

# The Last Days, Then and Now

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Dear Brother Anderson, This is going to be discourse without footnotes. I have always had a suppressed desire to risk such an indiscretion, and people have asked why I cannot write anything without timidly quoting chapter and verse from some German professor. This time, ignoring the public and the pedants, I pass the piece to a magnanimous and sensible critic, awaiting his weary sighs or indulgent silence with equanimity. Where we quote it will be from memory, wens and all, speaking with conviction but with no authority whatever.

## What Is an Achsenzeit?

It is about “axial” times and dispensations. They are those moments when civilization turns on its axis to face a totally new direction, sometimes referred to as a quantum leap; only at the same time that the old order collapses like a big bubble in a mud geyser, the old order is immediately followed by a new bubble just like it. Thus instead of displaying an ever-onward evolution, the course of history is punctuated at intervals by sudden reversions to square one after the breakdown of the old order had promised a bright new day. The axial extravaganza is thus “the best of times and the worst of times.” Any idealistic little Zions are soon removed from the scene, and the world is back on its old track. The seeds of the great revolution now become the seeds of the next revolution.

It is remarkable that the phenomenon remained unremarked for so long. Your bemused informant noticed it in writing the 1957 Melchizedek Priesthood manual. It seemed that Joseph Smith had chosen the perfect moment for Lehi’s crossing of the seas and founding of a new civilization. That is just the sort of thing that was happening everywhere about the year 600 B.C. It was a great age of discovery, exploration, and colonization—Hanno sailed around Africa in 600 B.C., and Olbia and Massilia at opposite ends of the Mediterranean world were founded by Greeks who themselves had to make room for swarming hordes pushing in from Asia, an event celebrated by the great lyric poets. Above all came the great intellectual revolution: Thales, the founder of modern physics; Pythagoras, his rival in the West; and Heraclitus, who put it all together, were all contemporaries of Lehi, as were the founders of the great world religions—Buddha, Confucius, Mahavira, and Zarathustra. I like to think that Lehi, an eminent merchant, had dealings with Solon, wisest of the Greeks and founder of Athenian democracy, who, when his family fortunes were ruined by the disastrous honesty and generosity of his father, had to cover his losses by business trips to Sidon.

Today there is a great and sudden revival of axial studies, and all scholars are agreed that the immense significance of 600 B.C. is the switch of Western thought from the “magic-mythic” thinking of the ancients to the rational and scientific mind of today. The Egyptologist Jan Assmann has written that the man of 600 B.C. “is the man we live with today.”

After writing the manual, I remembered that H. G. Wells had taken note of the phenomenon in his *Outline of History*, which I had read on my mission in 1928 (on a Saturday, of course; reading was not considered a vice in those days). Shortly after came the belated discovery that the German philosopher Karl Jaspers had described the great event and given it the name of the *Achsenzeit*, the Axial Period, as early as 1948. The recent revival of interest, one suspects, may be prompted by the disturbing possibility of another such event in the alarmingly near future. It has sent the experts searching widely and delving deeply for all sorts of axial periods—600 B.C. was not the only axial period. For example, Professor Assmann insists that the First Dynasty of Egypt was the Big One, being as far back as human memory goes and so was the beginning of everything.

The list of candidates for axial honors is an impressive one. The fall of the great world capitals—Troy, Babylon, Nineveh, Rome, Constantinople, etc.—each represents a turning point in world history. The civilizations of China and India are also carefully noted but though their technical and intellectual advances were significant, we are told (still barring footnotes) that they never rid themselves sufficiently of the magic-mythic-mystic elements. World migrations, ending the Roman Empire and creating the nations and languages of Europe, now recall other and earlier “dark centuries,” convincingly coordinated with the Big (1200–800 B.C.) and Little (A.D. 1440–1750) Ice Ages. Long before that, the sophisticated animal art of the caves of the Ariège and vicinity between 30,000 and 20,000 B.C. is the great “Quantum Leap” that marks the emergence of true human beings. After the rise and collapse of Egyptian and Mesopotamian splendor came the all-too-brief Periclean and Augustan Ages, the Gothic glory and the Italian Renaissance, the great seventeenth century followed by the self-important Age of Reason and Oswald Spengler’s *Untergang des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*).

## The Axial Steady State

Why was the axial event overlooked for so long? Answer: among the courses I took in high school was the “Progress of Civilization”; later I took one at UCLA called the “Idea of Progress.” The bursting meliorism of twentieth-century evolutionism, with Chicago taking the lead, swept all before it. Natural selection guaranteed inevitable progress from the single cell to the godlike scientist. At the same time at Los Angeles High, we read Omar Khayyám and recited his frank and realistic appraisal of the situation: “One moment in annihilation’s waste, one moment of the wine of life to taste—the stars are setting and the caravan starts for the dawn of nothing. O, make haste!” It was the existential agony of Kierkegaard, which was to become the fare of the next generation. The mindless, random, mechanical, and infallible operations of natural selection guaranteed that things could only go on getting better and better, but also that we were going nowhere.

Heraclitus, the favorite philosopher of many brooders, divided his mental problems into the realms of the cosmos, the king or government, and religion, all subject to axial changes. Many recent studies of the oldest creation myths show that the creation story always seems to follow upon the destruction of something greater and more wonderful. The new worlds are made of the ruins of the old. The progression in Hesiod and Daniel is from a Golden Age, now long gone, through those of silver, copper, iron, and now clay.

The axial occurrences seem actually to reverse the course of evolution; in the end things never seem to progress, and “there is nothing new under the sun.” Since “man’s great disobedience and the fall,” the race appears to be in a perpetual free fall. As Gibbon puts it, the Roman Empire was born decadent. The most significant difference between this philosophy of Heraclitus, “the wet blanket” (*skoteinos*), and that of what Albright called the “Chicago School” is that the Greek conclusion rests on solid evidence, the other on pure, American twentieth-century boomerism.

