

ANTICIPATIONS OF THE CIVIL WAR IN MORMON THOUGHT

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Since that historic day at Fort Sumter, men have sought to evaluate the Civil War and determine its basic causes. Among others who have spoken on the subject is Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet. His views are unique not only because of their content but also because they were first expressed over thirty years before hostilities commenced. Thereafter he continually repeated his views as he and his followers, with others, felt the lash of disrupting forces that finally terminated his life and brought civil war to the nation. People referred to the tall Yankee Prophet and his associates as Mormons, but to themselves they were Latter-day Saints (abbreviated Saints), called by modern revelation to usher in a new dispensation of the Christian gospel. While preaching a message of warning, they sought to build a New Jerusalem in Missouri, that a society capable of bringing peace to the earth might be established. The story of their successive treks while spanning the continent is the more interesting in light of their "foreknowledge" of the Civil War.¹

The Mormon Position

Joseph Smith claimed that by divine revelation, as early as 1823, he was informed that strife and warfare would characterize the future, unless intelligent preventive measures were taken. In 1828, he wrote that the "sword of vengeance of the Almighty" was threatening to "fall upon" the people.² A revelation the following year reaffirmed the coming of judgments, if people persisted "in the hardness of their hearts."³ Early in 1831 another revelation declared even more

pointedly that "wars in your own lands" were "nigh, even at the doors"--"not many years hence."⁴ Finally, on December 25, 1832, the Prophecy on War was given, detailing the picture of the coming Civil War: It would commence with "the rebellion of South Carolina"; it would cause "the death and misery of many souls"; the Southern States would be "divided against the Northern States"; and for assistance the Southern States would "call on other nations, even the nation of Great Britain."⁵

Thereafter the Mormon leader made repeated reference to the Prophecy on War. The coming conflict would probably arise through the slave question," he explained in 1843.⁶ Other details were clarified when he declared to a friend, "You will live to see war between the United States and Mexico, wherein the United States will acquire much territory to add to the slaveholding States or portion of the Union, out of which will grow a war between the Northern and Southern States."⁷ As to when the Civil War would take place, the Prophet reportedly stated" that whosoever lived to see the two sixes come together in '66 would see the American continent deluged in blood."⁸

While slavery and related issues were recognized as points around which future struggle would center, Mormon thought held that the basic cause of conflict centered in the inner fiber of men's souls. There enlightening spiritual forces from God that promote union and strength within society were said to be withdrawing, as a result of man's willful transgression and rebellion against their enlivening powers. The relationship of outward issues to inward causes of struggle might be seen by likening slavery and its related problems to hurdles along a race track. While there were obstacles to be surmounted, it was more significant that the nation would lose the necessary spring and coordination to meet these challenges. Here would be the chief cause of the outbreak of future hostilities.

Mormon literature repeatedly asserts man's dependency upon the Spirit of God, as an intelligent, enlightening power capable of promoting love, peace, joy, and social union among men.⁹ The right to the blessings that come from God's Spirit is the natural heritage of all men.¹⁰ But through willful transgression the rebellious "withdraw" themselves from its influence, or by their actions cause its withdrawal

from their lives. The issue lies with man, not with God.¹¹ To those who seek to save, Brigham Young explained, God "gives wisdom, increase, and power," but when men willfully depart from truth, God "takes away their wisdom . . . and they become insensible to their own interests."¹² With estrangement from the Spirit, a sense of "guilt, pain and anguish" occurs, resulting in feelings of insecurity, anxiety and uncertainty.¹³ Men are "filled with wrath, " as the growth of hatred, animosity and social conflict causes severe disruptions in society.¹⁴ When men withdraw themselves from the Spirit, said a prominent Mormon in 1847, "the world travails in pain and groans in bondage, and oppression, and cruelty, and strife, and bloodshed, and in ignorance, superstition, and zeal without knowledge."¹⁵ In the words of a Book of Mormon character, "When the Spirit ceaseth to strive with man then cometh speedy destruction."¹⁶

The Book of Mormon claims that here was the cause of the destruction by civil conflict of two early civilizations in ancient America.¹⁷ "The Spirit of the Lord ceased striving" with men in the first culture, the Mormon scripture explains, "for they were given up unto the hardness of their hearts, and the blindness of their minds that they might be destroyed."¹⁸ When the second people fell into serious transgression, God reportedly decreed, "Except they repent. I will withdraw my Spirit from them. . . and I will turn the hearts of their brethren against them unto their destruction."¹⁹ Here, too, would be the basic cause for civil war in modern America. Because men were failing to hearken to the "voice of the Spirit, " declared a revelation, the "whole world groaneth under sin and darkness."²⁰ A revelation, given in August, 1831, portrayed God as having to withdraw his "Spirit from the inhabitants of the earth, " which action would result in wars "upon the face of the earth, . . . by and by."²¹

To call attention to the general condition of the world and to warn America specifically, Joseph Smith wrote to N. E. Seaton, an editor in Rochester, New York. January 4, 1833. With reference to the revelation of August, 1831, he 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." Of the effect this withdrawal of spiritual powers would have upon American society. the Mormon Prophet then declared: "And now I am prepared to say by 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."²²