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THE “MARTYRDOM” OF JOSEPH SMITH: LIKE A LAMB LED TO THE SLAUGHTER?

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SYNOPSIS

Critics and supporters agree that the veracity of Mormonism hinges on Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-1844), the founder and first prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS or Mormon Church). Smith began his own church with just six people and saw it grow and thrive, despite the many persecutions it endured. He and his brother Hyrum Smith were murdered on June 27, 1844, by an armed mob, an event that has prompted Mormons to classify them as martyrs. It has caused others, however, to raise the question whether someone who dies in a gun battle fighting against his enemies can be considered to be a martyr. A close examination of the term reveals that one must meet specific requirements to be considered a martyr, which involve, for example, the reasons why one is put to death and the way one faces such a death. An investigation of the reasons why Smith was murdered and the actions he took to avoid this fate inevitably makes it difficult to maintain that Smith was “like a lamb led to the slaughter.”

Joseph Smith, Jr., was a simple, noneducated young man who insisted that God the Father and Jesus Christ commissioned him to restore the Christian church in 1830 from its state of “apostasy.”¹ Claiming to have “translated” the Book of Mormon, a literary work detailing how Jesus Himself visited descendants of the Jews in America after His resurrection in Palestine, Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS or Mormon Church). Smith began his church with just six people and saw it grow and thrive, despite the many persecutions it endured.

It was 1839 when enemies of Smith forced him to leave the state of Missouri. Together with fifteen thousand of his followers, Smith ended up in Commerce, Illinois, a swamp-ridden town on the Mississippi River that he later renamed Nauvoo and that quickly flourished under his leadership. Today, the LDS Church looks to Joseph Smith as a beacon of truth, and although Mormons do not worship him, they certainly revere him. As Donald Staheli, a Mormon official in Nauvoo, Illinois, put it: “If one can not square with Prophet Joseph, we have nothing as a church. If Prophet Joseph and his mission are true, then the church has everything. If it’s not true, we become a fraud.”²

There are basic facts leading up to Joseph’s imprisonment and eventual death that need to be considered in determining whether or not he should be considered a martyr in the traditional sense of the word. First, Smith’s adulterous affairs with other women and his eventual revelation of plural marriage (which is called “the new and everlasting covenant” and later was incorporated into Mormon scripture³) upset many of the local citizens, especially since teenage girls and married women were involved. A group of former Mormons criticized Smith, largely because of this and his political aspirations, when they put together the only issue of *The Nauvoo Expositor*, a newspaper printed on June 7, 1844.

When Smith, who was Nauvoo's mayor, realized that they were planning future publications of the *Expositor*, he convinced the Nauvoo City Council to declare the paper a "nuisance" and order the destruction of the *Expositor's* press and type. Even LDS historian B. H. Roberts called the legality of the destruction "questionable."⁴ Then, on June 19, Smith declared martial law and put his four-thousand-member Nauvoo Legion militia on alert before he and his brother Hyrum Smith escaped across the Mississippi River. They returned home when Joseph read a letter from his wife Emma pleading for him not to run from his charges.⁵ Two days later, Joseph and Hyrum were arrested for treason and placed in a minimum-security cell at the Carthage Jail, which is about twenty-two miles away from Nauvoo. On the way from Nauvoo to Carthage, Joseph Smith said that he believed he was about to be led "like a lamb to the slaughter."⁶

On the morning of June 27, Joseph wrote a letter to Emma, saying, "[I am] very much resigned to my lot, knowing I am justified and have done the best that could be done..." After he finished his note, however, he found out that the Illinois governor, who was supposed to be protecting him, had departed for Nauvoo, leaving him vulnerable to his enemies. According to *History of the Church* 6:605, Smith had Emma tell church leader Jonathan Dunham to direct the people to stay home and to "let there be no groups or gathering together, unless by permission of the governor." Smith biographer Fawn Brodie writes, however, that Smith later "hastily scribbled an order to Jonathan Dunham to bring the Legion, break the jail, and save him at all costs. Within seconds two messengers bearing this order and the letter to Emma were off at a frantic gallop on the fifteen-mile trip to Nauvoo."⁷

