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Mormon Passage of George D. Watt

Ronald G. Watt

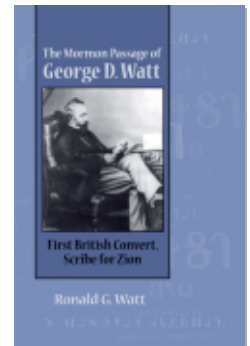
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SPIRITUAL WANDERINGS APOSTASY AND SPIRITUALISM

Your humble friend stands in this category of rejected ones, has been insulted and incensed with the cold shoulder and pity of old beloved friends and respected acquaintances, has been met with “apostate,” “son of perdition,” “traitor,” and such like hard and vicious terms. His presence and the presence of his family has been shunned with freezing persistency, and debarred from their usual social contact with neighbors and friends as though they carried with them the poison of the deadly Upas.

George D. Watt to John Taylor, December 5, 1878

Watt moved his family into their completed house in Kaysville before Christmas 1869. He left his longtime home in the capital city of Utah and Mormonism and took up residence in the hinterland—the provinces. The local people did not understand his digressive path. He would find no Mormons who would give him a sympathetic ear there.

Located twenty-one miles north of Salt Lake City, Kaysville was one of the main communities in Davis County. The town was settled in 1849, and in 1851 the new inhabitants built a school that they also used as a church meetinghouse. By 1853 Kaysville totaled just over four hundred people, with only about one-third living in town. Watt’s farm, about three miles north and east of town, is in present-day Layton. Just north of his land was the sand ridge, where the sand was so thick it was difficult to drive a wagon. When Watt moved there, his land had no irrigation water. In 1869

John Thornley, a close neighbor, first grew wheat without irrigation in a process called dry farming.¹

By the spring of 1870, Watt was busy on the farm: clearing land, planting, and taking care of his animals. In July 1871, he wrote to his wife Martha, who was in Manti taking care of her parents. He had just returned from Salt Lake City and had not left his room, “am most fatigued and half sick with the journey through this excessive hot weather and dry dusty road. While in the City I witnessed a new thing in Utah two celebrations of the 4th of July,” he told her. The liberal parade, which was a mixture of Godbeites and gentiles, “was entirely void of show, but represented wealth while the Mormon procession represented ‘bone and sinue.’” Still, he considered that “the Mormon procession was one of the finest I should judge that has ever been in these mountains, every trade was well represented.” The parades passed quietly, “and the day concluded with an exhibition of fireworks.” He mentioned that he had watched both processions but had not joined either one, “for I had my team to take care of and could not leave it.”²

Watt continued to struggle spiritually. He attended the Kaysville Ward services infrequently. The meetinghouse was a few miles away but not an insurmountable distance. His neighbors, who were more devout and attended church more frequently, understood that he was not fully committed, and they also knew about his earlier problems with the Godbeites.³

In April 1871, Watt sent a letter to Brigham Young requesting to borrow some wheat. Young replied that he was pleased to hear from him. However, “with regard to the wheat you wish to borrow you should have it with pleasure, but we have not got it,” he told Watt. Because of a shortage, the general tithing store was empty. The church also had to borrow. “I have some flour that you can have any time you like to send for it . . . and indeed very little flour, still I am willing to share with you rather than you should suffer,”⁴ Young offered. After this kindly letter arrived, Watt showed it to Christopher Layton, bishop of the Kaysville Ward, who asked if he could help Watt obtain some wheat through President Young. Watt did not think Layton could “but told him he might please himself.” Layton spoke to Young about Watt’s need, and Young told the bishop that Watt should provide Young with good security. Watt said he intended to do that. “However, it turned that I did not get flour from you or him. I found

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1. “Kaysville Ward Manuscript History,” Church Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).
 2. George D. Watt to Martha Watt, July 7, 1871, holograph, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as Perry Special Collections).
 3. George D. Watt to Brigham Young, August 23, 1871, holograph, incoming correspondence, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.
 4. Brigham Young to George D. Watt, May 5, 1871, outgoing correspondence, Latterpress Copybook, 12: 665, Young Papers.

other friends, and am grateful for your kind intentions,” Watt wrote back to Young.⁵

In the meantime, Layton had announced that Watt needed wheat at a sacrament meeting in the Kaysville Ward. When writing to Young, Watt remarked, “What right has bishop Layton on the instance of my wishing to borrow a little breadstuff, to drag the matter before a public meeting, and make out that a prophecy of bro. Brigham’s was fulfilled that I should beg my bread?” Watt wondered if the purpose was to make him humble, but “it never can be accomplished in this way. Espionage, or adversity only stiffens my neck and sets me in defiance, while generous kindness, and smiling friendship melts my soul into tears of gratitude and resolves of eternal affiance.” Instead, he retreated to the sanctity of his home, “where I love to be, and where I am known respected and honored.” He refused to go to a meeting “to be stared at by old and young as a person who is sure to apostatize because the bishop said so, to sit there like a poor trembling mouse, a mark for every jackanapes that stands up to throw at. *I will not do it.*” He then realized how angry he sounded and introspectively wrote, “Excuse me Sir. I have been wounded in the house of my friends, and I have written the above while the hurt was bleeding.” Feeling that he needed to reassure Young, he commented, “Brother Brigham I have for you the deepest respect, and sympathy. I have always held you to my heart as a very dear friend.”⁶

