

“Saved or Damned”: Tracing a Persistent Protestantism in Early Mormon Thought

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In the July 1838 issue of the *Elders' Journal*, Joseph Smith responded to a series of questions which he said were “daily and hourly asked by all classes of people.” To the question “Will every body be damned but Mormons?” he replied, “Yes, and a great portion of them, unless they repent and work righteousness.”¹ For years, I have assumed, along with others, that Joseph’s response was rather tongue-in-cheek. Actually, as we shall see, he was very much in earnest and was simply reflecting a sentiment widely held among the early Saints. Benjamin Winchester, for example, reasoned that as “Mormonism” was the restoration of the New Testament Christianity “all who reject this will be damned, if the scriptures are true.”² Such categorical statements were indeed rooted in the scriptures, particularly passages like Mark 16:16: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall damned.”³ One finds this verse frequently and unequivocally invoked in the early literature. In an article entitled “Gospel I,” Sidney Rigdon wrote:

And unless God had sent the apostles, or others authorized as they were, the world must have perished: every creature in it must have been damned: for they were to go into all the world, and preach the gospel to *every* creature, he (that is, *every* creature) that believed and was baptized, should be saved; but he (that is, every creature) that believed not, should be damned. Had there been one creature in *all* the world who was in a state of salvation, or could have *attained* that state without the apostles, this commission would not have been correct, that is, that every creature in all

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¹*Elders' Journal of the Church of Latter Day Saints* 1 (July 1838): 42.

²*Times and Seasons* 1 (November 1839): 10.

³Similarly worded declarations are found in three revelations received during the 1830s. Throughout this article the following abbreviations will be used: D&C for Doctrine and Covenants (current edition); BC for the Book of Commandments; and D&C (1835) for the Doctrine and Covenants (1835 edition). This is also the order in which they will appear in the notes. If the revelatory text was published in an early Church periodical, it will be noted at the end. Those passages similar to Mark 16:16 are (1) D&C 68:9; D&C (1835):148; *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (October 1832): [35]; (2) D&C 84:74; D&C (1835):92; and (3) D&C 112:29.

the world who did not believe them and be baptized by their direction should be damned.⁴

But what of the honest and honorable of other churches? A *Times and Seasons* editorial answered bluntly that it did not matter “how often a man prayed, how much alms he gave, how often he fasted, or how punctual he was in paying his tithes, if he believed not, he would be damned.”⁵ Such “either/or” thinking did not belong to some fanatic fringe; it permeated the membership from the Prophet on down. In a Nauvoo address Joseph referred to “the various professors of religion who do not believe in revelation & the oracles of God” and said, “I tell you in the name of Jesus Christ they will be damned & when you get into the eternal world you will find it to be so they cannot escape the damnation of hell.”⁶ A week later, he singled out the Presbyterians as an example and declared, “If they reject our voice they shall be damnded.”⁷

That the Saints did not balk at laying out the consequences of rejecting the message of the restored gospel is also evident from the frequency with which anti-Mormons and other observers commented on this very point, an emphasis they found suffocatingly exclusivistic. La Roy Sunderland, an active abolitionist minister who wrote one of the more widely circulated anti-Mormon pamphlets of the 1830s, decried Mormonism’s “monstrous cruelty” in “pretending to send all to hell who do not believe it.”⁸ In *Truth Vindicated*, Parley P. Pratt replied:

Every dispensation that God ever sent, is equally cruel in this respect; for God sends all to hell who reject any thing that he sends to save those that believe. And I add, if Methodism be true, God will send every man to hell who rejects it. And a man must be very inconsistent, to come with a message from God, and then, tell the people that they can be saved just as well without, as with it.⁹

⁴*Evening and Morning Star* 2 (September 1834): 187. Emphasis in original. This article was later reprinted in the *Times and Seasons* (see *Times and Seasons* 2 [November 1840]: 197). Other examples in the early literature of how this verse was used include *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1 (June 1835): 131, 135; 1 (July 1835): 151; 2 (March 1836): 283–84. Of the sixty most frequently cited scriptural passages in LDS periodical literature between 1832 and 1838, only two were quoted more often than Mark 16:16 (see Gordon Irving, “The Mormons and the Bible in the 1830s,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 13 [Summer 1973]: 481).

⁵*Times and Seasons* 4 (February 1843): 106.

⁶This excerpt from the Wilford Woodruff Journal is reproduced in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 156.

⁷Ehat and Cook, eds., *Words of Joseph Smith*, 162.

⁸La Roy Sunderland, *Mormonism Exposed and Refuted* (New York: Piercy and Reed, 1838), as cited in Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled: Zion’s Watchman unmasked, and its editor, Mr. L. R. Sunderland, exposed: Truth Vindicated: The devil mad, and priestcraft in danger!* (New York: O. Pratt and O. Fordham, 1838), 25.

⁹*Ibid.*

For modern Latter-day Saints accustomed to extolling the vision of the three degrees of glory as the antidote to the confining polarities of Protestant conceptions of the afterlife, the idea that early Mormons spoke almost entirely in terms of either being saved in the celestial kingdom or else being damned, rather than discussing terrestrial or telestial salvation, seems foreign indeed.¹⁰ Yet it is the purpose of this article to trace within Mormon thought the persisting lineaments of traditional salvationist rhetoric and to demonstrate that the vision of the three degrees of glory did not begin to alter such notions until the end of the Nauvoo period.

We begin with a word about background. After surveying the religious landscape in America in 1844, the eminent German churchman Philip Schaff remarked that "the reigning theology of the country . . . is the theology of the Westminster Confession."¹¹ The Westminster Confession, a creedal delineation of faith formulated two hundred years earlier by Reformed divines from both England and Scotland, had announced that, upon death, the souls of the "righteous" are received in heaven while the "wicked" are cast into hell. "Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies,"

¹⁰The terms *salvation* and *damnation* and their cognates present semantic problems which should be addressed briefly at the outset. "Just as there are varying degrees and kinds of salvation," writes Bruce R. McConkie, "so there are degrees and kinds of damnation." He distinguishes four usages of the term *damnation*: "1. Those who are thrust down to hell to await the day of the *resurrection of damnation*; 2. Those who fail to gain an inheritance in the celestial kingdom or kingdom of God; 3. Those who become sons of perdition; and 4. Those who fail to gain exaltation in the highest heaven within the celestial world, even though they do gain a celestial mansion in one of the lower heavens of that world" (Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966], 176–77).

