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The "Prognostication" of Asa Wild

Upstate New York newspapers in October 1823 carried a statement by a visionary soul who believed that God would soon open the way for a restoration of primitive Christianity.

Elden J. Watson

Asa Wild was almost a dozen years older than Joseph Smith, and it is probable the two never met. Like Joseph, Wild was born in Vermont—in 1794 at West Fairlee, about twenty miles northeast of Joseph's birthplace of Sharon. Most of what we know about Asa Wild comes from a pamphlet he published in 1824, entitled *A Short Sketch of the Religious Experience and Spiritual Travels of Asa Wild, of Amsterdam, N. Y.*¹

Wild recalls in the pamphlet that as a child his parents taught him basic tenets of Calvinism common in early-nineteenth-century upper New England. Among these tenets was the "dreadful doctrine" that the prayers and tears of the penitent sinner "would not render it any more probable that God would convert his soul."² For many years, he resisted the faith of his parents, practicing "almost every species of vice," until at age twenty-two he experienced a desire for forgiveness of his sins and looked back to Calvinism to satisfy his religious yearnings.³ He affiliated with the Calvinists and became "more and more assimilated" to their "theorists" before discovering that he was "surrounded with professors of religion who were only wolves in sheep's clothing, having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof."⁴

The power denied by the "professors of religion," however, came more easily to Wild. "Sometimes I . . . felt such a degree of the presence and power of God," he recounted, that it "caused me involuntarily to break forth in exclamations of praise, thanksgiving, and exhortation."⁵ Charismatic expressions of this kind were dismissed by the Calvinists as "the height of enthusiasm, false zeal,

even phrenzy, insanity, and madness itself; at best the delusions, temptations, and machinations of satan,” and they culminated in Wild’s expulsion from the church.⁶ Of this time, he sadly recalled that “those who were formerly my best friends, took the most active part, and became my warmest opposers.”⁷

Parting from the Calvinists, Wild joined with the Methodist Episcopal, whom he found had “much clearer and more scriptural views” than some in his former faith. But, in the end, Wild was not completely satisfied with the Methodists either. They, too, “limit[ed] the operations of the Spirit, and the attainments of the christian, in such an unreasonable and unscriptural manner,” that Wild “was led from a sense of duty, and the love of the truth, to protest, in these respects, against them.”⁸ Skirting along the margins of Methodism and longing for pure religion, Wild wandered for “two or three years” in a “dreary maze of unbelief, anxiety and painful disquietude of mind.”⁹

Wild’s discomfort remained until March 1823, when “the Lord was pleased to reveal himself to me as he never had before.” In his 1824 pamphlet, Wild describes the revelation as one where “I saw all my former mistakes, my false conclusions, and fatal miscarriages” and learned that one principal reason for this evil was the “‘commandments and doctrines of men.’”¹⁰ In 1823, Wild submitted a detailed account of his experience to a local newspaper, the *Mohawk Herald*, published in Amsterdam, New York, about 150 miles east of Palmyra. “The Lord in his boundless goodnes[s] was pleased to communicate the following Revelation,” the story begins, “having in the first place presented me with a very glorious *Vision*.” The account then rehearses what Wild heard the “Great Jehovah” reveal.

Wild’s timing was remarkable. His account published in the *Herald* was dated October 1, 1823—just ten days after the appearance of the angel Moroni to the Prophet Joseph Smith.¹¹ Within three weeks, the account found its way to Palmyra and was inserted on page four of the October 22, 1823, edition of the *Wayne Sentinel*, under the title of “Prognostication!!” E. B. Grandin and Pomeroy Tucker published the *Sentinel* every Wednesday at a printing office located on the corner of Main and Church Streets in Palmyra, a half mile west and two miles south of the Smith family

farm.¹² According to a local contemporary, Orasmus Turner, "once a week he [Joseph Smith Jr.] would stroll into the office of the old *Palmyra Register* for his father's paper,"¹³ but how early Joseph Jr. began this practice or how long it continued is not known. The *Register* was first printed in 1817 and, after several name changes, was bought in 1823 by Grandin and Tucker, who ran the paper under the name *Wayne Sentinel*.¹⁴

