New Age, Old Revelation

Reflections on the Millennial Contexts

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First let me say something about my point of view—which I can do with a personal story. I first met Richard Bushman in 1974 when I was spending a semester in the Boston area, and in order to get area library privileges, I had a nominal affiliation with Boston University. Someone arranged a meeting for Richard and me at his impressive office. I knew him only as the author of an excellent book on Colonial America. So when we met, we did what historians do and exchanged accounts of what we were working on. I said I was working on American fundamentalism and how it was shaped by its cultural setting. He said that he was working on the origins of Mormonism. I said that was a fascinating topic, and so he asked me how I explained it. I told him I thought that Mormon teachings could be explained largely by their cultural setting since it was a very creative amalgamation of many of the current religious ideas out there in the Burned-Over District. I think I may have been a bit dismissive, but he received that very genially. As he continued, though, he began to drop into his account little phrases like "we believe" regarding some things that he thought could not easily be explained. Then the truth began to dawn on me. He *is* a Mormon! The conversation went smoothly after that, and I think we even talked about what it is like as a believer to do the history of one's own tradition.

But our difference in outlooks has always struck me as one of the best examples of the role point of view plays in doing history—and that has been confirmed by his wonderful books on Joseph Smith. His Joseph Smith, no matter how judiciously presented, and my Joseph Smith are very different characters. His Smith is active and creative in

some respects and has some flaws, but he is most essentially obedient and passive, waiting to receive revelations from God before he makes any big claims. My Joseph Smith is a creative genius, a bit of a rogue, a charismatic leader, and an opportunist. Richard's question is, How was God using this admittedly imperfect man for such great things in those turbulent times? My first question is, How did he get away with it? And my larger historical questions have to do with how his outlooks both reflected and spoke to the religious and cultural concerns of the times.

So I realize well that what I have to say today on the millennial contexts of the times does not prove anything one way or another as to where Joseph got his ideas. It may be the contexts just suggest that God suited the revelations to the times and that helps account for the remarkable Mormon successes. In other words, this same contextual material can easily fit into a believer's framework, even though that differs very much from my own framework.

What I am here offering are some reflections on the millennial contexts that shaped various American religious views at the time of Joseph's revelations. The most widespread and influential of these views were postmillennial—teachings that the world would get progressively better as the preaching of the gospel spread through missions throughout the world and that human history would culminate in a millennial golden age *after* which Jesus would personally return. But there were also some mainstream Protestant and other premillennial views that held that—as in Mormon teaching—Jesus would personally return to set up his millennial kingdom. Joseph Smith and all the other early Mormon leaders would have been familiar with both of these views. In fact, in the United States during the early Republic, millennial views were probably more prominent than at any other time during the nation's history. So let me say something about the contents of these views, and I think you will see its relevance to the Mormon story.

There have been a variety of millennial views throughout the history of the Christian church. Since the early days of the church, there have been literal premillennial teachings expecting Christ's return at any minute to set up a literal millennial kingdom that will last an actual thousand years. Premillennial views have reemerged in various forms throughout the history of the church. Sometimes believers in such literalistic views have seen their own group as in the forefront of preparing the way for Christ's kingdom not only spiritually but also literally by engaging in military action against the wicked forces that had to be defeated to prepare the way. That happened, for instance, right after the Reformation among the radical Anabaptists at the city of Münster. And

more relevant as an American precedent, military action was conducted during the English Puritan Revolution of the mid-1600s, which was a precursor for the American Revolution. That unprecedented popular seventeenth-century revolution against a king and his subsequent execution set off high expectations for a new age. The most famous millennial movement was that of the Fifth Monarchy Men, whose members saw their movement as the one predicted after the fall of the four monarchies in the book of Daniel. They expected Christ's return by the year 1666, calculated according to the biblical numbers 1,000 and 666.

Just to cover the broader Christian church background, I should mention that while premillennial views have been susceptible to such literalistic expectations, what are called *amillennial* views typically see the millennium of the book of Revelation as not a literal thousand years but as symbolic of an era of the reign of Christ in the church. Augustine held to a version of this view and something like it persists today among Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and many Protestants, such as Anglican and their Methodist offshoots. Though such Christians affirm a literal return of Christ, they do not regard the Bible as containing an exact scenario of events leading to the return.

Postmillennial views have developed mainly in the modern era. In England, they too first appeared prominently at the time of the Puritan revolution, when there were high hopes for both spiritual and political progress. In the subsequent Puritan tradition, which did the most to shape outlooks in America, there were both premillennial and postmillennial views. But in the eighteenth century, postmillennial views emerged as the most common. Jonathan Edwards became one of the most prominent proponents of postmillennialism. Edwards and his disciples were immense influences in shaping the next generations of American millennial thought through the era of the American Civil War.