In other words, *damnation* can be said to come to anyone not exalted to the highest level of the celestial kingdom (sense 4), or to anyone not inheriting either the celestial kingdom at all (sense 2), or to anyone not inheriting either the celestial or terrestrial kingdoms (sense 1), or to anyone not inheriting either the celestial, terrestrial, or telestial kingdoms (sense 3). The range of interpretations is thus sufficiently broad that aside from "exalted" beings and "sons of perdition," it is possible to conclude that all the rest of humanity will in a sense be both "saved" and "damned." For reasons made clear in the remainder of this paper, such semantic options were not articulated in the years under study (1830–46).

Admittedly, in the strictest sense, "official" LDS doctrine is very limited in nature. That Bruce R. McConkie's ideas, however, epitomize currently acceptable doctrine is clearly revealed in the following: The Church Educational System recently completed preparation of college-level student manuals for each of the four standard works. These volumes (five in all) are organized like scriptural commentaries and contain numerous explanatory quotations. They are read and approved by the Church Correlation Committee and published under the name of the Church itself. Thus, they come as close as any literature to receiving the Church's doctrinal imprimatur. A total of 3,830 quotations from over two hundred different authors appear in these five manuals. The single most frequently cited author is Bruce R. McConkie; 543 quotations, or one in seven, are attributed to him. The next most frequently quoted is Joseph Fielding Smith with 447, followed by Joseph Smith with 345, and Spencer W. Kimball with 227. Elder McConkie's primacy is obviously due in part to the sheer volume of his writing. However, since other prolific Mormon authors, even among the General Authorities, are not cited with anywhere near the same frequency, it is clear that Elder McConkie is looked to today as the leading doctrinal exponent in the Church. At the very least, it seems safe to cite his works as representative of currently acceptable doctrinal positions.

¹¹*The Principle of Protestantism As Related to the Present State of the Church* (Chambersburg, 1845), 114, quoted in Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America*, 3d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), 8. Modern historians of religion concur. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, for example, speaks of its "enormous impact on subsequent history" and calls it "by far the most influential doctrinal symbol in American Protestant history" generally (Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2 vols. [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972; Image Books, 1975], 1:118, 177).

concluded the Confession, “the Scripture acknowledgeth none.”¹² The final chapter of the Confession dealt with the Last Judgment and explained:

The end of God’s appointing this day, is for the manifestation of the glory of his mercy in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of his justice in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing which shall come from the presence of the Lord: but the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.¹³

For centuries, the polarities of heaven and hell, election and reprobation, had informed the contours of Protestant thought. Thus, in the world into which Mormonism was born, it was customary to conceptualize man as either saint or sinner, righteous or wicked, bound for heaven or headed for hell; and this formed an important part of the cultural baggage early converts carried with them into the Church.

Significantly, such sharply contrasting categories were not explicitly contradicted either in the Book of Mormon¹⁴ or in the new revelations. One early revelation described the Last Judgment in these familiar terms: “And the righteous shall be gathered on my right hand unto eternal life; and the wicked on my left hand. . . . I will say unto them—Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.”¹⁵ On another occasion the Lord spoke of the gathering “that the wheat may be secured in the garners to possess eternal life, and be crowned with celestial glory . . . while the tares shall be bound in bundles . . . that they may be burned with unquenchable fire.”¹⁶ To portray Judgment Day outcomes only as *either* “celestial glory” *or* “unquenchable fire,” “eternal life” *or* “everlasting fire” without mentioning the intermediate glories seems

¹²Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 3:671. This is in sharp contrast to the Roman Catholic ideas of Purgatory and Limbo. Purgatory is defined as “the state, place, or condition in the next world, which will continue until the last judgment, where the souls of those who die in the state of grace, but not yet free from all imperfection, make expiation for unforgiven venial sins or for the temporal punishment due to venial and mortal sins that have already been forgiven and, by so doing, are purified before they enter heaven” (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967 ed., s.v. “Purgatory”). Limbo is “the state and place either of those souls who did not merit hell and its eternal punishments but could not enter heaven before the Redemption (the fathers’ Limbo) or of those souls who are eternally excluded from the beautiful vision because of original sin alone (the children’s Limbo)” (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967 ed., s.v. “Limbo”).

¹³Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 672.

¹⁴Some of the more obvious examples from the Book of Mormon of a polarized afterlife are 1 Ne. 15:29–36; 2 Ne. 9:11–19; and Alma 40:11–26.

¹⁵D&C 29:27–28; BC:64; D&C (1835):114; *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (September 1832): [26].

¹⁶D&C 101:65–66; D&C (1835):238.

incomplete from a modern perspective.¹⁷ Yet, with the exception of the Vision, a subject to which we will later return, the revelations of the Restoration perpetuated such traditional polarizations.

In fact, they seemed to strengthen the dichotomies by crystalizing into a single criterion the distinction between the two groups. That criterion was an individual’s response to the Mormon message. “Mine elect,” declared the Lord, “hear my voice and harden not their hearts.”¹⁸ By divine definition, the “elect” were only those who accepted the restored gospel. The same criterion was extended to the definition of “goodness.” “And there are none that doeth good except those who are ready to receive the fulness of my gospel, which I have sent forth unto this generation.”¹⁹

Conversely, the Lord defined the “wicked” just as succinctly. They were simply those “that will not hear my voice but harden their hearts.”²⁰ Even the casual observer will note that this is phrased as the exact negation of what constituted election. As if it were not already clear enough, a year later the Lord taught his Saints how to distinguish the two types of people: “Whoso cometh not unto me is under the bondage of sin. . . . And by this you may know the righteous from the wicked.”²¹ When talking theology, then, the Saints used the word *wicked* as a sort of generic term for all unbelievers whether or not they were morally bankrupt. Parley P. Pratt, for instance, defined “the wicked” as “that portion of the people who were not of the Kingdom of God.”²² On the other hand, believers were collectively described as “the righteous.” A *Times and Seasons* article explained that when a man “is adopted into the church and kingdom of God, as one of his Saints; his name is then enrolled in the book of the names of the righteous.”²³

In terms of these polarities, what was true for the one was also true for the many. Whole churches of non-Mormons were designated in various revelations as “the congregations of the wicked.”²⁴ “Babylon, literally understood,” wrote John Taylor, “is . . . the

¹⁷In the current lexicon of Mormon theology, eternal life “is the kind, status, type, and quality of life that God himself enjoys. Thus, those who gain eternal life receive exaltation” (McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 237). On the other hand, those whose destiny “is to be cast out with the devil and his angels, to inherit the same kingdom in a state where ‘their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched’ ” are defined as “sons of perdition” (McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 746). Thus, to apply these definitions to the quoted passages would seem to present only a partial picture of the results of Judgment Day.

