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Getting into the Meat of the Word of Wisdom

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Getting into the Meat of the Word of Wisdom

A. Jane Birch

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GETTING INTO THE MEAT OF THE WORD OF WISDOM

A. Jane Birch

Short as it is, the dietary counsel in section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants is far from straightforward, as evidenced by the wide variety of interpretations it has inspired since God revealed it to Joseph Smith in 1833. In contrast, what it means to “keep the Word of Wisdom,” to meet the worthiness standard set by the leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is relatively clear: abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, tea, and harmful drugs. Although there is much more to the revelation in D&C 89, the Church has provided no other binding interpretations, leaving members to decide whether and how to respond to the remaining counsel.

Amongst the verses left without official interpretation is a pair that may be as well known for their relative neglect as any other in modern-day scripture:

Yea, flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air, I, the Lord, have ordained for the use of man with thanksgiving; nevertheless they are to be used sparingly;

And it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine. (D&C 89:12–13)

Judging from the variety of interpretations elicited by these verses, they are deeply enigmatic. This is especially true

of verse 13. While a variety of writers have attempted various interpretations of this verse, what stands out is the contradictory nature of the diverse explanations. There is no consensus of opinion. This may be one reason why, historically, one popular approach to this verse has been to ignore it altogether.¹ Others who have attempted an explanation have frequently made no effort to support their claims with credible evidence.

To date, no one has collected the diverse explanations for D&C 89:13 or attempted to analyze them in light of the available evidence, so that is what I propose to do in this article. My purpose is not to provide a definitive resolution to the meaning of this verse; that, I believe, would require a prophetic voice. But where scholarship may fall short of prophetic clarity, it can help us clear out some of the weeds that have grown up in the absence of prophetic pronouncements. In this case, where we cannot be sure what this verse means, we can be reasonably sure of what it does not mean.

For example, one inexplicably popular understanding of D&C 89:13 has been that the comma inserted between the words *used* and *only*, beginning with the 1921 edition of the D&C, *changed* the meaning of the text. The implication of this theory is that the true meaning of the verse is revealed only by eliminating the errant comma: God is pleased if we do *not* restrict ourselves to eating meat only in times of winter, cold, or famine.² In a previous article, I demonstrated why this “errant comma theory” should not be considered among the valid contenders for a legitimate interpretation of D&C 89:13.³

1 The lds.org Gospel Topics “Word of Wisdom” entry, for example, does not even quote verse 13. Accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.lds.org/topics/word-of-wisdom>.

2 Note that while I will often use the word *meat*, the text actually refers to “flesh also of beasts and of the fowls of the air.” The terms are not necessarily equivalent.

3 A. Jane Birch, “Questioning the Comma in Verse 13 of the Word of Wisdom,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 133–49.

In short, the comma added in 1921 did not *change* the meaning of the verse; Church leaders have always read the word *only* to mean *except*, with or without the comma. However, the meaning of the word *only* changed over time, making the added comma useful to helping modern readers retain the original sense of that word.

In this article, I will explore the other major (as well as some of the minor) interpretations of this verse and suggest why some of these explanations may be more plausible than others.

Approaches to Understanding D&C 89:13

If the “errant comma theory” is not plausible, what does D&C 89:13 mean? Verse 13 seems to suggest a further restriction of meat consumption beyond the admonition in verse 12 to consume it “sparingly.” But what is that restriction? A literalist interpretation of D&C 89:13 would take it at face value: it is pleasing to God if we do not use the flesh of beasts or fowls of the air, except in times of winter, cold, or famine. This straightforward interpretation has, in fact, been the one most commonly used by Latter-day Saints who have examined this verse, and it was the only one used for well over 100 years after the revelation was given.⁴ This, of course, did not translate into widespread practice. And while abiding by this counsel has never been made a standard for Church worthiness (LDS leaders had a hard enough time convincing members to give up alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea), this interpretation was taken for granted by most Latter-day Saints who addressed the Word of Wisdom up through about the 1940s.

But even this literalist interpretation becomes complicated when we consider the meaning of “times of,” “winter,” “cold,” and “famine.” “Famine” might be the easiest to interpret as it is

⁴ This is based on my own analysis of the Word of Wisdom literature from 1833 to 2014.

intuitively clear why God would sanction the use of meat during periods when his children are threatened by starvation (see D&C 49:19, 21). But what definition of “winter” does this verse refer to? Is “winter” defined by the meteorologists, the calendar, or the weather? The average temperature of the winter season varies widely across the globe, from comfortably mild, and even warm, to bitter cold. Some countries are never cold and thus never experience winter at all. With modern heating in homes and cars, do people with these commonplace comforts truly experience winter? If it is cold outside, but we are in well-heated homes and offices, is it a “time of cold” for us? What is the difference between “winter” or “cold” and “times of” winter or cold?

Questions like these help us see why it can be difficult to interpret passages from the Word of Wisdom without some understanding of God’s intent in giving us these particular edicts. Surprisingly, this is equally true for other admonitions found in Section 89. While the twentieth-century Church made the standard for “keeping the Word of Wisdom” clear, most passages in D&C 89 are open to varying interpretations, which are influenced by what we assume to be God’s purposes for the revelation.

For example, most Latter-day Saints who have addressed the Word of Wisdom have assumed that one important reason why the Lord gave these particular admonitions was for our physical well-being. This assertion has logically led to the assumption that the advice in Section 89 is (or will be) verified by modern science, and the assumption that science can help us better understand the Word of Wisdom has then impacted the interpretation of almost every verse. For example, once caffeine was identified as a stimulant in coffee and tea, this fact led many Saints to suggest that these passages implied we should abstain from anything with high levels of caffeine, including, most famously, cola drinks. Clearly, as the Church has recently

taken pains to point out,⁵ the Word of Wisdom does not mention caffeine *per se*, but this line of reasoning is logical if one assumes that the Word of Wisdom is primarily a guide to better physical health and that science, therefore, should be able to help us understand its meaning and application. If the Lord had other purposes in mind, those purposes would likely lead to different lines of reasoning and alternative possible interpretations.

Below I discuss the various interpretations of verse 13 that have been proposed throughout its history, most of which assume a particular purpose for this counsel. I will deal first with explanations based on the assumption that verse 13 is primarily intended to promote physical health, and secondly discuss non-health-related explanations.

Health-Related Explanations

Although it has rarely been treated as simply a guide to better health, LDS Church leaders and members have consistently extolled this purpose of the Word of Wisdom. They have pointed to the fact that it was given for our “temporal salvation” (v. 2), that it explicitly tells us what is good and not good for our bodies (vv. 7–16), and that it includes promises appearing to relate to physical health (vv. 18, 20). Equally persuasive to many Latter-day Saints are the compelling links between the advice in D&C 89 and what science says about healthy dietary practices.