Watt and Layton had previously had their differences. In June 1864, Layton had been involved in moving Watt’s sheep without his knowledge to an area in Weber Valley. John Thornley, an old friend from Preston, England, who took care of both his and Watt’s sheep, had told Watt that he had been forced to move their sheep to the ward’s designated feeding ground. The men in the ward had previously agreed to the move. However, Thornley had felt pressured into agreeing and did not move their sheep until John Gailey, Bishop Layton’s counselor, approached him with threats of the loss of his priesthood position in the Kaysville Seventies Quorum. Thornley told Watt that some of their sheep had died of starvation as a result.

Watt wrote to Layton, complaining about the injustice of that situation. He felt that Layton had coerced some of the men in the ward. Their herd had plenty of feed, unlike the other sheep herds. Watt thought that if the people in the meeting felt that they should move their sheep, “move them and leave mine alone. If I wish to move my sheep and it does appear to me that it is best for the property that God has made me steward over I will do it, but I do not consider that Bishop Layton or his counselor has any business to threaten my fellowship to make me obey them in this matter.” He did not think that it was “right to use such a holy thing as a man’s fellowship

5. Watt to Brigham Young, August 23, 1871.

6. Ibid. Underlining in original.

to make him do a thing which doesn't particularly relate to spiritual and holy duties." He wanted his sheep on his own land where they could be cared for. "You and your neighbors have eaten out the range immediately around you, and you are obliged to move your stock, now give us the same privilege of eating out the range where we are and we shall have to be subject to not a law of the president but to the law of necessity," he told Layton. He assured Layton that he had nothing against him personally but felt that it had been unnecessary to move his sheep to the ward feeding ground.⁷

Bishop Layton, by the hand of John R. Barnes, his clerk, wrote Watt and denied that he had made a law without the sanction of the people. In the spring, a priesthood meeting of all the men in the ward had unanimously agreed to the proposal. They had found a suitable pasture in Weber Valley. "Most of the brethren went to work and moved their sheep to the place appointed where they are now doing well. A few however who seek only their own aggrandizement and care but little if any for the good of community held back a long time," Layton's letter claimed. Those individuals finally moved their sheep and suffered losses. The move generally had benefited cattle and sheep. "You say I have taken your property from you without your consent. In reply I beg to say I am not guilty of Larceny in any shape or form."⁸ Presumably Layton sent Watt and Thornley's sheep back to them. Watt harbored no ill feelings toward the bishop. Outwardly their relationship was normal, but Layton remembered these allegations and might have reveled in the thought in the 1870s that Watt was struggling.

After Watt moved to Kaysville, teachers, who were assigned to watch over families in the ward and keep them on the straight and narrow path, regularly visited him; they were always questioning their families about whether they were praying and living the tenets of the church. After one such prying visit in August 1871, Watt fired off a letter of protest to Brigham Young. The teachers had asked him whether he practiced secret and family prayer, honored the priesthood, believed in tithing, took the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune and Utah Mining Gazette*, and associated with the Godbeites, especially Amasa Lyman, a former apostle.⁹ Watt had told them that he prayed both in secret and with his family every day. He believed in paying tithing and also aiding other good causes with his means. As far as honoring the priesthood, "If you mean to pay due respect to men in office in the Church, Yes; this I have always done, and always expect to give honor where it is due." He admitted that he took the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune*, but he did so to keep himself

7. George D. Watt to Christopher Layton, 1864, shorthand, George D. Watt Papers, LDS Church Archives (transcribed by LaJean Carruth, 2006).

8. Christopher Layton per J. R. Barnes to George D. Watt, June 29, 1864, holograph, Watt Papers.

9. Lyman had turned from his Mormon origins and now believed in the Godbeite version of spiritualism.

informed about what it was up to. "Its mineral department is an exaggeration, and used to flood the country with people from abroad, to rob the Mormon people of their municipal legislative rights. . . . The communication and editorial department appear to me to be full of snap snarl and fight. As a whole I think it is an ambitious, shallow pated, boasting, insulting, pugnatious, snarling, senseless sheet," he told the teachers. As far as his association with Godbeites, he commented that he had known Amasa Lyman and William Godbe a long time, and "I do not see that a change of religion should interfere with the performance of the common civilities due to all persons." Watt said he did not think that the Godbeites had "a combination, aim or purpose that may at all be relied upon, a mere bubble upon society's wave."¹⁰