¹⁸D&C 29:7; BC:61; D&C (1835):113; *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (September 1832): [26].

¹⁹D&C 35:12; BC:76; D&C (1835):117.

²⁰D&C 38:6; BC:80, 81; D&C (1835):118; *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (January 1833): [61].

²¹D&C 84:49–53; D&C (1835):91.

²²Parley P. Pratt, *An Answer to Mr. William Hewitt’s Tract against the Latter-day Saints* (Manchester, England: W. R. Thomas, 1840), 8.

²³*Times and Seasons* 4 (March 1843): 141.

²⁴D&C 60:8, 13; 61:30, 32–33; 62:6; 68:1; BC:143–44, 148–49; D&C (1835):148, 199–202; *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (October 1832): [35]; 1 (December 1832): [53].

Roman Catholics, Protestants, and all that have not had the keys of the kingdom.”²⁵ Entire cities were also classified collectively. After their initial failure in London, early missionaries wrote home that though it was “the boast of the Gentiles” London contained “one million five hundred thousands souls who are ripening in iniquity and preparing for the wrath of God; and like the ox going to the slaughter, know not the day of their visitation.”²⁶ Yet, as Parley P. Pratt later explained:

The people of England may repent, and never be destroyed; but if they do not repent, they will perish, in common with all nations who are unprepared for the second advent of the Messiah: For lo! the time is near—very near, when every one who does not give heed to Jesus Christ “will be destroyed from among the people.” This applies equally to England, and all other places.²⁷

Thus, this was not just Yankee arrogance, for the American cities of Boston, Albany and Cincinnati were also promised “desolation and utter abolishment” if they rejected the gospel.²⁸ Even close friends were not exempt. Edward Partridge once penned this earnest entreaty to all his former acquaintances: “O take the advice of one that wishes you well . . . humble yourselves before God and embrace the everlasting gospel before the judgments of God sweep you from the face of the earth.”²⁹

Here we pause to notice a subtlety of early Mormon thought. Given its markedly millenarian character, it tended to move ahead the traditional saved–damned reckoning of Judgment Day to a saved–destroyed outcome apparent at Christ’s coming. “In the day of the coming of the Son of Man,” declared an early revelation, “cometh an entire separation of the righteous and the wicked; and in that day will I send mine angels to pluck out the wicked and cast them into unquenchable fire.”³⁰ The first Mormons spoke often of the Second Advent as a day of judgment or vengeance, demonstrating their focus on the attendant destruction of the unbelievers as much as on the salvation of the Saints.³¹ And there was no middle ground. Only Mormons would survive the second coming of Christ. According to Sidney Rigdon, all people on the earth during this period would be Saints: “all the rest of the world will without exception be cut off.”³²

²⁵*Times and Seasons* 6 (June 1845): 939.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 2 (December 1840): 250.

²⁷Pratt, *An Answer*, 41.

²⁸D&C 84:114; 61:30–31; BC:148; D&C (1835):95, 201; *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (December 1832): [53].

²⁹*Messenger and Advocate* 1 (January 1835): 61.

³⁰D&C 63:53–54; BC:155; D&C (1835):144; *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (February 1833): [71].

³¹See, for example, *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (February 1833): [67]; 1 (January 1833): [60].

³²*Messenger and Advocate* 3 (November 1836): 403.

When in 1841 Joseph first advanced the idea that there would be “wicked” men on the earth during the Millennium, it represented an abrupt about-face from a decade’s consensus to the contrary, and it would be at least another decade before the idea really caught hold even among Church leaders.³³ To introduce the color gray to those so accustomed to black and white was not easy. Because of their apocalyptic orientation, then, early Saints spoke more often of a “temporal” judgment to be effected at Christ’s coming than they did of the far-off Final Judgment.³⁴

Such an apocalyptic scenario infused the saved–damned dichotomy with an imminence and a tangibility that provided both motivation and rationale for missionary outreach. Orson Hyde, in what is recognized as the earliest LDS missionary tract, urged: “Pray, therefore, that God may send unto you some servant of his, who is authorized from on high, to administer to you the ordinances of the gospel. Except you do this, you . . . must fall victims to the messengers of destruction, which God will soon send upon the earth.”³⁵ And in the dedicatory prayer for the Kirtland Temple, Joseph Smith petitioned the Lord thus:

And whatsoever city thy servants shall enter, and the people of that city receive not the testimony of thy servants . . . let it be upon that city according to that which thou hast spoken . . . terrible things concerning the wicked, in the last days—that thou wilt pour out thy judgments without measure.³⁶

If in the early years the phrase “voice of warning” carried very literal connotations, it must be balanced with an acknowledgment that the elders were occasionally counseled to avoid overzealousness in declaring judgments against the wicked.³⁷ As W. W. Phelps advised:

Warn in compassion without threatening the wicked with judgments which are to be poured upon the world hereafter. You have no right . . . to collect the calamities of six thousand years, and paint them upon the

³³The first time on record of Joseph’s having taught that “wicked” men would be upon the earth during the Millennium is in a 16 March 1841 sermon (see Ehat and Cook, eds., *Words of Joseph Smith*, 65). As late as 1857, Orson Hyde was still talking of all the wicked being consumed at the Second Coming (see *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. [London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1855–86], 5:355–56). On the other hand, Brigham Young clearly felt that there would be “wicked” men—unbelievers—on the earth during the Millennium (see *Journal of Discourses*, 2:316, 7:142).

