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VAUGHN J. FEATHERSTONE'S ATLANTA TEMPLE LETTER

Christopher J. Blythe

Abstract: *In this essay, I examine a letter written by Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone in 1983 and deposited in the cornerstone of the Atlanta Georgia Temple. The letter is addressed to twenty-first century members of the Church and is written with the expectation that these future Saints will have been alive for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. I consider the claims made about this letter from a recent viral video entitled “7 Year Tribulation in the SEVENTH Seal TIMELINE.”*

On March 12, 2020, the video “7 Year Tribulation in the SEVENTH Seal TIMELINE” was released on YouTube.¹ Six weeks later it had 375,000 views and had made the rounds on various Facebook groups, including one devoted to discussion among seminary teachers. The video presents a last days timeline that places the Second Coming in the very near future. The video’s creator, Masayoshi Montemayor, makes his points largely through official Church sources, including the Church’s website, institute manuals, and conference reports. However, in other instances, he points to obscure sources, including an April 1983 letter written by Seventy Vaughn J. Featherstone. This letter serves as Montemayor’s final piece of evidence for an imminent second coming. In this essay, I examine this document to understand its limitations for the argument Montemayor makes. My goal is not to criticize Elder Featherstone or to disparage sincere Latter-day Saints — among them presumably this video’s creator — who like myself are eager to be present for our Savior’s coming.

1. Millennial Reign, “7 Year Tribulation in the SEVENTH Seal TIMELINE,” YouTube video, 54:00, March 12, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Klg4aj7C5vk>.

The Letter

On April 6, 1983, Elder Featherstone drafted a letter addressed to twenty-first century members of the Church. It would be deposited in a time capsule at the dedication of the Atlanta Georgia Temple presumably, like other Church time capsules, to be opened fifty years later. This powerful document predicts the millennial ministry of the Savior and the future success of the Saints' missionary labors in the American South. The opening paragraph describes what Featherstone believed the experience of these future Latter-day Saints would be like fifty years in the future.

Those of you who read this letter have witnessed the second coming of Christ, the day for which we have long awaited. What a glorious experience to live in the day when our Lord, our Redeemer, the very Son of God is reigning personally upon the earth. We can imagine what General Conference must be like, to have the Savior address the people. ... Oh what a blessed generation you are and must be.²

Featherstone notes that in his own time the Church was facing great adversity. "I believe we are on the very threshold of great trials. The darkest clouds in the history of the world are on the horizon."³

Featherstone then turns his attention to the future growth of the Church in the American South.

The Atlanta Temple is the first temple in the South. I can see temples in Charlotte, Columbia, Birmingham, Jackson, Nashville, and in Louisiana and Arkansas. We now have more than 110,000 members of the Church in this area. I can see in my mind[']s eye great hosts of converts to exceed a million members in the South. We will baptize people in the tens of thousands. These members, traditional Protestant and Catholic Christians are being prepared right now. ... Ten times tens of thousands will be baptized into the Lord's true Church. I know that the spirit of the Lord is brooding over the South. You who are reading this letter are witnesses to my words.⁴

2. Vaughn J. Featherstone, "To My Beloved Fellow Saints in the Twenty-First Century," (letter, April 6, 1983), <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=3438179d-a8c0-499d-a2cc-82d6a239cef7>.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

The letter concludes with a personal message of gratitude to the Savior in the event that “this letter come to the attention of our Lord who is reigning personally upon the earth.”⁵

The Letter's Provenance at “Church Headquarters”

Many among Montemayor's audience have come away with the impression that Elder Featherstone's letter received the official sanction of the Church's leadership. “[Featherstone] wanted to make sure that it was good to go for the time capsule, so he sent a copy to Salt Lake, and the Brethren said, ‘Great. Go ahead.’”⁶ Montemayor also states that the copy he cites comes “from Church headquarters.”⁷ In a blurb below the video, he states that the “letter is found on the church website. The photocopy digital information was uploaded by Elder John E. Enslen from the Church History Department.”⁸ This is misleading. When Montemayor speaks of “Church headquarters,” he is referring to the Church History Library, which does in fact house a copy of the letter. This copy, rather than having been sent to Salt Lake in 1983, was donated by then senior missionary John E. Enslen on February 15, 2010. Enslen had only acquired this letter the week previous.⁹ However, Enslen, who was serving in an Alabama stake presidency in 1983, recalled that he had heard Featherstone “read this letter at a meeting in Alabama a short time after the letter's date.”¹⁰ We have no way of knowing whether Featherstone shared his letter with other general authorities, but its inclusion in the Church History Library does not imply it came with any official approval.

