



The Word of Wisdom revelation (D&C Section 89) as recorded in the Kirtland Revelation Book, pages 49–51. The revelation is in the hand writing of Frederick G. Williams. Images courtesy of LDS Church History Library and Intellectual Reserve.

Different and Unique: The Word of Wisdom in the Historical, Cultural, and Social Setting of the 1830s

Paul Y. Hoskisson

Each dietary substance or element that appears in the revelation known as the Word of Wisdom, both the prohibitions and the admonitions, also can be found in the health literature contemporaneous to the 1830s. Nevertheless, although though there is nothing actually *new* in terms of Word of Wisdom items, I will demonstrate that the Word of Wisdom is not simply a rehash of nineteenth century ideas, as some have suggested.¹ Indeed, the Word of Wisdom is quite different and unique, but not in the way it has usually been taught.

When the Word of Wisdom was revealed to Joseph Smith in February 1833, the Ohio area had already become “a hotbed of temperance and health reform sentiment.”² This fact has led some observers to conclude that the Word of Wisdom was only a product of the time, not a revelatory injunction. For example, “according to Dean D. McBrien [writing in 1929], . . . 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 [McBrien] claimed, pertained to an item which had formed the basis of widespread popular agitation in the early 1830’s.”³ Therefore, questions such as, “Did Americans generally know that alcohol, tobacco, tea, coffee, and excesses of meat, were bad for you; and that grains and fruits were good for you?” is a moot

PAUL Y. HOSKISSON (paul_hoskisson@byu.edu) is a professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, where he also serves as director of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Jason Manwaring in the research and preparation of this paper.



Newel K. Whitney Store, Kirtland, Ohio, 2001. Joseph Smith received the Word of Wisdom revelation on February 27, 1833, while living in the second story of the store. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.



"Translation Room" located on the second floor of the Newel K. Whitney Store, 2003. Joseph Smith probably received the Word of Wisdom revelation in this room. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

question. Although no one in the 1830s had the kind of scientific evidence we possess today, many individuals and societies did write and speak about the items mentioned in the Word of Wisdom.⁴ The more important question that needs to be asked is, “Were the Latter-day Saints (especially those in Kirtland, and Joseph Smith in particular) aware of the negative and positive ideas about health that were generally afloat in their day?” My conclusion is that they could hardly have escaped not knowing or being familiar with these ideas. To demonstrate this, I will present a sampling of the historical evidence of the dietary elements in the Word of Wisdom that existed in spatial and temporal proximity to Kirtland in 1833. After presenting the evidence I will then explain why the Word of Wisdom is different and unique even when there is nothing new in it.

Alcohol

Alcohol consumption was a major societal problem in the United States in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. This led to the establishment of the first teetotaling temperance society, founded in Saratoga County, New York, on February 13, 1826.⁵ Five years later, most likely on October 6, 1831, the Kirtland Temperance Society was created with 239 signatories. It purchased the only distillery in Kirtland “under the agreement that it should never again be used as a distillery.”⁶ Long after Joseph Smith had arrived in Kirtland, and a little less than a month before he received the revelation we call the Word of Wisdom, the Kirtland “Temperance Society succeeded [on February 1, 1833] in eliminating a distillery in Kirtland [and] the distillery in Mentor, near Kirtland, was also closed at the same time.”⁷ Not everyone in Kirtland was happy with the closing of the distillery, and two abortive attempts were made to start up new ones.⁸ Such was the scene in Kirtland before and after the Prophet arrived—a temperance society on the one side militating against alcohol, and some citizens agitating for a new distillery on the other.

In addition, a number of people who converted to Mormonism in the Kirtland area, including Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, had previously been associated with the reformed Baptist community (later called Disciples of Christ) led by Alexander Campbell, and it was Campbell who was one of the chief proponents in the Ohio area. Before any of those associated with Alexander Campbell joined with the Latter-day Saints, he published under his own editorship and guidance the *Millennial Harbinger*. As early as June 1830, the following article appeared in Campbell’s publication:

THE FOUR GREAT SOURCES OF HEALTH.

One of the most pleasing of our duties is, to be able to direct into our own channel, and thereby circulate widely through the land, what we know to be wise counsel;

as is our good fortune to do upon the present occasion, by laying before our readers the following chapter from a valuable work, entitled, "Simplicity of Health."

"The poor injure themselves materially by intoxication, and that with drink of an inferior and hurtful quality. It is certain that every fit of drunkenness has its share in the shortening of life; for, however we may find men to whom it appears to do no injury, nothing is more reasonable than to conclude, that they would live longer by avoiding inebriation. Amongst the better classes, this vice has happily, for many years past, been gradually declining; and it is now a great reproach to gentlemen to be seen drunk. But they use rich wines, liqueurs, and spirits, of which, at their numerous meals, without getting tipsy or drunk, they take too much altogether." [End of the quote; the editorial continues:]

We are glad to see intemperance in drinking on the wane. 'Tis a lame charity which does its work by halves. We want two or three combinations more to double our domestic comforts, and to quadruple our social enjoyments. . . . A combination against Rum, Brandy, Whiskey & Co. we already have.⁹

This publication, coming nearly three years before the revelation of the Word of Wisdom, certainly would have influenced many reformed Baptists in the Kirtland area who later converted to Mormonism. Notice that the "wise counsel" included a call to "double" their efforts to combat items which they considered injurious to good health. The passage continues by placing more emphasis on distilled liquors and less on fermented drinks, but without a call for total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. The *Millennial Harbinger's* commentary on the quote, most likely written by Alexander Campbell, also falls just short of clearly calling for total abstinence. In fact, Campbell was decidedly against "the efforts now being made by some of the friends of Temperance to abolish the use of wine at the Lord's Supper" and substitute instead "milk or water for wine."¹⁰

