

The Saxton Letter
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Having been appointed by the Lord to initiate the work of establishing a new dispensation of the gospel and direct the proclamation of its saving message, Joseph Smith stepped forth in his prophetic calling to explain the nature of that work and to forewarn the people and the nation of impending judgments. In so doing, he marked out the way by which true peace could be established among men and by which the judgments he fore- saw could be averted.

Joseph Smith directed his first official proclamation to the American people on these subjects in a letter dated January 4, 1833. That significant statement, long referred to as the "Seaton Letter,"¹ was one of the most important documents he wrote during his eventful lifetime. Subsequently he explained to the editor to whom he directed his communication: "That letter which I wrote to you for publication. I wrote by the command of God."²

Through a lack of available information, historians have mis-titled this important letter, which takes its name from the editor to whom it was written. B. H. Roberts gave the editor's name as N. E. Seaton, with a note that it is also spelled Sexton in the Manuscript History of the Church. He explained that the person in question published a paper in Rochester, New York, then added: "The name of the paper cannot be ascertained."³

It has been discovered recently that N.C. Saxton was the editor and proprietor of the newspaper in question, the *American Revivalist, and Rochester Observer*. Its masthead carried the caption: "Dedicated to the Interests of Zion Generally and Especially to Revivals of Religion."

For some reason Saxton published only the latter part of Joseph Smith's important letter to the American public, which was less than one third of the total communication. The extract which he published appeared under the title "Mormonism." on page two of the issue, Saturday, February 2, 1833, after the following explanation by the editor:

We have received a communication on this subject. from Mr. J. Smith. Jr., who as appears, is a principal leader of the sect that embraces Mormonism. It is written throughout with much good feeling and urbanity. With our own views of truth, we do not feel that it would be consistent with our duty, or for the benefit of our readers to enter into a discussion on this subject, nor have we room for the whole letter. Still we think our readers may be gratified in learning something of the author's views, and therefore present them with the following extract, not holding ourselves responsible for its sentiments.

On February 12, Joseph Smith again wrote to editor Saxton expressing his disappointment that only a part of his letter had been published. Having explained that he penned the initial statement by the commandment of God, the Prophet added:

I am quite anxious to have it all laid before the public, for it is of importance to them: but I have no claim upon you, neither do I wish to urge you, beyond that which is reasonable to do it. I have only to appeal to your extended generosity to all religious societies that claim that Christ has come in the flesh; and also to tell you what will be the consequence of a neglect to publish it.

Some parts of the letter were very severe upon the wickedness of sectarianism. I acknowledge; and the Truth, remember, is hard and severe against all iniquity and wickedness, but this is no reason why it should not be published, but the very reason why it should be. I lay the ax at the root of the tree, and I long to see many of the sturdy oaks, which have long cumbered the ground, fall prostrate. I now say unto you, that if you wish to clear your garments from the blood of your readers. I exhort you to publish that letter entire; but if not, the sin be upon your head. Accept, sir, the good wishes and tender regard of your unworthy servant. Joseph Smith, Jun.⁴

A survey of later issues of the *American Revivalist* reveals that Saxton did not reconsider the matter after receiving the Prophet's second letter. Nothing further on the subject appears in his paper.

Joseph Smith began the initial Saxton Letter by observing that he had for some time been carefully reviewing the state of things throughout the land and had looked at the situation "with feelings of

the most painful anxiety." He wrote: "While upon one hand I behold the manifest withdrawal of God's Holy Spirit, and the veil of stupidity which seems to be drawn over the hearts of people; on the other hand, I behold the judgments of God that have swept, and are still sweeping, hundreds and thousands of our race (and I fear unprepared) down to the shades of death."⁵

