion: Priesthood authority is 'inseparably connected' to the powers of heaven but is lost through sin, pride, or compulsion.

"That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven... but when we undertake to cover our sins... Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man. (D&C 121:36-37)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, spiritual standing is based on Christ's imputed righteousness (Romans 3:21-22), and ministry authority is a matter of gifting and service, not a metaphysical 'power' that connects heaven and earth. D&C 121 posits a literal 'power of heaven' channeled through men, which functions like a spiritual utility that can be cut off ('Amen to the priesthood') if the user's behavior is unworthy. This creates a merit-based system of spiritual authority.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While the ethical instructions regarding leadership (v41-44) are compatible with Christian teaching, the theological foundation is radically different. The text posits a 'Council of the Eternal God of all other gods' (v32), moving Mormonism toward polytheism. Furthermore, it establishes a soteriology where 'exaltation' (v8) and access to God (v45) are contingent upon the adherent's ability to maintain Priesthood power through 'unceasing' virtue. This replaces the biblical model of a finished salvation in Christ with a progressive, power-accumulation model of godhood.

Shared Values:

The need for patience in suffering; God's sovereignty over enemies; Leadership should be servant-hearted (gentleness, meekness, love)

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Theology Proper (Monotheism) – Suggests a plurality of gods and a divine council of gods, violating Isaiah 43:10 ('Before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me').
2. [Major] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Exaltation and confidence before God are contingent on personal virtue ('let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly') and Priesthood standing.
3. [Major] Universal Priesthood – Establishes a hierarchical priesthood where authority is 'conferred' and 'withdrawn' based on specific rules, denying the equal standing of all believers.

Semantic Warnings:

"Priesthood"

In Text: The authority and power of God delegated to man, necessary for ordinances and governance, which can be lost through unrighteousness.

Evangelical: The Priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9) offering spiritual sacrifices, with Christ as the unique High Priest (Hebrews 7:24-25).

Example: *In D&C 121, a man loses 'priesthood' by being proud; in the Bible, a believer is a priest by virtue of being in Christ.*

"Chosen"

In Text: Selected for Priesthood power and exaltation based on the disposition of the heart (v34-40).

Evangelical: Elect of God for salvation (Ephesians 1:4).

Example: *D&C 121 says 'few are chosen' because they aspire to honors of men; the Bible says we are chosen by grace, not works (Romans 11:5-6).*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Exaltation (v8) and entering into God's 'eternal presence' and 'immortal rest' (v32).

How Attained: Through enduring well (v8), maintaining Priesthood rights (v36), and personal virtue (v45).

Basis of Assurance: Confidence waxes strong based on the adherent's own behavior ('let virtue garnish thy thoughts... THEN shall thy confidence wax strong').

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. In D&C 121, confidence is a result of personal performance (virtue/charity), whereas in Hebrews 10:19, confidence to enter the holy place is by the blood of Jesus.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Endure adversity well (v8)
2. Let bowels be full of charity towards all men (v45)
3. Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly (v45)
4. Reprove with sharpness when moved by the Holy Ghost, then show increased love (v43)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Seek and maintain Priesthood status
2. Avoid 'unrighteous dominion' to keep spiritual power
3. Trust that enemies will be punished by God

Ritual Requirements:

1. Ordinances of the house (Temple) are implied as necessary, as enemies are 'severed' from them (v19)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 45, it says confidence in God's presence comes when virtue garnishes your thoughts unceasingly. How do you handle the days when your thoughts aren't perfectly virtuous?
2. Verse 32 mentions a 'Council of the Eternal God of all other gods.' How does this fit with passages like Isaiah 44:6 that say there is no God beside the Lord?
3. The text warns that 'Amen to the priesthood' happens when we try to cover our sins. Does this create a fear that you might lose your spiritual standing without realizing it?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The longing for benevolent leadership – The text rightly identifies that true power is found in sacrificial love, not force. This points to Jesus, the ultimate Servant Leader who didn't just persuade, but died for His people. [Mark 10:42-45 (The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve)]
2. The cry for justice – The human heart cries out against injustice. The Gospel answers this not with immediate vengeance, but with the Cross, where God's justice and mercy met. [Romans 3:25-26]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Perfectionism/Performance [Severe] – The command to let virtue garnish thoughts 'unceasingly' (v45) to maintain confidence before God creates an impossible standard of mental purity. The believer's assurance is tied to their internal mental state rather than Christ's objective work.
2. Fear of Loss [Moderate] – The warning 'Amen to the priesthood' (v37) implies that spiritual authority and standing are fragile and easily lost through 'almost all' men's natural disposition. This creates a culture of anxiety regarding one's worthiness.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct revelation via the Holy Ghost.

Verification Method: Internal spiritual confirmation and the promise that 'God shall give unto you knowledge' (v26).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the objective standard of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16) illuminated by the Spirit. This text elevates subjective revelation and new prophetic utterances above the closed canon, promising knowledge about 'many gods' that contradicts the Bible.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: March 20, 1839

Authorship: Joseph Smith

Textual Issues: The canonized version is an excerpt from a much longer letter. The editing process removed significant portions of local context and personal grievances to create a more universal doctrinal text.