

CHAPTER XXV

The Problem of the "Rod" and the "Root of Jesse" in Isaiah 11

When the Angel Moroni appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith on the evening of September 21, 1823, he quoted the eleventh chapter of Isaiah and doubtless fully explained its meaning. The Prophet himself said:

". . . he [Moroni] quoted the eleventh chapter of Isaiah, saying that it was about to be fulfilled." (*Documentary History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 12.)

It can be presumed that Moroni would not have quoted the chapter from Isaiah unless in some way it directly involved Joseph Smith and the Church he was destined to organize. What the prophecy says about the gathering of Israel (Isa. 11:11-16) and the millennial era of peace (vss. 6-9) should lead one to suspect that Moroni would explain to the young Prophet the part he was to play in these future events. The membership of the Church should not find it too difficult to understand this outstanding prophecy, but certain expressions in two verses have occasioned some difficulties in interpretation. Indeed, there are differences of opinion on the meaning of these verses.

The problems in question are the meaning of "rod" in verse 1 and the "root of Jesse" in verse 10.

Verse 1 reads:

"And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots."

In March 1838 the Prophet gave answers to certain questions on scripture in which he explained the "rod" and the "stem of Jesse" of this verse. His explanation is found in Doctrine and Covenants 113:1-4"

"Who is the Stem of Jesse spoken of in the 1st, 2d, 3d, 4th, and 5th verses of the 11th chapter of Isaiah?"

"Verily thus saith the Lord: It is Christ.

"What is the rod spoken of in the first verse of the 11th chapter of Isaiah, that should come of the Stem of Jesse?"

"Behold, thus saith the Lord: It is a servant in the hands of Christ, who is partly a descendant of Jesse as well as of Ephraim, or of the house of Joseph, on whom there is laid much power."

The Prophet gives a clear, unequivocal answer when he identifies Christ as the "Stem of Jesse," but he leaves to our own discernment the task of determining the identity of the "rod." All he says is that "it is a servant in the hands of Christ," and then he adds some interesting genealogical data.

The writer has always assumed that the "rod" was Joseph Smith, believing that the Prophet, out of modesty, hesitated to name himself directly. None of us would question that Joseph was destined to become a great "servant in the hands of Christ." Moreover, if we assume that he was the "rod" or "servant," observe how very well such an identification fits in with Moroni's mission of explaining to the latter-day Prophet his part in Isaiah's great vision of the future. As the "rod" or "servant in the hands of Christ," Joseph Smith fits naturally into Isaiah's prophecy, and it is easy to understand why Moroni quoted and explained Isaiah 11 to him.

Despite this reasoning, we still have the uneasy feeling that better proof of Joseph Smith's being the "rod" should be available. I believe there is better proof and that it is found in Doctrine and Covenants 113:5-6, which reads:

"What is the root of Jesse spoken of in the 10th verse of the 11th chapter?"

"Behold, thus saith the Lord, it is a descendant of

Jesse, as well as of Joseph, unto whom rightly belongs the priesthood, and the keys of the kingdom, for an ensign, and for the gathering of my people in the last days."

In order to assess this explanation intelligently, let us turn to Isaiah 11:10:

"And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious."

A closer translation of the original may be given here:

"And it shall come to pass in that day, that the root of Jesse, that standeth for an ensign [sign, signal] of the peoples, unto him shall the nations seek; and his resting place [refuge, residence] shall be glorious."

Quite obviously the "root of Jesse" is a man, a descendant of Jesse and Joseph (as the Lord explains), who seems to have a great mission to perform in connection with gathering the remnant of Israel, as explained in Isaiah 11:11-16. I suggest that the "rod" of verse 1 and the "root of Jesse" of verse 10 refer to the same man, Joseph Smith. If the "rod" in D&C 113:4 is the "servant in the hands of Christ, who is partly a descendant of Jesse as well as of Ephraim, or of the house of Joseph," note that in verse 6 he seems to be more closely defined as a "descendant of Jesse, as well as of Joseph, *unto whom rightly belongs the priesthood, and the keys of the kingdom, for an ensign, and for the gathering of my people in the last days.*" (Italics added.) Who better fits the description of the words in italics than Joseph Smith? (See D&C 27:12-13; 86:8-11; 110:1-16; 115:18-19.) He rightly holds the priesthood and its keys by lineage, and surely no one disputes the fact that the keys of the "gathering of my people" were conferred on him by Moses in the Kirtland Temple, April 3, 1836.

But there are others who think differently. For example, a thoughtful brother from the eastern seaboard writes:

"In your . . . Sunday School gospel doctrine manual, "The Old Testament Prophets," page 41, . . . you give your opinion that the rod to come forth from the stem of Jesse, mentioned in Isaiah 11:1, and the root of Jesse, mentioned in Isaiah 11:10, are the same person, whom you believe is Joseph Smith. You give as evidence the fact that he holds the keys of the priesthood in this dispensation and also the keys of gathering, as mentioned in Isaiah 11:10.

"However, if we look further, we find that D&C 113:4 identifies the rod as a person who is partly a descendant of Jesse as well as of Ephraim. Jesse, of course, was the son of Obed and grandson of Boaz (partly a Canaanite through Rahab) and Ruth (a Moabite, descendant of Lot). Brigham Young, in a discourse delivered in the [old] tabernacle on April 8, 1855 (*Journal of Discourses* 2:269), stated that Joseph Smith was a pure Ephraimite. Pursuing this subject further, we find that in Isaiah 11:6-9 the discussion is clearly of the millennium. Then in verse 10 we read that 'in that day there shall be a root of Jesse. . . .

