Joseph Smith and the Millenarian Time Table

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"Of that day and hour knoweth no man" (Mt. 24:36), though claims to date the millennial coming are no historical rarity. In the past year newspapers carried stories of more than one group which separated itself to await the appointed day. Failures become miscalculation or misdefinition to persistent believers—and illusion to others. Joseph Smith joins the ranks of discredited visionaries in current publications reaching various intellectual levels. But the image is not a true one. Corrective historical analysis is not only in order, but also a word to those accustomed to dismiss him under the rubric of millennialism. A recent article of widely influential Protestant distribution does essentially this: "Like leaders of other groups in the early nineteenth century, Smith believed that Christ's coming was imminent, 'even 56 years should wind up the scene.' "[1]

This statement of Joseph Smith, made on the occasion of choosing the Twelve on February 14, 1835, has been given more direct treatment. Most elaborate is a curious exposé, Harrison's *Mormons Are Peculiar People*,[2] in which no less than fifty-seven false prophecies of Joseph Smith are formally listed. With minor exceptions this parade of instances is a redundant application of three techniques: making ultimate promises immediate, precluding human agency by affixing total responsibility on the author of the revelations, and giving relative statements of time absolute value. The last method well

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[1]Wesley P. Walters, "Mormonism," *Christianity Today,* V, No. 6 (December 19, 1960), 9. The prediction appears in Joseph's Smith's *Documentary History of the Church* (hereafter D.H.C.) II, 182. Full title of the current edition, cited herein, is *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (2d ed.; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1946-50).

[2]G. T. Harrison, *Mormons Are Peculiar People* (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1954).

matches the lack of sophistication claimed by the author for Mormons. Promises that "the hour is nigh" and "I come quickly" are now discredited in Harrison's perspective of history, despite Joseph Smith's express words that millenial events "are now nigh at hand"—"speaking after the manner of the Lord."[3] Distortion is carried further; in spite of citation of correct explanatory sources, "even fifty-six years should wind up the scene" becomes number seven in the list of "false prophecies": "According to Joseph Smith, Christ's second coming should have taken place no later than February 14, 1891."[4]

General Context

"Even fifty-six years should wind up the scene" is unequivocal in time; the question is quality. That is, clearly here is an estimated time of arrival—but did Joseph Smith intend it as human opinion or divine revelation? He had room in his philosophy for both, and a by-product of treating the issue is an important insight into his theory of revelation. The Mormon founder, as should be known, was unwilling to glorify every utterance—even serious ones—with the label of divine direction. He avoided cheapening revelation by too extensive an application. Those about him very well knew that he did not take himself this seriously; the visitor typically had to be corrected: It caused offense to have a sight-seer remark upon introduction that Smith "was nothing but a man, indicating by this expression, that he had supposed that a person to whom the Lord should see fit to reveal His will, must be something more than a man."[5] Converts arriving at Nauvoo were not indoctrinated with infallibility; "I told them I was but a man, and they must not expect me to be perfect . . . ."[6] And Joseph

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[3]*Doctrine and Covenants* 63:53 (hereafter D. & C.). Those who think Mormons ignorantly literal in reading their own millennial writings should see D. & C. 64:23—"Behold, now it is called today until the coming of the Son of Man . . ."—and an apostle's conclusion from it: "I know when he will come. He will come *tomorrow.*" Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation,* ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), III, 1.

[4]Harrison, *op. cit.,* p. 114. Materials in which Joseph Smith explains himself become "False Prophecy Number 56" (D.H.C. V, 336, cited Harrison, 166) and "Foul Ball Number 2" (D.H.C. VI, 254 cited Harrison, 169).

[5]D.H.C. II, 302.

[6]D.H.C. V, 181.

Smith records a private conversation "with a brother and sister from Michigan, who thought that 'a prophet is always a prophet'; but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such."[7] Both elements were summarized in a near valedictory to the saints: "I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught."[8]

For the observation that "even fifty-six years should wind up the scene," there is abundant and consistent evidence to determine whether Joseph Smith considered the statement guesswork or revelation. First, the Biblical mandate for agnosticism on exact time was reiterated and reinforced in his revelations and speeches: In 1831, four years before the prediction in question: ". . . the day or the hour no man knoweth . . ."; ". . . ye know neither the day nor the hour." The same year, to missionaries to the "United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing" (Shakers): ". . . the hour and the day no man knoweth, neither the angels in heaven, nor shall they know until he comes."[9] In 1839 (regarding millennial judgments): "I know not how soon these things will take place . . ."[10] Joseph Smith was not simply agnostic on the precise moment within a definite time scheme, but admitted lack of knowledge to formulate any date with assurance. Not only do the foregoing disclaimers mean "I don't know how soon"—but also "I don't know how far away" is the Second Coming. The Prophet reiterated through revelation before 1835 that the date of the millenium was unobtainable. Therefore, one would have to show that his "fifty-six year" statement was intended as a revelation revoking former ones in order to classify it as more than a public speculation.

