

Joseph Smith's Concept of *Zion and Latter Day Israel*

*“The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”*
– Isaiah 2:3

Perhaps the single most important tenet of Joseph Smith's theology was the identification of his church as “latter-day Israel.” This identification drove much of the rest of his scripture and doctrine, from his concept of “law” and a restored “priesthood” to his identification of America—and specifically Independence, Missouri—as the “promised land” to which Jesus would one day return. This concept of building an American *Zion* became the rallying cry of his young church throughout much of its early history. It was the glue which brought men together in the unity of pursuing a common and noble goal. And while the Mormon church largely abdicated its role in building this latter-day *Zion* by relocating itself to Salt Lake City, the Reorganized Latter Day Saints ultimately returned to Independence, Joseph Smith's “goodly land,” with this very goal in mind.

Accordingly, Joseph Smith's concept of Independence, Missouri as the latter-day *Zion* has been more fully embraced by RLDS than their Utah cousins. The very return of RLDS to Independence in the early 1900s was premised on its prophetic designation. In recent years, however, the RLDS church leadership have begun distancing themselves from a number of Joseph Smith's doctrinal positions, including his concept of a literal city of *Zion*.¹ But despite their now diluted concept of *Zion* the RLDS church still retains a variety of other earmarks by which Joseph Smith defined it as “latter-day Israel.” In this chapter we will explain the doctrinal development of Joseph Smith's concept of “*Zion*,”—or “the New Jerusalem,”—and “Latter Day Israel” and then compare them to their Biblical counterparts.

Historical Setting

The American continent has long held the hope of spawning a better society. Its once unspoiled land was also once unmarred by the tyranny of European social, political and financial structures of power which serve the interests of the few to the detriment of the many. To many of

1. As we will discuss below, a number of more conservative RLDS and nearly all of the more conservative groups which have broken away from the RLDS church since 1984 continue to believe in Independence as the literal city of *Zion*. These conservatives still encourage members to “gather to *Zion*” by moving to Independence and engage in a variety of initiatives to “build up *Zion*” as the literal earthly kingdom of God.

these downtrodden souls, America was truly a land of opportunity—opportunity to rid themselves of tyranny and in its place create a fair and just society which promoted the welfare of all.

It is not surprising, then, that in an earlier time America was a place of great social experimentation in search of this better society. Not long after their declared independence from England quite a number of Americans felt the freedom to pursue a variety of such experiments. The proliferation of these communities led the nineteenth century Emerson to decry “We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.”² Interestingly, many of these new communities centered around essentially communistic principals: joint ownership of assets and production, “one for all and all for one.” Having given birth to well over 100 such communities, this kind of experimentation seemed to hit its peak in the first half of the nineteenth century, “The United States was the Promised Land for both American and European communitarian planners, and the antebellum [pre-Civil War] half-century was their great seed-time.”³

It was against this backdrop of history that Joseph Smith wrote his scriptures and formed his church. And while his ideas have been heralded by some as original and ingenious, most of them were cut squarely from the social and religious fabric of his own day.

Development of the Doctrine of an American Zion

The prevalent notion among American and European clergymen in the early 1800s was that the American Indians were remnants of the lost tribes of Israel. When Joseph Smith produced his Book of Mormon during 1827–30 he took this concept one step further: America also became their “promised land.” The predominant Book of Mormon peoples, Nephites and Lamanites, are presented as descendants of Joseph through Manasseh (Alma 8:3). Only fifty-four verses into the Book of Mormon these Israelites are told that they would soon be sent from Jerusalem to “a land of promise” (1 Nephi 1:54), the American continent. This “land of promise” was being given by the Lord to the descendants of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) as the land of their inheritance, in both time and eternity. In the “last days” Joseph’s descendants would be gathered to this land of their inheritance, as the Jews would be gathered to the Jerusalem in Israel. These descendants of Joseph would build a city on this American continent which would be called “Zion” or “New Jerusalem” to coexist simultaneously with the Jerusalem of Israel which would also be built up. After the end of this age when “there shall be a new heaven and a new earth” both the American “New Jerusalem” and the Jerusalem of Israel will return to the renewed earth to once again coexist in the age to come. (See *BM* 3 Nephi 9:49–58; 10:1–7; Ether 6:1–13; 1 Nephi 3:187.)