The teachers asked him why he did not attend church more regularly. He replied it was because of the distance and his horses needed a rest. To Young he admitted the chief reason was "I cannot sit and hear personal castigations administered from the stand to myself and friends, instead of the consolations of religion and the necessity of observing its moral precepts." He had had other teachers ask him similar questions throughout his life, but this time they offended him because he knew his life was not attuned with those principles. He wrote that Bishop Christopher Layton had made "insinuations against my character as a gentleman and a Saint in a very inconsiderate, untruthful and unbrotherly manner."¹¹

His family had listened to such accusations in a meeting, and they no longer would attend the Kaysville Ward, Watt continued. "At one meeting he told the people that President Young had asked him if he was afraid of G. D. Watt. . . . That if he was afraid of me you would send one here to attend to my case, for you would 'make' me honor the priesthood." Watt had angrily told Bishop Layton "that neither Bishop Layton nor Brigham Young could 'make' me do anything." He could not understand what Bishop Layton had told Young "to have called forth such extreme expressions from you." He felt that he was not complaining, "but I have a right to defend myself, which right I expect always to exercise. Do I not hold the priesthood of the Son of God as much so as any of you, and should it not be honored in me?"¹²

A day later, he wrote a letter to Martha, who was in Manti helping her aged parents. He discussed the farm, the crops, and the family. He then repeated most of the letter he had sent to Brigham Young the day before, telling her about the visit of the teachers, including most of his comments about Layton, and ending with the phrase, "I will not do it." He ended the letter, "Kiss the children for papa. . . . All here join me in love to yourself."¹³

10. Watt to Brigham Young, August 23, 1871.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. George D. Watt to Martha Watt, August 24, 1871, holograph, Perry Special Collections.

The exchange with Layton and the teachers only drove Watt closer to his former friends among the Godbeites.

After the encounter with the teachers, Watt recognized that he needed further spiritual help. John Smith, the church patriarch, came to Kaysville in 1871 less than a month later, and Watt requested a patriarchal blessing from him. He thought the blessing would give him spiritual guidance. Smith, an old friend, told him in the blessing that even though he had seen “many changes and trying events recently that his life had been preserved and have given thee peace of mind. Therefore I say unto thee be prudent, seek to know the will of the Lord and hold sacred thy covenants for the Eye of the Lord is upon thee.” The Lord knew “of his integrity.” He still had work to perform, and his name would be held in “honorable remembrance and handed down with thy posterity from generation to generation.” Smith warned Watt to be on his guard “and adhere strictly to the promptings of the Monitor within thee.” He was a choice son of the blood of Joseph and entitled to many blessings. “And I say unto thee let thy faith fail not and thy days and years shall be prolonged until thou art satisfied with life.”¹⁴

It is difficult to tell when Watt finally turned to Spiritualism. He knew about the religious philosophy through the Godbeites. He had first allied himself with them because of their opposition to the Mormon cooperative. Possibly Watt began to embrace Spiritualism as early as the summer and fall of 1869, but he sincerely repented of his folly. His negative Kaysville ecclesiastical experience, though, reunited him with his former merchant friends.

Spiritualism confirmed the Godbeites’ religious experience without the unique Mormon connotation. They felt that Joseph Smith, as a gifted medium, had frequently misinterpreted his spiritual experiences. Spiritualists received their revelations through mediums, who sometimes in deep trances spoke for the spirits or angels beyond the veil of death. These spirits communicated by table moving and the use of the planchette, which was like a Ouija board. The spiritualists in Salt Lake had several well-known mediums visit the city and give lectures on Spiritualism as well as hold séances. Most of the mediums who came to Salt Lake City were men, but many families in Zion held séances with mediums who were either women or older children. Watt on his trips to Salt Lake attended a few of the lectures given by some of the leading spiritualists of the time.¹⁵

At first the Godbeites held their meetings in the Thirteenth Ward and the Masonic hall, but after William Godbe generously donated land, they

Underlining in original.

14. John Smith, “Patriarchal Blessing of George D. Watt,” September 17, 1871, microfilm of holograph, Patriarchal Blessing Collection, LDS Church Archives. For other blessings in the area, Smith used a clerk. For Watt’s blessing, he had no clerk. Perhaps Watt did not want a member of the ward to know he needed Smith’s help.
15. See Ronald W. Walker, *Wayward Saints: The Godbeites and Brigham Young* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), chaps. 11, 14.

constructed a building called the Liberal Institute at a cost of fifty thousand dollars. The seating was shaped like a half octagon with the pulpit in a corner of the building. The institute had portraits on the walls, including George and Martha Washington. It provided a space for religious services, debates, lectures, education, entertainment, and social relaxation. The building seated a thousand people.¹⁶

