

Comments on Doctrine & Covenants 87

This section is well known for its prediction of the U.S. Civil War. While that might be useful for some in an attempt to establish Smith's being a prophet, that is not the purpose of the revelation, and signs are not effective conversion tools, cf. D&C 63:7-11.

The primary purpose of this section is to describe upcoming events to the members of the Church (v. 1-5), explain their purpose (v. 6-7), and forewarn against them (v. 8) so the ecclesia can be prepared (cf. D&C 88:79-80).

The text can be arranged by subject as follows:

Wars on all nations of the earth (v. 1-5)

A - (v. 1) South Carolina rebels against Union

B - (v. 2) War poured out upon all nations beginning here

A - (v. 3a-f) North divided against South

B - (v. 3g) Then war poured out on all nations

A - (v. 4a-b) Slaves against masters

B - v. 4c) Marshaled for war

A - (v. 5a-b) Remnants against Gentiles

B - (v. 5c) Gentiles sorely vexed

Why there is war upon all nations (v. 6-7)

You are forewarned (v. 8)

The text is presented as a repetition of division (the A's) and conflict (the B's). Internal division, conflict and war are standard covenant curses, cp. Lev. 26, Deut. 28.

1 Verily, thus saith the Lord concerning the wars that will shortly come to pass, beginning at the rebellion of South Carolina, which will eventually terminate in the death and misery of many souls; 2 And the time will come that war will be poured out upon all nations, beginning at this place. 3 For behold, the Southern States shall be divided against the Northern States, and the Southern States will call on other nations, even the nation of Great Britain, as it is called, and they shall also call upon other nations, in order to defend themselves against other nations; and then war shall be poured out upon all nations.

4 And it shall come to pass, after many days, slaves shall rise up against their masters, who shall be marshaled and disciplined for war. 5 And it shall come to pass also that the remnants who are left of the land will marshal themselves, and shall become exceedingly angry, and shall vex the Gentiles with a sore vexation.

v1-5 The divisive and deadly war within the US (v. 1) will precede a time of war on all nations (v. 2). The Southern and Northern states will be divided in war, and other nations will get involved, and eventually war will envelope all nations of the world (v. 3). Social revolution will result in war (v. 4), and the remnants of Israel will afflict the Gentiles (v. 5).

v4-5 The common reading on v. 4 is to assume it is referring to African slavery in the Americas, and the 20th century civil rights movement. The typical reading on v. 5 is that it is referring to remnants of Israel among the Gentile nations (cf. Isa. 10:20-23), who will rise up, cf. Isa. 11:11-16, Micah 4:13.

However, just as two A-B couplets in v. 1-3 are both referring to the same thing, it is possible, if not probable, the two A-B couplets of v. 4-5 are referring to the same thing as well. Thus, the "slaves" and "remnants who are left" would be in parallel and the "masters" and "Gentiles" would be in parallel. If these verses are read in this manner, then the passage is eschatological, and not referring to relatively recent historical events. The eschatological reading is encouraged by the "after many days" in v. 4.

The context of slaves=remnants of Israel and masters=Gentiles is supported by the conquest imagery of 1 Ne. 13:34, 2 Ne. 26:19, as well as Isa. 10.

v5 "vex", when used in the context of physical conflict between nations the term means "attack", "assail" or "harass" (cf. Num. 25:17-18, Num. 33:55, Acts 12:1). See also D&C 97:23, D&C 101:89.

"vexation", in Deut. 28:20 the KJV has "cursing, vexation, and rebuke", the JPS renders that passage as "calamity, panic, and frustration".

6 And thus, with the sword and by bloodshed the inhabitants of the earth shall mourn; and with famine, and plague, and earthquake, and the thunder of heaven, and the fierce and vivid lightning also, shall the inhabitants of the earth be made to feel the wrath, and indignation, and chastening hand of an Almighty God, until the consumption decreed hath made a full end of all nations; **7** That the cry of the saints, and of the blood of the saints, shall cease to come up into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, from the earth, to be avenged of their enemies.

v6-7 A variety of means of destruction are deemed necessary to

chasten the people of the earth, to make an end of all nations (cp. D&C 84:96-98), and to satisfy the demands for justice for the innocent blood of the saints (cp. Isa. 26:21, Rev. 6:10, D&C 136:34-36).

This is why the events of v. 1-5 must be accomplished, because of the wickedness of man.

v6 "the consumption decreed", cp. Isa. 10:22, see also Isa. 1:28, Isa. 28:22. The Lord's intent is to purge the wicked and preserve a righteous remnant of Israel (cf. Isa. 10:20-23).

v7 "Sabaoth", i.e., hosts, as in the hosts, or armies, of heaven. Smith transliterated a Hebrew term.

