

Epilogue

History is of vital significance to the Latter-day Saints. As historian Jan Shipps and others, including John W. Welch in an early chapter in this volume, have affirmed, the claims of the Restoration are inextricably locked in an interpretation of history. The validity of the Latter-day Saint religion is tied to the historicity of events surrounding its founding under Joseph Smith and its course since his time. Hence the fierce historical debate between detractors and those who reaffirm the sacred record.¹ But, in a broader context, the claims of the restored gospel are also anchored in a historic interpretation which relates to the falling away of the pristine Church of Christ and its restoration in the latter days,² with a belief in its ultimate triumph over all the kingdoms of the world (see D&C 65:2–6).

This volume is an attempt to place that divinely attested role and mission in the context of

the wider history of the world. Drawing on the statements of scripture, ancient and modern, and those of modern prophets and apostles, it has attempted to show that this mission can only be accomplished within the broader context of the unfolding of human events as guided by the divine hand. The theme of the past several hundred years of history has been to prepare the world for the Second Coming of the Son of God. This dispensation has been ushered in not only for the salvation of people living in this age and future generations, but also for the salvation of all previous generations. Much of the great work of redemption of the human family is in fact reserved for the subsequent millennial reign in which the ordinances will be administered vicariously for those vast generations who have lived in previous ages. The preparation period for the Second Coming is indeed the prophesied age in which

we live, the dispensation of the fulness of times, when all things shall be brought together in Christ (see Ephesians 1:10).³

When these gospel insights are applied to world history, we see a phenomenal unfolding of events, which suggests that the history of the world is teleological in nature; i.e., that it is going in a certain direction and has ultimate purpose. Is it marching forward inexorably in a foreordained direction? It is clear that “the works, and the designs, and the purpose of God cannot be frustrated” (D&C 3:1) and that “the eternal purposes of the Lord shall roll on, until all his promises shall be fulfilled” (Mormon 8:22).

The dilemma for human understanding is to comprehend how God is able to accomplish his designs and purposes while maintaining the agency of man. The apostasy of the New Testament church of Christ is solemn testimony to the fact that God will not force the progress of His church, even though it might be observed that conditions at the time of Christ and Joseph Smith were relatively similar. In the war which began in heaven that has since played out in human history, there have been many reverses for the side of good in the battle between good and evil. Agency has been maintained, and events have unfolded according to the good and evil desires of those involved.

God is the great teacher of righteousness, the great dispenser of truth, preparing His children by degrees for their ultimate salvation. He guides all that is good. But He allows His children their agency to choose how they will respond to His counsels. Each must prove his or her individual merit out of His presence. The troubled course of the history of man on the earth which has resulted should not be confused with the notion that God is not in charge or does not care about His children.

God’s plan of human progress and salvation is carried forth by those who strive to do good. The history of the world could indeed be written from the point of view of whom God

sends at each juncture and the extent to which He instructs, inspires and directs them while on earth. What happens on both sides of the veil is thus of vital importance for human history. The full history of the world can never be known until God reveals “the secret acts of men, and the mighty works of God” of each dispensation (D&C 88:108–9). It is unlikely He will reveal all in either category until we have gone as far as we can. With the unique exception of the Lord Jesus Christ, God has no perfect instruments among individuals, groups, or nations for the accomplishments of His purposes among men. He uses the best resources He has for the task at hand.

While God’s hand may not be immediately visible in the day-to-day unfolding of events, in the long term His desires will be accomplished. The wisdom and foreknowledge of God are greater than the cunning of Satan, and God’s plan for the redemption of His children is more powerful than the evil designs of the adversary. This is attested to in the Lord’s preparation of the circumstances for the Latter-day establishment of His kingdom on the earth. The discovery of the New World, the long and difficult freeing of the mind from religious and state control in Europe, and the establishment of freedom in America were necessary conditions for the Restoration of the gospel. The providential preservation of the restored Church through its early trials and its rising to the task of a worldwide church are part of the Lord’s great plan.⁴ The gathering of the house of Israel within the gospel net, and ultimately their restoration to their lands of inheritance, in fulfillment of ancient covenants, is thus being accomplished as promised. The extension of freedom across the surface of the earth was and is necessary for the preaching of the gospel to all the world. Likewise, the disbursement of scientific and technical knowledge has prepared the way in transforming societies, in raising literacy and freedom, and in providing the necessary transportation and communication systems for the spreading of the gospel. Technological advance

has also given the means for the administration of a worldwide church and has facilitated the exponential expansion of family history and temple work for the salvation of the dead. A people is being prepared for the Second Coming of the Lord.

