

ZION

The Structure of a Theological Revolution

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An anthropologist traces the development of a key Mormon concept

Editors' Note

The following paper was delivered at the 1981 Sunstone Theological Symposium.

THEORIES of theological development in Mormonism have fallen primarily into two opposing camps. The first and most orthodox explanation is evolutionary: Mormon doctrine has unfolded in a gradual, unilinear, and inevitable manner. External forces serve primarily as catalysts for a predetermined doctrinal progression. As a result, society, history, and nature possess little if any ultimate significance for theological understanding. In this context doctrine and beliefs are mythic, that is they are the sacred traditions of a people and are viewed as divine communications.¹

The opposite explanation holds that theological development in Mormonism is primarily historical. Diffusion or the borrowing of doctrines from outside the original system of beliefs is the principal initiator of theological change. In this view the belief system is primarily a product of human interaction, a process without inevitable or intrinsic structure.

At first glance these two perspectives seem mutually exclusive. As a result the student of theology has been forced to make an absolute choice regarding the ultimate source of meaning in a theological system. Formulating the problem of theological understanding in such absolute terms is unsatisfactory to many students of Mormonism. Fortunately it may be possible to consider a third alternative which emphasizes both structure and process or, in other words, recognizes mythical as well as historical dimensions. Tracing the history of one central Mormon concept, that of Zion, can demonstrate the advantages of such an approach.

To understand the unique contours of the Mormon Zion it is necessary to examine the background of religious beliefs from which it emerged. Mormonism was founded in 1830 in the midst of America's primitive gospel movement. Popular with the common man from Revolutionary times until well into the nineteenth century, Christian primitivism was a reaction to the

revivalism, sectarian conflict, and Calvinist theology of many contemporary American religions. Characterized by belief in the final authority of the Bible, the restoration of Christ's ancient church, and an imminent millennium, Christian primitivism affected the religious thinking of not only Joseph Smith but also other early Mormons such as Wilford Woodruff, Newell Knight, John Taylor, Willard Richards, and Lorenzo Snow.²

The first tangible evidence of Smith's religious restoration was the Book of Mormon. Although this work extensively developed the theological principles which eventually characterized the Mormon kingdom, its primitivist passages were of primary concern to Smith at the time he founded the "Church of Christ." Important among the primitivist doctrines in the Book of Mormon were the need for a restoration of Christ's original gospel with Joseph Smith as its instigator, the purification and completion of the biblical canon, the evangelization of the American Indian, and the role of America in the Millennium.³

Smith's early revelations were also replete with primitivist concerns. The charter of his new church, issued 6 April 1830, addressed the topics of ecclesiastical organization, the Godhead, the operations of the Holy Ghost, the mission of Christ, baptism, justification and sanctification, communion, laying on of hands, the sanctity of the Sabbath Day, and excommunication. These issues were vital to New Testament churchmen as well as nineteenth century clergy.⁴

Although Christian primitivism constituted Mormonism's initial theological framework and influenced Smith's church throughout its formative years, additional doctrines emerged from Smith's revelations which came to distinguish Mormonism from other nineteenth century religions. The concept of Zion was central to this redefinition of Mormonism. The theology of Zion emerged during the first few years of the church's existence and both reinterpreted Mormonism's primitivist origins and generated remarkable theological innovations.

On the day the Church of Christ was formally organized, Smith issued a revelation which gave him a

title and indicated his role in the restored kingdom. He was to be known as "a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church. . ." and was to "move the cause of Zion in mighty power for good."⁵ In subsequent revelations, he was directed to "devote all thy service in Zion" and was promised "thou shalt receive an inheritance in Zion." Smith also repeatedly used the formulaic "seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion" to inspire and unify his new following.⁷ Although frequent, the imprecise usage of "Zion" in Smith's earliest sacred writings suggests that by mid-1830 the concept in Mormonism was nebulous at best.

