Terrible Revolution:
Latter-day Saints and the American Apocalypse
By Christopher James Blythe

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Reviewed by Tona Hangen

When a costume-clad man wielded a Captain Moroni "title of liberty" flag at the Capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, it was a notable reminder that revolutionary end-times ideology has a long and evocative presence in the culture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and adjacent religions. Christopher Blythe's timely and wide-ranging book explores these themes across time, geography, and even denominational boundaries. He defines apocalypticism both as a distinct Jewish-Christian scriptural literary form found in Hebrew and Christian texts and malleable perfectionist ideology embracing "catastrophic millennialism," to borrow Catherine Wessinger's coinage. In brief, apocalyptic rhetoric exhibits "the belief that society [i]s headed toward cataclysmic events that would uproot the current social order in favor of a divine order that would be established in its place" (2–4). This is a capacious enough definition that many different threads can be explored under its rubric, and indeed at times in the book it might prove daunting for readers without extensive prior understanding of Latter-day Saint history and theology to connect all the dots on their own.

Within Mormon culture broadly—and under that term Blythe enthusiastically includes the main body of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well as related schismatic, noncanonical, and fundamentalist groups—apocalyptic themes appear in reported prophecies, dreams, visions, folktales, speeches, publications, and artistic renderings, in both official and unofficial contexts. Their meaning, content, and context are not fixed and have changed dramatically over time. Blythe documents Latter-day Saint apocalypticism over four broad periods of time: in the lifetime and immediate postmartyrdom of Joseph Smith; during the Utah territorial era; at the turn of the twentieth century when Mormonism became Americanized; and over the twentieth century,

with a brief afterword addressing the 2012 "Mormon moment" during Mitt Romney's U.S. presidential campaign. As that chronology suggests, the book is weighted toward Mormonism's first century and only briefly sketches the contours of more contemporary iterations.

Drawing on extant wells of Biblical apocalypticism as understood by nineteenth-century Christian evangelicals like Millerites and others who anticipated the imminent return of Jesus Christ, beliefs of the leaders and members of the early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during Joseph Smith's lifetime echoed the prevailing culture while adding some unique elements (20). The Book of Mormon's pattern of cyclical destruction and renewal and its characterization of the American continent as a promised land peopled by divine intention fueled the young denomination's intense millennial expectation. A "strain of political messianism" arose during the Nauvoo period (39), in which "the image of Latter-day Saints salvaging the imperiled [United States] constitution became a standard component of Mormon last days prophecy" (40), culminating in establishing the Council of Fifty as a permanent "theodemocracy" on earth (45). Another uniquely Mormon twist on "redeemer nation ideas and Anglo-Saxon triumphalism" identified Mormons and Indians (23) as chosen people who were integral parts of a larger divine historical arc for the tribes of Israel and the eventual redemption of Zion (25–27).

Joseph Smith's murder raised questions about the future and fate of the movement, such as: Were these traumatic events unforeseen and therefore untimely? Or was this the Lord's will for his people, perhaps evidence of Smith's ascension to an expansive postmortal ministry? Might Smith return as a resurrected being to lead the Church again in some form? Would God now judge and curse the nation that had killed a prophet? Rhetoric steeped in vengeance abounded in the wake of the martyrdom, including folk stories about the hideous fates of those who participated in the Carthage mob (79–85). With the loss of its central visionary, "non-hierarchical . . . voices" (97) brought confusion and schism even as the main body of Mormons symbolically and rhetorically shook the dust from their feet, turned westward, and abandoned the nation to what they believed would be certain destruction. Those beliefs seemed justified during the national crucible of the Civil War, another peak era of American Protestant apocalypticism.