The second reason that the 1835 remark is merely opinion appears in Joseph Smith's critique of the Adventist William Miller, who had calculated the time of Christ's return as 1843. Miller's errors were two. As just discussed, setting any time exceeded human ability:

> Jesus Christ never did reveal to any man the precise

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[7]D.H.C. V, 265.
[8]D.H.C. VI, 366.
[9]Respectively, D. & C. 39:21, 133:11, 49:7.
[10]D.H.C. III, 391.

> time that he would come. Go and read the Scriptures, and you cannot find anything that specifies the exact hour He would come; and all that say so are false teachers.[11]

Second, Millerite predictions are wrong because they substitute a calendar of time for a schedule of events. The Prophet reports a lengthy discussion of the issue with a group of eastern inquirers:

> I showed them the fallacy of Mr. Miller's *data* concerning the coming of Christ and the end of the world . . . I told them the prophecies must all be fulfilled; the sun must be darkened and the moon turned into blood, and many more things take place before Christ would come.[12]

Joseph Smith actually had a historian's sense of world movements and some idea of the time it takes to bring them about. An aura of artificiality surrounded Miller's date, which ignored what had to take place on this earth before heaven could impinge upon it.[13] These events not only included divine judgments, but world events—the gathering of a great and prosperous people dedicated to the Lord,[14] the establishment of a Jewish nation,[15] and, among other things, the institution of Christian cooperation.[16] The Lord could not possibly come be-

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[11]D.H.C. VI, 254.

[12]D.H.C. V, 272. On this occasion Joseph Smith evidently suggested that the Bible could give insight to a correct millennial time, and he rationalized his date of 1890 by the Scriptures in public discourse (D.H.C. V, 336). However, the former instance really claims the need of revelation in correctly assessing Biblical predictions chronologically, a concept that seems obviously to apply to the latter case. These traces of Biblical time prediction are occasional methods of communicating millennial convictions, not sources.

[13]A more practical man is looking at the ivory tower in the following journal entry: "*Monday, April 6* [1843]—Miller's day of judgment has arrived, but it is too pleasant for false prophets." D.H.C. V, 326.

[14]D. & C. 49:24-25; for source collections of overview see Alma P. Burton, *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1956), chs. 7, 11; Daniel H. Ludlow, *Latter-day Prophets Speak* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1948), chs. 22-26.

[15]D.H.C. V, 337. This point alone is enough to explode Alice Felt Tyler's overdrawn identification of Mormons with radical millenarians: ". . . like the Millerites, the Mormons had as their chief drawing card the belief that the world was whirling to a speedy destruction in which only the Saints would be saved." *Freedom's Ferment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944), p. 95.

[16]See D.H.C. V, 499: "Christians should cease wrangling and contending with each other, and cultivate the principles of union and friendship in their midst; and they will do it before the millennium can be ushered in and Christ takes possession of His kingdom."

fore all these developments occurred, the Mormon Prophet always insisted. No event was an absolute moment in his scheme, and it is a mistake to insist that the climax, Christ's appearance, was subject to more than an estimate.

Statements of Time

"Even fifty-six years should wind up the scene" was one of Joseph Smith's free comments, and he left numerous incidental remarks on the source of the idea. In an 1842 review of religious experiences was recounted "the voice of God in the chamber of old Father Whitmer . . . and at sundry times, and in divers places through all the travels and tribulations of this Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."[17] About this time the Prophet disclosed through this means a limited but definite insight into the Second Coming:

> I was once praying very earnestly to know the time of the coming of the Son of Man, when I heard a voice repeat the following: "Joseph, my son, if thou livest until thou art eighty-five years old, thou shalt see the face of the Son of Man; therefore let this suffice, and trouble me no more on this matter." I was left thus, without being able to decide whether this coming referred to the beginning of the millennium or to some previous appearing, or whether I should die and thus see His face. I believe the coming of the Son of Man will not be any sooner than that time.[18]

