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The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism by Grant Underwood

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GRANT UNDERWOOD. *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993. iv; 213 pp. Notes, index. $24.95.

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Grant Underwood, associate professor of religion at Brigham Young University—Hawaii, wrote *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* after years of research, during which he wrote a doctoral dissertation on and published a number of scholarly articles concerning Mormonism and millenarianism. *The Millenarian World* is not only a polished formulation of Underwood's previous research that supersedes many of his earlier writings, it is also the only comprehensive work that places Mormon beliefs regarding the last days and the Millennium in a historical setting.

After briefly discussing the history of the "end times" from the early Christian era to the early nineteenth century, Underwood concentrates on Mormonism and millenarianism in the early nineteenth century. He concludes with a brief description of patterns of millenarian thought today, including the Latter-day Saint response to secularism and "scientific" history that challenges traditional millenarian beliefs.

According to Underwood, millenarianism is more than a belief in the imminent second coming of Christ and the Millennium. The term *millenariansim* is used to refer broadly to people's ideas about "the final events in individual human lives as well as the collective end of human history" (2). In addition to describing Latter-day Saint beliefs regarding the last days, the Second Coming, the Millennium, and judgments, this book "probes many related aspects" of the "mental universe" of Latter-day Saints, "and, in the process, demonstrates how one of the most satisfactory models for understanding Mormonism during its earliest phase (1830–1846) is from the standpoint of millenarianism" (2). Although some might argue that Underwood's expanded definition needs further qualifications, he notes:

> So central was the restoration of Israel to the meaning of the Mormon mission that it even influenced what they valued most about

> their new scriptures. Early Saints stressed that one of the prime purposes for the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and other revelations was to identify Israel and to locate the place of gathering. (67).

Underwood considers two main streams of millennial thought that were popular during the early nineteenth century—premillennialism and postmillennialism. He avoids the oversimplification that premillennialism was a belief that Christ would return before the Millennium and that postmillennialism was a school of thought that specified that Christ would return after the Millennium. These two schools of thought, he asserts, disagreed not only in "respect to the time and manner" in which the Millennium would be established, but also in "regard to its nature and the way Christ" would "exercise control" (4; quoting Robert G. Clouse). Postmillennialists held that there would be one general resurrection and one day of judgment and that "both would coincide with Christ's return to earth at the end of the thousand years." Premillenialists believed "there would be two comings, two judgments, and two resurrections—one at the time of Christ's coming and one after" (4). Postmillennialists further believed that "the thousand years represented the culmination of the gradual Christianization of the entire world and would be achieved largely through successful evangelists." Premillenialists "merely hoped to convert a relative handful before Christ came personally" (5).

Although some writers have reasoned that many early Latter-day Saints embraced basic postmillennial ideas, Underwood insists that Mormon theology from the days of Joseph Smith to the present has been more in harmony with views held by premillennialists than postmillennialists. He further suggests that postmillennial thought, as expressed in the teachings of influential leaders of the early republic, such as Alexander Campbell, was more popular in the early nineteenth century than premillennial thought.

One of Underwood's significant contributions is his comparison of the millennial beliefs of Latter-day Saints with popular teachings of early nineteenth-century religious leaders. A major difference existed between the theology of early Latter-day Saints and that of their contemporaries— "Mormonism added one more literal gathering spot [America] and several more literal gathering groups" (66). Latter-day Saints taught (and continued to believe)

that before the general destruction of the wicked and the coming of Christ, God would gather his people in a Zion, a place of refuge. The Saints included in this gathering not only the lost tribes of Israel and the Jews, but also the Native Americans.

Underwood also addresses the challenge early Latter-day Saints faced in remaining faithful while living in a world ripe for destruction. Some of their attempts to avoid worldliness fostered differences. As they became a "peculiar" people, they faced the challenge of knowing which behaviors were appropriate and which were undesirable. They had to resolve questions relating to slavery, politics, government, and economic practices as well as the propriety of drama and social dancing.

Underwood suggests that the early Latter-day Saints' stance on these issues led to increased persecution. Nevertheless, he notes, the Saints' belief in the imminence of the Second Coming and the peace that will follow helped them endure some of the trials they encountered in northeastern Ohio and western Missouri.

While one cannot fully understand the beliefs and actions of early Latter-day Saints without emphasizing their attitudes toward the imminence of the Second Coming and the millennial reign of Christ, one should understand these attitudes in context. Latter-day Saint millenarian thought was only one of many forces that fostered persecution and molded the Saints into a peculiar people. Moreover, many other Christians, some of whom did not embrace popular millennial ideas, were also trying to resolve the questions involved in forsaking the sins of the world. Many of these Christians became enthusiastic supporters of reform movements, and some gathered in utopian communities. The Latter-day Saint peculiarity was in part a product of this environment. In addition, not all of their new revelations and scriptures related directly to millennial ideas.

Readers also need to cautiously explore Underwood's account of how the revelation of the three degrees of glory gradually impacted early Mormon thought prior to the early 1840s. While the dualism of heaven and hell continued to be found in early Mormon writings following the 1832 publication of what is now known as Doctrine and Covenants 76, writings of early Latter-day Saints—such as W. W. Phelps, Warren Foote, Philo Dibble, Wilford Woodruff, Levi Hancock, George Laub, Zera Pulsipher, and

George Morris—provide examples of converts who rejected the traditional belief in hell and readily accepted the Prophet's vision of glories. Thus, although a belief in heavenly mansions was not emphasized in the 1830s by Latter-day Saint missionaries, it was a belief understood and embraced by many early converts. Additional study of the impact on early Latter-day Saints of the doctrine of the three degrees of glory is still needed.

Underwood's endnotes include an excellent listing of works that relate to the history of millennial thought, although Underwood did not gather them into a separate bibliography.

Underwood has blended his extensive research on early Mormon history and doctrine into a significant exploration of millenarianism. Recognizing the importance of Underwood's contribution, the Mormon History Association in 1994 gave its "best book" award to *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism*.