

Hard Questions in Church History

Lynne Hilton Wilson

Establish a Zion People for the Lord's Second Coming

Questions:

- What events will transpire before the Second Coming?
- How can we prepare?

Short Answers:

- “The world is in commotion but the Church is in forward motion.” (Elder Neal A. Maxwell, *General Conference*, April 2002).
- “This is all part of the Lord’s plan. This is His plan for the Church and world now, so listen and follow the prophet.” (Elder Kevin Pearson, *Leadership Training Meeting*, August 2020).

Protestant Interpretation of the Bible vs. Restored Understanding of the Last Days

The Second Great Awakening (1801-1840) stirred up a whirlwind of interest in the Lord’s Second Coming. The interests and eager curiosities of the earliest generation of Latter-day Saints interest probably stemmed from their surrounding culture. Yet Joseph’s restored scripture revealed a wealth of different ideas about the Last Days and the Millennium. His revelations are pregnant with details and depth that did not match and went far beyond the culture of that day. In comparison to the Bible’s scanty scriptural information about establishing a Zion society, the Second Coming, and the Millennium, the Doctrine and Covenants is full of informative references and inspiring resources.

This handout focuses on the historical setting from the early 19th Century, including their views of the Millennium. This is followed by the prophesied plagues that will precede the Lord’s Coming (D&C 29, etc.), the hope of establishing a people of Zion (D&C 28), and Elias’s call to gather Israel (D&C 27). Future lectures will address other eschatological topics and the Millennium as referenced in D&C 43, 45, 77, 84-88, and 116.

19th Century Historical Perspective: The Last Days

In America’s early national history, Christians took a keen interest in the Lord’s Second Coming, starting with the Pilgrims who hoped to be “a light on a hill” to purify the world. Preachers often addressed the subject, and city planners used the word “Zion” for towns, streets, and stores. American religious history books are filled with ideas of “manifest destiny,” stories of those expecting the Last Days, references to the burning of the earth, and the Second Coming of the Lord. In addition, here are three examples of eschatological thought from Joseph Smith’s contemporaries who led religious movements:

1. **Alexander Campbell** (1788-1866) dedicated himself to preaching the biblical truths of Christ, as Campbell’s father did in Ireland. One step in that direction was to begin a new periodical in 1830. Its purpose was to send out a warning voice: *The Millennial Harbinger*. As his title suggests, his writings emphasized a post-millennial anticipation of Christ’s

return. He focused it on “that political and religious order of society called The Millennium, which will be the consummation of that ultimate amelioration of society proposed in the Christian Scriptures.” Campbell claimed that as “far as the ancient order of things . . . the religion of the New Testament, is restored.” By the mid-1850s the *Millennial Harbinger* had a circulation of approximately 15,000 (Boring, *Disciples and the Bible*, 17, 14, 15).

2. **William Miller** (1782-1849) studied the Book of Daniel and concluded that he had calculated the date when for the Lord’s Second Coming. By 1831 he began a New York periodical, “The Midnight Cry.” Shortly thereafter he expanded circulation to Boston, with “Signs of the Times.” In the five months preceding April 1843, approximately 600,000 copies were distributed to interested Americans. Miller estimated that between 50,000 and 100,000 people gathered on April 18, 1844 to greet the Lord at His Second Coming. When Christ did not appear, Miller recalculated and determined October 22, 1844 was the correct day. On that date over 20,000 believers experienced “the great disappointment.” This became the beginning of the Seventh Day Adventist Church (William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ*, 289).
3. **Mother Ann Lee** (1736-1784) The Shaking Quakers’ official church name was “The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing,” and it was also known as “the Millennial Church.” They were led by Mother Ann, first in England, and then in the United States. She claimed to usher in the Millennium as the female version of Christ reincarnate. This came to her in a vision during an incarceration in an insane asylum. There she had another vision where Adam and Eve told her that sex was the root of all evil. She felt there was no need for offspring, because God’s offspring would soon arrive to destroy the wicked.

In 1774, after much persecution, Mother Ann and a group of followers came to America. They became known as the Shaking Quakers because of their ecstatic behavior and trembling during their services. Over the next fifty years, a branch of Shaking Quakers worshiped in North Union, Ohio, near Kirtland. They lived in a communal society, with equality for men and women and gender segregation as much as possible (Hillerbrand, *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, 3.54). Early Latter-day Saint convert Leman Copley had previously been a member of this community of Shakers and returned to them after a few years (D&C 49:1).

19th Century Historical Perspective: Christian Expectations of the Millennium

Questions:

- What did the Prophet Joseph Smith and his contemporaries understand as the millennium?