The double ambiguity between fermented and distilled drinks, and moderation and total abstinence evident in the *Millennial Harbinger*, was also reflected in some popular perceptions of the Word of Wisdom among some early Latter-day Saints. That is, did wine and beer fall into the same category as whiskey and rum? And were the Saints obliged to abstain or just to be moderate? These popular sentiments and ambiguities notwithstanding, whether from members or nonmembers, the official pronouncements of the Church between 1833 and 1839 do not reflect these perceptions. The official Church position, as published in the Church's *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, was abstinence, except in the sacraments, including marriage, and it made no distinction between distilled and fermented drinks.¹¹ Unofficially, an exception to abstinence was made for wine in the sacrament and the medicinal use of alcohol, the latter also reflecting many contemporary opinions in those days that moderate medicinal use of alcohol contributed to good health.¹²

In short, there can be no question that before their encounter with Mormonism, many in the Kirtland area had been exposed to the idea that alco-

hol was to be avoided. Whether aware of it or not, these individuals adopted the ambiguities expressed in the publications of Alexander Campbell. On the other hand, the official Church position was clear and unambiguous—except in the sacraments, alcohol was not acceptable, though enforcement was tempered by tolerance and patience.

Tobacco

From the time that tobacco was first introduced to Europeans, there were voices that spoke for and against its use. Grace G. Stewart has written: “Tobacco was at the height of its fame as a sanatory herb when the seventeenth century dawned. . . . Among those writing against the medicinal and social uses of tobacco was King James I of England, of King James Bible fame. His book, *A Counterblaste to tobacco*, published in 1604 was responsible for a large part of the controversy which followed. The king denied that tobacco had any medical value.”¹³ By the time Joseph Smith came on the scene, the defenders of the use of tobacco were losing ground to the detractors, and it is evident that such voices also reached Kirtland. In the same issue of the *Millennial Harbinger* that called for abstinence from alcohol, there is a call for a “combination against Tobacco in the three forms of chewing, smoking, and snuffing,” like the “combination against Rum, Brandy, Whiskey & Co.” The clear intent of this “call” to the readers of Campbell’s publication was to do away with the use of tobacco altogether. After this call for action against it, there follows a long invective against its use, including statements that tobacco is

one of the most disgusting productions of the vegetable kingdom. . . . Tobacco is, in fact, an absolute poison. . . . It must be evident to every one, that the constant use of an article possessing such deleterious properties, cannot fail, at length, to influence the health of the system. . . . The almost constant thirst occasioned by smoking and chewing has, in numerous instances, it is to be feared, led to the intemperate use of ardent spirits.¹⁴

Although the quote is not from Alexander Campbell himself, the *Millennial Harbinger*’s position against tobacco is clarion clear—tobacco was not to be used at all, and efforts should be made to organize something like a temperance society to combat tobacco use. Here again, the emphasis is on the unhealthy effects of tobacco.

These reformed Baptist sentiments toward tobacco can be found among the Latter-day Saints. The official position of the Church after the reception of the Word of Wisdom was total abstinence from tobacco, and the popular view among the Latter-day Saints seems also to have reflected the same position.

The unofficial Latter-day Saint exception to temperance in the use of alcohol for medicinal purposes was never invoked for tobacco during Joseph Smith's lifetime by individual members as far as I could determine from the published materials.¹⁵ The minutes of the Salt Lake School of the Prophets states that "when the Word of Wisdom was first presented by the Prophet Joseph (as he came out of the translating room) and was read to the School [of the Prophets in Kirtland], there were twenty out of the twenty-one who used tobacco and they all immediately threw their tobacco and pi[p]es into the fire."¹⁶ Nevertheless, time was allowed for those who smoked or chewed to overcome their habit. Some substituted tobacco with less addictive substances: "Those who gave up using tobacco eased off on licorice root."¹⁷ In addition, patience and tolerance were the rule of the day for those who otherwise made a good-faith effort.

To sum up the case for tobacco—the position of the Church on abstinence from tobacco was for all intents and purposes identical to the stand taken by those associated with Alexander Campbell.

Tea and Coffee

Tea and coffee, like some alcoholic drinks, evoked mixed reactions among Americans in Joseph Smith's day. Perhaps because Alexander Campbell liked his tea, he was not as vociferous in his writing against the herb in his editorials in the *Millennial Harbinger*.¹⁸ Nevertheless, other voices cried out against the use of both tea and coffee. Perhaps the most shrill of these voices was Samuel Thomson, father of Thomsonian medicine, which rejected the procedures of the early nineteenth century medical establishment in favor of botanical ingestion.¹⁹ Joseph Smith would have heard about this new style of medicine while growing up in Palmyra because "nowhere was Thomsonianism so successful in its early days as [in the burned-over district] in western New York."²⁰

If the Prophet had somehow escaped exposure to Thomsonian medicine in New York, he certainly would have gained first-hand knowledge of Thomsonian practices and practitioners when he moved to Ohio. "By the mid-thirties, Thomson claimed, half of the population of Ohio adhered to his practice, and orthodox physicians conceded that at least a third did."²¹ Among those who had taken up the Thomsonian brand of medicine was Frederick G. Williams, who had been a member of one of Sidney Rigdon's reformed Baptist congregations and had practiced Thomsonian medicine in Kirtland before he joined the Church in 1830.²² By March 1832, Frederick G. Williams had been called as a counselor to Joseph Smith and subsequently served as a counselor in the First Presidency from 1833–1837. From the time he joined the Church until

his passing in 1842, he practiced botanic medicine as an honored physician to many of the Saints, including the Prophet.