³⁴See Grant Underwood, “Seminal versus Sesquicentennial: A Look at Mormon Millennialism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14 (Spring 1981): 32–44.

³⁵*Messenger and Advocate* 2 (July 1836): 346. The tract was published separately as a broadside entitled *A Prophetic Warning* (Toronto, August 1836).

³⁶D&C 109:41, 45; *Messenger and Advocate* 2 (March 1836): 279.

³⁷The relationship between millenarianism and missionary work during the early years is explored at greater length in my article, “Millenarianism and the Early Mormon Mind,” *Journal of Mormon History* 9 (1982): 41–51.

curtain of these last days to scare mankind to repentance; no; you are to preach the gospel . . . even glad tidings of great joy unto all people.³⁸

In the same dedicatory prayer, it was remarked, "O Lord, we delight not in the destruction of our fellow men; their souls are precious before thee; but thy word must be fulfilled."³⁹

It is not surprising that people weaned on the Bible and steeped in its literal interpretation would feel there were simply too many graphic passages predicting "wo" upon unbelievers to have the notion "spiritualized" or "explained away." Time and again in early Mormon periodicals and pamphlets one encounters references to Moses' prophecy that all who will not hearken to Christ will be cut off from among the people or to Paul's portrayal of a Savior descending in flaming fire to take vengeance "on them that know not God, and obey not the gospel."⁴⁰ No Bible verse, however, more effectively bolstered the saved-destroyed dichotomy than Luke 17:26: "And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man." This scripture told the Saints two things. First, the majority of mankind in their day would reject the message; and second, such people would therefore be destroyed. "Just *precisely* as it was then," wrote the editors of the *Times and Seasons*, "'so shall it be at the coming of the Son of Man.' Revelations shall precede his coming, the whole world shall ridicule them and cast them off, for so it was in the days of Noah, and the consequences were, inevitable destruction; and so it will be with this generation, the righteous only, will be saved."⁴¹ That this would leave few men to enjoy the Millennium merely accorded with their understanding of Isaiah's prophecy that "the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left."⁴² "This destruction," explained Parley P. Pratt in his *Voice of Warning*, "is to come by fire as literally as the flood in the days of Noah; and it will consume both priests and people from the earth . . . or else we must get a new edition of the

³⁸*Evening and Morning Star* 1 (July 1832): [14].

³⁹D&C 109:43-44; *Messenger and Advocate* 2 (March 1836): 279. That such comment was more than mere rhetoric is obvious from diary entries such as Orson Hyde's record for 16 September 1832: "Called on sister Laura and her husband Mr. North. They disbelieved. We took our things and left them, and tears from all eyes freely ran, and we shook the dust of our feet against them, but it was like piercing my heart; and all I can say is 'The will of the Lord be done.'" (Cited in Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* [New York: Knopf, 1979], 193.)

⁴⁰Moses' prophecy was originally recorded in Deut. 18:15-19, but the Mormons preferred Peter's version as recorded in Acts 3:22-23. Examples of their discussion of this passage can be found in *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (September 1832): [30]; 2 (June 1843): 161; and *Times and Seasons* 2 (April 1841): 359.

Paul's words are found in 2 Thes. 1:7-10. Examples of how the Mormons used this passage are *Evening and Morning Star* 2 (May 1834): 155; *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (January 1835): 56-57; and *Times and Seasons* 1 (December 1839): 26.

⁴¹*Times and Seasons* 2 (March 1841): 351.

⁴²Isa. 24:6.

Bible, leaving out the 24th of Isaiah."⁴³ For literalist Latter-day Saints, it was no more difficult to conceive of the earth being swept clean of every single non-Mormon at the Second Coming than it was to accept the fact the the Flood had destroyed all but the eight believers then in existence. As Parley P. Pratt explained to Queen Victoria, "As Noah was a survivor of a world destroyed, and himself and family the sole proprietors of the earth, so will the saints of the Most High possess the earth, and its whole dominion, and tread upon the ashes of the wicked."⁴⁴

From all that has been presented thus far, it seems clear that a saved-damned duality was deeply entrenched in early Mormon thought. But what about the vision of the three degrees of glory? Did it not immediately uproot all the old "either-or" notions? Did not the Saints quickly discard their former thinking as theologically naive when presented with this vision of a pluralized rather than a polarized afterlife? The answer is "no," and that should not come as much of a surprise to those aware of the historical development of ideas within the Church. Nonetheless, that early Mormons neither understood the implications of the vision of the three degrees of glory nor lampooned notions they still retained is significant enough to merit careful consideration.

First, a brief history. The "Vision," as it was commonly called in the early years, was received by Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in February 1832. Five months later what appears to be the earliest identifiable copy of the revelation was published in *The Evening and the Morning Star*.⁴⁵ The Vision seemed to attract some attention for the first year or two. Though a few "stumbled at it," at least one individual considered it "the greatest news that was ever published to man."⁴⁶ Some developed strange ideas about it that required reproof, but even legitimate comments were sufficiently superficial that they offered no real interpretation or elucidation of the Vision and certainly no repudiation of the traditional Christian cosmos.⁴⁷ A specific search

⁴³Parley P. Pratt, *Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People* (New York: Sanford, 1837). Unless the original wording is different, the 1881, Salt Lake edition has been used.

⁴⁴Pratt, *Truth Vindicated*, 6.

⁴⁵*Evening and Morning Star* 1 (July 1832): [10–11]. See Robert J. Woodford, "The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974).

⁴⁶For the "stumbling," see John Murdock Journal, 18, 27–29; and Orson Pratt Journal (1833–34), both in Library-Archives, Historical Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. For the "praise," see *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (July 1832): [14].

