Will Things Get Better or Worse before the Second Coming?

Are the Latter-day Saints Premillenarians or Postmillenarians?

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For millennia, Christians of every variety have puzzled over the meaning of biblical prophecies that seemed at odds with one another. Passages in Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation spoke of impending disaster and doom at the end of the world. God was angry with the wicked and would destroy them with his mighty hand. Other passages in Revelation and Isaiah conveyed a different message. A new heaven and a new earth would come at the end of time, ushering in a millennium of perpetual peace. God seemed kinder and more benevolent, less inclined to destroy the wicked and the unjust. Just how the passages related to one another was never explained in the scriptures with any degree of specificity. Would the world end in calamity or in peace? Countless schemes have sought to work out a relationship between the two sets of images.[1]

The fulcrum in these end-time scenarios was always the triumphal return of Jesus Christ. Would Jesus come at the beginning of the Millennium or the end? Would the wicked be destroyed before Christ returned or not at all? Beginning with the works of postrestoration English prophecy writers of the seventeenth century, two basic positions emerged. One view held that at the end of time, moral and spiritual conditions

1. See, for example, John M. Court, *Approaching the Apocalypse: A Short History of Christian Millenarianism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008); Timothy P. Weber, "Millennialism and Apocalypticism," in *The Oxford Guide to United States History,* ed. Paul S. Boyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 503–4; Stephen Hunt, ed., *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1999).

on Earth would progressively worsen, ending in a wave of natural and spiritual calamities. Only an event outside of history, the Second Coming of Christ, would end these terrors and establish God's kingdom of peace on earth.[2] In contrast to the declension narrative, another view held that light and truth would gradually fill the world, brought on by human action, culminating in Christ's glorious return at the end of time. In the one view, the world was getting worse and worse; in the other, it was getting better and better. These Christian millenarianisms are but two instances of countless millenarian schemes, religious and secular, designed to make sense of the future of the earth and the ultimate destiny of the human family.[3]

By the 1960s, scholars had begun to distinguish these competing Christian positions with the terms *premillennialism* and *postmillennialism* (alternatively *premillenarianism* and *postmillenarianism,* the terms used in this essay). As the prefix suggests, premillenarians hold that Christ's return will come at the beginning of the Millennium, not at the end. Premillenarians typically look upon the state of the world in bleak terms: things are falling apart, and no amount of human effort can do anything to reverse the course of events. Postmillenarians, by contrast, tend to look upon the world more optimistically and to see human agency as vital to the dawning of the golden age. The spread of Christianity, the development of enlightened values like tolerance and equality, and the advent of educational and charitable institutions of all kinds are inching the world closer toward universal peace and harmony. Postmillenarians disagree on whether Christ will return, but all within the camp agree that human effort is not futile in creating a better future. Sometimes haltingly, sometimes rapidly, the world is steadily improving.[4]

The terms *premillenarian* and *postmillenarian* originally referred to beliefs about the timing of Jesus's return. In scholarly usage, however, these terms have long been used more broadly to refer to the two divergent eschatological understandings described above. They are often

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2. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1992), 66; Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 22.

3. James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: Eighteenth-Century New England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 28–29; see Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

4. On Christ's figurative reign, see Davidson, *Logic of Millennial Thought,* 261–76.

used with little or no reference at all to the timing of Jesus's return relative to the Millennium. In these terms' obsolete sense, Latter-day Saints are unquestionably premillenarian. This is no open topic. Yet how these terms' current meanings might apply to Latter-day Saints is a more complicated question. The terms can only imprecisely characterize restoration theology but may sometimes be useful as shorthand descriptions for the various points of view considered in this essay.