How did Thomsonian medicine, the most widespread of the “botanic” medical sects, match up with the Word of Wisdom? In general, Thomsonian medical practice was a rebellion against the standard practice of blood-letting and against administering large doses of calomel (mercurous chloride) and/or laudanum (a tincture of opium) and/or opium. Practitioners of Thomsonian medicine believed in using natural herbal remedies, along with “diet and regimen,” and, beginning around 1825, “openly proclaimed against the use of alcohol, tobacco, tea, coffee, etc.”²³

Thomsonians were not alone in decrying the use of tea and coffee. The *Journal of Health*, often quoted by Alexander Campbell, published an article in 1830 singling out “tea, coffee, sugar, and tobacco” as causing health problems in European countries.²⁴ In addition, Sylvester Graham, the inveterate health crusader for vegetarianism and whole grains and originator of “Graham crackers,” totally proscribed “tea, coffee, alcohol, spices, and other stimulants or narcotics,” believing that “tea and coffee, like alcohol and tobacco, stunted growth and poisoned the system.”²⁵ In the “Graham” boarding houses that sprang up in certain cities, “Pure soft water was ‘earnestly recommended as the exclusive drink of a Graham Boarding House,’ and those caught drinking alcoholic beverages, tea, coffee, or hot chocolate were thrown out.”²⁶ Even the “young Millerite preacher, James White, who later married Ellen G. White, one of the principals of Seventh-day Adventism, never touched alcohol, tobacco, tea, or coffee.”²⁷

Not every medical practitioner in the milieu of Joseph Smith eschewed the taking of tea and coffee. An 1850 book on health, speaking almost wistfully, declared that “[Chocolate] is justly regarded as more nutritious, and less stimulating, than tea or coffee. . . . These three articles [drinks], above all others, have become general among mankind, as nutritious and pleasant table beverages.”²⁸ An 1854 publication found nothing wrong with tea and coffee, except that they interfered with an accurate diagnosis of stomach ailments, or at least that is what the following quote seems to be saying: “Tea and coffee so universally drunk by our people, neither excite inflammation nor contribute directly to the production of a phlogistic diathesis. They disorder the innervation, however, and often establish in the stomach a morbid sensibility, and thus indirectly favor the production of subacute gastritis, rendering the differential diagnosis of the chronic affections of that organ somewhat difficult.”²⁹ So much for the effects of tea and coffee! However, despite the positive opinions about tea and coffee during the early to mid-1800s, “certain special characteristics of the health reform movement [included] widespread . . . opposition to tea and coffee as well as alcohol and tobacco.”³⁰

Meat Sparingly

As with alcohol, tobacco, tea, and coffee, there was no single universal opinion among health practitioners in Joseph Smith's day on whether or not to eat meat, and if so, how much meat was appropriate. On the one extreme were people like Sylvester Graham, who preached a fairly strict vegetarianism. In striking contrast to Graham's ideas, and no doubt the target of his zealous preaching, Americans typically ate a lot of meat in those days. The contemporary practice is described well in a book published in 1850 concerning the diseases of "the interior valley" (the Ohio and eastern half of the Mississippi River valleys) of the United States: "With a limited number of exceptions, meat is on the table



Reverend Sylvester Graham (1794–1851), best known today for his creation of Graham crackers, was a leading spokesman and activist for dietary health reform during the 1830s. He advocated use of whole wheat for bread, fresh fruits and vegetables, and pure drinking water.

three times a day, and as often eaten by the great majority. Even children, in most families, are allowed to eat it at every meal. . . . A liberal consumption is not confined to cool weather and healthy seasons of the year, but prevails in summer and autumn, not less than at times to which it would seem to be better adapted."³¹ More humorous but not less descriptive is the advice of "an old cook book [that] solemnly warned young husbands not to expect more than *three* sorts of meat, in case they brought the boys home to dinner unannounced." If the meal were special, say a party or banquet, "it was not unusual to serve as many as thirty or more kinds of meat and fish at one occasion."³²

In the mean between the vegetarian and the carnivore, the country did not lack opinions that were often expressed in language and ideas similar to those of the Word of Wisdom. For example, it was also well recognized that meat

was especially appropriate for “times of cold.” The *Millennial Harbinger* for 1831 quoted an advance copy of *Porter’s Health Almanac* (Philadelphia, 1832): “In summer the food should consist principally of vegetables; in winter a larger amount of animal matter may be taken, especially by the laborer.”³³ An 1836 book published in New York suggested that “in winter, in our own climate, an animal diet is best, while vegetables are more conducive to health in the summer season.”³⁴ A distinction was even drawn between the Northern and Southern states. For the latter, “a vegetable diet is doubtless the best, and should the animal food, appropriate to the colder climates, be adopted by [the Southern states], it is probable the number of their phlegmasiæ would increase.”³⁵

The excesses of meat consumption prevalent in America, and no doubt in England, also came in for criticism. One of the standard medical texts for family use of the late eighteenth and on into the mid-nineteenth century suggested that “animal food was surely designed for man, and, with a proper mixture of vegetables, it will be found the most wholesome; but to gorge beef, mutton, pork, fish, and fowl, twice or thrice a day is certainly too much. All who value health ought to be contented with making one meal of flesh-meat in twenty-four hours, and this ought to consist of one kind only.”³⁶

The Word of Wisdom commandment “to [use meat] sparingly,” and that it “should not be used, only in times of winter, or of cold, or famine” (D&C 89:12–13), would not have seemed strange or unfamiliar to the Latter-day Saints in Ohio and Missouri. As has been proclaimed, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically, “The congruence of Mormon and contemporary orthodox views on meat, fruit and vegetables is especially striking.”³⁷

Herbs and Fruit in Their Season

In reality, the congruence of Mormon and orthodox views on fruits and vegetables is not “especially striking.” The Word of Wisdom commends “herbs and fruits in their season.” At the very least this means that herbs (specifically vegetables) and fruits should be eaten. In partial contrast to the Word of Wisdom’s endorsement of fruit, an 1828 publication expressed perhaps a common view: “[Fruits] are generally regarded as articles rather of luxury than of food. . . . But when taken under other circumstances, they contribute to health, and appear to be providentially sent at a season when the body requires that cooling and antiseptic aliment which they are so well calculated to afford.”³⁸ In other words, fruit was not seen as a regular and appropriate part of the American diet. In fact, there must have been some question about the appropriateness of eating some fruit at all, or the *Journal of Health* would not

have made the following comment: “If it be ripe fruit . . . we can see no objection to moderate eating of it.”³⁹

As for vegetables, the question in Joseph Smith’s day was not whether or not to eat vegetables; rather the question most often raised was what time of the year to eat vegetables and the proper ratio of vegetables to meat. One view suggested that “vegetables are more conducive to health in the summer season.”⁴⁰ The *Millennial Harbinger* intoned in 1830 that “man has little inclination to live solely on animal food—it is indeed questionable whether he could enjoy perfect health on a diet purely of flesh. It is well known, however, that vegetable substances, particularly the farinaceous [meaning all flours], are fully sufficient of themselves for maintaining a healthy existence.”⁴¹ Though herbs and fruits in their season would have been a familiar concept to the Latter-day Saints, the emphasis in the Word of Wisdom, as I will point out below, is different than in the contemporary literature.