⁴⁷For an account of some who advance doctrinally unacceptable positions, see Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (reprint, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1951), 1:366. For an early but brief discussion that was apparently acceptable, see *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (June 1832): [6]; 1 (July 1832): [22] (this source is reproduced in *History of the Church*, 1:283); and *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (February 1833): [69].

of presently available periodicals, pamphlets, and tracts, as well as hundreds of unpublished diaries, journals, and letters from this time period reveals that throughout the rest of the decade and on into the early 1840s, the Vision was virtually ignored.⁴⁸ Admittedly there were numerous references to the celestial kingdom, but that term for most Mormons seems to have been just another name for the heaven Christians had always talked about, and it required no new mental framework to adopt it. *Celestial*, after all, was a common synonym for *heavenly*. Discussion, even mention, of the terrestrial and telestial glories, however, which might have hastened the demise of dualistic thinking, appears to have been almost nonexistent.⁴⁹ The only example of anything like a substantive commentary on the Vision was Joseph Smith's 1843 poetic version.⁵⁰ Perhaps the experience of reissuing the revelation as a kind of epic poem stimulated the Prophet's pondering of the overall significance of the Vision, for in the remaining sixteen months of his life he discussed in new ways the nature of hell and the torment of the damned. Furthermore, he specifically ridiculed the pervasive Protestant rhetoric that in the hereafter there were only

⁴⁸Some have felt that the absence of discussion of the vision of the three degrees of glory was by design, that due to its revolutionary nature, it was considered too advanced for those still needing milk and was therefore intentionally suppressed during the early years. Such thinking is based on the Prophet's recorded counsel to the English missionaries to "remain silent concerning the gathering, the vision, and the book of Doctrine and Covenants, until such time as the work was fully established" (*History of the Church*, 2:492). The assumption is that similar restrictions must have been in effect in the United States. There are problems, however. In the first place, there is no documentary evidence to support this extrapolation. On the contrary, there is overwhelming evidence to show that such a limitation was *not* in effect. American missionaries constantly talked of the Gathering. It was central to their millenarian message. They were also occasionally encouraged to preach the "late revelations" (*Times and Seasons* 4 [April 1843]: 175, for example). Thus two of the three doctrines restricted in Britain were openly advanced in America. Since the vision of the three degrees of glory was merely listed along with other delicate doctrines, rather than being singled out, can its absence in America be considered intentional when the other controversial concepts were freely advocated?

Furthermore, it should be remembered that even in the Prophet's proscription, provision was made for a later learning when "the work was fully established." Yet we have no evidence of anything more than passing mention of the vision of the three degrees of glory in any of the early Church headquarters, be it Kirtland, Far West, or early Nauvoo. Though in extant reports of sermons and in the early periodicals we find that the plan of salvation and the afterlife were frequent topics of discussion, they almost never included the Vision, even when written to a gathered Mormon audience accustomed to other deep doctrine.

⁴⁹One exception to this is the following from W. W. Phelps: "All men have a right to their opinions, but to adopt them for rules of faith and worship, is wrong, and may finally leave the souls of them that receive them for spiritual guides, in the telestial kingdom: For these are they who are of Paul, and of Apollos . . . but received not the gospel" (*Evening and Morning Star* 1 [February 1833]: [69]). Also interesting along this line, though from a decade later, is Joseph's poeticized version:

These are they that came out for Apollos and Paul;
For Cephas and Jesus, in all kinds of hope;
For Enoch and Moses, and Peter and John;
For Luther and Calvin, and even the Pope.

(*Times and Seasons* 4 [February 1843]: 85)

Another exception which illustrates the conceptual confusion apparent when these kingdoms were mentioned is Wilford Woodruff's record of Zebedee Coltrin's prophecy upon his head when he was ordained a seventy: "Also that I should visit COLUB [Kolob] & Preach to the spirits in Prision & that I should bring all of my friends or relatives forth from the Terrestrial Kingdom (who had died) by the Power of the Gospel" (Dean C. Jessee, ed., "The Kirtland Diary of Wilford Woodruff," *BYU Studies* 12 [Summer 1972]: 380).

⁵⁰*Times and Seasons* 4 (February 1843): 82–85.

two possible outcomes—heaven or hell.⁵¹ This represents a watershed in Mormon thought.

Until that time, if the Vision were discussed at all, it was done from within an interpretive framework that was still patently polarized. Even the Prophet himself, when describing the thinking which led to the revelation, wrote: "It appeared self-evident from what truths were left [in the Bible], that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body the term 'Heaven,' as intended for the Saints' eternal home must include more kingdoms than one."⁵² There is a subtle difference between saying that there are divisions *within* heaven and saying that there are different heavens, and the Saints had not yet shifted to the latter position. W. W. Phelps felt that the great value of the Vision lay in providing details on the various heavenly mansions.⁵³ To be sure, those mansions were distinguished as "the great, greater, [and] greatest," but conceptually they all blended into one "heaven." As Joseph Smith put it:

The glory celestial is one like the sun;
The glory terrestrial is one like the moon;
The glory telestial is one like the stars,
And all harmonize like the parts of a tune.⁵⁴

"Men are agents unto themselves," declared an early Saint, "and they can prepare for a kingdom of glory, or, for one without glory"⁵⁵—as much as if to say, though clothed in new terminology, men can prepare for heaven or for hell. Even part of the poem's final quatrain summed up the entire revelation in dualistic terms: "The secret of life is blooming in heaven, and blasting in hell."⁵⁶

Telling evidence that the Vision did not immediately force an abandonment of traditional notions of damnation and hell is manifest

⁵¹Ehat and Cook, eds., *Words of Joseph Smith*, 183, 206, 211–14, 240, 244, 319, 330–31, 335, 342–61, 367–72, 381. Of course, Joseph Smith was not the first individual to challenge traditional formulations. Mitigated conceptions of hell, eternal damnation, and divine punishment have been advanced periodically since the days of Origen and the Cappadocian Fathers (see D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964]).

⁵²*History of the Church*, 1:245. Such an idea had also occurred to earlier religionists. "The idea of different degrees of felicity in future life, as differences of reward was widely prevalent" among patristic theologians. This was also true even of some later Protestant divines. "In opposition to Rome, the influence of personal merit on the future state was denied by these theologians; but some of them, while admitting that blessedness is essentially the same for all, hold to several *degrees* of blessedness." (John McClintock and James Strong, eds., *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 10 vols. [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1867–81; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969], 3:315, 317.)

⁵³*Evening and Morning Star* 1 (July 1832): [14].

⁵⁴*Times and Seasons* 4 (February 1843): 85.

