

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE RISE OF A MODERN PROPHET

Throughout the history of the world, the majority of people have never been able to recognize a living prophet. Only a few were able to believe that God could speak to a man who wears the common clay of one's own generation. The rest of the people would idolize the prophets of the past, while they stoned and killed the living prophets of the present.

It is a fascinating study of human nature to see how these people would usually honor the prophets of the past. Once the prophets were dead, they would place them on imaginary pedestals, turning them into perfect individuals who had never made a single mistake. Then they would make a selection from their teachings which suited their own particular tastes, and smugly go about living their lives of wickedness while mouthing a few popular phrases which identified them with these past servants of God.

But men cannot do this with living prophets. Living prophets will denounce these hypocrites who say they are following God but instead obey their own licentious desires. Living prophets will not allow men to pick their teachings to pieces and construct a crazy-quilt pattern of personal interpretation which matches popular opinion.

This is why prophets are seldom popular with their own generation.

#### THE SIGNS OF A TRUE AND LIVING PROPHET

It is the task of the people of each generation to discover whether or not God has raised up living prophets for them. The Bible teaches that whenever prophets are raised up, certain things

will begin to happen.<sup>1</sup> Doctrines will be clarified. New truths will be revealed. Prophecies will be given. The kingdom of God will be revitalized and every honest seeker after truth will be able to observe the power with which a true prophet carries out his mission.

This is what convinced Israel when Moses came among them. This is what awakened the children of Judah when Jeremiah appeared in their midst. Even in the days of the Savior, the antagonistic teachers of the law were “astonished at His doctrine, for He taught them as one having authority.”<sup>2</sup> Those who followed Jesus observed great power in His ministry.

#### HOW GOD SELECTS HIS PROPHETS

In all of the holy writ there is not one single instance where God ever selected a professional holy man to be one of His prophets. In every case the call came like a bolt out of the blue, often to men who considered themselves weak and incapable and were amazed that God should honor them with revelation or consider them worthy of a prophetic calling.<sup>3</sup>

This was the case with Moses who said, “They will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice. . . . I am not eloquent.”<sup>4</sup> This was the case with Enoch who said, “All the people hate me; for I am slow of speech; wherefore am I thy servant?”<sup>5</sup> And this was the case with Jeremiah who said, “Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a child!”<sup>6</sup>

These men felt incapable. They felt there were others who would be more readily accepted. But in spite of their own inadequate feelings, they went forth and delivered their prophetic messages because they knew that God had called them.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings 17:13; Amos 3:7; Jeremiah 1:5-7; Acts 3:22-24.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:28-29.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 3:11; Isaiah 6:5; 1 Nephi 1:5-7, 2:16.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 4:1, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Moses 6:31.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 1:6.

Such was the case in modern times when God bypassed all the professional proponents of religion throughout the world and spoke to a humble, fourteen-year-old farm boy. Jewish tradition has it that this was exactly the age of Jeremiah when he received his first call. And like Jeremiah, this young prophet was overwhelmed by his assignment. He was a youth. His education was limited, his means were extremely modest. And he had a most ordinary name—Joseph Smith.

But it was not long before important things began to happen. Others were raised up to assist him. New knowledge began to pour forth. Doctrines began to be clarified. Revelations were recorded. The original organization of the Church of Jesus Christ, which was lost sometime after the first century, was soon restored. The gospel came back into the earth in great power just as Jesus had promised His disciples.<sup>7</sup>

At first the work progressed slowly. People said God would not speak to a mere boy. They held aloft their scriptures containing the writings of prophets from the past and said that this was all the revelation they needed. They said that the new young prophet was making up his revelations—that they weren't from God.

But this was to be expected. These people could not recognize a living prophet any more than the people could at the time of Christ. Nevertheless, Joseph faithfully persevered through the persecution he subsequently suffered, and he eventually published to the world the prophecies and revelations that were given to him. As we study these words, we can discern for ourselves whether Joseph was a prophet of God.