Grains

The Word of Wisdom extols “all grain [as] good for the food of man,” with wheat being singled out as especially appropriate for humans (D&C 89:16–17). Contemporary literature also recommended grains. The great proponent of a vegetarian diet in Joseph Smith’s day, Sylvester Graham, maintained that “properly the diet should consist of [whole] wheat bread and other grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts, and perhaps on occasion custard made with eggs.”⁴² The superiority of some grains over other grains for humans was also recognized by some. Wheat flour is specifically singled out as promoting a healthy existence. “It is to the quantity of [gluten] that wheat flour possesses so decided a superiority over that of barley, rye, or oats, for from these grains far less gluten can be extracted. It furnishes by far the best ingredient for making that important article of diet, Bread.”⁴³ Even before the beginning of the nineteenth century, wheat was deemed superior to most other grains: “The best bread is that which is neither too coarse nor too fine; well fermented, and made of wheat flour, or rather of wheat and rye mixed together.”⁴⁴ “Oats for horses” was also fairly common, the idea probably having been imported from England. In Samuel Johnson’s 1755 dictionary, he wryly defined “oats” as “a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.”⁴⁵

Ideas that did not Make it into the Word of Wisdom

If this excursive into the positive analogs were to end here, as other treatments have done, it would leave a distorted view of the situation. A less dis-

torted and more complete view must include a representative sample of the contemporaneous material that does not find an analog in the Word of Wisdom. While some of these negative analogs have unavoidably been included in this narrative along with the positive ones, during the Prophet's lifetime there were many more health ideas that were advocated than the few already mentioned. It will become obvious as this negative material is presented that contemporary literature and sermons did not substantially influence either the Prophet's formulation of the Word of Wisdom or the few clarifying comments he was reported as having said. Indeed, if he had, as some have suggested, simply distilled "the prevailing thought of frontier America"⁴⁶ of the early nineteenth century, at least some of the ideas below would have found a place in the Word of Wisdom, yet none of them did.

What about those ideas that did not find their way into the Word of Wisdom? Perhaps the place to begin would be with *hot drinks*. Within a few months following the reception of the Word of Wisdom, according to a late remembrance, hot drinks were defined by the Prophet as coffee and tea.⁴⁷ Subsequent statements by Church leaders and official Church publications have not modified that interpretation. Noticeably absent from this definition are other liquids that were traditionally consumed hot or at least warm, such as chocolate, herbal teas, soup, and milk. Indeed, the health literature of the Prophet's day was divided over whether any hot liquids, not just tea and coffee, were beneficial or harmful.

Chocolate was considered by some to be healthy and good, while others condemned it as unhealthy. Witness the following statement from an 1828 book of proper diet: "As a common beverage, chocolate is highly objectionable: it contains an oil which is difficult of assimilation; it therefore oppresses the stomach."⁴⁸ Chocolate was also condemned by some of those who followed Sylvester Graham. For example, if a guest at one of the Graham boarding houses drank hot chocolate, that guest would be required to find another place to lodge.⁴⁹ Chocolate, it was thought, could be made less harmful if it were mixed with other, more bland, ingredients: "The use of chocolate, butter, cream, sugar, and rich sauces, without a due admixture of bread, potatoes, and other less nutritive aliments, is invariably attended with disordered digestion."⁵⁰

In none of the literature I reviewed did anyone state that chocolate, and for that matter tea and coffee, were unhealthy because of caffeine; and the lack of caffeine condemnation was not because they were necessarily ignorant of the presence of the substance in tea, coffee, and possibly in much smaller amounts in chocolate.⁵¹ Witness the following favorable evaluation of chocolate as a nutritious and healthy drink from an 1850 publication: "[Chocolate] is justly regarded as more nutritious, and less stimulating, than tea or cof-

fee. The discovery in kernels of the cocoa of a peculiar principle, *theobromin* [theobromine], nearly identical in composition with [caffeine], is certainly a curious fact, and seems to suggest a reason why these three articles, above all others, have become general among mankind, as nutritious and pleasant table beverages.”⁵² It would seem that the presence of caffeine or theobromine did not disturb some experts. The same Philadelphia health journal from which the *Millennial Harbinger* quoted freely on the ill effects of tobacco and alcohol also wrote of the positive, salubrious effects of cocoa: “The good health enjoyed by the crew [of a ship on the West India run was due in part to] giving each man a proportion of his allowance of cocoa *before* he left the ship in the morning.”⁵³

In place of hot drinks, much health literature of the day extolled water as “unquestionably the natural beverage of man.”⁵⁴ The reasoning behind “pure water” as “the only proper drink” was that “if nature requires water only to sustain animal life in quadrupeds, it alone is necessary for man in health.”⁵⁵ That is, if water is good for cows and pigs, it must be good for humans. The 1830 *Journal of Health* attempted to make that point clear: “In recommending the use of water, as a means of purifying the blood and expelling noxious humours—giving serenity to the mind, and healthful feelings to the body, nature and science are now well agreed. . . . The drinking [of] cold water cures the following diseases: the hiccup, fetor of the mouth and of the whole body; it resists putrefaction, and cools burning heats and thirst; and after dinner it helps digestion. . . . Would the strong man preserve his strength, and the fair woman her beauty, water will be their beverage, their cordial, their restorative.”⁵⁶

Notice that the water should be cold, meaning in those days *not* ice cold, but cool and fresh. It was generally agreed that extremely cold water, such as the ice water that we drink today, was not healthy. On the other hand, plain, hot water was also considered unhealthy by some pundits of the day: “Those who are fond of [tea and coffee] err particularly in two respects—first in taking them *too warm*; and secondly, in taking them in a undue proportion to their food. In respect to *hot tea*, I believe it is positively less injurious than simple *hot water*; the tea [going] far to counteract the relaxing, debilitating effects of the hot water.”⁵⁷ It would seem that the temperature of the beverage was a determining factor in deciding whether it was beneficial or not. Yet Joseph Smith never defined hot drinks as a liquid with an elevated temperature.