The actual story of the race is divided into separate, distinct, and discrete episodes. It cannot be viewed or digested in any other way. It is not progressive—and that is the most shocking thing about it. Take Lehi’s story. It begins in the supremely optimistic year of 600 B.C., which presently explodes in the fall of Jerusalem and the Captivity. But along with the bright promise that introduces Nephite civilization goes the plotting of Laman and Lemuel, already setting Lehi’s children on the road to Cumorah. Next, the glory of Zarahemla and its apocalyptic obliteration were followed at once by the nearest thing to a Zion civilization; but then the old appeal of money, power, and pride building up to a perpetual crime wave necessitated defensive tribal organizations, which ended with the last tribal coalitions, at Cumorah, and henceforward a permanent, shifting, savage warfare.

As that same force of gravity which brings the stars into existence also brings about their violent demise, even so, the natural man is programmed to bring about the corruption and fall of civilization by his constant and unvarying self-centeredness. According to Solon and Heraclitus it must be so if “the natural man is an enemy to God . . . carnal, sensual, [and] devilish” (Mosiah 3:19; 16:3), a flawed product of evolution, as Arthur Koestler wrote just before his suicide, programmed to self-destruct. It is only since the sixties that “Neocatastrophism” pointed to at least five major extermination periods on earth, when almost all existing species (sometimes 90 percent or more) were wiped out and abruptly displaced by a whole new menagerie of dominant types. The face of the earth itself, like that of all the other bodies in the solar system, has been violently altered from time to time. The comfortable and assured triumphant evolution, science now tells us, must make way for axial reverses and the “Violent Universe.”

## **All in the Family**

Two of Lehi’s contemporaries, who worked with his friend Jeremiah, have left us most penetrating studies of the axial periods. Writing from Babylon about thirty years after the fall of Jerusalem, Ezra the Scribe recalls other great overthrows when the elements and the enemy combined against humanity. After the fall of Adam he names calamities of the generations of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Like the great Greeks, Ezra can find no good reason for these strange and unwelcome reverses. Though a teacher in Israel, he is unable to give a clear answer to the question of the Holocaust: “Why does God allow the chosen people to be afflicted by people who are even worse than they?” The admonition of the Lord to Nephi, that a brutal enemy would be on hand as “a scourge to thy seed to stir them up to remembrance of me” (2 Nephi 5:25), does not seem to occur to Ezra or his friend Baruch even though both insist that the Jews are suffering because they have utterly failed to keep the law of Moses, and that the earth will suffer as long as the inhabitants continue to fail the test of righteousness. Granted that, however, the sufferings of Israel still seem to be out of proportion to Ezra, and the best answer he can give is from the catalog of stock clerical answers: (1) the ways of God are inscrutable; (2) some things are unavoidable; (3) God still loves his chosen people after all; (4) the misery must go on until a certain preordained number of people have suffered, and (surprisingly) a set time has passed; and (5) it was all foreseen in the council in heaven at the creation, if that is any comfort.

God also tells Ezra that his son the Messiah will appear, to reign on earth for four hundred years. Ezra ends with a report on the ten tribes who, he is able to declare, have recently added another leg to their migration into an even more distant place than their first concealment.

Finally, he asks how long the gap or waiting period is to be between the gloomy end of one dispensation and the happy beginning of the next and is told that there is no gap! As the infant Jacob’s hand grasped the heel of Esau, so that the one followed the other in birth without a break, so there is no interval between axial periods. Ezra is finally instructed to appoint a conventicle of five scribes and with them take forty days to write down everything; twenty-four of their books are to be taught to the people and seventy of them to be reserved in secret by the Quorum of the Wise Ones. Note how carefully the record of the great succession of dispensations has been cultivated.

The book of 2 *Baruch* is considered the last truly inspired writing of Judaism, immediately followed by what R. H. Charles calls “an evil and a barren era.” Baruch takes Jeremiah and a company of the righteous to fast and weep with him in the valley of Cedron. His tendency is to blame Adam for everything, though he cites almost verbatim God’s words to Enoch about giving man knowledge, commandments, and agency, all of which he has despised. Even the happy Messianic times on earth, he says, are only temporary as men’s virtues and energies seem now entirely used up. Israel suffers because Israel sins, abusing the elements of earth—the destruction of the

environment unfailingly signals axial disaster ahead. He cites Ezra's principle that the Lord has taken away Zion to leave the earth clear (as in the days of Noah) for a clean sweep of destruction. Sadly, the axial disasters of one time perfectly match those of another occurring centuries later. The number of those born, Baruch assures us, is fixed and a place is prepared for each, and the resurrection is postponed until a set number of souls has been completed. He lists twelve ages of the earth, calling them alternative times of "the black waters" and "the white waters," which correspond to the early Christian teaching of "the summertime of the just" and "the wintertime of the just." The black element dominates here, and each period involves the whole earth. The length of the various ages, like the number of spirits, was determined at the council of heaven before the creation. Our comfort is that God is aware of it all, so why complain? He lists the dispensations of Adam, the Watchers, Abraham, Moses, David and Solomon, Hezekiah and Josiah, and another yet to come, that will be the darkest of all and cover the whole earth. He gives us that fools' progress, the unfolding thought pattern to which our great sixth-century thinkers trace the doom of nations. It runs from mental laziness through a stupor of thought to feelings of insecurity, panic, and paranoia, and finally to hysterical accusations and insane hatred; then it is time for the earthquakes, fires, and famines to ring down the curtain. Yet the Saints shall be spared in a holy land. Baruch concludes with the lament: Zion has been taken from us and all that remains to us is the law of God.

### **Axial Times or Dispensations?**

What is the difference between an axial period and a dispensation? They describe much the same phenomena but each in its own special light. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that a dispensation is something bestowed from the permanent stock or storehouse, e.g., heaven, the content of which can include spiritual enlightenment as well as substantial blessings. A dispensation is monitored and directed from above, while the normal course of axial history is mindless, mechanical, random, and inevitable, like evolution. That is why world literature is so bleak and hopeless, centered as it is on the futility of the human condition that is brought out unsparingly in the times of great social upheavals and forced migrations.

