

# PROBLEMS IN MORMON TEXT

By

LaMar Petersen

A brief study of certain changes in important Latter-day Saint publications including the *Book of Mormon*, *Book of Commandments*, *Doctrine and Covenants*, and *History of the Church*; with references to controversial aspects of the Restoration of the Priesthood and Mormon concepts of Deity.

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Salt Lake City, Utah

1957

(Digital Edition 2023)

Utah Lighthouse Ministry

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## PROBLEMS IN MORMON TEXT

On Friday, April 1, 1842, in Nauvoo, the largest city in the state of Illinois (and not long since reclaimed from the parcel of swamp), the *Times and Seasons*, a miniature newspaper devoted to the interests of the Mormon people, made it semi-monthly appearance. There was nothing on the cover page to suggest the thunderbolt that lay obscurely on page 748: God, the Creator of the Universe had visited the earth! And in company with his Son, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the World! This plain announcement set in lower case, and without fanfare, was one of the most astounding items ever to appear in an American newspaper. Transcending the limits of the word “news,” it was now also history. The visit had occurred in 1820, twenty-two years prior to publication, in a quiet grove not far south of an ordinary American village: Palmyra, in western New York. The event had been witnessed by a fourteen year old lad, one Joseph Smith, the fourth child of humble parents, destined to become the famous American prophet. Joseph had carried the glorious vision in memory these many years, saying little even to intimates within the church he had founded in 1830. His reticence may have stemmed from the bitter persecution he claimed to have suffered at the hands of professors of religion, neighbors, and men of high standing to whom he had related the vision at the time of its occurrence. He had felt like Paul when he made his defense before King Agrippa and was reviled for saying he had seen a light and heard a voice, no amount of persecution inducing him to gainsay it. So it was with Joseph. He was certain that two Personages had addressed him; nevertheless he amended the assertion with “or one of them did.”<sup>1</sup> Because he had often wondered if all the churches were wrong Joseph sought enlightenment from the Personages “for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong.”<sup>2</sup> He was told they were all an abomination and he was to join none of them.

During the three years following his audience with the Deities, Joseph, candid in his admissions of frailty, succumbed to the “corruption” of his human nature, and to the “gratification of many appetites” offensive in

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1 This phrase, deemed contradictory, was deleted from the official *History of the Church* edited by B. H. Roberts in 1902. References to unidentified dual beings who resembled each other and who appeared to the boy Joseph were made first by Orson Pratt in *Remarkable Visions* in 1840 and by Joseph in a letter to John Wentworth, *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842, p. 707. Neither version indicated that they were Gods, Father and Son.

2 This mild contradiction too was deleted.

the sight of God.<sup>3</sup> On the evening of September 21, 1823, Joseph went to his room to ask God to forgive him for his sins and follies and to obtain a divine manifestation. A personage appeared at his bedside, announcing that he was Nephi, and that God had a great work for him to do.<sup>4</sup> Nephi quoted some of the prophecies of Malachi, but with variation from the Bible text. Although many years had now elapsed since his encounter with the angel, Joseph, in recording the interview, remembered the exact words that Nephi used on that memorable September night in 1823, noting perhaps as he wrote them that not only did they vary from the King James Bible, but also from his own Inspired Translation of the Scriptures (which in 1842 was still a manuscript) as well as the Savior's quotes from Malachi in the *Book of Mormon*, and a revelation from God to Joseph dated November 3, 1831.<sup>5</sup> Nephi spoke of the Priesthood which was soon to be restored by the hand of Elijah, but for reasons unknown Joseph failed to record these portentous words, among the most important in all Latter-day Saint scripture, in any of the published revelations.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Such candor was thought unnecessary by redactors. The offensive words were deleted from the official history of 1902 and the following apologetic inserted:

In making this confession, no one need suppose me guilty of any great of malignant sins. A disposition to commit such was never in my nature. But I was guilty of levity, and sometimes associated with jovial company, etc., not consistent with the character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been. But this will not seem very strange to any one who recollects my youth, and is acquainted with my native cheery temperament.

An example of other sentences added to Joseph's story may be found in the *History of the Church*, Volume I, page 6, following "When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven," and ending with "Why the opposition and persecution that arose against me, almost in my infancy?"

4 The name "Nephi" appeared in reprints of the story for several years, including the *Millennial Star*, August, 1842, the first edition of the *Pearl of Great Price*, 1851, Lucy Mack Smith's *Biographical Sketches*, 1853, and *History of the Church of Jesus Christ* (Reorganized), 1902. John C. Whitmer, nephew of David Whitmer, told that he often heard his grandmother, Mary M. Whitmer, say that she was shown the plates of the Book of Mormon by an holy angel" whom she always called Brother Nephi." (*Historical Record*, Volume VII, edited by Andrew Jenson, October, 1888, p. 621.)

Early chroniclers of Mormon history such as Henry Caswell and Jules Remy used the Nephi designation: also Thomas Gregg, William Linn, and Sheridan Jones at later dates. The earliest stories of the celestial visitor referred to him only as a spirit, an angel, a personage, or a heavenly messenger. The first edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, 1835, and the *Elders' Journal*, July, 1838, both stated that the plates were revealed by Moroni. In the Wentworth letter (see footnote, page 3) Joseph declared that prior to 1827 he had had "many visits from the angels of God." Possibly he confused the identities of two of the angels as the story seems to have been told two ways.

5 Compare "Extracts from the History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Pearl of Great Price* 2:37-39 with Malachi 4:1-6, 3 Nephi 25:1-6, and *Doctrine and Covenants* 133:64.

6 This important omission was corrected by Church officials 32 years after Joseph's death when it became Section 2 of the 1876 edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*.