⁵⁵*Evening and Morning Star* 1 (March 1833): [77]. Or as W. W. Phelps later put it, "The vision points out the degrees of happiness and misery" so plainly that "all of the commonest understanding may learn for themselves what kingdom the Lord will give them an inheritance in" (*Messenger and Advocate* 1 [February 1835]: 66).

⁵⁶*Times and Seasons* 4 (February 1843): 85.

in the Mormon reaction to Universalism. Universalism reflected the optimism of the Age of Enlightenment from which it emerged and, as its name implies, taught that all men would ultimately be redeemed, that damnation would be done away, and that the notion of eternal torment in a lake of sulfurous fire was superstition.⁵⁷ Modern Mormons might find much that is appealing in such ideas, believing, as they do, that the vast majority of mankind will ultimately receive some degree of salvation. Early Saints, however, did not react this way. When a Universalist preacher came to Kirtland in 1835, Oliver Cowdery withstood him with the same zeal that Gideon did Nehor, a Book of Mormon “Universalist.” What incensed Oliver Cowdery was the audacity of asserting, in the face of overwhelming scriptural proof to the contrary, that there would be no damnation: “If no such principle exists as damnation, and that eternal,” Oliver exclaimed, “[God] certainly has spoken nonsense and folly.”⁵⁸

It must also be remembered that before the late Nauvoo period there was little explanatory discussion of the term *unpardonable sin*. Therefore, even if the early Saints had talked of damnation coming in its fullest sense only to “sons of perdition,” there were then no conceptual restraints limiting that category to apostate Mormons alone.⁵⁹ Again we see that circumstances and understandings in the 1830s did not require interpretations of the Vision that undermined the old saved–damned dichotomy.

As for hell itself, Joseph’s belief in its reality, and his use of traditional jargon to describe it, is conspicuous as late as his 1843 poem. Whereas in the original scriptural text of the Vision the word *hell* is found only once, the Prophet uses it six times in his poem. In terms familiar to any evangelical Protestant, he talks of the ungodly suffering “in hell-fire, and vengeance, the doom of the damn’d.” No passage, however, is more striking than this quatrain describing the fate of the sons of perdition:

⁵⁷Good introductions to Universalism are provided in George H. Williams, *American Universalism: A Bicentennial Essay* (Medford, Mass.: Universalist Historical Society, 1971); and Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982). The definitive study is now Russell E. Miller, *The Larger Hope: The First Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1770–1870* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1979).

⁵⁸*Messenger and Advocate* 1 (July 1835): 151. Lewis O. Saum has recently reminded us of the widespread antipathy to Universalism among the common man in antebellum America (see his *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America* [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980], 44–47).

⁵⁹A standard current statement on the nature of the unpardonable sin and the sons of perdition is McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 746, 816–17. Joseph began discussing these topics in depth about the same time he was also modifying his conception of hell and the afterlife, that is, during the final months of his life (see Ehat and Cook, eds., *Words of Joseph Smith*, 330, 334–35, 342, 347–48, 353–54, 360–61). It is true that in June 1833, Joseph mentioned the sons of perdition, but, as we have already noted, this was only to say that not enough was known about them or their destiny to justify discussing it (*History of the Church*, 1:366).

They are they who must go to the great lake of fire,
Which burneth with brimstone, yet never consumes,
And dwell with the devil, and angels of his,
While eternity goes and eternity comes.⁶⁰

If to later Saints a hell that is continually burning but never consumes is a mass of confusion, such was not always the case.

That the Vision is not mentioned in the earliest anti-Mormon works is further evidence that it was not initially seen as subversive to contemporary Protestant thought. Given the tenor of their writings, it is hardly conceivable that such men as Philastus Hurlbut, Origen Bachelier, or La Roy Sunderland would not have eagerly seized the chance to ridicule the Vision had they known about it and perceived its eschatological implications.⁶¹ Yet the earliest I have found mention of the doctrine is in ex-Mormon John Corrill's *A Brief History* published in 1839. Though Corrill had been a leading elder almost from the first, his comments evidence little more than a mere awareness of the revelation.⁶² Furthermore, later anti-Mormon commentators like Henry Caswall or J. B. Turner seem only to be borrowing from Corrill.⁶³ The question that follows, then, is why did all these early anti-Mormons overlook that which would later be stock-in-trade for such polemicists if the Vision's revolutionary significance were widely perceived?

Also significant is the case of former Mormon William Harris. In his exposé, he claimed that the Saints felt that their idea of heaven "shows the superiority of their system over all others" and that they "ridicule as absurd the notion generally entertained of the location and nature of heaven. As a matter of curiosity, then," William Harris continued, "... I will here insert a description of the Mormon Paradise."⁶⁴ What follows is *not* a recapitulation of the Vision, as might be expected from his lead-in, but rather an excerpt from Parley P. Pratt's *Voice of Warning* showing heaven would be material, not spiritual, and here on earth, not out in the ethereal blue.⁶⁵ This

⁶⁰*Times and Seasons* 4 (February 1843): 83.

⁶¹Doctor Philastus Hurlbut was the principal collaborator, but the book was published as Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: E. D. Howe, 1834); Origen Bachelier, *Mormonism Exposed* (New York: Published at 162 Nassau St., opposite the Park, 1838); and La Roy Sunderland, *Mormonism Exposed and Refuted* (New York: Piercy and Reed, 1838). There is neither direct mention nor allusion to the vision of the three degrees of glory in any of these works.

⁶²John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints (Commonly Called Mormons)* (St. Louis: Printed for the author, 1839), 47.

⁶³Henry Caswall, *The Prophet of the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1843), 98–99. Caswall admits dependence on Corrill (Jonathan Baldwin Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages* [New York: Platt and Peters, 1842], 243).

⁶⁴William Harris, *Mormonism Portrayed* (Warsaw, Ill.: Sharp and Gamble, 1841), 23. Harris is mentioned in the context of faithful missionary service in *Messenger and Advocate* 3 (January 1837): 446.

