

## Chapter 1

### The Sabbath in Early Mormonism

Of all the concerns which the early members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had to face, arguing over which day was the Sabbath was not one of them. It was briefly mentioned and observed with an apparent mixture of reverence and convenience. Yet a few early Mormons raised questions which still exist.

Though of little apparent concern during those first years, Mormon scripture recognized a rest day very early. The “Lord’s Day” reference in the fifty-ninth section of The Doctrine and Covenants on August 7, 1831, remains the main bulwark of the Mormon Sabbath doctrine.

Among modern Mormons Sunday, the day upon which the major spiritual activities of the church occur, can be a very busy day indeed. It would thus seem appropriate for Sunday to have been the day upon which the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded. But this was not the case.

Tuesday was the day the church was organized. In his account of the church’s history written several years afterward, Joseph Smith recorded the events of that day in Fayette, New York:

“Whilst the Book of Mormon was in the hands of the printer, we still continued to bear testimony and give information, as far as we had opportunity; and also made known to our brethren that we had received a commandment to organize the Church; and accordingly we met together for that purpose, at the house of Mr. Peter Whitmer, Sen., (being six in number,) on Tuesday, the sixth day of April, a.d., one thousand eight hundred and thirty.” 1

By unanimous vote on that day the six persons present indicated their recognition of the right to organize the Church of Christ on the earth in the latter days. Joseph Smith ordained Oliver Cowdery as Elder of the church, and Cowdery reciprocated by ordaining Smith “to the office of an Elder of said Church.” 2

Then “the Holy Ghost was poured out upon us to a very great degree - some prophesied, whilst we all praised the Lord, and rejoiced exceedingly.” 3

Climaxing the day’s events, Joseph Smith received a “revelation” in which the church was instructed to keep a record in which Joseph Smith was to “be called a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of

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Jesus Christ, an elder of the church through the will of God the Father, and the grace of your Lord Jesus Christ.” 4

In this revelation the church was admonished to heed the words and commandments given through Joseph Smith and to receive his words as if they had come from the Lord’s “own mouth.” 5

The first Sunday in the church’s history appears to have been less momentous. The location was the same, Fayette, New York. The date was April 11, 1830. Smith’s record states that “Oliver Cowdery preached the first public discourse that was delivered by any of our number.” Six persons were baptized. 6

The first Sunday actually called “the Sabbath” in Smith’s history occurred “shortly after” a church conference held in June of 1830. 7 Accompanied by his wife, Oliver Cowdery, and others, Joseph Smith went to Colesville, New York, where a number of interested persons awaited baptism:

“We appointed a meeting for the Sabbath, and on the afternoon of Saturday we erected a dam across a stream of water, which was convenient, for the purpose of there attending to the ordinance of baptism; but during the night a mob collected and tore down our dam, which hindered us from attending to the baptism on the Sabbath.” 8

Here Saturday is clearly named as the day preceding “the Sabbath.” It appears that Smith simply assumed that Sunday is the Sabbath of the Bible. No hint of any idea to the contrary is present; and, in a period when most persons, Catholic and Protestant, worshiped on Sunday, anything but this type of reckoning would be unexpected.

Not to be dissuaded by this act of vandalism instigated “by certain sectarian priests of the neighborhood, who began to consider their craft in danger, and took this plan to stop the progress of the truth,” 9 the men repaired the dam early Monday morning; and before the Mormons’ enemies knew what was astir, thirteen persons were baptized in the backwaters behind the repaired dam.

But the events connected with what was originally proposed as a quiet Sabbath baptism continued to gain ominous momentum. Those who were finally baptized on Monday morning were scheduled to be confirmed during a meeting that evening. Instead, Joseph Smith was “visited by a constable, and arrested by him on a warrant, on the charge of being a disorderly person, of setting the country in an uproar by preaching the Book of Mormon, etc.” 10

This was but the beginning of harassments in the name of the law which were to include the languishing of Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail

during the Missouri persecutions of the church, and which for him ended after fourteen years with his martyrdom by a mob at the jail in Carthage, Illinois, in 1844.