During this time, certain spiritualistic phrases entered Watt's letters. In July 1871, in a letter to Martha, he wrote that he thought of her and the children every day and "throw a desire to the Angels to watch over you and keep you from all harm." He also used another phrase with a spiritualistic connotation: "Let us live to do each other good and no wrong that our garments may be pure and white in the glorious summerland."¹⁷ In October 1873, he told Martha, "Praying the guardian of the Angels to be around you and the children constantly."¹⁸

Watt had struggled long and hard, but finally his Mormon faith failed. His neighbors, his old friends, and perhaps the hardship of the farm changed him, and he substituted Spiritualism for his Mormon faith. On April 12, 1874, the *Salt Lake Tribune* announced that George D. Watt would give a lecture at the Liberal Institute that evening on "Why I Joined the Mormon Church and Why I Left It and Became a Spiritualist." The newspaper described him as an entertaining speaker and said his subject was one that both Mormons and non-Mormons could listen to profitably.¹⁹ In an overflowing hall, Watt related his boyhood experiences and conversion to Mormonism. He stated he had found a lack of power in the priesthood and that the Mormon Church's power and gifts were not real, only a matter of faith.²⁰ He believed that he had always been a spiritualist. He finished with an explanation of the Order of Enoch, or the United Order, which was "for the people to give themselves and all they possess to the Lord Brigham and allow him to dictate where they shall live, what labor they should follow, and what they should do with the proceeds of their labors." Watt said he thought that meant "to give up their individuality and become slaves to the priesthood, and be fed, clothed and housed as the priesthood might dictate." He, however, said nothing about his days in Brigham Young's office.²¹

16. Ibid., 275-76.

17. George D. Watt to Martha Watt, July 7, 1871. Parley P. Pratt, in his book *Key to the Science of Theology*, refers to angels as men who died and now have a "human body of flesh and bones, immortal and eternal." See Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons Co., 1891), 115. This idea could have influenced Watt's belief in what he called angels, but Spiritualism teaches that the angels are spirits of human beings who have passed through life.

18. George D. Watt to Martha Watt, October 13, 1873, holograph, Perry Special Collections.

19. "Elder Watt at the Institute," *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 12, 1874, 1.

20. He made a similar argument when he left James Fielding's church back in Preston.

21. "Geo D. Watt at the Institute," *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 15, 1874, 1.

An anonymous writer to the *Tribune* commented, “The lecture of friend Watt was gladly received by many of his old time brethren. . . . His plain and unvarnished tale has had more effect upon his hearers than would the most polished effort of any learned orator and he has caused many to think of the impositions practiced among them.”²² Edward Partridge Jr., a stake president in Fillmore, also attended the lecture and observed that the “Hall was full and the audience paid marked attention and frequently applauded when some good hit was made.” He acknowledged that Watt “had written a very good piece, ably got up and delivered in good style, which looks very plausible from his stand point.”²³

A month before Watt’s talk at the Liberal Institute, the *Salt Lake Tribune* published a poem entitled “The Mormons Order of Enoch,” written by a person with the pen name of Georgius, which could have been a play on Watt’s first name. He had written some poetry more than twenty years earlier, and even though this was not very good poetry, it probably was not his. Then on March 13 and 15, an author with the pen name of “W” wrote two articles titled “Brigham’s Enoch” and “The Gobbling Prophet.” He made an economic argument against Young, stating that his riches had caused untold poverty among the lower classes. This author said that cooperation was a correct principle, but Brigham Young interpreted it as gathering all the riches together for himself. He also said that he did not “write in bitterness of spirit towards Young or the Mormons, but with an uncompromising hostility to oppression and wrong.” The pen name—the same one Watt used in his early articles in the *Semi-Weekly Telegraph*—and the economic approach seem to mark these articles as Watt’s. He had turned his head and heart away from his former beliefs.²⁴

Watt had finally declared himself in opposition to Mormonism and all it stood for. Several weeks later, a short notice in the *Deseret Evening News* simply stated, “Kaysville, May 3, 1874. The undersigned hereby certify that George D. Watt was excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, on the above date, for apostasy. C. Layton, Bishop, James Walker, clerk.”²⁵

Watt had started his original spiritual search many years earlier in James Fielding’s congregation in Preston. When he met the Mormon elders, he joined them and became a stalwart member of the faith for thirty-seven years. He learned much about the church from the leaders because he recorded their speeches. He had no qualms about Mormon doctrine or

22. “When Will He Lecture Again?” *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 15, 1874, 4.

23. Edward Partridge, Journals, 1854–89, 9 vols., 2: May 10, 1874, holograph, LDS Church Archives.

24. “The Mormons Order of Enoch,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 7, 1874, 4; “Brigham’s Enoch,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 13, 1874, 3; “The Gobbling Prophet,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 15, 1874, 4.