The *Times and Seasons*' story of Nephi's visit appeared in the April 15, 1842 issue, being part of the third installment of the "History of Joseph Smith," which might well have been entitled "the Story of the Birth of Mormonism." It was not the first time the story had been told. Seven and a half years earlier Oliver Cowdery, with Joseph Smith's assistance, had written eight articles in the form of letters to W. W. Phelps, entitled "Early Scenes and Incidents in the Church" which appeared in the *Messenger and Advocate*, the official Church organ at Kirtland, Ohio, beginning with the October, 1834 issue. The reader was informed that "we have thought that a full history of the rise of the church of the Latter Day Saints, and the most interesting parts of its progress, to the present time, would be worthy the perusal of the Saints. . . . That our narrative may be correct, and particularly the introduction, it is proper to inform our patrons, that our brother J. Smith, jr. has offered to assist us." The promise was made that it would be "founded upon facts" and would be "particular" and "minute." The third letter offered an additional promise of accuracy:

Since, then, our opposers have been thus kind to introduce our cause before the public, it is no more than just that a correct account should be given; and since they have invariably sought to cast a shade over the truth and hinder its influence from gaining ascendancy, it is also proper that it should be vindicated, by laying before the world a correct statement of events as they have transpired from time to time.

Thousands of words were used to relate the dramatic story of Joseph's early quest for guidance after partaking of the excitement of a religious revival, his prayer asking to know which church to join, the resultant visit of a personage—all of which occurred, it was said, in 1823 when Joseph was seventeen. This 1834 account, being several years closer to the events described, might well be more accurate than the version in 1842, but the reader of the two accounts is likely to become confused at certain obvious discrepancies. Did Joseph's spiritual excitation occur in 1820 or in 1823? Was he fourteen or seventeen when the personage answered his appeal, and was this personage single or dual?

In the 1842 history Joseph continued his narrative with the story of the Restoration of the Holy Priesthood which had been lost to the earth since shortly after the advent of the Savior. The Restoration was a double event: the first half being an ordination of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery by the resurrected John the Baptist with the bestowal of the Aaronic, or lesser, Priesthood on May 15, 1829, and the second being the conferring of the Melchizedek Priesthood with the gift of the Holy Ghost by Peter, James, and John sometime later. The "full history—correct, particular, and minute" of 1834 should surely contain the details of these miraculous events, but

though there is indeed an ecstatic account of the ordination by an angel, other particulars are notably lacking. The angel is unidentified (if Joseph and Oliver knew him to be John the Baptist they did not reveal it), there is no mention of two Priesthoods, Aaronic or Melchizedek, lesser or higher, no promise of the Holy Ghost, no visit of Peter, James, and John (which in 1834 should have been a matter of historical record for five years), no mention of baptism and ordination of each other, and finally, a different wording of the angelic conferment. According to the first account the angel said: “upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah I confer this priesthood and this authority, which shall remain upon earth, that the sons of Levi may yet offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness!” but in the later account he said: “Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of the Messiah, I confer the Priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins, and this shall never be taken again from the earth, until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness.” It will be noted that in the first there is no mention of Aaron, the keys, or baptism by immersion, and an entirely different meaning is conveyed in “*that* the sons of Levi may yet offer an offering” than in “*until* the sons of Levi do offer again an offering.”<sup>7</sup>

It has been officially declared that the angel, in conferring the Priesthood, set a perfect pattern for the Elders of the Church to follow, yet several problems here present themselves: (1) John, who baptized Christ, and whose name bespeaks his mission, did not baptize either Joseph or Oliver. (Although this fact is made quite clear in the 1842 account, Joseph added somewhat ambiguously: “. . . we were baptized and ordained under the hand of the messenger.” This was slightly altered in modern editions to read: “. . . we were ordained under the hand of this messenger, and baptized.”) (2) John conferred the Priesthood on unbaptized men and, according to a third account, ordained them to the office of Priest which ordination they repeated upon each other. (At no time since has it been the custom to ordain before baptizing, or to repeat the ordination). (3) Joseph, unbaptized, baptized Oliver. (A pattern not since observed). (4) John, filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother’s womb,<sup>8</sup> could not impart the gift of the Holy Ghost to the two initiates, nevertheless, they too were filled with the Holy Ghost. (A distinction is made between merely having the Holy Ghost and having the gift of the Holy Ghost.) (5) It has often been asserted by Church officials that at the time of John the Baptist’s visit to restore the Priesthood there was

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7 The 1834 wording agrees more nearly with the Malachi quote in 3 Nephi 24:3 than does the 1842 wording. The later version of the revelation was added to the *Doctrine and Covenants* as Section 13 in 1876.

8 *Doctrine and Covenants* 84:27.

no one living on the earth with Priesthood authority, yet in Mormon scripture the Lord promised John the Apostle who had asked to have power over death, “thou shalt tarry until I come in my glory.”<sup>9</sup> He had likewise promised the three Nephite disciples “ye shall never taste of death; but ye shall live to behold all the doings of the Father unto the children of men, even until all things shall be fulfilled according to the will of the Father, when I shall come in my glory with the powers of heaven.”<sup>10</sup> (The whereabouts of these four ordained mortals in 1829 has never been explained).