Later on when Joseph Smith produced his *Inspired Version* of the Bible he further embellished this concept of Zion. In Genesis chapters 6–7 of his *Inspired Version* he creates an imaginary legend of Enoch, the father of Methuselah. In chapter 7 he develops the idea that this Enoch built a city for his followers, coincidentally also called “Zion” (v. 25). Because of its righteousness, this city was ultimately “translated” and taken up into heaven. From that point on,

2. From a letter to Carlyle in 1840, as cited in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, “The Communitarian Impulse,” *A Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 491.

3. *Ibid.*

many other righteous people were similarly “caught up...into Zion” (v. 34). Just prior to the Lord’s return to usher in the millennium, another city of “Zion” would be built on the earth, which would also be called “a New Jerusalem” (v. 70). Upon His second coming, Jesus would bring Enoch’s heavenly Zion with Him and join it with the earthly Zion which had been established on the earth (vv. 71–72). This lengthy, and highly imaginative insertion into the Genesis account was designed to provide additional support for the Zion which Joseph himself was trying to build in Missouri.

While Joseph Smith portrayed the American Indians as descendants of Manasseh, he came to portray the European portion of his church as descendants of Ephraim (*D&C* 64:7; 108:6), both groups combining to comprise the entire tribe of Joseph. When Gentiles joined his church Joseph taught that their actual blood would be changed to make them the literal seed of Abraham. “As the Holy Ghost falls upon one of the literal seed of Abraham, it is calm and serene; ...while the effect of the Holy Ghost upon a Gentile, is to purge out the old blood, and make him actually of the seed of Abraham.”⁴ Since they were both the children of Joseph, and therefore spiritual cousins, the Latter Day Saints and the American Indians were to come together to jointly build up this American New Jerusalem as the land of their eternal inheritance—their own “promised land.”

A Communal Society

As we indicated above, well over 100 different communities were experimenting with various kinds of social reform in the first half of the nineteenth century. Many of these endeavored to implement some of the basic principles of communism, joint ownership of assets and production. It was not long before Joseph Smith’s new church would join in this experimentation.

You will recall from chapter 1 that Sidney Rigdon and most of his Campbellite congregation joined Joseph Smith’s new church within its first few months of existence. Joseph started his church in April 1830 and Rigdon joined it later that same year. Rigdon’s congregation had been a part of Alexander Campbell’s “Restoration Movement” which advocated a return to primitive first century Christianity. As a part of this effort they had adopted a plan of “common stock,” by which each member enjoyed equal ownership of all of their assets, imitating the account of the early Christians as recorded in Acts 2:42–47. This group exerted considerable influence on Joseph Smith since their mass conversion now comprised about 65% of his young church.

Since Joseph Smith was also claiming to restore primitive Christianity, he decided he could safely embrace this practice of “common stock,” but only after he had purified the doctrine by the light of a new revelation. Accordingly, his entire church now began to practice what has also been referred to as “all things common.”

4. *Documentary History of the [Mormon] Church*, vol. 3, p. 380, as cited in Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*, p. 562.

But shortly after its implementation, dissention arose over the practice within even the highest ranks of the church. And by 1835 the practice had largely been abandoned and Joseph Smith's revelation, which had governed the practice, was substantially altered for republication.⁵

The Growth and Decline of the Zionite Idea

As we discussed in chapter 1, teachings from the Book of Mormon became the basis of the first westward mission of Joseph Smith's new church. This mission resulted in Independence, Missouri being designated as the site for the American New Jerusalem. Joseph Smith designated Independence in July 1831—scarcely fifteen months after starting his church. A number of his followers immediately moved to Independence to begin laying the foundation for "Zion." But just two years later the church was forced to leave Independence by mob force, having infuriated the other settlers by their claims of being God's chosen people and of Independence being their "promised land." Five years later they were driven from Missouri altogether by similar action.

These expulsions necessarily mediated the church's crusade to build Zion—they had been outlawed from even entering the state. And so they built up Nauvoo, Illinois instead. When they were later forced to leave Nauvoo the majority followed Brigham Young to Utah where they built up Salt Lake City. By so doing, the Mormon church implicitly surrendered much of its claim to Independence as Joseph Smith's city of Zion. For them Zion would become more of a theological concept than an immediate reality. It became more of a "condition" than a "place." But they have not completely abandoned the idea of a literal Zion in Independence. They believe that when the time is right God will just turn Independence over to them, as He did the land of Canaan to the Israelites.