25. “Kaysville, May 3rd 1874,” *Deseret Evening News*, May 20, 1874, 7: 249.

theology at that time. He tried to do what the church leaders wanted him to. His argument with Brigham Young ended that period of his life. When Young accused him of not being at work when he was needed, he was speaking the truth, although he handled the situation injudiciously and publicly.

When he left Young's employ and became a storekeeper, Watt's wanderings really began. He separated himself from Young and other church leaders over economic policy. His bitter encounters with Bishop Layton widened the breach. He formulated his doctrine of spiritualism in a series of speeches that began on April 12, 1874. Earlier in the year Watt also pontificated in Ogden in January 1874 at the inaugural services of the Ogden Liberal Hall.²⁶ These lectures took the same course as his own conversion to Spiritualism.

A month later at the Liberal Institute, Watt again attacked the United Order and expressed his views on the failures of the priesthood. In June the Reverend C. C. Strattan, a visitor, deferred his lecture so Watt could speak. He warned the Mormon workers of Utah about Young's economic system, but then began assailing the theological doctrines of Mormonism. In July he spoke on the claims of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, and he followed that in December with a presentation entitled, "My Former Ideas of God. How I Became Possessed of Them and Why I Rejected Them." After thinking of religious topics through the winter, he preached about Spiritualism at the Liberal Institute again in May 1875. The lecture, to the Salt Lake Society of Progressive Spiritualists, was entitled, "The Phenomena of Spiritualism and Its Uses."²⁷

His lectures at the Liberal Institute fulfilled his inner desire to express his views on religious topics. No Watt articles appeared again in the *Salt Lake Tribune*. The newspaper covered more salacious tales, advertising the book *Tell It All* by Fanny Stenhouse, the wife of Thomas Stenhouse who had also left Mormonism with the Godbeites; and Ann Eliza Young's book, *Wife No. 19*, by a former wife of Brigham Young, which spoke against polygamy.²⁸ The *Tribune* wanted more sensational stories for its campaign against Mormonism.

After 1875 Watt did not speak at the Liberal Institute. Probably he became too involved on the farm. Because of his beliefs and his outspoken views, he became isolated from neighbors and friends. However, he found it difficult to cast off Mormonism socially. Even though he had been

26. Walker, *Wayward Saints*, 270.

27. See the following articles in the *Salt Lake Tribune*: "Another Lecture by Geo. D. Watt," June 7, 1874, 4; "Lecture by Mr. George D. Watt," July 19, 1874, 4; "Mr. Watt at the Institute," December 6, 1874, 4; and "Salt Lake Society of Progressive Spiritualists," May 9, 1875, 4. After the first talk, only the title appears in the newspaper. It is possible that Watt gave other lectures, but the *Tribune* did not cover them.

28. "Agents Wanted for 'Tell It All,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 9, 1874, 3.

excommunicated, he did not want to be separated from the Mormon people. He lived among Mormons, and he needed their sustenance, love, and acceptance, but he did not receive it. Instead, he was called a “son of perdition,” an “apostate,” and a “traitor.”²⁹

Watt no longer believed that priesthood blessings helped heal the afflicted. Most spiritualists believed in laying their hands on the sickly person and, by “physical magnetism,” driving the illness out of the body.³⁰ In December 1875, while Martha was visiting with her parents in Manti, her father, William, became ill. Watt felt that Martha could comfort “your sick father” by her tender nursing. He advised her to “place your hands often on his head and desire at the same time his speedy recovery, and the good angels through you will bless him and restore him to health and comfort.” He also told her to call in some of her father’s friends every day, “but let them be robust healthy and honest men, care not if they are ignorant tailors, and let them touch him.” He thought it was all right if they prayed and anointed him in the Mormon fashion. He advised her to converse with him cheerfully, which “will inspire him with confidence—with faith.” She should feed him “with that he desires to eat, and be not discouraged if he only eats a spoon full at a time.” He thought that she should move her father from the bed “everyday” and change the bed linen and his clothes often, “that he may not inhale the sickly exhalations of his body and thereby enhance his trouble.” He advised, “By following the above instructions and keeping from him doctors drugs, you will reap the reward of your labors in seeing your father restored to health and life.”³¹ Although Watt thought that his father-in-law would return to health, he died on December 27, 1875. Martha stayed in Manti throughout the holidays to help her mother.

In the next few years, Watt read widely. He changed his views somewhat from his original spiritualist beliefs. He still believed in the spiritualistic concepts about God and man, however. He had originally believed that the angels spoke to human beings in séances. He had attended many séances himself in Salt Lake City. He had also participated in séances in his own home where tables moved, but it is difficult to know who the medium was, probably one of his wives.³² Although he accepted the idea of spiritual

29. Most of this can be gleaned from the long letter to John Taylor; see George D. Watt to John Taylor, December 5, 1878, holograph, general correspondence, John Taylor First Presidency records, LDS Church Archives.

