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An Economic Interpretation of the "Word of Wisdom"

LEONARD J. ARRINGTON*

How did it happen that the Latter-day Saints, once distinguished primarily by their group economic, political, and social activity, and by certain "peculiar" beliefs and practices, came to be noted, in this century, primarily for the non-use of liquor, tobacco, tea, and coffee? Certain evidence suggests that an important contributing factor was economic in nature. Economic interpretations are almost always inadequate and one-sided, but they frequently offer helpful insights into historical processes and their causation. This essay is presented, not as a "final" interpretation, but only as a contribution toward the understanding of a sensitive phase of Utah history that has seldom been studied.

The "Word of Wisdom" of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a part of its revealed scripture, having been announced by Joseph Smith, first Prophet of the Mormons, at Kirtland, Ohio, on February 27, 1833. The name of the revelation, "Word of Wisdom," is found in the first verse of the revelation which begins: "A Word of Wisdom, for the benefit of the council of high priests, assembled in Kirtland, (Ohio) and the church, and also the saints in Zion (i. e., Missouri) . . ." The admonitions given in the revelation are as follows:¹

1. It is not good to drink wine or strong drink, except during the Lord's Supper, when it should be "pure wine . . . of your own make."
2. Tobacco is not good for man.
3. Hot drinks (interpreted contemporaneously and at present to mean tea and coffee) are not good for man.
4. God has made available for man's use wholesome herbs and fruits. These are to be used in their seasons "with

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prudence and thanksgiving." Grain is set apart for man's use, as the "staff of life."

5. The flesh of beasts and fowls also is ordained for man's use, but must be used sparingly. It should not be used except in the winter, during cold weather, and in times of famine.

Those who obey these admonitions are given promises that they shall receive health and strength, find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, run and not be weary, and walk and not faint, and escape the destroying angel, who will "pass by them and not slay them." The revelation states that it was given as a "greeting" rather than as a "commandment" or by way of "constraint," but it purported to show forth "the order and will of God in the temporal salvation of all saints in the last days." It was given as a "principle with promise," and was adapted to the capacity of "the weak and the weakest of all saints"

There are two theories as to the origin of the "Word of Wisdom." One is that it grew out of specific problems in the early history of the Mormon Church. Thus, the provision with respect to wine states that it was given in consequence of the "evils and designs which do and will exist in the hearts of conspiring men" Among these were the apparent attempts of hostile elements to dispose of church leaders by putting poison in wine. Similarly, the provision on tobacco is said to have grown out of the complaints of Emma Smith, wife of Joseph, about the condition of her floors after meetings of early church leaders in her home. Brigham related the circumstances as follows:

I think I am as well acquainted with the circumstances which led to the giving of the Word of Wisdom as any man in the Church, although I was not present at the time to witness them. The first school of the prophets was held in a small room situated over the Prophet Joseph's kitchen Over this kitchen was situated the room in which the Prophet received revelations and in which he instructed his brethren. The brethren came to that place for hundreds of miles to attend school in a little room probably no larger than eleven by fourteen. When they assembled together in this room after breakfast, the first (thing) they did was to light their pipes, and while smoking, talk about the great things of the kingdom, and spit all over the room, and as soon as the pipe was out of their mouths a large chew of tobacco would then be

taken. Often when the Prophet entered the room to give the school instructions he would find himself in a cloud of tobacco smoke. This, and the complaints of his wife at having to clean so filthy a floor, made the Prophet think upon the matter, and he inquired of the Lord relating to the conduct of the Elders in using tobacco, and the revelation known as the Word of Wisdom was the result of his inquiry.²

In recent years a number of scholars have contended that the revelation is an outgrowth of the temperance movement of the early nineteenth century. According to Dean D. McBrien, who first expressed this theory, the Word of Wisdom was a remarkable distillation of the prevailing thought of frontier America in the early 1830's. Each provision in the revelation, he claimed, pertained to an item which had formed the basis of widespread popular agitation in the early 1830's:

A survey of the situation existing at Kirtland when the revelation came forth is a sufficient explanation for it. The temperance wave had for some time been engulfing the West. Just a few years before, Robert Owen had abolished the use of ardent spirits in his community at New Harmony. In 1826 Marcus Morton had founded the American Temperance Society, called at first the Cold Water Society by way of contempt. In June, 1830, the *Millennial Harbinger* quoted in full, and with the hearty personal endorsement of Alexander Campbell, an article from the Philadelphia "Journal of Health," which in turn was quoting a widely circulated book, "The Simplicity of Health," which article most strongly condemned the use of alcohol, tobacco, the eating intemperately of meats. Thereafter, Campbell and his paper gave wide publicity to the temperance cause. Temperance Societies were organized in great numbers during the early thirties, six thousand being formed in one year. On the Western Reserve many temperance lectures were delivered, many temperance pamphlets circulated, and many temperance meetings held from 1826 on. The arguments used everywhere were based as much on physical as on moral grounds. On October 6, 1830, the Kirtland Temperance Society was organized with two hundred thirty nine members. Among its members were listed a George Smith, several Morleys, a Wells, a Coe, and a Lyman. These are names all associated with the history of Mormonism, and it is not improbable, though not known as certain, that these temperance workers had relatives among the Saints, even if they themselves were not Mormons. This society at Kirtland was a most active one . . . it revolutionized the social customs of the neighborhood.³

McBrien then goes ahead to point out that the Temperance Society succeeded in eliminating a distillery in Kirtland on February 1, 1833, just twenty-seven days before the Latter-day Saint revelation counseling abstinence was announced, and that the distillery at Mentor, near Kirtland, was also closed at the same time.

How did Mormon leaders and members interpret their obligations under the new revelation? The evidence points two ways. Some apparently regarded the revelation as prohibitory and binding and wanted to make the obedience of its principles a matter of fellowship. The church council in Kirtland, in February, 1834, for example, adopted the following resolution: "No official member in this Church is worthy to hold an office, after having the Word of Wisdom properly taught him, and he, the official member, neglecting to comply with it or obey it . . ."⁴ In December, 1836, the church congregation voted a pledge of total abstinence from intoxicants after which water was used in the Lord's Supper.⁵ At a general meeting conducted by church authorities in Far West, Missouri, in 1837, the membership agreed that "we will not fellowship any ordained member who will not, or does not, observe the Word of Wisdom according to its literal reading."⁶ Several months later, at the annual conference of the church, Joseph Smith spoke on the Word of Wisdom and stated that it should be observed.⁷ Moreover, when a council at Far West tried a high church official (David Whitmer) for his fellowship, the first of the five charges against him was that he did not observe the Word of Wisdom.⁸

Taking the 1830's and 1840's as a whole, however, there is considerable evidence that many Mormon leaders and members believed that the Word of Wisdom meant only a piece of good advice and nothing more. One large group of Mormon families, for example, was advised in 1838 that they should not be "too particular in regard to the Word of Wisdom"⁹ The same attitude continued during the years 1839-1845 when the Mormons were in Nauvoo, Illinois.¹⁰

Joseph Smith's published journal, moreover, indicates a somewhat casual treatment of the injunctions contained in the revelation. After a double wedding in January, 1836, he wrote: "We then partook of some refreshments, and our hearts were

made glad with the fruit of the vine. This is according to the pattern set by our Savior Himself, and we feel disposed to patronize all the institutions of heaven."¹¹ A fortnight later at the marriage of the apostle, John Boynton, the Prophet was presented by Orson Hyde, Luke Johnson, and Warren Parrish with "three servers of glasses filled with wine, to bless." "And it fell to my lot to attend to this duty," he wrote, "which I cheerfully discharged. It was then passed round in order, then the cake in the same order; and suffice it to say, our hearts were made glad while partaking of the bounty of earth which was presented, until we had taken our fill; and joy filled every bosom, and the countenances of old and young seemed to bloom alike with cheerfulness and smiles of youth" The feast, he wrote, "was conducted after the order of heaven, which has a time for all things"¹² A few months later in the same year Joseph records that he took his mother and Aunt Clarissa in a carriage to Painsville, Ohio, where they "produced a bottle of wine, broke bread, ate and drank, and parted after the ancient order, with the blessings of God."¹³