"It seems clear, then, that the root of Jesse cannot be Joseph Smith, but a future leader who has the specified lineage and who will also hold the keys of the priesthood and of gathering, undoubtedly passed down through successors of Joseph Smith."

This position claims that the "rod" of Isaiah 11:1 cannot be Joseph Smith, because he was a "pure" Ephraimite (i.e., all of his blood ancestors were strictly of Ephraimite stock); hence he could not be of mixed stock, as is the person described in D&C 113:4. Nor can the "root of Jesse" in Isaiah 11:10 be Joseph Smith, because the subject matter just preceding deals with the millennium, and the phrase represents a future leader who has the specified lineage mentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants.

Can this reasoning be answered? Which position holds the truth?

First, the latter position fails to give Joseph Smith the prominent role that one naturally expects Moroni to give when he appeared to the Prophet.

Second, the crux of the latter argument is that Joseph Smith was a "pure" Ephraimite and not a descendant of both Jesse and Ephraim. Unfortunately, President Brigham Young did not give an explanation of what he meant by a "pure" Ephraimite; nor is there any scriptural evidence, ancient or modern, to support the view that Joseph Smith would be descended from blood lines that were strictly of Ephraim. Not only that, but modern genealogical research shows the Smith ancestry traced back through English and other European stock, including English kings, as far back as Charlemagne. Joseph Smith's ancestry, like many others in the Church, was bound to include lines of gentile as well as Israelite stock. I know of no reputable genealogist who would claim that all of Joseph Smith's ancestors were strictly Ephraimites.

Third, the argument cannot be proved that "and in that day there shall be a root of Jesse" refers to the millennial era. Using similar logic, one might claim that the words in verse 11, referring to the gathering of Israel, also refer to the millennium, because they say, "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people...." But the Lord began to "recover the remnant" in Joseph Smith's own day; the words do not refer to the millennium alone.

If one examines the phrase "and in that day" in Isaiah 11:10-11 and 12:1, 4 (chapter 12 is in the context), he will perceive that Isaiah was speaking of a whole era that would last from Joseph Smith's day (the gathering of Israel in Isaiah 11:11) until the Lord was actually in the midst of his redeemed Israel during the millennium. (Note: "Great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee." [Isa. 12: 6.]

Isn't it more reasonable to believe that when Moroni

appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith, he would explain that he (Joseph) was the "rod" (Isa. 11:1) whom Isaiah saw "on whom there is laid much power" (D&C 113:4)— indeed, that he was the "root of Jesse" (Isa. 11:10) unto whom "rightly belongs the priesthood, and the keys of the kingdom, for an ensign, and for the gathering of my people in the last days"? (D&C 113:6.) Moroni would explain to Joseph the great role he was destined to play in the era of gospel restoration as a "servant in the hands of Christ" as seen by Isaiah.

There is still another problem in connection with the "root of Jesse" in Isaiah 11:10. In Romans 15:12 the Apostle Paul expressly quotes this passage from Isaiah and seems to imply—as many theologians believe—that Christ is the "root of Jesse." (See Rev. 5:5; 22:16.) If so, it would then appear that Paul contradicts the revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants that, as we have already seen, explains that the "root of Jesse" is "a descendant of Jesse, as well as of Joseph, unto whom rightly belongs the priesthood, and the keys of the kingdom, for an ensign, and for the gathering of my people in the last days." The Lord, speaking through the Prophet, does not really identify the "root of Jesse" as Christ; otherwise he would have said so, as he did regarding the "stem of Jesse" of Isaiah 11:1. (See D&C 113:3, 4.) So we are confronted with a dilemma: Does Paul really identify the "root of Jesse" as Christ, thus contradicting the Doctrine and Covenants, or is there some other explanation?

It is well known to New Testament scholars that Paul often quotes texts with little regard for the original context, as one may see in Romans 9:11, and more especially Hos. 2:23 and 1:10, as cited in Romans 9:25-26. Scholars even question to some degree Paul's interpretations of the texts he quotes in Romans 15:9-12, which is of present interest to us. It appears that the great Apostle to the Gentiles equates the "root of Jesse" (Isa. 11:10) with the

Christ in Romans 15:12. This means that his interpretation of the "root of Jesse" is at odds with that in D&C 113:6. But a reasonable explanation can be found.

A careful examination of the Greek text of Romans 15:12 demonstrates that Paul is closely following the Septuagint (LXX, Greek trans.) text of Isaiah 11:10 rather than the Hebrew. As a matter of fact, the LXX version is only a paraphrase of the original Hebrew. Moreover, it is to be noticed that the Greek version of Isaiah 11:1 translates the Hebrew text, "stem of Jesse," as the "root of Jesse" and uses the same phrase in Isaiah 11:10. The Greek word *riza* (root) is used in both verses to translate different Hebrew words. It would not be difficult for Paul to discern that the "root of Jesse" of the LXX text of Isaiah 11:1-5 was the Christ. And when he noticed that the phrase "root of Jesse" was used again in verse 10, he would naturally assume that it, too, had reference to the Christ. There is also a possibility that Paul may never have studied the original Hebrew text of Isaiah 11:1 and 10 sufficiently to determine by the power of the Spirit all of the facts made known about them to Joseph Smith. At any rate, Romans 15:12 does not reveal such knowledge.