At 5:00 p.m. about two hundred armed men with blackened faces stormed the two-story Carthage Jail, with the two Smiths, John Taylor, and Willard Richards remaining inside. Joseph "sprang to his coat for his six-shooter, Hyrum for his single barrel," and the others for nearby canes.⁸ Shots were fired into the room, and Hyrum Smith was killed when he was hit in the face. Joseph Smith then grabbed a six-shot Pepperbox revolver, "pulled the trigger six times into the hall, dropped the pistol on the floor, and sprang to the window. With one leg over the sill, he raised his arms in the Masonic sign of distress. A ball from the doorway struck his hip, and a shot from the outside entered his chest. Another hit under the heart and a fourth his collarbone. He fell outward, crying, 'O Lord my God!'"⁹ After Joseph and his brother Hyrum Smith were killed, they were said to "be classed among the martyrs of religion."¹⁰

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEEMING SMITH A MARTYR

"I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer's morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I shall die innocent, and it shall yet be said of me—He was murdered in cold blood."

—Joseph Smith¹¹

To say that Joseph Smith was martyred rather than simply murdered is important to many Latter-day Saints. Mormon apologist Samuel Katich argues that "Joseph was, and always had been, willing to die for his faith, his God, and his people. Illustrating this willingness, Daniel Bachman cited an 1838 incident when Joseph and Hyrum were in the hands of their enemies and were sentenced to be executed. Did he resist? No!"¹²

Brigham Young University (BYU) professor Robert Millet explained how Mormons consider Smith's death to be similar to the death of Jesus when he wrote: "The life of Joseph Smith was in some degree patterned after that of the Master, Jesus Christ. That pattern holds true even when extended to its tragic conclusion. Like his Master, Joseph Smith also shed his blood in order that the final testament, the reestablishment of the new covenant, might be in full effect (see Heb. 9:16)."¹³

One famous LDS hymn references Smith's death this way:

Praise to his memory, he died as a martyr;
Honored and blest be his ever great name!
Long shall his blood, which was shed by assassins,
Plead unto heaven while the earth lauds his fame.
Hail to the Prophet, ascended to heaven!
Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain.
Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren;
Death cannot conquer the hero again.¹⁴

THE FALLACY OF DEEMING SMITH A MARTYR

Based on the following syllogism, however, I do not believe it is accurate to classify Joseph as a martyr:

- Premise 1: A martyr is someone who, at the risk or cost of his own life, willingly dies for his faith.
- Premise 2: Joseph Smith did not die willingly, or:
a. he would not have attempted to call on the Nauvoo Legion, and
b. he would not have shot at his attackers.
- Premise 3: Joseph Smith did not die for his faith but rather for:
a. his imposition of nonbiblical practices upon his people, and
b. his illegal destruction of a newspaper printing press.
- Conclusion: Therefore, Joseph Smith was not a martyr for his faith.

The Meaning of the Word *Martyr*

To determine whether Joseph Smith is in fact a martyr, for Premise 1, we need to define just what it means to be a martyr. Many LDS apologists utilize the dictionary to support this designation for Smith. For instance, Mormon apologist Lance Starr says that those who say Smith was not martyred “must take some creative liberties with the English language,” and that “some anti-Mormon writers have taken the term *martyr* and subtly changed its definition to suit their own needs. The new definition would probably read something like this: *Martyr: a person who chooses to suffer or die rather than give up his faith or his principles without any resistance or effort at self-defense on his part whatsoever*”¹⁵ (emphasis in original). Starr later concludes, “A martyr is simply someone who dies defending his or her faith.”¹⁶

W. John Walsh, another Mormon apologist, criticizes anyone who stops at the definition used by Starr, but he still defends the classification of Joseph Smith as a martyr when he writes:

If you reexamine the dictionary, you will find that you skipped over parts of the definition of martyr and definitions of related words. Webster’s also states that to martyr is “to put to death for adhering to a belief, faith, or profession.” In addition, Random House Webster’s College Dictionary (1991) states that a martyr is: “1. a person who willingly suffers death rather than renounce his or her religion.; 2. A person who is put to death or suffers on behalf of a cause.; 3. A person who undergoes severe or constant suffering.” There is no doubt that Joseph Smith was finally murdered, after suffering severe and constant afflictions, because he would not renounce his religious beliefs or prophetic claims. Therefore, there can be no doubt that he was martyr.¹⁷

