To Overcome the "Last Enemy": Early Mormon Perceptions of Death

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American society in the years prior to the Civil War was, generally speaking, "saturated" by a concern with dying. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century the specter of physical demise was, to quote a recent study of the subject, a "familiar personage in most Victorian households" and on most Victorian minds.[1] However, in contrast to the fearful vision of death dictated by the strict Calvinism of early New England, Americans of the 1800s responded to it with qualified resignation, as is manifested in the following verse, published in 1820, which combines a sense of the futility of mortal existence with the prospect of justification for having faithfully served the Lord while in the earthly probation:

> Through sorrow's might, and danger's path,
> Amid the deepening gloom
> We, soldiers of a heavenly King,
> Are marching to the tomb.[2]

Instead of the eternal agony conceived by earlier generations, these later ones, the cultural offspring of romanticism and Jacksonian enthusiasm, expected an immortality that offered a cessation of evil and an endless time of peace and harmony. David E. Stannard has noted that mid-nineteenth-century Americans, often disenchanted with their rapidly changing society, "sought a return to their lost sense of community in the graveyard and the heavenly world of the dead."[3]

Early Mormons had much in common eschatologically with their countrymen. Consistent with the basic tenets of contemporary Christianity, faithful Latter-day Saints also espoused a fervent hope in an eternal bliss. Having regularly confronted the harsh realities of life as they were persecuted, reviled, and driven from place to place, most Mormons were more than willing to place their trust in a benevolent God and optimistically looked forward to immortality. Peter L. Berger has observed that the "power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately as they walk, inevitably, toward it."[4] Devout Mormons sought, and often found, comfort and assurance in their perception of immortality. Deep faith, buoyed up by optimistic prophetic promises in regard to the next life, alleviated many death-related anxieties for pious Latter-day

Saints.[5] The afterlife forecast for valiant Saints was indeed awe-inspiring, a highly structured heaven in which mankind was rewarded in varying degrees based on worthiness displayed during the earthly sojourn.

A recent study by Mary Ann Meyers concluded that the murder of Joseph Smith in 1844 inaugurated a revision of Latter-day Saint eschatology. According to this thesis, the despondent followers of the martyred prophet recreated the community of the Saints beyond death.[6] In other words, Meyers argues that Mormon perceptions of the hereafter were drastically altered in the second half of the nineteenth century in order to compensate for the loss of the Church's beloved organizer. However, this assessment was based on a marginal amount of primary documentation from the early years of the religion and consequently overlooked the extensive development of Latter-day Saint thought on death prior to the assassination of Joseph Smith. A more thorough survey demonstrates that Mormon attitudes on this subject were formulated mainly under the tutelage of the Prophet, not as a belated response to his death.

Like their countrymen in antebellum America, the Saints displayed an abounding fascination with death. As Mormon mortality rates rose in the late 1830s and early 1840s due to the persecutions suffered in Missouri and the unhealthy conditions in Nauvoo, the literary records repeatedly refer to death and the afterlife. The newspapers, diaries, journals, and personal letters of this time, as well as the canonized writings of the Prophet recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants, provide a historical guide to the creation of a Mormon eschatology—one which was almost fully matured by 1844.

In its early stages, the philosophy of Mormonism in regard to dying and the hereafter could not be easily distinguished from the contemporary beliefs. It focused primarily on the promise of a resurrection and individual postmortal rewards for the righteous. The *Evening and the Morning Star,* an official organ for the Church, had admonished its readers in 1832, "Remember that you were born to die, and to live again."[7] Mormons were, from their earliest years, generally optimistic believers in an afterlife. As a consequence of this position, mourning was, theoretically, held to a minimum. A regular reassurance that the inevitability of death would be mitigated by the blessings of eternity helped ease anxieties.[8]

Mormon obituaries and funeral sermons customarily sought to encourage righteousness by recounting the positive traits of the deceased. This approach was common in nineteenth-century encomiums and, in fact, has remained standard fare in similar writings and orations to the present. As one eulogist noted in 1833, such accolades could not assist the dead, but nevertheless they were deemed to be justified.[9] Or, as a Mormon woman observed in her diary after having witnessed a moving funeral service, the speakers had "preached to the Living."[10] If properly directed by

obituarists and orators, the emotions evoked by the demise of a loved one or close acquaintance could be channeled into a renewed dedication to worthy pursuits.

A noteworthy example of the use of death to mold the behavior of the living was a panegyric written in remembrance of Hilah Carter, a Mormon woman who died in 1834:

> Her friends and near relatives, though deeply sensible of her personal worth and virtues, are consoled with the assurance which she left of her acceptance with God; and though they cannot but drop a tear in consequence of their loss, yet they can, with propriety cherish the pleasing reflection, that they soon will meet her in the rest prepared for the saints.[11]

Two fundamental aspects of Mormon thought about death are revealed by this obituary: first, that the bereaved would be reunited with the deceased at some future moment; and second, that the next life would be a place of rest for the righteous. Both of these features were common to basic Christianity, and by the mid-nineteenth century many Americans regarded dying as a transition to a state of blessedness for the faithful.