A tolerant rather than vigilant attitude also characterized the application of the Word of Wisdom in pioneer Utah. Brigham Young, although a fairly strict adherent to the Word of Wisdom, particularly after 1861, did not make the obedience of it a matter of fellowship; nor did he identify the Word of Wisdom with moral principle. As Nels Anderson wrote, "For him the test of a man's faith was his integrity to an assignment given by the church. Could a man take a company of Saints to a desert and hold them to the task of building a community; then it didn't matter much to Brother Brigham if he was a user of whiskey and tobacco. Those 'Word of Wisdom' virtues were precious to him but secondary."¹⁴

President Young's remarks in the "Old Tabernacle" in Salt Lake in 1861 were surely not typical and yet they indicate a kindly—though disapproving—eye toward tobacco users:

Many of the brethern chew tobacco, and I have advised them to be modest about it. Do not take out a whole plug of tobacco in meeting before the eyes of the congregation, and cut off a long slice and put it in your mouth, to the annoyance of everybody around. Do not glory in this disgraceful practice. If you must use tobacco, put a small portion

in your mouth when no person sees you, and be careful that no one sees you chew it. I do not charge you with sin. You have the "Word of Wisdom." Read it. Some say, "Oh, as I do in private, so do I in public, and I am not ashamed of it." It is, at least, disgraceful . . . to expose your absurdities. Some men will go into a clean and beautifully-furnished parlour with tobacco in their mouths, and feel, "I ask no odds." I would advise such men to be more modest, and not spit upon the carpets and furniture, but step to the door, and be careful not to let any person see you spit; or, what is better, omit chewing until you have an opportunity to do so without offending.¹⁵

Likewise at the fortieth annual conference of the Saints in Salt Lake City in 1870, President Young similarly took time to chastise the members:

On Sunday, after meeting, going through the gallery [of the new tabernacle] which had been occupied by those claiming, no doubt, to be gentlemen, and perhaps, brethren, you might have supposed that cattle had been standing around there and dropping their nuisances. Here and there were great quids of tobacco, and places a foot or two feet square smeared with tobacco juice. I wish the door-keepers, when, in the future, they observe any persons besmearing the seats and floor in this way to request them to leave the house; and, if they refuse and will not stop spitting about and besmearing their neighbors, just take them and lead them out carefully and kindly. It is an imposition for those claiming to be gentlemen to spit tobacco juice for ladies to draw their clothes through and besmear them, or to leave their dirt in the house. We request all addicted to this practice, to omit it while in this house. Elders of Israel, if you must chew tobacco, omit it while in meeting, and when you leave, you can take a double portion, if you wish to.¹⁶

Obviously, such backsliders were in the minority. Nearly every reliable writer who traveled through Mormon Country in the nineteenth century made special comment of the fact that the Latter-day Saints were frugal, industrious, sober, and temperate. To quote just one example from among the many, Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, after a relatively lengthy tour through the Mormon commonwealth in 1855, wrote the following about its citizens:

The style of living among the Mormons is simple and frugal. They are very temperate, which enables them the better to bear the privations to which they are exposed by their frequent

changes of place, and during the periods of scarcity too often caused by great droughts and the ravages of locusts. Bread, maize, potatoes, pumpions, dairy produce, bacon, beef, are their principal and almost their only food. They make use of tea, and coffee less frequently. The majority abstain from fermented or spiritous liquors, either voluntarily and from motives of temperance, or on account of their poverty. They chew tobacco more than they smoke it; this vile habit, however, is less usual among them than in other parts of the Union.¹⁷

In short, the Word of Wisdom was largely observed, but there can be little doubt that it had not become a group taboo in the 1850's and early '60's.