By September 1830 "Zion" was beginning to acquire definite features. In response to some unauthorized revelations by Hyrum Page, Joseph Smith reasserted his exclusive right to "receive commandments and revelations in this church." In this revelation, Smith gave Zion an urban form and located it near the Indians on the American frontier.⁵

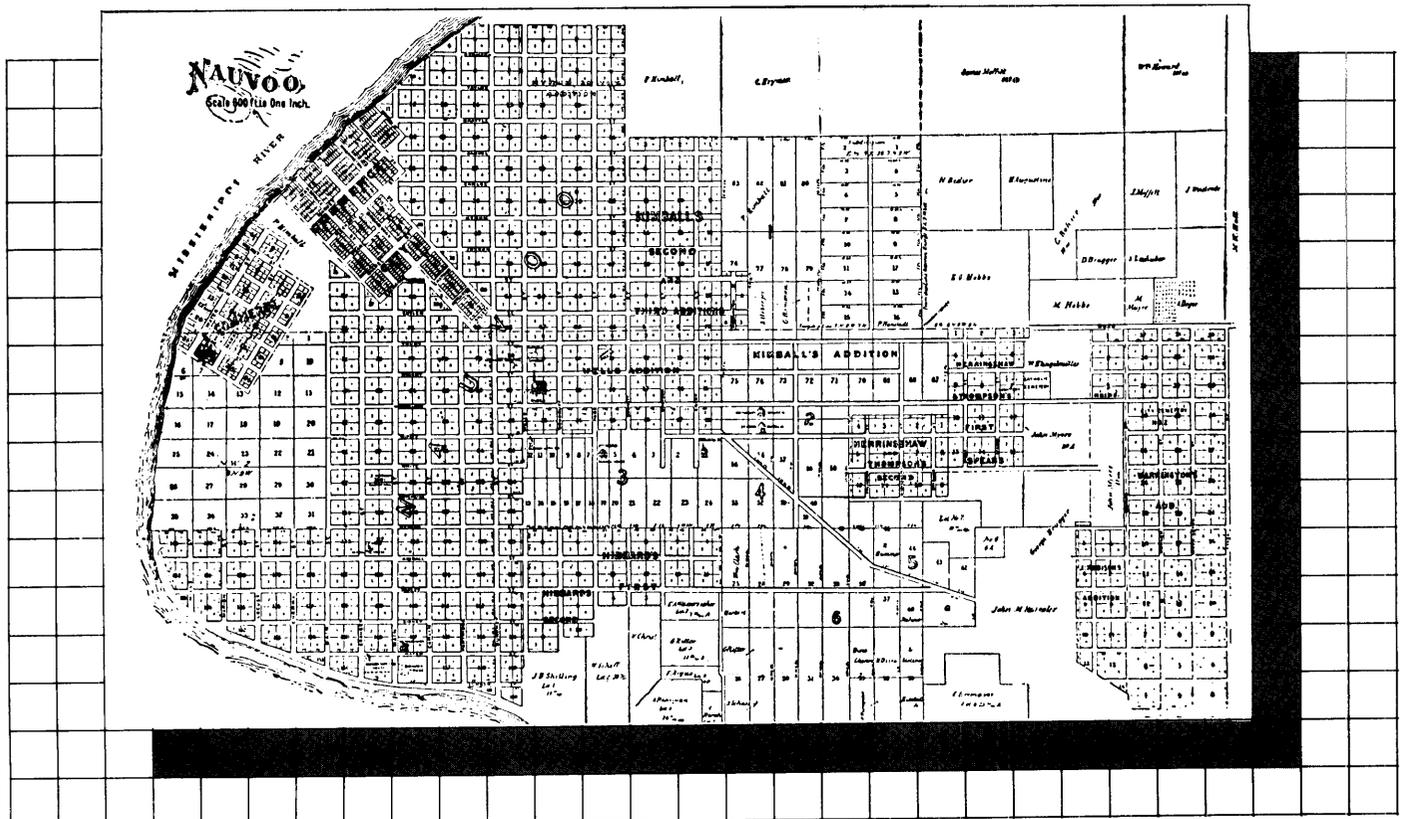
The promise to reveal the specific location of the city of Zion became, from that point on, the principal incentive for Smith's followers to obey his commandments. The promise was included in the commandments to the Church to move as a body from New York to Ohio, to live the social gospel of Smith's restoration, to proselytize the inhabitants of the trans-Appalachian West, and to convene a conference of Mormon leaders in "the land of Missouri." Each of these commandments specified further the territorial, social, and theological dimensions of Zion. By the end of July 1831, the Mormons knew that the city of Zion was destined for Jackson County, Missouri, with Independence as its "center place," that occupying the promised land would be the sign of a covenant by which