30. Walker, *Wayward Saints*, 254

31. George D. Watt to Martha Watt, December 6, 1875, holograph, Perry Special Collections. Underlining in original.

32. Elizabeth was there when séances took place, but her devotion to her church probably excluded her from being the medium. It had to be one of the last two wives, either Sarah or Martha or both. Sarah, for unknown reasons, was rebaptized after she began to attend the Layton Ward. It’s unclear why since she had never been excommunicated. Elizabeth told Zipporah Layton Stewart, her granddaughter, that she had seen tables move in the

intervention wholeheartedly at first, it did not appeal to him intellectually. Not that he had to prove all things; he accepted concepts of spiritualism by faith also.

He also studied the science and philosophy of the day and acquired a small library to satisfy his own reference needs. While he did not completely find eternal truths in books, either, he began to recognize that God revealed things to humanity in different ways. Revelations or “revelments,” as he called them, could result from quite natural phenomena. Rain was just an example, and when it rained, he sometimes took his wives and children into the field and, with arms extended, thanked God for the moisture.³³ He also studied the philosophers of the past. His beliefs appear to have rested primarily in Spiritualism and secondarily in Mormonism with science and philosophy interwoven into the fabric of the two.³⁴

Watt asked for readmittance into the church two times, but his beliefs differed basically from Mormonism. He seemed to have forgotten that Mormonism had certain tenets that could not be altered just for him. Finally in 1878, he wrote a long letter to President John Taylor, who was now the leader of the LDS Church. The letter is a philosophical treatise that, because of its language and concepts, is difficult to understand. It reveals a man who is able to grasp and explain complicated religious concepts, sometimes not clearly, nor in simple terms, but in the words of a student of philosophical theology.³⁵

He asked for readmittance into the church but wanted to explain his present beliefs to Taylor: “The object of this letter is, to lay before you, briefly, the salient points of my convictions and belief as I find them today.” He believed in an impersonal God, as he defined it, “in the unchangable and infinitely extended God—the soul of universal nature.” He felt that God was “the fountain of all truth, light life and intelligence, stamping himself in degrees, planes, and phases upon the infinite arcana of matter.”³⁶

Watt believed that every “power principle and law, which pertains to the spiritual and physical constitution of matter, have their roots deep in this impenetrable mystery, from which they draw their progressive strength.” He wrote that God could not love or hate as men love or hate, hear “as men hear, or speaks as men speak.” Also, this “Infinite Presence” could not have

house. Stewart relayed that information to the author.

33. Ida Watt Stringham and Dora Dutson Flack, *England's First "Mormon" Convert: The Biography of George Darling Watt* (n.p.: privately printed, [1958]), 99.

34. Watt to John Taylor, December 5, 1878. This paragraph paraphrases most of Watt's beliefs, which are explained in detail in the next few pages of the chapter.

35. In a few cases, Watt uses words for which there seem to be no definitions. The word “astroaligorical” is left to the reader's interpretation. He also refers to the “law of the ubiquitous Almighty power—the law of integration.” The author has not found such a law or theory; perhaps it is a spiritualist term.

36. Watt to John Taylor, December 5, 1878, p. 2.

a likeness and be incarnated in man. He was an “essence,” who could not be angered by disobedience or placated by prayers or ceremonies.³⁷

Watt believed that Jesus Christ was a good man who had come to earth almost two thousand years ago to introduce moral and religious reforms; “there is a soul of truth in all he said and did is abundantly substantiated in the vitality and endurance of the systems of theology which has been founded upon it.” He believed that Christ had saved humanity through these reforms, not through atonement. “In this sense I understand Jesus Christ as the Savior of men . . . which was enshrined in his pure mind and exemplified in his holy life.”³⁸

Watt did not believe in the fall of humanity; rather, human beings had been progressing from ages past to the present. Each person had “steadily advanced . . . from the lowest point through the evolutions of matter and mind to his present attainments.” Watt did not believe “in the efficacy of sacrificial blood.”³⁹

He also did not believe in the devil. “I can see no room or use for a personal devil,” he stated. This individual was a mythical personage; beliefs in it had denied people revelations from heaven. The “whisperings of angels and other holy manifestations in their . . . endeavors to reach humanity” had sometimes been attributed to the devil, “thus rendering their approach almost imposable.”⁴⁰

Watt recognized the Bible as “repositories of biographical, historical, moral, and spiritual truth” but not as an unerring guide: “To accept sacred writings as infalable guides and rules of faith is equivalent to confining infinite capacities to finite limits; which is an impossability.” He thought that the Bible was “a very beautiful astroaligorical expression of the uncultured notions of primitive man regarding the wonderous mystery of creation around him.”⁴¹