#### WHY DID THE LORD CHOOSE JOSEPH SMITH?

As we study the life of Joseph Smith, we are amazed at some of the circumstances that he had to face. He was born into extreme poverty. He received a very limited education. He was not a polished or eloquent speaker.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 24:14; Acts 3:21.

But many of Joseph's limitations were problems imposed upon him by circumstances into which he was born. Why would the Lord handicap him with these problems? Why was Joseph given the problems of poverty, a limited education and plainness of speech?

#### THE PROBLEM OF POVERTY

Like many other farming families in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Joseph's family was quite poor.<sup>8</sup> Their poverty came upon them due to circumstances beyond their control. It was not because of laziness, for they were a very hard-working family. They would take any jobs that could be found, including making barrels, baskets and split-wood chairs, manufacturing birch brooms, cutting and selling cordwood, digging wells, harvesting maple syrup and boiling it to create hundreds of pounds of sugar, and many other back-breaking tasks.<sup>9</sup>

Because Joseph began the restoration of the gospel in the midst of such poverty, it required extreme faith and patience to move the work of the Lord forward. Joseph's poverty also required him to rely more wholly upon the Lord, and to not depend on the things of this world. As Joseph watched the Lord use various means to bring about His work, this increased his faith in the power and ability of God to move the Church forward.

There were times when the work of the Lord would almost grind to a halt until generous individuals came forward with contributions. Because the Church was begun in such poverty, it became a proving ground that tested whether a convert would choose between the work of the Lord or personal wealth and comfort. Those converts to the Church who had greater financial means were asked to give liberally to help move the work of the Lord forward. Great faith was required of these early Latter-day Saints.

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<sup>8</sup> John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith: An American Prophet*, (New York: Macmillian, 1933), p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Pearson H. Corbett, *Hyrum Smith, Patriarch*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), pp. 14, 26.

When missionaries of the Church were sent forth, they went without purse or scrip, like the ancient apostles, relying on the Christian generosity of others. Those who responded to the missionaries' request for food and lodging were often those who were open-hearted and prepared to receive the message of the gospel.

As the Church was begun in such humble circumstances, the Lord could use this poverty to determine if members were dedicated to the cause of Zion or if they would be seduced by worldly gain. It was a difficult test. Most of them passed, but many did not.

#### THE RESULTS OF A LIMITED EDUCATION

Joseph was blessed with a keen intellect and mind. However, like others born into poverty and the farming lifestyle in which he was raised, he was never able to receive an adequate education. Like other teenage farm boys in the 1820s, Joseph went to school only three months out of the year.<sup>10</sup> Still, Joseph could read without difficulty, though he wrote with “a very imperfect hand.” He also knew enough math to meet his needs.<sup>11</sup> As his wife Emma later said:

“Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictate a book like the Book of Mormon, and though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me—a marvel and a wonder—as much as to anyone else.”<sup>12</sup>

This was exactly as the Lord had intended. If Joseph had been a well-educated man, others would have said that he created the Book of Mormon by using his imagination and education. To find

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<sup>10</sup> Preston Nibley, *Joseph Smith the Prophet*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1944), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> John A. Widstoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker After Truth, Prophet of God*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints Herald* (October 1, 1879) 26:290.

such a marvelous book with such complex characters, stories and doctrine coming from an unlettered youth is a shock to unbelieving doubters. The testimony of Joseph's calling as a prophet of God is strengthened by his humble and uneducated background.

As many have discovered for themselves, the Book of Mormon cannot be dismissed as the invention of an uneducated young man. It stands as a witness that Joseph was working under the inspiration of God. It affirms the veracity of all of the other things that he taught.

Throughout his life Joseph had a ferocious appetite for learning and truth. In his later life he studied the Greek and Hebrew languages, and learned all that he could from available books and newspapers. His mind was constantly reaching far and wide, asking many questions, and because of the questions he asked, he received many enlightening revelations from the Lord.