We will probably never know whether Joseph himself read the account of Wild's vision in the *Sentinel*. A local clergyman had persecuted Joseph for proclaiming his first vision, but it is not clear whether his reputation as a visionary had spread to members of the general public who, in 1823, might have drawn his attention to the Wild account. If Joseph was aware of the account, coming so soon after his own visions, Wild's experience might well have made a serious impression on his young mind. Just days before, Moroni had spoken of young visionary men, repeatedly quoting to Joseph the prophecy of Joel:

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit.¹⁵

From Moroni, Joseph learned that Joel's prophecy "was not yet fulfilled, but was soon to be."¹⁶ Assuming that Joseph, at age 17, became aware of Wild's vision soon after Moroni's appearance, the account could have been to him a confirmation that he should trust the divine messenger. Joseph could take heart that he was not alone in his visionary experiences, as it appeared that the Lord was pouring out his spirit "upon all flesh." This perception might have encouraged him to assert that he had seen a vision—in spite of his initial apprehensions about sharing his experiences and the persecution that he had reason to believe would follow.¹⁷

Reprinted below is Asa Wild's prognostication as published in the *Wayne Sentinel*. The document reflects subjects of concern that were familiar to people of that day, including those early converts to the Church who had experienced the fervor of the Second Great Awakening. These topics of common concern included a belief in the widespread apostasy of organized Christianity; a longing

for spiritual gifts and a restoration of primitive Christianity in its fullness; an expectation that the Lord's second coming was imminent, bringing with it the destruction of the wicked and the commencement of the Millennium; and an understanding that Revelation 14:6 was soon to be fulfilled.¹⁸

Visionaries like Asa Wild and many early Latter-day Saints belonged to a class of people who found their spiritual needs largely unfulfilled by contemporary formal religion. As Richard Bushman has argued, "One can imagine a warm reception for the Mormon message among people who believed that the heavens were not sealed."¹⁹ Although nothing more is known about Asa Wild, visionaries such as Solomon Chamberlin, who believed that God led him to the Church, found institutional completion to spiritual longings and recognized Joseph Smith as the prophet called by God to usher in his church in the dispensation of the fullness of times.²⁰

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NOTES

¹Asa Wild, *A Short Sketch of the Religious Experience and Spiritual Travels of Asa Wild, of Amsterdam, N. Y. Written by himself by Divine Command, and the Most Infallible Inspiration* (D. Wells: Amsterdam, New York, 1824).

²Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 4.

³Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 4-5.

⁴Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 10, 12-13. See also Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 85; 2 Timothy 3:5; Joseph Smith—History 1:19.

⁵Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 18.

⁶Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 2, 18.

⁷Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 18.

⁸Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 44. According to Wild, though the Methodists "understand tolerably well" the first principles of the gospel, they are "not *experienced*, and therefore, *cannot be correct and successful* teachers of christianity." Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 44; italics in original.

⁹Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 43.

¹⁰Wild, *Short Sketch of the Religious Experience*, 43.

¹¹The first of the angel Moroni's four sequential visits to the Prophet Joseph Smith began after Joseph retired for bed on the evening of September 21, 1823, and continued until the morning of the following day. Joseph Smith—History 1:29, 47.

¹²Milton V. Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context*, 2d ed., rev. and enl. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 36–37, 41, 47.

¹³Orasmus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps & Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester: William Alling, 1852), 214.

¹⁴Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, 47. In 1818 the *Albany Argus* reported that the ninety-six daily, semi-weekly, and weekly newspapers published in New York state averaged five hundred copies per edition. "Newspapers," *Palmyra Register*, January 14, 1818.

¹⁵Joel 2:28–32. For instances where Moroni quoted Joel, see Joseph Smith—History 1:41, 45–46, 49.

¹⁶Joseph Smith—History 1:41.

¹⁷On Joseph's apprehension, see Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 79. For Joseph's own recollections of persecutions that followed his affirmation of early visions, see Joseph Smith—History 1:21–27, 58. Joseph recalled Moroni saying that "my name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues." Joseph Smith—History 1:33.

¹⁸See Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1984), especially 179–184; Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), especially 20–41, 127–31. Revelation 14:6 appears on the masthead of Alexander Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger*.

¹⁹Richard L. Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–98): 196.

²⁰For more on Solomon Chamberlin, see Larry C. Porter, "Solomon Chamberlin's Missing Pamphlet: Dreams, Visions, and Angelic Ministrants," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 2 (1997–98): 113.

PROGNOSTICATION!!

