

SECTION 77

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

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 77, received in March 1832, represents a unique genre within Mormon scripture: a catechistic (Q&A) revelation. Occurring while Joseph Smith was engaged in his 'inspired translation' of the Bible, this text records Smith's specific inquiries to God regarding the imagery found in the Apocalypse of John (Book of Revelation). The text systematically reinterprets biblical apocalyptic symbols—such as the sea of glass, the four beasts, the 24 elders, and the 144,000—through the lens of Restoration theology. Crucially, it establishes a rigid dispensational timeline, asserting that the earth has a 'temporal existence' of exactly 7,000 years, with the Second Coming occurring at the beginning of the seventh millennium. It also redefines the 144,000 not merely as Jewish remnants, but as 'High Priests' ordained to administer the everlasting gospel, thereby inserting the distinct Mormon priesthood hierarchy into the biblical eschaton. This section serves as a foundational text for Mormon eschatology and the concept of the earth's eventual sanctification into a celestial sphere.

KEY FIGURES

Joseph Smith, John the Revelator, The Four Beasts, The 144,000 High Priests, Elias

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. TEMPORAL EXISTENCE OF EARTH

Assertion: The earth has a fixed temporal lifespan of 7,000 years, corresponding to the seven seals of Revelation.

"the hidden things of his economy concerning this earth during the seven thousand years of its continuance, or its temporal existence. [77:6]"

Evangelical Comparison: D&C 77:6-7 canonizes a strict 'millennial week' theory, asserting that each of the seven seals represents a specific 1,000-year period of human history, totaling 7,000 years. While some early church fathers and historical theologians speculated on this, Evangelicalism largely rejects this as binding dogma, particularly the implication that the Second Coming is mathematically calculable based on this timeline. Evangelical eschatology emphasizes the imminence of Christ's return (Matthew 24:36, 42) rather than a deterministic chronological map.

2. ETERNAL FELICITY OF ANIMALS

Assertion: Animals have spirits, are created in the likeness of their spirits, and will enjoy eternal happiness (heaven).

"the happiness of man, and of beasts... the spirit of man in the likeness of his person, as also the spirit of the beast, and every other creature which God has created. [77:2]"

Evangelical Comparison: In D&C 77:2-3, Smith interprets the four beasts of Revelation 4 not merely as symbolic archetypes (as in standard Christian exegesis) but as literal, individual animals representing their classes in 'eternal felicity.' This introduces a pneumatology (doctrine of the spirit) that extends the eternal, spiritual nature to the animal kingdom. Evangelicalism traditionally holds that humans are unique in possessing an eternal spirit capable of redemption and fellowship with God, distinguishing sharply between the mortality of animals and the immortality of man.

3. THE 144,000 AS HIGH PRIESTS

Assertion: The 144,000 mentioned in Revelation are specifically High Priests ordained to the holy order of God.

"We are to understand that those who are sealed are high priests, ordained unto the holy order of God, to administer the everlasting gospel [77:11]"

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine fundamentally alters the identity of the 144,000 from Revelation 7. Where the biblical text identifies them as 'servants of our God' from the 'tribes of the children of Israel,' Smith redefines them through the lens of Mormon ecclesiastical hierarchy. They become 'High Priests' (an office in the

Melchizedek Priesthood in Mormonism). This contradicts the Evangelical tenet of the Universal Priesthood of Believers (1 Peter 2:9) and the belief that the Levitical/High Priestly office was fulfilled and terminated in Christ (Hebrews 7).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the hermeneutical approach and the resulting ecclesiology. Evangelicals approach Revelation as a text to be understood through consistent symbolism and Old Testament allusion. Joseph Smith approaches it as a riddle requiring new revelation that inserts concepts foreign to the original text—specifically, the Mormon Priesthood hierarchy. By defining the 144,000 as 'High Priests,' Smith shifts the focus from God's preservation of Israel to the authority of the Mormon priesthood structure. Furthermore, the 'Sea of Glass' being the earth itself introduces a cosmology where matter is eternal and evolving toward divinity, contrasting with the Evangelical view of a new creation ex nihilo or a redeemed creation distinct from the Creator.