#### A PLAIN AND SIMPLE TESTIMONY

As had been prophetically declared 3,500 years before he was born, Joseph was not "mighty in speaking."<sup>13</sup> Toward the end of his life his ability to speak improved,<sup>14</sup> but in his younger years when he first established the Church he bore a simple testimony of the things he had seen and done.<sup>15</sup> As his friend Parley P. Pratt described:

"His language abounded in original eloquence peculiar to himself—not polished—not studied—not smoothed and softened by education and refined by art; but flowing forth in its own native simplicity, and profusely abounding in a variety of subject and manner. He interested and edified, while, at the same time, he amused and entertained his

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<sup>13</sup> 2 Nephi 3:17.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Ricks Anderson, *Joseph Smith's Kirtland*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), pp. 47-48.

<sup>15</sup> For several fascinating descriptions of Joseph's speaking ability see Dean C. Jessee, "Priceless Words and Fallible Memories: Joseph Smith as Seen in the Effort to Preserve His Discourses," *BYU Studies* (Spring 1991) 31:2:19-21.

audience; and none listened to him that were ever weary with his discourse. I have even known him to retain a congregation of willing and anxious listeners for many hours together, in the midst of cold or sunshine, rain or wind, while they were laughing at one moment and weeping the next. Even his most bitter enemies were generally overcome, if he could once get their ears.”<sup>16</sup>

Because of this “simplicity in speech,” Joseph was able to bear a plain but fervent testimony that resonated with those who were humble and penitent. The Lord was able to use Joseph’s limited speech as a sifting process to find those who would believe in the message more than worshiping the man. Joseph’s humility was plain for all to see, and it helped him perform his mission as an unpretentious servant of God.

#### JOSEPH WAS ABLE TO RISE ABOVE HIS PERSONAL CHALLENGES

However, in spite of these limitations that Joseph had been given, he was able to develop certain attributes that helped him in his calling as a prophet of God. He learned how to be a great leader and earned the admiration and respect of many. He grew to become extremely strong and muscular, and he was able to endure great fatigue. He was also blessed with an optimistic and infectious attitude that carried him through many trials.

#### A NATURAL LEADER

Joseph had a charismatic personality that drew others to him. They grew to love and admire him, and were willing to sacrifice their lives for his safety and protection. These were men and women of great faith and thinking, not mindless simpletons who might have been “magnetized” by Joseph’s presence. One of the early converts, Orson Pratt, was one of the preeminent scientists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Other converts included prominent newspaper

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<sup>16</sup> *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938, 1970), p. 46.

editors, doctors, lawyers, and university-educated men and women. These converts had joined the Church after the Spirit witnessed to their souls of the truth of the Prophet Joseph and his work, and had confirmed their belief in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

Joseph had a special quality of leadership. When asked later in life how he governed the people, he replied, "I teach the people correct principles, and they govern themselves."<sup>17</sup> As a prophet of God, Joseph led with the crystal-clear words of *truth*. Eternal truth, ringing in the ears of the people from the mansions of the pre-mortal existence, struck a resonant chord in the hearts of the Saints and moved them forward in faith. Joseph could explain the scriptures and open them up to the Saints' understanding to the point that they were left dumbfounded and astonished at the clarity of his teachings. Suddenly scriptural passages that had previously confused them now made perfect sense and fit in with other precepts of the gospel that they had learned.

Joseph exercised his natural ability as a leader by trusting those around him and expecting the best from them. His friends wanted to earn his trust and followed him to the end. It was leadership by persuasion, not coercion—a principle that he later recommended to all holders of the holy priesthood.<sup>18</sup> Parley P. Pratt observed:

"He possessed a noble boldness and independence of character; his manner was easy and familiar; his rebuke terrible as the lion; his benevolence unbounded as the ocean."<sup>19</sup>

#### THE STRENGTH AND PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE PROPHET

From an early age, Joseph was taught to be a hard worker. Out of necessity and poverty he had learned to earn a day's wage by the sweat of his brow and the strength of his muscles. Later, during the march of Zion's Camp, whenever a problem surfaced such as a

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<sup>17</sup> John Taylor, May 18, 1862, *Journal of Discourses* 10:57-58.