If the Word of Wisdom is a health guide, it is logical to assume that the guidelines are or will be verified by science. Not surprisingly, the majority of Latter-day Saints who have addressed the Word of Wisdom have been quite eager to show how the admonitions in D&C 89 are in perfect harmony with

5 See “Mormonism in the News: Getting It Right, August 29,” accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/mormonism-news--getting-it-right-august-29>.

cutting-edge science. Of course the science they cite is, at best, a reflection of the nutritional thought of their time, much of which now appears quite dated since science continues to evolve, sometimes quite dramatically.

Below are some of the theories that have been used as explanations of the Lord's counsel on meat consumption in verse 13 in light of its impact on our physical health. I will be questioning whether any of these explanations are compelling enough to provide useful insight into this verse.

Theory: Consuming meat in the winter and cold, rather than in the heat and summer, is better for human health.

Historically, the most common explanation for why the Lord counseled the Saints to not eat meat, except in times of winter or cold, has been that this is better for the human body. Not all of these explanations were tied to scientific evidence. For example, in 1865 one author asserted:

The eating of much flesh in a warm climate, besides other evils, produces drowsiness, which leads to the breaking of another commandment ... which teaches us to "arise early."⁶

By far the most frequent reason given for why it is better if meat is eaten in the cold rather than the heat is the claim that meat warms the body. For example, one author writes, "Meat builds heat, so if you are out in the cold a lot and need the extra heat for your body you can get it by eating meat."⁷ Similarly,

6 E. C. Brand, *The Word of Wisdom* (San Francisco: n.p., 1865).

7 Doris T. Charriere, *Hidden Treasures of the Word of Wisdom* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1978), 51.

another author cites contemporary experts in claiming, “In summer or hot weather [meat] is ‘too heating.’”⁸

While this explanation has its roots in a pre-modern understanding of the human body and was first employed long before any scientific reasoning was used to support it, there is a scientific basis for this assertion, which later authors (including contemporary ones) have used. The scientific backing comes from the fact that consuming protein produces more heat than fats or carbohydrates because of the higher thermic effect of protein (also known as “diet-induced thermogenesis” or “specific dynamic action”). The “thermic effect of food” is the energy used by the body to process food and is one factor in maintaining the body’s temperature. Protein produces a thermic effect of 20–30%, meaning that 20–30% percent of a food’s protein calories are spent to metabolize the protein. The thermic effect of carbohydrate is 5-10%. The thermic effect of fat is a mere 0–3%.⁹ These facts suggest a theoretical possibility that higher protein consumption might help keep the body warm, and many Latter-day Saint writers have cited these facts to demonstrate the wisdom of D&C 89. But ultimately there is no evidence that increased protein or meat consumption results in a discernible difference in maintaining body temperature in comparison to other sources of calories.

In an exhaustive 350-page study commissioned by the U.S. military entitled *Nutrition Needs in Cold and in High-Altitude Environments*, no evidence was found that macronutrient needs change in cold weather; nor was any evidence found to support the idea of increasing meat consumption in winter or cold. In fact, because the energy allowance for military personnel is higher in the cold but the total amount of

8 Leah D. Widtsoe, *How to Be Well* (Independence, MO: Zion’s Printing, 1943), 71.

9 Klass R. Westerterp, “Diet Induced Thermogenesis,” *Nutrition & Metabolism* 1/5 (2004): 1–5.

protein needed remains relatively constant, “the percentage of calories to be contributed by protein is significantly lower.”¹⁰ Long-term studies of human subjects specifically testing the potential of protein to increase thermoregulation concluded that *carbohydrates* helped humans maintain “a higher core temperature during cold exposure than did fat or protein.”¹¹

A second study commissioned by the U.S. military to investigate the nutritional needs of military personnel in hot environments produced over 550 pages of analysis, none of which recommend *decreasing* meat or protein consumption in warm weather. In fact, at one point it suggests a “slight increase in protein may be required for work in hot environments.”¹² Humans eat food, not specific macronutrients, and studies show that “when people consume mixed meals, the relative SDE [specific dynamic effect] impact of protein, carbohydrate, or fat becomes indistinguishable.”¹³

A second, far less common, rationale used to explain the wisdom of increasing meat consumption in the winter is that “meat has more calories than fruits and vegetables, which some individuals may need fewer of in summer than winter.”¹⁴ People do tend to consume more calories in the cold, and most studies suggest there is an increased energy need in cold weather.¹⁵ The problem with this interpretation, however, is that humans can

10 Committee on Military Nutrition Research, Food and Nutrition Board, Institute of Medicine, *Nutritional Needs in Cold and High-Altitude Environments*, ed. Bernadette M. Marriott and Sydney J. Carlson (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1996), 24.

11 Committee on Military Nutrition Research, *Nutritional Needs in Cold*, 285–86.

12 Committee on Military Nutrition Research, Food and Nutrition Board, Institute of Medicine, *Nutritional Needs in Hot Environments*, ed. Bernadette M. Marriott (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1993), 45.

13 Committee on Military Nutrition Research, *Nutritional Needs in Hot Environments*, 109.

14 *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual Religion 324 and 325* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 210.

15 See previously cited studies commissioned by the U.S. military.

obtain energy (calories) from any food source; there is nothing special about meat calories (although under certain limited conditions, animals may be available where plants are not; this condition will be dealt with later in this article).

Caloric (energy) density depends on factors like the amount of water, fiber, and fats in food. Meat can be roughly two to ten times more calorically dense than vegetables, fruits, or whole grains, but some plant foods (like nuts, seeds, vegetable oils, and many plant-based processed foods) can be two to four times more calorically dense than meat. An extra 300 calories of beef, chicken, or pork delivers no more calories to the body than an extra 300 calories of fruits, vegetables, and grains. In addition, studies indicate that when people eat more foods with lower energy density, they typically eat less because these foods provide greater satiety.¹⁶

The majority of the LDS authors who have addressed the question of meat consumption and human health have dwelt largely and often exclusively on the hazards of making meat more than a moderate portion of the diet, regardless of the season. Several have pointed out that at the time D&C 89 was revealed, Americans were known to consume a relatively large quantity of meat.¹⁷ Living in a land of rich abundance, Americans have almost always been able to consume a significantly higher quantity of meat as compared to other countries.¹⁸ In the 2000s, meat consumption in the U.S. hit a record high.¹⁹ Consequently, one can readily find criticisms and cautions against heavy meat

16 Gordon M. Wardlaw and Anne M. Smith, *Contemporary Nutrition*, 6th ed. updated (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 38–40.

17 See, for example, Lester E. Bush Jr., "The Word of Wisdom in Early Nineteenth-Century Perspective." *Dialogue* 14/3 (Fall 1981): 47–65.