The Prophet held that in significant ways the world of his day was at a crossroads. His statement about the withdrawal of God's Holy Spirit was drawn from a revelation given to him in August, 1831. III, the Lord, am angry with the wicked) I am holding my Spirit from the inhabitants of the earth," the divine communication stated. "I have sworn in my wrath, and decreed wars upon the face of the earth, and the wicked shall slay the wicked, and fear shall come upon every man."⁶ In the Saxton Letter. Joseph explained: "The Lord declared to His servants, some eighteen months since, that He was then withdrawing His Spirit from the earth; and we can see that such is the fact, for not only the churches are dwindling away, but there are no conversions, or but very few: and this is not all, the governments of the earth are thrown into confusion and division; and *Destruction*, to the eye of the spiritual beholder, seems to be written by the finger of an invisible hand, in large capitals, upon almost everything we behold."⁷

In looking back to that period, the historian sees just reason for Joseph Smith's concern. Seeds of conflict that ripened into civil war in America were appearing in many areas of society. The period from the adoption of the Federal Constitution to 1830 is usually called the era of nationalism. as William Warren Sweet correctly observed, and "with equal appropriateness that from 1830 to the opening of the Civil War may be termed the era of sectionalism." This was the case not only in politics, but in religion. The period beginning about 1830 came to be "characterized by quarrels and contentions and slanders among the churches."⁸

An alarming change was occurring deep in the fiber of mens' souls. Harriet Martineau, an English traveler and student of American society, concluded that hatred was "not too strong a term" to describe the rising sectional feeling, or the developing animosity that was being expressed by "Americans against fellow-citizens in distant sections of their country."⁹ In the first week of September, 1835, Hezekiah Niles clipped over five hundred items reporting acts of

violence and disorder from newspapers throughout the country. "Society seems everywhere unhinged and the demon of 'blood and slaughter' has been let loose upon us!" he exclaimed. "The character of our countrymen seems suddenly changed."¹⁰ Thus, Emerson could report in 1844 that, while "the thoughtful and virtuous" manifested a "deeper belief and reliance on spiritual facts, there was in all the practical activities of New England ... a gradual withdrawal of tender consciences from the social organizations."¹¹

In the wake of "the new winds"¹² that were blowing over America, other ominous signs became visible. On January 1, 1831, William Lloyd Garrison founded the *Liberator* at Boston and stirred the nation with the cry of the radical abolitionist: "I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation I am in earnest – I will not retreat a single inch – AND I WILL BE HEARD."¹³ Meanwhile, there were indications that the seeds of conflict were sprouting on the Southern scene. The nullification movement, which then centered in South Carolina, may properly be regarded in that light, "it was," said Parrington. "a warning gesture, a militant expression of the southern temper."¹⁴ The change that occurred in Southern sentiment was exemplified in the life of John C. Calhoun. In 1821, John Quincy Adams declared that Calhoun was "above all sectional and factious prejudice more than any other statesman of this Union with whom I have ever acted."¹⁵ By 1830, however, a marked difference could be seen. "From about 1830 to the day of his death," a biographer wrote, "Calhoun may be called the very impersonation of the slave question."¹⁶

The slavery debates that occurred in the Virginia Assembly in 1832 registered the change which was taking place. During the course of those debates Thomas R. Dew gave a defense of slavery which, along with the rise of radicalism in the abolitionist movement in the North, did much to turn the Southern mind toward the justification of slavery. "From this point forward," Craven notes after analyzing the debates, "the defense of slavery sharply changed in tone if not in content." When the "positive and fanatical" cry of the abolitionist arose in the North,

... the Southern defense became as extreme, as aggressive, and as uncompromising. Uncertainty passed. Emotion matched emotion. Sectional criticism brought sectional reaction. As Calhoun said: "It has compelled us to the South to look into the

nature and character of this great institution [of slavery], and to correct many false impressions that even we have entertained in relation to it. Many in the South once believed that it was a moral and political evil; that folly and delusion are gone; we see it now in its true light, and regard it as the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the whole world.¹⁷