Dispensations, on the other hand, have a meaning and a purpose. What is the purpose of it all? "We will make an earth whereon these may dwell; And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do the things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:24–25). The earth then, is a proving ground, a testing place. And for what are we being tested? Again the answer is clear: "I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, I gave unto man his agency; And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given *commandment*, that they should *love one another*, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood; . . . and in my hot displeasure will I send the floods upon them" (Moses 7:32–34). The test leading to axial disaster is simply our capacity to love. And what is the purpose of determining that? That "they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; . . . and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads forever and forever" (Abraham 3:26). All are being tested for permanent or at least very long-range assignments in the real world to come. We are here only long enough for testing—this is made glaringly apparent in the wails of protest by Kierkegaard and his existential companions against the injustice of curtailing human life before it even gets interesting. The terribly poignant tragedy which they loudly deplore is that while we come to earth endowed with enormous potential, eagerly excited to develop our manifold powers to the fullest, we are only given a few minutes and then snatched away and dumped in a hole in the ground. It is the cruelest of cruel jokes.

### **More Intimations of Immortality**

But isn't the coincidence of those two realities of high-powered brains going almost completely to waste in the world, which matches the evolutionary absurdity of brains far more splendidly equipped than mere survival requires (thus confronting Darwin with what he called "an abominable mystery"); does that not give the broadest possible hint that our phenomenal power of thought was developed elsewhere in a time and place where it was needed, and that it is meant to be put into full operation in another environment hereafter? One might say our real existence brackets fifteen minutes of testing. Heraclitus saw the point ("we are in a drunken stupor") and so did Plato in his doctrine of anamnesis.

The Lord showed Enoch that one "time of wickedness and vengeance" is just like the others though centuries apart and that of all worlds this is the very wickedest. So we have the honor of facing the hardest of tests in the worst of worlds for the greatest of prizes! Professor Erik Hornung, the dean of contemporary Egyptologists, names the great and terrible questions that arise in every axial crisis, namely, "Why is this happening to us? Where is God when we need him? Why is our lifetime so cruelly curtailed?" The first question was a favorite of the indignant Robert Ingersoll, who bitterly chided God for not existing. As a missionary in Germany in the 1920s, I heard the ceaseless refrain, "Es gibt keinen Gott!" Would he have allowed the war and all this? It did little good to remind them of their own folly. That led to the second question, the problem of God's silence; the Greeks had a word for it — *aporia*, meaning failure to get through, interpreted as implying that God is either uninterested, unwilling, or, even worse, unable to help us. Again, the dispensations give us a sound explanation exonerating God of cruelty or weakness.

The Joseph Smith book of Enoch, a theodicy, lays it all out, justifying the loudly condemned and misunderstood cruelty of the flood. God actually joins Enoch in weeping for the destruction of mankind (see Moses 7:28–29). This astounding event is also recorded in the writings of the rabbis; in their version, when Enoch asks God why he weeps, he is told to mind his own business. Only the Joseph Smith account has a real answer. The whole heavens weep and all his creations weep at the destruction of a world to which all have contributed and in which all share the same law of love that binds God's children and here binds the worlds together. The wicked will be imprisoned, having disqualified themselves for advancement, pending their repentance and deliverance at a later time. For the Savior's work and love are as vast and all embracing as the most distant reaches of existence.

As to the explanation of the Gospels (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 18, Joseph Smith—Matthew in the Pearl of Great Price), they entertain conjecture of a time when the master of the house takes a far journey, leaving his servants in charge. As soon as he departs the more highly placed servants begin to overwork, underpay, and beat the underlings. Now the master of the house has deliberately delayed his coming (*aporia*), and, when he does come, it is "like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10), catching everybody completely off guard, doing their normal thing—a highly reliable test and measure of their merits. The purpose of the test, we are told, was to assign rewards and punishments, each one being sent to the place he deserved; and what they were being tested for was simply their humanity, or, as the scriptures call it, charity.

As an invaluable and neglected handbook of dispensations, the Pearl of Great Price lays out for us the course of seven major dispensations, placing them against a much vaster background of worlds without number. It shows how each dispensation is a restoration, a real breakthrough from above, and then how each is subjected from the beginning to that pressure or test that eventually reaches the breaking point, scattering its people as wanderers over the whole earth. (1) Adam received everything at the outset, but Cain teamed up with Satan and the family "loved Satan more than God" (Moses 5:18), leaving their parents to "[mourn] before the Lord" (Moses 5:27), while the Cainites, prevailing over the Sethians, took the hordes down into the plains to live in the land of Nod, a perpetual wandering. (2) A crash program sent the Watchers onto the scene as missionaries of reform. But even

they, “the sons of God,” were enticed by the “daughters of men” (Moses 8:21), fell, and perverted and corrupted everything. Enoch, who preached to the cattlemen on the mountains, led his righteous Zion away to another planet entirely, while “the residue of the people” are removed from the scene in the great purging of the flood. What two solutions could be more totally “axial”? (3) By all accounts (and there are many), Noah’s flood was the greatest axial event of them all, calling for a complete transfusion of blood into the earth through the family of one man. God warned Noah not to expect too much of the New Age or the corrective action of the flood, since “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Genesis 8:21). Things are not going to improve in the long run. Noah’s sons migrated in various directions, and their offspring were soon proving that dismal proposition to the hilt as the earth became blighted by the terrible winds which dried up large areas of the land, overthrew the tower, and drove the Jaredites and many other tribes on their long, sorrowful treks. (4) Such was the world of Abraham, ever wandering in the deserts as “the famine waxed sore in the land,” planting trees and digging wells for others to enjoy as the greatest benefactor of the human race. He excelled all others in the three departments that Heraclitus lists as man’s greatest achievements: His searching of the cosmos, his right to kingship and priesthood, and his knowledge of the true religion. Though the mightiest of intellects, Abraham realized (again with Heraclitus) that the true work of man is not *theoria*, contemplation, as the Miletian philosophers, Aristotle, and the rest of the Schoolmen taught, but *euarestesis*, i.e., being of the greatest possible service to one’s fellowman, that all the nations of the earth might call him blessed. (5) A special book of Moses puts us in the eternities amidst “millions of worlds like this.” And was there ever an axial spectacular of afflictions and miracles to match the plagues of Egypt, the wild behavior of the sea, or the sight of Moses standing on the fiery mountain? Most of all, an entire nation wandering forty years in the deserts—how could there be a more complete break with the rest of world civilization, which had already collapsed in its main stronghold, Egypt? Moses broke off his stay with the people; he simply left them, promising in his farewell address that they would go from bad to worse. And so to the trials and scandals and excesses of David, Solomon, and the rest. Some Jewish writers have considered the emergence of Samuel and the priesthood to be the most important axial point in history. The prophets vainly tried to improve things until (6) the time of Christ. The Lord was “despised and rejected . . . ; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). The destruction of Jerusalem, following his departure, was but “the beginning of sorrows” (Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:19), which would last for almost two thousand years until the Lord told (7) Joseph Smith, “Behold the world lieth in sin,” and there is “none that doeth good no not one, . . . mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them acording [sic] to this ungodliness” (see 1831–32 account of Joseph Smith’s first vision as recorded by Frederick G. Williams). Yet presently the Saints were joyfully singing, “The Morning Breaks, the Shadows Flee” —again the best of times and the worst of times.