18 Vaclav Smil, "Eating Meat: Evolution, Patterns, and Consequences," *Population and Development Review* 28/4 (2002): 599–639.

19 United States Department of Agriculture, *Agriculture Fact Book 2001–2002* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office Superintendent of Documents, 2003), 15.

consumption throughout American history, up to the present day. Many LDS writers have relied on various critiques of meat consumption in their own explanations of why the Lord would caution us to consume meat “sparingly” and only in times of winter, cold, or famine.

The following are some of the reasons historically cited by Latter-day Saints as to why immoderate meat consumption can be detrimental to the human body. The popularity of some of these reasons has waxed and waned, but surprisingly none of them has gone totally out of favor, though not all would be championed by current mainstream scientific research. The first few points, for example, are currently less controversial than some of the others:

- Higher meat consumption is strongly associated with many chronic diseases, especially heart disease.
- High meat consumption crowds out other healthy foods and their nutrients.
- Meat contains an unhealthy amount of saturated fat and cholesterol.
- Excess meat protein is hard on the liver and kidneys.
- High meat consumption has a negative effect on the acid–alkaline balance of body.
- Meat is high in uric acid (associated with gout and kidney stones).
- Meat is more subject to “putrefactive and other disturbances.”
- Meat is hard for humans to digest.
- Meat is overly “stimulating” to the human body.

The assertion that meat consumption is deleterious to health is an ancient concept, and it was preached by a few prominent people in Joseph Smith’s day.²⁰ Today, very few mainstream nutritionists would argue for high meat consumption; current

20 Bush, “Word of Wisdom,” 53–54.

dietary advice counsels cutting back on meat. A number of experts assert that higher levels of meat consumption lead to obesity and a large variety of bodily ailments, particularly chronic illnesses such as heart disease, strokes, and cancer (among the top causes of death in America).²¹

But what about the advice to abstain from consuming meat, except during times of winter or cold? Is there a rationale for this counsel on a health basis? On the one hand, there are experts who feel the evidence for limiting our consumption of meat beyond the standard of “sparingly” is very compelling. On the other hand, there doesn’t appear to be strong evidence that consuming meat in the winter or cold has health advantages over consuming it in the summer and heat (assuming both are done sparingly).

Nevertheless, it is self-evident that abstaining from all meat consumption during certain parts of the year (spring, summer, and fall) and sparingly at other times (winter or cold) would lead to overall less meat consumption than consuming meat sparingly year round, and, according to some experts, this would be better for our health.²² However, we might legitimately ask, “Would the Lord provide an *arbitrary* distinction between the seasons simply in order to decrease the total amount of meat we consume?” If not, what logical rationale might there be for the obvious distinction made in verse 13?

21 See, for example, Joan Sabate, “The Contribution of Vegetarian Diets to Health and Disease: A Paradigm Shift?” *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 78(suppl) (2003): 502S–07S.

22 See, for example, Carrie R. Daniel, Amanda J. Cross, Corinna Koebnick, and Rashmi Sinha, “Trends in Meat Consumption in the USA,” *Public Health Nutrition* 14/4 (2010): 575–583.

Theory: Plant foods are not as available in the winter or cold, so meat is needed to supplement the diet.

Several editions of the LDS Church Educational System *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual* state, “Before fruits and vegetables could be preserved, people often did not have enough other food to eat in winter.”²³ Actually, humans have known for thousands of years how “fruits and vegetables could be preserved,” but this interpretation at least implies that meat is more necessary in conditions in which plant foods are scarce. This is more of a survival strategy than a health claim, but scarce food resources are a threat to health.

Before the era of modern transportation, mechanical refrigeration, and year-round stocked grocery stores, the human diet was tied to the cyclical nature of the farm. People ate seasonally. Most plant foods were harvested during late summer and fall. From this harvest, people preserved a variety of plant foods for the winter and cold months, but this supply (depending on its size) could run out, causing a “hunger gap” between the time the supplies ran out and the earliest harvest in spring. The flesh of animals was used not just for taste and variety, but also as a useful supplement to the diet to provide adequate calories. Animals were routinely slaughtered in the late fall, preserved, and consumed until the supply ran out. It was hoped that the next harvest would be available by that time.²⁴

According to this interpretation of the Word of Wisdom, eating the flesh of animals during winter and cold would serve a function similar to eating meat during a famine or

23 *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual Religion 324 and 325*, 210. Similar arguments are used by others. See, for example, Lora Beth Larson, “The Do’s in the Word of Wisdom,” *Ensign*, April 1977, 46.

24 James E. McWilliams, *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America* (New York: Columbia University, 2007).

times of “excess hunger” (v. 15). Winter and cold are times when nonplant foods may be scarce, and humans without supplementary animal foods could face hunger. In fact, the similarity between verses 13 and 15 of Section 89, both of which describe when it is appropriate for humans to use the flesh of animals, suggests a close relationship between these verses. The parallel construction could indicate that they are referring to the same conditions:

only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine. (v. 13)

only in times of famine and excess of hunger. (v. 15)

As writers on the Word of Wisdom frequently point out, the Word of Wisdom does not require a total vegetarian diet.²⁵ Together with all that the earth produces, the Lord has ordained the flesh of animals for humans (D&C 49:19; 89:12), so that his children might always have “in abundance” (D&C 49:19). Although the Lord cautions that the flesh of animals should not be used when there is “no need” (D&C 49:21; JST Genesis 9:11), clearly the Lord would sanction the consumption of animal flesh in times of need. While in our day, the plant foods we have access to provide more than enough abundance, there certainly are times and places where this has not been the case. As John and Leah Widtsoe point out in their influential book on the Word of Wisdom, even though animal flesh is not an ideal source of nutrition, “meats have the power to sustain life for a time if nothing else is eaten.”²⁶

However, the suggestion that meat is more needed in times when plant foods are scarce does not explain why it is pleasing

25 Interestingly, the book most often cited to bolster this claim is one that promotes a near-vegetarian diet. See John A. Widtsoe and Leah D. Widtsoe, *The Word of Wisdom: A Modern Interpretation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1937), 137.

26 Widtsoe and Widtsoe, *The Word of Wisdom*, 217.

to God if we avoid consuming the flesh of animals during times *other* than winter or cold.

Theory: Before the era of mechanical refrigeration, meat spoiled easily so it was prudent to abstain from eating meat except in times of winter or cold.

Another relatively common explanation of verse 13 (dating from at least the early 1940s to the present day) is the idea that since the early Saints did not have the convenience of modern-day refrigeration, the Lord counseled them to consume meat only in times of winter or cold, when the meat would not spoil as quickly. The implication is that since “modern refrigeration now makes it easy for us to eat meat safely in any season” this counsel is no longer relevant to us.²⁷

It is true that many food-borne illnesses derive from meat, and temperature is a critical and well-recognized factor that can lead to spoiling. The early Saints would no doubt have appreciated the convenience of mechanical refrigeration, but the hypothesis that God would instruct humans to eat meat only in times of winter or cold to reduce the chances of them consuming it spoiled faces several challenges.