Joseph Smith made it clear that the withdrawal of enlightening spiritual powers from men in general, along with the challenge of such baneful forces as were being made manifest, would ultimately result in major judgments upon the world, unless proper remedies were applied. His ministry marked the beginning of the great era known in prophetic literature as the last days, when the fulness of the gospel would be restored, Zion would be built as a divine and peaceful order of society, and human systems would finally be reduced to chaos by powerful forces and major challenges that would confront man in the latter days. He wrote in the Saxton letter: "The plain fact is this, the power of God begins to fall upon the nations, and the light of the latter-day glory begins to break forth through the dark atmosphere of sectarian wickedness, and their iniquity rolls up into view, and the nations of the Gentiles are like the waves of the sea, casting up mire and dirt, or all in commotion, and they are hastily preparing to act the part allotted them, when the Lord rebukes the nations, when He shall rule them with a rod of iron, and break them in pieces like a potter's vessel."¹⁸ When present and future issues were viewed in their proper light, they gave reason for great concern. The Prophet wrote:

I think that it is high time for a Christian world to awake out of sleep, and cry mightily to that God, day and night, whose anger we have justly incurred. Are not these things a sufficient stimulant to arouse the faculties and call forth the energies of every man, woman or child that possesses feelings of sympathy for their fellows, or that is in any degree endeared to the budding cause of our glorious Lord? I leave an intelligent community to answer this important question, with a confession that this is what has caused me to overlook my own inability, and expose my weakness to a learned world; but trusting in that God who has said that these things are hid from the wise and prudent and revealed unto babes. I step forth into the field to tell you what the Lord is doing, and what you must do to enjoy

the smiles of our Savior in these last days.¹⁹

The solution Joseph Smith proposed was based in the fact that Christ the Lord, with His true gospel, is the only true and sure foundation upon which man can build a life and a society of lasting peace, prosperity and happiness. This was no superficial panacea for the ills of mankind, but the indispensable foundation upon which all else in life had to be based, if true peace and happiness were to be achieved.²⁰

Only as man establishes his life upon the true gospel of Jesus Christ can he be changed and transformed spiritually from the state of the natural man in mortality to a state of righteousness in which he is alive in Christ through the enlightening powers of the Holy Spirit.²¹ This, Jesus explained as He established such a system among the ancient Nephites of the Western hemisphere, is the only way man can build upon His "rock" and thereby develop a society capable of realizing true and lasting peace and prosperity. Otherwise, man's life will rest on a sandy foundation.²²

In the Saxton Letter the Prophet addressed himself to people who had been brought to a high point of Christian interest and feeling. It "was distinctly and increasingly a religious period" in which the elements of faith and religious fervor were diffused throughout all spheres of human life. "Almost every subject was invested with the religious qualities of certainty and enthusiasm," said one writer. "Every orator had to prove that his position was endorsed by the constitution and the Bible."²³ Significantly, the religious interest and fervor of that era was brought to a high point at the same time that Joseph Smith organized the Church and began to proclaim the restored gospel throughout the land. "The year 1831 is known in religious annals of America as the year of the great awakening." said another writer. "There had been religious revivals before, but none so great as the one that shook the country in the years 1831 to 1834."²⁴

With such religious interest as then prevailed, but with the seeds of social conflict and disorder beginning to make their appearance and develop rapidly in America, Joseph Smith set forth the principles of the only true and sure program by which a lasting peace and union among men could be established and the judgments he foresaw be averted. He wrote in the Saxton Letter:

And now what remains to be done, under circumstances like these? I will proceed to tell you what the Lord requires of all people, high and low, rich and poor, male and female, ministers and people, professors of religion and non-professors, in order that they may enjoy the Holy Spirit of God to a fulness and escape the judgments of God, which are almost ready to burst upon the nations of the earth. Repent of all your sins, and be baptized in water for the remission of them, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and receive the ordinance of the laying on of hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power, that ye may receive the Holy Spirit of God; and this is according to the Holy Scriptures, and the Book of Mormon; and the only way man can enter into the Celestial Kingdom. These are the requirements of the new covenant. or first principles of the Gospel of Christ; then “Add to your faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity; for if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful, in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁵

The Prophet also explained that, having begun the work of regenerating man to a spiritual plane where he was alive in Christ, it was necessary to gather scattered Israel and establish them upon the divine law of Zion. In that way the New Jerusalem was to be built in the latter days as a truly Christian society, and the Saints and their fellow Americans were to be given an opportunity to accomplish that great work. He announced: “The time has arrived when the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has set His hand again the second time to recover the remnants of his people, and with them to bring in the fulness of the Gentiles, and establish that covenant with them, which was promised when their sins should be taken away.”²⁶