Latter-day Saints are generally of two minds when it comes to this debate. On the one hand, the Doctrine and Covenants paints a dour picture of the conditions that are to precede the Second Coming. Famine, pestilence, and violence of wide and grotesque proportion fill the pages of Joseph Smith's early revelations.[5] Like other premillenarians, early Latter-day Saints spoke of Jesus's literal and imminent return close on the heels of judgments that would wipe the wicked from the earth. But alongside these bleak pronouncements are more optimistic passages suggestive of postmillenarian thought. The Saints are to seek for light and truth. They are to establish temples and places of learning, to cultivate spiritual harmony between people in the hopes that understanding can grow "brighter and brighter until the perfect day" (D&C 50:24). Even if the end-time scenario had already been worked out in the mind of God, human effort very much matters to Latter-day Saints, in the nineteenth century and today.

The case for the premillenarian and postmillenarian positions has much to do with where we are looking and what we believe counts for evidence. In general, nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints tended to be more premillenarian in worldview and disposition. In the twentieth century, members tended to be more postmillenarian. Even then, there are exceptions to these generalizations, and elements from both strands of thought inform the Church today.

The Case for Latter-day Saints as Premillenarians

At first glance, the Latter-day Saint movement appears to fit comfortably within premillenarian Christianity. Joseph Smith is often placed within a stream of Anglo-American prophets who preached that the world was rotten and had to be destroyed before the Lord's Second Coming. Between 1750 and 1820, at least three hundred men and women were recognized as prophets in England and North America, many of them

5. See, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 5:19; 29:14–21; 35:14; 36:6; 38:11–12; 43:25–26.

doomsaying prophets of "loose millenarian movements": Joanna Southcott, Richard Brothers, Ann Lee, David Austin, Jemima Wilkinson, and later Joseph Smith and William Miller, to name a few.[6] Jesus was coming soon, and the wicked had to repent before it was too late.

These prophets can be joined together by a set of common concerns. As upstarts, they often criticized establishmentarian churches for their departure from the one true way. Like their Protestant Reformer and Puritan forebears, these prophets were concerned by dilution in the churches, and they taught a Christian primitivism that stressed a return of the spiritual gifts and power of New Testament Christianity. These prophets read the scriptures literally more than figuratively and sensed the nearness of sacred events. Jesus, after all, had spoken of destruction before his return. He had said he would come quickly (Matt. 24; Mark 13:26, 30, 33; Rev. 22:12–14). Awaiting Christ's quick return, these upstart prophets often organized their followers in communitarian societies modeled on the book of Acts.[7]

Joseph Smith's early revelations seemed to confirm the standard bleak premillenarian outlook. In his earliest recorded account of the First Vision, Joseph Smith linked Jesus Christ's anger to his speedy return. "The world lieth in sin at this time," the Lord said, "and none doeth good no not one." God was displeased with the state of the world. "Mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth," he said, "to visit them ac[c]ording to th[e]ir ungodliness. . . . Behold and lo I come quickly as it [is] written of me in the cloud clothed in the glory of my Father."[8] In Joseph Smith's early revelations, "I come quickly" was repeated over and

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6. Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 65, 73–74; Court, *Approaching the Apocalypse,* 111–38; Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993).

7. Theodore Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism,* 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute and North Carolina Press, 2011); Lincoln A. Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 138–39, 159; Matthew J. Grow and Bradley Kime, "Mormon Communalism and Millennialism in Trans-Atlantic Context," in *Protestant Communalism in the Trans-Atlantic World, 1650–1850,* ed. Philip Lockley (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 175–76; see also Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Donald E. Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

8. "History, circa Summer 1932," 3, Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3, also in Karen Lynn Davidson

over, giving newfound urgency to the spiritual lives of Latter-day Saints (D&C 33:18; 34:12; 35:27).