The likelihood of eating spoiled meat has to do with *how* meat is handled and not *when* it is consumed. Warm weather complicates the handling of meat, but eating either properly prepared fresh meat or properly preserved meat is no more dangerous or unhealthy in one season than another. Likewise, both fresh and preserved meats are dangerous in any season if they are not properly prepared.²⁸ Spoilage is a year-round problem, even in modern times, and there are a variety of

²⁷ Melanie Douglass, R.D., *Losing It: Life Is Better When You Feel Good* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 8.

²⁸ Gordon M. Wardlaw and Anne M. Smith, *Contemporary Nutrition*, 6th ed. updated (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 529–40.

factors (in addition to heat) that determine whether meat will spoil: animal feed and hygiene, slaughtering techniques, cross-contamination, food handling and preparation, and other factors.²⁹ Keeping raw meat cold, while clearly an important factor in preventing or postponing most types of spoilage, does not prevent all types of spoilage.³⁰ And while there are additional risks when the weather is warm, this is true with plant-based foods as well.³¹

Before mechanical refrigeration, there were fewer ways to keep the flesh of animals cold enough to thwart decay for long periods of time. If there were no means to reduce the temperature of the meat to a safe level, slaughtered animals had to be either consumed or preserved within a necessarily short time frame, but this was by no means an insurmountable obstacle, especially given that the timing of the slaughter is also controlled by humans.³²

Whether or not spoilage can be detected without instruments, spoiled meat can quickly make a person very sick and can even lead to death, a clear incentive for avoiding it. Humans who are prone to eating spoiled meat would not last long. Fortunately, spoiled meat often looks, smells, and tastes bad. Meat was too prized to allow it to spoil on a frequent basis, and techniques for preserving it were established hundreds, even thousands of years before the 1830s. Such preservation techniques included adding sugar, salting, drying, dehydrating, smoking, pickling, fermenting, and brining.³³

If helping the Saints avoid meat spoiled by excess heat was the Lord's reasoning for verse 13, it was particularly ineffectual. There is no evidence that the early Saints changed their behavior

29 R. A. Lawrie, *Lawrie's Meat Science*, 6th ed. (Cambridge: Woodhead, 1998), 119–25.

30 Lawrie, *Lawrie's Meat Science*, 143–211.

31 Wardlaw and Smith, *Contemporary Nutrition*, 538.

32 McWilliams, *A Revolution in Eating*, 79–81.

33 Lawrie, *Lawrie's Meat Science*, 143–211.

in light of this counsel, at least not to the extent that any known illness or death was prevented by following this admonition. Indeed, the early Saints were no doubt at least as well aware as their fellow Americans of the need to handle meat carefully and as well versed in the various techniques to preserve animal flesh when it could not be consumed immediately. What the early Saints could have used, however, was revelation on the importance of water safety, sanitation, and waste removal, all of which would have greatly curbed the devastating impact of infectious diseases, which were rampant during the 19th century. In fact, some LDS authors have noted that, contrary to the Word of Wisdom, the habit of consuming “hot drinks” could have protected the early Saints because the temperature of the water would more likely kill some of the bugs that caused such harm.³⁴ No doubt cholera can be more deadly than caffeine or even spoiled meat.

While it remains true that warm weather complicates the handling of meat, it appears to be a stretch to suggest that D&C 89:13 was specifically designed to address this issue. In fact, it is only since the invention of mechanical refrigeration that this particular explanation for verse 13 became popular, too late to have done the early Saints any good. The Word of Wisdom says nothing about properly preserving meat, refrigeration, or the conditional nature of this counsel.

In contrast to the abundance of scientific data to support the value of not consuming the flesh of animals beyond the level of “sparingly,” there appears to be no evidence that it would be better for human health to consume the flesh of animals during certain seasons of the year rather than others. The only exception is when conditions such as cold or winter make plant foods so scarce that animal flesh is needed to sustain life. It is possible that other health-related evidence will surface in

34 Bush, “The Word of Wisdom,” 60.

the future, either via science or continuing revelation. In the meantime, I will now take a look at the variety of non-health-related explanations of the Word of Wisdom to see if they shed light on D&C 89:13.

Non-Health-Related Explanations

While it might be unprecedented for a Latter-day Saint to claim that the Word of Wisdom has *no* bearing on physical well-being, there might also be a danger in assuming it is primarily a health code that will be unequivocally confirmed by scientific research.³⁵ If we believe the two are inextricably linked, the danger is that when scientific assertions seem to contradict the counsel in the Word of Wisdom, our loyalty to it might diminish, even if the science later proves to be wrong. If science tells us caffeine is bad for our health, this might strengthen our resolve to abstain from tea and coffee. But what happens when science uncovers beneficial aspects to caffeine or links the consumption of tea, coffee, and even alcohol to positive health benefits? Along parallel lines, experts leading the small but growing interest in low-carb and so-called “Paleo” diets marshal their own lines of evidence to assert the health benefits of meat consumption, sometimes even at dramatically high levels. If we believe there is “scientific proof” that consuming more meat is good for us, might our commitment to the Word of Wisdom as a health code call on us to rethink our interpretation and implementation of related verses?

But what if the Word of Wisdom is not (or is not primarily) a health code? If this is true, whether or not the specific counsel given in the Word of Wisdom benefits human health is less

35 Paul Y. Hoskisson is one scholar who believes the Word of Wisdom should not be viewed as a health code. His research suggests that “during the Kirtland and Missouri period, the Word of Wisdom in general was never promoted as a health code.” “The Word of Wisdom in Its First Decade,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38/1 (Winter 2012): 140.

important, and changes in our scientific understanding will not dramatically change our appreciation of this revelation.

A majority of the historical explanations of verse 13 assume that since obeying the Word of Wisdom results in greater physical health that verse 13 must contribute in some way toward that purpose. But regardless of whether the Word of Wisdom as a whole should be understood as a health code, it is possible that verse 13 may serve another function. One clue to the meaning of verse 13 might lie in the sole reason the Lord gives in the verse itself for abstaining from meat except during certain times. The Lord says it is “pleasing” to him. Why would it be pleasing to God for us to abstain from eating meat except at certain times? Clearly he may be pleased that we are healthy, but might there be other reasons for not consuming the flesh of animals that go beyond our physical well-being that are pleasing to him? What other explanations are possible, and how might they impact our interpretation of verse 13?

Theory: The LDS understanding of our stewardship over the earth and its creatures suggests we consume meat only when necessary.