The strong and increased emphasis on the Word of Wisdom which characterized the official Mormon attitude throughout the remainder of the century appears to have begun in 1867. In that year were organized, in each Mormon community, a Women's Relief Society and a men's School of the Prophets. Both organizations adopted rules requiring observance of the spirit and meaning of the Word of Wisdom.¹⁸

The explanation for these rules and the widespread resolves to obey the Word of Wisdom seems to lie in the conditions of the Mormon economy. Separated as they were from the United States by over 1,500 miles of treeless plains, hounded as they had been by hating "mobocrats," it was necessary for the Latter-day Saints to develop and maintain a self-sufficient economy in their Rocky Mountain retreat. Economic independence was a necessary goal of the group and every program of the church tended toward that end. Economic independence meant developing all the agricultural, mineral, and industrial resources of the region, but it also means husbanding the cash resources of the community under proper (i.e., church) leadership for the purchase of machinery and equipment needed in building a prosperous commonwealth. There must be no waste of liquid assets on imported consumers' goods. Utah had no Marshall Plan on which to rely for the solution of her chronic shortage of dollars; she could not maintain consumption as usual and still build up her productive power in the way that was necessary to provide jobs for the never-ending streams of converts coming to Zion to dwell. And as for "the gathering"

of the converts—also a basic Gospel principle—that also required large sums of cash.

For the purchase of needed supplies and equipment the Saints had few cash resources. They had little cash when they reached Utah; and there was no product they could export from Utah to get more cash in the normal commercial way. Saints who used their cash to purchase imported Bull Durham, Battle-Axe plugs, tea, coffee, and similar “wasteful” (because not productive) products were taking an action which was opposed to the economic interests of the territory. In view of this situation, President Young came to be unalterably opposed to the expenditure of money by the Saints on imported tea, coffee, and tobacco. It was consistent with the economics of the time that he should have had no great objection to tobacco chewing if the tobacco was grown locally. It was also consistent that he should have successfully developed a locally-produced “Mormon” tea to take the place of the imported article. Something more permanent and productive than tea, coffee, and tobacco was wanted for the building of the Kingdom, in view of the limited funds at the disposal of the Saints.

A particularly crucial problem faced the church as the transcontinental railroad approached Utah after the Civil War. It was evident to Mormon officials that a stepped-up program of economic development was essential if the local economy was to escape absorption into the wider free-trading economy of the nation. At least three things had to be done: (1) The territory must utilize every means of earning “outside” income with which to purchase machinery and equipment and other needed imports. This was done by taking a contract to construct the transcontinental line in Utah. (2) The territory must establish cooperative stores and industries to insure that the profits of trade would be available for investment in the local economy. Thus was initiated what is known as the “cooperative movement” in Mormon history. (3) The territory must pare consumer imports to the bone in order to finance agricultural and industrial (i.e., productive) imports. The School of the Prophets and the Women’s Relief Societies figured prominently in executing this third phase of Mormon policy. Accented emphasis on Word of Wisdom observance after 1867 was unquestionably

an essential part of the development program stimulated by the approach of the railroad.¹⁹

Brigham Young's sermons in the 1860's and '70's give clear indication that Mormon leaders were worried over the economic waste resulting from importation of the products prohibited in the Word of Wisdom. In a letter of instructions to all the settlements south of Great Salt Lake City, President Young wrote:

This community has not yet concluded to entirely dispense with the use of tobacco, and great quantities have been imported into our Territory. The silver and gold which we have paid out for this article alone, since we first came into Utah, would have built several extensive cotton and woolen factories, and filled them with machinery. I know of no better climate and soil than are here for the successful culture of tobacco. Instead of buying it in a foreign market and importing it over a thousand miles, why not raise it in our own country or do without it? True principles of domestic and political economy would suggest the production at home of every article of home consumption, for herein lies the basis of wealth and independence for any people

Tea is in great demand in Utah, and anything under that name sells readily at an extravagant price. This article opens a wide drain for the escape of much of our circulating medium Tea can be produced in this Territory in sufficient quantities for home consumption, and if we raise it ourselves we know that we have the pure article. If we do not raise it, I would suggest that we do without it.²⁰