Though many conventional sentiments continued to characterize Mormon thinking about death, a more distinctive note gradually came in. By at least the early 1840s, Latter-day Saint eschatology had come to espouse eternal family relations as the greatest blessing of immortality. This was, however, recognized as a reward reserved for only the most valiant of God's children. Facilitated by the endowment and sealing rituals, devout Saints could by the mid-1840s look forward to the promise of unending kinship bonds.[12]

Although this concept of a heavenly family reunion was gradually emerging, Mormon thought on death during the first decade of the Church's history still centered on the expectation of an individual restful bliss in paradise. When Sally Knight died in 1834, her eulogist recalled that she had made many sacrifices and faced countless tribulations for the sake of the gospel and suggested that her stalwart devotion assured her an immortal prize. Her obituary read, in part, "She had fled to those mansions prepared in the economy of the Lord, to dwell there till she comes triumphant to receive a reward with the sanctified when peace shall crown the blessed, and the wicked shall cease from troubling."[13] When Parley P. Pratt's wife Thankful Halsey died after childbirth in 1837, the bereaved widower wrote, "My dear wife had now lived to accomplish her destiny, and when the child was dressed, and she had looked upon it and embraced it, she ceased to live in the flesh."[14] The rhetoric of this lamentation reveals two important elements about Mormon eschatology. First, Pratt readily embraced what might be called optimistic sorrow: he sincerely mourned

his wife's passing but was able to assuage his grief by assuring himself of her eternal reward. Second, he refused to even consider the possibility that they had been permanently separated, but only that she had "ceased to live *in the flesh.*"

Not all of the Saints were able to so readily accept the inevitable end to physical life as had Parley P. Pratt. Some members of the Church were stunned by the untimely death of Elder Joseph B. Brackenbury in January 1832. He was the first recorded Mormon missionary to have died while preaching the gospel. At that time it was apparently assumed that the Lord would always prolong the life of one in his service. Benjamin F. Johnson wrote of Brackenbury's death:

> To us, then young and inexperienced members of the Church, his death came as a sore trial to our faith, as well as a very great grief. To think that so good a man, in such a field of useful labor, and far from his home and family, should be permitted to die, and that too so suddenly, was naturally a test to [our] faith and integrity.[15]

Another example of faithful optimism being outweighed by the realities of the moment was evident in the recollections of Nancy Tracy. In 1836, while on a trek from Kirtland, Ohio, to western Missouri with the William Corey family, she witnessed the death of one of the Corey sons. The harsh facts of a frontier existence were noted by the chronicler when she wrote: "We were quite a long distance from a settlement, so we camped while the [men in the party] made a rude coffin for the child and buried it in the forest. Sister Corey thought this was a great trial and so it was."[16] It is very possible that this grief-stricken mother had her sorrow intensified by the crude nature of the burial, the apparent absence of any institutionalized funeral services, and the fact that the interment was not in a designated cemetery. Most mid-nineteenth-century Americans placed great significance on the deceased being laid to rest in hallowed ground.[17]

The evolution of the Mormon elegy reveals an increasingly complex eschatology as the 1830s progressed. A simple stanza published in the *Evening and Morning Star* in 1832 documented the rudimentary character of Latter-day Saint thought on death at that early date:

> The body is but chaff—
>   The soul may live in glory,
> When the Earth's epitaph
>   Is written in its ashes![18]

While hope for an afterlife obviously existed for the Saints at this time, the eventual doctrine on the subject was still largely undeveloped. In March 1835, William W. Phelps, a prominent churchman, theologian, and poet, provided additional insight on the seeming futility of human existence:

What is life? 'tis to exist
    In a world of wealth and woes
Where the wickedness and death
    Makes one shudder as he goes.

'Tis to come like morning fair;
    Rise and rove like ocean wave,
Fall and fade like shooting stars,
    Leaving nothing but—*a grave!*[19]

In these verses Phelps highlights a gradually emerging Mormon trend toward fatalism in regard to mortality, which would be coupled to an increased emphasis on eternity.

This resignation about physical life is similarly manifested in the "Funeral Hymn" composed by Parley P. Pratt at some point following the death of his wife, but the poem also radiates the author's faithful optimism and offers solace to the bereaved:

For sickness, sorrow, pain, and death,
    With awful tyranny have reigned;
While all eternity has shed
    Her tears of sorrow, o'er the slain.

No longer let creation mourn;
    Ye sons of sorrow, dry your tears;
Life—life—eternal life is ours,
    Dismiss your doubts, dispel your fears.

After having played down the temporary afflictions of mortality, Pratt gives the following assurances in regard to conditions in heaven:

No tears, no sorrow, death or pain,
    Shall e'er be known to enter there;
But perfect peace, immortal bloom,
    Shall reign triumphant ev'ry where![20]

As a reaction to the suffering endured by the early Saints because of the natural hostility of a frontier environment and the frequent persecutions dispensed at the hands of anti-Mormon agitators, Pratt clearly attempts to overshadow the often bleak reality of their temporal situation with the glorious expectations of the next world.