The first biblical mention of animal flesh as a source of food is the Lord’s instruction to Noah after the Flood subsided and he and his family left the ark. God had given Adam and Eve herbs and fruit for meat (Genesis 1:29), but now God tells Noah “every moving thing that liveth shall be for meat” (Genesis 9:3). Joseph Smith added a qualification to this injunction in 1830, three years before the Word of Wisdom was revealed:

And surely, blood shall not be shed, only for meat, to save your lives; and the blood of every beast will I require at your hand. (JST Genesis 9:11)

The following year, in a revelation given in May 1831, Joseph Smith warned that while the flesh of animals is ordained for the use of man, “wo be unto man that sheddeth blood or that wasteth flesh and hath no need” (D&C 49:21).

These and other scriptural injunctions may be one reason why many Latter-day Saints have associated the counsel given in the Word of Wisdom with human stewardship over animals and the injustice of slaughtering them without cause. Certainly the assertion that it is wrong to kill animals unnecessarily has been a strong and consistent theme throughout much of Church history.³⁶ Historically, it is the second most frequently cited reason (next to better health) for why the Saints should eat meat “sparingly.”³⁷

Might the Lord’s love and concern for his animal creations be a reason why it is “pleasing” to him that we restrict meat consumption? Some LDS scholars have noted that the LDS doctrine concerning animals is fairly unique among Christian religions in declaring that they, like humans, are eternal beings (D&C 77:2–3), that they are “living souls” (Moses 3:19) who will be “resurrected and glorified” in God’s presence, and that they have “an external existence and man is held accountable by God for his treatment of them.”³⁸

LDS scholar Hugh Nibley suggests that the use of the word *sparingly* in D&C 89:12 means “sparing God’s creatures.” He goes on to say, “The family who needs a deer to get through the winter have a right to that. The Lord will not deny them, but

36 See, for example, Gerald Jones, “Concern for Animals as Manifest in Five American Churches: Bible Christian, Shaker, Latter-day Saint, Christian Scientist and Seventh-Day Adventist” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1972).

37 This is based on my own analysis of the Word of Wisdom literature from 1833 to 2014.

38 Jones, “Concern for Animals,” 58, 144.

he is also pleased with those who forbear.”³⁹ Apostle Lorenzo Snow said, “We have no right to slay animals or fowls except from necessity, for they have spirits which may some day rise up and accuse or condemn us.”⁴⁰ Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith explained, “Although there was no sin in the shedding of their blood when required for food ... to take the life of these creatures wantonly is a sin before the Lord. It is easy to destroy life, but who can restore it when it is taken?”⁴¹

How might this perspective help us interpret D&C 89:13? In the context of animals being ordained for the use of man, to slaughter them for food appears to be appropriate under at least these conditions.

- for meat, to save your lives (JST Genesis 9:11)
- when there is a “need” (see D&C 49:21)
- in times of famine and excess of hunger (D&C 89:13, 15)

In light of these restrictions, it may be pleasing to God if the flesh of animals is not used, except in times of necessity, when it is important for our survival. This would suggest that “times of winter, or of cold, or famine” may refer to times when we would go hungry unless animal foods were included in our diet. This is a frequent theme in the Word of Wisdom literature. Apostle John Henry Smith said:

The revelation says that meats are to be used sparingly and that it will please the lord if they are only used in times of famine and excessive cold. Animal life is to be properly guarded and not wantonly sacrificed to the

39 Hugh Nibley, “Word of Wisdom: Commentary on D&C 89,” accessed April 12, 2014, <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1044&index=1>.

40 Dennis B. Horne, ed., *An Apostle’s Record: The Journals of Abraham H. Cannon* (Clearfield, UT: Gnolaum Books, 2004), 424.

41 Joseph Fielding Smith, “Is It a Sin to Kill Animals Wantonly?” *Improvement Era*, August 1961, 568.

appetite of man. His use of it must be limited to times of scarcity or those seasons of extreme cold when it may be necessary.⁴²

Two other themes related to stewardship come out of the literature on the Word of Wisdom: stewardship of the environment and stewardship over the resources we have at our disposal, particularly our financial resources. Neither of these themes is as clear and consistent in LDS writings on the Word of Wisdom as the theme of stewardship over animals, but each introduces concepts that have potential bearing on our interpretation of D&C 89:13.

Stewardship over personal resources intersects with the Word of Wisdom in LDS literature through the claim that spending money on meat is wasteful because meat is a more expensive form of calories. It is true that poor people have always eaten significantly less meat than the wealthy because of the higher cost of meat.⁴³ Some Latter-day Saints have suggested that, like money spent on alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea, money spent on meat could be more profitably spent on more nutritious foods, in service to others, or in building the kingdom of God.⁴⁴ If this reasoning is part of the rationale behind the Word of Wisdom, it too may suggest that, except in times of necessity, humans may be wise to devote their financial resources to more significant causes.

The concept of stewardship over the earth ties into the discussion of meat consumption because of the relatively negative impact meat production has on the environment. Substantially more energy, land, water, and other resources are required to

42 John Henry Smith, "The Word of Wisdom," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 46 (March 1884): 170.

43 Smil, "Eating Meat," 606–08.

44 See, for example, John Brown, "Word of Wisdom," *Young Woman's Journal* 6/5 (February 1895): 225.

produce animal versus plant foods.⁴⁵ Scientists argue that our current rate of meat consumption is unsustainable and that the poor of the world disproportionately bear the weight of the negative environmental costs.⁴⁶ Reducing meat consumption would have a positive effect on factors such as energy use, clean water and air, forest deforestation, land degradation, and declining biodiversity.⁴⁷ It would also free up more resources to provide for those who go without, for whom the Lord seems particularly concerned (see D&C 49:19–21). Among a few Latter-day Saints, these arguments suggest a benefit to reserving the consumption of meat for times of need.⁴⁸

However, while the depth of the secular literature addressing the connection between meat production and the environment is broad and compelling, the topic is surprisingly rare in LDS literature. This is not due to a lack of LDS writers exploring the profound ways that humans are intimately connected with and responsible for the environment.⁴⁹

Many Latter-day Saints have written with eloquence and conviction on the sacred nature of the earth and the compelling

45 David Pimentel and Marcia Pimentel, “Sustainability of Meat-based and Plant-based Diets and the Environment,” *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 78(suppl) (2003): 660S–63S.

46 Physicians for Social Responsibility, “Health Implications of Global Warming: Impacts on Vulnerable Populations,” accessed April 12, 2014, www.psr.org/assets/pdfs/vulnerable-populations.pdf. See also D&C 49:19–20.

47 Henning Steinfeld et al., *Livestock’s Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options* (Rome: United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, 2006).