they would recognize themselves as God's chosen people, and that the city of Zion, with its temple, would hasten the millennial reign of the Messiah.⁹ In view of these rising expectations, Joseph Smith later recorded in his journal, "the mission to Western Missouri and the gathering of the Saints to that place was the most important subject which then engrossed the attention of the church."¹⁰

As the Church increased in size and Zionite fervor, Smith further refined the social and territorial orders of the Mormon kingdom. On 25 June 1833, he issued the well-known "plat of the city of Zion." Zion, in this formulation, consisted of a consolidated agricultural settlement having well-defined concentric districts corresponding to Zion's principal social functions of civic regulation, residence, and subsistence. The layout of the city consisted of an orthogonal grid oriented to the cardinal compass directions. The projected population of this mile square settlement was from fifteen to twenty thousand Saints. Although modified in actual settlement attempts, the Zion plat inspired Mormon town planning throughout the nineteenth century.¹¹

Zion, however, was more than a territorial order. It was also a theological system, a set of beliefs and practices which helped establish Mormon identity on a religious foundation and which demonstrates the integrative tendencies of early Mormon thought.

Zion's first major theological development was its association with the concept of the gathering, the idea of assembling the faithful to share a common set of religious experiences. The concept of the gathering, like that of Zion, was introduced into Mormonism without meaningful content. In conjunction with an 1828 revelation which detailed the goals Smith hoped to accomplish by publishing the Book of Mormon, Smith



The single most significant revelation to give sanction and definition to the Zion quest was Joseph Smith's vision of Enoch. The vision of Enoch was issued in December 1830 as part of Smith's revision of the Bible. His religious restoration not only adopted the general primitivist concern of righting contemporary religious errors but also assumed the task of bringing to light previously unrecorded or omitted events in the history of God's dealings with man.²⁵ The vision of Enoch was claimed as one such addition to the Bible. It expands the biblical account of Enoch from four to some one hundred twenty verses and stands as one of Mormonism's most

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remarkable theological innovations. Although the subject of Enoch held little interest for American theologians and churchmen before the mid-nineteenth century, the "seventh from Adam" was the most oft mentioned Old Testament figure in early Mormonism.²⁶

The vision tells the story of the son of Jared who was called by God to reform a degenerate society. Despite his perceived weaknesses, Enoch responded to the divine call and became such a powerful minister that his contemporaries called him a "wild man" of God. His faith was sufficient, according to the record, that he moved mountains, changed the course of rivers, and "walked with God." His efforts over three and one-half centuries enabled Enoch to establish a holy city, named Zion, whose inhabitants qualified themselves to be received by God into heaven where Zion became God's "abode forever."