Three conclusions appear in comparative analysis: 1) It is a significant coincidence that Joseph Smith would reach eighty-five on December 23, 1890, and that the 1835 statement (adding "fifty-six years") would give February 14, 1891. Both opinions obviously derive from the same line of thinking.[19] Therefore, later explanations of the premises for an estimate of 1890/1 are vital in understanding how the 1835 remark of "fifty-six years" must be taken. 2) What revelation communicated in predicting the time of the millennium is not much. The over-all frame of reference of thorough agnosticism as to specific date is preserved, in spite of the divine voice. Joseph Smith felt certain of the experience but at a loss to apply its

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[17]D. & C. 128:21.
[18]D.H.C. V, 324 (D. & C. 130:14-17).
[19]Specific mention of 1890 appears at D.H.C. V, 336.

meaning. He speculated on possible alternatives without suggesting any method for choosing among them. 3) However, one—and only one—inference from the voice he thinks valid; on any alternative the millennial coming *"will not be any sooner than that time."*

This single conclusion applies no less to the 1835 remark about "fifty-six years." All of Joseph Smith's time statements refer to the identical period as a possible date of advent. And all of his discussions that raise the issue give the close of 1890 as the *earliest* time of the Second Coming. Shortly before death the Prophet responded to the Millerite revised calculation (October 22, 1844):

> But I will take the responsibility upon myself to prophesy in the name of the Lord, that Christ will not come this year, as Father Miller has prophesied . . .; and I also prophesy, in the name of the Lord, that Christ will not come in forty years; and if God ever spoke by my mouth, He will not come in that length of time. Brethren, when you go home, write this down, that it may be remembered.[20]

As if this were not adequate, there is a third public discourse (referring again to the "voice") which concludes: "I prophesy in the name of the Lord God, and let it be written—the Son of Man will not come in the clouds of heaven till I am eighty-five years old."[21]

Reiteration of this unequivocal proclamation would better grace a footnote, were it not for persistent misunderstanding of the 1835 observation, "even fifty-six years should wind up the scene." Harrison prefers to construe the words of the Mormon founder in the face of clear explanations: "Joseph Smith . . . definitely set the time limit for Christ's return as *not later* than February 14, 1891."[22] That interpretation would be one alternative if the 1835 statement stood alone. However, Joseph Smith's "no sooner" cannot historically become Harrison's "no later." Because the opinion appears once without a complete review of its basis does not entitle a commentator to ignore restatements of the same opinion together with full qualifica-

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[20]D.H.C. VI, 254.
[21]D.H.C. V, 336.
[22]Harrison, *op. cit.*, xi, italics added; cf. 114.

tions. There is a procedural difference between history, which tries to understand its subject, and debate, where rules encourage attack on inadequate communication.

Revelation and Speculation

Joseph Smith openly prophesied that Christ would not come until the end of 1890 but confessed his data inadequate for further insight. But this prophet of the latter-days was far too involved to reserve comment altogether. However, readers should see the clear line (in this case) between his stated revelation and avowed mortal opinion. The April 2, 1843 summary is agnostic: "I was left thus, without being able to decide whether this coming referred to the beginning of the millennuim or to some previous appearing, or whether I should die and thus see His face." This version was followed in a few days by a spontaneous description less carefully expressed:

> Were I going to prophesy, I would say the end would not come in 1844, 5, or 6, or in forty years. There are those of the rising generation who shall not taste death till Christ comes.
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> I was once praying earnestly upon this subject, and a voice said unto me, "My son, if thou livest until thou art eighty-five years of age, thou shalt see the face of the Son of Man." I was left to draw my own conclusions concerning this; and I took the liberty to conclude that if I did live to that time, He would make His appearance. But I do not say whether He will make his appearance or I shall go where He is. I prophesy in the name of the Lord God, and let it be written—the Son of Man will not come in the clouds of heaven till I am eighty-five years old.[23]

Note that the term "prophesy" is reserved specifically for the single ambiguous assertion that could be made from religious experience—a coming after his eighty-fifth year. But Joseph Smith rarely answered "no comment" to questions from others or himself. In this case he went beyond his own stated revelation *"to draw my own conclusions concerning this. . . ."* However, personal reflections are expressed strongly and hesitatingly, since he could not logically infer that the voice even

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[23] D.H.C. V, 336.

related to the Second Advent. With an emotional set of millennial expectation he pressed beyond his own data to surmise, "I took the liberty to conclude that if I did live to that time, He would make His appearance." On his own facts, the "rising generation" sentence lies within the same area of personal conjecture.

