

## SPECIAL ISSUE: JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION

HISTORY, CONTEXT, ART, VISIONARY EXPERIENCES

Scholarship informed by  
the restored gospel of  
Jesus Christ

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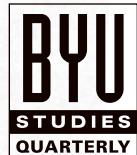
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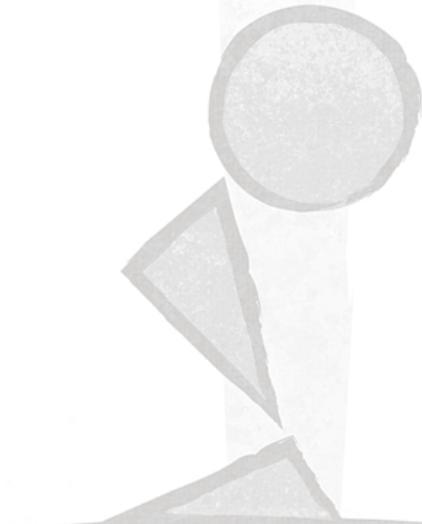
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# The First Vision of Joseph Smith Jr.: 200 Years On

A Conference at the Huntington Library,  
January 24–25, 2020

*Richard E. Bennett*

This special issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly* features the proceedings of a conference held at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith's First Vision. In presenting slightly modified transcripts of the papers delivered at this conference, we hope *BYU Studies Quarterly* readers will gain insights into both this experience of Joseph Smith's and the various ways scholars have come to view it.

Why was the Huntington Library interested in sponsoring a conference in late January 2020 on Mormon history, specifically during the two hundredth anniversary year of the initial vision of Joseph Smith, the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? These are fair questions, and as the one who suggested the idea for this conference in the first place, I will try to give at least a short answer or two.

Not well known is the fact that the Huntington Library has long held some of the most precious early Latter-day Saint historical documents extant. These include several letters and writings of Oliver Cowdery, who was Joseph Smith's primary scribe while translating the Book of Mormon, "second elder" of the newly organized Church of Christ, and personal assistant to Joseph for so many years. Furthermore, decades ago, the family of John D. Lee, the man who was executed in 1875 for his lead role in the horrific Mountain Meadows Massacre of September 11, 1857, donated his papers to the Huntington in hopes that here they would be carefully preserved and freely utilized. Later in the twentieth century, Juanita Brooks of St. George, Utah, whose persistent research led her to write more about the Mountain Meadows Massacre than any

other person, also donated her valuable papers and findings to the Huntington Library. With a sizeable grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Huntington even hired Brooks as a field agent in the 1940s to collect several more regional histories of Latter-day Saints and other residents living in southern Utah. The Huntington has very recently catalogued hundreds of these Mormon-related collections that exist nowhere else and has added to this sizeable collection since then. Never before has the Huntington highlighted its holdings in this field of research. Thus, a conference of this kind not only focused attention on its impressive holdings but also underscored its continuing commitment to build upon its reputation as the leading center in California for Mormon studies.

There may be other reasons. The growth in membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Southern California has been significant in recent years. In the year 2020, thousands of Latter-day Saints who reside within a certain radius of the Huntington are commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of the founding vision of their faith and appreciate the Huntington Library's desire to showcase its holdings. Many are also aware that a chair in Mormon studies has recently been established at nearby Claremont College. Thus 2020 promised to be a year of many celebrations and commemorations, to which this conference was to have been a kick-off of sorts, the first of many significant remembrances. However, the coronavirus pandemic has obviously placed a damper on many of these celebrations. Fortunately, the Huntington conference was able to take place not long before stay-at-home directives began to be issued in the United States.

Entitled "The First Vison of Joseph Smith Jr.: 200 Years On," the conference featured speakers from across the religious spectrum. Some were Latter-day Saints; others were leading scholars from other faith traditions. The program also positioned Smith's claim to visions and revelations within the larger context of American religious history, explored its historicity and theological ramifications, and more generally illuminated what remains, even at two centuries' distance, a highly contested moment in American history. *BYU Studies Quarterly* is pleased to present the proceedings of this important conference.