Former LDS bishop Stephen R. Gibson writes, “Joseph Smith certainly fits this definition of a martyr. To say differently is to either invent a new definition or to be ignorant of the facts regarding the last few days of the prophet’s life.”¹⁸

Here is a popular Internet definition for the noun *martyr* from Dictionary.com:

–noun

1. a person who willingly suffers death rather than renounce his or her religion.
2. a person who is put to death or endures great suffering on behalf of any belief, principle, or cause....
3. a person who undergoes severe or constant suffering....
4. a person who seeks sympathy or attention by feigning or exaggerating pain, deprivation, etc.¹⁹

If we use this along with the other definitions provided by the Mormon apologists, there are three main meanings of *martyr* when used as a noun. To summarize, they are:

1. those who “choose” death (or allow themselves to die) for their beliefs or for a cause,
2. those who suffer for their beliefs but are not killed, and
3. those who attempt to gather sympathy by exaggerating their difficulties in life.

To be sure, the Mormon apologists are not referring to the secondary meanings of the noun *martyr*. They are focusing, rather, on the primary meaning, essentially claiming that Joseph Smith chose to allow himself to die for his principles of faith. While comparing dictionary definitions, perhaps we ought to consider a primary source that was in use during the 1840s when the word *martyr* was first ascribed to Joseph Smith by Taylor in Doctrine and Covenants 135. This is how Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* defines the noun *martyr*:

n. [Gr. a witness.] One who, by his death, bears witness to the truth of the gospel. Stephen was the first Christian martyr.

To be a martyr signifies only to witness the truth of Christ.

1. One who suffers death in defense of any cause. We say, a man dies a martyr to his political principles or to the cause of liberty.²⁰

Webster’s 1828 dictionary, then, actually bases the idea that a martyr is a person who voluntarily chooses death to remain true to his principles (definition 1: “One who suffers death in defense of any cause”) on the original definition that a martyr is one who, by death, “bears witness to the truth of the gospel.”²¹

True Martyrs in Comparison

Besides Stephen, as Webster mentioned, other New Testament martyrs are John the Baptist, James, and Jesus Himself. Using a side-by-side comparison, let’s consider the martyrdoms of these men and how their deaths are examples that bear “witness to the truth of the gospel”:

A Comparison of Biblical Martyrs²²

TRAIT BEING COMPARED	JOHN THE BAPTIST	JESUS	STEPHEN	JAMES
Charges brought	Criticizing Herod for taking his brother Phillip’s wife (Matt. 14:3-4)	“Blasphemy” (Mark 14:64)	Speaking “blasphemous words against Moses, and against God” (Acts 6:11)	The exact charge is not clear, though blasphemy is most likely
Accuracy of the charge(s)	True, but justified	False; Jesus was truly God incarnate and thus what He said was true, so it was not blasphemy	False; Acts 6:13 says that false witnesses were given against him	False
Execution method	Beheading (Matt. 14:10)	Crucifixion (John 19:17ff)	Stoning (Acts 7:59)	Sword (Acts 12:2)
Possibility of avoiding the death sentence	Could not have avoided it; Herod imprisoned John, then promised to give Herodias’s daughter “whatsoever she would ask” (Matt. 14:8). Since she asked for John’s head, Herod killed John to fulfill his oath (Matt. 14:9); though Herod was “distressed,” he felt obligated to follow through with the execution	Could have allowed His disciples to fight (but instead He reprimanded Peter for resisting— Matt. 26:52); could have called down angels and destroyed His accusers (Matt. 26:53)	Could have lied about his testimony; could have told his accusers what they wanted to hear rather than give them cause for the charge of blasphemy. Instead he preached with boldness (Acts 7)	Could have fled , but likely could not have avoided it; killed in an apparent political move when Herod Agrippa became governor of Judea because Herod wanted to please the Jewish leaders
Last words	Unknown	“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34); “It is finished” (John 20:30)	“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. . . Lord, lay not this sin to their charge” (Acts 7:59–60)	Unknown
Last action	Unknown	Forgives His enemies	Asks that the sin not be charged against his killers	Unknown
Extent to which his death “bears witness to the truth of the Gospel” (as defined in Webster’s 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language)	John the Baptist preached the truth, and this cost him his life	Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee” (John 17:2)	Stephen is killed for the truth, according to Acts 7. His death is mourned in Acts 8:2 by devout men.	Early Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea says that the soldier who guarded James was so affected by his witness that he declared himself a Christian and was willingly executed with James ²³