During the 1850s to the 1890s (a critical era in Mormon–U.S. relations), Blythe calls attention to new additions to the 1876 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants that carried "apocalyptic themes" such as the Civil War prophecy and commentaries on portions of Revelation and Isaiah (D&C 87, 77, and 113). He also notes widely circulated vision discourses—some

anonymously authored—describing plagues, urban social breakdown, and desolation on a biblical scale. Visions and dreams infused with fears of invasion, destruction, and mortal threat (in which only armed defenses, the temple, or divine intervention provided protection) marked the persecuted and nationally isolated generation prior to Utah statehood. Blythe points out that few Church leaders disavowed these folk theology explorations at the time, since they "bolstered the church's authority and strengthened the Saints' resolve to endure in the face of American oppression. Meanwhile, this separatist apocalypticism was frightening to non-Mormon Americans and won the Mormons few friends" (178). He documents a spike in Mormon millennial expectation for the Second Coming of Jesus around 1890–91, timing supposedly prophesied by Joseph Smith before his death (181–84). Around that same time, "more and more Saints recorded their recollections of the words of Mormonism's departed visionaries" (206), including Edwin Rushton putting the so-called "White Horse Prophecy" in writing supposedly from his memory of hearing it fifty years earlier—a detailed noncanonical narrative often attributed to Joseph Smith but not actually found among his verified personal writings (207–11). Only after Utah statehood in 1896 and the formation of expatriate Mormon communities in Canada and Mexico would Latter-day Saints formally begin to fuse their religion with American patriotism, downplay literal geographic gathering (whether to a reclaimed Missouri "Zion" or to the intermountain West), and scorn earlier forms of ecstatic religious performance (visions, tongues, female healing by laying on of hands). For Blythe, these developments provide evidence that "the Mormon concept of the apocalypse shifted into an institutionally regulated [cultural] space" with a markedly Americanized tone (194). Resurgences of interest in the White Horse Prophecy and other vernacular apocalyptic writings like the racist, fearmongering Horseshoe Prophecy at particular moments of American political crisis trace Mormon cultural anxieties over the state of the world and their role in its trajectory (239–42).

Blythe's final chapter catalogues a dizzying array of post-1945 books from prophecy enthusiasts with ties to Mormonism and varying levels of religious authority. These include Robert W. and Elisabeth A. Smith's *The Last Days* (1931), Bruce R. McConkie's *The Millennial Messiah* (1981), Avraham Gileadi's *The Last Days: Types and Shadows from the Bible and Book of Mormon* (1991), and excommunicated Mormon Ronald Garff's video series *Today through Armageddon* (early 1990s). The chapter's broad sweep captures elements as disparate as prophecy writings from Mormon fundamentalist sects, self-published near-death experience narratives, and chatter on the online subscription forum Another

Voice of Warning. Many more could be added to this list, such as the prolific dispensationalist writings by W. Cleon Skousen, who published under the Church's official Deseret Book imprint and with independent publisher Bookcraft from the late 1940s (for example, *Prophecy and the Modern World,* 1948) through the 1990s (including his posthumous *The Cleansing of America*), or the early 2000s end-times Mormon-themed Times of Turmoil novel series by Chad Daybell. The chapter's highly impressionistic rendering makes it difficult to compare the significance or scope of influence of these various texts and authors or to identify how much these tracked with or simply held up a Mormon mirror to wider Cold War fears and popular Christian end-times theologizing like the 1990s fiction series Left Behind. Here and there, Blythe hints at traceable connections between Latter-day Saint apocalypticism and American far-right political groups, anti-UN sentiment, prepper culture, antigovernment militia movements, white supremacy organizations, and off-the-grid separatism, yet it is often unclear precisely how these interconnections are distinctively "Mormon" in nature.

As a case study in how a new religion accommodates change and polices its ideological boundaries, *Terrible Revolutions* fascinates on multiple levels. It aspires to do for Mormonism something similar to what David Hall did for Puritans in *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (1989), exploring how ordinary people of faith make sense of their time and place and see divine signs in the events and natural phenomena unfolding around them. Blythe's decision to selectively include so many noncanonical figures in his account contributes to the ongoing larger project of both folklore studies and social history: privileging and centering marginal voices instead of church leaders and elites. Certainly, the book reveals a rich lode of apocalypticism that persists *and* changes within religious traditions that lay claim to be the restoration of all things prior to the earth's final dispensation. In so doing, it invites promising further work by scholars of religious futurism.

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