Watt believed that eternal progression went beyond death. The angels were “advanced mortals who do exercise in the care and the advancement of their brethren who are lower down in the scale of existance.” All mortals and immortals were God’s children “in different stages of advancement.”⁴²

He believed that God spoke in many ways. He had studied other religions or, as he put it, had rummaged among the dusty record “resurrected from the filthy rags of mummied myths.” He thought he was one of the first

37. Ibid., pp. 2–3.

38. Ibid., p. 5. There is no discussion of the Holy Ghost in Watt’s long letter. Most Mormons in the nineteenth century did not classify the Holy Ghost or Spirit as a member of the Godhead, but rather as a divine substance or fluid. See Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 29–30, 38–42.

39. Watt to John Taylor, December 5, 1878, p. 6.

40. Ibid., p. 4.

41. Ibid., p. 5.

42. Ibid., pp. 5–6.

to arrive at these eternal truths and the Mormon Church must eventually accept them. He thought the LDS Church contained reformatory energy and was the only Christian church that could advance out of what he called the “ungodly notions which has characterized Christian sects from the first inception among mankind.” The church needed to coexist with other faiths for a time so these other faiths would not suppress it. It now had to have a revolutionary reformation from within.⁴³

Watt hoped that everyone who wanted to live with the Saints would be accepted: “I cencerely [sincerely] hope that the day is not far distant when those conditional bars—upon which all men, in the church and out of it, differ more or less in opinion and belief—will be removed.”⁴⁴ Beliefs by members could vary widely; close social association among members was more important.

Watt felt that even though he had changed his beliefs, that should not prevent him from associating with his old church and friends. It was difficult for him to understand how a person can be “justly severed from the association of his friends purely on account of a change of conviction and faith if it is his wish still to be associated with them.” Many men—“good and true—has for this been severed from your church whose destiny is unchangably cast with the Mormon people. Who care not to live with any other people.”⁴⁵

Watt considered himself as righteous as anybody in the church. More importantly, the “presence of his family has been shunned with freezing persistancy, and debarred from their usual social contact with neighbors and friends as though they carried with them the poison of the deadly Upas.”⁴⁶ He and his family had to socialize among themselves: “We have been forced to take shelter within our lonely environments to comfort each other as best we could, often shedding tears of grief and vexation, in our heart yearnings for that intercommunication with friends to satisfy our longings for those social delights which well poised man and woman require.” He felt that this exclusionism was an untrue attribute of religion.⁴⁷

Watt thought this feeling of coldness had started to melt, “gradually giving way to the aura of love and friendship,” after John Taylor had become president of the church. Watt repeated a theme he had often stated in his letters: “While love sings, and friendship pleads resistance dies. When

43. Ibid., p. 7.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., p. 8.

46. The Upas is a poisonous tree found in Southeast Asia. The poison comes from the sap, which exudes out of the bark. According to legend, the Upas could kill all animals and vegetable life for miles around because the air around the tree was poisonous. Europeans at one time thought that natives of Southeast Asia tied people to the Upas tree to kill them.

47. Watt to John Taylor, December 5, 1878, p. 9.

coercion gives place to the guiding hand of love and wisdom, trusting confidence displaces jealous doubt and cowardly fear.” He then concluded his long epistle, “Its imperfections I must trust to your clemency; its aim I shall leave you to jud[g]e of from the spirit of its contents, and in its author you may trust for honesty love and friendship.”⁴⁸

The letter remained on his desk unsent. More than a month later, he added a postscript. He did not want Taylor to believe that he considered himself blameless for his separation from his former friends and associates. He explained what had happened: “While conscious of no wrong doing to man woman and child, during the pilgrimage of my life, either in act or intention, but constantly devoted to one ruling thought of my life, to work and to die in the harness for the triumph of truth and God’s Kingdom on earth,” he was suddenly “crushed, by a public charge of meanness and sly robbery, by one against whose affirmation I had no appeal.” He must have been referring to the argument with Brigham Young. “I could only see my character as an honest man gone among my friends and brethren, my future efforts to do good defeated, over thirty years of labor and struggle a blank, and branded as a scoundrel to the end of my life.” For that reason, he had left the office. “I have since discovered that I might have taken a more reasonable view of the matter. But feeling outraged and abused, I was chagrined and insensed. I did not take time to reason, but in strict accordance with my impulsive nature kicked over the bucket and spilled the milk.”⁴⁹