Here is the final and conclusive reason why "even fifty-six years should wind up the scene" of 1835 is more accurately classed as speculation than revelation.[24] Accepting scripturally enjoined agnosticism (and rejecting a millenarian timetable), Joseph Smith claimed a single revealed insight into the millennial hour—there would be no coming until he had reached eighty-five. This alone was labelled prophecy, though on occasion he opined that the millennium would arrive soon after the end of 1890. Such latter remarks must be correctly classified as admittedly fallible inference. In spite of the strongest interpretation of the 1835 prediction, the recorded equivalent exposes doubting reconsideration right after the opinion. (". . . I took the liberty to conclude that if I did live to that time, He would make His appearance. But I do not say whether He will make his appearance or I shall go where He is."[25]) Here lies

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[24]Fawn M. Brodie sees the distinction: "And although Joseph never officially forecast the exact year of the Second Advent, he once ventured to suggest that 'even fifty-six years would wind up the scene,' " *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), p. 102. Mrs. Brodie's version of the 1835 statement substitutes "would" for "should" and fails to disclose the Prophet's agnosticism on Christ's coming. Serious errors appear in alluding to blessings given at the occasion the quoted statement was made and the following days. Joseph Smith is made author of promises of Christ's coming within a lifetime, which contradicts both the official account (D.H.C. II, 187, 189, 194) and Heber C. Kimball (cited D.H.C. II, 188). Mrs. Brodie's footnote (p. 102) also misleads in claiming wrongly that promises were deleted in subsequent D.H.C. editions, an unjustifiable exaggeration of some textual problems.

As to the "millennial spirit" she describes, without doubt the Prophet's opinion contributed to the zeal of some promises relating to the Second Coming. However, it must be faced that in form many of these are what a lawyer would call "precatory"—that is, requesting a blessing rather than promising it.

[25]D.H.C. V, 336. Since Joseph Smith had publicly expressed premonitions of early death prior to both conditional predictions (made in April, 1843), it is far from clear that he expected to live until 1890. Note that appearance in life, not reunion in event of death, is conditioned upon life to eighty-five. The third alternative, expressed in the more temperate and reflecting statement on April 2 but not repeated on April 6, is "some previous appearing," evidently of the type described by Joseph Smith at D.H.C. I, 5, 247; II, 380, 436.

the insight to his theory of revelation—the agent has exceeded his instructions with full disclosure. In historical accuracy, before one can detect a "false prophecy" in Joseph Smith, it must be shown that he intended a prophecy. In application, the outspoken founder of Mormonism scarcely left intention in doubt. What is not revelation, like *dicta* of a court, may be of value, but it is not to be confused with official decision.

Mormon Millennialism

Juxtaposition of Joseph Smith's millennial pronouncements shows that he did not seriously attempt to forecast a date. Others did, and if a man is judged by the historical company he keeps, widespread classification of Mormonism as a "cult" brings no honor to its founder. Not only is it done by responsible theologians,[26] but serious historians. The wildly emotional frontier world, on this view, produced "anti-Masonry, millennialism, spiritualism, Mormonism, and a score of fervent and often rabid causes . . . ."[27] But Mormonism is no congenial bedfellow here. Although the issue merits full discussion, comment on the millennialism sponsored by Joseph Smith can scarcely be avoided.

Richard Niebuhr sees the germ of the distinction that ought to rehabilitate Mormonism from incarceration with the cults. The life expectancy of a radical sect was not long in the ebb and flow of "the excitable atmosphere of nineteenth-century America," but the Latter-day Saints prospered: "One such group, that of the Mormons, under able leadership, was able to survive and to form a really distinct and important religious denomination."[28] In addition to its heavenly vision, it is not

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[26]*Christianity Today,* V, No. 6 (Dec. 19, 1960) is devoted to "Christianity and Modern Cults," of which Mormonism leads the list numerically; see editorial comments on the rise of "non-Christian American cults" (p. 20).

[27]Clifton E. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1960), p. 335; the statement prefaces the account on Mormonism in the chapter, "The Emergence of Religious Cults and Movements." Alice Felt Tyler, e.g., makes the same association (v. *supra* at n. 15) with great lack of insight and evidence, though she acknowledges that Joseph Smith's teaching was not "so immediate in pledge of a more glorious day as Millerism . . . ." (*op. cit.,* p. 86).