In quick succession two trials were held after the 1830 arrest, but charges were found to be without foundation. Proceedings of these trials might not show what Smith's persecutors had against quiet "Sabbath" baptisms by the Mormons; but they do show that the new religion and its founder elicited considerable concern, as can be seen in part of the courtroom dialogue as Joseph Smith later recalled it:

"Newel Knight was called up and examined by Lawyer Seymour, who had been especially sent for on this occasion. One Lawyer Burch, also, was on the side of the prosecution; but Mr. Seymour seemed to be a more zealous Presbyterian, and appeared very anxious and determined that the people should not be deluded by any one professing the power of godliness, and not [sic] 'denying the power thereof.'

"Mr. Knight was sworn, and Mr. Seymour interrogated him as follows:

"Did the prisoner, Joseph Smith, Jun., cast the devil out of you?' [Mr. Seymour referred to a previous experience when Joseph Smith was supposed to have cast the devil from Knight.]

"No, sir.'

"Why, have not you had the devil cast out of you?"

"Yes, sir.'

"And had not Joe Smith some hand in its being done?"

"Yes, sir.'

"And did not he cast him out of you?"

"No, sir; it was done by the power of God, and Joseph Smith was the instrument in the hands of God, on the occasion. He commanded him to come out of me in the name of Jesus Christ.'

"And are you sure that it was the devil?"

"Yes, sir.'

"Did you see him after he was cast out of you?"

"Yes, sir! I saw him.'

"Pray, what did he look like?"

"[Here one of my lawyers informed the witness that he need not answer the question.] The witness replied:

"I believe I need not answer your last question, but I will do it, provided I be allowed to ask you one question first, and you answer me, viz., Do you, Mr. Seymour, understand the things of the spirit?"

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“No,’ answered Mr. Seymour, ‘I do not pretend to such big things.’

“Well, then,’ replied Knight, ‘it would be of no use to tell you what the devil looked like, for it was a spiritual sight, and spiritually discerned; and of course you would not understand it were I to tell you of it.’

“The lawyer dropped his head, whilst the loud laugh of the audience proclaimed his discomfiture.” 11

The second specific mention of Sunday as the “Sabbath” in Joseph Smith’s account was also associated with a mob incident. This was in March, 1832, at Hiram, Ohio. Joseph Smith and his family were staying in the home of “Father Johnson,” where nothing particular had occurred except that Joseph “had held meetings on the Sabbaths and evenings, and baptized a number.” 12

On Saturday evening, March 24, 1832, a mob abducted Joseph. Although some of the members were apparently set on the prophet’s demise, the ruffians, on the basis of a hastily staged conference, finally decided to spare his life. However, they administered a sound beating and scratching, stripped him, and applied tar generously over his naked body.

The spirit of Joseph Smith which endeared him to his followers is found in his account of what followed:

“My friends spent the night in scraping and removing the tar, and washing and cleansing my body; so that by morning I was ready to be clothed again. This being the Sabbath morning, the people assembled for meeting at the usual hour of worship, and among them came also the mobbers; viz.: Simonds Ryder, a Campbellite preacher and leader of the mob; one McClentic, who had his hands in my hair; one Streeter, a son of a Campbellite minister; and Felatiah Allen, Esq., who gave the mob a barrel of whiskey to raise their spirits. Besides these named, there were many others in the mob. With my flesh all scarified and defaced, I preached to the congregation as usual, and in the afternoon of the same day baptized three individuals.” 13

More often Sunday services were less exciting. On a typical Sunday, May 18, 1834, the threat of persecution of the Saints in Missouri had brought a detachment of Mormon men to Zion’s Camp from what was then the main location of the Latter-day Saints, Kirtland, Ohio. Though beset with difficulties during the trip on that Sunday “we had preaching as usual, and the administration of the Sacrament.” 14

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Zion's Camp was staked out near Jacksonville, Illinois, on Sunday, June 1, 1834. Since many of the men had been ministers of other denominations prior to becoming Mormons, it was decided to hold an all-day preaching service with each speaker dealing with doctrines taught with some emphasis by his previous religion. Joseph Young spoke about free salvation, Brigham Young and Orson Hyde gave their views on baptism, and "Brother Lyman E. Johnson... spoke at some length upon the necessity of men being upright in their walk, and keeping the Sabbath day [Sunday] holy." 15

So effective were these men at presenting the doctrines of the denominations of which they had previously been members that the people of Jacksonville guessed that they had listened to a Methodist, a Baptist, a Campbellite, a Presbyterian, a Restorationer, and others.