Latter-day Saint doctrine from its inception had made eligibility for the richest blessings of immortality contingent upon satisfactory performance during the earthly probation. The following revelation, recorded by the Prophet, was published for the edification of the Saints in July 1832:

Thou shalt live together in love, insomuch that thou shalt weep for the loss of them that die, and more especially for those that have not hope of a glorious resurrection. And it shall come to pass, that those that die in me shall not taste of death, for it shall be sweet unto them; and they that die not in me, wo unto them; for their death is bitter.[21]

This disclosure dictated much of the Mormon thought on death and the afterlife until 1836, establishing the criteria for mourning, promising eternal rewards for the righteous, and warning the ungodly that their future estate was in jeopardy.

This doctrinal position obviously necessitated that the survivors make some kind of value judgment concerning the deceased: had he or she truly been numbered among the faithful? The vast majority of Latter-day Saint obituaries, eulogies, and personal accounts answered with a resounding affirmation of the piety of the departed soul. As has been correctly surmised by one scholar, the Saints "were loath to predict anyone's condemnation to hell."[22] Excerpts from the encomiums of several early Mormons attest to the belief that death was but an easy, and joyous, transition for those who had proven themselves worthy. The obituaries published in a single issue of the *Evening and Morning Star* in 1834 note that Louisa Ann Stickney had "left this world rejoicing in a crown of glory"; that Joanna Roberts "fell asleep in the full assurance of a glorious immortality"; and that Bathia Fordham, who is described as a faithful friend, worthy sister, and devoted Saint, had "gone home" to "the glorious hope of a happy immortality."[23] A eulogy written about Mary Bradbury, who died that same year, similarly recounts that:

> During the latter part of her sickness she manifested a calm resignation to the will of a divine Providence; and when death was about to grasp her in his icy arms, she stayed herself on the promises of Him who is able to save, and who gave himself a ransom for her soul. In her last moments, when kindred spirits waited . . . to escort her spirit to the Paradise of rest, she said, "I am dying—glory to my Jesus, even so Lord Jesus come quickly:" then . . . she reposed her weary head, and without a sigh or struggle,—'
> breathed her life out sweetly there.[24]

Joseph Smith recorded the death of his brother Hyrum's wife in a like manner: "She left five small children and numerous relatives to mourn her loss," the Prophet lamented. In the expected noble fashion of the period, the dying Saint reportedly instructed her children, "Tell your father when he comes that the Lord has taken your mother home and left you for him to take care of." With that final gesture, she then died "in a full assurance of a part in the first resurrection."[25] Optimism in the face of death was not limited to adults but was occasionally manifested by younger Mormons as well. When the fourteen-year-old son of Thomas B. Marsh died at Far West, Missouri, in May 1838, his obituarist observed that the youngster had, from a most tender age, "manifested a love and reverence towards his heavenly Father" and at nine years old "had a remarkable vision, in which he talked with the Father." He also was said to have died with a full assurance that he would come forth in the resurrection of the just.[26]

A similar phenomenon, which has been aptly labeled a "triumphant" death, was a common occurrence among antebellum Americans. In 1838, an Indiana couple wrote to a relative concerning the death of one of their mothers, noting with pride that "she left the wourld in the triumfs of faith. . . . Such a great witness that she went happy out of the wourld."[27] An account from the same time period of the funeral of a little girl also bears a striking resemblance to the eulogy accorded the Marsh child. The clergyman who directed this particular service praised the youngster as having been "sanctified from her infancy." She was reportedly very fond of Bible stories and never tired of hearing the scriptures read. When her mother asked if she was afraid to die, the response was said to have been "No. . . . for I trust in Jesus."[28] Such optimism on the deathbed, by Mormons and non-Mormons alike, was a distinct departure from the pessimistic self-doubt which had plagued an earlier generation. Ever unsure of the prospects for eternity, a devout Calvinist of the seventeenth century questioned his status with God up to the very end. For the conscientious Puritan, adult or child, "doubt of salvation was essential to salvation."[29] In adopting a more optimistic attitude, Mormonism was well within the mainstream of nineteenth-century-American thought.

A new element of Mormon thought about the afterlife can be found in the 1836 vision Joseph Smith related of the celestial kingdom of heaven. Much to his amazement, he beheld his brother Alvin as an inhabitant of that highest postmortal estate.[30] This beloved brother had died before the Church was organized and had never been baptized as a Latter-day Saint. Therefore, according to the accepted dogma of the religion, he could not dwell among the most valiant. Joseph reported that when he inquired of the Lord concerning this seemingly impossible matter, he was informed, "All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, *who would have received it . . .* shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God" (italics added). Furthermore, children who died before the age of eight years were also heirs of the celestial kingdom.[31] There is a precedent for this position in the Book of Mormon, where the doctrine of infant depravity had been rejected and little children declared to be incapable of sin.[32]