The RLDS, on the other hand, continued to view Independence as Joseph Smith had, the place for the literal city of Zion. Shortly after the Reorganization of 1860 RLDS members began slowly moving back to Independence, a few at a time. Not long after the turn of the twentieth century a sizable body of members had developed there. The church became so thoroughly established in Independence that by 1918 the church headquarters were moved there as well. And once the church headquarters were in Independence the push was on for as many members as possible to "gather to Zion." There they were to work out the social and economic orders which they believed had been laid out by their founding prophet. This impetus continued throughout much of the twentieth century.⁶

Beginning in the late 1960s, however, this literal view of Zion began to shift. The RLDS leadership began to promote a more philosophical view of Zion, as the Mormons had done. Zion now became more a "condition" than a "place," whereas Joseph Smith taught that it was both. RLDS members were no longer being encouraged by their leadership to "gather to Zion," and the influx of members to Independence began to slow down. Members were now being encouraged to stay where they were and merely create a "Zionite condition." In reality, many more members had already moved to Independence than the leadership knew what to do with, and they had long

5. The substantial alteration of this revelation—and many others—will be covered in more detail in chapter 8 which deals with Joseph Smith's *Doctrine & Covenants*.

6. This "gathering of the saints" to Independence in order to "build up Zion" was widely promoted even through the 1960s. A good example of this teaching is found in Evan A. Fry, *The Restoration Faith*, (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1962), pp. 311–313. Evan Fry was a popular radio minister for the RLDS church for many years.

since given up trying to figure out exactly how to create a literal Zion. The more conservative members, however, did not follow this leadership and continued their traditional literal view of Zion, including the literal “gathering of the saints.” As it turns out, this controversy became another of the issues which contributed to many conservatives leaving the church beginning in 1984.

Zion versus Jerusalem?

We opened this chapter with Isaiah 2:3

*“The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”*

Joseph Smith's followers often cite this scripture and others like it to support the idea that there will be two distinct centers of influence for God's people, *Zion* versus *Jerusalem*. They claim that “The law will go forth from *Zion*,” whereas “the word of the LORD [will go forth] from *Jerusalem*,” as if these were two separate activities occurring in two separate cities. And, of course, they claim that the *Zion* spoken of here is a reference to the one in Independence, Missouri. In so doing they have convinced themselves that the Bible prophecies of the Zion of Joseph Smith.

But rather than displaying a prophecy of their own Zion, RLDS actually display their lack of understanding of the Old Testament. Major portions of the Old Testament, and especially the Prophets and Psalms, are written in Hebrew poetic structure. One of the predominant characteristics of Hebrew poetic structure is its use of *parallelism*. While there are various types of parallelism, the most simple is *synonymous parallelism*. In synonymous parallelism the thought of the first line is echoed, and therefore reinforced by the second line. This is done through the use of words or phrases that have essentially equivalent meanings. Consider the following examples.

*“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.”* (Psalm 19:7)

*“I have swept away your offenses like a cloud
your sins like the morning mist.”* (Isaiah 44:22)

Therefore, to cite Isaiah 2:3 in support of a Zion in Independence, Missouri is self-defeating. The scripture actually proves that Zion and Jerusalem are synonymous terms—*they are really just different names for the same city.*⁷

7. Any good Bible dictionary will have an article which describes the parallelism found in Hebrew poetry. For example, see Merrill F. Unger, “Poetry, O.T.,” *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, third edition, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), p. 874. See also William S. La Sor, David A. Hubbard and Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), chapter 23, esp. pp. 307–315.

The Biblical Promised Land, Zion and The New Jerusalem

The Promised Land. The term *promised land* refers to the land of Israel formerly known as Canaan and later also known as Palestine. It came to be known as the *promised land* because of God's promise to give it to Abraham and his descendants. God's promise to Abraham is first recorded in Genesis 12:1-9 and later confirmed in Genesis 13:14-17; 15:7,16,18-21; 17:8, etc. Later on God reaffirmed His promise first to Isaac (Gen. 26:2-4), and then Jacob (or Israel; Gen. 28:13-15; 35:11-12). And as God was about to fulfill His promise to the nation of Israel He reaffirmed it to Moses (Ex. 3:6-8; 6:2-8).