## The Grove

When the Smiths put money down  
on that plot of land, it was all  
trees. Maples and beech, wild cherry  
and ironwood; ash, oak, hickory,  
elm. The boys must've measured their  
hours by axe-stroke some days as they  
put their shoulders to the slow, sweaty  
work of clearing land. To make room for  
wheat, rye, and oats, for buckwheat and beans  
they brought down maybe six thousand trees—  
those towering majesties—some saplings  
before Columbus laid eyes  
on their world's distant shore.

But those boys laid their axes aside  
long before the land was bare.  
Spared some three thousand of the  
land's old companions, knowing man  
does not live by bread alone.  
They left trees to blunt  
the wind, to offer sap for  
sugar and fuel against the  
winter's cold. Kept a piece  
of that old, wild wood where  
they could go to think, or,  
perhaps,  
to pray.

The Smiths left.  
The trees stayed.

It was thirty years and good  
rail lines later when Seth Chapman  
put money down on the place  
the Smiths had once  
helped farm. Those were  
different days: no one kept woods  
when they could plant cash crops,  
and so tree by tree, all around  
the neighborhood, the old forest  
was turning into new money. But Seth  
could never bring himself  
to put an axe  
to the trees  
on the west end of his lot.  
And he told his son the story of why  
he'd kept it: of the vision it was  
said once opened among the maples and  
beech, wild cherry and ironwood, the  
ash, oak, hickory, and elm.

There are trees there today  
that were tall already when  
Joseph Smith was young. And who can  
know if God shielded them because  
the grove is sacred—  
or if He just wanted  
to keep at least one  
old patch  
of green?

—James Goldberg



Photograph of the Sacred Grove by George Edward Anderson, 1907. Courtesy Church History Museum.

# The First Vision and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

*Elder LeGrand R. Curtis Jr.*

I am grateful for the opportunity to be here with you. As was mentioned, I am the Church Historian and Recorder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In our Church, that position is an ecclesiastical calling. While I oversee the Church History Department—which is filled with trained historians, librarians, archivists, and other professionals—my own training is as a lawyer, and prior to being called to full-time church service as a General Authority, I practiced law for several years. My service as a General Authority has included being in the presidency of the Church's Africa West Area and in different capacities at Church headquarters, including in the department that supervises the production of curriculum and other programs for our Church members. In this presentation, I will draw on those experiences, and others, to reflect on Joseph Smith's 1820 vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ, commonly known as the First Vision. I am not an academic by training, but I hope that I can share some things in this academic setting that will help you understand what we view to be the theological implications of the First Vision and how we share the First Vision with others.

For Latter-day Saints, the fundamental theological truth conveyed by the First Vision is that the heavens are open and that those who lack wisdom can inquire of God and receive God's answers. As individuals, we believe that this is a profound pattern for how we can receive revelation for our own lives. Also, as a community of believers, we place particular importance on the idea of prophets. To understand the role of the First Vision in our church, it is helpful to start in the Bible. The prophet Amos wrote, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he

revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). What we see throughout the Old Testament is God doing just that: revealing his word through those chosen to be his prophets. It started with God speaking to Adam as recorded in Genesis (Gen. 2:16–17; 3:9–19) and continued right up through Malachi where that last Old Testament prophet delivered "the word of the Lord to Israel" (Mal. 1:1).<sup>1</sup> The revelations that came to Old Testament prophets came from God in different ways at different times. These included dreams (Gen. 28:12–15; 1 Kgs. 3:5; Dan. 7:1); writing on tablets (Ex. 34:4; Deut. 10:4); the spoken word (Ex. 19:19; Deut. 5:24; 1 Sam. 3:1–8), including a "still, small voice" (1 Kgs. 19:12); impressions to the mind or heart (Ex. 4:15; Jer. 4:19); and other ways. But the most significant of those ways is the personal appearance of God to prophets. Jacob proclaimed, "I have seen God face to face" (Gen. 32:30). The Old Testament uses that same "face to face" language to describe some of Moses's revelatory experiences, including this one: "And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Ex. 33:11; see also Num. 14:14 and Deut. 34:10). Moses was not the last Old Testament prophet to have such encounters with God. For example, as a youth, Samuel had the Lord come and talk to him (1 Sam. 3:10–14). Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others had similar experiences (see Isa. 6:1; Jer. 31:3; and Amos 9:1).