The Church History Library houses all sorts of documents that could be significant for preserving the Latter-day Saint past, not simply what has received official endorsement. These documents are published on the Church History Library website in order to assist historians in their work. In fact, these include documents critical of the Church and others that have been repudiated by Church leaders. For example, there are

5. Ibid.

6. Millennial Reign, “7 Year Tribulation in the SEVENTH Seal TIMELINE,” 48:57.

7. Ibid., 49:23.

8. Ibid., video description.

9. John E. Enslen, Journal Manuscript, January 25, 2010, in possession of author. The author expresses his gratitude to John E. Enslen for allowing him access to his personal journal.

10. Elder John E. Enslen, “To Any Who May Be Interested,” (letter, February 15, 2010). This letter is included in the same collection as the Vaughn J. Featherstone letter. MS 22631.

several copies of the White Horse Prophecy — a prophecy traditionally credited to Joseph Smith but denounced by the president of the Church, Joseph F. Smith, at the October 1918 General Conference — on the website and many more at the archives.¹¹ To avoid anyone's thinking the prophecy was legitimate, Church Historian (and future president of the Church) Joseph Fielding Smith marked copies donated to the archives with phrases like "not true," "not to be accepted," and "not a word of truth in it."¹² This is an exception. In most cases, refuted documents are not marked in any way. It is assumed that Church History Library patrons would be aware that documents housed at the Church History Library did not necessarily hold a Church endorsement.

Vaughn J. Featherstone's "Phenomenal Prophecy"¹³

I do not mean to suggest that Featherstone's letter is a forgery or that it has been repudiated by Church authorities. It has not. By all accounts, Featherstone's letter appears genuine. Copies have been in circulation for many years, and the letter has similarities to other statements that Elder Featherstone made during his ministry.¹⁴ John Enslen recalls its being read in a meeting in the mid-1980s. But were Featherstone's remarks intended as a prophecy? Did Elder Featherstone believe he had a personal revelation on the timing of the Second Coming?

In the past, when this letter circulated among the Saints, it was usually to discuss Featherstone's prophecy of the American South, rather than his statements on the Second Coming. This is also how

11. Joseph F. Smith, (*Eighty-Ninth Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Salt Lake City, October 4–6, 1913): 57–58, <https://archive.org/details/conferencereport1918sa/page/56/mode/2up>. See also "The White Horse Prophecy," FairMormon, https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Joseph_Smith/Prophecies/White_Horse_prophecy.

12. "Collected copies of the white horse prophecy, circa 1902–1970," Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record?id=f7fda731-7fd2-48f6-adb5-ce3236a2b841>.

13. Montemayor describes Featherstone's statements on the Second Coming as a "phenomenal prophecy." See Millennial Reign, "7 Year Tribulation in the SEVENTH Seal TIMELINE," 48:43.

14. One returned missionary who served in Oklahoma recalls having a copy in the early 1990s. Another who served in Little Rock, Arkansas, recalls discussing portions of the letter involving "baptisms in the Southern states all throughout my mission from 2000–2002." The mission even had a song that included a verse stating, "A million will join us! It's the end of the drought! We're called to the harvest, It's the day of the South!" (Brett D. Dowdle, correspondence with the author, April 30, 2020.)