Thus began his spiritual wanderings. After that he had joined the Godbeites and learned many of the doctrines he espoused in this period of his life: “My mind gradually lost its fixedness to the one purpose, and merged into a state of mobility. I have wandered over the arid and hop[e]less wastes of infidelity, I have wrestled with the ghostly mirage, and to me, unprofitable manifestations of modern spiritualism. . . . I have looked upon the hard cold and polished surface of exact sciense, to find at last some comfort and spiritual food in the more inductive revealments of true philosophy.” It is not clear which philosophers he read. He reaffirmed that he was convinced that Mormonism held the potential for complete truth: “Deep beneath the surface of the Mormon system of theology I can discover, marked out in unmistakable lines, an unlimited scope of possible attainments for the immeasurable capacity of the immortal mind of man, which offers a restfull hope to the searching and perturbed spirit of the weary wanderer through this vale of tears.” However, “if your humble friend may never again—in consequence of the important changes in his faith—be permitted to be associated as formerly with this section of the grand army of God, he is contented to be a camp follower, minus the usual insults

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 10

and indignities.”⁵⁰ He signed the letter again with the intention of sending it to President Taylor, but it remained unsent.

Two weeks later, he added more to the letter. He discovered when he reread it that he had not included anything about Joseph Smith, who was an essential part of his religious philosophy. He began a two-and-a-half-page discourse on Smith and his contributions; he also explained his beliefs in eternal progression and his difficulties with modern Spiritualism. In reference to Smith, Watt said “that the two forms he saw in the woods had been two mortals—father and son—advanced to immortal dignity through righteousness, who made choice of him as their agent, and to whom they entrusted their particular priesthood or calling.” These two “immortals” had chosen Joseph Smith “to organize a system to embody all dispensations in one is, to me, a most natural and unavoidable consequence.” He believed that Smith “was chosen and authorized by the angels” to be in charge of that dispensation.⁵¹

Watt said he believed that the church of Jesus Christ, both anciently and presently, was founded in Spiritualism: “In the above brief delineation of my faith regarding the mission of Joseph Smith, of course, you see spiritualism.” Modern Spiritualism, however, was homogeneous, indefinite, uncertain, and seemingly devoid of purpose. The Mormon Church was integrated, well defined, organized, coherent in its purpose, and useful to humanity. Watt thought that the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants owed their very existence to what he termed “celestial spiritualism. And is not the Church, with its priesthood ordinances and dignities its legitimate offspring and exponent?”⁵²

Watt finally closed his long epistle:

I have doubtless exhausted your patience. I have had to write what I have written to satisfy myself. I have opened to you my heart, and explained to you-imperfectly-my present faith; that if I am again permitted to enrole myself as a member of your church I may do so as an honest man, and not as a sneak and an embicile. If I cannot do this with the full confidence of yourself and your brethren that I will conduct myself discreetly and honorably while I am enjoying the privileges and hopes engendered by such a position. I would rather remain as I am than be received with jealous distrust.⁵³

After fourteen pages and almost two months, he ended his letter by initialing the last addendum and sent it off to Salt Lake City.

When Taylor received the letter, he understood certain points, but some were so philosophically complicated that he gave it to his clerks to digest

50. Ibid., pp. 10–11.

51. Ibid., pp. 12–13.

52. Ibid., pp. 13–14.

53. Ibid., p. 14.

the points. Even the clerks must have had difficulty, but they finally outlined five beliefs where Watt differed from orthodox Mormonism. The first was he did not believe in a personal God. The concept of a personal God was basic to Mormonism and had been since the days of Joseph Smith. Secondly, he did not believe in the devil. To Mormons this personage, who enticed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, was responsible for all temptations. Third, he saw little use for the Bible. Actually he recognized its virtues, but he could not accept all of its teachings. Fourth, he could not believe in the atonement of Jesus Christ. He recognized him as a good man and reformer but not as a God who atoned for the sins of the world. Fifth and last, Watt did not believe in the fall of humanity. He felt that human beings had started as almost nothing and steadily progressed from earliest times to the present.⁵⁴

Taylor must have sympathized with Watt's need for love and acceptance. He understood that excommunication also meant the loss of old friends and associates, but he also knew that conviction and belief were what made Mormons. Watt no longer held those beliefs; thus, he could not be readmitted into his old faith. It is possible that Taylor sent Watt a short letter explaining this to him. It is more probable that he sent someone to Watt to explain Taylor's beliefs.

Sometime after writing that letter, Watt began a lengthy autobiography of his life. He described his boyhood in England, his experiences throughout his life near Brigham Young, and his movement to Spiritualism. When he finished, he sent it off to Edward Tullidge to publish. Watt's death came before publication, and thus the manuscript languished and was lost.⁵⁵

54. "George D. Watt's Statement of His Faith," Watt Papers. A cataloger incorrectly placed this document in the Watt Papers

55. Watt's obituary in the *Salt Lake Herald* was taken from this autobiography. The newspaper reporter read it before writing the article on his death. That is the last mention of the autobiography. See "Geo. D. Watt Dead," *Salt Lake Herald*, October 25, 1881, 8; or "Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," October 24, 1881, LDS Church Archives.