Three months before Joseph was murdered at Carthage he gave other particulars of his first ordination:

I went into the woods to inquire of the Lord, by prayer, His will concerning me, and I saw an angel, and he laid his hands upon my head, and ordained me to a Priest after the order of Aaron, and to hold the keys of this Priesthood, which office was to preach repentance and baptism for the remission of sins, and also to baptize. But I was informed that this office did not extend to the laying on of hands for the giving of the Holy Ghost. . . .<sup>11</sup>

Two points here are of interest: (1) Oliver seems to be excluded from the experience and (2) the angel by-passed the offices of Deacon and Teacher in ordaining Joseph a Priest. (There is evidently some confusion here in semantics. Despite the two references to “office” historian Joseph Fielding Smith says, “Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, as the record shows, were not ordained to any office, but the priesthood was conferred upon them”).<sup>12</sup>

The important details that are missing from the “full history” of 1834 are likewise missing from the *Book of Commandments* in 1833. The student would expect to find all the particulars of the Restoration in this first treasured set of 65 revelations, the dates of which encompassed the bestowals of the two Priesthoods, but they are conspicuously absent. The only reference to the angelic visitation is in Chapter 24, paragraph 7: “But after truly repenting, God ministered unto him by an holy angel . . . that he should translate a book.” The notable revelations on Priesthood in the *Doctrine and Covenants* before referred to, Section 2 and 13, are missing, and Chapter 28 gives no hint of the Restoration which, if actual, had been known for four years. More than four hundred words were added to his revelation of August 1829 in Section 27 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*, the additions made to include the names of heavenly visitors and two separate ordinations. The *Book of Commandments* gives the duties of Elders, Priests, Teachers, and

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9 Ibid., 7:3

10 3 Nephi 28:7

11 *History of the Church*, Volume VI, pp. 249–250

12 *Church History and Modern Revelation*, A course study for the Melchizedek Priesthood Quorums for the year 1947, Volume I, p. 56

Deacons and refers to Joseph’s apostolic calling but there is no mention of Melchizedek Priesthood, High Priesthood, Seventies, High Priests, nor High Councilors. These words were later inserted into the revelation on Church organization and government of April, 1830, making it appear that they were known at that date, but they do not appear in the original, Chapter 24 of the *Book of Commandments* three years later. Similar interpolations were made in the revelations now known as Sections 42 and 68.

There seems to be no support for the historicity of the Restoration of the Priesthood in journals, diaries, letters, nor printed matter prior to October, 1834 David Whitmer declared that he was ordained an Elder in June 1829, and that the offices of Elder, Priest, and Teacher—parts of a single Priesthood—were in evidence long before the formal organization of the Church on April 6, 1830. This conflicts with Joseph’s statement that he and Oliver ordained each other Elders on that historic day and that these ordinations were the first to be made to a definite office since the conferment by the angel. Whitmer contends that he was present on April 6 and that the only ordination Joseph received was that of Prophet, Seer, and Revelator; that the idea of dual Priesthoods conferred by heavenly beings was not known in the early years of the Church.<sup>13</sup> If Whitmer is correct it helps to explain the mystery in Joseph’s annotation of the fourth conference of the Church at Kirtland, June 3 to 6, 1831: “The authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood was manifested and conferred for the first time upon several of the Elders.”<sup>14</sup> (Joseph’s comment is in conflict with *Doctrine and Covenants* 107:7 which says: “The office of an elder comes under the priesthood of Melchizedek”). It has been suggested that this refers to the ordination of the first High Priests and does not mean what it says, but another instance of the bestowal of Melchizedek Priesthood upon Elders is found in William Smith’s account of the conference which followed at Orange, Ohio, October 25, 1831 “where Elders, Priests, Teachers, and Deacons received some general instructions from the leaders of the Church concerning the priesthood of Melchisedec, to which they had not as yet been ordained.”<sup>15</sup> (As these statements were written in retrospect they may not conclusively establish that the term “Melchizedek Priesthood” was in use at the specified dates).

Some have believed that the revelation to Cowdery and Whitmer in June, 1829 when they were called “with that same calling with which he

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13 See David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, Richmond, Missouri, 1887, Chapters IV and IX; also the affidavit of John J. Snyder, Whitmer’s scribe during the year preceding his death, in *A History of the Church of Jesus Christ*, Monongahela, Pa., 1945, W. H. Cadman, Historian, pp. 24–25.

14 *History of the Church*, Volume I, pp. 175–176

15 *William Smith on Mormonism*, Lamoni, Iowa, 1883, pp. 19–20

[Paul] was called”<sup>16</sup> is evidence that they held the Melchizedek Priesthood at that time. If so, Whitmer’s reply to a question from Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt in 1878 gives no clue. He was asked: “Can you tell the date of the bestowal of the Apostleship upon Joseph by Peter, James and John?” He replied: “I do not know, Joseph never told me. I can only tell you what I know, for I will not testify to anything I do not know.”<sup>17</sup>

If the Priesthood was an assumption rather than a Restoration it helps to explain Cowdery’s melancholy statement of 1839:

When the Church of Christ was set up by revelation, he [Joseph] was called to be First Elder, and I was called to be the Second Elder, and whatever he had of Priesthood (about which I am beginning to doubt) also had I. . . . The prophet hath erred and the people are gone astray through his error. God’s word is open. We may read it. There is no “First Presidency” there, no “High Priesthood” save that of Christ himself. . . .<sup>18</sup>

Cowdery made amends for his errantry upon rejoining the Church in 1848. He said, “I was also present with Joseph when the higher or Melchizedek Priesthood was conferred by the holy angel from on high.”<sup>19</sup> (The holy angel in this case being Peter, James, and John).

A rude paragraph awaits the faithful who read the history of the Church as viewed by Joseph Smith III, son of the Prophet. Referring to the visit of the three angels he wrote: “There is no historical evidence of such an event. Nor is there any evidence that Peter, James, and John were present, either when the instruction was given to ordain or when the ordination actually took place. . . . It is not safe then to write historically that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were ever ordained literally under the hands of Peter, James, and John.”<sup>20</sup> In a footnote to the story of the Restoration of the High Priesthood B. H. Roberts wrote similarly: “There is no definite account of the event in the history of the Prophet Joseph, or, for matter of that, in any of our annals. . . .”<sup>21</sup> This lack of historical proof will not alter belief in the divine commission. These matters are to be accepted by faith, not proven by chapter and verse. In Mormon belief

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16 *Doctrine and Covenants* 18:9

17 *Millennial Star*, Volume XL, p. 771

18 *Defense in a Rehearsal of My Grounds for Separating Myself from the Latter Day Saints*, Norton, Ohio, 1839. Reprinted in *Saints Herald*, March 20, 1907

19 *The Deseret News*, Wednesday, April 13, 1859, p. 48, Vol. IX, No. 6. Great Salt Lake City

20 Joseph Smith III and Heman C. Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ* (Reorganized), Volume I, pp. 64–65. Lamoni, Iowa.