Enslen stated it was used by Church leaders in the South in the years after 1983.¹⁵ The language in these two portions of Featherstone's letter are distinct. Featherstone takes for granted the fact that the Second Coming would have occurred by the time these future Saints had read his letter, but he speaks only of "seeing in my mind's eyes" and offers specific details of the future when it comes to the South.¹⁶ Even in that regard, John Enslen recalled that over time "Elder Featherstone seemed somewhat uncomfortable about calling his statements a 'prophecy.' He preferred that they be referred to as his 'prediction.'"¹⁷

What is certain is that Vaughn J. Featherstone believed the Second Coming was imminent. He was often open about these beliefs in a way in which others might have been more cautious. In the 1990s, a different statement from Elder Featherstone began to circulate. In 1995, I was given a copy of this statement, then titled "A Haven in a World of Turmoil," dated June 1987, as part of a photocopied packet with various statements on the last days. There are several copies on the internet. Featherstone spoke on the importance of temple attendance in the last dispensation, when "Satan has unleashed every evil." He was also quoted as saying, "I believe we may well have living on the earth now, or very soon, the boy or babe who will be the prophet of the Church when the Savior comes. Those who will sit in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are here."¹⁸

In 1993, an institute director contacted Elder Featherstone to confirm that this was a genuine statement. Elder Featherstone replied by providing a "slightly revised" copy of the statement, now titled, "Holiness to the Lord." In this new version, a brief explanatory note was added following the comment that the last prophet was already born or would soon be born:

*Author's Note: This could take place deep into the 21st century or in a relatively few years. If a man lives to be 80 or 90 and is now a boy or not yet born, it could be many years after the turn of the century. There has been some who misunderstand my statement.*¹⁹

15. Enslen, "To Any Who May Be Interested."

16. Featherstone, "To My Beloved Fellow Saints in the Twenty-First Century."

17. Enslen, "To Any Who May Be Interested."

18. "Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone Given at the Manti Temple in April 1987," Kieran's Mission Notes (website), <https://sites.google.com/site/kieransmissionnotes/quotes-spiritualthoughts-extracts/elder-vaughn-j-featherstone-given-at-the-manti-temple-in-april-1987>.

19. Vaughn J. Featherstone, "Holiness to the Lord," Nick Literski's Latter-day Saint Temple Homepage, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000916092439/http://>

Importantly, when a reworked version of “A Haven in a World of Turmoil” was published as part of his 1995 book, *The Incomparable Christ*, Featherstone modified the language to state simply, “There are among our youth today who will be someday called to the holy apostleship.” While his statement was still surrounded by descriptions of the Second Coming, he no longer emphasized his belief that those who would serve as the last prophet and apostles were already living. In fact, he would go on to state “Those who live in that day — whether that be us, our children, our children’s children, or some future generation — will bow down at His feet and worship Him as the Lord of lords, King of kings.”²⁰ We should weigh both Featherstone’s 1993 explanatory note and his published sentiments in 1995 when we consider whether he claimed to have had a revelation on the matter.

Based on a February 2001 devotional at Brigham Young University, it appears that Featherstone remained convinced that the Second Coming would be in our present lifetimes. He started his remarks by reading a passage from the Book of Jeremiah describing the Millennium, when “they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them.”²¹ Featherstone then said, “It is my conviction that most of you will live to see that day.”²² Montemayor also pointed to this passage as confirmation of Featherstone’s letter.

So why would Featherstone have believed the Second Coming was scheduled for the early twenty-first century if it had not come to him by an independent revelation? Featherstone’s reasons were likely similar to those Montemayor offers in his video. According to Doctrine and Covenants 77:7, the seven seals opened by the Lamb in Revelation chapter 5 represent things relative to “this earth during the seven thousand years of its continuance, or its temporal existence.” If we are to understand these thousand-year periods as exact and literal, and we hold that the Savior was born on 1 CE, then it would reason that the Millennium was scheduled to begin at 2000 CE. That the Millennium would occur after six thousand years of the Earth’s temporal existence

www.ldstemplepage.org/vjfeathr.html. I have confirmed that this is genuine from the institute director, although he would prefer to remain anonymous.

20. Vaughn J. Featherstone, *The Incomparable Christ: Our Master and Model* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 4–5.