These appearances of God to man did not end with Old Testament times. They also took place in the days of the Apostles of the New Testament. There are, of course, the multiple appearances of the Lord Jesus Christ to his Apostles and others shortly after his Resurrection (see Matt. 28:18; Luke 24:13–32, 36–44; and John 20:19, 26–28; 21:1–14). Jesus Christ also appeared to Saul of Tarsus (later called Paul) on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–6) and multiple times thereafter (Acts 18:9; 22:17–21; 23:11; 1 Cor. 15:8). There are other appearances of God to persons recorded in the New Testament, including the vision where Stephen was filled with the Holy Ghost and saw God "and Jesus standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55–56; see also 1 Cor. 15:6–8 and Rev. 19:11–16).

Thus, the vision that Joseph Smith experienced in 1820 fits into the pattern of God's dealings with his children as described in the Bible. As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we accept the Bible as the word of God. We also accept the truth of the Bible's prophecies of a general apostasy (Amos 8:11–12; 2 Thes. 2:1–3;

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1. Throughout the book of Malachi, the prophet quotes God saying, "saith the Lord" or similar words. For examples, see Malachi 1:2, 4, 8, 9, 11, 13; 2:8; 3:5, 11–13, 17; 4:1, 3.

1 Tim. 4:1–2; 2 Tim. 4:3–4) and then a restoration of God’s true church on the earth (Isa. 29:14; Dan. 2:44; Acts 3:21; Eph. 1:10; Rev. 14:6). For us, Joseph Smith’s First Vision was the beginning of the promised “times of refreshing” and “restitution of all things” prophesied by the Apostle Peter (Acts 3:19, 21).

So, the First Vision is important because it begins this restoration. Later revelations would bring the authority of the priesthood, additional scripture, ordinances (including temple ordinances), doctrinal principles, and much more.<sup>2</sup>

Although the First Vision is just the beginning of the Restoration, it still has important implications for Latter-day Saint theology. First, it shows us that God does hear and answer prayers asked with faith, just as James 1:5 states.<sup>3</sup>

Second, we learn from the First Vision that God is willing to reveal his will to mortals, just as he did in Bible times. Additional revelations lay ahead for Joseph and the Church, but the First Vision shows that just as God spoke face to face with Moses, he can speak face to face with a prophet in modern times.

Third, the First Vision teaches us much about the nature of God. Just as Stephen was shown the distinctness of the three members of the Godhead through his vision, Joseph was allowed to learn the same thing through his vision.<sup>4</sup> Joseph also learned that God is merciful and would forgive the sins of the truly penitent.<sup>5</sup> He learned that such forgiveness is possible because of Christ’s suffering for mankind’s sins.<sup>6</sup>

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2. For example, see Joseph Smith—History 1:72; and Doctrine and Covenants 110; 124:40. The Doctrine and Covenants was first published in 1835 and contains over 130 revelations received by Joseph Smith during his lifetime.

3. James 1:5 states, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”

4. Like Stephen, Joseph was filled with the Holy Ghost as he saw God the Father and Jesus Christ as separate, distinct personages. Joseph Smith—History 1:17; “Journal, 1835–1836,” 24, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>; Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 707.

5. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>; Orson Pratt, *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 5.