The rise of freedom and its spread across the earth is a theme that deserves special mention. The importance of the rise of freedom in the divine plan can hardly be overemphasized. In 1350, at the dawn of the modern era, not a single European state, except those under the rule of Islam, had religious toleration. Despite numerous attempts by Satan and his agents for the enslavement of man in such things as the inquisition of the Middle Ages, the institution of slavery, autocratic and absolutist government, and modern totalitarian movements such as fascism, nazism and communism, the Lord's hand, in the long term, has been in the extension of freedom. In the words of David O. McKay, "The history of the world with all its contention and strife is largely an account of man's effort to free himself from bondage and usurpation."⁵ The happy results in the modern era, despite all the violence and suffering, have been that now approximately two-thirds of the world's population live under a system of religious toleration. A comparison of a map of those countries which have religious freedom with those areas to which the gospel has been taken shows them to be almost identical.⁶

THE FUTURE

What the future holds between now and the glorious event of the Lord's Second Coming is beyond the province of history and can only be discerned in part by the spirit of revelation and through a study of the revealed word on the subject. In a thought-provoking lecture given to BYU students in April 2001, Elder Alexander B. Morrison projected the challenges the Church now faces into the twenty-first century. These include the challenges of cultural diversity in a globalized world and of leadership training in a time of exponential growth. At the same time, the flood

of sexual immorality across the Western world is putting increasing pressure on the family, while the AIDS epidemic in Africa threatens the very fabric of major parts of that society. In his view, the message of the gospel is the only hope for the problems of the world.⁷

One should not be deceived into believing that the rise of the Church to its ultimate destiny will follow a straight, rising path. The Book of Mormon documents the rise and fall of societies based on a cycle in which righteous living is followed by prosperity, which gives rise to class distinction, pride, and loss of faith. These conditions lead to calamity, usually in the form of dissension and wars, which in turn may lead to repentance and a renewal of God's blessings.⁸ This cycle is a theme which has been developed by Elder Ezra Taft Benson, who noted that at least 20 great civilizations have shown "a decline in spiritual values, in moral stamina, and in the freedom and responsibility of their citizens" before their fall.⁹ As Nephi observed, "The Lord raiseth up a righteous nations, and destroyeth the nations of the wicked" (1 Nephi 17:37).

America, we learn from the Book of Mormon, is a covenant land, a land of freedom, whose maintenance depends on righteous living. As Moroni outlined:

And now, we can behold the decrees of God concerning this land, that it is a land of promise; and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall serve God, or they shall be swept off when the fulness of his wrath shall come upon them. And the fulness of his wrath cometh upon them when they are ripened in iniquity. . . .

And this cometh unto you, O ye Gentiles, that ye may know the decrees of God—that ye may repent and not continue in your iniquities until the fulness come, that ye may not bring down the fulness of the wrath of God upon you, as the inhabitants of the land have hitherto done.

Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from

bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, if they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ, who hath been manifested by the things which we have written. (Ether 2:9, 11–12)

While the divinely appointed mission of America as the great promulgator of freedom remains unimpaired¹⁰ and America will surely survive according to prophetic utterance,¹¹ the rampant evil of current society will almost certainly bring various destructions upon it (see 3 Nephi 21–22). As President James E. Faust observed in early 2004, there has been a rapid decline of moral, ethical, and spiritual values in America from the 1960s to the present to the extent that now approximately half of all marriages fail, cohabitation as an alternative to marriage is increasing at an alarming rate as are the number children born out of wedlock, while across the world an estimated 25 percent of all pregnancies end in abortions.¹² In many Western countries, homosexuality has become a human right, with gay marriages seeking recognition. According to President Gordon B. Hinckley, the evil in the world may now be as bad as it was in the days of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹³ “Further we warn,” declared the First Presidency and Council of Twelve Apostles in 1995 in a proclamation to the world on the family, “that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.”¹⁴