The vision of Enoch contributed to Mormonism's Zion concept in three major ways. First of all, it helped define mormon eschatology. Early Mormon eschatology was considerably influenced by the Apocalypse of John.²⁷ Enoch's vision enabled Mormonism to reject the teleology of the Apocalypse in favor of an eschatology based on geographical contingencies. As William Mulder has observed, "while other millenarians set a time [for the Second Coming], the Mormons appointed a place."²⁸ Recognizing spatial, not temporal limitations enabled Mormonism's millennial fervor to survive America's primitive gospel movement and remain a vital force in Mormonism to the present day.²⁹

The vision of Enoch painted paradise as the product of a strong prophet and his devoted followers living together in divine harmony. It also suggested that when earthly Zion perfected itself, heavenly Zion would descend with Christ at the Second Coming to restore paradise to earth. These events would consummate the express purpose of the gathering, namely the integration of heaven and earth. In the words of the vision,

righteousness and truth will I [God] cause to sweep the earth as with a flood to gather out mine elect from the four quarters of the earth, unto a place which I shall prepare, an Holy City, that my people may gird up their loins, and be looking forth for the time of my coming; for there shall be my tabernacle, and it shall be called Zion, a New Jerusalem.

And the Lord said unto Enoch: Then shalt thou and all thy city meet them there, and we will receive them into our bosom, and they shall see us; and we will fall upon their necks, and they shall fall upon our necks, and we shall kiss each other;

And there shall be mine abode, and it shall be called Zion, which shall come forth out of all the creations which I have made; and for the space of a thousand years the earth shall rest.³⁰

The components of the Zion concept—namely, the city, the temple, the land, and the people of Zion, the gathering and the millennium—are all defined in terms of one another in this high point of Mormon religious rhetoric.

The vision of Enoch also helped define Zion's social order, which was called on occasion the "city" or "order of Enoch." Enoch's city came to be the divine model for the Mormons' earthly undertakings, the platonic essence, if you will, of Smith's subsequent commandments and revelations on the subject. According to this vision, Zion's ideal urban order would be permeated by religion. Religion, not politics, would ensure domestic tranquility. Religion, not the military, would provide for a common defense. Religion, not economics, would promote the general welfare. In the words of Enoch's vision,

the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them.

... And it came to pass, in his days, that [Enoch] built a city that was called the City of Holiness, even Zion.

... and lo, Zion, in process of time, was taken up into heaven. And the Lord said unto Enoch: Behold mine abode forever.³¹

The communalism of Enoch's Zion enabled the Mormon Prophet to reject Sidney Rigdon's communitarianism following, "the Family."³² In its place, Joseph Smith established the United Order or Order of Enoch. Based on the law of consecration and stewardship, this order sought to eliminate the power relations of politics and the competitive and individualizing tendencies of free market economics and private property.³³ Smith expected the Order of Enoch to unite Zion's inhabitants "in love" while providing for their material "wants and needs."³⁴ That the Mormon attempt has never realized Enoch's utopia does not reduce the significance of the vision in shaping early Mormon social planning. The concept of Zion expressed early Mormonism's highest social ambitions and ultimate existential concerns. Its ability to do so was, in large measure, dependent upon the theology of the vision of Enoch.

The third major contribution of the vision of Enoch to the Mormon concept of Zion concerns Joseph Smith's growing consciousness of his mission as prophet of the restoration. The first spiritual impressions Smith received regarding his mission had to do with his translating the Book of Mormon. Insights into his self-conscious mission from the Book of Mormon and his early revelations focus primarily on his "bringing

forth" the Nephite record to the "remnant of Israel" on the American continent.³⁵ On April 6, 1830 he assumed the ecclesiastical titles of "apostle of Jesus Christ and elder of the Church," with an additional major role to prophesy, see, and reveal the things of God.

In a July 1830 revelation, Joseph was told, "devote all thy service in Zion." Although this responsibility expanded his divine calling, Zion at this time was too nebulous to define a course of action for the Mormon prophet. As the Zion concept developed according to the pattern outlined above, Smith understood better his duties as prophet of the restoration. However, not until he received the vision of Enoch did he have a role model. After the vision, Smith had a clear mandate from heaven to mobilize the spiritual and material resources of his followers to restore to earth not only the primitive church but also the heavenly city. After December 1830, Joseph Smith saw himself as a latter-day Enoch called to fulfill the promises made to the ancient founder of Zion. The flurry of excitement and activity in the quest for Zion following the vision of Enoch indicates the importance with which Smith held the vision, for himself and his followers. Suggestive of the personal relevance of the vision is the fact that on several occasions Smith substituted Enoch's name for his when he wished to avoid specific personal reference in his revelations.³⁶