An added indication of the thinking of Latter-day Saint leadership is gleaned from the remarks of Brigham Young at one of the sessions of the general conference of the church, held in Salt Lake City in 1867, at which he strongly urged the women of the church to refrain from the use of tea and coffee. By this abstinence, and by teaching their families to do likewise, he stated, means could be saved and devoted to emigration, the construction of temples, and the support of Gospel and economic missionaries.²¹ On the tobacco question, he gave explicit expression of the economic loss to the Saints of importing that article:

You know that we all profess to believe the "Word of Wisdom." There has been a great deal said about it, more in former than in latter years. We, as Latter-day Saints, care but little about tobacco; but, as "Mormons," we use vast quantity

of it . . . How much do you suppose goes annually from this Territory, and has for ten or twelve years past, in gold and silver, to supply the people with tobacco? I will say \$60,000. Brother William H. Hooper, our Delegate in Congress, came here in 1849, and during about eight years he was selling goods his sales for tobacco alone amounted to over \$28,000 a year. At the same time there were other stores that sold their share and drew their share of the money expended yearly, besides what has been brought in by the keg and by the half keg. The traders and passing emigration have sold tons of tobacco, besides what is sold here regularly. I say that \$60,000 annually is the smallest figure I can estimate the sales at. Tobacco can be raised here as well as it can be raised in any other place. It wants attention and care. If we use it, let us raise it here. I recommend for some man to go to raising tobacco. One man, who came here last fall, is going to do so; and if he is diligent, he will raise quite a quantity. I want to see some man go to and make a business of raising tobacco and stop sending money out of the Territory for that article.

Some of the brethren are very strenuous upon the "Word of Wisdom," and would like to have me preach upon it, and urge it upon the brethren, and make it a test of fellowship.

I do not think that I shall do so. I have never done so.²²

The attempts of the latter-day Saints in southern Utah and elsewhere to make wine are also illustrative of the dominating philosophy of economic self-sufficiency. One function of these enterprises, of course, was to provide wine for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Brigham Young stated in 1864: "I anticipate the day when we can have the privilege of using, at our sacraments pure wine, produced within our borders. I do not know that it would injure us to drink wine of our own make, although we would be better without it than to drink it to excess."²³ Wine was used in the sacrament of the church as late as 1897.²⁴ A more important function of wine-making, however, was to provide much-needed income for the poverty-stricken pioneers in Utah's Dixie. The intention was to sell most of the wine in mining communities in southern Utah and Nevada. Brigham Young instructed as follows: "First, by lightly pressing, make a white wine. Then give a heavier pressing and make a colored wine. Then barrel up this wine, and if my counsel is taken, this wine will not be drunk here, but will be exported, and thus increase the fund."²⁵ More of the Dixie wine was con-

sumed in the Mormon settlements than church officials had hoped, however, and the enterprise was discontinued before 1900.

There can be no doubt that a major goal of church policy in pioneer Utah was economic independence. Achieving self-sufficiency required a policy of urging upon the Saints the necessity of saving their dollars for items which were more important to the welfare of the group than tea, coffee, and tobacco. Thus, it came about that those who "wasted" their cash on such "unnecessary, self-gratifying" imports were "talked about," criticized, and accused of being unwilling to sacrifice for the common good. The majority realized that abstinence would help to build local industry and agriculture and help to finance immigration and missionary work; therefore, strong sanctions were applied against those who refused to cooperate in this program of building up Zion. Persons who refused to go along with the policy of non-use were not "good Mormons."

Those interested in promulgating the Word of Wisdom worked particularly with the young people, who soon learned that to abstain from tea, coffee, tobacco, and wine—all imports—was a test of one's loyalty to the church, its program, and its leadership. By the time of the 1880's the Word of Wisdom campaign had gone so far as to lead to widespread pledges of total abstinence. The "infamous" antipolygamy raid, the growing influence of nearby mining camps, and the lack of employment for the younger men, all combined in the 1880's to create a worrisome problem of drunkenness and juvenile delinquency. At the general and local conferences of the 1880's much time was devoted to sermons on the "liquor habit," the "tobacco habit," and similar vices.²⁶ There is evidence that the church's governing "Council of Twelve Apostles" took the pledge to obey the "Word of Wisdom" at this time. This program was so effective that in the late 1890's it was possible for President Lorenzo Snow to state that he believed the Word of Wisdom was "violated as much or more in the improper use of meat as in other things, and (he) thought the time was near at hand when the Latter-day Saints should be taught to refrain from meat eating and the shedding of animal blood."²⁷ A matter of

economic necessity had been converted into a principle of religious faith.

