

The Appearance of Elijah and Moses in the Kirtland Temple and the Jewish Passover

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Stephen D. Ricks

A brief note in the History of the Church under the date of Sunday, 3 April 1836, records the appearance of the Lord, Moses, Elias, and Elijah to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple.¹ Subsequent writers have noted that this date corresponds to the Jewish Passover, during which the arrival of Elijah is traditionally awaited.² In his April 1936 general conference address, Joseph Fielding Smith remarked:

It was, I am informed on the third day of April, 1836, that the Jews, in their homes at the Paschal feast, opened their doors for Elijah to enter. On that very day Elijah did enter—not in the home of the Jews to partake of the Passover with them, but he appeared in the House of the Lord.³

A parenthetical note in the *Missionary Training Manual: For Use in the Jewish Proselyting Program* states the correlation of the two events even more emphatically. There we are informed that Elijah appeared in the Kirtland Temple “at about the same hour that the Jewish families in that time zone would have been preparing to begin their feast of the Passover.”⁴ These statements, although correct in their identification of the Jewish Passover with the ritual expectation of Elijah and in their connecting the time of the appearance of Elijah in the Kirtland Temple with the Passover season, warrant further elucidation and modest chronological correction.

Pentateuchal material for the Passover celebration prescribes the evening preceding the fourteenth day of the Hebrew month Nisan (Abib) as the time for the Passover sacrifice.⁵ The Passover celebration itself took place on the fourteenth of Nisan and was immediately followed by the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread.⁶ Over time, however, the distinction between the two festivals was blurred, with the Passover becoming synonymous for both.⁷ With the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70, the sacrifice associated with the Passover celebration ceased, and, in fact, all of the rites connected with the celebration of the Passover were transferred to the fifteenth of Nisan. From an early period, Elijah was incorporated into the Passover activities.⁸ At the table prepared for the Passover meal a place is left vacant for Elijah, and a cup is filled to the brim for him (the fuller the better, since anything less would show the host to be niggardly and could

hardly be expected to attract so important a guest). At one point during the *Seder*, the traditional Hebrew name for the Passover ritual, a child is sent to the door to see if Elijah may be standing outside and to invite him in.⁹

An examination of chronological tables which compares the Jewish calendar with corresponding Christian dates shows that the fifteenth of Nisan in the Christian year 1836 coincides with the first and second of Aril.¹⁰ The Jewish day begins at sundown, so the Passover *Seder* on the fifteenth of Nisan in 1836 would actually have taken place on the evening of the first of April. The appearance of Elijah in the Kirtland Temple took place on Sunday, the third of April. Thus, it would be inaccurate to claim an absolute chronological correspondence of the two events. However, in view of the long-standing use of the word *Passover* for the entire week following the fifteenth of Nisan, it would certainly be correct to say that Elijah came during the Passover season. Also, it has been a tradition among Jews outside of the land of Israel to celebrate the Passover *Seder* two evenings in succession, on the fifteenth and sixteenth of Nisan. therefore, on the very day, according to Hebrew time reckoning (which goes from nightfall to nightfall), that the Jews had for the second time opened their doors for Elijah to enter, he entered the House of the Lord at Kirtland.

The significant role accorded to Elijah in the Passover celebration (for whom there is no explicit biblical link with the Passover) can perhaps best be explained on the basis of this function as a precursor to the Messiah. At least as early as Malachi, the imminent return of Elijah, who would come before “the great and dreadful day of the Lord,” was predicted.¹¹ Elijah became, in Jewish thought, the Messianic forerunner *par excellence*. The Passover, which recounts the redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage, foreshadows Israel’s eschatological redemption by the Messiah. Thus Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, is appropriately associated with the quintessential festal symbol of Messianic redemption.