To recapitulate, through the long, sad history things have been kept at virtually the same level, to provide a fair and equal test for each generation in its turn in this our “time of probation.” For the Pearl of Great Price, our “handbook,” gives us the plan and rationale of the whole thing which is completely missing from the conventional axial system with its relentless procession of “dark centuries” and brief recoveries.

### **Line by Line**

But the main question still remains—why is the whole story broken up into so many distinct and discrete sections and compartments? Moses was given the answer when he was sharply rebuked by the Lord for wanting to see the whole picture. It is true that the object of all science and art is to see the wholeness of things, but it is also true that that can only be done when we know what the things are we are dealing with. Moses was shown “every particle” of the earth which was to be the scene of his mission (I take this to mean all the different types of particles that make up its composition; the scriptures require us to look into no smaller particulates than “the sands of the seashore”). The whole program of our earth life is conveniently divided into neat packages for easier handling or grasping.

Every seventh day we are supposed to drop everything and allow the complete and total gap of rest to segment our activities. That is no small matter; no delinquency of Israel could surpass the awful offense and dire retribution of failing to observe the Sabbath. "In it thou shalt not do *any* work" (Exodus 20:10, emphasis added). For at the end of their work of creation the Godhead announced, "We shall rest for a season." Sir John Eccles, the great authority on the brain, assures us that awakening from sleep in the morning is as great a miracle as resurrection itself, the break between one episode of existence and the other is absolute. The Egyptians constantly punctuated their activities with festivals of total release from daily care. These recurred with the cycles of sun, moon, and stars—every day, week, month, year, dynasty, aeon, etc., the human race is to take a break. The question of "continuity and discontinuity" is foremost today among students of the axial period. One happy aspect of this refreshing discipline is our opportunity to experience delights which "age cannot wither nor custom stale." Take the case of Adam, which should reconcile us to the single brief and frustrating span of this earthly episode.

## **Eternal Lives**

Adam's life is a succession of complete and widely differing careers: (1) It begins with a premortal existence in a world we know not of, first as coplanner and designer of this mortal world; (2) then to building inspector, bearing progress reports to his fellow executives; (3) then as a primitive man living on intimate terms with the animals for an indefinitely prolonged period, since "time was not yet measured unto man." Apparently it was an uninhibited existence since his next step was (4) marriage under the covenant in a totally new environment, an earthly paradise with unlimited delights for the senses and the palate, all provided "spontaneously," and all this along with ready access to heavenly visitation. (5) Then comes an awful axial shift, a dreadful wrenching into a lone and dreary world and a harsh environment requiring him to dress in skins (probably including furs) and work his head off, hacking at the stubborn soil to make a living, allergic to the new plant life, deserted by his own children to "mourn before the Lord." It looks like a dead end, but then Adam is placed here expressly in an environment that will give Satan every opportunity to "try him and to tempt him," to see whether he will be true and faithful in all things and qualify for advancement hereafter; (6) so what comes next is elevation of his hard earthly life to a new and happier level, as an angel comes and explains the gospel of salvation to Adam and his delighted wife. (7) This effects a return to former glory when his earthly days are ended. (8) And so on to "eternal lives," a convincing promise completely beyond our reckoning: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Fundamental to the gospel is the bringing together of "all things in one" (D&C 84:100). Of the twelve apostles and the rest of us the Lord said "if ye are not one ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27). Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one, an endless mystery to the theologians. Zion is "of one heart and one mind" (Moses 7:18). The Lord summed up the Ten Commandments in one great commandment, the second being like unto it (cf. Matthew 37:40). We have today the Grand Unified Theory (GUT), one theory to explain absolutely everything. But to get it we must know the parts; this oneness must be comprehended "line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little" (2 Nephi 28:30). And while the cosmos is one, and "all things are created and made to bear record of me" (Moses 6:63), yet God marks the fall of a tiny but individual sparrow. If that is not so we are all left out, for what do we count against infinity? The Lord blesses the children of the Nephites "one by one" (3 Nephi 17:21), rather than as a pontiff from the balcony. "A man's way is One," say the Arabs. Yet the Seven Ages of Man make him, in the course of his lifetime, seven distinct personae, as Solon and Shakespeare both tell us, in mind, manner, appearance, voice, and mood.