6. “Revelation, circa Summer 1829 [D&C 19],” 40, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-circa-summer-1829-dc-19/2>; Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–19.

Fourth, through the First Vision, Joseph learned the reality of the prophesied general apostasy and that the fulness of the gospel would be restored.<sup>7</sup> Joseph learned directly from God that he was not to join any of the churches then existing on earth, but instead he was to wait for the promised fulness of the gospel (JS-H 1:19–20). That learning foreshadowed what would become Joseph’s lifework: to be an instrument in God’s hands in accomplishing the restoration of God’s true Church.

The First Vision was the first of many revelations received by Joseph Smith. Those revelations inform what we do in the Church today. On the day that the Church was organized in 1830, Joseph Smith received a revelation that started, “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you” (D&C 21:1). Since that time, Latter-day Saints have taken seriously what we regard as a divine charge to keep a record. In the Church History Department, we do this by collecting materials concerning our history,<sup>8</sup> preserving those materials,<sup>9</sup> and sharing what has been collected and preserved.<sup>10</sup>

So, how does The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints share the First Vision? We do it in a variety of ways. Let me mention eight of them.

1. Joseph Smith’s 1838 account of the First Vision is included in *The Pearl of Great Price*, one of the three books, in addition to the Bible, that Latter-day Saints accept as holy scripture. The story of the First Vision is

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7. Joseph Smith—History 1:33; Pratt, *Several Remarkable Visions*, 5.

8. The Church History Department collects information concerning the history of the Church—with respect to both past happenings and current events. This means that we collect documents, photographs, audiovisual recordings, art, artifacts, reports of Church units and departments, and numerous other items from across the globe. We also record oral histories with members of the Church throughout the world.

9. The Church History Department seeks to follow the best professional practices in preserving historically significant material that documents our history. In addition to preserving the original item, we also digitize and migrate copies to more modern formats.

10. The Church History Department shares the history that we have collected and preserved in various ways. We operate a large library, where materials can be accessed both in person and online. We have a publications division that writes and publishes not only historical pieces but also key document collections such as *The Joseph Smith Papers*. We maintain historic sites where many of the important events of our history took place and where those events are commemorated and interpreted in their historical context. We operate a museum where visitors can learn more about our history through artifacts, exhibits, media, and art. We have a website where historical matters may be explored in depth. We produce videos and podcasts that discuss different aspects of our history. In these many enterprises, we seek to fulfill two standards: First, we strive to do our work in a way that would be pleasing to God and true to the divine commission we believe we have received to be a record-keeping people. And second, we follow the best professional practices of various disciplines from documentary editing to curating museums to digital preservation.

thus studied as scripture, and it is readily available to anyone with access to our Church's books of scripture. The Pearl of Great Price is currently available in sixty-five languages and, like all our scriptures, is available free both online and in the Gospel Library app.

2. In the early days of the Church, missionaries typically introduced the restored gospel by telling about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. The publication of the Book of Mormon has remained important, but over time emphasis has also been given to the First Vision. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as agnosticism and atheism spread across the Western world, teaching about the First Vision increased in importance. It was viewed as an important part of our ministry that we testify that God had personally appeared to a modern prophet.<sup>11</sup> The First Vision was included in some tracts used by missionaries early on, including some written by Apostles Orson Hyde and Orson Pratt during Joseph Smith's life. Around 1910, the 1838 recitation of the First Vision was published as a stand-alone pamphlet that was distributed in several of the Church's missions.<sup>12</sup> Potential converts to the Church are told the story of the First Vision, and many proclaim that their conversion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began with the spiritual feelings they encountered when they first heard or read about the First Vision. Full-time missionaries share the story with millions of people, in their own language, every year. That is often done the first time someone encounters the missionaries.