Joseph Smith’s reported definition of hot drinks as only tea and coffee, and the glaring omission of other liquids consumed hot in those days, namely, chocolate, herbal teas, soups, and milk, puts a narrower definition on hot drinks than did most health codes of his day. Nevertheless, some of the contemporary ideas about drinking cold water as opposed to tea and coffee must have been current among the Latter-day Saints, as W. W. Phelps seems to

betray. In a letter written by Phelps from Kirtland to his wife in Missouri in 1835, he declared: “You are not aware how much sameness there is among the Saints in Kirtland. They keep the Word of Wisdom in Kirtland; they drink cold water and don’t even mention tea and coffee.”⁵⁸ And yet, with all the talk in the contemporary health literature of drinking only water, and with the Saints in Kirtland drinking cold water, there is no mention in the Word of Wisdom about drinking water, hot or cold. If the Prophet had been influenced by contemporary literature, one would expect *water* to appear in some form (hot or cold) in the Word of Wisdom.

Standard medical procedure for Joseph Smith’s day—sometimes referred to as “heroic medicine”—often resorted to administering calomel, giving laudanum and opium, along with a host of less harmful pharmaceuticals, and even blood-letting. Samuel Thomson, the father of the alternative medical treatment mentioned previously, particularly disliked calomel and the practice of blood-letting and campaigned vigorously against their use.⁵⁹ The more moderate *Journal of Health* took up the evils of opium and laudanum.⁶⁰ Today, with hindsight, it is easy to see that mercury compounds, opium derivatives, and blood-letting were not only harmful, but decidedly dangerous and in many cases more deadly than the malady they were used to treat. Therefore, it is all the more remarkable that no mention is made of these substances (or practices) in the Word of Wisdom. And the often raucously negative attitudes of the Thomsonians and other rebels against “heroic medicine” in the 1820s and 30s finds no place therein. This is even more surprising because Joseph Smith lost his beloved older brother Alvin to an overdose of calomel.⁶¹

“Wheat for man,” as discussed above, was fairly common in Joseph Smith’s day. However, most of the literature never mentions wheat in particular. What the literature does mention as particularly healthy is bread, especially whole wheat bread (à la Sylvester Graham). The Word of Wisdom is silent on the subject of bread. Where the revelation does speak out, it is generic wheat that is mentioned. Very little is said about generic wheat in the health literature, except as an ingredient in bread.

As noted, fruits and vegetables are mentioned fairly often in the literature, but often only with specific instruction. For example, they were not to be eaten with the skins on.⁶² Neither were “illy cooked vegetables,” meaning undercooked, to be eaten at all.⁶³ One vegetable in particular came in for undeservedly harsh treatment by one pundit: “To the nourishment of the body [the cucumber] is totally unadapted. . . . It is an article of diet which it would be well entirely to relinquish, whether in its simple state, or in the various modes of preparation by which its injurious effects have been attempted to be counteracted.”⁶⁴ Vinegar, on the other hand, was praised because it will “prevent vegetable matter in its raw state from inducing flatulence.”⁶⁵

American literature of the day contained considerable and varied advice about eating in general and how to prepare food. Spicy foods were condemned almost uniformly, along with fancy sauces. “The refinements of cookery, high seasoning, and every poignant sauce, render food unwholesome, which would be perfectly innocent and nutritious.”⁶⁶ Eating too much, and, as mentioned above, eating a lot of meat, also came in for comment. “Tis most salutary to eat of *one* dish only, and letting that, too, be a plain one; to rise up from table before the appetite has been sated—to drink but little wine—not to eat *flesh* suppers, and to forbear from strong soups and high seasonings.”⁶⁷ The Word of Wisdom does not comment generally on how to prepare, cook or season food, let alone single out any particular vegetable as fit or unfit for consumption.

Bodily cleanliness came in for considerable comment, as it well should have. “America in the early nineteenth century was a sick and dirty nation. Public sanitation was grossly inadequate, and personal hygiene, virtually nonexistent. The great majority of Americans seldom, if ever, bathed.”⁶⁸ The standard medical establishment and health reformers alike campaigned to increase personal hygiene. An 1850 establishment publication bemoaned the fact that Americans in general did not bathe often: “Of the efficacy of daily bathing, in the preservation of sound health and a hardy constitution, there can be no doubt; and it is much to be regretted, that the practice cannot be made more general.”⁶⁹ One can only imagine what conditions would have been like twenty years earlier when the Word of Wisdom was given.

Some of the health reformers who were active in the 1830s did mention the necessity of personal cleanliness. Sylvester Graham suggested that “the whole body should be given a sponge bath daily, just after rising, and rubbed briskly with a coarse towel or flesh brush, as stiff as the body could bear.”⁷⁰ Attempts at personal hygiene reform extended also to children. A standard reference book of the time recommended that “every child, when in health, should at least have its extremities daily washed in cold water. . . . In winter this may suffice; but in warm season, if a child be relaxed, or seem to have a tendency to the rickets or scrofula, its body ought to be daily immersed in cold water.”⁷¹ From today’s viewpoint, it would seem that if the child were not already sick, then attempting to cure the child with a cold water bath would exacerbate whatever was bothering the afflicted child. Yet with all this talk in the air in Joseph Smith’s day about the necessity of bathing and personal hygiene in promoting health, no mention is made of it in the Word of Wisdom.