The vision of Enoch gave theological, cosmological, eschatological, social, and personal sanction to the quest for Zion. Strains of these ideas had been present in Mormonism prior to the vision, but the vision integrated and energized them in a powerful and unmistakable manner. As section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants

became Mormonism's ecclesiastical charter, the vision of Enoch was the sacred charter of the quest for Zion.

That the early Mormons failed to realize the expectations of the vision makes the vision no less significant for the definition of the Mormon kingdom. In fact, when Joseph Smith became aware that he would not realize Enoch's vision, he altered the definition of Zion. After the Mormons in 1838 were forced to abandon their hopes of immediately establishing Zion's "center place," there was considerable concern as to the precise nature of the Mormon kingdom. In a speech on 19 July 1840, Joseph Smith reformulated the Zion concept: "... the land of Zion. . . consists of all N[orth] and S[outh] America but that any where the Saints gather is Zion. . . ."³⁷ Shortly before his martyrdom, Smith reissued this proclamation as a revelation which enabled the Saints to retain their identity as God's chosen people while acknowledging the collapse of their earthly paradise.³⁸ This revised concept of Zion accompanied the Mormons to the Great Basin and into the twentieth century.

From this brief study of early Mormon theology, we can tentatively suggest that the Mormon concept of Zion has followed a revolutionary process.³⁹ That is, neither evolution (gradual progression) nor diffusion (random borrowing) characterizes the development of the Mormon Zion. Rather the history of Zion seems to be divided into a series of conceptually distinct and chronologically specific states, or revolutions. While these theological revolutions manifest historical continuity and logical association, they do not determine one another in any absolute sense; thus they express formal and material but not final causality.⁴⁰



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The first revolution in the theology of Zion occurred as distinctive Mormon doctrines emerged from the initial primitive gospel orientation Mormonism shared with many nineteenth century religions. Joseph Smith was able gradually to integrate the disparate religious and social doctrines of the gathering, the temple, the millennium, and the city, land, and people of Zion into a distinctive theological system, "Zion." This system acquired absolute moral and doctrinal legitimacy from the vision of Enoch, an elegant and authoritative synthesis of these doctrines in a cosmic context. The vision of Enoch provided the ultimate justification for the Zion quest. Nevertheless, this initial formulation of the concept of Zion was weakened by the compelling data which could not be explained by the vision, namely the persistent imperfection of the Saints and their violent expulsion from the promised land of Missouri. Finally, the initial theological paradigm was reformulated as a revised concept of Zion became more compatible with Mormonism's changing historical and ideological contexts.

These theological revolutions have been influenced by the forces of diffusion and evolution. A diffusionary analysis emphasizes process at the expense of order and by itself cannot explain the distinct "Mormonness" of any changes. On the other hand, evolution tends to isolate any such changes from their historical context. In either case, the significance of the development is reduced by the inherent limitations of the perspective. A model of theological revolutions considers both the internal logic of a system and its environment; it suggests that theological development depends primarily upon the dynamic relationship between the two. A model of theological revolutions helps us realize that in religious systems, as in culture generally, change occurs for the most part within definite limits. In the end, discovering order in theological processes helps us better appreciate the innovations.