This direct admittance of the very young into the celestial kingdom, along with the possible sanctification of the faithful dead, must certainly have been gratefully received by many early Mormons, not the least of them being Joseph Smith and his family. The Smiths had suffered extreme sorrow as a result of Alvin's death. This grief had been intensified when a local Presbyterian minister had vocally condemned him to hell for his supposed lack of religious propriety.[33] Joseph and his wife, Emma, must have been elated to learn that small children were to be numbered among the valiant in the next life. Since their marriage nine years previously, the

couple had lost three babies out of four live births.[34] In 1832 the Prophet had expressed his sense of sadness concerning these losses in a letter to Emma in which he referred to the death of his brother's infant. "I was grieved to hear that Hiram [*sic*] had lost his little child," he wrote. "I think we can in some degree simpathize with him but we all must be reconciled to our lots and say the will of the Lord be done."[35] Here Joseph reveals his empathy for bereaved parents, the loss he and Emma felt for their babies, and a degree of fatalism about death. He later tempered this submission to divine prerogative by advancing the theory that

> the Lord takes many away, even in infancy, that they may escape the envy of man, and the sorrows and evils of this present world; they were too pure, too lovely, to live on earth; therefore, if rightly considered, instead of mourning we have reason to rejoice as they are delivered from evil, and we shall soon have them again.[36]

This rationalization of the fortuitous nature of an early death was not unusual during the period.[37]

The doctrine regarding the salvation of those who died before the age of eight apparently received increased emphasis in the late 1830s, when the migration from Kirtland to western Missouri brought a high mortality rate among children. Samuel Tyler, who kept a daily journal of the trek, noted on 12 August 1838 that those departed souls had "gone to their Maker & they are saved in the celestial kingdom and we *if we are faithful* will meet them there" (italics added).[38] Three years later in Nauvoo, the exaltation of the young was still a source of comfort for many. Upon the death of Hyrum and Jerusha Smith's son, "aged 7 years lacking a few day," the eulogist wrote:

> Relying upon the promises of Jehovah, the parents need not mourn over the early death of their promising child. Omnipotence, in his wisdom, has seen fit to take him from them just ere he arrived at the years of accountability; and the parents have the blessed assurance that he has been taken from the evils to come, to bask in the endless felicity and heavenly beatitude, in the mansions of his heavenly father.[39]

In this particular instance, a devout faith in prophetic dictates concerning the afterlife had transformed what might have been a disheartening premature demise into a timely blessing from God: the young boy had died just before the age of eight and gained automatic admission into the celestial kingdom.

By the mid-nineteenth century, American society generally adhered to the belief that the death of young children, as well as pious adults, was a blessed transition to a more glorified existence. It took only a simple adjustment in perspective to allow a grief-stricken parent to see a deceased child as "specially called to heaven."[40] For the surviving parents in the Latter-day Saint culture, their dead offspring had received all that a benevolent God

had to give. According to Mormon eschatology, the victims of childhood demise not only secured a release from the pain and trials of mortality, but they held a distinct advantage in the world to come. Those who passed on to eternity before the age of eight years were natural heirs of the celestial kingdom, whereas all who lived to maturity had to prove themselves worthy.

The Saints' expectations for postmortal happiness developed into a more complex, family-oriented system in the 1840s. Even with the new tenets added by the Prophet's 1836 revelation, which opened the door to the highest degree of glory to two groups of deceased persons whose eternal status had been unknown prior to that time, the Mormon afterlife did not completely assume the emphasis of familial associations, which came to be characteristic of the religion, until the Nauvoo period. As a result of the deaths suffered from the Missouri persecutions and the unhealthfulness of their new city in Illinois, the Saints became even more preoccupied with death and immortality. And their God and his prophet provided further insight into eternity and the blessings awaiting the righteous.

While recent historians have disagreed as to the severity of health conditions which prevailed at Nauvoo during the Mormon settlement, all are in agreement on one basic point: it was the most sickly environment yet encountered by the Mormons.[41] Levi Jackson, who was one of the first Saints to inhabit the site, recalled that it was "very sickley the first year."[42] And by most available reports, it never progressed much beyond that initial judgment. In July 1839, during their first summer at the new headquarters of the Church, the family of Zina Huntington recorded her demise. Oliver B. Huntington noted that "my mother died. I suppose from or on account of the persecutions of Missouri, at the same time I was so sick I could not attend the funeral."[43] Concerning the untimely death of his wife, William Huntington lamented, "My companion [was] taken from me and consigned to the grave in a strange land and in depth of poverty." Like his son, the older man also commented that the rest of his family and numerous others were sick due to the unhealthfulness of their surroundings. But, stalwart Latter-day Saint that he was, William Huntington rejoiced because "all our afflictions [are] for Christ's sake [and we are] Looking forward for the Recompenc[e] of reward as did Paul throug[h] the goodness of God."[44] Joseph Smith had chosen to move Church headquarters to this swampy lowland regardless of its questionable reputation. In his official history of those early years, the Prophet noted that the vicinity "was so unhealthful, very few could live there."[45] But believing that divine intervention could reverse the natural conditions, construction of a city was attempted. Unfortunately, heavenly blessings never proved sufficient to stay the calamitous effects of disease which annually ravaged the community. Malaria was endemic in the region, and murderous epidemics repeatedly plagued residents of