There have been many who have died for their Christian faith since the days of Jesus and the apostles. The classic *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, which was compiled by John Foxe in the sixteenth century, documents the stories of many Christians who paid the ultimate cost for their commitment to Christ.²⁴ In the twenty-first century, more than four hundred Christian martyrdoms take place every day.²⁵ Consider just one example:

Two evangelists in [Bangladesh] were stabbed to death around midnight.... Liplal Mardy (35) and Tapan Roy (30) had been showing the Jesus film, as well as health education films, in villages around the area. They had received at least two verbal threats from the head of the local madrassa (Islamic religious school), telling them to stop showing the film. After the second threat they stopped their work and were planning to leave the area, but they were murdered before they could do so.²⁶

Joseph Smith in Contrast

Mardy, Roy, and the biblical martyrs were killed for nothing more than their commitment to Christianity and desiring to spread the gospel; what about Joseph Smith? The accusations against Smith as detailed in the *Nauvoo Expositor*, including the practice of plural marriage, were true, and the behavior unjustifiable. The final straw for Smith's enemies was the destruction of the paper's printing press. Joseph Smith's deeds—not merely his Mormon beliefs—were what upset the non-LDS population of Illinois. Perhaps Smith's aspiration to be king and the perceived abuse of power that they saw him and his followers wield since their arrival in Nauvoo made the non-LDS population believe that the end result of this man's death justified the means of their unlawful action.

Some wonder how Smith obtained the gun that he used against his attackers. Early LDS Church leader Cyrus H. Wheelock smuggled the Pepperbox six-shooter to him during a visit to Smith in the Carthage Jail. As he was about to leave, Wheelock took it out and said, "Would any of you like to have this?" As Taylor writes: "Brother Joseph immediately replied, 'YES, give it to me,' whereupon he took the pistol, and put it in his pantaloons pocket."²⁷

Joseph Smith took his pistol out after Hyrum Smith was shot and began firing at his attackers. Regarding the use of force by the Mormon prophet, Walsh writes:

You seem to imply that there is something wrong or immoral about defending either yourself or others from unlawful attack....Also, you seem to believe that the early Christian martyrs all died willingly without any resistance. Somehow I suspect that they did not step willingly into the mouths of lions. When they were alone with the lions in the arena, I imagine that they tried to run, hide, or even fight back. Their resistance did not disqualify them from being martyrs....When Paul faced a similar mob who had decided 'it is not fit that he should live.' (Acts 22:22), he used his Roman citizenship for protection....²⁸

Certainly Smith was morally justified to defend himself in the circumstance that he was in because it is simply reasonable to defend oneself. Such action, however, can hardly be compared to the Jesus who reprimanded Peter, saying "for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt. 26:52 KJV), no matter how unjust His arrest was.²⁹ Also, it is absolutely blasphemous for Smith to make a comparison of his situation ("I am going like a lamb to the slaughter") to the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ. To even insinuate that the scriptures Isaiah 53:7 and Acts 8:28–33 had anything to do with his circumstances is completely missing the mark. As former Mormons Jerald and Sandra Tanner pointed out, "While we agree with the Mormons that there is no way to justify the unlawful and brutal acts of the mob at Carthage, we feel that it is going beyond the facts to compare the death of Joseph with that of Jesus."³⁰

MURDER IS NOT MARTYRDOM

Just because a person is murdered does not make him a martyr. If simply being murdered is grounds for martyrdom, then David Koresh, Mussolini, and anyone else who has ever been killed for his or her ideology should also be considered martyrs. If merely dying for one's faith is the lone prerequisite, then Smith's death and the "martyrdom" of suicidal Islamic terrorists would have more commonality than dissimilarity. The Latter-day Saints are free to venerate their founding prophet, but it is not accurate to call Joseph Smith's death an instance of martyrdom.