In the Bible the *promised land* has only to do with *one* promise (to Abraham) and *one* land (the land of Israel). It has nothing at all to do with any other land—including the Americas in general or Independence, Missouri in particular.

Zion. As we discussed in the preceding section, the name *Zion* in the Bible is simply another title for the city of Jerusalem. As such it is used in three general senses (1) as the capital of Israel's United Kingdom from the time of David, and later as the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah (as opposed to Samaria which was the capital of northern Israel), (2) the seat of government during the millennial Kingdom Age from which Jesus the Messiah will govern the entire earth and (3) the eternal city of God which will come to reside on earth after the millennium, and after all things have been "made new." This eternal city is also referred to in the Bible as the "*New Jerusalem*."

The term *Zion* is first used in the Bible as the title of the Jebusite fortress conquered by David in approximately 1,000 b.c., also known as Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6-7). This was several hundred years after the nation of Israel began their conquest of the land of Canaan under Joshua. The Jebusites had created the fortress of *Zion* on top of a steep rock outcropping that rose from the floor of the Kidron and Tyropeoan valleys and which separated the two. This site had originally been selected as a fortress because of its strategic setting, being surrounded on three sides by steep and rocky cliffs. The Jebusites were so confident of their fortress that they taunted David, "You will not get in here; even the blind and the lame can ward you off" (2 Sam. 5:6). But despite this jeering David conquered the city, which was one of his most significant achievements.

After he conquered *Zion* David renamed it the "City of David," a name which remains to this day.⁸ He quickly took up residence in Jerusalem and established it as his own capital city, which had previously been Hebron. David soon relocated Israel's tabernacle there as well as the ark of the covenant. Just north of the City of David is the temple mount where David's son Solomon built Israel's first temple, resulting in its designation as "Mount *Zion*." In subsequent centuries the term *Zion* came to refer to the entire ever-expanding city of Jerusalem.

In the previous section we looked at Isaiah 2:3

*"The law will go out from Zion,
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⁸ For example, see the Map Supplement in Alan Mairson, "The Three Faces of Jerusalem," *National Geographic*, April 1996, p. 2.

This is one of many prophecies referring to the millennial rule of Jesus the Messiah who is to “rule all the nations with an iron scepter” during the Kingdom Age to come (Rev. 12:5; see also Ps. 2:4–9; Rev. 2:27; 19:15). In accordance with Isaiah 2:3 and other Old Testament prophecies Jesus will conduct His millennial rule of the nations from Jerusalem, or Zion (see also Isa. 1:27; 4:1–6; Joel 3:16; Zech. 1:16–17; 8:3–8).

It is clear, then, that the term *Zion* in the Bible has everything to do with the city of Jerusalem in the land of Israel. It has nothing to do with *any* other city or *any* other land whatever.

The New Jerusalem. Finally, Zion, or Mount Zion in the Bible also refers to the eternal city of God which comes to reside on earth after all things have been “made new” following the millennial Kingdom Age (compare Heb. 11:10; 12:22–24 to Rev. 21–22). In the book of Revelation the apostle John also refers to this eternal city as the *Holy City* or the *New Jerusalem*. The Lord announces this brand new age by the declaration “I am making everything new!” (Rev. 21:5). This new creation will completely replace everything in the universe which we now know. John says “I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Rev. 21:1). There will be a fundamental change in the very composition of matter, for “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4). In contrast, deterioration and death are very natural and necessary features of the present order of things. This is because mankind’s sinfulness has brought a curse over all of creation. That curse will be entirely lifted from the eternal world to come, “No longer will there be any curse” (Rev. 22:3). In light of the universal nature of this entirely new and perfect creation it is only fitting that the Jerusalem of that coming age be referred to as the *New Jerusalem*.

At this point it is interesting to note some important contrasts between the Biblical New Jerusalem and that of Joseph Smith.