Finally, the people there from Jacksonville "inquired if we all belonged to one denomination. The answer was, We were some of us Baptists, some Methodists, some Presbyterians, some Campbellites, some Restorationers." 16

In the desperate days surrounding the Missouri persecutions the Saints did not always feel free to hold religious services and otherwise rest on Sunday. During 1838 a large number of the Mormon population in Kirtland, Ohio, moved to Missouri to help the deteriorating condition of the Saints there, where they faced some of their worst persecution.

Sunday, September 23, 1838, was one such day. Following a description of some of the hardships - a broken wagon and an injury - the camp record tersely noted the group had "traveled today twenty-one miles. Distance from Kirdand, seven hundred and eighteen miles." 17

Driven from Missouri, the Saints settled in the quiet Illinois town of Nauvoo, which lay along the bank of the Mississippi River. Despite hardships, this was a time of spiritual and temporal growth and strengthening of the Mormon people. At Nauvoo the Prophet Smith added baptism of the dead and initiated polygamy ("celestial marriage"). But in 1844, with the martyrdom of their prophet, the destruction of Nauvoo, and the scattering of the Saints, most of the people followed Brigham Young in the epic trek to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

In Nauvoo the Sunday appears to have been a special community day for worship. Smith recorded that on Sunday, July 3, 1842, he used

the prophecies of Daniel as he “preached at the grove to about 8,000 people.” 18

The flair with which the prophet ruled his followers at this time is reflected in his actions at the Sunday morning service of May 21, 1843. Meeting in the unfinished Nauvoo Temple, Joseph Smith found it difficult to make his way up the aisle to the speaker’s stand. He then requested that the aisles be kept free from people, “for if they did not, I might some time run up and down and hit some of them; and called on two constables to keep the aisles clear.” 19

During this sermon the prophet described himself:

“I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, priestcraft, lawyer-craft, doctor-craft, lying editors, suborned judges and jurors, and the authority of perjured executives, backed by mobs, blasphemers, licentious and corrupt men and women - all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty, who will give me dominion over all and every one of them, when their refuge of lies shall fail, and their hiding place shall be destroyed, while these smooth-polished stones with which I come in contact become marred. 20

Of Sunday, March 19, 1843, he wrote, “Rode out with Emma and visited my farm; returned about eleven, a.m., and spent the remainder of the day at home.” 21

Although Sunday was kept as the day of rest and worship, items involving community order were brought up. At ten o’clock Sunday morning, April 30, for example, the first presidency of the church judged in the trial of Coltrin against Matthews in a dispute over a sale of land. 22

The apparent unanimity of belief and practice of Sunday observance in early Mormonism did not go unchallenged both from within and from without. Nor did these challenges go unmet. As a last resort the defenders of Sunday sacredness would point to the fifty-ninth section of the book, The Doctrine and Covenants, where “my holy day” (v. 9) and “the Lord’s day” (v. 12) were mentioned. In reply to a Mormon layman requesting help to answer a neighbor who maintained that the Mormons were worshiping on the wrong day of the week, one of the Council of the Twelve Apostles wrote:

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“The complete answer to these questions is found in the The Doctrine and Covenants, Section 59. This revelation was given on Sunday, August 7, 1831, in Jackson County, Missouri....

“Thou shalt thank the Lord thy God in all things.

“Thou shalt offer a sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in righteousness, even that of a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

“And that thou mayest more fully keep thyself unspotted from the world, thou shalt go to the house of prayer and offer up thy sacraments upon my holy day;

“For verily this is a day appointed unto you to rest from your labors, and to pay thy devotions unto the Most High;

“Nevertheless thy vows shall be offered up in righteousness on all days and at all times;

“But remember that on this, the Lord’s day, thou shalt offer thine oblations and thy sacraments unto the Most High, confessing thy sins unto thy brethren, and before the Lord.