Notes

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 87-125, provides a lucid discussion of this concept of myth, while Karin B. Andriolo, "Myth and History: A General Model and its Application to the Bible," *American Anthropologist* 83 (June 1981): 261-284, summarize the theoretical literature in the relationship between myth and history. Her model varies somewhat from that proposed here.
2. Marvin S. Hill, "The Role of Christian Primitivism in the Origin and Development of the Mormon Kingdom, 1830-1844," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1968, 6-79.
3. *Ibid.*, 99-108.
4. Joseph Smith, Jr., *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), section 20, See I. Daniel Rupp, comp., *An Original History of the Religious Denominations as Present Existing in the United States* (Philadelphia: J.Y. Humphreys, 1844), for first hand accounts expressing many of these beliefs and concerns.
5. D&C 21:1,7.
6. *Ibid.*, 24:7; 25:2.
7. *Ibid.*, 6:6; 11:6; 12:6; 14:6.
8. *Ibid.*, 28:1-9; Richard H. Bushman, "New Jerusalem, U.S.A.: The Early Development of the Latter-day Saint Zion Concept on the American Frontier," Honors Thesis, Harvard College, 1955.
9. *Ibid.*, 38:13-33; 39:13-16; 42:4-69; 52:1-6, 42-44; 57:1-3.
10. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vol. 2nd rev. ed. by B.H. Roberts, (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1955), 1:182.
11. *Ibid.* 1:357-362. Joseph Smith's plat of Zion has been reproduced widely, perhaps most notably in the fine works of John W. Rees, *The*

Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 467, and *Cities of the American West: A History of Frontier Urban Planning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 289. The original is in the Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

12. D&C 10:65.
13. *Ibid.* 27:13.
14. *Ibid.*, 29:7-8.
15. *Ibid.* 42:35-36.
16. *Ibid.*, 29:7-8.
17. *Ibid.* 35:7-27; 38:4-22; 39:13-24; 42:1-17; 43:24-35; 45; 63:20-37.
18. *Ibid.* 36:8.
19. *Ibid.* 42:35-36.
20. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:199.
21. *Ibid.*, 1:359-362.
22. Subsequent Mormon temples have generally followed the lead of Zion's grand temple, being placed in the center of the city and on its most elevated plain and being oriented toward the cardinal compass directions. Departures from this pattern indicate a weakening of the original Zion concept.
23. Thomas F. O'Dea, "Mormonism and the Avoidance of Sectarian Stagnation: A Study in Church, Sect, and Incipient Nationality," *American Journal of Sociology* 60 (1954): 285-293; O'Dea, "Foreward," to Nels Anderson, *Deseret Saints: The Mormon Frontier in Utah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. xiv.
24. D&C 45:65-69.
25. See Robert J. Matthews, "A Plainer Translation": *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, a History and Commentary* (Provo, Ut.: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), for a thorough study of Smith's "inspired revision" of the Bible.
26. Hugh W. Nibley, "A Strange Thing in the Land: The Return of the Book of Enoch, Part 2" *The Ensign* 5 (December 1975): 73-74; Gordon I. Irving, "Mormonism and the Bible, 1832-1838," Honors Thesis, University of Utah, 1972, p. 23.
27. D&C 29 and 45.
28. William F. Mulder, "Mormonism's 'Gathering': An American Doctrine with a Difference," *Church History* 23 (1954): 252.
29. On the decline of American millennialism, see Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 287-357; and Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: A Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 181-201.
30. Joseph Smith, Jr., *The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), Moses 7:62-64.
31. *Ibid.*, Moses 7:18-21.
32. See Robert Kent Fielding, "The Growth of the Mormon Church in Kirtland, Ohio," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1957, 23-24.
33. D&C 42, 78; see also Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), pp. 15-40.
34. D&C 42:45; 51:3.
35. *Ibid.* 3-8; Joseph Smith, Jr., *The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1950), 2 Nephi 3:11-15; 27:12-14.
36. *Ibid.*, 78:1, 4, 9; 96, heading.
37. Dean L. Jessee, "Joseph Smith's 19 July 1840 Discourse," *Brigham Young University Studies* 19 (1979): 392.
38. *History of the Church* 6:318-319. Brigham Young called Smith's reformulation "a perfect knock-down to the devil's kingdom," *ibid.*, p. 321.
39. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
40. "Causation," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Paul Edwards, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), 2:56-66.

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