the upper Midwest until the mid-nineteenth century.[46] The situation was so bad for the Latter-day Saints in 1839 that one wrote, "I never saw so sickly a time," while another noted, "It truly seemed like a time of pestilence."[47] The following year, as the situation grew steadily worse, Joseph Smith issued a "Proclamation" in which he optimistically promoted the city.[48] In addition to recurrent fevers, the Mormons also had to combat such afflictions as consumption (tuberculosis), chronic bouts with diarrhea, and an assortment of childhood maladies.

Prophetic expectations aside, disease and death remained rampant at Nauvoo. Newel Knight, a prominent Church member and early settler in the community, sadly commented in 1841, "I believe no place was more infested with sickness. . . . Some of your best men were swept down by the distroyer."[49] The fever epidemic of that year was so disastrous that Sidney Rigdon found it necessary to preach "a general funeral sermon."[50] The realities of sickness and death for the Mormons at Nauvoo were documented by the official sexton's reports published in the city newspapers. Available studies of mortality rates in other mid-nineteenth-century locations have tended to indicate that the Latter-day Saint community had, on the average, a significantly higher incidence of death. The crude mortality rate for the United States from 1830 to 1840 has been estimated at 13.8 deaths per 1,000 persons. In the following decade this figure had declined only slightly to 13.5 per 1,000. The state of Illinois had a mortality rate identical to this second ratio for the same date. While the estimates for larger American cities ranged from 25–26.5 per 1,000 in the antebellum period, one student of the topic has calculated that a rate as low as 10 per 1,000 might be considered reasonable for many smaller Massachusetts towns. He has further theorized that this figure might well have been close to the national average for similarly sized communities.[51]

However, based on information compiled from the sexton's reports for Nauvoo from January 1843 through October 1845, it would appear that the Saints were subjected to an incidence of death which was consistently above the mortality statistics cited above. In 1843 the crude estimate for the city was 22 per 1,000; the following year this had increased to nearly 26 deaths per 1,000 persons before it declined somewhat in 1845 to 19.5 per 1,000. These statistics represent only those deceased residents who were buried within the city limits and thus included in the official notice.[52]

The specter of death had been constantly with the Mormons throughout much of their early history, but during this period from 1839 to 1845 it became even more pronounced. Although its population grew quickly, Nauvoo never was able to meet the full expectations of Joseph Smith and his followers and become a garden spot. As a consequence of these *natural* conditions, the Prophet directed a sizable portion of his pedagogical activities

to discussing the afterlife and to the promulgation of the concept of the celestial family. Latter-day Saint eschatology grew to maturity in the early 1840s—perhaps by a natural process, or possibly one hastened by necessity. Mormon rhetoric of this period images them as engaged in a battle with the devil for the right to obtain the riches of the next life. Their victory or defeat was dependent upon how valiantly they had lived: the price could be steep, but the product was without comparison.

Martha Coray, a resident of Nauvoo, recorded a sermon by Joseph Smith in which he taught that "salvation is for a man to be saved from all his enemies, even our last enemy which is death."[53] On another occasion, the Prophet had instructed his followers, "Death is the last enemy to conquer on the pathway to salvation."[54] An example of this perspective in Latter-day Saint writing from the Illinois period appeared in a eulogy delivered at the funeral of Joseph Smith, Sr., the father of the Prophet, in September 1840. Robert B. Thompson said of the deceased that "his spirit now free and unincumbered, roams, and expatiates in that world, where the spirits of just men made perfect dwell, and where pain and sickness, tribulations and death cannot come."[55]

Latter-day Saint expectations about the afterlife displayed a sense of special entitlement during this period. The triumphant death was now associated with being the Lord's anointed people. This feeling in regard to eternity had been fostered by Joseph Smith since at least 1832 and was not an uncommon attitude among many other antebellum Americans as well. The obituary of Mary Fate, published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1841, concluded, "We sorrowed, *but not as those who have no hope;* death has a sting, the grave has a victory now, but thanks be to God who will give us the victory when the last enemy shall be conquered" (italics added).[56] At about this same time, Mormon eschatology continued its transition to encompass the family and friends of the deceased. When Robert B. Thompson died in September 1841, his panegyrists rejoiced in the faithfulness he had exhibited in life and in death. One sought to comfort his wife and child further with the observation that they could look forward to that happy period when they would again meet in a brighter and better world, where the "wicked cannot trouble, and where the weary may find rest."[57]

An excellent example of the evolution of Latter-day Saint eschatology is contained in an elegy written by Eliza R. Snow and published in 1843. She was a plural wife and confidante of the Prophet, and her works generally reflect accepted gospel precepts. In this particular poem, entitled "Apostrophe to Death," she traces the changing Mormon views on death as it was transmuted from a fearful tyrant into a "portal to the worlds on high." Modern revelation, as received by the Prophet Joseph Smith, is credited as the source of the enlightened change. Excerpts from the poem contrast the initial thought on death with the new philosophy:

> Where art thou Death?—I've seen thy visage and
> Have heard thy sound—and the deep, low murm'ring sound
> That rises on thy tread!
>
> Thy land is called a land of shadows: and thy path
> A path of blind contingence gloominess and fear—

Later the author enunciates the welcome transition:

> But thou art chang'd—the terror of thy looks—
> The darkness that encompass'd thee is gone;
> There is no frightfulness about thee now.
> Intelligence, the everlasting lamp
> Of truth, of truth eternal, lighted from
> The world on high, has pour'd its brilliant flame
> Abroad, to scatter darkness and to chase
> The horrors that attended thy approach!
> And thou art chang'd for since the glorious light
> Of revelation shone upon thy path
> Thou seem'st no more a hideous monster. . . .[58]

As is evidenced by the above poem, Latter-day Saint eschatology had, by the date of this publication in 1843, elevated death to a position of high importance: for the faithful Mormon it represented the passageway to eternal life. While this concept was by no means limited to any specific antebellum American denomination, it did enhance the importance of adherence to gospel precepts for the faithful.

Funeral sermons preached by Joseph Smith in 1843 and 1844 served to further develop Latter-day Saint thought on death and the afterlife. These discourses consistently linked dying with other necessary prerequisites for exaltation. By this time, the familial unit had evolved into a primary focal point in the Saints' concept of eternity. In a eulogy rendered in August 1843, Joseph Smith expounded upon the necessity of priesthood sealings in order to weld a family together forever. The Prophet pronounced the deceased, Judge Higbee, to have been a "just and good man." He then admonished his survivors to live so that they could be "reunited" with Brother Higbee in the hereafter.[59] Two months later, on the occasion of the demise of James Adams, Joseph Smith further emphasized the necessity of sacred rituals. He taught that "knowledge . . . [which is required for admittance into the celestial kingdom] can only be obtained by experience in these things, through the ordinance of God set forth for that purpose."[60] The true travail which accompanied death, defined by mid-nineteenth-century Mormonism as being eternally orphaned by the absence of sanctified familial bonds, could be overcome only through the prescribed ecclesiastical ministrations. It was for this reason that the Saints were so vigorously employed in the construction of the Nauvoo Temple, the established edifice wherein the needed religious observances could be properly

practiced. The Prophet and his associates in the Church hierarchy constantly admonished the disciples to hasten the work so that the provisions for eternity could be met.

In the spring of 1844, Joseph Smith preached the most renowned eschatological sermon in Latter-day Saint history. The reason for the oration was the accidental death of King Follett, whom the Prophet described as "our worthy brother." The elegy, known in the annals of Mormondom as the "King Follett Discourse," was given approximately one month after Follett's demise. It was delivered to a large congregation at the April conference of the Church. The speech lasted over two hours and touched on twenty-seven theological topics, including the character of God, the final state of the righteous, and the relation of man and deity. The Prophet reiterated the promise of continuing family ties and gave the Saints the charge to do the necessary ordinance work vicariously in order to save their ancestors. Those who had suffered the sorrow of losing a friend or relative were urged not to weep or mourn. "I have a father, brothers, children, and friends who have gone to a world of spirits," the Prophet lamented. But he was confident that they were parted only "for a moment" and all would soon be together again. For those who were worthy, Joseph Smith promised that theirs would be an "eternity of felicity."[61] Needless to say, Mormon optimism in regard to the next life was even further enhanced by these remarks.

It seems clear, then, that from the early 1830s until just months before the Prophet's murder in 1844, the eschatology of Mormonism had continuously expanded from the rudimentary Christian belief in an individual reward for the righteous to a complex, highly structured immortal existence. Similar concepts can be found in American Protestantism during the first half of the nineteenth century. For example, many tenets espoused by the Latter-day Saints concerning the postmortal reunion of loved ones had been nurtured at an earlier time in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. However, for Swedenborgians this joyous occasion lasted only for somewhere between a few hours and one year. At that juncture, each spirit then either went on to a more glorious realm or was consigned to hell.[62] The basic difference which separated these two strains of thought is evident in the duration of the period of togetherness: for one group it was a temporary restoration of earthly ties followed by an unattached eternity, whereas for the other family ties were perceived as continuing forever. This emphasis upon the celestial family is the most notable point of variance between Mormons and their contemporaries.