<sup>18</sup> D&C 121:39-44.

<sup>19</sup> *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, p. 45.

wagon mired in the mud, Joseph was the first to jump in and use his strength to help pull the wagon free so they could continue their journey.<sup>20</sup>

Joseph grew to be six feet tall and weighed about 200 pounds. He was handsome with a fair complexion, blue eyes and light brown hair. As described by Parley P. Pratt:

“His countenance was ever mild, affable, beaming with intelligence and benevolence; mingled with a look of interest and an unconscious smile, or cheerfulness, and entirely free from all restraint or affectation of gravity; and there was something connected with the serene and steady penetrating glance of his eye, as if he would penetrate the deepest abyss of the human heart, gaze into eternity, penetrate the heavens, and comprehend all worlds.”<sup>21</sup>

Joseph was also extremely strong, and he loved to pull sticks, play ball, wrestle, long jump and then gather the young men in the community to help him roll logs so that they could build houses for some of the widows. He was endlessly full of energy.<sup>22</sup>

Joseph walked with a graceful and straight posture, with a feeling of dignity that others called “kingly.”<sup>23</sup> Without any thought of fear he would face danger head on, even when he was young. He later described one such harrowing experience:

“When I was a boy, I once fought with a man who had whipped his wife. It was a hard contest; but I still remembered that he had whipped his wife; and this encouraged me, and I whipped him till he said he had enough.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> John Chidester, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* (1892) 27:152; *History of the Church* 2:69.

<sup>21</sup> *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), pp. 342-343; James W. Phippen, *Young Women's Journal* (1906) 17:540.

<sup>23</sup> *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet*, pp. 343, 347.

<sup>24</sup> *History of the Church* 5:285.

Throughout his life, Joseph always stood up in defense of those who were feeble, helpless or vulnerable to mistreatment by others. He did this many times even when it put his own life at risk.

Joseph also understood the critical need to balance work and play so that he could maximize his effectiveness as a servant of God. When the physical and mental exertion of translating the Book of Mormon became too much, Joseph and his scribe would take a walk in the nearby woods and skip rocks on the Susquehanna River.<sup>25</sup> Joseph loved to take time to play with his children after spending the day working hard in his prophetic duties.<sup>26</sup> Whenever he engaged in sports with others, he did it in a spirit of gentleness and good nature.

#### AN OPTIMISTIC ATTITUDE

Joseph went through an unbelievable number of ordeals during his lifetime. The one quality that helped him and his associates through these times of trial was his strong spirit of optimism. When the times were hardest, Brother Joseph would boldly move the work of the Church forward and strengthen others with words of encouragement. Joseph received his optimism by drawing close to the Lord in prayer, and following the counsel that he was given.<sup>27</sup>

The doctrine that Joseph brought to the world was optimistic in nature. Gone was the doom of unbaptized infants being consigned to hell. The bleak and dismal belief that God was an uncaring, distant being had been shattered by the light of truth. Other churches believed that life was a drudgery brought upon the human race by the fall of Adam. But Joseph boldly declared:

“Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness and keeping all the commandments of God.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Millennial Star* (February 6, 1882) 44:86-87.

<sup>26</sup> George A. Smith, March 18, 1855, *Journal of Discourses* 2:214.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Ricks Anderson, *Joseph Smith's Kirtland*, pp. 225-226.

<sup>28</sup> *History of the Church* 5:135.

Joseph's optimistic leadership guided the church through many narrow and dangerous passages. He was the right man, with the right attitude, at just the right time.