“And on this day thou shalt do none other thing, only let thy food be prepared with singleness of heart that thy fasting may be perfect, or, in other words, that thy joy may be full.” 23

One expositor asserts with finality: “It was for our own time that the revelation 24 was reserved forever setting aside matters of dispute and establishing the Lord’s Day, Sunday, as the Sabbath of the restoration.” 25

Another member of the Twelve wrote, “Again, it is through the revelation of the Lord to his prophet of this dispensation that this truth is made plain, rather than through a study of ancient scriptures or of history.” 26

And one of the General Authorities affirmed the matter by pointing out that “the Latter-day Saints keep the first day of the week as their Sabbath, not in imitation of what any peoples of the past have done, but because the Lord so commanded them by direct revelation. (D. & C. 59.)” 27

Since this revelation is used to settle the issue, a fair question might ask its original intent and the attendant circumstances.

When Joseph Smith gave this revelation, he was in the part of Missouri known in Saintism as Zion. Four days prior, near Independence, Joseph dedicated a spot where a temple was to be built. On the day of the revelation the prophet attended the funeral of the first of the Saints to die in Zion. Most likely this weighed deeply on Joseph as he wrote in the revelation, “Those that die shall rest from all

their labors, and their works shall follow them; and they shall receive a crown in the mansion of my Father, which I have prepared for them.”  
28

This exhortatory revelation was given for those “whose feet stand upon the land of Zion,” 29 challenging them to live in light of gospel principles such as those found in the Ten Commandments.

That this revelation was given to authorize worship on the first day of the week is doubtful, for nowhere in the revelation itself or the record of the early Mormon Church can it be found that Joseph Smith questioned the validity of the Ten Commandments, which authorize worship on the seventh day, Saturday. On the contrary he indicated that the things in this revelation were “according to the law and the prophets,” 30 a phrase commonly used to refer to the writings of Moses and the writings of the prophets of the Old Testament.

Not only does the phrase “the law and the prophets” generally refer to Old Testament writings with their proclamation of the seventh-day Sabbath, but the two terms, “my holy day” and “the Lord’s day,” used in section fifty-nine of The Doctrine and Covenants, are those which the Bible applies to the seventh-day Sabbath. In Isaiah 58:13 “My holy day” refers to the day God ordained for Israel’s day of worship, the seventh-day Sabbath. And “the Lord’s day” is synonymous with the Exodus 20:8-11 enunciation of the Fourth Commandment where the seventh day is called “the Sabbath of the Lord thy God.” Christ substantiated this by reminding His listeners (Mark 2:28) that “the Son of man is Lord also of the Sabbath.”

The use of the fifty-ninth section of The Doctrine and Covenants by modern defenders of Sunday as the Sabbath of Mormonism is out of context with its original intent and was not used for this purpose by Joseph Smith, who in all likelihood kept the first day, not because of any special revelation from God (none has been found), but because it was the customary day for Christian worship since the fifth or fourth century.

There were those in the early Mormon Church who had questions concerning the Sabbath. However, these were few, and their questions seems to have been engulfed in the furor of the times.

An example of this tendency is shown by the experience of Wilford Woodruff, fourth in the line of presidents and prophets of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Converted to Mormonism in the early 1830’s, Woodruff’s belief upheld him during the persecutions in



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Missouri and Illinois, the trek to Utah, and the church presidency when agitation over polygamy reached its peak.

It was Wilford Woodruff who stated in his journal of September 25, 1890, that because the United States Government was about to destroy the Church he was “under the necessity of acting for the temporal salvation of the church.” Having prayed and “feeling inspired.” 31 he issued the manifesto forbidding polygamous marriage among the Saints, a manifesto which, along with a supporting statement, was canonized as the last entry in the Mormon The Doctrine and Covenants.