As a young missionary in Italy, I shared this account over and over, both by reciting the experience and by giving a copy of the Joseph Smith pamphlet to those we taught. I have feelings of sacredness as I remember standing in piazzas or sitting in people's homes and telling them about the First Vision. Italian after Italian felt the power of that event. During the years that I spent in West Africa, I found that the First Vision was also important to the conversion of the Church members there. For example, in 1964 a Ghanaian by the name of Joseph William "Billy" Johnson was given some Latter-day Saint literature, including the Joseph Smith pamphlet. Johnson wrote, "I read the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and I believed that testimony. I believed it was

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11. James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–61.

12. *The Prophet Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story: A Brief History of the Early Visions of the Prophet and the Rise and Progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (New York: Eastern States Mission, circa 1910).

a great message for the whole world.”<sup>13</sup> Billy Johnson sought to have Latter-day Saint missionaries sent to Ghana, but none came until 1978. While he waited, Billy Johnson spread the Latter-day Saint message and helped establish many congregations of believers who followed the principles he found in the Joseph Smith pamphlet and other literature of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was baptized, with many others, in 1978 on the first day that Latter-day Saint baptisms were performed in Ghana. He became a leader of the Church in Ghana and was a devoted member of the Church until his death in 2012.<sup>14</sup> In 1984, another Ghanaian, Freebody Mensah, was first exposed to the Latter-day Saint faith by two pamphlets, including *The Joseph Smith Story*. He wrote, “I was spellbound after reading, and could not sleep the whole night.” The next morning, he went back to the member of the Church who had given him the pamphlets and asked for more information. He was baptized a month later and, over his life, has served in important leadership positions in the Church.<sup>15</sup>

Africans are not the only people to be impacted powerfully by Joseph Smith’s recitation of his vision. For example, Argentinian Rubén V. Alliaud described his first encounter with the First Vision in these words: “All my life I have been a very rational person, who needs to analyze everything in logical terms and in all directions. However, I remember very well the first time I read about the First Vision. When I finished, there was no place for doubt. It was true, it was all true! Surprisingly there were no other questions or concerns. . . . The knowledge of the First Vision impacted my life in such a way that it changed the course of it forever. I was never the same.”<sup>16</sup> Rubén Alliaud is now serving as a General Authority Seventy in the Church.

Arthur Henry King, a British scholar who converted to the Church and later taught at Brigham Young University, described his first encounter with Joseph’s First Vision narrative as follows:

When I was first brought to read Joseph Smith’s story, I was deeply impressed. I wasn’t inclined to be impressed. As a stylistician, I have spent my life being disinclined to be impressed. So when I read his

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13. E. Dale LeBaron, “Steadfast African Pioneer,” *Ensign* 29 (December 1999), 45.

14. Elizabeth Maki, “A People Prepared: West African Pioneers Preached the Gospel before Missionaries,” *Pioneers in Every Land*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 21, 2013, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/ghana-pioneer-jwb-johnson>.

15. Freebody Acquah Mensah, Biographical Information, January 11, 2013. In possession of author.

16. Email from Rubén V. Alliaud to author.

story, I thought to myself, this is an extraordinary thing. This is an astonishingly matter-of-fact and cool account. This man is not trying to persuade me of anything. He doesn't feel the need to. He is stating what happened to him, and he is stating it, not enthusiastically, but in quite a matter-of-fact way. He is not trying to make me cry or feel ecstatic. That struck me, and that began to build my testimony, for I could see that this man was telling the truth.<sup>17</sup>

3. Although the 1838 narrative that Joseph Smith dictated as part of an official history of the Church is the most comprehensive and well-known recitation of his 1820 vision, it is not the only one. Joseph Smith related the vision at different times to different audiences. Beginning with Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith in 1945, some have interpreted the variations in the accounts as evidence that Joseph embellished his experience over time, or that he manufactured the experience later in his life to bolster his religious authority.<sup>18</sup>