The Bible contains several verses regarding the period of time leading up to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Many generations of Christians believed the Savior’s return was imminent. They were aware of His discussion on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 24) and John the Revelator’s prophecies (Rev. 8:1-19:2), both of which discuss the eschatological ending of the world. With limited information, Christians have interpreted these scriptures differently. As early as 400 A.D., three basic interpretations were debated. Generally speaking, these three interpretations are:

1. **Pre-millennialists:** After a period of tribulation Jesus would physically return before a literal thousand-year Millennium, and reign in a golden age of peace. Some early Church Fathers held this view.
2. **Amillennialism:** The millennium began when Christ established His church and the thousand number is not literal. It symbolizes the Church's work with the Spirit. Believers of Amillennialism claim Satan is already bound and when the church age ends, Christ will return and establish a new heaven and a new earth after the judgment (Acts 2:16-21; Matt. 12:28; Luke 17:20-21; Rom. 14:17).
3. **Post-millennialists:** Jesus established His church and it will prosper in a thousand-year golden age where Christian ethics will prosper. After the Millennium Christ will sit in judgment (Matt 28:19).

Since the time of the Ephesus Council held in 431 A.D., most Christians have followed “post-millennial” thought. The Lord revealed repeatedly to the Prophet Joseph in revelations contained in the Doctrine and Covenants that this is a misunderstanding. The glorified Savior will come prior to the Millennium. (We are pre-millennialists.)

The Last Days and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in Restored Scripture

The Restoration of Christ's Gospel was restored, in part, to usher in the Lord's return to rule and reign on earth (Rev 9; D&C 77:13). In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord revealed much information about the Last Days so that His church and people can prepare for His Coming. He promised, “For I, the Almighty, have laid my hands upon the nations, to scourge them for their wickedness” (D&C 84:96). We have been told by modern prophets that the world is wicked enough for the Lord to come.

The problem is not the wickedness, but that God's people (known as the bride or the church) are not righteous enough for His coming. The Book of Revelation describes a direct relationship between the timing of the Second Coming and the preparation of God's people. Once the church members are sanctified, “The marriage of the Lamb [will] come . . . [because] his wife hath made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7).

Plagues of the Last Days

Although we are living in the “Last Days” before Jesus's return (Rev. 9; D&C 77:13), we know that much still has to be fulfilled even after the opening of the seventh seal before the Lord's return (D&C 77:7). We still have the hope that some of the calamities will be cut short. Lord promised the Latter-day Saints:

For I, the Almighty, have laid my hands upon the nations, to scourge them for their wickedness. And plagues shall go forth, and they shall not be taken from the earth until I have completed my work, which shall be cut short in righteousness (D&C 84:97, also see D&C 52:11, D&C 109:59).

And in D&C 29:14-20 and in other sections, the Lord enumerates some of the plagues. Some overlap with Moses's plagues in Exodus and the plagues referenced in the Book of Revelation.

Moses' Plagues		Plagues of the Last Days	
	Exodus	Revelation	D&C
1. Turn water to blood	Ex 7:14-24	Rev 8:8; 11:6; 16:4-6	

2. Frogs	Ex 8:2-15		
3. Lice or gnats	Ex 8:16-19		
4. Swarms of flies	Ex 8:21-32		D&C 29:18
5. Pestilence of livestock	Ex 9:1-7		D&C 43:25; 97:26
6. Boils on people/animals	Ex 9:8-12		
7. Thunderstorm hail + fire	Ex 9:22-6	Rev 8:7	D&C 29:16, 43:21,25, 87:6; 97:26; 108:30
8. Locusts	Ex 10:1-20	Rev 9:2	
9. Sun darkened	Ex 10:21-29	Rev 8:12	D&C 29:14
10. Death of firstborn	Ex 11:1-12:36	Rev 9:13-19	
11. Famine, plague, earthquake			D&C 29:14-21; 87:6