Feature	The Biblical New Jerusalem	The New Jerusalem of Joseph Smith
Location	Jerusalem of Israel	Independence, Missouri
Builder	God alone builds it for his children	Latter Day Saints build it for God
Timing	<i>after</i> the return of Jesus Christ and His millennial rule, when all things shall be “made <i>new</i> ”	<i>before</i> the return of Jesus Christ and His millennial rule, and in preparation for it
Number of cities	only <i>one</i>	<i>two</i> —the New Jerusalem in Independence, Missouri and the “old” Jerusalem in Israel will coexist, both before and after Jesus’ return

It is clear that Joseph Smith created an “upside-down” New Jerusalem which bears no resemblance at all to the New Jerusalem of the Bible. In so doing he doomed his followers to a life of confusion and frustration by trying to build a city which was never anything more than a figment of his own imagination. And in the process he has blinded them to God’s real plan as contained in the Bible.

Patriarchs and Blessings

The English word *patriarch* is a combination of the Greek *pater* (father) and *arches* (beginning or origin). Since the word is of Greek origin, it appears only in the New Testament. There it is used to refer to first fathers, the origin of the nation of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (later renamed Israel) and Jacob’s twelve sons who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. The term is used once to refer to David (Acts 2:29).

In that ancient world it was customary for the father to impart a blessing upon his son(s) shortly before his own death. This was no mere sentimental tradition but one filled with the spiritual power to govern the rest of one’s life, for better or worse. Often the destiny of entire nations hinged on the event. Just read the last half of the book of Genesis.

Since Joseph Smith regarded his church as “Latter Day Israel” he eventually came to the conclusion that he needed to restore this concept of Israel’s patriarchs together with their blessings. Accordingly, his own father, Joseph Smith, Sr., became the church’s first Patriarch.⁹ This way Joseph Smith, Jr. was assured of being among the first to receive his own Patriarchal Blessing. Later, Joseph implied that the office of Evangelist also served a patriarchal function.¹⁰ This unlikely combination ultimately led to the dual office of Patriarch/Evangelist.

This office of Patriarch/Evangelist, along with its special blessings, has continued to be a part of both the RLDS and Mormon churches down to the present day. RLDS Patriarchs start off as Melchisedec High Priests who then receive a secondary ordination. They tend to be older fatherly types whose ordination as a Patriarch is often seen as a semi-retirement. Leaders of the very highest positions of the church have often been “called” to be Patriarchs as a way to retire them.

Most active RLDS seek a Patriarchal Blessing at some point in their lives, often in their late teen-age or early adult years. It is a very special event and a real high point in their church life. Most Patriarchal Blessings are prepared for ahead of time with opportunity for the Patriarch and the subject to get to know each other. Occasionally Blessings will be given spontaneously with no prior notice, though these are becoming increasingly rare. Up until recent times it was a normal expectation for the subject’s “lineage” to be revealed in the course of a Blessing. This way he would know to which specific tribe of Israel he belonged. This revealing of lineage has become controversial and is now discouraged. At a minimum Patriarchal Blessings usually contain fatherly counsel, comfort and assurance. They have often also included prophecies of what a person’s life might hold in store for them. Sometimes these predictions materialize, sometimes they don’t. In any event they are normally highly prized by the recipient.

⁹. Two different dates are given for this ordination. *RHC* 2:16 gives the date of January 21, 1836, whereas Joseph Smith's own biographical sketch of his father at *RHC* 1:631 specifies a date of December 18, 1833.

¹⁰. See *D&C* 104:17–29.

It should go without saying that there is no evidence in the New Testament or church history for either Patriarchs or their Blessings in the early Christian church. In fact, outside of their own Patriarchal period there is no evidence for them even within Israel itself, ancient *or* modern.

Literal Descendants of Aaron

When God gave the Law to Moses at Mt. Sinai He also established Aaron and his sons to be its exclusive administering priesthood (Ex. 28:1; 29:9; Num. 16:40; 2 Chron. 26:18). It was illegal for anyone but a literal descendant of Aaron to officiate in the priest's office. In order to maintain their ritual purity under the Law the Israelites kept strict genealogical records so they would be able to identify Aaron's descendants. Departure from this rule was always a mark of serious rebellion, as with Korah (Num. 16–17) and Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:25–33; 2 Chron. 11:5–17). Israel's Aaronic priesthood was both fulfilled and forever abolished by Jesus' completed work on the cross. Consequently, there has never been an Aaronic priesthood in the Christian church.¹¹