[*From the Mohawk Herald*]

We publish the following in compliance with the solicitation of the author. He is a respectable inhabitant of this town. The constant exercise of his mind on religious topics, has, it is thought by many of his friends, affected the sanity of his mind; on every other subject, he appears entirely rational.— *Ed. Herald.*

Remarkable VISION and REVELATION: as seen and received by Asa Wild, of Amsterdam, (N. Y)

Having a number of months enjoyed an unusual degree of the light of God's countenance, and having been much favored of the Lord in many respects: and after having enjoyed the sweetest, and most soul ravishing communions with *Him*; the Lord in his boundless goodnes[s] was pleased to communicate the following Revelation, having in the first place presented me with a very glorious *Vision*, in which I saw the same things:

In the first place I observe that my mind had been brought into the most profound stillness, silence, and awe; realizing in a remarkable manner the majesty, presence and glory, of that Being before whom all nations are as the drop of the bucket. It seemed as if my mind, though active in its very nature, had lost all its activity, and was struck motionless, as well as into nothing, before the awful and glorious majesty of the Great Jehovah. He then spake to the following purport; and in such a *manner* as I could not describe if I should attempt.— He told me that the Millen[n]ium state of the world is about to take place; that in *seven* years literally, there would scarce a sinner be found on earth: that the earth *itself*, as well as the *souls* and *bodies* of its inhabitants, should be redeemed, as before the fall, and become as the garden of Eden. He told me that all the most dreadful and terrible judgments spoken of in the blessed scriptures, were to be executed within that time; that more than two thirds of the inhabitants of the world would be destroyed by these judgments: some of which are the following — wars; massacres; famine; pestilence; earthquakes; civil, politic[a]l, and ecclesiastical commotions; and above all, various and dreadful judgments executed immediately by God, through the instrumentality of the Ministers of the Millen[n]ial dispensation;

which is to exceed in glory every other dispensation; a short description of which may be seen in the last chapter of Isaiah, and in other places. He also told me, that every denomination of professing christians had become extremely corrupt; many of which had never had any *true* faith at all; but are guided only by depraved reason, refusing the teaching of that Spirit which indited the scriptures, and which alone can teach us the true meaning of the same; even as the diamond alone can cut its fellow. He told me further, that he had raised up, and was now raising up, that class of persons signified by the Angel mentioned by the Revelator, xiv. 6, 7, which flew in the midst of heaven; having the everlasting gospel to preach: that these persons are of an inferior class, and small learning: that they will be rejected by every denomination as a body; but soon, God will open their way, by miracles, judgments, &c.: that they will have higher authority, greater power, superior inspiration, and a greater degree of holiness, than was ever experienced before: inasmuch as this is [by] far the most glorious dispensation of divine grace and glory. Furthermore he said that all the different denominations of professing christians, constituted the New Testament *Babylon*; and that he should deal with them according to what is written of IT, in the book of Revelation: that he is about to call out all his sincere children, who are mourning in Zion, from the oppression and tyranny of this mother of harlots; and that the severest judgments will be inflicted on the *false* and *fallen* professors of religion; which will immediately commence in Amsterdam, and has already commenced in different parts of the world, and even in this country. And though their operations at first are gradual, and under cover, yet it will soon be generally seen that it is the immediate execution of divine vengeance upon an ungodly world.

Much more the Lord revealed, but forbids my relating it in this way. But this, I have written and published, *by the express and immediate command of God*: the truth and reality of which, I know with the most absolute certainty.—Though I have ever been the most backward to believe things of this nature; having been brought up in the Calvinistic system, and having had a thorough understanding of the same, and was fully established in the belief of it for several years after I experienced the love of God in my heart: but finding the Calvinists did not understand the glorious depths of holiness,

and conformity to the divine character in heart and practice, which I saw was our privilege and duty, I joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, which I found had much clearer and more scriptural views on these and some other points than the Calvinists; though I soon saw that *they as a body*, were very corrupt, having departed much from their primitive purity and holiness. I also saw that their first founders did not travel into all that was their privilege; and that vastly greater depths of holiness might have been experienced, even by them. Yet I thank God for what light I have received through their instrumentality, but know that much greater and more glorious light is about to burst upon the world.

Amsterdam, October, 1823.

N. B. Printers of newspapers and periodical publications are requested to insert the above.

I further observe that I shall soon publish, in a cheap pamphlet, my religious experience and travel in the divine life, with a more full account of the truths above written, and many other things connected with them.

ASA WILD.

Amsterdam, October 1.