⁶⁵Pratt, *Voice of Warning*, 217–18.

recollection from Harris's seven years in the Church as to what the Saints actually ridiculed about contemporary notions of heaven further confirms the minimal role of the Vision in early LDS thought.⁶⁶

That which persisted, however, eventually began to break up. Just four months after the Prophet versified the Vision, he began to publicly and repeatedly denounce the heaven-hell dichotomy. Wilford Woodruff recorded this comment, for example: "Says one I believe in one hell & one heaven all are equally miserable or equally happy, but St Paul informs us of three glories & three heavens."⁶⁷ Later, Joseph reiterated, "I do not believe the methodist doctrine of sending honest men, and noble minded men to hell, along with the murderer and adulterer."⁶⁸ In the 1844 King Follett discourse we find the culmination of his latest thinking about salvation and damnation. During recent months hell had been acquiring an explicitly nonphysical dimension, and he here announced, "*I have no fear of bell fire, that doesn't exist, but the torment and disappointment of the mind of man is as exquisite as a lake burning with fire and brimstone.*"⁶⁹

If salvation or damnation still revolved around one's reaction to Mormonism, there was now a qualifier attached: "I call upon all men—priests, sinners, and all . . . [to] obey the gospel. For your

⁶⁶Harris's recollection is confirmed in the words of this early Mormon song:

The heaven of sectarians is not the heaven for me;
So doubtful its location, neither on land nor sea.
But I've a heaven on the earth—
The land and home that gave me birth,—
A heaven of light and knowledge—
O, that's the heaven for me, &c.

(*Times and Seasons* 6 [February 1845]: 799)

⁶⁷Ehat and Cook, eds., *Words of Joseph Smith*, 214.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 368.

⁶⁹For this and subsequent quotations from the King Follett address, I have used the Larson amalgamation of the various contemporary accounts (Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18 [Winter 1978]: 205).

Seven verses in the Book of Mormon directly equate "torment" with a "lake of fire and brimstone" (2 Ne. 9:16, 19, 26; 28:23; Jacob 6:10; Mosiah 3:27; and Alma 12:17). A symbolic connection, however, seems necessary only in Mosiah 3:27 and Alma 12:17, where the word *as* is used to link the two terms (for example, "Then is the time when their torments shall be *as* a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever" [Alma 12:17]). For individuals accustomed to a literal hermeneutic, the remaining passages would not have seemed unusual. In well-worn cadences, Jacob 6:10 speaks of going "away into that lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever, which lake of fire and brimstone is endless torment"; 2 Ne. 28:23 also warns of a "place" prepared for them, "even a lake of fire and brimstone, which is endless torment." It is easy enough to see how such verses with their spatial allusions would not have forced abandonment of traditional perceptions of a physical hell.

Of related interest is the textual change from the 1830 edition in 2 Ne. 9:16. Originally it read, "And they shall go away into everlasting fire, prepared for them; and their torment is a lake of fire and brimstone" (1830 ed., 80). Later the important word *as* was inserted, and today this verse and the other two mentioned above are invoked to provide scriptural justification for the metaphorical interpretation Joseph Smith began explicitly employing in the last months of his life (for example, McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 280–81). Significantly, I could find no instance in which either Joseph Smith or any other Latter-day Saint used these verses in such a fashion during the period studied (Grant Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology," *Dialogue* 17 [Autumn 1984]: 35–74).

religion won't save you, and if you do not, you will be damned, but," he added, "I do not say how long."⁷⁰ Though the concept of a terminable hell was provided for in a revelation received even before the Church was organized (D&C 19), not until Joseph led the way interpretively did others begin describing hell as a purgatory for unrepentant sinners.⁷¹ At the same time, he acknowledged that those who had committed the unpardonable sin "*must dwell in hell, worlds without end*" and that "they shall rise to that resurrection which is as the lake of fire and brimstone."⁷² Only the sons of perdition would be damned in the fullest and most traditional sense. Toward the close of his life, then, Joseph Smith began to emphasize a pluralized, rather than a polarized picture of eternity. He symbolized hell, diminished damnation's domain, and expanded salvation.

The fact that he repeatedly discussed these concepts the last months of his life did not, however, guarantee that they were instantly internalized by the Saints. This is perhaps best illustrated in the case of John Taylor. Throughout this period, John Taylor was closely associated with the Prophet both as editor of the *Times and Seasons* and, from September 1843, as a member of the Anointed Quorum, a select group who had received their temple endowments from the Prophet. John Taylor was thus well exposed not only to Joseph's public but also his private teachings. Yet, in a *Times and Seasons* editorial published less than a year after Joseph's death, John Taylor declared that "hell" is literally "in the midst of the earth, and when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed they sunk down to hell, and the water covered up the unhallowed spot. . . . No wonder we have earthquakes, hot springs and convulsions in the earth," he continued, "if the damned spirits of six thousand years . . . have gone down *into the pit*. . . . No wonder the earth groans and is in pain to be delivered as saith the prophet."⁷³

If a man as intelligent and literate as John Taylor either did not understand or ignored the Prophet, one can imagine to what degree the finer doctrinal subtleties that Joseph was introducing in the late Nauvoo period actually settled into the conscious understanding of the ordinary member. It is a truism that what one who speaks (or writes) intends to convey is not necessarily what the man who hears (or reads) understands. We simply cannot assume that once an idea was revealed

⁷⁰Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 207. Duration of postmortem punishment was an issue raised by the Universalists.

⁷¹The early revelation is D&C 19:5-12; BC:39-40; D&C (1835):174-75. The "chains of hell" are given symbolic meaning in Alma 12:9-11, but, again, the verses were not discussed in the early years (Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology," 35-74).

⁷²Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 207-8.

⁷³*Times and Seasons* 6 (February 1845): 792.

or once it was taught by the Prophet the Saints immediately assimilated it into their mental world. "Mormon thought" was the sum total of the thinking of individual Mormons rather than some creedal collectivity.⁷⁴ Thus it is difficult indeed to assert that the Prophet's ideas or even revealed ideas were "Mormon" ideas equally ascribable to leader and layman alike. As Darrett Rutman pointed out some years ago in his study of the Puritans:

The idea that filters past the preconceptions, values, and particular concerns of the imparter, travels the sound waves or light rays to the recipient, filters past the recipient's own preconceptions, values, and concerns, mixes in the melting pot that constitutes the recipient's mind with all the other notions and impressions stored there.⁷⁵

The point here is that even though Joseph opened the door for a further break with traditional Protestant views, the old saved-damned dichotomy did not die out immediately. If by the 1850s some leading Mormons grasped and elaborated on what the Prophet was saying a decade earlier, it should not be assumed that as of 1844 the entire Church shelved "sectarianisms" in favor of less Calvinistic conceptions of salvation and damnation.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, Joseph's late Nauvoo teachings did signal the beginning of the end, even if that end came gradually.