[28]H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1960), p. 160.

generally appreciated that long before the pragmatic Brigham Young, Mormonism had its feet firmly on earth.

"Basically Joseph's was not a revivalist sect. Although he followed some of the revivalist patterns, he appealed as much to reason as to emotion . . . ."[29] But men are inveterate sorters —further thinking responsibility ends with quick disposition into some ready-made slot. Mormonism, with points of contact in many directions, is particularly vulnerable to being too easily typed. Be that as it may, belief in a millennial era ought not associate Joseph Smith with intellectual and emotional excesses of millenarian contemporaries whom he criticized and declined to emulate. "The *Book of Mormon* is millennial, but it is calm in its hopes, and neither it nor the movement to which it gave rise ever suggested anything like Millerite enthusiasm."[30]

From the beginning under Joseph Smith the Latter-day Saints were millenarians with a difference. The first angelic announcement heralded "the preparatory work for the second coming of the Messiah . . . that a people might be prepared for the Millennial reign."[31] No passive, dependent waiting for a sensational outcome ever preoccupied those who accepted the message of Joseph Smith. Latter-day Saints rallied to a platform of achievement, not a millenarian timetable. "Though Mormonism, like other adventist faiths, was a millennial proclamation, a warning . . . it was also a program to deal with these eventualities."[32] Concurrent with prophecy and anticipation came a plan of preaching, gathering, building, and educating, whose spirit can be caught from the First Presidency's message in 1840 "To the Saints Scattered Abroad"; "The work which has to be accomplished in the last days is one of vast

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[29]Brodie, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

[30]Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 35.

[31]D.H.C. IV, 537.

[32]William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957), p. 19. Cf. p. 21: "While other millenarians set a time, the Mormons appointed a place."—p. 23: "What for other millenarian faiths marked the end, for the Saints was just the beginning."—and p. 25, observing that Mormon periodicals reflected "a sober and practical economics that once more distinguished the Saints from the adventists of the time . . . ."

importance, and will call into action the energy, skill, talent, and ability of the saints, so that it may roll forth . . . ."[33]

Far from being a symptom of radical emotionalism, Mormon millennialism took stock of the future but lived very much in the present. Therefore, the sociologist can discern here "a strong motive in Mormon constructive efforts"; intense millennial beliefs, in spite of usual connotations, "have been integrated into the general framework of Mormonism in such a way that they always arouse enthusiasm for preparation."[34] It is easier to see the social dimension with demonstrated excellence in co-operative endeavor than consequences in individual lives. But these were equally important and related in the scheme of the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints:

> When I contemplate the rapidity with which the great and glorious day of the coming of the Son of Man advances, when He shall come to receive His Saints unto Himself, where they shall dwell in His presence, and be crowned with glory and immortality; . . . I cry out in my heart, What manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness![35]

In Joseph Smith's program the invitation is not to dream about the date, but to labor for the event. He instilled into the Latter-day Saints the double ability to visualize a millennial reign and yet to work patiently for it. This was not later rationalization based on exploded prophecies, but the deliberate, consistent program from the outset. The Prophet disassociated himself from the easy, fanciful millenarianism of his environment. However, many contemporaries made the same erroneous classification as later polemicists and historians. For instance, an editor felt that "Joe Smith has met his match at last"

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[33]D.H.C. IV, 185: cf. the similar conference appeal of the Presidency: ". . . let every man, woman and child realize the importance of the work, and act as if success depended on his individual exertion alone . . ." (D.H.C. IV, 214).

[34]O'Dea, *op. cit.* p. 137; cf. Hyrum L. Andrus, "The Second American Revolution: Era of Preparation," *Brigham Young University Studies,* Autumn 1959-Winter 1960, 79.

[35]D.H.C. I, 442; cf. D. & C. 38:8: ". . . he that is not purified shall not abide the day."

in Cyrus Redding, who reported seeing "the sign of the Son of Man." The reply was both cutting and official. It is Joseph Smith's parting of the ways with millenarians who failed to sense the patterns and processes of history to be:

> But I shall use my right, and declare that, notwithstanding Mr. Redding may have seen a wonderful appearance in the clouds one morning about sunrise (which is nothing very uncommon in the winter season), he has not seen the sign of the Son of Man, as foretold by Jesus . . . . Therefore hear this, O earth: The Lord will not come to reign over the righteous, in this world, in 1843, nor until everything for the Bridegroom is ready.[36]

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[36]D.H.C. V, 291.