21 *History of the Church*, Volume I, page 40. Paragraphs believed to substantiate the Restoration in *Doctrine and Covenants* 128:20, 27:12, 20:2,3, and 18:9 are cited.

authority to act in God's name comes not from an inner conviction of one's sonship with God but by the backward tracing of authority from one Priest to another through the imposition of hands. It is a transfer of privilege, not an inalienable right.

A study of changes made in the revelations indicates that many things came by evolution rather than endowment. In the *Book of Commandments* 4:2, March, 1829, the Lord said: “[Joseph] has a gift to translate the book, and I have commanded him that he shall pretend to no other gift, for I will grant him no other gift.” But a more expansive program is outlined for Joseph in the same revelation as it appeared later in the *Doctrine and Covenants* 5:4: “And you have a gift to translate the plates; and this is the first gift that I bestowed upon you; and I have commanded that you should pretend to no other gift until my purpose is fulfilled in this; for I will grant unto you no other gift until it is finished.” Even as Cowdery's “full history” omitted the story of the baptism so does the revelation of March, 1829 in the *Book of Commandments* fail to indicate the importance of the rites of ordination soon to be initiated: “Whosoever believeth in my word, them will I visit with the manifestation of my Spirit, and they shall be born of me. . . .” These words were affixed in the *Doctrine and Covenants*: “. . . even of water and of the Spirit—And you must wait yet a little while, for ye are not yet ordained.”<sup>22</sup> Many improvements were made in the Lord's word. “The gift of working with the rod” became “the gift of Aaron.”<sup>23</sup> “Power to translate” became “power given unto you to translate by the means of the Urim and Thummim.”<sup>24</sup> “The Lord your God suffered death in the flesh” became “the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh.”<sup>25</sup> “Administer the flesh and blood of Christ” became “administer bread and wine—the emblems of the flesh and blood of Christ.”<sup>26</sup> “Neither the teachers nor deacons have authority to baptize, administer the sacrament, or lay on hands.”<sup>27</sup> The words of encouragement to Emma, “And thou needest not fear, for thy husband shall support thee *from* the church” became “And thou needest not fear, for thy husband shall support thee *in* the church.”<sup>28</sup> “Behold, thou shalt consecrate *all* thy properties, that which thou hast unto me” became, “behold, thou wilt remember the poor, and consecrate *of* thy

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22 Cf. *Book of Commandments* 4:4 with *Doctrine and Covenants* 5:16–17

23 Cf. *Book of Commandments* 7:3 with *Doctrine and Covenants* 8:6

24 Cf. *Book of Commandments* 9:1 with *Doctrine and Covenants* 10:1

25 Cf. *Book of Commandments* 15:13 with *Doctrine and Covenants* 18:11

26 Cf. *Book of Commandments* 24:32 with *Doctrine and Covenants* 20:40

27 Cf. *Book of Commandments* 24:41 with *Doctrine and Covenants* 20:58

28 Cf. *Book of Commandments* 26:8 with *Doctrine and Covenants* 25:9

properties for their support.”<sup>29</sup> “I will consecrate the riches of the Gentiles unto my people” became “I will consecrate of the riches of those who embrace my gospel among the Gentiles unto the poor of my people.”<sup>30</sup> “The calling of twelve disciples in these last days” became “the calling of Twelve Apostles in these last days.”<sup>31</sup> In the transfer of the revelations from the *Book of Commandments* to the *Doctrine and Covenants* the alterations were matched by as many deletions, one of the least explicable being the removal of Christ’s presageful words of March, 1829: “I will establish my church, like unto the church which was taught by my disciples in the days of old.”<sup>32</sup>

The *Book of Commandments* was given the divine seal of approval in Chapter One:

Search these commandments, for they are true and faithful, and the prophecies and promises which are in them shall be fulfilled. What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself, and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same: For behold, and lo, the Lord is God, and the Spirit beareth record, and the record is true, and the truth abideth forever and ever. Amen.

That the book was vouchsafed as the word of God is implicit in the statement of the First Presidency of the Church, viz., Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams on June 25, 1833 as they noted four typographical errors:

We have found the following errors in the Commandments, as printed: fortieth chapter, tenth verse, third line, instead of “corruptable,” put corrupted. Fourteenth verse of the same chapter, fifth line, instead of “respector to persons,” put respector of persons. Twenty-first verse, second line of the same chapter, instead of “respector to” put respector of. Forty-fourth chapter, twelfth verse, last line, instead of “hands,” put heads.<sup>33</sup>

For connoisseurs of Mormonism the chore of locating and examining extant copies of this rare little volume offers one of the more intriguing facets of Latter-day Saint history. Its worth as a collector’s item, up to several thousand dollars per copy, is enhanced by the controversy surrounding its genesis. An explanatory note to the *Doctrine and Covenants* says:

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29 Cf. *Book of Commandments* 44:26 with *Doctrine and Covenants* 42:30

30 Cf. *Book of Commandments* 44:32 with *Doctrine and Covenants* 42:39

31 Cf. *Book of Commandments* Chapter XV superscription with D. C. 18

32 Cf. *Book of Commandments* 4:5 with *Doctrine and Covenants* 5

33 *History of the Church*, Volume I, p. 364

On November 1, 1831, at a conference of the Elders of the Church held at Hiram, Ohio, definite action relating to the publication of the revelations was taken, and the compilation was called the *Book of Commandments*. . . . In accordance with official action taken at the conference of the Church, the manuscript was sent to Independence, Missouri, then known as Zion, in care of Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer. In due course the printing was begun, and by the early summer of 1833 was nearing completion. But on July 20, 1833, the printing plant at Independence, together with most of its contents, including all save a few copies of some of the forms of the unfinished book, were destroyed by a mob.