Along with the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ which was being restored, an ancient scriptural record had been brought forth by divine means, to aid in the work of gathering Israel and building up Zion in the

last days. The Prophet explained:

The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians; having been found through the

ministration of an holy angel, and translated into our own language by the gift and power of God, after having been hid up in the earth for the last fourteen hundred years, containing the word of God which was delivered unto them. By it we learn that our western tribes of Indians are descendants from that Joseph which was sold into Egypt, and that the land of America is a promised land unto them, and unto it all the tribes of Israel will come, with as many of the Gentiles as shall comply with the requisitions of the new covenant.²⁷

There would be two areas to which the latter-day remnants of Israel would be gathered. The scattered remnants of the ancient kingdom of Israel²⁸ would be assembled on the Western hemisphere, along with the Gentiles who would repent. This would include, ultimately, the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, when they were finally revealed and came from the north countries, whose return would be preceded by great judgments upon America. The Prophet declared: "Pestilence, hail, famine, and earthquake will sweep the wicked of this generation from off the face of the land, to open and prepare the way for the return of the lost tribes of Israel from the north country."²⁹ Meanwhile, Joseph Smith said: "The tribe of Judah will return to old Jerusalem."³⁰

Two great centers had to be established for the millennial kingdom of Christ – the City of Zion, and Jerusalem. Joseph Smith declared:

The city of Zion spoken of by David, in the one hundred and second Psalm, will be built upon the land of America. "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads II (Isaiah xxxv:10); and then they will be delivered from the overflowing scourge that shall pass through the land. But Judah shall obtain deliverance at Jerusalem. See Joel ii:32; Isaiah xxvi:20 and 21; Jeremiah, xxxi: 12; Psalm 1:5; Ezekiel xxxiv:11, 12 and 13. These are testimonies that the Good Shepherd will put forth His own sheep, and lead them out from all nations where they have been scattered in a cloudy and dark day, to Zion, and to Jerusalem; besides many more testimonies which might be brought."³¹

Developments toward the building of Zion, the gathering of the Jews to Jerusalem, and the coming of great judgments were then

beginning to occur. Converts to the restored gospel, who were being given the opportunity to build Zion on the Western hemisphere, were then gathering to the state of Missouri to establish the Center Place of Zion. "The people of the Lord, those who have complied with the requirements of the new covenant, have already commenced gathering together to Zion," Joseph Smith explained.³² He also expected that as the work of the Lord progressed in the latter days, and as the baneful forces developed which were then being made manifest in society, great judgments would take place. Less than a fortnight before Joseph Smith wrote the Saxton letter, he received the revelation known as "The Prophecy on War," in which the Lord declared that the great era of latter-day judgments upon the world foretold by ancient prophets would begin "at the rebellion of South Carolina," when the Southern States would "be divided against the Northern States." Beginning with those future events, the time would finally come when war would "be poured out upon all nations." And if men still failed to repent and build up the Lord's kingdom, the ultimate consequence would be that the great era of latter-day judgments would finally make "a fun end of all nations."³³

In this context, Joseph Smith's statement of warning in the Saxton letter had significant meaning. That warning statement, part of which was in the portion of his letter which Saxton published, stands as a testimonial in a non-Mormon periodical that the Prophet was then aware of the coming of the American Civil War; and, as such, the Saxton letter supports the fact that Joseph had received the revelation known as "The Prophecy on War." Having stated the condition of the Christian world and set forth the way by which men could establish true peace and prosperity (which included the need to build Zion on the Western hemisphere), the Prophet declared emphatically in that portion of his letter which Saxton published: "And now I am prepared to say by the authority of Jesus Christ, that not many years shall pass away, before the United States shall present such a scene of *bloodshed* as has not a parallel in the history of our nation."³⁴

Traditionally, true prophets have never been merely religious figures, but they have spoken to the needs of society, of nations, and of the world. Joseph Smith was no exception. "I declare unto you the warning which the Lord has commanded me to declare to this generation," he concluded, "remembering that the eyes of my maker

are upon me, and that to him I am accountable for every word I say, wishing nothing worse to my fellow men than their eternal salvation.”³⁵ In looking back to Joseph Smith’s day and to the dramatic scenes in the American Civil War, men can now see the appropriateness of his warning, which stands as another testimony of his divine mission as a true prophet of the living God.