Joseph Smith himself often spoke of the world growing worse, not better. The wickedness of the world filled him with "the most painful anxiety," he once said. He observed the "withdrawal of Gods holy Spirit and the vail of stupidity which seems to be drawn over the hearts of the people." Everywhere he looked, he beheld the judgments of God "sweeping hundreds of thousands of our race (and I fear unprepared) down to the shades of death."[9] While visiting New York City in 1832, Joseph wrote home to his wife, Emma, that he believed "the anger of the Lord [was] kindled" against the city's inhabitants. Their works were sure to be "burned up with unquenchable fire." He compared New York to Nineveh, a city ripening for destruction.[10]

Early Latter-day Saint converts tended to share the same bleak worldview. Sidney Rigdon, one of the leading lights of the early movement, broke with the postmillenarian preacher Alexander Campbell in part over the question of whether the Millennium could be brought about by preaching alone.[11] Mormonism's early convert base included Shakers, radical Methodists, and reformed Baptists, all groups that taught an imminent Second Coming. Many converts seem to have been attracted to the restored gospel precisely because it offered safety from the judgments surely awaiting a wicked world.[12]

For early Latter-day Saints, gathering with the Lord's elect was the only way to avoid the judgments reserved for the wicked. The City of Zion, founded in Jackson County, Missouri, in the summer of 1831 was

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and others, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844,* Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 13.

9. "Letter to Noah C. Saxton, 4 January 1833," 14, Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-noah-c-saxton-4-january-1833/1, also in Matthew C. Godfrey and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833,* Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 351.

10. "Letter to Emma Smith, 13 October 1832," [2], Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-emma-smith-13-october-1832/2, also in Godfrey and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 2,* 304–14.

11. Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1993), 25–26; Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 24–25.

12. Grow and Kime, "Mormon Communalism and Millennialism," 166–68; Stephen J. Fleming, "The Religious Heritage of the British Northwest and the Rise of Mormonism," *Church History* 77, no. 1 (March 2008): 73–104; Givens and Grow, *Parley P. Pratt,* 39–40, 106–7; see also Malcolm R. Thorp, "The Religious Backgrounds of Mormon Converts in Britain, 1837–52," *Journal of Mormon History* 4, no. 1 (1977): 51–66.

to be a New Jerusalem where God's people could build a temple complex and find refuge from destruction while they awaited the Lord's return.[13] "A great many people imbibed the same idea which I did in the beginning," Brigham Young later recalled, "and really believed that in Jackson County all the earthly sorrows, afflictions, disappointments, and weaknesses pertaining to the flesh would be at an end, and that every one would be sanctified before the Lord, and all would be peace and joy from morning until evening, and from year to year, until the Savior should come."[14] Joseph Smith later expanded the idea of the City of Zion to include multiple sacred cities designed to "fill up the world in these last days."[15]

Even after the demise of the City of Zion at the hands of a mob, Latter-day Saints living in the nineteenth century and beyond anticipated a return to Jackson County. In 1890 and 1891, around the time when Joseph Smith would have been eighty-five years old, some Latter-day Saints anticipated a near Second Coming. Church leaders downplayed such rhetoric, however, and life soon returned to normal.[16] Although the timing of events has changed over the years, the basic series of events thought to be connected to Christ's return has remained largely unchanged since the mid-nineteenth century, and the basic premillenarian assumptions of early Church members have not been called into question.

The Case for Latter-day Saints as Postmillenarians

The case for Latter-day Saints as postmillenarians begins with the complication of the premillenarian and postmillenarian camps. The distinction between the two is not as clean as it was once thought to be. As historians looked more closely at the evidence, they found premillenarian and postmillenarian strains within the writings of the same thinker or movement. Jonathan Edwards, for example, was often classified as a postmillenarian who wrote hopefully of Christianity's advance, but

13. Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Random House 2007), 161–76.

14. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 2:252–53 (April 6, 1855).

15. "History, 1838-1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834]," 306, Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/312.