## **Waiting Their Turn**

And so it goes. After recent discoveries that show us the galaxies, the stars, the planets, the face of the earth, the living species on it, all passing from one tentative state of existence to another, we realize that if we are here only for a one-night engagement it can only mean that there is more to come. With all the hustle and bustle and Malthusian overcrowding of the earth, we overlook the manifest truth that the planet was meant for multiple use. To take fullest advantage of its limited space and resources, discrete periods of *time* have been set apart for the accommodation of different species. Thus one now celebrated population used the planet for millions of years without in any way interfering or competing with us. Then they were abruptly moved out, possibly by the brusque and uncompromising impact of a meteor—the K/T scenario—to make room for a new menagerie of creatures. It should therefore be obvious that provision has been made for every form of life, from the most primitive to the most advanced, to fill “the measure of its creation” (D&C 88:19)—no matter how different from ours—and have joy therein. And they are free to do it without our knowledge or permission; their assigned time on earth is their own. Must I deny their existence simply because I was not told about them? This raises a serious question.

### **An LDS Dilemma**

Every individual has his own private *imago mundi*, the way he envisages how things were way back then or at any time in the past. It is doubtful whether most people are greatly concerned with the scientific accuracy of the pictures they formed in Sunday school of the Garden of Eden, Noah’s ark, and the creation. But those images had the sanction of everlasting truth when they were taught to the seven-year-old; they were from the Bible. His fundamentalist background leaves no room for things totally alien to the Genesis story. Now every convert to the church brings with him his own *imago mundi*, which in fact can only be his own and never identical with another’s. What does he do with it when he joins the church? How does he adapt to the new doctrines he has accepted? He may make adjustments and allowances, but old impressions last.

New knowledge added to our old knowledge is in fact a sort of intrusion, even a gentle rebuke, to our present complacency. It renders former convictions outdated, replacing teachings we have become attached to, not by refuting them, but simply by adding to them. But that offends us. The celebrated Adolf Erman reports that when he made a find that could be a valuable contribution to a subject that his colleague, the equally celebrated Eduard Meyer, was working on, the latter, instead of being grateful and delighted, was definitely miffed—must he revamp his already finished conclusions? One of the greatest burdens for the Prophet Joseph was the steady resistance he met when he tried to expand the knowledge of the Saints beyond their fundamentalist stereotypes.

### **One Act Only?**

The most fundamental issue causing this distressing tension was the world of difference between the doctrine of discrete dispensations or axial periods and the mandatory scenario of the one-act play. It is true that they all make one single drama, but it can be expanded infinitely in either direction, past or future, like the mystic pentagram. Ancient nations saw their theogony and past history as a single glorious epic. It furnished the subject of mighty bardic recitations, or great dramatic trilogies, dividing the epic into three basic plays. Each play in turn was divided into acts—we still favor three today—and separate scenes, each emerging when a new character enters onto the stage. The characters’ separate speeches in turn were often famous, standing alone as material for study in the schools or recitations by prize students, or for little Philo to be shown off to company. This is the same principle that divides and subdivides the universe and everything in it: We can view the whole epic history best by seeing it as one scene, one act, or one play at a time, with the whole argument in the background; just as the eye focuses on only one object at a time, while subliminally taking in its essential peripheral ambiance.



But such is not the position of either the most rigid fundamentalists or the doctrinaire evolutionists who are in perfect agreement on one thing; they both accept without question the standard definition of *creation* as laid down by the Schoolmen long ago and expressed by Thomas Aquinas as the emergence of (1) absolutely everything out of (2) absolutely nothing in (3) absolutely no time—an immeasurably brief instant. Recently the popes have favored the Big Bang theory, overlooking the disastrous effect of that supremely axial event in introducing not only one possible world but millions.

The standard definition of creation required the one-act version, since there was no act before it because there was nothing there, and no more acts after it because it has already accounted for everything that ever is or was. This limits our timing to six thousand years; that is all we are allowed. This became the burning issue which divided the two schools. To meet the test of faith, followers of the Bible must renounce any other timescale. The axial experience and the idea of dispensations, on the other hand, not only allow infinite stretches of time in either direction but divide up the whole into smaller epochs, ages, and lifetimes. This is not only necessary for handling but observes the basic rule of science and of art that the whole cannot exist without its parts while each part is a whole in itself, containing countless more parts of the same nature.

This is the idea of dispensations, each containing a complete revelation of the same gospel plan, whatever their number. The favorite argument of the ministers against the assertion that the Prophet Joseph was “blessed to bring in the Last Dispensation” was the third verse of Jude: “the faith which was once delivered unto the Saints.” They conveniently rendered it “once and for all”—there could be no more delivery or dispensation of the gospel. They would usually add Revelation 22:18: “If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book.” Though we are explicitly told that the forbidden additions are those of *men*, leaving the way open to God to do as he pleases, the reverend gentlemen had to fall back on these two shaky arguments—once and for all and no more!—to prove that the last revelation had been given for all time.

The Jews used the same one-act-only argument to reject Jesus as the Messiah, insisting that he could come once only in the clouds of glory to settle all things forever, while Christ breaks that one-act rule by appearing in glory at least at the transfiguration and the ascension, with promise of yet another such appearance. Our handbook of dispensations, on the other hand, has the Lord appearing gloriously in person to all the founders of the seven dispensations described.

## **Enter Science Fiction**

The one-act, single-creation theory strictly forbids the discovery of *other worlds*, there being no mention of such in Genesis, while the first creation includes everything that ever was or could be created. This is the only inhabited world, said Aristotle, and man is the only animal endowed with a spirit and rational speech. It has always been maintained by fundamentalists and scientists alike that the discovery of life on other worlds would destroy man’s unique position in the universe, deny this world’s claim to be the center of the cosmos, and minimize the Creator’s singular achievement, making a mockery of the Genesis story. There is nothing to substantiate such a claim in the scriptures, but the one-act theory required it. It may be hard for the present generation to realize that teachers of science (such as my own) were until recently just as fanatically opposed to life on other worlds as were teachers of the Bible classes; for they recognized that for the unimaginably remote possibility of the purely random creation of life ever to have happened more than once was out of the question. So they too joined the one-world congregation.