CONCLUSION

If it is true that the saved-damned dualism persisted, if indeed the Vision was not initially appreciated for its revolutionary significance, then it remains for us to consider briefly two questions: "Why?" and "So what?" In responding to the first question, we can hardly overemphasize the biblicism and literalism of the early Saints. In his study of antebellum Protestant theology, George Marsden discusses the period polarities of exegesis then known as "spiritualist" and "literalist" hermeneutics. For those who applied a strictly literal hermeneutic to the scriptures, the numerous graphic descriptions of the physical destruction of the wicked and a plethora of passages basing salvation on belief and damnation on disbelief had to be taken at

⁷⁴The anti-creedal nature of early Mormonism is discussed in Peter Crawley, "The Passage of Mormon Primitivism," *Dialogue* 13 (Winter 1980): 26-37.

⁷⁵Darrett B. Rutman, *American Puritanism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 33.

⁷⁶A shift is evident in Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855); yet the old saved-damned dichotomy persists in Lorenzo Snow's *The Only Way to Be Saved* which, though originally published in 1841, went through nineteen later English editions and over two dozen foreign language printings right up to the turn of the century.

face value. There was little interpretive leeway.⁷⁷ With early Mormons coming from such a tradition, it would have been almost inconceivable that they would immediately drop their polarized perceptions of life and afterlife because of a single revelation, especially when so many other passages in modern scripture seemed to support the age-old dualisms. As the prophets, however, led out in metaphorical and figurative interpretation of certain portions of the Word of God that had usually been interpreted literally and as they explicitly rejected certain facets of contemporary theology, the people generally began to follow suit.

Furthermore, the early Saints had different notions about latter-day revelations. Calling them "commandments" as often as they called them "revelations" evidences a subtle distinction. They utilized these messages more for their directional rather than for their doctrinal value. The excerpts most frequently cited in the periodical literature dealt with some task to be performed rather than some truth to be taught.⁷⁸

Closely related, and also helpful in explaining our findings, is the manifest millenarianism of the early Church. It was truly "a day of warning, not a day of many words." It was a day for first principles, not far-reaching theology. Even if they had been wont to discuss new and unique doctrines not central to the message of the Restoration, how much could an individual have assimilated in the brief transition from hearer to herald? For it was not uncommon that a man who heard the message of the Restoration one day would be out preaching it the next, and with good reason.⁷⁹ They felt the end was imminent. All had to be warned and that warning was to come both "by word and by flight." There simply was no time to extensively catechize prospective converts and no systematic creed with which to do it.

So what is the significance of all this? In the first place, it confirms what Brigham Young later said when reflecting on those early years: "I

⁷⁷George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1970), 182-99.

For a more comprehensive discussion of Christian hermeneutics (*hermeneutica sacra*), see Daniel P. Fuller, *Hermeneutics*, 3d ed. (Pasadena, Calif.: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974). Also valuable for perspective because of its extension into secular hermeneutics (*hermeneutica profana*) is E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1967).

⁷⁸This is not unusual in light of the fact that less than one-fifth of the canonized revelations have a purely doctrinal message. "Most of the revelations he [Joseph] received in the early part of his ministry," explained Brigham Young, "pertained to what the few around him should do in this or in that case—when and how they should perform their duties" (cited in Lydon W. Cook, *The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith* [Provo: Seventy's Mission Bookstore, 1981], xii. Cook supports the "task" orientation of the early Saints throughout his book).

⁷⁹See S. George Ellsworth, "A History of Mormon Missions in the United States and Canada, 1830-1860" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1951), 38-39.

never could believe like the mass of the Christian world around me; but I did not know how nigh I believed, as they did. I found, however, that I was so nigh, I could shake hands with them any time I wished.”⁸⁰ Aside from the core concepts of the message of the Restoration, the early Saints *do* seem handshakingly close to contemporary Christianity. Realizing their proximity to Protestantism also helps explain why some anti-Mormons could charge that the elders “dwell upon the common topics of Christianity” or that “they preach the doctrines they held in other churches, slightly modified by some of their new notions.”⁸¹ Even Joseph Smith himself admitted, “It is often the case that young members in this church, for want of better information, carry along with them their old notions of things and sometimes fall into eggregious errors.”⁸²

More importantly, however, is that we are a step closer to what LDS church historian James B. Allen called for when he said, “Only recently have Mormon historians begun to study in detail the historical development of ideas within the Church but such a study, if complete, could provide valuable insight into why some concepts have changed from generation to generation while others have remained constant as pillars of the faith.”⁸³ Absolutely essential to a proper understanding of Mormon thought is that one recognize the “line-upon-line” principle, that is, the construct which allows for a gradual focusing and refining of doctrine based on both human capacity and divine design. From those who would hamstring us with our history, we have little to fear. The more it is studied, the more we realize the naiveté of intersecting our past at any given point in time and expecting to hold the Church accountable for the finality of all views there discovered. Indeed, to pursue Paul’s metaphor, the Church is like a body, and all bodies go through successive stages of development from infancy to adulthood. A wise and loving father does not immediately correct all his children’s mistaken notions nor attempt to teach them all truth at once. Rather, he closely monitors their development, adding, subtracting, and refining until they reach maturity. Would a perfect Father in Heaven be less wise? Continuous revelation is merely his method, the “light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” For now, however, the Saints must be content to say with Paul:

⁸⁰*Journal of Discourses*, 6:281.

⁸¹The first quotation is from John A. Clark, *Gleaning by the Way* (Philadelphia: W. J. and J. K. Simon, 1842), 347; the second is from J. B. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages*, 298.

⁸²*Times and Seasons* 3 (June 1842): 823. For a similar but earlier statement by the Prophet, see *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (September 1835): 180.

⁸³James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

(1 Cor. 13:11–12)