

SECTION 89

FAITH: Mormonism | TEXT: Doctrine and Covenants | VOLUME: 2013 | AUTHOR: Joseph Smith

OVERVIEW

Doctrine and Covenants Section 89, commonly known as the 'Word of Wisdom,' was dictated by Joseph Smith in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1833. Historically situated amidst the 19th-century American temperance movement, the text addresses the physical health of the Saints. It explicitly prohibits the use of wine and strong drink (except for sacraments), tobacco, and 'hot drinks' (interpreted as coffee and tea). Conversely, it encourages the consumption of herbs, fruits, and grains, specifically wheat for humans. Notably, the text mandates that meat be used 'sparingly' and primarily in winter or famine. While the text opens by stating it is sent 'not by commandment or constraint' (v. 2), it concludes with significant spiritual promises: health, wisdom, endurance, and protection from the 'destroying angel.' In modern Mormon practice, strict adherence to the prohibitions (though often not the prescriptions regarding meat) has evolved into a binding commandment required for temple entrance, making this text central to Latter-day Saint identity and soteriology.

KEY FIGURES

The Lord (Mormon conception), Joseph Smith, Council of High Priests, The Destroying Angel

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. TEMPORAL SALVATION

Assertion: Obedience to dietary laws is necessary for 'temporal salvation' and physical protection.

"showing forth the order and will of God in the temporal salvation of all saints in the last days (D&C 89:2)"

Evangelical Comparison: While Evangelicals believe in stewardship of the body, they reject the notion that dietary observance grants 'salvation' of any kind, temporal or spiritual. The New Testament explicitly teaches that 'food does not bring us near to God' (1 Corinthians 8:8). This doctrine in D&C 89 re-introduces a Levitical-style connection between physical ritual and divine favor that the New Covenant abrogated (Mark 7:18-19).

2. CONDITIONAL PROTECTION (THE DESTROYING ANGEL)

Assertion: Obedience to this dietary code causes the destroying angel to pass over the adherent.

"And I, the Lord, give unto them a promise, that the destroying angel shall pass by them, as the children of Israel, and not slay them. (D&C 89:21)"

Evangelical Comparison: This is a critical theological divergence. In Exodus 12, the destroying angel passed over because of the blood of the lamb on the doorpost. In D&C 89:21, the destroying angel passes over because the adherent abstained from tea, coffee, alcohol, and tobacco. This effectively replaces the sufficiency of Christ's atonement for protection with human merit and works-righteousness.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While Evangelicals affirm taking care of the body, D&C 89 elevates dietary choices to the level of spiritual law. The New Testament explicitly dismantles the distinction between 'clean' and 'unclean' foods (Mark 7:19, Acts 10:15). By re-erecting these barriers and attaching the promise of the 'destroying angel passing by' to them, the text undermines the finished work of Christ. It suggests that Jesus's blood is insufficient for protection without the adherent's dietary works. Furthermore, the text's definition of 'hot drinks' (coffee/tea) as sinful has no biblical basis.

Shared Values:

Stewardship of the physical body; Avoidance of addiction/drunkenness; Value of wisdom and knowledge

Friction Points:

1. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Adds new dietary commandments not found in the Bible and contrary to NT teaching on food.
2. [Major] Christian Liberty – Binds the conscience on matters of food and drink, which Paul explicitly forbids (Colossians 2:16).
3. [Critical] Christology (Atonement) – Attributes protection from judgment (destroying angel) to dietary obedience rather than the blood of Christ.

Semantic Warnings:

"Hot drinks"

In Text: Interpreted authoritatively by Hyrum and Joseph Smith as coffee and tea.

Evangelical: No biblical prohibition exists; 'hot' is a temperature, not a moral category.

Example: *A Mormon refuses tea as a sin; an Evangelical sees it as a matter of Christian liberty (1 Corinthians 10:31).*

"Temporal Salvation"

In Text: Physical preservation and health derived from obedience to law.

Evangelical: Usually refers to deliverance from immediate danger, but never contingent on a new dietary code.

Example: *D&C 89:2 links diet to 'temporal salvation,' whereas the Bible links salvation to God's grace.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: In this text, 'temporal salvation' is physical health and protection.

How Attained: By obedience to the dietary laws (works).

Basis of Assurance: Physical health and the feeling of wisdom are evidences of standing with God.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide by making physical blessings and protection contingent on human effort ('walking in obedience') rather than faith in Christ alone.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Abstain from wine and strong drink (except for sacraments)
2. Abstain from tobacco
3. Abstain from hot drinks
4. Use herbs and fruits with prudence
5. Eat meat sparingly, only in winter/cold/famine

Implicit Obligations:

1. Maintain physical health as a spiritual duty
2. Avoid substances deemed harmful by church leadership

Ritual Requirements:

1. Use pure wine of 'your own make' for sacraments (D&C 89:6)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. I noticed verse 2 says this was given 'not by commandment or constraint.' When did that change, and why?
2. The text promises that the 'destroying angel shall pass by.' In the Bible, the angel passed by because of the blood of the lamb. Do you feel that your diet adds to the protection Jesus provides?
3. Verse 12 says meat should be used 'sparingly' and implies it's for winter or famine. How does the modern church interpret that part compared to the ban on coffee?

4. How do you interpret Jesus's words in Mark 7:15 that 'nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them' in light of the Word of Wisdom?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Body as a Vessel – The desire to keep the body pure is noble. The Bible teaches our body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19), purchased by Christ. We care for it not to earn protection, but because we are already bought with a price. [1 Corinthians 6:19-20]
2. The Destroying Angel – The text acknowledges the need for protection from judgment. The true fulfillment of the Passover is Christ, our Passover Lamb, who has been sacrificed. [1 Corinthians 5:7]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Legalism/Performance [Moderate] – The adherent must constantly monitor ingredients and social situations to ensure compliance. This creates a 'checklist' spirituality where righteousness is measured by what is NOT consumed rather than the heart's posture toward Christ.
2. False Security/Guilt [Severe] – If an adherent gets sick (cancer, etc.) despite obeying the Word of Wisdom, they may question their faith or God's promise. Conversely, they may feel a false sense of spiritual safety based on diet rather than Christ's atonement.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation.

Verification Method: Pragmatic/Experiential: Adherents are told they will receive health, wisdom, and protection if they obey.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the revealed Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16) rather than pragmatic results or new revelations that contradict previous scripture (Galatians 1:8).

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: February 27, 1833

Authorship: Joseph Smith

Textual Issues: Verse 2 states 'not by commandment or constraint,' yet modern Mormonism enforces this as a strict commandment for temple worthiness. This represents a significant evolution in the application of the text versus its internal claim.