This tedious controversy that binds the book of Genesis in Spanish boots should mean little to Mormons, released from any obligation to take sides, thanks to their legacy of sweeping and stunning revelations, such pronouncements as “millions of earths like this, . . . [which] would not be a beginning to the number of [God’s] creations” (Moses 7:30), “worlds without end” (D&C 76:112), “I could not see the end thereof” (Abraham 3:12). “There are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power. And there are many that now stand, and innumerable are they unto man” (Moses 1:35), and “there is no end to my works, neither to my words” (Moses 1:30). This world is actually made after the pattern of “other worlds which we have heretofore created,” all of the same substance and following the same rules of physics. Equally liberating is the position of man in the picture, man who “was [also] in the beginning with God” (D&C 93:29), but always himself, since “Intelligence . . . was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). Then why is one “more intelligent than another” (Abraham 3:18)? Everyone can answer that for himself, since no one so far has used or unfolded more than a fraction of his intelligence. To get us out of that situation is God’s main interest, since “The glory of God is intelligence” (D&C 93:36) and his “work and [his] glory” are one and the same—to bring men up to his own level: “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). This he does by teaching us: His words are inseparably joined in the revelations with his works, always mentioned together, “and there is no end to my works, neither to my words” (Moses 1:30). The words give purpose and meaning to the works.

To the idea of pleniarism, the doctrine that you cannot have too much of a good thing, we add the principle of multiple use, allowing for untold populations of creatures of the universe such beings as we dream not of, flourishing communities of anaerobic organisms living at tremendous temperatures and pressures in the unexplored depths of the sea. Thus countless species have enjoyed life, as unaware of our existence as we have been of theirs.

Why have the Mormons hesitated to take advantage of their great legacy of wisdom? Is it a lingering sense of loyalty to our sectarian past? Or is it not rather because we share a common resentment of the swaggering and condescending science majors and professors alike? The old Sunday school teachers, to save face, stood by their guns and dug in their heels, and so the tug-of-war continued between the two royal armies, both lacking ammunition for a decisive victory.

## **Write Your Own**

Mormonism has always welcomed new knowledge from any source. Thus we are invited to be attentive and alert in the temple, with brain and intellect revved up for high performance; everyone is invited and required to form his own *imago mundi* by being shown various astronomical spectacles, followed by a dramatic presentation when we are confronted on different days by different casts moving in widely varying stage settings, in different costumes, people of different complexions and mannerisms, speaking with different voices and inflections and even different languages. And from all that, each individual must compose his own visions of Genesis. Stephen Hawking assures us that there is just as much imagination in the scientific picture of the world as there is in the religious. We are not only allowed but forced to use our talents and our faith to put ourselves into the picture.

## **A Parable**

When I first came to Utah, the missionaries were showing a Book of Mormon film depicting the journey of Lehi’s family in the wilderness. There were men, women, and small children dressed in the lavish drapes of Hollywood *orientalisme*, all carrying jars, boxes, and bundles in their arms and on their heads and shoulders as they painfully clambered over rocks and gullies. Eight years of that in the wilderness? Half a day of it would have finished Davy

Crockett. When the film was shown in Beirut, the local Saints, who knew all about Arabs, laughed with uncontrollable irreverence. So one day I dropped into Brother Joseph Fielding Smith's hospitable office, his door always wide open there at the top of the stairs, and pointed out to him that a rich merchant, accustomed to traveling in the desert, would have thought of getting some help in moving his family, at least in carrying those huge black goat's hair tents under which he was to hold his frequent family councils—all the more so, because everybody else at that time was using donkeys and camels to negotiate the vastness of Arabia Deserta. Brother Smith instantly saw the point and agreed that Lehi's people must have had beasts of burden, even though they were not specifically mentioned by Nephi. Is there any reason then, short of a special revelation through the highest channels (though such is available to all of us individually), why the details of life in ancient worlds, having no doctrinal significance for us, should not be left open to private fancy, individual research, and even-tempered discussion? There is even a place for the gorgeous, but strictly noncanonical fantasies of an Arnold Friberg.

## **Axial and Apocalyptic**

Scholars have never hesitated to acknowledge close resemblance between axial crises and the awesome promises of apocalyptic literature. Klaus Koch has shown that apocalyptic has always been out of favor with the Christian clergy. The English title of his book, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, implies as much, while the original title, *Ratlos* (helpless) *vor der Apokalypik*, indicates their hopeless inability to cope with it. It makes no sense to them because of their one-act fixation. Apocalyptic literature is rich with multiple crises—past, present, and future; the sounding of successive trumpets; the coming and going of hosts; the climactic progression of plagues. The forty-day episodes call for repeated visits of the Lord; in chapters 14–17 of his Gospel, John speaks of the Lord's much coming and going, leaving and returning, taking others with him, acting as a guide and showing the way. He is one with the apostles who are thereby one with each other and with all who accept their teachings and in turn, with all who accept *theirs*, etc. The times and places are of great importance; what does “a time, and times, and half a time” (Revelation 12:14) mean? For the simplistic Christian, it all sounds much too complicated; where is the appealing simplicity of the rustic Jesus in our wall pictures? Apocalyptic is deemed by the ministry most fit for the “lunatic fringe.”

With the Jews, all but one coming of the Messiah is unacceptable. Jesus, with at least three appearances in glory—at the transfiguration, at the ascension, and at his promised return in like manner—simply does not qualify.

The Christians find other contradictions. His promise, “Behold I come quickly!” (D&C 35:27), was naturally seen by the Schoolmen as arousing the “Great Expectation”—to the early Christians Jesus was to come at any moment. But he did not come quickly! Hence an established teaching of twentieth-century Christian church history is what the scholars call the “Great Disappointment.” It took a generation, they tell us, for the Saints to give up their overwrought, wishfully inventive thinking and come around to a more rational, down-to-earth, light-of-day acceptance of the real world of sensible people.

But now comes the rub: as Pascal and Kierkegaard both saw, and the Neo-Freudians now confess, that safe light-of-common-day position is really a desperate denial of reality by frightened modern society “tranquilizing themselves with the trivial.”