The vast changes in the Mormon economy in this century, of course, no longer require the monolithic program of sacrifice and development which spurred Utah's pioneers. Nevertheless, there has been, if anything, a heightened emphasis on the Word of Wisdom since 1900. Much of this is the normal institutionalization of social ideals and processes. But there is far stronger reason for the continued weight of the Word of Wisdom in Mormon practice: the findings of medical research. Several Utah-born scientists who had been trained in the East, particularly Dr. John A. Widtsoe and his wife Leah, began to demonstrate the medical truths of the Word of Wisdom in a widely-read series of articles in Mormon magazines and papers.²⁸ Science could now demonstrate to the reasoning mind the ultimate wisdom of the Lord and His Prophet in announcing the revelation to His people. For reasons of faith, loyalty, and good health, therefore, the faithful Latter-day Saint still observes the Word of Wisdom.

1 The *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City, 1935), section 89.

2 Sermon of February 8, 1868, *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool, 1854-1886), XII, 158.

3 Dean D. McBrien, "The Influence of the Frontier on Joseph Smith" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 1929), pp. 147-149.

4 Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period I* (2nd ed., Salt Lake City, 1948), II, 35.

5 Matthias Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff . . .* (Salt Lake City, 1909), p. 65.

6 *History of the Church*, II, 482.

7 *Far West Record*, p. 11, quoted in John A. Widstoe and Leah D. Widstoe, *The Word of Wisdom: A Modern Interpretation* (2nd ed., Salt Lake City, 1938), p. 263.

8 *History of the Church*, III, 18-19.

9 *Ibid.*, III, 95.

10 See *History of the Church*, V, 380; "History of Joseph Smith," June 27, 1843, in the *Millennial Star*, XXI (1859), 283; Diary of Oliver Huntington, Vol. III, p. 166, typescript, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

11 *History of the Church*, II, 369. It is quite possible, of course, that the "fruit of the vine" could have been unfermented grape juice.

12 *Ibid.*, II, 378.

13 *Ibid.*, II, 447.

14 Nels Anderson, *Desert Saints: The Mormon Frontier in Utah* (Chicago, 1942), p. 439.

15 Sermon of March 10, 1861, *Journal of Discourses*, VIII, 361-362.

- 16 Sermon of May 5, 1870, *Deseret News, Weekly*, May 11, 1870.
- 17 Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, *A Journey to Great-Salt-Lake City* (London, 1861), II, 271-272.
- 18 The rules of the School of the Prophets are given in the Journal History of the Church, September 19, 1868, MS., Church Historians Library, Salt Lake City. See also Emmeline B. Wells, "History of the Relief Society," *Woman's Exponent* (Salt Lake City), XXXII (1903); and sermons in *Journal of Discourses* for 1867-1870.
- 19 A fuller discussion of this program is found in Leonard J. Arrington, "The Transcontinental Railroad and Mormon Economic Policy," *Pacific Historical Review*, XX (May, 1951), 143-158.
- 20 *Deseret News*, July 15, 1863.
- 21 Sermons of April 6, 1867, *Journal of Discourses*, XI, 349, 350-353.
- 22 Sermon of April 7, 1861, *Ibid.*, IX, 35.
- 23 Sermon of June 4, 1864, *Deseret News*, June 22, 1864.
- 24 Journal History, October 29, 1897.
- 25 Journal History of St. George Stake, March 26, 1874.
- 26 See, for example, Journal History, July, August, and September, 1884.
- 27 Journal History, March 11, 1897.
- 28 Their great synthesis, of course, is *The Word of Wisdom: A Modern Interpretation*, already cited.