16. See Dan Erickson, *As a Thief in the Night: The Mormon Quest for Millennial Deliverance* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

he also wrote of God as a wrathful deity, reminiscent of premillenarian writings.[17]

James West Davidson argues that eighteenth-century postmillenarians like Edwards embraced an "afflictive model of progress" in which the advance of Christianity comes only after a series of setbacks and trials.[18] Thus, postmillenarians could hopefully anticipate the approaching Millennium while, at the same time, somewhat gloomily foresee only wickedness, persecution, and turmoil on the short-term horizon. Postmillenarians, in other words, were not necessarily the "dewy-eyed optimists" they seemed to be at first glance.[19]

The split mind can be found in Joseph Smith as well. In the same 1832 letter to Emma in which he said the wicked were doomed to be burned up by fire, Smith asked himself whether God was displeased with the "truly great and wonderful" architectural splendor he observed in New York City. No, he concluded, "seeing these works are calculated to make men comfortable, wise, and happy." Presumably, Joseph Smith would have commended any invention intended to "make men comfortable, wise, and happy" as being in keeping with God's plan for the latter days.[20]

Nor was Joseph Smith opposed to social reform, which was typically affirmed by postmillenarians. Evangelical Christians like Charles Finney taught that the expansion of United States sovereignty, Christianity, and social reforms like temperance and antislavery could help bring about an earthly millennium before Christ's Second Coming.[21] Like other postmillenarians, many early Latter-day Saints embraced social reform. One early revelation enjoined the Saints to be "anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness"—implying, of course, that individuals had a role to play in God's eschatology (D&C 58:27). Setting the example, Joseph Smith revealed the Word of Wisdom, which promised "great treasures of knowledge" to those who shunned alcohol, tobacco, and hot drinks.[22]

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17. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More,* 76.

18. Davidson, *Logic of Millennial Thought,* 151, see 75, 260; Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 18–21.

19. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More,* 76.

20. "Letter to Emma Smith, 13 October 1832," [1].

21. John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016), 126; see Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

22. Doctrine and Covenants 89:19; see also Jed Woodworth, "The Word of Wisdom," in *Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants,*

He later ran for president of the United States on a platform that sought to mitigate human suffering of various kinds: penal reform, the abolition of slavery, and the founding of "seminaries of learning."[23] Rather than seeing it as pointless to try to regenerate a dying world, as premillenarians often did, early Latter-day Saints saw themselves as active agents in preparing the world for the return of Christ.

Near the end of his life, Joseph Smith sought to distance himself from more ardent premillenarians. At the April 1843 general conference of the Church, while commenting on William Miller's failed prophecy of Christ's imminent return, Smith recounted praying and hearing a voice proclaim, "My son, if thou livest till thou art 85 years of age, thou shalt see the face of the son of man." Smith then prophesied "in the name of the Lord God" that "the Son of Man will not come in the heavns till I am 85. years old."[24] That view pushed back the return of Christ even as other premillenarians were pushing it up.

Likewise, the reconfiguration of Zion tended to shrink the space ripe for destruction and expand space designated as a refuge. "The whole America"—North and South America—"is Zion," Joseph Smith proclaimed shortly before his death. "Build chu[r]ches where ever th[e] people receive the gospel."[25] The instruction to build up churches everywhere implied that the Saints could build Zion anywhere and at any time. The idea could be found from the early days of the Restoration and stood in tension with the belief that Zion needed to be built in a single geographical location. Like the early Saints, later Saints conceived of their lives as a *work*: they were to proclaim the gospel to every kindred, tongue, and people; gather out the Lord's elect; and strive to build temples and do temple work wherever they happened to be living. The

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ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 183–91.

23. Joseph Smith, *General Smith's Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States* (Nauvoo, Ill.: John Taylor, 1844), 9.

24. Doctrine and Covenants 130:14–15; see also "Discourse, 6 April 1843–B, as Reported by Willard Richards," [73], Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-6-april-1843-b-as-reported-by-willard-richards/10, also in Andrew H. Hedges and others, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843,* Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), 338.

25. "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 4, 1 March–22 June 1844," [73–74], Joseph Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-4-1-march-22-june-1844/75, also in Andrew H. Hedges and others, eds., *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844,* Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015), 223.

vastness of this labor pushed the timetable of the Lord's return backward, not forward.