Fifteen Prophesied Events Preceding the Second Coming of Jesus Christ

- Book of Mormon Will Be Brought Forth** (Isa 29:4-18; Ezek. 37; 2 Ne 3; 27; 29; 3 Ne 21:1-11; Morm 8).
- Restoration of Christ's Gospel** (Isa 2; 4; 5; 10; 11; 13; 18; 24; 29; 33; 34; 35; 51; 52; 54; 60; 63; 64; Acts 3:19-21; Dan 7; Rev 14:6-8; D&C 29:4; 45:26-32; 52:11; 84:96-99; 133:36-41).
- Restoration of Priesthood Keys** (Mal 3:1-6; 4:5-6; D&C 11:11-16; 13; 27; 110; 128).
- Gathering of the Twelve Tribes of Israel** (or Children of the Covenant) through preaching the gospel to every kindred, tongue and people (Acts 1:6-11; 2 Ne 30:6; D&C 1:4-5; 29:2, 7, 8, 27; 49:24-25; 110:11; 133:26-37). We still have the task of bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Arab nations, India, and China (which make up about half the current population of the world).
- Return of Judah to Jerusalem**—Orson Hyde dedicated Jerusalem on October 24, 1841 for the return of the Jewish people (D&C 45:25; 133:13).
- Building Temples and Gather Genealogical Research** (Mal 3:1; 4:6; D&C 110:1-10).
- Plagues: Hailstorm, flies, maggots, boils, etc.** (Luke 21:26; Rev 11:19; 16:21; D&C 29:14-21; 45:31; 84:92-97; 121:7).
- Desolations: Earthquakes, tribulations, fires, floods, cities sink, and famines** (Morm 8:26-41; D&C 29:8, 16, 21; 45:26, 33; 61:4-5, 14-15; 87:6; 88:89-90; 97:26-28; 112:23-24; etc.).
- Wickedness:** The wicked are cursed and will experience plagues and burnings because they repent not (2 Ne. 27:1-2; Eth. 15:19; Moro. 8:28; 9:4; D&C 1:33, 35; 29:8-9, 11, 17, 27, 45; 63:32; 112:23-24).
- Wars and Rumors of Wars including Armageddon** with all nations (army of two hundred million). Peace is taken from the earth (Zech. 12-14; Joel 3; Ezek. 38-39; Rev. 9; D&C 29:14-21; 63:33; 97:22-24; 87; JS-H 1:32).
- Appearance of Christ to Church Leaders at Adam-ondi-Ahman and Building of Temples in Jackson County, Missouri** (D&C 116)
- Signs and Wonders in the Heavens:** Signs in Heavens, sun darkens, moon turned to blood (Joel 2:30-31; Matt. 24:29-30; D&C 29:14-16; 34:9; 45:39-42; 49:23; 88:87-90).
- Two Prophets Preaching in Jerusalem** for 3½ years, followed by their death and resurrection 3½ days later (D&C 77:15; Rev 11).
- Wicked Burned:** (Mal 4; D&C 29:9-10; 63:34, 54; 101:23-31; 133:63-64).
- Christ Returns in Red to the Mount of Olives with New Jerusalem and all Righteous Dead:** (Isa. 65:17-25; Rev. 1:7; 11:15; 1 Thes 4:17; D&C 29:11; 101:23-31; 133:22-25; Moses 7:63-64).

Saints' Responsibility for the Return of our King

The Lord revealed much information about the Last Days so that we disciples, can prepare—and not be confused, frightened, or misunderstand. Disciples of Christ need to remember that as His servants, we need to help with the preparations for His return. As God's servants, disciples can do much to help others prepare for the Lord's Second Coming. As His servants, we can hear our assignments through His words in scripture, from the Spirit and prayer. If we misunderstand our relationship to God, we may think that our relationship is one of God serving us. If our prayers become more “like dropping memos on a desk in a heavenly office—“Please take care of this as soon as possible” we need to realign our relationship with God as our Master (Larry Y. Wilson, BYU Speeches: The Return of the King, Dec 2015). The Lord needs his servants (1) to build a Zion society and (2) gather Israel with the spirit of Elias.

Zion (D&C 28:9)

One of the oft repeated eschatological ideas in scripture, and expanded on in modern revelation, is the concept of Zion. Forty percent of Joseph's canonized revelations reference “Zion”—and even more if we add in references to the Last days, the Lord's Second Coming, and the millennium. In D&C 28:9, “Zion” is used for the eighth time in the canonized revelations. By September 1830, when the church was only six months old, Zion was already a familiar theme.

In the Old Testament, Zion is often synonymous with Jerusalem. Isaiah and the Psalms refer to “Mount Zion” as the place where the God dwells (Isaiah 8:18; 24:23; Psalm 74:2). Zion was the location where God enthroned His King David (Psalm 2:6). In modern revelation we learn that Zion is a name for “the pure in heart” (D&C 97:21), and that a Zion society must be reestablished prior to the coming of the Lord. In 1830 Joseph received three chapters on Enoch's Zion, expanding our understanding of their consecrated life style and learning much, including the fact that there were “no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). We find the Doctrine and Covenants filled with ideas about Zion.