## **Fear and Trembling**

The inhabitants of the earth are invited to “fear and tremble” in the introductory statement of the Doctrine and Covenants (1:7). “The hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand, when peace shall be taken away from the earth, and the devil shall have power over his own dominion” (D&C 1:35). It is not a pleasant thing to contemplate, and it all

seems rather brutal. The favorite argument of atheists and the disaffected throughout history is the old complaint of *aporia*—would a kind God permit such things to happen?

First of all, before we seek an explanation, we might as well acknowledge that such intensely unwelcome things have happened and will happen again. I can still hear my grandmother singing a favorite hymn: “When the earth begins to tremble, Bid our fearful thoughts be still; When thy judgments spread destruction, Keep us safe on Zion’s hill, Singing praises, Singing praises, Songs of glory unto thee . . .” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 83). The Hopis say the human race survived the three great axial destructions of the past by taking their stand on a holy mountain and joining in hymns of praise until the strenuous transition passed. And we are told that the Jaredites survived the mountain waves that poured over them, crouched in their small submersible vessels, as they sang hymns together all the way across the ocean (see Ether 6:7–9).

Whether the tremendous trials of the dark times occur or not is no longer a question. As a child, growing up in full view of the great Cascade Peaks, I was beset by apocalyptic imaginings of fiery eruptions. Of course older and wiser people assured us children that any spectacular displays from those old and exhausted heaps of slag would have to wait at least ten thousand years; those things take time. We have not had to wait that long.

On a mission in poor and hungry Germany, less than a decade after World War I, the constant refrain heard from door to door was “Es gibt keinen Gott!”—There is no God! Could a kind God have allowed such suffering? Equally frequent was “Nie wieder Krieg!”—No more war! And before I got out of school they were cheering themselves hoarse for Hitler, and in due time I found myself very much in the front line of another world war. Moral: Impending axial surprises are a distinct possibility.

### **To This Favor You Must Come**

Even the most frightful natural upheavals can be endured, and the lone survivor is a stock figure in literature, as the “remnant” is in the scriptures. What they tell us is best summed up in the two oldest exemplars of axial literature. The first is called the *Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage*, which Alan Gardiner, who edited the text, declared to be beyond question an authentic eyewitness report of what was happening at the collapse of the Old Kingdom more than forty-four centuries ago, when Egypt took a sudden plunge into 350 years of darkness. The uncanny resemblance to everything in our own time is both an adequate confirmation and commentary. We shall follow Gardiner’s example in selecting, paraphrasing, and comparing the text. The other is the so-called *Writing-Board* from the British Museum, an even older document reporting the same events.

The opening lines of the *Admonitions* are only half preserved but give a clear picture of petty crime and public indifference: In the first line a doorkeeper is proposing to his friends, “Let’s go down and knock over (*haq.n*) the candy store (*bnry.t*).” Next line: “They refuse to pick up the laundry anymore. . . . They are systematically poaching the birds. . . . These things have been prophesied since the (prehistoric) time of Horus. . . . There are gangs (*shemyw*) everywhere, a man has to have his shield when he goes out to plow. . . . have your bow ready—there are criminals afoot everywhere, not a trustworthy man around. . . . a man considers his own son an enemy. . . . even if the Nile rises as usual nobody is plowing, because nobody knows what is going on. . . . women are not having children—it is not the fashion (*skhrw-ta*).”

There are many bitter jokes about the wild redistribution of wealth: “The poor man who couldn’t afford a pair of shoes is now a big property owner. . . . laborers are discouraged. . . . Violence is increasing; epidemics are spreading, bloodshed is common, corpses lie in the open. . . . The river has become the new mortuary; the current provides processions for the dead. . . . in every town the word is ‘Let’s beat up (or get rid of, *dr.n*) the bigshots (*qnw*).’ . . . Men

are like *gem*-birds (pecking around for bits of food), and everybody goes around in filthy clothes . . . the rich man is being robbed by the help [but how did he get his money in the first place?]. People are nauseated by drinking Nile water with blood in it . . . everywhere buildings are burned to the ground, though so far the palace has managed to escape; ships from the South are stranded; the towns are in ruins down there, the whole country is drying up. Crocodiles are fattened by suicides . . . the population is decimated; everywhere you will find somebody who has buried a brother. . . . The desert is advancing over the land, whole provinces (nomes) are laid waste . . . undesirable aliens are pouring in across the borders . . . there are no natives left . . . servant girls are seen wearing somebody's splendid jewelry. . . . There is no more foreign commerce, for the gold is all used up . . . the crafts are deserted. . . . Laughter has died, nobody laughs anymore . . . people of every class say they wish they were dead . . . the children suffer most . . . the trees are being cut down illegally . . . everybody calls for honesty while practising dishonesty . . . the animals feel it especially, their cries are pitiful to hear . . . what is to be done when a man strikes his brother, a son of his own mother? . . . People have taken to highway robbery, hiding in the bushes at night and murdering their victims . . . what was there yesterday is missing today [cf. Helaman 13:34]. . . . If only the noise and uproar would stop! . . . I wish the whole human race would just disappear . . . they are eating weeds and drinking ditch water. Even birds can't find fruit or vegetables . . . food is even stolen from the pigs. . . . the law courts are looted by mobs . . . the secret rites and ordinances openly divulged . . . the lawbooks are trampled underfoot and kicked to pieces in the alleys . . . the recorders of the graineries have their records snatched, and everybody takes what he wants (6:8–9). The street people make their own legal councils, and the Sacred Council of the Thirty is deposed, their secrets disclosed. . . . There are fires throughout the land lighting the sky by night. The King is deprived of his authority by secret combinations of a few men. . . . The royal residence is overthrown in an hour. . . . A brave man alone hasn't a chance against the cowardly gangs."

There is another long, grimly humorous list of how the poor have become rich and vice versa, e.g., "the man who could not afford a wooden coffin now owns a tomb, while the one who built it is buried by exposure in the uplands. . . . who slept on the street now lies abed . . . who scavenged in the dump for cloth now wears fine linen . . . who had no loaf now has a barn (though it belongs to somebody else) . . . and why not? if you can get it you deserve it . . . the butchers cheat the gods by supplying geese instead of oxen for sacrifice, and they eat the meat they have been paid to prepare for others . . . cattle are running wild everywhere with no one to round them up . . . there are no concerned overseers in business or government. . . . those in power are never told the real condition of the people, so everything goes to ruin. . . . fields are reaped, but it is not reported . . . for housing, Egyptians are now making their own tents like the hill people . . . there is no income for the palace; the guard of the warehouse is knocked out, but the thieves find the bins empty in the king's storehouse . . . all this because of machinations of the secret enemy."