Clothing as an item that effected health also came in for critique. Sylvester Graham held an extreme view, stating that “natural man in his natural climate needed no clothing, so that was the normal state for physiological and moral well-being. In colder climates where clothing was a necessary evil, it

should offer as little restriction as possible. . . . Corsets, stays, garters, and the like should be abjured.”⁷² It is likely that puritanical Americans, which probably included most Latter-day Saints, might have disagreed that “natural man . . . needed no clothing.” Nevertheless, Graham’s point about the unhealthy effects of restricting the body came in for widespread but not universal approval. No doubt many Americans, after looking around at the fashionably dressed women in those days, wondered along the following lines of an 1830 publication: “We often meet ladies dressed so cruelly [in corsets], that we wonder where their lungs and livers are gone to.”⁷³ But not all commentaries condemned corsets outright. “The truth is, that the inferior muscularity of the trunk of the body in females, and the greater amount of cellular, adipose, and glandular matter covering the muscles, than in males, seems to suggest the corset as a natural and necessary support. . . . The true objections to the corset do not involve its use, but its abuse.”⁷⁴ The “inferior muscularity” of women, as explained by male authors, may have excused some women for abusing themselves with a corset, but the same excuse could not be said of women’s shoes, also pointed out by male writers. “Shoes of too restricted dimensions distort and blister the feet, and produce, invariably, those small but painful excrescences denominated corns. Nine women in ten, upon the reasonable calculation, before the age of twenty-four, have, to a certain extent, deformed and suffering feet from this cause alone.”⁷⁵ Not much has changed for men or women since this statement was made over 175 years ago.

Lest anyone think that nineteenth century health promoters were all male chauvinists, it should be noted that men’s styles were also the subject of some criticism. “Tight bandages about the neck, as stocks, [neckties], necklaces, &c. are extremely dangerous. They obstruct the blood in its course from the brain, by which means headaches, vertigoes, apoplexies, and other fatal diseases are often occasioned.”⁷⁶ This would suggest that if men today have not been feeling well, perhaps they need to loosen their tie to avoid a worse case of apoplexy. As one contemporary of Joseph Smith suggested, “[The necktie] should be loosened, also, when we are engaged in reading, writing, or profound study; and invariably should it be removed [please note this] . . . on retiring to sleep.”⁷⁷

Advice on clothing for good health even extended to underwear. “No young person ought to wear flannel, unless the rheumatism or some other disease renders it necessary.”⁷⁸ Today, we all should be completely free from disease, at least on this score. With all the talk in American and British literature about promoting health through appropriate clothing, it is interesting that the Word of Wisdom makes no mention of this important and no doubt accurate assessment of fashionable clothing in the world in which the Prophet lived.

Exercise in moderation, then as now, was extolled, and the *Journal of Health* recommended “frequent opportunities to set forth the necessity of daily exercise for the preservation of health.”⁷⁹ And the best form of exercise was also the simplest: “Walking is undoubtedly one of the most natural, gentle and beneficial of the active species of exercise.”⁸⁰ With a regular, daily walking routine came the implied promise of longevity: “Most of those who have attained to an advanced age were celebrated as great walkers.”⁸¹ Given that most people walked a great deal in those days, it might be assumed that most people could also have expected a long life, if they survived childhood. And yet, no mention is made in the Word of Wisdom either for or against exercise of any kind.

Intimacy did not escape comment in the contemporary health literature. Sylvester Graham inveighed against marital excess, which he “defined for most people as intercourse more than once a month. In his mind, diet and sex were intimately related since stimulating foods inevitably aroused the sexual passions. Thus one of the best means of controlling these unwholesome urges [for intimacy] was to adopt a meatless diet and forsake condiments, spices, alcohol, tea, and coffee.”⁸² Indeed, for Graham sex was one of “the areas that most frequently debilitated the system of organic life.”⁸³ Debilitating or not, intimacy found no place in the Word of Wisdom.

Advocates of higher education will be particularly interested in some of the views about thinking that were common in Joseph Smith’s day. For instance, in some circles it was believed that “intense thinking is so destructive to health, that few instances can be produced of studious persons who are strong and healthy, or live to an extreme old age. . . . Hence it would appear, that even a degree of thoughtlessness is necessary to health.”⁸⁴ And the more a person was engaged in thinking, the more destructive it was thought to be. “He who thinks the most constantly and the most intently, no matter whether the subject be real or imaginary, is the most apt to suffer derangement of health, and particularly from disordered digestion.”⁸⁵ The reason that an “excess of mental labor is a predisposing if not a producing cause of inflammatory disease” stems from the idea in those days that “from over action of the mind, the cerebral substance is unfavorably affected; and an increased quantity of blood comes to occupy its vessels, which do not always send it forward within the proper time.”⁸⁶ Even the *Millennial Harbinger* thought it appropriate to quote from a contemporary health book on the perils of too much mental activity: “Long continued mental application, whether in study or the cares of business, wears out the system, and exhausts the powers of life even more rapidly than protracted manual labor.”⁸⁷ As dangerous as thinking might have been in Joseph Smith’s day, the Prophet obviously took an opposite view. In fact, one of the rewards for observance of the Word of Wisdom is that the individual

“shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures” (D&C 89:19).

Conclusion

The Word of Wisdom revealed to Joseph Smith was not simply a distillation of contemporary early nineteenth century health concerns. True, the items mentioned in the revelation, particularly the prohibitions that we associate today with maintaining good health, were mentioned in contemporary health literature of the day, including sources that were very close in time and space to Kirtland, and the Prophet could have been influenced by these ideas. However, the fact that the Word of Wisdom does not contain any of the other prevalent ideas that Joseph Smith would also have been equally exposed to, both good and bad, militates against a simplistic appropriation on his part.