“Zion” cited in Scripture	Old Testament	New Testament	Book of Mormon	D&C 1-133 (Joseph Smith's words)	Book of Moses
Number of verses:	153	7 (Sion)	42	191	14
Ratio: # Verses with Zion / per 100,000 Words	25.1	3.9	15.7	178.0	110.0

In addition to its numerical predominance, Zion takes on new meanings in our modern scriptures. The expanded definitions include:

- D&C 43:8-11; 101:16-22; 3 Ne 20-22, a land appointed for the righteous disciples of Christ to gather for purification into “stakes . . . of Zion”
- D&C 45:66-67, a “city of refuge” and protection from the last plagues and sins
- D&C 84:23-45, Moses “sought diligently” to establish a Zion people without success
- D&C 97:21, “pure in heart”
- D&C 100:13, 16, a place for “pure people” who serve God “in righteousness”
- Alma 13:10-14, Melchizedek's people were “made pure and entered into the rest of the Lord their God”
- Morm 10:31-33; Alma 13:11-12, A place where the “pure” live and are “sanctified”

- Moses 7:19, Zion is a “city of Holiness” and a way of life (also achieved in 4 Ne 1:3, 15-16)
- Moses 7:18; 4 Ne 1:3, they share “all things common” and have “no poor”
- Moses 7:61, Prepare “an Holy City . . . and be looking forth for the time of my coming; for there shall be my tabernacle, and it shall be called Zion, a New Jerusalem”
- Moses 7:69, God “dwelt in the midst of Zion; and . . . Zion was not, for God received it up into his own bosom”

The aspect of the Church bringing souls to Christ and establishing a Zion society will prepare the Saints to greet the Lord at His Coming. Elder Christofferson taught:

Zion is Zion because of the character, attributes, and faithfulness of her citizens. Remember, “the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). If we would establish Zion in our homes, branches, wards, and stakes, we must rise to this standard. It will be necessary (1) to become unified in one heart and one mind; (2) to become, individually and collectively, a holy people; and (3) to care for the poor and needy with such effectiveness that we eliminate poverty among us. We cannot wait until Zion comes for these things to happen—Zion will come only as they happen (General Conference, October 2008)

Preparing for the Lord’s return is like joining a spiritual battle against Satan and serving our master to prepare Zion.

Assist Elias in the Work of Gathering (D&C 27:7)

Signs of the Last Days and the Second Coming began to be fulfilled with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the restoration of the Gospel. Directions for preparing for the calamities and the return of Jesus Christ are clearly outlined throughout the Doctrine and Covenants. For example, in August 1830, the Lord revealed that translating, publishing, and receiving the Book of Mormon are all part of the preparations for the Lord’s Second Coming. This was done under the direction of Elias.

Identifying Elias is always tricky as there are multiple people and titles that share that name or title. The term basically refers to a messenger sent by God to restore needed keys and knowledge. A quick look at the Bible Dictionary gives several options. The Doctrine and Covenants identifies John the Baptist son of Zacharias. He is referred to as an Elias in D&C 27:7-8, who came to restore the priesthood of Aaron. Later on in D&C 77, we learn that John the Revelator is also an Elias, who has the calling of overseeing the gathering and restoration of Israel in preparation for the Lord’s Second Coming.

D&C 27:6-7

“Elias to whom I have committed the keys of bringing to pass the restoration of all things spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets since the world began, concerning the last days; And also John the son of Zacharias, . . . (Elias) visited and gave promise that he should have a son, and his name should be John and he should be filled with the spirit of Elias”

D&C 77:9

Elias will “come to gather together the tribes of Israel and restore all things.”

D&C 77:14

“Q. What are we to understand by the little book which was eaten by John [the Revelator], as mentioned in the 10th chapter of Revelation?

A. We are to understand that it was a mission, and an ordinance, for him to gather the tribes of Israel; behold, this is Elias, who, as it is written, must come and restore all things.”

Summary

The Lord’s Second Coming has fascinated Christians since the Lord’s death and resurrection. The topic includes several branches within eschatology that are fascinating to study—building Zion society, Elias’s role of gathering Israel, signs of the times, plagues, sealed covenants, and Christ’s millennial reign—to name just a few. However, living in these times includes a bombardment of calamities. Some days we may feel like Frodo in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when he complained, “I wish it need not have happened in my time.” Gandalf replied, “So do I and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.” Ultimate victory belongs to God. If we join in His work, victory will be ours too.

Sources

JosephSmithPaper.org; BookofMormonCentral.org; M. Eugene Boring, *Disciples and the Bible: A History of Disciples Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1997). Hillerbrand, *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, 3.54. William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ* (Boston, MA: Joshua Himes, 1842). Daniel Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4.1624-1426. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Larry Y. Wilson, *BYU Speeches: The Return of the King*, Dec 2015. Elder D. Todd Christofferson, *General Conference* (October 2008).