In the nineteenth century, Latter-day Saint missionaries routinely warned potential converts to flee from their lands of residence—Babylon—and move to Zion in the Great Basin of the American West. But in the twentieth century and especially after 1920, missionaries advised converts to stay in their native lands. The old "Babylon-Zion" distinction lived on in Latter-day Saint hymns, but the demarcation of space as "inside" and "outside" came to an end. Zion, more a state of the heart and less a geographical place, could be found wherever the person lived. Babylon was understood more in figurative than in literal terms.[26]

Latter-day Saints continued to have much in common with premillenarians well into the twentieth century. At a time when postmillenarianism was in steep decline, leading Latter-day Saint theologians like President Joseph Fielding Smith and Elder Bruce R. McConkie articulated a dispensational view of world history not unlike that popularized by John Nelson Darby and other Protestant fundamentalists, in which the earth is divided into seven 1,000-year periods, or "dispensations." The earth was thought to be very near the end of the sixth dispensation, awaiting the Lord's return at the beginning of the seventh. According to some frameworks, the righteous would be caught up to meet the Savior when he returned amid widespread destruction.[27] More recently, some Latter-day Saints have overlaid belief in the rapture with a reading of the Book of Mormon that sees the book of 3 Nephi as a type or prophecy of the last days. Just as God's wrath was poured out upon the wicked Nephites, leaving only "the more righteous part of the people" to witness Jesus Christ's appearance in the flesh in the New World, so too will the ungodly be destroyed and a remnant spared at Christ's Second Coming.[28]

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26. Turner, *Mormon Jesus,* 140–41, 145–46; Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 130–49.

27. Doctrine and Covenants 77:6–7; Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Signs of the Times: A Series of Discussions* (Independence, Mo.: Press of Zion, 1942); Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982); James H. Moorhead, "The Erosion of Postmillenialism in American Religious Thought, 1865–1922," *Church History* 53, no. 1 (March 1984): 61–77; Court, *Approaching the Apocalypse,* 123–24; Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 332–33.

28. 3 Nephi 10:12; see also Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion," *Ensign* 16, no. 11 (November 1986), 4–7; Donald W. Parry and Jay A. Parry, *Understanding the Signs of the Times* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 1999), 451, 494.

But the Protestant fundamentalist position, influential as it was, stood in tension with other Latter-day Saint thinking. Elder B. H. Roberts's magnum opus, *The Truth, the Way, the Life,* accepted the dispensationalist framework without privileging a cataclysm at the end of time. For Roberts, "the destructive forces—so called—as well as the creative forces in the universe are under the dominion of law, which will conserve and perpetuate through eternity the orderly cosmos." Destruction (and the regeneration he believed inevitably accompanied it) was more the order of a rational universe and less the workings of an angry God.[29]

Elder Roberts was one of a handful of important second-generation thinkers who represent a break from the first generation's concern with apocalypticism. As the Latter-day Saints sought accommodation with the world, many aligned themselves with liberal Protestantism's turn away from end-time speculation. In fact, twentieth-century Latter-day Saints can generally be distinguished from nineteenth-century Saints by their attention to the distant past more than to the distant or near future. Nephi Anderson's novel *Added Upon,* which went through thirty-five printings between 1898 and 1973, captured the Saints' fascination with a deep past where premortal spirits fall in love and find each other once again in mortality. It is telling that the tradition's most beloved musical theater production, *Saturday's Warrior,* descends directly from *Added Upon.*[30] The basic tension in both *Added Upon* and *Saturday's Warrior* is the idea of measuring up in mortality to the destiny *one has already chosen* in the premortal realms. This is a 180-degree turn away from the nineteenth-century Saints' preoccupation with purifying and readying oneself for some glorious future event wholly outside of time.