Clearly, the Word of Wisdom contains none of the fallacious or strange ideas that were rampant in the 1830s. Neither does it include all of the reliable, consequential, and lasting principles espoused in Joseph Smith’s milieu. Even the laudable opinions of his day about personal hygiene, proper clothing, and exercise fail to appear in the Word of Wisdom. But it does contain appropriate, enduring, and correct precepts that have withstood the test of time. Rather than being a compendium of nineteenth century health ideas, the Word of Wisdom is different and unique—both in the day it was given by revelation, and today when a different set of health concerns and initiatives dominates our world. Thus, the Word of Wisdom is yet another witness to the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith.

Notes

1. See Lester E. Bush, Jr., “The Word of Wisdom in Early Nineteenth-Century Perspective,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1981): 58.

2. Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 258.

3. Leonard J. Arrington, “An Economic Interpretation of the ‘Word of Wisdom,’” *Brigham Young University Studies* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1959): 39. See also Bush, “The Word of Wisdom in Early Nineteenth-Century Perspective.” After reading Lester Bush’s article for the first time many years ago, I came to what I thought was the opposite conclusion than he did, namely; that the Word of Wisdom was more singular than we had thought. This article attempts to demonstrate that Bush’s conclusion that “Mormons must grant that the Word of Wisdom is not quite as unique a document as we might hope” is inaccurate. Bush, “The Word of Wisdom in Early Nineteenth-Century Thought,” 58. Kenneth J. Brown also came to a different conclusion than Bush, namely: “Joseph Smith could hardly have derived the truths of the Word of Wisdom from what knowledge was available to the people of the time.” Kenneth J. Brown, “Early Nineteenth Century Health Views and the Word of Wis-

dom (Section 89),” in *Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, January 27, 1979: Doctrine and Covenants* (Provo, UT: Religious Instruction, Brigham Young University, 1979), 271. Though I agree with the general sentiment of Brown’s conclusion, there is good evidence that he was not accurate regarding what knowledge was available to the people of the time. Others prior to Bush have also made the point that “a survey of the situation existing in Kirtland when the revelation came forth is a sufficient explanation for it,” Dean D. McBrien, “The Influence of the Frontier on Joseph Smith” (PhD dissertation, George Washington University, 1929), 146. Brown may have come to his conclusion in part because, other than the Word of Wisdom itself, he quotes no primary sources that predate 1843, or that were close to the people, times, and places that could have influenced Joseph Smith.

4. Joseph L. Lyon and Steven Nelson have written that “although perceptive observers were to comment on the relationship of disease to various occupations or diets regularly from the time of the Greek physicians onward, rigorous ‘scientific’ verification of such observations is a recent development.” Joseph L. Lyon and Steven Nelson, “Mormon Health,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 84.

5. D. Griffith Jr., *Two Years’ Residence in the New Settlements of Ohio* (London: Westley & Davis, 1835), 113. “Temperance” is not to be confused with “teetotaling,” although the two words are used almost interchangeably. As the name suggests, “temperance” does not denote total abstinence, whereas “teetotaling” does. Therefore, while 1826 marks the year when the first “teetotaling” society was created, “temperance” societies had sprung up nearly two decades earlier. “The first temperance organizations were not formed until early in the nineteenth century. . . . These earliest societies generally asked their members to pledge that they would not drink excessively, especially during social gatherings. One of the most rigorous of these pledges was drawn up by a temperance group founded in upstate New York in 1808, but it did not advocate total abstinence.” Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform Contributions* (Westport CN: Greenwood Press, 1980), 70.

6. Christopher G. Crary, *Pioneer and Personal Reminiscences* (Marshalltown, IA: Marshalltown Printing, 1893), 25.

7. Arrington, “An Economic Interpretation of the ‘Word of Wisdom,’” 40, citing McBrien.

8. Crary, *Pioneer and Personal Reminiscences*, 38.

9. *Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 6 (June 1830): 279–81. In this and all subsequent quotes, an attempt has been made to retain original spelling and wording.

10. *Millennial Harbinger* 6, no. 8 (August 1835): 389, 392.

11. See Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev. 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 2:34–35; *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 2 (November 1836): 412; and 3, no. 8 (May 1837): 510–11. When the word liquor is used in early Church literature, it should not be automatically assumed that it means only a distilled drink, as is the common usage today. See Sidney Rigdon’s call for a vote in Kirtland on December 4, 1836 “to discountenance the use intirely of all liquors from the Church in Sickness & in health except wine at the Sacraments & for external Washing. The vote was Carried unanimously” Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898, Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983–1984), 110–11. In this quote, “liquors” clearly refers to both distilled (for washing) and fermented (wine for the sacrament) liquids. The *Journal of Health* also lumps all alcoholic beverages together as “liquors,” as is evident in the following quote: “potations of vinous, malt, or distilled liquors.” *Journal of Health* 1, no. 1 (1830): 13.

12. Nearly all liquid medicines in those days contained large amounts of alcohol. In

fact, alcohol by itself was considered by some to be a powerful medication. For example: "Alcohol richly merits a place on the shelf of the apothecary, by the side of our most potent remedies. . . . I speak now of ardent spirit, alcohol, under the varied forms of distilled liquors and wines." Caleb Ticknor, *The Philosophy of Living: Or, The Way to Enjoy Life and Its Comforts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), 89.

13. Grace G. Stewart, "A History of the Medicinal Use of Tobacco 1492–1860," *Medical History* 11 (1967): 239.

14. For the whole discussion see *Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 6 (June 1830): 279–283. Much of what the *Millennial Harbinger* published on this issue was taken from the *Journal of Health*, published in Philadelphia between 1829 and 1832, along with a recommendation that the readers of the *Millennial Harbinger* subscribe to the *Journal of Health*.

15. No doubt some individuals excused their continued use of tobacco by appealing to tobacco's medicinal qualities, but I could find no record of such excuses during Joseph Smith's lifetime.