In spite of Jesus' completed work on the cross, Joseph Smith claims that John the Baptist came to him and Oliver Cowdery in May 1829 to restore the Aaronic priesthood to the earth again.¹² It is significant to note that the only requirement for priesthood in Israel was being a descendant of Aaron. Yet no mention of this sole criteria is reported when Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were ordained. (This is understandable, since Joseph himself claimed that his church was made up of the tribe of Joseph through Ephraim, none of whom would have been eligible for the Levitical priesthood even when it *did* exist during the Old Testament period.) In fact, Joseph Smith made no mention of Aaron's lineage for several more years, all the time ordaining more and more men into the Aaronic priesthood. It was not until 1835 that two of Joseph's previous revelations were systematically altered to provide for literal descendants of Aaron in his priesthood structure (*D&C* 68:2 & 104:8).¹³ But, ironically, these revelations indicate that literal descendants of Aaron were to be candidates for *the New Testament office of bishop!* According to these altered revelations, *bishops* were to serve as presidents over the Aaronic priesthood.¹⁴

In summary, Joseph Smith tried to further identify his church as "latter day Israel" by making specific provision for "literal descendants of Aaron" within his priesthood structure, notwithstanding the fact that the Aaronic priesthood was altogether abolished by Christ, and notwithstanding the fact that he claimed his church consisted of the tribe of Joseph, not Levi. But in an even more convoluted way he specified that these literal descendants of Aaron were to hold *the New Testament office of bishop*. This bizarre twist by Joseph has created great confusion for his followers. Joseph's commingling of the obsolete priesthood of Israel with Christianity and

11. The purpose and function of Israel's Aaronic priesthood will be discussed more fully in chapter 14.

12. For more detail of this event see chapter 11.

13. Both of these sections of the *Doctrine & Covenants* (68 & 104) originated in November 1831. In 1835, however, a number of systematic changes were made in these revelations in order to produce the *Doctrine & Covenants*. A number of other significant changes in the *Doctrine & Covenants* will be discussed in chapter 8.

14. The English term *bishop* comes directly from the Greek *episkopos*, which is also rendered in English as *overseer*. The title *episkopos* and the function which it describes are uniquely Greek in origin and conspicuously out of place when describing the Hebrew Aaronic priesthood. The New Testament office of bishop is discussed more fully in chapter 12.

with the New Testament office of bishop has created a barrier to Biblical understanding which the vast majority of his followers never overcome.

Gospel to be Preached First to *Gentiles*—and *Then* to the Jews?

Jesus Christ is first and foremost the Messiah of *Israel*. Jesus made this very clear as He spoke with the Canaanite woman who had come asking Him to heal her daughter, “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel*” (Matt. 15:24). He maintained this focused mission to Israel throughout His ministry. And when He sent out His disciples He strongly emphasized that this was to be their focus as well, “*Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ...I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes*” (Matt. 10:5–6, 23).

In compliance with Jesus’ instruction the early Christian church always presented the gospel to the Jews *first*. It was only Israel’s rejection of Jesus which allowed the gospel to come to us Gentiles. As the Apostle Paul conducted his missionary travels he would always seek out the local synagogue and first preach Jesus to the Jews. When the Jews rejected the gospel he would then present it to the Gentiles, often with much greater success. This is Paul’s consistent pattern all the way through the book of Acts. He very clearly explains this principle after the Jews rejected his message at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, “*We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles*” (Acts 13:46).

Jesus’ mission to Israel was not to be temporary; it was a permanent mission which would remain in effect right down to the time of His second coming. “*I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.*” Joseph Smith, however, turned this divine pattern completely upside-down. Not only did he set up a fraudulent city and people to compete with the Jews and Jerusalem, he made the Jews second-class citizens in their own kingdom. Whereas Jesus and His disciples placed the Jews as the first priority in receiving the gospel, Joseph Smith made them last. Five times in his *Doctrine & Covenants* he placed the Jews in a secondary position to Gentiles, and in two of these sections he instructed his church to preach first to the *Gentiles*, leaving the Jews for last: “*Send forth the elders of my church...call upon all nations; firstly upon the Gentiles, and then upon the Jews*” (D&C 108:3a, emphasis added). “*...that through your administration...the word may go forth unto the ends of the earth, unto the Gentiles first, and then, behold, and lo, they shall turn unto the Jews*” (D&C 87:3c, emphasis added).¹⁵

Once again, through his subordination of Israel to the Gentiles, Joseph Smith demonstrated his complete misunderstanding of God’s plan. In so doing he opposed the very mission for which Christ was sent, to first be an offering of peace to His own people, Israel. When the Canaanite woman came asking Jesus to heal her daughter, He told her “*It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs*” (Matt. 15:26). These children, as we have already seen, are the children of His kingdom, the nation of Israel. Joseph Smith took these children and put them at the very end of the bread-line.