In this discussion relatively little has been said about Moses. Perhaps because he lies near the heart of the events ritually recounted during the Passover celebration, his arrival at Passover time seems natural. Still, his appearance in company with Elijah offers another striking parallel between Mormon teachings and Jewish tradition, according to which Moses and Elijah would arrive together at the “end of time.”¹²

The appearance of Elijah and Moses at Passover season to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery thus represents a fulfillment and a promise. Elijah did come at Passover time—as pious Jews had long hoped he would—although he did not avail himself of the hospitably opened door of a faithful Jewish family but came to the House of the Lord in Kirtland. And the appearance of Moses and Elijah together—to restore keys—harbors the promise of the Lord’s imminent coming.

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1. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1973), 2:434–36. See also the background material recorded in the Joseph Smith Diary under the date 3 April 1836 in the hand of Warren A. Cowdery, cited in Lyndon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo: Seventy's Mission Bookstore, 1981), p. 220.

2. On the traditional association of Elijah and the Passover, see Aharon Wiener, *The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism: A Depth-Psychological Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 133–34, 138–39.

3. Conference Report, April 1936, p. 75.

4. *Missionary Training Manual: For Use in the Jewish Proselyting Program* (Salt Lake City: The church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), p. 25. In an interesting article in the January 1977 *Ensign*, "The 15th of Nisan," William J. Adams, Jr., incorrectly identifies the evening of the second of April 1836 with the beginning of the fifteenth of Nisan.

5. For example, Exodus 12:6: "And ye shall keep it up [the lamb which is to be sacrificed] until the fourteenth day of the same month [that is, the month of Nisan, which is called "the first month of the year" in Exodus 12:2]: and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening." Since the Hebrew day begins at nightfall, "the evening" (here the Hebrew is *ben 'arbaim*, literally "between the two evenings") mentioned here is actually the period immediately preceding the beginning of the fourteenth of Nisan. It should be noted, too, that the month name *Nisan*, corresponding to the months March and April in the Christian calendar, is a secondary development in the Hebrew calendrical system. Here (as well as in Leviticus 23:5 and Numbers 9:5, 11) it is only referred to as "the first month," whereas in Exodus 13:4–5 and Deuteronomy 16:1 it is called *Abib*. The name *Nisan* has been in use since at least post-exilic times (that is, from ca. 500 B.C.) and is still employed.

6. Exodus 12:15; Numbers 28:16–25.

7. There has been considerable discussion concerning the exact relationship between the Feast of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Many scholars are of the opinion that there were originally two separate festivals which were later melded because they coincided in time (for a convenient synthesis and analysis of these theories, see J. B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover from the Earliest Times to A.D. 70* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 78 ff.). Others, including Segal himself (*ibid.*, pp. 175–77), prefer a unitary origin, that is, that there was originally only one festival, the Passover sacrifice being the opening and principal ceremony of the Passover week. On the name Passover being used for the entire week at least as early as the first centuries of the Christian Era, see J. C. Rylaarsdam, "Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962): 3:663).

8. The precise date of the incorporation of Elijah into the Passover celebration is uncertain. The biblical injunctions for the Passover say nothing about Elijah, and there are, unfortunately, no other texts from the pre-Christian period which deal with the order of service of the festival. It seems likely, however, that Elijah was accorded a function on the Passover service from at least the early centuries of the Christian Era.

9. In many Jewish homes, in fact, the door is left ajar so that Elijah may feel more welcome to come in of his own accord.

10. Eduard Mahler, *Handbuch der juedischen Chronologie* (Leipzig: G. Fock, 1916), p. 589.

11. Malachi 4:5–6. The usual Jewish interpretation of the prophecy of Malachi concerning Elijah, who is to “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers,” is that it is a foretelling of a reconciliation of the generations (see Wiener, *Prophet Elijah in Judaism*, p. 35, n. 2).

12. Deut. Rabba 3:10, cited in Geza Vermes *Jesus the Jew* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), p. 97. In light of this, it is easy to suppose that many in the earliest Christian community, most of whom were Jews by birth, would have interpreted the appearance of Elijah and Moses to the transfigured Christ (Matt. 17:1–3) as a sign of an imminent end of the world.