Edwards saw the history of redemption as being progressively realized in the Old and New Testaments and then in church history. An especially important development in that redemptive history was that Constantine brought Christianity to the Roman Empire and to Europe. Since the time of the Reformation, true Christianity was spreading through the world and into the New World. The revivals and awakenings of his own time, Edwards believed, were precursors of a new era in the accelerating spread of the gospel. The spread of the true gospel, he believed, would be accompanied by all sorts of moral improvements in the world and eventually the ending of tyrannies and oppressions. As the morality of Christian civilization continued to spread, populations would continue to grow, as they already were in the eighteenth century. Yet these advances would always

come in the face of tribulations, disasters, and setbacks as apocalyptic passages of scripture described. Satan was still on the loose and would counter every good development with a counterfeit to undermine it. The most evident work of Satan was the Church of Rome, which Edwards was sure was the Antichrist. Edwards tended to read the Bible literally and believed that, if understood in the right framework, the prophecies would be seen as being fulfilled in contemporary events. So the Reformation was the crucial modern event challenging the power of the Antichrist. Edwards expected the Roman Catholic empire to be destroyed within a century or so.

As you can see from this sketch, there was definitely a political dimension to this largely optimistic scenario. Edwards lived in a tiny Protestant corner of America where Catholicism was the dominant European power. He regarded the British nation, for all its religious faults, as having been raised by God to be the principal champion in fighting the Antichrist. Missions were one of the great concerns for postmillennialists, since the spread of the gospel to all nations was a necessary preparation for the millennial age. Edwards himself was especially concerned for the conversion of the American Indians, and he even became a missionary to them for a time. But such missions required the British armies to protect the missionaries against the French. Edwards always made a clear distinction between the church and the nation, but national powers were necessary for revivals.

Another dimension of these modern postmillennial views was that, while they were very optimistic about the progress of the gospel and of civilization in the long run, they also expected there to be many trials and tribulations in the meantime. Satan would counter every step of this progress. Every true revival would be met with a counterfeit one. There would be wars, rumors of wars, and natural disasters. So the postmillennial view involved both reading the signs of the progress of God's great work of redemption and reading the negative apocalyptic signs of the times. Edwards believed that at the end of this period of both spiritual progress and conflict the millennium would begin as the last great age in world history. He thought (based on Bishop Usher's chronology that dated the creation at around 4000 BC) that the millennial age might begin around the year 2000 and last for a literal thousand years. That last great age of human history would involve the virtually universal spread of true religion together with all its moral benefits. Since the human population would expand exponentially during that thousand years, most of the people who would ever have lived would have been saved. At the end of the millennium, Christ would return in judgment and institute the "new heaven" and the "new earth" (see Rev. 21:1).

Whatever the exact details, it is easy to see that such optimistic and progressive views fit with the prevailing American mentality that emerged after the American Revolution. Like the British in the era of the English Civil War, Americans saw their nation as playing a leading role in introducing a new era of history (except that this time the new regime lasted). During the revolution itself, patriotic American preachers often invoked millennial imagery in support of the American cause. In their rhetoric at least, they often blurred the line between church and nation. Americans were fighting for "the *sacred* cause of liberty." And the British Empire, since it had become a source of oppression, could even be identified with the Antichrist.[1] (In fact, the chief ally of the United States was France, a Roman Catholic power—but who ever said that humans' political views were logical?)

And even though most Americans did not hold these specifically biblicist millennial views, the whole national enterprise took on a sacred aura, whatever the specific religious belief of various Americans. All sorts of religious-like symbols and ceremonies emerged with the new nation. The clearest example of the millennial dimension of these is in the great seal of the United States, designed in 1782, which you can find on the back of your dollar bills. The seal, although theistic, is not Christian but rather Masonic in symbolism. In any case, the motto suggests a secular millennium—"novus ordo seclorum," a new order for the ages.

During the next generations, many Americans in the New Republic were caught up in this cultural optimism that involved most every sort of religious and nationalistic theme. Some made clear distinctions between the church and the nation, but others tended to conflate the two in varying degrees.

Nathan Hatch, in his account of what he calls "The Democratization of American Religion" in this era, remarks that "judging by the number of sermons, books and pamphlets that addressed prophetic themes, the first generation of United States citizens may have lived in the shadow of Christ's second coming more intensely than any generation since." Hatch highlights the views of the radical Baptist New England evangelist of the era, Elias Smith. Though a Baptist, Smith did not mind mixing the church with politics. Many of his more respectable Federalist and Congregationalist New England counterparts thought that Thomas Jefferson was anti-Christian and so not fit for the presidency. Smith disagreed. After

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1. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977).