48 I devote a few pages to this topic in Jane Birch, *Discovering the Word of Wisdom: Surprising Insights from a Whole Food, Plant-based Perspective* (Provo, UT: Fresh Awakenings, 2013), 83–86. There are other examples, but I have not found a longer treatment of this topic in the LDS literature.

49 For examples taken from LDS Church leaders, see Richard D. Stratton, ed., *Kindness to Animals and Caring for the Earth* (Portland: Inkwater, 2004). For some contemporary LDS writers, see *Stewardship and the Creation: LDS Perspectives on the Environment*, ed. George B. Handley, Terry B. Ball, and Steven L. Peck (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2006).

ways LDS doctrine should move us to embrace our stewardship over a planet that depends on us, even as we depend on it. Even the Church, via its newsroom, has recently (2013) come out with a statement on “Environmental Stewardship and Conservation.”⁵⁰ Environmental stewardship themes are present throughout LDS history, especially in the last quarter century, but this literature is rarely linked to discussions of meat consumption. As in the secular literature, the link between meat consumption and environmental stewardship appears more frequently in LDS writing promoting healthy eating than in the environmental stewardship literature.⁵¹

Nevertheless, insofar as this rationale is valid, it might suggest another reason the Lord would be pleased if his children chose plant foods over animal foods (except in times of need).

Theory: Spirituality is deepened when humans cease their enmity toward the animal kingdom.

Discussions of the spiritual blessings that come from obedience to the Word of Wisdom play a profound role in its history. Writers frequently dwell on these points at length, often emphasizing that spiritual, rather than physical, blessings are the most desirable benefits of keeping the Word of Wisdom.

What have been the rationales used to explain why obeying the Word of Wisdom results in spiritual blessings and how might they apply to D&C 89:13? Not surprisingly, the most straightforward rationale has been that the Word of Wisdom is a commandment from God, and obedience to any commandment brings spiritual blessings. The fact that Section

50 LDS Newsroom, “Environmental Stewardship and Conservation,” accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/environmental-stewardship-conservation>.

51 In addition to previously cited Birch, *Discovering the Word of Wisdom*, another example is Scott A. Johnson, *The Word of Wisdom: Discovering the LDS Code of Health* (Springville, UT: CFI, 2013), 67.

89 is introduced as a “principle with a promise” (v. 3) is often mentioned, along with the explicit blessings stated in verses 18–21.

Clearly the rationale that “obedience brings blessings” would apply to D&C 89:13. In the verse itself the Lord explicitly states that it is pleasing to him for us to follow this admonition, and the promises at the end of the section (vv. 18–21) appear to apply to all of the counsel given in Section 89, which would include verse 13. But simply obeying the counsel in verse 13 may not help us understand it. Because we don’t have a tradition of believing God routinely gives commandments to the entire Church for the sole purpose of asking the Saints to make sacrifices that have no other rationale than to test their obedience, we are left to believe there might be another connection between the wording of this verse and the promised blessings.

In discussing the connection between what we eat and spiritual blessings, Latter-day Saints have often pointed to the intimate connection between our bodies and our spiritual well-being to explain why to the Lord cares so deeply about our physical health. There are countless examples in the LDS literature connecting spiritual blessings to physical health.⁵² However, while there is ample evidence that most of the admonitions in the Word of Wisdom, including eating meat sparingly, can have a profound effect on physical health, thus far, as I have demonstrated, there is no evidence that suggests eating meat at certain times of the year versus other times of the year has a specific value for enhancing human health. So, in terms of evidence, it is hard to see how this line of reasoning

52 Here is one example among many, from President Ezra Taft Benson, “There is no question that the health of the body affects the spirit, or the Lord would never have revealed the Word of Wisdom That which affects our bodies also affects our souls.” “In His Steps,” *Ensign*, September 1988, 5.

helps us to connect verse 13 with the promised spiritual blessings.

There is, however, an approach to this scripture that not only suggests a link between obedience and spiritual blessings, but also adds evidence to an interpretation of verse 13 that I have already explored. This line of reasoning, used by various Latter-day Saints, claims there is a deep interconnection between the human spirit and the treatment of animals. It suggests that the killing of innocent animals when they are not needed for our survival has a profound impact on the human soul. President Joseph F. Smith was one of the proponents of this view. He was an emphatic advocate of “Humane Day,” an institutionalized LDS program of kindness toward animals that lasted over 20 years (1897–1918).⁵³ Here is just one of many statements he made:

We are a part of all life and should study carefully our relationship to it. We should be in sympathy with it, and not allow our prejudices to create a desire for its destruction. The unnecessary destruction of life begets a spirit of destruction which grows within the soul. It lives by what it feeds upon and robs man of the love that he should have for the works of God.

... The unnecessary destruction of life is a distinct spiritual loss to the human family Love of nature is akin to the love of God; the two are inseparable.⁵⁴

The idea that cruelty to animals has a brutalizing effect on human character and leads to cruelty to other humans is an ancient one,⁵⁵ and it has been a tradition that runs deep

53 Jones, “Concern for Animals,” 92–120.

54 Joseph F. Smith, “Humane Day,” *Juvenile Instructor* 53/4 (April 1918): 182–83.

55 See Colin Spencer, *Vegetarianism: A History* (London: Grub Street, 2000).

through LDS thought.⁵⁶ For example, while traveling with Zion's Camp, Joseph Smith "exhorted the brethren not to kill a serpent, bird, or an animal of any kind during our journey unless it became necessary in order to preserve ourselves from hunger." He explained:

Men must become harmless, before the brute creation; and when men lose their vicious dispositions and cease to destroy the animal race, the lion and the lamb can dwell together, and the sucking child can play with the serpent in safety.⁵⁷

Heber C. Kimball stated, "There is nothing in the spirit of love that will kill or destroy unnecessarily."⁵⁸ These are a few of the statements made by Church leaders about the relationship between the human spirit and how humans treat animals. They may have added significance in our day, when it is clear that humans do not need the flesh of animals to sustain life or maintain excellent health.⁵⁹

Following this line of reasoning may suggest we could interpret verse 13 to mean it is pleasing to God that we not slaughter animals except when needed for food, or as Hyrum Smith and others pointed out, in times (like famine) when the animals would die anyway.⁶⁰ According to this reasoning, ceasing enmity toward animals will lead to a greater depth of spirituality, sensitivity, and charity in the hearts of the

⁵⁶ See compilation of quotes in both Stratton's *Kindness to Animals and Caring for the Earth* and Jones's, "Concern for Animals."

⁵⁷ B. H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1904), 2:71.

⁵⁸ Heber C. Kimball, 13 December 1857, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:128.

⁵⁹ "Position of the American Dietetic Association: Vegetarian Diets," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 109/7 (July 2009): 1266–82.

⁶⁰ Hyrum Smith, "The Word of Wisdom," *Times and Seasons* 3/15 (June 1, 1842): 801.

