

# Section 87

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Section 87 came during a Constitutional crisis. Congress had passed tax laws that favored northern factories over southern planters. So a South Carolina convention “unilaterally nullified the tariff and forbade its collection. President Andrew Jackson, refusing to acknowledge this assertion of state power, called out troops. By Christmas 1832, a military confrontation appeared imminent.”<sup>1</sup>

Latter-day Saints and other Christians viewed these events (along with a plague in India and a nearly global outbreak of cholera) in eschatological terms, meaning they thought the end of the world would come soon.

At least that’s how it looked to Joseph Smith and others late in 1832. Wars and rumors of wars, desolating sicknesses and scourges were in the news.<sup>2</sup> Joseph asked for and received a revelation about what was to come. It said that wars—plural—would begin shortly with South Carolina’s rebellion, then continue until wars had gone global and resulted in “a full end of all nations” (D&C 87:6). The revelation foresaw slave rebellions and the uprising of “remnants” vexing the Gentiles, which Joseph and the early Saints interpreted in Book of Mormon terms to mean descendants of Lehi irritating the unrepentant (Mormon 7:1–10; 3 Nephi 10; D&C 19:27).<sup>3</sup>

Section 87 is mainly descriptive, not prescriptive. The first seven verses describe what God knows will happen because people reject His laws and His love. It is not about what He wants to happen or what would happen if people obeyed His laws and reflected His

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 191.

<sup>2</sup> “Signs of the Times,” *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 8 (January 1833): 62.

<sup>3</sup> “[Revelation, 25 December 1832 \[D&C 87\]](#),” p. 32, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 7, 2020.

love. It describes unfathomable violence by which the inhabitants of the earth “feel the wrath, and indignation, and chastening hand of an Almighty God” whom they have rejected. Given the impending eschaton (day of the Lord), the prescriptive point in the last verse is “stand ye in holy places, and be not moved” (D&C 87:8).

Is that a command to be passive? Does it mean we should be bystanders or immobilized by fear? I think it means something like “take a stand for holiness and don’t get pushed around.” I interpret it as a command to take an immovable stand for the laws and love of God in a world descending into self-destruction. The otherwise depressing revelation ends with good news for those who take such a stand: The day of the Lord—the eschaton—comes quickly (D&C 87:8).

Joseph Smith may have looked foolish to some when the crisis blew over. Civil war didn’t come. It didn’t start with the rebellion of South Carolina, nor result in death and misery, or global warfare, or the end of nations. Well, at least not right away, as Joseph and others probably expected.

The eschaton never seems to happen as expected. That’s the story of Christian eschatology in a nutshell. Since the days of Paul at least, Christians have been expecting the end of the world any day. Every generation of Christians has waited for the end times, and there are always some Christians somewhere who are sure that it’s coming very, very soon.

Early Latter-day Saints were like that, though not quite as much as the followers of William Miller (1782–1849). He was a generation older than Joseph Smith. He was a Baptist, then a Deist, but the combination of having his life miraculously saved in the War of 1812 and the deaths of loved ones led him to conversion to Jesus Christ, and he renewed his Baptist faith. He longed for Jesus’s return to end wars and death. Like me, William Miller didn’t have the knowledge or skills or the revelation necessary to read and understand apocalyptic parts of the Bible in context. So he made some assumptions that led him to interpret Daniel 8:14 to mean that the Savior would return sometime between March 21, 1843, and a year later.

Some of William Miller’s followers got even more specific. They narrowed the day of the Savior’s Second Coming to April 3, 1843. They were not the only ones interested as that day approached. Latter-day Saints were also looking forward to the Savior’s

Second Coming, studying the prophecies, trying to discern the signs of the times, as Christians had been doing for nearly two millennia.

So it was no wonder that on Sunday, April 2, 1843, the subject came among the Saints. Joseph told them,

I prophecy in the Name of the Lord God that the commenceme[n]t of bloodshed as preparat[o]ry to the coming of the son of man. will commenc[e] in South Carolina.— (it probably may arise through the slave trade.)— this the a voice declard to me. while I was praying earne[s]tly on the subje[c]t 25 December 1832. I earnestly desird to know concern[in]g the coming of the Son of Man & prayed. when— a voice said to me, Joseph, my, son, if thou livest until thou art 85 years old thou shalt see the face of the son of man. therefore let this suffice & trouble me no more on this matter.<sup>4</sup>

The next day was April 3, 1843. It turned out not to be the eschaton. Joseph’s journal entry takes a poke at Miller and his followers: “tis too. pleas[a]nt. for false prophets.” A few days later on April 6, 1843, Joseph again told his experience a decade earlier of praying to know when the Savior’s Second Coming would be, and this time he added how he had decided to interpret the Lord’s intentionally vague revelation:

[W]ere I going to prophecy. I would procpesy [prophecy] the end will not come in 1844. or 5— or 6. or 40 years more [p. [72]] there are those of the rising generation who shall not taste death till christ come. <I was once praying earnestly upon this subject. and a voice said unto me.> My son, if thou livest till thou art 85 years of age, thou shalt see the face of the son of man. . . . <I was left to draw my own conclusions concerni[n]g this &,> I took the liberty to conclude that if I did live till that time Jesus <he> would make his appearance.— <but I do not say whether he will make his appeara[n]ce, or I shall go where he is.—> I prophecy in the name of the Lord God.— & let it be written. <that the> Son of Man will not

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<sup>4</sup> “[Instruction, 2 April 1843, as Reported by Willard Richards](#),” p. [39], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 7, 2020.

come in the heavns till I am 85. years old 48 years hence or about 1890—” (cross-reference D&C 130:14–17).

Look at the way Joseph read his own revelations in the context of his culture’s eschatology. He accurately prophesied the American Civil War, but he didn’t fully understand his prophecy. When he received the revelation in 1832, as South Carolina was threatening secession, he assumed, as almost all Christians have done, that the Savior’s Second Coming would be soon. Then in 1843 Joseph specifically noted the difference between what the Lord revealed and what he, Joseph, interpreted it to mean. The Lord’s revelation: “Joseph, my, son, if thou livest until thou art 85 years old thou shalt see the face of the son of man. therefore let this suffice & trouble me no more on this matter.” Joseph’s interpretation:

I was left to draw my own conclusions concerni[n]g this &> I took the liberty to conclude that if I did live till that time Jesus <he> would make his appearance.— <but I do not say whether he will make his appeara[n]ce, or I shall go where he is.—> I prophecy in the name of the Lord God.— & let it be written. <that the> Son of Man will not come in the heavns till I am 85. years old 48 years hence or about 1890.—

This is a terrific way to show that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God and a frontier farmer in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) United States. That means that he knew things from God that no one else could and that he understood them as most everyone else in his time and place would.

Sometimes Joseph didn’t understand right away how to interpret the Lord’s revelations. He referred to his Christmas 1832 revelation occasionally but never published it during his lifetime. Latter-day Saints began to pay attention to it in the 1850s as the American Civil War loomed. Then, in 1861, when it began to be fulfilled to the letter, a Philadelphia newspaper reprinted the revelation and asked, “Have we not had a prophet among us?”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “A Mormon Prophecy,” Philadelphia Sunday Mercury, May 5, 1861, reprinted in Robert J. Woodford, *The historical development of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 3 volumes (PhD dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1974), 2:1110.