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith—History 1:17ff. (“Joseph Smith—History” is the name of a selection from the Mormon scripture The Pearl of Great Price that contains excerpts from Smith’s official history.)
2. “Pageant Rekindles Smith Debate,” *Deseret News*, August 6, 2005, available at <http://deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,1249,600153800,00.html>.
3. Doctrine and Covenants 132.
4. *History of the Church* 6:38.
5. Emma told Joseph that people were accusing him of being a coward. See Milton R. Hunter, “Love of Fellow Men,” *Conference Report*, April 1948, 31, LDS Library, <http://search.ldslibrary.com/article/view/172978#173080>.
6. *Ibid.*, *History of the Church* 6:555.
7. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 391–392. The message in the note addressed to Dunham was not obeyed, although it is not known why. That was a curious command, at any rate, for if the Legion had come—and there were many more in the Legion than in the outfit supposedly guarding the jail—there would have been much more bloodshed.
8. *History of the Church* 6:617.
9. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 550. According to *History of the Church* 7:100–103, Smith’s bullets hit three men, killing two of them. Some Mormon apologists argue that these men were not killed; regardless, the history records that Joseph did fire at his attackers and apparently hit them.
10. Doctrine and Covenants 135:1ff. This idea is confirmed in *History of the Church* 6:629–631.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 135:4.
12. Samuel Katich, “Joseph Smith,” *Mormonism 201*, Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), <http://www.fairlds.org/apol/morm201/m20117b.html>.
13. Robert L. Millet, “Joseph Smith among the Prophets,” *Ensign*, June 1994, 22.
14. William W. Phelps, “Praise to the Man,” Hymn no. 27, *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985).
15. Lance Starr, “Was Joseph Smith a Martyr or a Murderer?” FAIR Papers (Mesa, AZ: FAIR, May 2003), available at <http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/jsmartyr.pdf>. Concerning the false dichotomy in his title, Starr says “critics claim that Smith is a murderer because two of the three men he wounded died.” Leaving only two choices creates an “either/or” logical fallacy. I, for one, do not claim that Smith is a martyr, but I would not call him a murderer, either.
16. *Ibid.*
17. W. John Walsh, “Was Joseph Smith a Martyr?” *Mormonism, Response to Criticism, Questions about Mormonism*, LightPlanet, www.lightplanet.com/mormons/response/qa/martyr_joseph.htm.
18. Stephen W. Gibson, “Was Joseph Smith Really a Martyr?” *Mormonism, Response to Criticism, One-Minute Answers to Anti-Mormon Questions*, LightPlanet, www.lightplanet.com/response/answers/martyr.htm.
19. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (v 1.1), based on the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 2006), s.v. “martyr,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=martyr>.
20. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (np: 1828), <http://1828.mshaffer.com/d/search/word,martyr>.
21. This is confirmed by the careful layout of Webster’s 1828 dictionary (which he began when he was 43 and did not publish until he was 70), and clarified in subsequent early editions, such as Webster’s *Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G & C. Merriam, 1913). See “Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913 + 1828),” The ARTFL Project, <http://machaut.uchicago.edu/?resource=Webster%27s&word=martyr&use1913=on>.
22. Names of persons being compared are in order by date of death.
23. Eusebius, *Church History* 2.9.2-3, available at Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.vii.x.html>.
24. See John Foxe, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2007). Foxe explains, for instance, how all of the apostles (except John) were martyred for their faith by various means, including crucifixion, beheading, and stoning.
25. There will be 175,000 annual Christian martyrdoms by mid-2008, up from 160,000 in mid-2000, according to a 2008 survey. See David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, “Missiometrics 2008: Reality Checks for Christian World Communions,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32, 1 (January 2008), available as “Status of Global Mission, 2008, in the Context of 20th and 21st Centuries,” Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, <http://christianity.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=christianity&cdn=religion&tm=52&f=10&tt=11&bt=0&bts=0&z=http%3A//www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/globalchristianity/resources.php>.
26. Barnabas Fund, “Two Bangladeshi Christians killed for showing Jesus film,” *The Barnabas Fund* 5 (August 2005), http://www.barnabasfund.org/News/archives/article.php?ID_news_items=48.
27. *History of the Church* 7:100. Joseph Smith also had a second gun smuggled in, though he never fired it during the gunfight.
28. Walsh.
29. Christians running away from lions or Paul’s legal maneuver in an attempt to save his life—as mentioned by Walsh—is not even close to the example provided us in Jesus Himself.
30. Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, “Jesus and Joseph Smith,” Online Resources, Tracts, Utah Lighthouse Ministry, www.utlm.org/onlineresources/jesusandjosephsmith.htm.