Shortly before he died at age eighty-three David Whitmer wrote sadly:

Early in the spring of 1833, at Independence, MO., the revelations were printed in the Book of Commandments. Many of the books were finished and distributed among the members of the church, and through some of the unwise brethren, the world got hold of some of them. From the time the ill-feeling toward us began to increase; and the summer of 1833 the mob came upon us, tore down the printing press, and drove the church out of Jackson county. . . . when the Book of Commandments was printed, Joseph and the church received it as being printed correctly. This I know. In the winter of 1834 they saw that some of the revelations in the Book of Commandments **had to be changed**, because the heads of the church had gone too far, and had done things in which they had already gone ahead of some of the former revelations. So the book of “Doctrine and Covenants” was printed in 1835, and some of the revelations changed and added to. By the providence of God I have one of the old Book of Commandments published in 1833. I will prove by a revelation in it, which is changed in the Doctrine and Covenants, a revelation that was given through the “stone” and is true—I will prove that God called Brother Joseph to translate the Book of Mormon only, and that he was not called to organize and establish the church any more than the rest of us Elders. That God commanded him that he should pretend to no other gift but to translate the Book of Mormon, that God would grant him no other gift.<sup>34</sup>

It is debatable whether the hundreds of changes which have been made in official Church literature such as the *Book of Mormon*, the *Evening and Morning Star*, the *Book of Commandments*, the *Doctrine and Covenants*, and the History of Joseph Smith help to clarify or confuse the study of Mormon history and dogma. For example, the prime purpose of the *Book of Mormon*, according to its title-page, is “to the convincing of the Jew

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<sup>34</sup> *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, pp. 55-57

and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God,” yet additions to the original text of First Nephi declare Christ to be “the *son* of” the Eternal God.<sup>35</sup> The obvious error on page 236 that Jesus is “the Son of the only begotten of the Father” was corrected to “the Son, the Only Begotten of the Father,”<sup>36</sup> yet Christ’s strange references in the *Doctrine and Covenants* 29:42, 46 to “mine Only Begotten Son” are permitted to remain. Alterations of the text concerning the respective roles of Benjamin, Mosiah, and Gidgiddoni<sup>37</sup> may help clarify the story; likewise the elimination of phrases such as “and the land which was between the land of Zarahemla”<sup>38</sup> and “according to the crime which he hath committed”;<sup>39</sup> and changing “directors” to “interpreters”<sup>40</sup> in reference to the translating stones. Other alterations from the first edition such as part of the Isaiah text in 2 Nephi 12:9 or the wording of the Lord’s prayer in 3 Nephi 13:9–13 do little to enlighten, the original being more in accord with the Bible than the altered text. Hundreds of grammatical errors, tautological expressions, and provincialisms have been eliminated, including such persistent minutiae as these: “as I was *a* journeying”; “Lamanitish servants *a* going forth”; “he found Muloki *a* preaching”; “Korihor did go about . . . *a* begging food”; “every whit *a* pointing”; “Moroni . . . had been *a* preparing”; “Lamanites are *a* marching”, Moroni was *a* coming against then”; “all the people . . . were *a* shedding blood.”<sup>41</sup> Again it is difficult to understand why such phrases as “state of awful woundedness,” “diseases which was subsequent to man,” and “the numerority of their forces having slain a vast number” were re-written but other phrases such as “I am consigned that these are my days,” “he being stabbed by his brother by a garb of secrecy,” and “they knew not whither they should steer the ship, insomuch that there arose a great storm” were left untouched.<sup>42</sup> Improvements were made in “He that eatheth this bread, eatheth of my body to their soul,” “they did not fight against God no more,” “the Devil is the preparator of it,” and “that all might see the writing which he had wrote upon the rent,” but not in “they should observe to do all these things for to keep these commandments,” “retaining a remission of their sins,” “until we repair unto them the many murders,” “to bring about the bowels of mercy,” “there can be no labor performed,” nor in “that I may

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35 1 Nephi 11:18, 21, 32; 13:40

36 Alma 5:48

37 Mosiah 21:28, Ether 4:1, 3 Nephi 3:19

38 3 Nephi 3:23

39 Mosiah 29:15

40 Alma 37:21, 24

41 Alma 10:7; 17:26; 21:11; 30:58; 34:14; 48:7; 57:31; 62:31; Ether 13:31

42 1 Nephi 13:32; Alma 46:40; 56:10; Helaman 7:9; 9:6; 1 Nephi 18:13

discover the abominations of this people to other nations.”<sup>43</sup> Repetitions and ambiguities were deleted from 1 Nephi 8:7, Alma 17:3, 29:4, 3 Nephi 10:4, and Mormon 9:34 but not from 1 Nephi 17:5, 6, 1 Nephi 4:9, Jacob 5:65, 2 Nephi 3:4–21, Alma 5:6, 3 Nephi 10:4–6, nor Ether 2:17.

This re-phrasing of the text of the revelations as originally printed in the *Evening and Morning Star* and the *Book of Commandments*, plus the inclusion of material foreign to the original meaning, make it difficult for all but the persistent to understand the chronology of events. Except for the withdrawal of the controversial Lectures on Faith in 1921 the *Doctrine and Covenants* has undergone little revision since 1876, although a comparison of that edition with earlier ones reveals unique changes in the concepts of marriage and an increased need for priestly authority. One interesting addition, made sometime after the Manifesto of 1890, is the superscription of Section 132 in which plurality of wives is made an appendage to the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, rather than the covenant itself. A comparison of the prayer and prophecies written by Joseph in Liberty jail as printed in the *Times and Seasons*, Volume I, May 1849, pages 99–104 with Section 121:28, 31 reveals interesting interpolations on the plurality of Gods: “whether there be one God or many Gods” and “the Council of the Eternal God of all other Gods.”