Jefferson's second election in 1804, Smith, while acknowledging that Jefferson had his faults, believed that God had raised him up like Cyrus "to dry up the Euphrates of mystery Babylon." In Smith's view, the foundations for Christ's millennial kingdom had been laid in the American and French revolutions, which were leading to the bringing down of false human monarchies. "The time will come," Smith proclaimed, "when there will not be a *crowned head* on earth."[2]

Another of the most radical evangelists of the day, Methodist Lorenzo Dow, also mixed the political and the evangelical. In England, Dow had refused ordination because it involved an oath of loyalty to the king. But in the New World, he saw what God was doing in the last days. Earlier Americans had speculated that God had kept the New World hidden from Christendom until after the Reformation so that a new work might begin in this hemisphere. And Jonathan Edwards, for instance, had at one point suggested that America might play a leading role in the awakenings and accompanying events leading to the millennium. Dow, writing in 1812, carried that idea further and related it to the political developments of the American Revolution in an exposition of "The Dawn of Liberty." It was, said Dow, "as if the Creator's wisdom and goodness had a 'NEW WORLD' in reversion for a new theatre for the exhibition of new things." While the Old World suffered from "the galling yoke of Tyranny and priest-craft," America opened the prospects for new beginnings, a land of liberty that would open a new chapter in salvation history.[3]

Other evangelists saw the turmoil and political upheavals of Europe as specific signs of the approaching millennial age. In 1809, Thomas Campbell, in the first manifesto of the Disciples movement, declared that these were the signs of the time of the approaching millennial age, as "these awful convulsions and revolutions . . . have dashed and are dashing the nations like a potter's vessel."[4]

Postmillennial expectations also became one of the most prominent parts of the Disciples movement. Alexander Campbell titled his magazine *The Millennial Harbinger.* Campbell hoped to counter the division of the churches by returning to the primitive practices of the New Testament church and thus establishing the one simple "Church of Christ." He referred to his movement for church reformation as "a declaration of

2. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 185, emphasis in original.

3. Hatch, *Democratization*, 185–6.

4. Hatch, *Democratization*, 185.

independence of the kingdom of Jesus."[5] The liberated Church of Christ would lead to the spread of the gospel and eventually to "THE MILLENNIUM, which will be the consummation of that ultimate amelioration of society proposed in the Christian Scriptures."[6]

Such views were not simply those of radical new populist movements or simply the preserve of religious outsiders. Many of the elite leaders of American Protestantism of Joseph's day taught such views. For instance, these views were common among the New School Presbyterians, who were allied with the New England Congregationalists and instrumental in settling, evangelizing, and educating the expanding northern tiers of the nation, of which western New York State was an important first stop for settlers when Joseph Smith was growing up.

Lyman Beecher (the father of the famous Beecher clan), for instance, probably did as much as anyone to shape the Presbyterianism of what is now the upper Midwest. Beecher was typical of some of the most culturally influential religious leaders, educators, and social reformers of the era. Among the forces driving his evangelistic and moral reform efforts were his millennial expectations—pretty much in the tradition of Jonathan Edwards. So Beecher declared in 1812, in a characteristic statement, "If we endure a little longer, the resources of the millennial day will come to our aid." He read the political signs of his days, particularly the convulsions in Napoleonic Europe as a sign that "the day of his vengeance is wasting the earth. The last vial of wrath of God is running out." And then he concluded on a positive note, "The angel having the everlasting Gospel to preach to men has begun his flight: and . . . is calling to the nations to look unto Jesus and be saved."[7]

So the evangelistic and political outlooks of the day were thoroughly mixed together. This was also the era of the founding of major evangelical missionary movements. The bringing down of monarchs and tyrants around the world was seen as clearing the way for the dramatic spread of the gospel, and both were signs that the millennial days were near. The United States was in the forefront of these developments. Social reforms such as Sabbath legislation, temperance, and antislavery were also typically presented as evidences of the approaching millennial days.

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5. Hatch, *Democratization*, 186.

6. As quoted in Jon R. Stone, "Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Millennialisms," in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism,* ed. Catherine Wessinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 498. Details on any of the millennial views mentioned in this article may be found, among other places, in this volume.

7. George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), 186–87.

Timothy L. Smith observed long ago in his classic study, *Revivalism and Social Reform,* "that clergymen identified the popular belief in America's mission with the Christian hope."[8]

Also, in this era, among the mainstream Protestant groups, such as the Presbyterians, a minority held premillennial views. These groups differed from their postmillennial coreligionists, mainly concerning the timing of Christ's return, but they did not differ much in expecting cultural progress and the spread of missions, as well as tribulations, as signs of the end times.[9]

Evangelical identifications of Christ's kingdom with social and political advances were largely a northern phenomenon and varied, of course, according to political affiliations. Perhaps the best evidence that millennial motifs had become simply part of a common cultural heritage is seen in the North in the Civil War era. Ardent abolitionists saw the ending of slavery as one of the most important precursors of the millennium that they should be working for. And perhaps the best-known example of how easily the millennial could be mixed with the national and the militaristic is found in "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Even Julia Ward Howe in Unitarian Boston could have a number-one hit by invoking the violent imagery of the book of Revelation to glorify the advances of the Union Army.