Shared Values:

Belief in the Second Coming of Christ; Belief in the ultimate sanctification/renewal of the earth; Belief in the reality of angels and judgment

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – The text claims the Bible is a 'sealed book' effectively unintelligible without Smith's extra-biblical revelation.
- 2. [Minor] Theology Proper (Creation) – Attributes eternal spirits and felicity to animals, blurring the distinction between the Imago Dei in man and the rest of creation.
- 3. [Major] Universal Priesthood / Christology – Re-establishes a High Priestly class (144,000) necessary for administering the gospel, obscuring Christ's sole High Priesthood.

Semantic Warnings:

"High Priest"

In Text: An office in the Melchizedek Priesthood held by thousands of men; the status of the 144,000.
Evangelical: A singular office fulfilled by Christ (Hebrews 4:14); historically, the leader of the Levitical priests.
Example: *In D&C 77, the 144,000 are High Priests. In Hebrews, Jesus is the only High Priest of the New Covenant.*

"Elias"

In Text: A title for a forerunner or restorer; here, an angel from the east gathering Israel (distinct from Elijah in some contexts, though the name is Greek for Elijah).
Evangelical: The Greek form of the name Elijah; refers to the prophet Elijah or John the Baptist acting in his spirit.
Example: *D&C 77:9 identifies an angel as 'Elias' who holds the seal of the living God, functioning as a specific restorative office.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Includes 'eternal felicity' (even for beasts) and exaltation in the 'Church of the Firstborn'.

How Attained: Implies necessity of priesthood ordinances (administered by the 144,000 High Priests) and the 'sealing' in the forehead.

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is tied to the 'sealing' and the authority of the priesthood administration.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text emphasizes the administration of the gospel through a specific priesthood order (144,000) and the 'sealing' work, shifting focus from faith in Christ's finished work to the necessity of authorized administrators.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

- 1. Understand the 'sea of glass' as the sanctified earth

2. Understand the 144,000 as High Priests
3. Gather the tribes of Israel (assigned to John/Elias)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Joseph Smith's authoritative interpretation of biblical symbolism over historical or grammatical exegesis
2. View the current era as the 'sixth seal' or the time of preparation for the seventh millennium

Ritual Requirements:

1. Ordination of High Priests (implied by the existence of the 144,000 as such)
2. Sealing ordinances (referenced in verse 9 and 11)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. When you read about the 144,000 in Revelation 7, the Bible calls them servants from the tribes of Israel. How does D&C 77's description of them as 'High Priests' change your understanding of their role?
2. D&C 77 mentions the earth has a temporal existence of 7,000 years. How do you view this timeline in light of history, and does it affect how you view the timing of the Second Coming?
3. In Hebrews, we learn that Jesus is our High Priest. Why do you think D&C 77 emphasizes a group of 144,000 High Priests to administer the gospel?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. Desire for Understanding – Just as Smith sought clarity in confusing symbols, we all seek to understand God's plan. Jesus is the Word (Logos) who reveals the Father (John 1:18) without needing secret keys or new hierarchies. [Hebrews 1:1-2]
2. Restoration of Creation – The text reflects a longing for a creation free from suffering. The Bible promises that creation itself will be liberated from bondage to decay, not through animal spirits, but through the resurrection of the children of God. [Romans 8:19-21]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Dependency on Hierarchy [Moderate] – The believer is taught that Scripture is a locked code requiring a prophet to decipher. This creates a spiritual dependency on the leader rather than fostering direct confidence in God's Word.
2. Performance/Qualification [Moderate] – By defining the 144,000 as ordained High Priests, the text implicitly elevates priesthood office as the mechanism for end-times ministry, potentially alienating those (women, unordained men) who cannot hold this office.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic interrogation of the Divine; knowledge is received, not derived through study.

Verification Method: Testimony of the Spirit confirming Joseph Smith's role as translator/revelator.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelical epistemology relies on the illumination of the Holy Spirit through the text of Scripture itself (hermeneutics), comparing scripture with scripture (Acts 17:11), rather than relying on a single prophet's gnostic key to unlock hidden meanings.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: March 1832

Authorship: Joseph Smith

Textual Issues: This text is part of the JST (Joseph Smith Translation) project context. It reflects Smith's method of 'translation' as charismatic expansion rather than linguistic translation.