The reasons for certain changes in the History of Joseph Smith are understandable. Joseph was sometimes more forthright than his redactors would permit. It was more sophisticated for the witnesses to “urge” or “importune” Joseph to seek information from the Lord than to “tease.” It was more accurate to prophesy: “Orson Hyde . . . *may* stand on earth and bring souls till Christ comes” than to insist: “Orson Hyde . . . *shall* stand on earth and bring souls till Christ comes.” It would not do for a Prophet to cheer some tired brethren with “a couple of dollars with directions to replenish the bottle to stimulate them in the fatigues of their sleepless journey,”—the offending clause had to be removed. Joseph’s assertion that “Water, Fire, Truth, and God are all the same” emerged “water, fire, truth, and God are all realities.” It was kinder to read that “prophesying” were pronounced upon the enemies of Christ at the Kirtland Temple than “cursing.” The elimination of the last clause of Joseph’s dire prophecy concerning the fate of the government rendered it less fearsome: “While discussing the petition to Congress, I prophesied, by virtue of the holy Priesthood vested in me, and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that, if Congress will not hear our petition and grant us protection, they shall be broken up as a government *and God shall damn them, and there shall be nothing left of them—not even a grease spot.*”

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43 3 Nephi 20:8; Alma 23:7; 1 Nephi 15:35; Alma 46:19; Mosiah 13:25; Alma 4:14; 27:8; 34:15; 34:33; Mosiah 12:8

Many of Joseph's entries that were eligible for emendation were left intact: imprecations, boasts, extravagant prophecies, personal piques, dream and astrological interpretations, phrenologia, and trivia. Despite these cankers Joseph emerges as a man of abundant energy and imagination, a man interested in people, in giving final answers to all perplexing theological questions, and in building the perfect society. Whether one accepts his visions as objective realities, subjective illusions, or only as fabrications he cannot deny him his place as a vigorous and unique American: founder of a church, editor of a paper, reviser of the Bible, temple builder, banker, collector of Egyptian documents, proponent of adult education and westward expansion, city planner and councilman, merchant, land agent, mayor, lieutenant-general of the Nauvoo Legion, polygamist, Mason, and candidate for President of the United States. In Mormon belief these roles were all eclipsed by one far greater; vicegerent of God and intercessor with Christ and holy angels. The injunction read: "For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith"<sup>44</sup> and so Joseph's pronouncements could never be companion to the adage: "Truth is forever on the scaffold; wrong forever on the throne." His definitions of God and eschatology, i.e. the science of death, judgment, heaven, and hell, were absolute and there would be no retraction or modification. His task of re-instituting Zion was formidable. This was to be the third and final attempt at establishing Christ's church upon the earth. If it was to stand forever and break all other kingdoms in pieces according to Daniel's prophecy the record must be free of contradiction and obscuration, free of all but the lucid, the forthright, and the explicit. A scribe at his elbow and the Church press at his side, these aids would help insure accuracy in the preservation of God's word.

One of the distinguishing features of Mormonism is its concept of an anthropomorphic God, a sentient being of body, parts, and passions. Having conversed with God in 1820 Joseph knew him to be a physical entity distinct from the other two members of the Trinity. But the *Book of Mormon* ten years later described the triune God of the Christian world: the three-in-one personage sometimes known as the great Incomprehensible. Mormon wrote, "unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Ghost which is one God."<sup>45</sup> Abinadi said:

I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth

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44 *Doctrine and Covenants* 21:5

45 Mormon 7:7. In promotion of either better grammar or plurality this was changed in later editions to read, "which *are* one God."

in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son— The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son—And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth.<sup>46</sup>

Zeezrom said:

Thou sayest there is a true and living God? And Amulek said: Yea, there is a true and living God. Now Zeezrom saith again unto him: Is there more than one God? and he answered, No. . . . Now Zeezrom saith again unto him: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father? And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last.<sup>47</sup>

To the brother of Jared Christ said: “I am the Father and the Son. . . . and man have I created after the body of my spirit.”<sup>48</sup> In contrast to the oneness in these expressions there are several instances in the *Book of Mormon* where Jesus prays to his Father. The unity, yet separateness, expressed in “that I may be in them as thou, Father, art in me, that we may be one,” used by Mormon theologians as proof of the individuality of the Father and Son, is perplexing in relation to the verse which follows: “And when Jesus had spoken these words he came again unto his disciples; and behold they did pray steadfastly, without ceasing, unto him; and he did smile upon them again.”<sup>49</sup> The injunction to pray only to God in the name of Christ is disobeyed frequently throughout the *Book of Mormon* as Christ permits the Nephites to pray directly to him.

The three witnesses to the reality of the Golden Plates, Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris, subjoined their testimony with, “And the honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God.” This is interpreted today to mean “one in purpose” and not one in person, but this explanation is not harmonious with Cowdery’s reference to the Trinity as “an exalted personage” in the *Messenger and Advocate*.<sup>50</sup> The first definitions of the Father and Son as separate personages appeared in Kirtland in the Lectures on Faith, a set of seven theological essays comprising the first seventy-five pages of the *Doctrine and Covenants*. God was identified as a personage of spirit and Christ as a personage of

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46 Mosiah 15:1–4

47 Alma 11:26–29, 38, 39

48 Ether 3:14, 16

49 3 Nephi 19:30

50 See the letter to William Frye regarding the Book of Joseph, *Messenger and Advocate*, Volume II, (December, 1835), p. 236

tabernacle, the two possessing the same mind. This common mind was the Holy spirit, not yet an individual personage. Question No. 3 of the catechism asked: “How many personages are there in the Godhead?” and the answer was “Two.”