Latter-day Saints and help prepare the earth for the Millennium. As Hyrum Smith preached:

[God] has appointed the word of wisdom as one of the engines to ... remove the beastly appetites, the murderous disposition and the vitiated taste of man; to restore his body to health, and vigour, promote peace between him and the brute creation.⁶¹

These are clear spiritual blessings that could be directly linked to the counsel in D&C 89:13. However, while this may be one plausible interpretation of verse 13, this reading is not clearly explicit in the wording of Section 89.

Theory: Careful, constrained food consumption based on divine guidance helps sanctify the daily ritual of mealtime and sets us apart as a people.

Two remaining explanations for the specific admonitions of the Word of Wisdom include (1) sanctifying the daily consumption of food by providing divine directions to guide practice and (2) setting the Latter-day Saints apart as a people. If these were not intended purposes of the Word of Wisdom, they do appear to be notable results.

LDS historian Paul Peterson describes how the Jewish dietary code has worked to sanctify the practice of daily food consumption for observant Jews:

For reasons largely having to do with holiness rather than health or hygiene, many Jews follow [an] intricate and complex dietary system—one they consider to be divinely sanctioned and one that closely governs and limits what foods they eat.

61 H. Smith, “The Word of Wisdom,” 800.

... Jews believe that obeying such laws promotes holy living. “Jews who keep these laws,” as noted by scholar Louis Jacobs, “introduce a spiritual element into their lives, even into the satisfaction of hunger, the most basic and animal-like of all human appetites. By means of the dietary laws one’s everyday life becomes nobler and purer.”⁶²

The fact that the Word of Wisdom has not done the same for the Latter-day Saint community, Peterson suggests, may be because we have neglected the counsel of D&C 89 that goes beyond the proscriptions of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea. Peterson claims that if Latter-day Saints were to pay more attention to the counsel given in D&C 89 that the Word of Wisdom could function in a similar way in the Latter-day Saint community:

There are also scriptural and prophetic models for viewing the entire revelation in a more holistic way by our combining the physical with the spiritual—by our viewing the eating of foods that God has prescribed as a spiritual act or event. Indeed, if Latter-day Saints chose to pursue this path, it would be somewhat analogous to Jewish attitudes.

... Although such a view is hardly widespread in the Latter-day Saint community, it is scripturally supportable. For example, why couldn’t Latter-day Saints, by avoiding the food and drink God has placed off limits and by eating only those foods they believe God has singled out as being especially good for mankind, gain greater reverence for life and increased appreciation for the Lord? My suspicion is that in the future, some Church members will do so and

62 Paul H. Peterson, “The Sanctity of Food: A Latter-day Saint Perspective,” *Religious Educator* 2/1 (2001): 33.

thus come to regard eating as much more than just a practical necessity.

To concern oneself with eating foods the Lord has prescribed and to consider eating prescribed foods as an act of holiness are both attitudes that could be understood as logical results of living in divine harmony with the earth God has created.⁶³

While the Word of Wisdom may presently not work to sanctify the daily food consumption for most Latter-day Saints, it does serve another purpose that is analogous to observant Jews: it sets the Latter-day Saints apart as a distinct people. Some scholars suggest that the dietary codes given to ancient Israelites may have been at least partly for this purpose. After all, many health-related explanations of these ancient dietary restrictions have tended to fail by scientific standards⁶⁴ (as, some would claim, do some of the health-related Word of Wisdom restrictions⁶⁵). Clearly the Jewish dietary code has traditionally set them apart as a people, and the LDS commitment to abstain from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea has had this same effect. According to scholars, the LDS adherence to the Word of Wisdom is one of the factors that most distinguishes Latter-day Saints in the eyes of those not of their faith.⁶⁶

How might this reasoning about the purpose of the Word of Wisdom relate to our understanding of D&C 89:13? Currently meat consumption by Latter-day Saints is not

63 Peterson, "The Sanctity of Food," 40–42.

64 Marvin Harris, "The Abominable Pig," in *Food and Culture*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (London: Routledge, 2007), 67–79.

65 Heather May, "What Science Says about Mormonism's Health Code," accessed June 8, 2014, <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/54897327-78/health-coffee-disease-tea.html.csp>.

66 Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1986), 270.

remarkably different from other omnivorous populations.⁶⁷ A dramatic drop in meat consumption among LDS people would significantly impact what most of us eat and thus force us to reconsider how we approach our meals. If the Lord's counsel and advice played a more central role in how and what we ate, this could possibly lead us to experiencing mealtimes as a more sanctifying, spiritual experience. The fact that our eating habits would also be more in harmony with our stewardship of the earth and its animal creatures could also lead to increased spiritual sensitivity to the connection between what we eat and the sacred nature of the world around us.

Even more certainly, dramatically cutting meat consumption would mark the Latter-day Saints even more as a unique people. There is no doubt that a largely meat-free LDS food culture would be in sharp contrast to the ways of the world. In addition, it might also have a sharp and dramatic effect on our health. According to experts who document the correlation between low levels of meat consumption and remarkably lower levels of all major chronic illnesses,⁶⁸ the health of a generally meat-free LDS population might dramatically set the LDS people apart as a very distinct and peculiar group indeed.

Other Possible Themes That Could Bear on Verse 13

I have not, of course, covered every rationale used to explain the Word of Wisdom and its impact on our interpretation of verse 13. In fact, one of the most important rationales used

67 Lester E. Bush, Jr. *Health and Medicine among the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 67. Note also that Mormons are often used as a control group in studies of Seventh-day Adventist because both groups avoid alcohol and tobacco, but while many (not all) Adventists are vegetarian, Mormons are not significantly different from the general population in being omnivorous. See the series of studies cited in "Do Vegetarians Live Longer Than Health Conscious Omnivores?" accessed June 8, 2014, <http://healthylongevity.blogspot.com/2014/02/death-by-veggiephobia.html>.

68 T. Colin Campbell and Thomas M. Campbell, *The China Study* (Dallas: Benbella, 2006).

to explain why this section is important in our day is the one given by the Lord in the Word of Wisdom itself:

Behold, verily, thus saith the Lord unto you: In consequence of evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men in the last days, I have warned you, and forewarn you, by giving unto you this word of wisdom by revelation— (D&C 89:4)

While this theme plays a prominent role in the LDS literature on the Word of Wisdom, relatively little of this has been linked to the advice on meat consumption. However, much of the reasoning that has been employed to suggest why the “evils and designs ... in the hearts of conspiring men” affects our food supply could also apply to meat consumption, where the profit motive (to name just one influence) has had an enormous impact on how animals are raised and slaughtered, and therefore on the quantity and quality of the meat modern humans consume.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, insofar as this impacts human health, it is still not clear that this has a bearing on verse 13. And insofar as this impacts our stewardship over animals and the earth, I have already explored this dimension. Nevertheless, I believe there could well be other aspects of verse 3 that impact our understanding of verse 13.