8 wherefore, stand ye in holy places, and be not moved, until the day of the Lord come; for behold, it cometh quickly, saith the Lord. Amen.

v8 Conclusion. The revelation closes by stating the members of the Church have been warned, so they had best stand in holy places (cp. comments on D&C 27:15) until the Day of the Lord arrives.

In the historical context, the probable implicit message is the saints need to heed the Lord's commands to establish Zion, for their own protection from the impending calamities (cf. D&C 45:68, D&C 88:79-81, D&C 133:1-12).

Historical Material Pertaining to Doctrine & Covenants 87

Most historical comments on this revelation, even those of various contemporaneous General Authorities (e.g., Orson Pratt, Journal of Discourses, volume 13, page 135; Orson Pratt, Journal of Discourses, volume 18, pages 224-25; Joseph Fielding Smith, Church History and Modern Revelation, volume 1, pages 358-59; James E. Talmage, Articles of Faith, pages 25-27), focus on the prediction of the civil war as being evidence of Smith's prophetic calling.

But, that is not the purpose of this section, any more than D&C 89 is given as proof of Smith's calling. The purpose is to warn the Saints to be prepared, giving them insight into what they need to be prepared for, so they will establish Zion as a refuge against the turmoil of the country they live in, and the wider world at large.

Print publication of this revelation was very late, when compared to other contemporary revelations. Hand-written manuscript copies were plentiful, and knowledge of the revelation was common among the contemporary Church. This section was first published in 1851 as part of [the original Pearl of Great Price](#), in Liverpool, England by Franklin D. Richards, who was mission president of England at that time. It was not included in Doctrine and Covenants until 1876. It was published in the Millennial Star, volume 27, number 12, pages 184-185, dated March 25, 1865.

The late publication date was likely a result of the ecclesia interpreting the text as referring to the Nullification Crisis, and therefore being disappointed when it didn't end up being fulfilled in the manner they had anticipated. When it didn't, they probably feared being mocked in the press, owing to the significant negative reports being advertised about the Church at the time.

Excerpt from Online Historical Commentary

Section 87 came during a Constitutional crisis. Congress had passed tax laws that favored northern factories over southern planters. So a South Carolina convention "unilaterally nullified the tariff and forbade its collection. President Andrew Jackson, refusing to acknowledge this assertion of state power, called out troops. By Christmas 1832, a military confrontation

appeared imminent." [e.g., [Tariff of Abominations](#), [Nullification Crisis](#)]

Latter-day Saints and other Christians viewed these events (along with a plague in India and a nearly global outbreak of cholera) in eschatological terms, meaning they thought the end of the world would come soon.

At least that's how it looked to Joseph Smith and others late in 1832. Wars and rumors of wars, desolating sicknesses and desolating scourges were in the news. Joseph asked for and received a revelation about what was to come. It said that wars-plural-would begin shortly with South Carolina's rebellion, then continue until wars had gone global and resulted in "a full end of all nations" (D&C 87:6). The revelation foresaw slave rebellions and the uprising of "remnants" vexing the Gentiles, which Joseph and the early Saints interpreted in Book of Mormon terms to mean descendants of Lehi irritating the unrepentant (Mormon 7:1-10, 3 Nephi 10, D&C 19:27).

[...]

Joseph Smith may have looked foolish to some when the crisis blew over. Civil war didn't come. It didn't start with the rebellion of South Carolina, nor result in death and misery, or global warfare, or the end of nations. Well, at least not right away, as Joseph and others probably expected. ([Steven C. Harper, Come Follow Me: Doctrine & Covenants](#))

Excerpt from History of the Church

Appearances of troubles among the nations became more visible this season than they had previously been since the Church began her journey out of the wilderness. The ravages of the cholera were frightful in almost all the large cities on the globe. The plague broke out in India, while the United States, amid all her pomp and greatness, was threatened with immediate dissolution. The people of South Carolina, in convention assembled (in November), passed ordinances, declaring their state a free and independent nation; and appointed Thursday, the 31st day of January, 1833, as a day of humiliation and prayer, to implore Almighty God to vouchsafe His blessings, and restore liberty and happiness within their borders. President Jackson issued his proclamation against this rebellion, called out a force sufficient to quell it, and implored the blessings of God

to assist the nation to extricate itself from the horrors of the approaching and solemn crisis.

On Christmas day [1832], I received the following revelation and prophecy on war.