Endnotes

¹ This letter, written to N. C. Saxton of Rochester, New York, is found in the Joseph Smith Collection, Historical Department of the Church, Salt Lake City, Utah. The full text of the letter can be found in *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City, 1951), I, pp. 312-316. Hereafter this source is abbreviated HC, followed by the appropriate volume and page number. [See also “The Joseph Smith Papers” Letter to N.C. Saxton 4 January 1833 for a copy of the letter and the translation.]

² Letter of Joseph Smith to N.C. Saxton, February 12, 1833, Joseph Smith Collection; found also in HC, I, p. 326. [See also “The Joseph Smith Papers” Follow up letter to N.C. Saxton 12 Feb 1833.]

³ HC, I, p. 312.

⁴ HC, I, p. 326.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁶ Doctrine and Covenants 63:32-33. Hereafter this source is abbreviated D&C, followed by the section and verse number.

⁷ HC, I, p. 314. (Italics in the original.)

⁸ William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America*. (New York, 1939). pp.373-374. See also pp. 9-10, 375-378, 379, 386; Whitney Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (Ithaca, New York, 1950), pp. 254-264.

⁹ Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*. (London, 1837). I, p. 185.

¹⁰ *Niles' Weekly Register*. Baltimore, Maryland, August 8, September 5, 1835. (Italics added.)

¹¹ Emerson, “New England Reformers.”

¹² Sweet, *op. cit.*, pp. 373-374.

¹³ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The United States, 1830-1850* (New York, 1935), pp. 84-85.

¹⁴ Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1930), II, p. 68.

¹⁵ John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs*, ed. C. F. Adams (Philadelphia, 1877), v, p. 361.

¹⁶ Hermann von Holst. *John C. Calhoun* (Boston and New York. 1899), p. 7.

¹⁷ Avery Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (New York 1942). pp. 160-162. Craven cites from the *Works of John C. Calhoun* (Cralle edition), II, pp. 625-633. Even John Randolph of Roanoke. noted for his consistency of thought and for his hatred of slavery, was driven by lithe growing wrath of the Negro controversy ... into a position of advocating what he abhorred."--Russell Kirk, *Randolph of Roahoke: A Study of Conservative Thought* (Chicago, 1951), p. 128.

¹⁸ HC. 1. p. 314.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²⁰ See, for example. Helaman 5:12.

²¹ See Mosiah 3:19; 27:25-26; Alma 5:6-15; 22 3 Moses 6:52-62. 223 Nephi 11:39-40.

²² 3 Nephi 11:39-40

²³ Carl Russell Fish, *The Rise of the Common Man* (New York. 1929), p. 179.

²⁴ *Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes, Founder of the Onedia Community*, ed. George Wallingford Noyes (New York, 1923), p. 32.

²⁵ HC I. pp. 314-315.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 313. For references to this covenant, the Prophet cited Isaiah 11; Romans 11:25-27; Jeremiah 31 :31-33.

²⁷ HC, I. p. 315.

²⁸ The ancient kingdom of Israel consisted of the ten tribes with their capitol city at Samaria. When that kingdom was subjugated by Assyria. the leading families of the nation were taken into Assyria and later migrated to the north. while the general populace was scattered throughout the world.

²⁹ HC. I. p. 315. The Book of Mormon teaches that after the judgments of the last days. when the millennia kingdom is finally established. the ten tribes of Israel who return from the north will receive their inheritance in the area surrounding Jerusalem. See Ether 13:11.

³⁰ HC. I. p. 315.

³¹ HC. I. p.315

³² *Ibid.*

³³ D&C 87; 130:12-13.

³⁴ *American Revivalist, and Rochester Observer*, VII (February 2. 1833), p. 2; HC, I. p. 315.

³⁵ *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Section One 1830-34, p.17