The Word of Wisdom literature also contains extensive discussions of how the *addictive* properties of prohibited substances in the Word of Wisdom curtail our liberty as individuals and block the reception of the Holy Ghost. It is possible that the strongly addictive nature of these substances and the impact this has on the free exercise of human agency plays an important role in why the Lord warns against their use. There is evidence that meat, like most calorically dense

⁶⁹ See John Robbins, *The Food Revolution: How Your Diet Can Help Save Your Life and Our World* (San Francisco: Conari, 2001).

foods, also has addictive qualities,⁷⁰ and if this claim is correct, this may also explain why the Lord recommends curtailing its use, except in times of need.

Many other less-frequently used rationales for the Word of Wisdom have also been discussed in LDS literature, rationales that I will not have space to explore here. I'll conclude with just one other example that I find particularly intriguing. It is the reasoning that Brigham Young employs as he relates the well-known account about the coming forth of the Word of Wisdom. Here are the passages just before and after that account, ones that are rarely mentioned:

When the school of the prophets was inaugurated one of the first revelations given by the Lord to His servant Joseph was the Word of Wisdom The prophet commenced to teach them in doctrine to prepare them to go out into the world to preach the gospel unto all people, and gather the elect from the four quarters of the earth The prophet began to instruct them how to live that they might be the better prepared to perform the great work they were called to accomplish. [Here Brigham tells the well-known story of the brethren smoking and spitting, Emma complaining, and Joseph praying and receiving the Word of Wisdom.]

So we see that almost the very first teachings the first Elders of this Church received were as to what to eat, what to drink, and how to order their natural lives, that they might be united temporally as well as spiritually. This is the great purpose which God has in view in sending to the world, by His servants, the gospel of life and salvation. It will teach us how to deal, how to act in

⁷⁰ Neal Barnard, *Breaking the Food Seduction: The Hidden Reasons behind Food Cravings—and 7 Steps to End Them Naturally* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003), 61-74.

all things, and how to live with each other to become one in the Lord.⁷¹

How might learning what to eat and drink help us “order [our] natural lives,” unite us “temporally as well as spiritually,” teach us “how to act,” and prepare us to accomplish the Lord’s purposes as we “gather the elect” in preparation for his coming?

Conclusion

Whatever the interpretation various LDS people have of verse 13 of the Word of Wisdom, in general this verse appears to have had little impact on our general food habits.⁷² One reason Latter-day Saints may ignore it (and even come up with reasons to dismiss it) may be that we have found it difficult to believe this verse can be taken at face value. Is this verse really that ambiguous and difficult to interpret?

One factor that might have elevated the difficulty of interpreting this verse could be the American love affair with meat consumption. Meat is the staple of the standard U.S. diet. It is something we love to eat, something we are told is important to our health, and something that our ancestors have consumed (in varying quantities) since the Paleolithic time period. Meat is even enshrined in all of the various USDA food guidelines produced during the last century. Not just in the U.S., but in most other countries (developed or undeveloped, modern or ancient), meat has been and remains a powerful sign of prosperity, power, and prestige. It has also been an

71 Brigham Young, “School of the Prophets,” 8 February 1868, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:209.

72 Rick B. Jorgensen, “Not By Commandment or Constraint: The Relationship Between the Dietary Behaviors of College-Aged Latter-Day Saints and Their Interpretation of the Word of Wisdom” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2008).

important symbol of “manliness” and “machoism.”⁷³ It can be hard for humans to look objectively at something they love.

Is the LDS attitude toward meat any different? For all the many occasions when Latter-day Saints enjoy meals together, how often does meat play an important role, no matter the season or temperature? As LDS youth grow up in this culture, when would they have reason to question how much or when meat is consumed? Speaking from personal experience as a lifelong meat-eating member of the Church, I don’t remember my love of meat ever being challenged or my being asked to seriously consider whether it was in harmony with the Word of Wisdom.

The thought that a Latter-day Saint should restrict meat consumption for any reason beyond cost, personal taste, or unusual health concerns is not part of the Mormon mindset. Up until recently, most Americans were taught and believed that the daily consumption of meat was actually essential to health. Considering this mindset may help us understand why it has been so difficult for Latter-day Saints to interpret this verse. Any of the straightforward interpretations may simply clash too harshly with our traditional prejudices and practices. Perhaps as Latter-day Saints we have automatically assumed that verse 13 of the Word of Wisdom simply cannot mean what it appears to mean and, given no official interpretation, we have simply ignored it. But beyond ignoring this verse of scripture, some have actually rewritten it—as the case of the “errant comma theory” shows. When someone asked Apostle Richard L. Evans whether the commandments should be rewritten, he

73 Jeffery Sobal, “Men, Meat, and Marriage: Models Of Masculinity,” *Food and Foodways: Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment* 13 (2005): 135–58.

replied: “No! They should be reread.”⁷⁴ Might it be time for Latter-day Saints to reread and rethink this verse?

Clearly the Lord ordained the use of animal flesh for human consumption, at least in times of need. He has warned against forbidding the use of “meats” and explained that they are part of the abundance of this earth with which he has blessed his children. While it is clear that Section 89 includes the pointed admonition to use the flesh of animals “sparingly,” it is interesting that the counsel to use it only during times of winter, cold or famine is prefaced simply with the explanation that this is “pleasing” to the Lord. Combined with the fact that Section 89 was given “not by commandment or constraint” (D&C 89:2), might this suggest that this verse was not intended to be binding on all Latter-day Saints but rather is counsel we may follow should we specifically desire to please the Lord?

While warning against individual faddish interpretations, Church leaders have also consistently spoken about the “spirit of the Word of Wisdom” and the need for individuals to seek personal revelation in interpreting it in order to make practical decisions for themselves and their families. Regardless of whether it was given for health reasons, for spiritual reasons, for the animals or the environment, it is clear that the Word of Wisdom counsel on consuming the flesh of animals is more relevant in our present day than at any other time in human history. There is no doubt that for some people in former times (and even now for a few in distant locations of the world) meat has been a necessity. It is only during our time that it is clear that meat, for the vast majority of us, is simply a luxury. We now know that meat is optional as far as nutrition goes. It may taste good; it may be convenient; it may be socially acceptable; it may supply useful nutrients; but it is not a “need.” Living in a day when we have more than enough other options to

⁷⁴ Ewart A. Swinyard, “Wisdom in All Things,” *New Era*, September 1974, 45.

supply our daily need, decreasing our meat consumption can be beneficial to our health, to the environment, and naturally to the animals. In light of these benefits, it remains to be seen whether individual Latter-day Saints will reconsider the advice in D&C 89:13.

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