16. S[alt] L[ake] School of the Prophets Minute Book, October 3, 1883, 56, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

17. S[alt] L[ake] School of the Prophets Minute Book, October 11, 1883, 68.

18. For Campbell's "fondness for tea," see Selina Huntington Campbell, *Home Life and Reminiscences of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis: John Burns, 1882), 339. While Campbell quoted extensively from the *Journal of Health* on alcohol and tobacco in the *Millennial Harbinger*, he did not quote the journal's stand that to relieve headache, sleeplessness, nervousness, and sadness, tea and coffee should be given up. See *Journal of Health* 1, no. 2 (1830): 18.

19. Alex Berman, "The Thomsonian Movement and Its Relation to American Pharmacy and Medicine," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 25, no. 5 (September–October 1951): 406.

20. Joseph F. Kett, *The Formation of the American Medical Profession: The Role of Institutions, 1780–1860* (Westport CN: Greenwood Press, 1968). 129.

21. Kett, *The Formation of the American Medical Profession*, 106.

22. See Robert T. Divett, "Medicine and the Mormons," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 19; and Frederick G. Williams, "Frederick Granger Williams of the First Presidency of the Church," *BYU Studies* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1972): 245.

23. Kett, *The Formation of the American Medical Profession*, 125–26. Kett makes this conclusion after citing the Cincinnati journal, *Botanico-Medical Recorder* 13 (February 1, 1845): 99; 13 (January 4, 1845): 56; and 12 (September 21, 1844): 356–57.

24. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 2 (1830): 27.

25. John B. Blake, "Health Reform," in Edwin S. Gausted, ed., *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper & Row: 1974), 39; and Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 53.

26. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, 55.

27. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, 38.

28. Daniel Drake, *A Systematic Treatise, Historical, Etiological, and Practical on the Principal Diseases of the Interior Valley of North America* (Cincinnati: W. B. Smith & Co., 1850), 661.

29. Drake, *A Systematic Treatise*, 660.

30. Blake, "Health Reform," 46–47.

31. Drake, *A Systematic Treatise*, 655.

32. Richard Harrison Shryock, *Medicine in America: Historical Essays* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 113, italics in the original.

33. *Millennial Harbinger* 2, no. 12 (December 1831): 561.
34. Ticknor, *The Philosophy of Living*, 37.
35. Drake, *A Systematic Treatise*, 658.
36. William Buchan, *Buchan's Domestic Medicine: or the Family Physician*, 10th American edition (Hartford, CT: Silas Andrus & Son, 1855), 57. Buchan lived from 1729 to 1805. He taught at the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh, Scotland. A Philadelphia edition was published in 1772. A Boston edition was published in 1811.
37. Bush, "The Word of Wisdom," 53.
38. J. A. Paris, *A Treatise on Diet: with a view to Establish, on Practical Grounds, a System of Rules for the Prevention and Cure of the Diseases Incident to a Disordered State of the Digestive Functions* (New York: Duyckinck, Collins & Co., 1828), 126.
39. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 23 (1830): 366. However, on the following page the narrative suggests that the skin of fruits and vegetables should not be eaten.
40. Ticknor, *The Philosophy of Living*, 37.
41. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 18 (1830): 277.
42. Blake, "Health Reform," 39.
43. Paris, *A Treatise on Diet*, 115.
44. Buchan, *Buchan's Domestic Medicine*, 59–60.
45. "Oats," in Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan, 1755). James Boswell, Johnson's Scottish friend, is reported to have said, "It is true. In England they have beautiful horses and in Scotland we have beautiful people." I acknowledge Grant Boswell for alerting me to these quotes.
46. Arrington, "An Economic Interpretation of the 'Word of Wisdom,'" 39.
47. Joel H. Johnson, *Voice From the Mountains: Being a Testimony of the Truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1881), 12.
48. Paris, *A Treatise on Diet*, 92.
49. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, 55.
50. Paris, *A Treatise on Diet*, 70.
51. Caffeine had been isolated as the stimulant in coffee and tea by 1827. The presence of theobromine and caffeine in cacao came later.
52. Drake, *A Systematic Treatise*, 661, italics in the original.
53. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 2 (1830): 28, italics in the original.
54. Paris, *A Treatise on Diet*, 84.
55. Ticknor, *The Philosophy of Living*, 87.
56. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 9 (1830): 29–30.
57. Ticknor, *The Philosophy of Living*, 105, italics in the original.
58. W. W. Phelps to Sally Waterman Phelps, May 26, 1835, Church History Library.
59. See Blake, "Health Reform," 34.
60. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 11 (1830): 161–63.
61. See Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 300–01.
62. See, for example, *Journal of Health* 1, no. 23 (1830): 367.
63. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 23 (1830): 366.
64. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 22 (1830): 340–41.
65. Paris, *A Treatise on Diet*, 79.
66. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 12 (1830): 179.
67. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 4 (1830): 57, italics in the original.
68. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, 48.
69. Drake, *A Systematic Treatise*, 679.
70. Blake, "Health Reform," 40.

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71. Buchan, *Buchan's Domestic Medicine*, 34.
 72. Blake, "Health Reform," 40.
 73. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 8 (1830): 118.
 74. Drake, *A Systematic Treatise*, 677.
 75. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 14 (1830): 217.
 76. Buchan, *Buchan's Domestic Medicine*, 75.
 77. *Journal of Health*, 1, no. 1 (1830): 10.
 78. Buchan, *Buchan's Domestic Medicine*, 74.
 79. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 8 (1830): 118.
 80. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 8 (1830): 119–20.
 81. *Journal of Health* 1, no. 8 (1830): 121.
 82. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health*, 54.
 83. Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* (Westport CN: Greenwood Press, 1980), 100.
 84. Buchan, *Buchan's Domestic Medicine*, 49–50.
 85. Ticknor, *The Philosophy of Living*, 230.
 86. Drake, *A Systematic Treatise*, 663.
 87. *Millennial Harbinger* 2, no. 12 (December 1831): 563.