In order to complete my account of the ongoing millennial contexts, I need to include what has become since the early twentieth century by far the most common type of premillennialism that one will find among American Evangelicals and fundamentalists. This view is called "dispensational premillennialism," which became the dominant view among biblicist Evangelicals after the Civil War era. I think these views reached their peak of popularity in the later twentieth century with hugely best-selling books like Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. The twentieth-century popularity of these views highlights, by way of contrast, the early nineteenth-century story, since dispensational views are culturally pessimistic and arise among biblicist Evangelicals when it appears that the world is not becoming better but increasingly secular and immoral.

And directly relevant to our topic is that, even though dispensational premillennialism did not catch on widely until the late nineteenth century, it was first developed in Ireland by a close contemporary of Joseph Smith, John Nelson Darby (b. 1800). Darby was one of the founders in the

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8. Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon, 1957), 236.

9. Marsden, *Evangelical Mind,* 190–98.

late 1820s of the Plymouth Brethren movement, another group hoping to get beyond denominations by returning to the pure practices of the New Testament church. Without going into detail, this view holds that during this present dispensation of the church age, the world—and the churches themselves—are not getting better, but worse (one might compare it to Latter-day Saint views on the "general apostasy"). In this setting, God is saving a faithful remnant. For dispensationalism, it is urgent to preach the gospel, which must be at least heard by every nation. But things will continue to get worse and worse until a series of dramatic events will occur, beginning with the return of Christ in Jerusalem. In the meantime, one of the signs of the times will have been the return of the Jews to Jerusalem.

These culturally pessimistic premillennialists always emphasize that the events leading to the return of Christ are likely to come in the next few years of their own time. In that sense, they bear a resemblance to the most radical of the premillennial views to develop in Joseph's day, William Miller's prediction of the literal return of Jesus in 1843, leading his followers to sell their worldly goods and go to the mountaintops. But unlike them, contemporary premillennialist almost always hedge their bets, buying insurance and planning for the long-term even while predicting the end at any moment.

So how does this all relate specifically to Joseph's First Vision and to Mormonism? It is easy to relate it to the First Vision since that is the first occasion when Joseph realized that he was the prophet to whom the true details of a new dispensation for the church and the true "new order of the ages" were to be revealed.

But as to specific resemblances of Mormon teachings to these other millennial views, I am not expert enough in the Mormon views, and so I can only report on what some others have said. I think the most important observation related to this contextual material I have been describing is this: strictly speaking, the Mormon view of the millennium is clearly premillennial—Jesus will personally return to earth to set up a millennial kingdom. But as Jon R. Stone observed, drawing largely on Klaus Hansen, I think, even during Joseph's lifetime the views progressed as Mormonism evolved from being a tiny sect to a large and growing community with substantial political concerns and aspirations. That degree of optimism can be seen most sharply if one sets Joseph's views, as is often done, against the contemporary views of William Miller. Joseph's views, though still premillennial, had evolved into a "kingdom-building" that Stone suggests is "quasi-postmillennial."[10] In that sense, Mormon views bear a resemblance

10. Stone, "Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Millennialisms," 499.

to some mainstream evangelical Protestant views of the era, such as the Presbyterian premillennialists, who were also culturally optimistic kingdom builders. The kingdom in both cases would have social and political as well as ecclesiastical dimensions. But kingdom building for the Latter-day Saints also differed from that of their contemporaries. For one, they were not building Christ's kingdom in America on existing foundations. Rather, they were to lay the foundations of a unique new church and kingdom in a specific American place. Another big difference was that this new ecclesiastical order, based on direct revelations, would be far more authoritative than was found in the many conflicting views of Protestantism.

Mormons read apocalyptic signs of the times in earthquakes, famines, wars, and disasters, much as did other millennialists of the time, both premillennialists and postmillennialists. But like some of the most confident evangelical millennialists of their day, Mormons were tremendously optimistic, even in the short run. They were especially optimistic regarding the spread of the gospel to every nation. According to Joseph's revelation concerning the "Stakes of Zion," the center stake might be in Jackson County, Missouri, but the supporting stakes would spread so that the kingdom would cover North and South America and eventually the world.[11]

I am sure that most readers are much better than I am at seeing the parallels with the optimistic millennialist Protestantism of the era and also in pointing out the differences. As I said, the number of parallels neither proves nor disproves the legitimacy of the Mormon revelations. Some may see the resemblances as helping to explain where Mormon doctrines came from. But those who see those doctrines as divine revelations can just as easily say that parallels simply demonstrate how well the revelations were suited to answering the questions raised by the cultural settings and by the religious longings of the day.

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11. Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 9–10.