[text of D&C 87 quoted]

(Joseph Smith, History of the Church, volume 1, page 301)

Excerpt from The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith

Section 87, commonly known as "the prophecy on war," was received on Christmas Day 1832, some twenty-eight years before the American Civil War commenced at Fort Sumter on Charleston Bay in South Carolina.

In November 1832, before the reception of this revelation, South Carolina had adopted a States' Rights position intended to nullify federal regulations not in their interests (specifically, high tariffs on foreign imports, which protected northern manufacturing interests). In addition to the economic problems of the upcountry cotton planters, the wealthy rice aristocracy of the lowcountry had become sensitive to the beginnings of northern antislavery movements. Reacting to the protective tariffs and the agitation against slavery, radical South Carolinians saw nullification as the logical defense to the "tyranny" of the majority. On 24 November 1832 a special convention passed an Ordinance of Nullification that prohibited the collecting of tariff duties in the state after 1 February 1833. Students of the period generally agree that the situation in South Carolina was explosive, and the passage in early March 1833 of a compromise tariff temporarily averted civil war.

Although Joseph Smith considered this action on the part of the South Carolina convention a "rebellion," he later clarified that the commencement of warfare prior to the Second Coming would arise through the slave question.

Brigham Young, who noted that section 87 was intentionally left out of the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, indicated that this revelation was received "when the brethren were reflecting and reasoning with regard to African slavery on this continent, and the slavery of the children of men throughout the world." [JofD, vol. 8, pg. 58] (Lyndon W. Cook, The Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith)

Excerpt from Journal of Discourses

Brother Hyde spoke of a revelation which he tried to find in the

Book of Doctrine and Covenants. That revelation was reserved at the time the compilation for that book was made by Oliver Cowdery and others, in Kirtland. It was not wisdom to publish it to the world, and it remained in the private escritoire. Brother Joseph had that revelation concerning this nation at a time when the brethren were reflecting and reasoning with regard to African slavery on this continent, and the slavery of the children of men throughout the world. There are other revelations, besides this one, not yet published to the world. In the due time of the Lord, the Saints and the world will be privileged with the revelations that are due to them. They now have many more than they are worthy of, for they do not observe them. The Gentile nations have had more of the revelations of God than is their just due. And I will say, as I have before said, if guilt before my God and my brethren rests upon me in the least, it is in this one thing—that I have revealed too much concerning God and his kingdom, and the designs of our Father in heaven. If my skirts are stained in the least with wrong, it is because I have been too free in telling what God is, how he lives, the nature of his providences and designs in creating the world, in bringing forth the human family on the earth, his designs concerning them, &c. If I had, like Paul, said—"But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant," perhaps it would have been better for the people. (Brigham Young, Journal of Discourses, volume 8, page 58, remarks made May 20, 1860)

Excerpt from Journal of Discourses

In 1860, Brothers Orson Pratt, Erastus Snow, myself, and others, were going on missions, and we arrived at Omaha in the month of November of that year. A deputation of the leading citizens of that city came to our camp and tendered to us the use of the Court House, as they wished to hear our principles. The invitation was accepted, and Elder Pratt preached to them. During the service, there was read the revelation to which I have referred—the revelation concerning the division between the South and the North. The reason probably, for reading it was that when we reached Omaha, the news came that trouble was already brewing, and several States were threatening to secede from the Union. Its reading made considerable impression upon the people. A good many had never heard of it before, and quite a number were struck with the remarkable character of the prophecy. It might have been expected, naturally speaking and looking at it as men naturally do, that the reading, of such a

revelation, at such a time, when the crisis was approaching, would have had the effect to direct men's attention to it, and they would be led to investigate its truth and the doctrines of the Church and the foundation we had for our belief. But if there were any converted in that audience I am not aware of it. Good seed was sown, but we did not remain to see what effect it produced. The revelation being so remarkable, and the events then transpiring being so corroborative of its truth, one might naturally think, as there were present on that occasion the leading and thinking portion of that community, that a great number would have been impressed with the probability of its truth, and would have investigated and joined the Church. You doubtless remember it was for a good while doubtful whether the rebellion should commence at South Carolina or not. I was in England at the time, and was engaged in publishing the *Millennial Star*, and took a great deal of notice of the American papers, and I well remember that to all human appearances it seemed for a while as though the trouble would break out at Fort Pickens, Florida. But the word of God had been spoken concerning that event, and consequently it had to be fulfilled as predicted, and the war did commence at South Carolina. It was fulfilled, as you know, to the very letter, Fort Sumter being the place where the rebellion broke out. (George Q. Cannon, November 2, 1879. *Journal of Discourses* 21:265-266)

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