### PROPHECIES OF JOSEPH'S LATTER-DAY WORK

Ancient prophets had been anticipating for thousands of years the marvelous work that Joseph would perform. His earthly mission was seen in vision thousands of years previously by Enoch,<sup>29</sup> Joseph of Egypt,<sup>30</sup> King David,<sup>31</sup> Isaiah,<sup>32</sup> Lehi,<sup>33</sup> Nephi,<sup>34</sup> Ezekiel,<sup>35</sup> Daniel,<sup>36</sup> Malachi,<sup>37</sup> John the Beloved<sup>38</sup> and Moroni.<sup>39</sup>

Even the Savior prophesied of the work that Joseph would inaugurate when He said, "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in *all* the world for a witness unto *all* nations."<sup>40</sup> After His death and resurrection, He foretold of Joseph's mission to restore the gospel and said that it would go first to the Gentiles and then to the house of Israel.<sup>41</sup> He also predicted that Joseph would be "marred," but the Lord would "heal him."<sup>42</sup>

### JOSEPH'S MISSION WAS ANTICIPATED BY THE JEWS AND SAMARITANS

One of the most ancient and respected traditions among Jewish scholars is a prophecy that a "Messiah ben Joseph" would be raised up in the latter days for the specific purpose of preparing the way for the coming of their Great Messiah, Messiah ben David. This

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<sup>29</sup> Moses 7:62.

<sup>30</sup> 2 Nephi 3:6-21; JST Genesis 50:26-36.

<sup>31</sup> Psalms 85:11.

<sup>32</sup> Isaiah 2:2-5; 18:1-7; 29:1-24; 2 Nephi 26:14-27:35.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Nephi 10:12-14.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Nephi 13:34-37; 2 Nephi 27-29.

<sup>35</sup> Ezekiel 37:15-20.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel 2:44-45.

<sup>37</sup> Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Revelation 14:6-7; D&C 27:5.

<sup>39</sup> Ether 5:1-4.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew 24:14; emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup> 3 Nephi 21:6-11.

<sup>42</sup> 3 Nephi 21:9-11.

astounding Jewish prophecy is discussed in the *Talmud*, the *Midrash* and the *Targum*. This prophecy said that this “Joseph” of the latter days would die a martyr’s death while performing his sacred mission.<sup>43</sup>

It was also said by Jewish scholars that this Joseph would be a descendant of the original Joseph who was sold into Egypt, and he would come through the line of Ephraim. The Jews also believed that this Joseph would arise about the time Elijah returned to fulfill the promise of turning the hearts of the children to their fathers.<sup>44</sup>

The Samaritan people had a similar prophecy of a descendant of Joseph. They called him “Teal,” meaning “the restorer,” “he who returns” or “he who causes to return.” They said he would call the people of the world to repentance and bring back better days for Israel. This Joseph of the latter days would also “restore everywhere the true law to its former validity and convert all peoples, especially the Jews, to the Samaritan [Ephraimite] religion.”<sup>45</sup>

#### A MODERN PROPHECY

Very few people know that Brother Joseph also fulfilled a prophecy that Thomas Jefferson made late in his life. In 1820—a rather significant year—after Jefferson had retired as President of the United States, he made a prophetic statement in a letter to his friend, Jared Sparks:

“I hold the precepts of Jesus, as delivered by Himself, to be the most pure, benevolent and sublime, which have ever been preached to man. I adhere to principles of the first age, and consider all subsequent innovations as corruptions of religion, having no foundation in what came from Him. . . .

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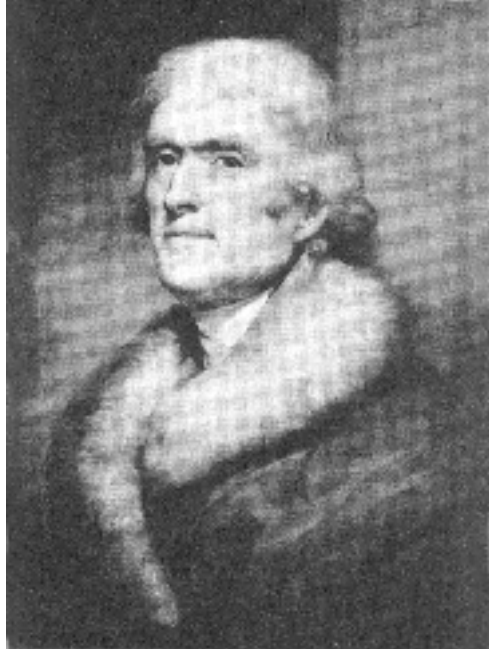
<sup>43</sup> Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1955), p. 496.