These calamities may include the ravages of war and related social and economic disruption, which, as President Hinckley observed after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, can disrupt and challenge the work of the Lord.¹⁵ The scriptures are replete with prophecies and warnings concerning the last days and the many destructions which shall befall the inhabitants of the earth prior to the Second Coming, including such things as wars and rumors of wars, pestilence, famine and disease, thunderings, lightnings,

earthquakes, and other natural disasters (see D&C 1:4–17, 29:1–28; 45; 88:84–116; 133; and Joseph Smith—Matthew, to mention a few). The hurricane disasters and the Southeast Asian Tsunami of 2004 have been particularly poignant reminders of the latter-day prophecy that after the testimony of the Lord’s servants “cometh the testimony of earthquakes, . . . the voice of tempests, and the voice of the waves of the sea heaving themselves beyond their bounds” (D&C 88:88–90).¹⁶

What the future holds until the Lord’s work is fully accomplished has not been fully defined, but, by degrees, one may anticipate an accelerated preaching of the gospel, the wider division between the forces of good and evil, with “great desolations by famine, sword, and pestilence” (Joseph Smith—History 1:45). For, as the Lord has declared, “The hour is . . . nigh at hand, when peace shall be taken from the world, and the devil shall have power over his dominions. And the Lord shall have power over his saints, and shall reign in their midst, and shall come down in judgment upon . . . the world” (D&C 1:35–36). While some of the righteous may perish in the destruction of the wicked in the great winding-up scenes prior to the Second Coming, their salvation will not be impaired.¹⁷

Following the counsels of the living prophets and living righteous lives so that we can be constantly guided by the Holy Spirit are the best hedges against personal disaster in such a troubled world (D&C 45:56–59).¹⁸ Those who walk in obedience before the Lord, who keep their covenants, and who put their main effort into the building up of Zion have little cause to fear. We live in perilous times surrounded by evil. But, as President Hinckley has said, this is also one of the most exhilarating of times to be alive in the history of the earth, in this the “dispensation of the fulness of times,” the culmination of all previous ages of human progress, when God’s great purposes are unfolding.¹⁹ As we Latter-day Saints come to a better understanding of our place in history, we are better

able to cope with the world in which we live. A knowledge of the promises and challenges before us is a call to faith and a constant reminder of the need to serve God with all our “heart, might, mind and strength” (D&C 4:2).

God is at the helm. His purposes are known and His promises are sure. We are a vital part of His plan. “Wherefore labor ye, labor ye in my vineyard for the last time—for the last time call upon the inhabitants of the earth. For in my own due time will I come upon the earth in judgment, and my people shall be redeemed and shall reign with me on earth. For the great Millennium, of which I have spoken by the mouth of my servants, shall come” (D&C 43:28–30). And so it shall!

Roy A. Prete
Editor

NOTES

1. See Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 101–7; also Paul Y. Hoskisson, ed., *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001).

2. Shipps, *Mormonism*, 1–3, 51–53; Eric Dursteler, “Interpreting the ‘Great Apostasy’: The Evolution of Mormon Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 23–24.

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, “At the Summit of the Ages,” *Ensign*, November 1999, 74.

4. Historians will undoubtedly amplify various aspects related to Church growth, such as regional socioeconomic factors, the development of supportive ideas and cultures, and the improvement of the popular image of the Church.

5. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, October 1965, 8.

6. See maps in the article by Robert S. Patterson and E. Dale LeBaron, herein.

7. Alexander B. Morrison, lecture at BYU, April 13, 2001, notes in author’s possession. (The paper is to appear in an anthology published by the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Church History at BYU).

8. For specific examples, see Helaman 6–12 and Alma 62:38–48.

9. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 674; also 358.

10. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1919), 409.

11. Harold B. Lee, *Ye Are the Light of the World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 351; Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 360; John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom*, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 137, 219; Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 76.

12. James E. Faust, “Challenges Facing the Family,” *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting: The Priesthood and the Auxiliaries of the Relief Society, Young Women, and the Primary, January 10, 2004* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 1–2.

13. “I do not know that things were worse in the times of Sodom and Gomorrah,” said President Hinckley on January 10, 2004 (“Standing Strong and Immovable,” *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, 20).

14. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.

15. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Times in Which We Live,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 72.

16. See Henry B. Eyring, BYU—Idaho devotional address, summarized in “Continue Seeking Higher Ground,” *Church News*, February 5, 2005, 207.

17. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 162. Compare 1 Nephi 22:15–19. “Wherefore, the righteous need not fear,” writes Nephi, “for thus saith the prophet, they shall be saved, even if it so be as by fire” (v. 17).

18. See Eyring, in “Continue Seeking Higher Ground,” 207.

19. See Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Dawning of a Brighter Day,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 81.