However, many scholars acknowledge the variations in the accounts but tend to interpret them differently than Brodie did. These scholars understand that the accounts differ but do not interpret the differences as evidence that the vision did not happen when and how Joseph Smith said it did. Richard Bushman and Stephen Prothero, for example, have both noted that they expect different accounts of the same experience given over many years to different audiences for different purposes to differ in details and emphasis. I attribute the differences in the accounts partly to Joseph Smith's inability to adequately describe his experience, which is something he mentioned and lamented repeatedly. I believe that the accounts, taken as a whole, are harmonious, and that the differences are expected rather than a cause to suspect that Joseph did not experience a vision of divine beings.<sup>19</sup>

So, one of the ways that we share the story of the First Vision is by publishing these different accounts. Several articles about these different accounts have appeared in Church publications over the years.<sup>20</sup> In

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17. Arthur Henry King, *Arm the Children: Faith's Response to a Violent World* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1998), 288.

18. See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945).

19. Stephen R. Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 171; Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (1969): 83. My thanks to Steven C. Harper for sharing these thoughts as I prepared this paper.

20. For example, see James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision; What Do We Learn from Them?" *Improvement Era* 73, no. 4 (1970):

addition, about five years ago, the Church published a series of essays known as the Gospel Topics Essays that provide additional context to various historical and doctrinal issues. One of these essays, entitled “First Vision Accounts,” addresses the multiple accounts of the First Vision. The differences between the accounts and the basic consistency are discussed.

This essay has been published in many languages and has been read hundreds of thousands of times. It contains links to all known accounts of the First Vision so that Latter-day Saints and others can read for themselves the words of the accounts. In addition, various writers have produced harmonies and other writings concerning these different firsthand accounts and several descriptions recorded by Joseph’s contemporaries.<sup>21</sup>

4. Many other publications of the Church have also told the story of the First Vision. In 2018, the Church published the first volume of a new narrative history of the Church entitled *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*. The goal of the *Saints* project is to write an accessible multivolume history that can be read by Latter-day Saint adults and teenagers around the world. The books are translated into fourteen languages and are available either in inexpensive paperback printings or as free ebooks or audio books on the internet. We frankly have been stunned by the success of the book; over 500,000 print copies have been sold, 30 percent in non-English languages, and we believe that over one million people have read volume 1 in digital formats (in our Church’s Gospel Library app, our largest content channel, the 46 chapters in volume 1 have been viewed more than 110 million times).

Chapter 2 of this first volume tells about the First Vision, using details from the different accounts. Here is how the incident is described in *Saints*:

Joseph rose early on a spring morning in 1820 and set out for the woods near his home. The day was clear and beautiful, and sunlight filtered through the branches overhead. He wanted to be alone when he prayed,

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4–13; and Richard L. Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s Testimony of the First Vision,” *Ensign* 26 (April 1996): 10–21.

21. For example, see Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971); Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012); and Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 1–35.

and he knew a quiet spot in the woods where he had recently been clearing trees. He had left his ax there, wedged in a stump.

Finding the place, Joseph looked around to make sure he was by himself. He was anxious about praying out loud and did not want to be interrupted. Satisfied he was alone, Joseph knelt on the cool earth and began to share the desires of his heart with God. He asked for mercy and forgiveness and for wisdom to find answers to his questions. “O Lord,” he prayed, “what church shall I join?” As he prayed, his tongue seemed to swell until he could not speak. He tried to pray again, but the footsteps grew louder, as if someone was coming for him. He sprang to his feet and spun around, but still he saw no one. Suddenly, an unseen power seized him. He tried to speak again, but his tongue was still bound. A thick darkness closed in around him until he could no longer see the sunlight. Doubts and awful images flashed across his mind, confusing and distracting him. He felt as if some terrible being, real and immensely powerful, wanted to destroy him.