<sup>44</sup> *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, p. 498; Malachi 4:5-6.

<sup>45</sup> *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, p. 484.

“If the freedom of religion guaranteed to us by the law in theory can ever rise in practice, . . . truth will prevail over fanaticism, and *the genuine doctrines of Jesus, so long perverted by pseudo-priests, will again be restored to their original purity . . . but too late for me to witness it.*”<sup>46</sup>

Jefferson was so certain there would be a restoration of the original teachings of Jesus that in 1822 he wrote to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse that he was “happy in the prospect of a restoration of primitive Christianity.”<sup>47</sup> Jefferson died in 1826, just as Joseph’s ministry was beginning.



Thomas Jefferson prophesied of the restoration of Christianity in its original form.

#### PREPARING THE WORLD FOR JOSEPH’S BIRTH

The Lord had been preparing the world for hundreds of years for the arrival of the gospel through Joseph Smith.

To begin with, a nation had to be established that was independent from the tyrannical rule and the grasp of the apostate churches whose power was not spiritual but political. In looking at the history of the church that Joseph restored, one is amazed at the degree of persecution that was heaped upon the young and growing church even from the beginning. If the restoration of the Church had occurred in Europe, this persecution would not only

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Allison, *The Real Thomas Jefferson*, (Washington D.C.: National Center for Constitutional Studies, 1983), p. 366; emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> *The Real Thomas Jefferson*, p. 366.

have been carried out by local thugs and mobs, as happened here in the United States, but it would have received the full power and support of a religiously-corrupt political state. The infant Church would never have been able to survive if it had been established outside the United States.

So Christopher Columbus was given a sacred mission to find a land that had been set aside as the new location where the church of God could be restored. As had been predicted by a prophet of God nearly 2,100 years before it happened, Columbus was instructed and guided by the Holy Spirit so that he could complete this important task.<sup>48</sup> Even the angel Moroni encouraged him to make the journey and helped him by calming the stormy seas and guiding him to his destiny.<sup>49</sup> Columbus reported:

“The Lord was well disposed to my desire, and he bestowed upon me courage and understanding. . . . Our Lord with provident hand unlocked my mind, sent me upon the seas, and gave me fire for the deed. Those who heard of my enterprise called it foolish, mocked me, and laughed. But who can doubt but that the Holy Ghost inspired me?”<sup>50</sup>

Other reformers followed, both spiritual and political. Noble spirits like John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Locke and others were raised up by the Lord to break the stranglehold of the apostate churches on the people. Wave after wave of immigrants who desired religious freedom fled to the new holy land of America and established settlements which grew into cities and states.

The Lord knew that this new nation would have to be free of the fetters of tyrannical kings. Through the providence of God, a rag-tag volunteer army of American colonists was able to win their freedom from Great Britain, the most powerful nation on earth at

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<sup>48</sup> 1 Nephi 13:12.

<sup>49</sup> Orson Hyde, July 4, 1854, *Journal of Discourses* 6:368.

<sup>50</sup> Jacob Wasseman, *Don Quixote of the Seas*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1930), p. 18.

that time. However, shortly after this hard-won victory, the new nation disintegrated into political chaos until divinely-inspired men gathered to create a magnificent document—the Constitution of the United States of America. Under the protection of the Constitution there would be sufficient religious freedom that the Lord could inaugurate a new “marvelous work and a wonder” on the earth, as prophesied by Isaiah.<sup>51</sup>

After several hundred years of religious reformation and the establishment of political liberty, the Lord had now prepared the way for the birth of a great and noble spirit who was sent from the heavenly realms with a challenging and sacred mission. Born into a humble home in a small farming community, Joseph Smith Junior would someday introduce a new gospel dispensation that would be different from all others—a dispensation that would prepare the world for the ushering in of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>51</sup> Isaiah 29:14.