Gardiner, on the other hand, sees a passionate complaint against God's *aporia*: "Why has not Re created all men good alike? If he had done so, the present evils would never have arisen." Yet he describes the righteous ruler as the "Good Shepherd (Herdsman) of Mankind." It is because God "failed in the beginning that the human race is hopelessly flawed . . . this goes for the King too: 'Is he sleeping? His power is not to be seen.'" Many believe this was the ninety-six-year-old Pepi II. "Though the King has all the official requirements, yet noise, confusion, and general violence prevail throughout the kingdom." Then a direct charge against the king: "You have deceived us!" (13:19). Next a description of a kingdom that could be—a Zion. Here the good and bad societies are contrasted as in the Shield of Achilles, a scene of pious festivity and contentment. Next he chides the Egyptians for not standing up to the Asiatic invaders and again accuses the aged and incompetent king.

We noted in the priesthood manual that the axial switch of 600 B.C. saw the end of the old sacral kingship everywhere. And here we find the same thing happening twelve hundred years before!

## Déjà Vu

The author of the Egyptian *Writing-Board* bitterly complains that the axial horrors of the time present nothing new to write about: “I have said that which I have seen, and from the first generation down to the present time they are all the same. I wish I had something new to explain my present anguish. If there is change, it is always for the worse, increasing confusion and waste (entropy). Everyone suffers, everything is going downhill, but everybody puts up with it . . . people get up every morning and go through the usual routine; no one has the wisdom or concern to speak up—nobody cares that much. I don’t see any way out. . . . The stronger will always prey on the weaker . . . speaking out just makes trouble. You can’t get anywhere with stupid people; everybody listens only to himself.”

### The Merciful Plan

Especially effective among the complaints brought before and against God (the rabbinical *Vorwurf an Gott*) has been the charge of the killing of innocent animals and children in the flood. When Adam complained about it in heaven, God told him he could not even begin to imagine the extent of God’s own love for all his creatures. And to Ezra, championing the animals, he explains that animals have no conception of death, the terror of which lies all in the anticipation. They don’t know about it until it strikes them and it is over. There is the classic example of the calmly feeding mastodons, frozen hard with their flesh still edible and their mouths full of fresh buttercups.

The same mercy is shown to humans. All the recurrent “times of wickedness and vengeance” follow the same pattern. We have noted from the first how the axial change is always very swift and sudden. As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of Man and also in our own “days of wickedness and vengeance” (Moses 7:60). It has happened before, and each time with business as usual: “They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:26–27). If it must come, it is made quick and painless. Likewise, in the great axial age of Abraham, “They did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; But the *same day* that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:28–29). Whether by a tsunami or a firestorm, or by both as in the Book of Mormon, death is almost instantaneous by suffocation. It could not be more merciful. We are told of occasions when the angels protested God’s delay in smiting a sinful community, but he put them off, as he did the apostles at Capernaum, saying that some might yet repent, and all must have the full benefit of the doubt.

### The Extended Hand of Mercy

The accusing question arises—what comes after all that destruction? What is gained by it? You will find the complaints in all the literature—Egyptian, Greek, Latin, Babylonian, Hebrew, Eddic, Bardic, Romantic, modern—all of it is the product of a series of axial disasters, teaching us that man is bound to find himself in hopeless situations no matter when or where he lives. Then again it all goes back to the Chadwicks’ “Epic Milieu” when natural forces, especially the weather, pushed men over the brink and sent whole nations, notably grass-dependent nomads of the “Heartland” of Central Asia into migration toward rich and settled civilizations around the coastal periphery and so threw the world into turmoil.

Koestler’s flawed evolution puts one in mind of a machine that is missing a vital part. Nothing can be done until the part is supplied. Who will deliver it—and us? Theologians today are fond of the word *breakthrough*—such must be the very nature of religion; they have at last recognized that we cannot make it all up ourselves, that college courses cannot cut it. It must be brought from above. The universal note of despair that runs through all of the world’s literature proclaims our helplessness. Even the promise of the nineteenth-century superman and

twentieth-century science has yet to make us safer and wiser. By precept and example the Prophet Joseph alone shows us the astonishing reality of our situation: We were *meant* to be tried beyond our strength; the test was intentionally made too hard for us!

The late Karl Popper explained that to test a piece of machinery or material you must do your best to break it, putting it under merciless pressure until you have passed the breaking point; otherwise the test is incomplete—an easy test is no test. So “in this world ye shall have tribulation (*thlipsis*, lit. “keeping the pressure on”); but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Was the crucifixion to be called off, then? No, neither was the tribulation of the disciples. Yet the word is, “Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). This is how it must be, and everything is made clear.

Merciful toward afflicted mankind on earth—even the guilty ones of “the times of wickedness and vengeance”—the Lord also brings them the greatest of gifts in the next world. Though, admittedly, Grace does not ask anything in return, still, to be forgiven outright, without even an opportunity to repent, is to be treated like a feeble-minded child who, whatever he does, knows no better. The Lord, on the other hand, gives all of them the opportunity to prove themselves independent and responsible spirits, able to earn forgiveness and to return to the great plan of salvation by seconding the work of the Savior with all their own might, mind, and strength, not because he needs our help, but that he graciously permits it.

So he goes down to those disobedient spirits in prison, victims of sundry axial punishments, teaches them the words of life, laying out the whole plan for them. Putting them all on their good behavior, he arranges for their baptisms and endowments and so gives all a chance to work out their own salvation. In the end, the weeping Enoch saw “all things, even unto the end of the world . . . and received a fulness of joy” (Moses 7:67).