15. In addition to the two sections cited here see D&C 16:2a & 5a and 18:3.

Summary and Conclusion

The theology which drove Joseph Smith's early church was his claim that it was literally "latter-day Israel" which was being restored in the last days. This theology held that America was the "promised land" for the lost tribes of Joseph (Ephraim [Latter Day Saints] and Manasseh [American Indians]) who would be gathered together in the last days to build their own Zion or New Jerusalem in Independence, Missouri. Joseph Smith created the scriptural underpinnings of this theology in various parts of his Book of Mormon and *Inspired Version* of the Bible. The social structure of Joseph's set-apart society followed that of other such experimental communities of his day: the communistic principle of joint ownership of all property.

This principle of "all things common" soon fell out of favor with a number of members, including some high ranking church leaders. This dissension led to the abandonment of the doctrine and necessitated substantial alterations to Joseph's revelation which had been governing the practice.

When the Latter Day Saints were expelled from Independence, Missouri they ultimately settled in Nauvoo, Illinois where they built a substitute city. After Joseph Smith's murder in 1844 the Latter Day Saints were forced to leave Nauvoo as well. Brigham Young led the largest surviving group to Salt Lake City to form what is known today as the Mormon church. By so doing the Mormon church largely abdicated its role in building up Independence, Missouri as Joseph Smith's city of Zion. In contrast, the Reorganized Latter Day Saints returned to Independence around the turn of the twentieth century for the express purpose of building up Zion.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, the RLDS leadership lost interest in building a literal city of Zion and began to spiritualize Zion as merely a condition, much as the Mormons had done. This became another issue which marginalized conservative members of the RLDS church and was a contributing factor to the exodus of many beginning in 1984.

In addition to developing his concept of an American Zion, Joseph Smith left other permanent imprints on his church which were to further define it as "latter day Israel." These included the institution of Patriarchs and Patriarchal Blessings which have continued in his churches to this day. Another imprint was the provision for "literal descendants of Aaron" in his priesthood structure.

Joseph Smith's entire theology of his church as "latter day Israel" is actually a major distortion of Biblical truth, and demonstrates his fundamental misunderstanding of Biblical theology. Throughout the Bible the terms "promised land," "Zion" and "New Jerusalem" *always* refer to the Biblical land of Israel and its capital city of Jerusalem. No other land or city is ever in view—neither America in general nor Independence, Missouri in particular.

Joseph's reintroduction of Patriarchs and their Blessings was another vain attempt to imitate a social and spiritual custom unique to Israel's Patriarchal period which ended with the twelve ancestral tribal heads. This custom was never practiced outside of this Patriarchal period even within Israel itself, and has never been practiced in the Christian church age. Another vain imitation was provision for "literal descendants of Aaron" within Joseph Smith's priesthood structure. Israel's Aaronic priesthood died with Jesus on the cross. It has likewise never had any place within the Christian church.

Finally, Joseph Smith unwittingly subordinated Israel to the Gentiles when it comes to hearing the gospel. Jesus instructed His disciples to always present the gospel to Jews *first*. He made it clear that this priority was to be effective right down to the time of His return. In typical fashion Joseph Smith turned this divine order upside-down by instructing his disciples to preach to the Jews *last*, after the Gentiles had received an ample hearing.

Joseph Smith did not understand the Bible. His writings and theology are clear evidence of this. The heart of his theology, Zion and latter-day Israel, are prime examples of his perversion of Biblical concepts. It wasn't bad enough that Joseph Smith himself was confused on these issues. He created "scriptures," theology and a whole church structure which have served only to blind his followers to Biblical truth. He has created a gigantic trap from which very few of his followers effectively escape. We pray that God will send His powerful Spirit to break these bonds for more and more of these people before it is too late.