Following the murder of the Prophet in June 1844, the teachings of the surviving Church leaders continued to have a profound impact on many Mormons' perceptions of death and immortality. For example, Zina Young recorded her attendance at the funeral of the wife of Peregrine Sessions, in

January 1845. She was deeply moved by the sermon and wrote in her diary that she prayed for help from the Lord to do his bidding and to seek after divine truths. In conclusion she beseeched her Heavenly Father: "O help me to do thy will, and to bring my mind in a perfect subjugation of thy will."[63] Yet many of the Saints, despite their faith in the gospel, were still not easily reconciled to the death of a loved one. Even the most devout believers could be expected to reveal natural human responses to such a loss. Levi Jackman, whose wife died in 1846, recorded the following sentiments in his journal some time following her passage:

> That was a gloomey day for me. We had lived together . . . twenty-eight years without a jar or contention. She was true and faithfull under all circumstances. She was a . . . loving wife, a tender mother, and a neighbor whose loss was lamented. In short she lived and died a Saint.[64]

While Jackman may have harbored hope for being with his deceased spouse in the next world, he expressed a deep sense of grief concerning her death.

The innermost thoughts of many early Mormons may never be known. To express any dissatisfaction, either verbally or in writing, was deemed to be improper behavior and possibly even sacrilegious. As Nancy Tracy observed in her autobiography, "We . . . felt that the Lord was very mindful of those who trusted in Him and we never felt to murmer or complain."[65] Obviously some Latter-day Saints accepted life's tragedies more easily than others, and many more were not inclined to disclose their private anxieties. Nonetheless, the literary history of Mormonism displays a culture that was increasingly reconciled to death and confident of an exalted eternity. The banners with which mid-nineteenth-century Mormonism armed its adherents as they faced eternity were powerful. While Latter-day Saint eschatology remained basically within the mainstream of antebellum American thought, it also developed some distinct aspects which were dictated by (or possibly dictated) fundamental Mormon theology. In April 1846, as the harried emigrants fled Nauvoo, William Clayton penned the words to a well-loved Latter-day Saint hymn. Part of the final stanza captures in a simple manner the focal point of the Mormons' basic immortal expectations:

> And should we die before our journey's through
> Happy day! All is well!
> We then are free from toil and sorrow too;
> With the just we shall dwell![66]

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1. Michael McEachern McDowell, "American Attitudes toward Death, 1825–1865" (Ph.D. Diss, Brandeis University, 1978), 17. On the evolution of European-American

eschatology see Stanley French, "The Cemetery as Cultural Institution: The Establishment of Mount Auburn and the 'Rural Cemetery' Movement," *American Quarterly* 26 (March 1974): 37–59.

2. The verse cited was written by Henry Kirke White and is quoted in McDowell, "American Attitudes toward Death," 16.

3. Quotation from David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, antisocial Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 185. See also Lewis O. Saum, "Death in the Popular Mind of Pre–Civil War America," *American Quarterly* 26 (December 1974): 477–95; Phillipe Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death.' From the Middle Ages to the Present,* trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 63; and Maris A. Vinovskis, "Angels' Heads and Weeping Willows: Death in Early America," in *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective,* ed. Michael Gordon, 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 560.

4. Peter L Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1969), 52.

5. D&C 93:29. See also Davis Bitton, "Early Mormon Lifestyles; or, the Saints as Human Beings," in *The Restoration Movement: Essays in Mormon History*, ed. F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards (Lawrence, Kans.: Coronado Press, 1973), 284; and L. De Moyne Bekker, "Reactions to Death among Early Mormons: Religious Faith as a Coping Stategy" (Paper presented at the Conference on Early Mormonism and American Culture, May 1980). Also very valuable in studying the nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint response to dying is Klaus J. Hansen, "The Mormon Rationalization of Death," chap. 3 of *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

6. For quotations and doctrinal positions on the degrees of glory see D&C 76. Also helpful is Mary Ann Meyers, "Gates Ajar: Death in Mormon Thought and Practice," in *Death in America,* ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 117–19.

7. *Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (July 1832): 10–11.

8. McDowell, "American Attitudes toward Death," 16–17.

9. Obituary notice for David Johnson in *Evening and Morning Star* 2 (December 1833): 117.

10. Zina Diantha Huntington Young, Diary, 26 January 1845, Library-Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

11. *Evening and Morning Star* 2 (April 1834):153.

12. See Michael Guy Bishop, "The Celestial Family: Early Mormon Thought on Life and Death, 1830–1846" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, 1981).

13. *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate 1* (October 1834): 12.

14. Quotation from Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 25 March 1837, LDS Church Archives. See also Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt: One of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter. day Saints, Embracing His Life, Ministry and Travels, with Extracts, in Prose and Verse, from His Miscellaneous Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938), 297–98.

15. *Latter* Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate 1 (July 1835): 154.

16. Nancy Naomi Tracy, "A Sketch of the Life of Nancy Naomi Tracy," n.d., Utah State Historical Society Library, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited Utah State Historical Society Library).

17. See McDowell "American Attitudes toward Deaths" 160. For an assessment of early Latter-day Saint attitudes in this regard see Truman G. Madsen, "Distinctions in

the Mormon Approach to Death and Dying," in *Deity and Death,* ed. Spencer J. Palmer (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 73–74.

18. *Evening* and Morning Star 1 (June 1832): 8.

19. *Messenger* and Advocate 1 (March 1835): 81.