The incorporeal God of Kirtland became corporeal at Nauvoo: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s” (blood no included) and the Holy Ghost was advanced to the status of a personage.<sup>51</sup>

Controversies inevitably ensued as to the character and identity of God. A half century later Wilford Woodruff, fourth President of the Church, was to plead: “Cease troubling yourselves about who God is, who Adam is, who Christ is, who Jehovah is. For heaven’s sake, let these things alone . . . God is God. Christ is Christ. The Holy Ghost is the Holy Ghost. That should be enough for you and me to know. If we want to know any more, wait till we get where God is in person. I say this because we are troubled every little while with inquiries from Elders anxious to know who God is, who Christ is, and who Adam is. I say to the Elders of Israel, stop this.”<sup>52</sup>

The numerous assertions throughout Mormon scripture that Christ is the Father, the creator of our spirits,<sup>53</sup> lead to an exposition by Apostle James E. Talmage which was no doubt intended to be the definitive answer to the question of God’s identity:

We claim scriptural authority for the assertion that Jesus Christ was and is God the Creator, the God who revealed Himself to Adam, Enoch, and all the antediluvial patriarchs and prophets down to Noah; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of Israel as a united people, and the God of Ephraim and Judah after the disruption of the Hebrew nation; the God who made himself known to the prophets from Moses to Malachi; the God of the Old Testament record; and the God of the Nephites. We affirm that Jesus Christ was and is Jehovah, the Eternal One.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the tone of finality, and possibly in response to continued speculation, the First Presidency of the Church, together with the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, issued a doctrinal essay June 30, 1916 in which they stressed that “Jesus Christ is not the Father of the spirits who have taken or yet shall take bodies upon this earth, for He is one of them.”<sup>55</sup> The dissertation might well have been extended to include a discussion of such antithetical passages as these:

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51 *Doctrine and Covenants* 130:22

52 *Millennial Star*, Volume LVII, (June 6, 18895), pp. 355–356

53 See 2 Nephi 11:7; Mosiah 5:15; Alma 22:10; Ether 3:15; *Doctrine and Covenants* 29:34

54 James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1915, The Deseret News, p. 32

55 *Improvement Era*, Volume XIX, (August, 1916), p. 942

Never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created. (The Lord showing himself to the brother of Jared).<sup>56</sup>

And the Lord appeared unto them (Adam, Seth, Methuselah, et al.).<sup>57</sup>

And I (Enoch) saw the Lord and he stood before my face.<sup>58</sup>

Thus I, Abraham, talked with the Lord, face to face, as one man talketh with another; and he told me of the works which his hands had made.<sup>59</sup>

No man hath seen God at any time.<sup>60</sup>

And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; For without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live.<sup>61</sup>

It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of 1820 . . . I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him! [Joseph, without the ordinances or the priesthood in 1820, lived to tell that he had seen God].<sup>62</sup>

Other deific problems in Mormonism such as God's continual growth vs. his immutability, his oneness vs. his plurality, his geographical confinement near Kolob vs. his omnipresence, have enlivened many discussions in Mormon circles. Orson Pratt, who often discoursed on God's physical characteristics, once gave a definition which offered surprisingly little comfort to materialists:

. . . when we speak of only one God, and state that He is eternal, without beginning or end, and that He is in all worlds at the same instant, let it be distinctly remembered, that we have no reference to any particular person or substance, but to *truth* dwelling in a vast variety of substances. Wherever you find a fulness of wisdom, knowledge, truth, goodness, love, and such like qualities, there you find God in all His glory, power, and majesty—therefore, if you worship these adorable perfections, you worship God.<sup>63</sup>

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56 Ether 3:15

57 *Doctrine and Covenants* 107:54

58 *Pearl of Great Price*, Moses 7:4

59 *Ibid.*, Abraham 3:11

60 John 1:18

61 *Doctrine and Covenants* 84:21, 22

62 *Pearl of Great Price* 2:14, 17

63 *The Seer*, (February, 1853), pp. 24–25, Washington, D.C. Republished, Liverpool, England

After reflecting at some length on the character of God one Mormon educator, something of an iconoclast, wrote: “It follows therefore from the very nature of things, that the honest man’s conception of God is a progressively growing ideal . . . let no council of ecclesiastics presume to lay an embargo on his soul, by pronouncing once for all what God is or is not.”<sup>64</sup>

The *Book of Mormon*, cornerstone of the faith, “the most correct book on earth,” reveals God in varying attitudes toward his children. He encircles them about “eternally in the arms of his love.”<sup>65</sup> He commands the murder of the prostrate Laban.<sup>66</sup> He send the Spirit of the Lord to Nephi to interpret his father’s dream, part of which concerns the fountain of living water, a representation of the love of God, which is a representation of awful hell prepared for the wicked.<sup>67</sup> He forbids Adam and Eve to eat the fruit, but hopes they will: the entire plan of peopling the earth and redeeming man from the fall will be “frustrated” unless they disobey.<sup>68</sup> He curses the hard of heart and their posterity with dark skins and blesses with whiteness those who unite with the righteous.<sup>69</sup> He directs the building of barges with holes in the top and holes in the bottom, guiding the barges, filled with people, animals, and supplies for 344 days as the waves toss them towards the promised land.<sup>70</sup> He takes vengeance upon the wicked by burning, drowning, and smothering the inhabitants of sixteen cities, calling to the survivors: “O ye that are spared because ye were more righteous than they, will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you?”<sup>71</sup> He says much about whoredoms, fornications, adulteries, abominations, secret combinations, secret oaths, concubines, and plural wives—all of which he is against. He speaks frequently of love, his bowels of mercy, and the resurrection, but not of the home, the family, children, laughter, music, nor kindness to animals. He speaks of repentance and baptism, but not of baptism for the dead, salvation by proxy, marriage for time and eternity, sealing ordinances to insure the celestial continuation of families, nor the three degrees of glory. He watches in sorrow as the Jaredites, lacking the Priesthood, flourish in an area adjacent to a narrow neck of land (defined as Central America by Joseph Smith and Mormon geographers), and annihilate themselves several centuries before Christ at the hill Ramah (located in what is now New York State.)