21. Jeremiah 31:34, quoted in Hebrews 8:11

22. Vaughn J. Featherstone, “Things too Wonderful for Me,” BYU Devotional, February 13, 2001, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/vaughn-j-featherstone/things-wonderful/>.

was a position held by Gerald Lund in *The Coming of the Lord* as well as Bruce R. McConkie in *Millennial Messiah*. Both Lund and McConkie, however, acknowledge the problems of assuming we can pinpoint when the Millennium would begin. In Lund's words, "The scholars disagree on exactly how many years the earth has undergone since the Fall of Adam, however, so it cannot be said that the Millennium will occur in the year 2,000 A.D. (as some enthusiastic interpreters of scripture would like to conclude)."²³ McConkie similarly stated, that we "cannot tell with certainty how many years passed from the fall of Adam to the birth of Jesus, nor whether the number of years counted by our present calendar has been tabulated without error."²⁴

McConkie also commented on the half-hour period of silence that follows the opening of the seventh seal in Revelation 8. He suggests a possible reading of this half-hour as a clue to the timing of prophecy. "If the time here mentioned is 'the Lord's time' in which one day is a thousand years, the half hour would be some twenty-one of our years. Could this be interpreted to mean that such a period will elapse after the commencement of the seventh thousand-year period and before the outpouring of the woes about to be named?"²⁵ This is important to the timing suggested by Masayoshi Montemayor as well.

I would suggest the most likely explanation for Elder Featherstone's assumption that the twenty-first century readers of his letter would have lived through the Second Coming was that he shared the belief of Elder McConkie and Elder Lund that the seventh seal would open in 2000 CE and that it would not be much longer before the Second Coming occurred. I am not interested in refuting this idea, but it is based on a speculative calculation of scripture rather than an independent revelation.

"No Man Knows the Day or the Hour"

What have other recent general authorities suggested about knowing the timing of the Second Coming? Let us consider an experience that happened to Gordon B. Hinckley, then an apostle, only five years before Elder Featherstone wrote his letter. In 1978, a document circulating among the Saints alleged that Elder Hinckley had revealed to missionaries serving in South Africa that the Second Coming would occur on April 6

23. Gerald N. Lund, *The Coming of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 21.

24. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 31.

25. *Ibid.*, 382.

and would be on a Sunday. The document found that there were three April 6th Sundays leading up to the year 2000. “1980 seems too soon and 1997 too late. The year 1986 could be the one we’re looking for.” In a 1979 devotional at Brigham Young University, Elder Hinckley addressed this rumor and had this to say:

I assume that no one in the Church would think that a member of the Council of the Twelve would make such statements as these attributed to me. Furthermore, should any such idea have come into my mind, it would not have stood unchallenged with the President of the Church seated immediately behind me. The fact is that the whole thing is a fabrication. ... Of course I do not know when the Savior will come. He himself said: *Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.* ... If anyone were to ask me the day and the hour of the Second Coming, I could only answer that I do not know. But while neither I nor any other man knows when He will come, there are some things that I do know — and that knowledge comes from the scriptures, and the testimony of its truth comes by the power of the Holy Ghost. Although I do not know the time, I look forward to the Lord’s coming.”²⁶

M. Russell Ballard made a similar comment in his own Brigham Young University devotional on March 12, 1996.

So can we use this scientific data to extrapolate that the Second Coming is likely to occur during the next few years, or the next decade, or the next century? Not really. I am called as one of the apostles to be a special witness of Christ in these exciting, trying times, and I do not know when He is going to come again. As far as I know, none of my brethren in the Council of the Twelve or even in the First Presidency know. And I would humbly suggest to you, my young brothers and sisters, that if we do not know, then nobody knows, no matter how compelling their arguments or how reasonable their calculations. The Savior said that “of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (Matthew 24:36). I believe when the Lord says “no man” knows, it really means

26. Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Need Not Fear His Coming,” BYU Devotional, March 25, 1979, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/gordon-b-hinckley/need-not-fear-coming/>.

that no man knows. You should be extremely wary of anyone who claims to be an exception to divine decree.²⁷

Though I have questioned the significance Vaughn J. Featherstone's letter should play into our sense of the nearness of last days events, that does not mean we don't have reason to prepare and enthusiastically look forward to the Lord's return. One of President Russell M. Nelson's key messages to the Saints seems to be the significance of the Restoration leading to the Second Coming. "It is our charge — it is our privilege — to help prepare the world for that day."²⁸

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27. M. Russell Ballard, "When Shall These Things Be?" BYU Devotional, March 12, 1996, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard/shall-things/>.

28. Russell M. Nelson, "The Future of the Church: Preparing the World for the Savior's Second Coming," *Ensign*, (April 2020), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2020/04/the-future-of-the-church-preparing-the-world-for-the-saviors-second-coming?lang=eng>.