20. Parley P. Pratt, *The Millennium and Other Poems* (N.p., ca. 1839), 89–90, copy located in LDS Church Archives.

21. *Evening* and Morning Star 1 (July 1832): 1. See also Doctrine and Convenants 42:45–47.

22. Meyers, "Gates Ajar," 117.

23. See *Evening and Morning Star* 2 (August 1834): 186.

24. Ibid. 2 (March 1834): 141.

25. Journal History, 13 October 1837. The "first resurrection," as was mentioned by Joseph Smith, is understood in Mormon theology to be the coming forth of the valiant to usher in the Second Advent of Christ. See D&C 88:96–102. The term "resurrection of the just" is used synonymously.

26. *Elders Journal* (Kirtland, Ohio), July 1838.

27. Saum, "Death in the Popular Mind," 492.

28. See D. Griffeths, Jr., *Two Years Residence in the New Settlements of Ohio, North America* (London: Westley and Davis, 1835), 101–3.

29. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death,* 83.

30. See Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter. day Saints,* ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2d ed. Revelation. (reprint; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 2:380–81 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church).*

31. Ibid.

32. See Moroni 8:8; see also Joseph Smith, Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* romp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 107, 196–97; and James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith: Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter. day Saints,* 12th ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1964), 87–89.

33. Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 59–60.

34. E. Cecil McGavin, *The Family of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 120–39 and passim.

35. Joseph Smith, Letter, 6 June 1832, microfilm copy, Lovejoy Library, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville (original located at Chicago Historical Society).

36. Journal History, 20 March 1842. Late twentieth-century Mormons generally continue to hold this optimistic attitude about the death of infants (see Brent A. Barlow, ed., "Children and Death," sec. 4 of *Understanding Death* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1979]).

37. See Peter Gregg Slater, *Children in the New England Mind: In Death and in Life* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977), 38–39.

38. Journal History, 4 October 1838.

39. *Times* and Seasons 3 (15 November 1841): 592.

40. McDowell, "American Attitudes toward Death," 21–22.

41. For varying opinions as to the healthfulness of the location see Robert Brace Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 38; David E. Miller and Delia S. Miller, *Nauvoo: The City of Joseph* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Peregrine Smith, 1974), 5; and Dennis Rowley, "Nauvoo: A River Town," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 255.

42. Levi Jackman, Journal, n.d., 27, LDS Church Archives.

43. For Greek examples of this last usage, see ibid. 1:115–19.

44. William Huntington, Diary, n.d., 10–11, LDS Church Archives.

45. *History* of the Church 3:375.

46. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament,* 49–51.

47. Newel Knight, Diary, ca. 1839, 30, LDS Church Archives; Erastus Snow, "Sketch Book," n.d., 52, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

48. See *Times and Seasons* 2 (15 January 1841): 274. Refer also to Flanders, *Nauvoo,* 54; and *History of the Church* 4:268.

49. Knight, Diary, n.d., 33.

50. Journal History, 25 July 1841; see also James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 143.

51. See Yasukichi Yasuba, *Birth Rates of the White Population in the United States, 1800–1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), 80, 88; Carl L. Erhardt and Joyce E. Berlin, eds., *Mortality and Morbidity in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 2–3; and Maris A. Vinovskis, "Morality Rates and Trends in Massachusetts before 1960," *Journal of Economic History* 32 (March 1972): 185.

52. Sexton's repons were published in the *Wasp* (Nauvoo, Illinois), 21 January–22 March 1843, and in the *Nauvoo Neighbor,* 17 May 1843–29 October 1845. An analysis of this morality data can be seen in M. Guy Bishop, Vincent Lacey, and Richard Wixon, "Death at Mormon Nauvoo: Crude Morality Rates for a Western Illinois Community," *Western Illinois Regional Studies* 9 (Fall 1986), in press.

53. Martha Jane Knowlton Coray, Notebook, n.d. LDS Church Archives.

54. Smith, *Teachings,* 297.

55. *Times and Seasons* 1 (September 1840): 170.

56. Ibid. 2 (15 February 1841): 325.

57. Ibid. 2 (1 September 1841): 519.

58. See the *Wasp* 1 (21 January 1843): 38.

59. See *History of the Church* 5:529–31. Refer also to Gordon Irving, "The Law of Adoption: One Phase of the Development of the Mormon Concept of Salvation: 1830–1900," *BYU Studies* 14 (Spring 1974): 295.

60. Times and Seasons 4 (15 September 1843): 331–32. For the entire discourse, see *History of the Church* 6:50–52.

61. For the complete text of this sermon see *History of the Church* 6:302–17. Refer also to Donald Q. Cannon, "The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith's Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective," *BYU Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 197–92.

62. See Mary Ann Meyers, "Death in Swedenborgian and Mormon Eschatology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14 (Spring 1981): 59.

63. Young, Diary, 26 January 1845.

64. Jackman, Journal, n.d., 34.

65. Tracy, "A Sketch of the Life of Nancy Naomi Tracy."

66. "Come, Come, Ye Saints," *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latte-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985), no. 30; see also Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience,* 102–3.