Even if they accepted the dispensational framework, most twentieth-century Church leaders resisted making dire prognostications about the end times. During the Cold War, evangelical preachers often spoke of coming destructions as a way of driving people to repent, just as Jonathan Edwards had done. Not so in twentieth-century Latter-day Saint sermons, where the subject of the Second Coming largely disappeared.[31]

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29. B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology,* ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1996), 218.

30. Nephi Anderson, *Added Upon: A Story* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1898); *Saturday's Warrior,* dir. Bob Williams (Fieldbrook Entertainment, 1973); see Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 270, 285.

31. Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed: Themes in the Development of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984), 253.

More stress was put on living righteously and peaceably in the present, and less emphasis was given to future destructions and signs. "We must have faith in the future regardless of the ultimate eventualities," Apostle Richard L. Evans urged at the dawn of the Cold War. Elder Evans paraphrased President Wilford Woodruff, who, when asked when the Second Coming would be, reportedly said, "I would live as if it were to be tomorrow—but I am still planting cherry trees!"[32] The quotation captured the divided mind on the matter of millenarian questions.

Unlike many premillenarian Christians, Latter-day Saints generally did not look upon the year 2000 as the beginning of the end. By the late nineteenth century, many Latter-day Saints had relegated belief in an imminent Second Coming to a "hobby of fringe elements." This group said, in effect, "We will now move smoothly along into the millennium; [and] no great sorrows or upheavals will trouble us." For some, the fall of Communism had suggested that a "progressive peace" would precede the Lord's Second Coming.[33]

The chasm between Latter-day Saints and premillenarian Christians today can be seen in their approach to natural disasters. For prominent Protestant fundamentalists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 Haitian earthquake were God's way of punishing sin. Latter-day Saint leaders, meanwhile, spoke of these disasters exclusively in humane, compassionate terms, offering no explanation for the disaster's cause. Modern Latter-day Saints are much less comfortable attributing natural disasters to God's wrath than their forebears were. Food storage and emergency preparedness are necessary, Latter-day Saints teach, not just for the Saints to help themselves but to lend aid to others not in the Church. Rather than attributing the destruction wrought by natural disasters to God's will, Latter-day Saint Charities and the Church's "Helping Hands" program seeks to minimize the effects of natural disasters around the world.

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32. Richard L. Evans, in *One Hundred Twentieth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1950), 105. Martin Luther is alleged to have said much the same thing: if he discovered the world would end tomorrow, he would immediately "go out into the garden and plant a tree." Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 181.

33. Avraham Gileadi, *The Last Days: Types and Shadows from the Bible and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 1. Still, the Church's commercial press capitalized on interest in end times as the year 2000 approached. See, for example, Parry and Parry, *Understanding the Signs of the Times*.

Contemporary Latter-day Saints are known more for their sunny, optimistic dispositions than for an anxious, brooding, sky-is-falling premillenarianism. The outlook can be seen in a 2005 talk in which Apostle Boyd K. Packer briefly acknowledged that these are the last days of the earth's history before he moved quickly to the many reasons to avoid pessimism. "When I think of the future," he said, "I am overwhelmed with a feeling of positive optimism."[34]

Conclusion

Today, Latter-day Saints do not look for an imminent return of Jesus the way they once did. The "signs of the times" are not discussed in detail in the lessons missionaries preach to potential converts. Church leaders today do not talk publicly about a return to Missouri or about judgments that leaders once said must precede the Second Coming.[35] But the internet has kept the older teachings alive. In the backs of their minds, believers know that teachings long forgotten and seemingly discarded could be taught once again in a Church that holds to a belief in modern revelation. Older teachings can reappear, and newer teachings can be set aside. Premillenarianism and postmillenarianism are likely to ebb and flow in the future, in new combinations, just as they have done in the past.

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34. Boyd K. Packer, "On Zion's Hill," *Ensign* 35, no. 11 (November 2005): 70.
35. Turner, *Mormon Jesus,* 149–50.