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64 N. L. Nelson, *Scientific Aspects of Mormonism*, G. P. Putnam’s, New York, 1904, p. 20

65 2 Nephi 1:15

66 1 Nephi 4:18

67 1 Nephi 8:13–32, 11:25, 12:16, 15:26–29

68 2 Nephi 2:22, 23; Alma 12:26

69 2 Nephi 5:20–25; 3 Nephi 2:14–16

70 Ether 2:16–25, 6:2–12

71 3 Nephi 9:1–13

He bestows the Priesthood upon a second group, the Nephites, and again watches in sorrow as history repeats itself: they flourish in Central America and annihilate themselves (nearly) at the same hill in New York (now known as Cumorah) a thousand years later.

God tolerates his foe, the Devil, who at times is an unwitting ally, as in the tempting of Eve: the Devil enacted the role requisite to the plan of life and salvation, thus preventing the scuttling of the divine program. Rejected from heaven because of his plan of redemption by coercion, Satan is the only one of the great interstellar authorities, save the Holy Ghost, who is bodiless. He has his own Priesthood, and duties that often overlap those of God, the term “Destroyer” being applicable to either. In the early days of the Church the ubiquitous man of sin was seen at conference, in the missions, and at the temple. He visited Church leaders, once pulling Sidney Rigdon from his bed by the heels three times in one night.<sup>72</sup> President John Taylor wrote: “But again, who is Satan? He is a being of God’s own make under His control, subject to His will, cast out of Heaven for rebellion”; and at another time asked the moot question: “why is it, in fact, that we should have a devil? Why did not the Lord kill him long ago? Because He could not do without him.”<sup>73</sup> Jedediah M. Grant, counsellor to Brigham Young, asserted: “The Lord our God absolutely gave Lucifer a mission to this earth,”<sup>74</sup> and President Young announced: “You cannot get your endowment without the devil’s being present.”<sup>75</sup> The Devil seems less active in the Church today and it may be that Nephi’s prophecy 2,500 years ago is being fulfilled: “The time speedily cometh that Satan shall have no more power over the hearts of the children of men.”<sup>76</sup> But even with waning power his existence must be acknowledged, the *Deseret News*<sup>77</sup> recently concluding: “Lucifer is as much a person as Christ himself . . . We in this Church must believe as definitely that there is a Devil as that we believe there is a God.”

The controversial aspects of Mormonism are many—and so are its achievements. The desert has blossomed, an empire of homes has arisen, a culture has been implanted. Benevolent, wealthy and influential, the Church is expanding constantly in membership and material assets. It has produced

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72 Rigdon’s interesting encounter with the Devil was recorded by Lucy Mack Smith, the Prophet’s mother, in *Biographical Sketches*, p. 196, but has been deleted from modern editions of the book.

73 *The Government of God*, p. 81. Liverpool: Published by S. W. Reynolds, 15 Wilton Street, London, 1852. *Journal of Discourses* 23:336

74 *Journal of Discourses* 2:11

75 *Ibid.*, 3:50

76 1 Nephi 22:15

77 Church Section, Editorial Page, January 15, 1955

its quota of leaders in the arts and sciences, in education and in government. The notable work of the auxiliary organizations, the Primary, the Mutual Improvement Association, and the Relief Society, has won wide acclaim. As an ethical society it provides opportunity for social work, participation in music, sports, public-speaking, dancing, and dramatics. Its study classes include civics, home-making, and English literature. As in other faiths the Church is the instrument for many to express the best in their lives. The Church maintains a missionary force of several thousand workers and disseminates the gospel message in many varieties of the printed page. The investigator will find hundreds of items open for his inspection at the Church Historian's Library, 47 East South Temple, Salt Lake City, Utah. Perhaps one day all documents, including those now restricted, will be available to him, if not in the original, then by means of microfilm or photostat service. That the broadest possible understanding be promoted, and history served, the contents of all Church bibliography should be open for evaluation.

A wellspring of Mormon belief is that the earth will one day be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory: the glory of peace under Christ, and the glory of universal brotherly love. In this quest for ultimate justice it is hoped that the Church will not overlook two immediacies: a more active participation in those organizations dedicated to the achievement of world peace, and the recognition of the equality of all peoples before God. Serious consideration should be given the Supreme Court declaration in favor of integration. Serious consideration should be given Nephi's declaration that "all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden . . . and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile."<sup>78</sup> The symbol of special privilege exemplified in the bestowal of Priesthood upon Elijah Abel,<sup>79</sup> lone negro Seventy and missionary, should be demolished; the lie should be given the charge that the brotherhood of man is only a hopeful phrase and not a demonstrable fact.

Mormonism embraces much that is wholesome and ennobling. Its thirteenth Article of Faith approaches in idealism the tenets of the Gentile philosopher who said:

I belong to the great church that holds the world within its starlit aisles; that claims the great and good of every race and clime; that finds with joy the grain of gold in every creed, and floods with light and love the germs of good in every soul.

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78 2 Nephi 26:28, 33

79 Andrew Jenson, *Biographical Encyclopedia*, Volume III, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1920, p. 577

The doctrine of that church professing Jesus Christ as founder must be broad enough to include the religion of reason, the creed of science:

To love justice, to long for the right, to love mercy, to pity the suffering, to assist the weak, to forget wrongs and remember benefits—to love the truth, to be sincere, to utter honest words, to love liberty, to wage relentless war against slavery in all its forms, to love wife and child and friend, to make a happy home, to love the beautiful in art, in nature, to cultivate the mind, to be familiar with the mighty thoughts that genius has expressed, the noble deeds of all the world, to cultivate courage and cheerfulness, to make others happy, to fill life with the splendor of generous acts, the warmth of loving words, to discard error, to destroy prejudice, to receive new truths with gladness, to cultivate hope, to see the calm beyond the storm, the dawn beyond the night, to do the best that can be done and then—to be resigned.