This was but one time Wilford Woodruff felt led by the Spirit. Before becoming a Mormon in 1832, Woodruff sought divine guidance in his search for God’s people on the earth. He felt that he was led to the idea that God’s people were about to be made known to him and that he should not bother himself with the established religions of the day. He worshiped as he was led in God’s Word.

“In our zeal,” Woodruff later wrote in his journal, “my brother Azmon and I adopted the worship of the Lord on Saturday instead of Sunday. I felt that a change in the seventh to the first day of the week was likely a perversion made by man without authority from heaven.” 32

Woodruff’s attraction to the magnetic personality of Joseph Smith and his teachings apparently subjugated his thoughts concerning the “perversion.” At a later period in his life President Woodruff reminisced:

“When I was baptized into this Church, I was observing the seventh day as the Sabbath of the Lord, and not the first day of the week; but I knew that the Latter-day Saints were the people of God, and had the true Church of Christ; and if I had a hundred traditions I would have laid them all aside.” 33

The problem had also crossed other minds. While on a mission in England shortly after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, Orson Pratt, one of the Twelve Apostles, listed subjects which he felt required additional light. Among the religious topics he discussed was the Sabbath:

“Again, must the seventh day or the first day of the week be kept holy unto the Lord? The New Testament does not clearly answer this question. There is rather more evidence in that book for keeping holy the Sabbath day or Saturday, than there is for keeping the first day or

Sunday. The New Testament is very indefinite on this subject, and therefore it is an insufficient guide.” 34

But although turbulence surrounding the birth of Mormonism clouded the Sabbath issue, it did not escape. James J. Strang saw to that.

### REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1948-1960), Vol. 1, pp. 74-77.

2. Ibid., p. 78.

3. Ibid.

4. The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 21:1. Chapter 4 deals with this book and three other books considered Scripture in Mormonism. The Doctrine and Covenants is mostly the work of Joseph Smith and is held in Mormonism to contain revelations given from God to Smith. It is divided into sections and verses similar to the Biblical chapters and verses.

5. Ibid., 21:5.

6. Smith, History of the Church, op. ext., Vol. 1, p. 81.

7. The conference was held on either June 1 or June 9, 1830. There is disagreement among the sources. See Ibid., p. 84, footnote. The date of the Sunday mentioned is not noted by Smith.

8. Ibid., p. 86.

9. Ibid., p. 86.

10. Ibid., p. 88.

11. Ibid., pp. 92, 93.

12. Ibid., p. 260.

13. Ibid., p. 264.

14. Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 69. The record of the expedition of Zion's Camp is found, among other places, in this volume of Smith's History, pages 61-123.

15. William E. Berrett and Alma P. Burton, Readings in L.DJS. Church History (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1953-1958), Vol. 1, p. 185.

16. Ibid., p. 186.

17. Smith, History of the Church, op. cit., Vol. 3, p. 143.

18. Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 56.

19. Ibid., p. 400.

20. Ibid., p. 401.

21. Ibid., p. 307.

22. Ibid., pp. 371, 372.

23. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1957-1966), Vol. 2, pp. 58, 59. Smith here quotes *The Doctrine and Covenants*, section 59. It deals mainly with a reiteration of several of the Ten Commandments and the blessings attending their observance. Joseph Fielding Smith succeeded David O. McKay as president of the Latter Day Saints in 1970.

24. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints holds each president to be the prophet of the Lord on the earth during the time he holds office. Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church, holds preeminence, by far, in the number of revelations achieving canonicity in Mormon scripture.

25. Ariel L. Crowley, *Statement of Beliefs of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1963), page 121.

26. LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1950), page 345.

27. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Company, 1958), p. 658.

28. *The Doctrine and Covenants*, 59:2.

29. Ibid., 59:3.

30. Ibid., 59:22.

31. Berrett, op. cit., Vol. 3, p. 106.

32. Matthias F. Cowley, WUford Woodruff (Salt Lake City: *The Deseret News*, 1909), pages 29, 30.

33. Ibid., p. 450.

34. Orson Pratt, *Orson Pratt's Works* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1945, page 170. Pratt's writings were first published between 1848 and 1851 in Liverpool, England.