Exerting all his strength, Joseph called once more to God. His tongue loosened, and he pleaded for deliverance. But he found himself sinking into despair, overwhelmed by the unbearable darkness and ready to abandon himself to destruction. At that moment, a pillar of light appeared over his head. It descended slowly and seemed to set the woods on fire. As the light rested on him, Joseph felt the unseen power release its hold. The Spirit of God took its place, filling him with peace and unspeakable joy. Peering into the light, Joseph saw God the Father standing above him in the air. His face was brighter and more glorious than anything Joseph had ever seen. God called him by name and pointed to another being who appeared beside Him. “This is My Beloved Son,” He said. “Hear Him!” Joseph looked into the face of Jesus Christ. It was as bright and glorious as the Father’s.

“Joseph,” the Savior said, “thy sins are forgiven.” His burden lifted, Joseph repeated his question: “What church shall I join?”

“Join none of them,” the Savior told him. “They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.”

The Lord told Joseph that the world was steeped in sin. “None doeth good,” He explained. “They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments.” Sacred truths had been lost or corrupted, but He promised to reveal the fullness of His gospel to Joseph in the future.

As the Savior spoke, Joseph saw hosts of angels, and the light around them blazed brighter than the noonday sun. “Behold, and lo, I come quickly,” the Lord said, “clothed in the glory of My Father.”

Joseph expected the woods to be devoured by the brilliance, but the trees burned like Moses’s bush and were not consumed.

When the light faded, Joseph found himself lying on his back, looking up into heaven. The pillar of light had departed, and his guilt and confusion were gone. Feelings of divine love filled his heart. God the Father and Jesus Christ had spoken to him, and he had learned for himself how to find truth and forgiveness.<sup>22</sup>

5. As mentioned previously, *Saints* is a narrative history. It is designed for general readers. By following the footnotes, readers can access the original sources online. Some of the footnotes point to the Joseph Smith Papers, a multivolume compilation of primary documents related to Joseph Smith. On the Joseph Smith Papers website, readers can view primary sources side by side with the transcriptions of documents related to the life of Joseph Smith, including those linked to the First Vision. The print volumes of the Joseph Smith Papers contain all four firsthand accounts of the theophany, while the website also includes five secondary accounts written during Joseph's lifetime.<sup>23</sup> The primary accounts are accessed by tens of thousands of individuals every year on the website. They are, by far, the most popular documents on the site. This is partly because they are linked to other Church sites, such as the Gospel Topics Essays and *Saints*. As you can see, we are going to great lengths to make all documents related to the First Vision accessible.

In addition to the documents found in the written volumes and online, supplemental materials include lesson plans for high school and college classes covering topics like "Joseph Smith's Early Visions and Frontier Revivalism."<sup>24</sup> The website also features videos with scholars discussing the First Vision.<sup>25</sup> A podcast was released a few weeks ago by the Joseph Smith Papers featuring historians who explore the historical context of Joseph's day and various aspects of the First Vision in six episodes.

6. Some of the footnotes in *Saints* take readers to short essays on various topics mentioned in *Saints*. Several of these essays relate to the First Vision. These can be found in "Church History Topics" in the Church

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22. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 14–16.

23. "Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Deity," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>.

24. See "Joseph Smith's Early Visions and Frontier Revivalism," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/early-visions-and-frontier-revivalism>.

25. Available at <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/media/videos>.

History section of [ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org) and the Church's Gospel Library app. These essays cover such topics as "Awakenings and Revivals," "Christian Churches in Joseph Smith's Day," "Joseph Smith's First Vision Accounts," "Palmyra and Manchester," "Religious Beliefs in Joseph Smith's Day," and "Sacred Grove and Smith Family Farm."<sup>26</sup> These short essays provide general context to better orient readers to time and place as specific events relate to Latter-day Saint history. Each essay contains a bibliography that is intended to help the reader explore topics further by citing the best available secondary sources. Of course, not many readers are able to participate in graduate seminars taught by Professor Marsden or Professor Taves, but readers can investigate our topic on "Christian Churches in Joseph Smith's Day" and if they are interested in more information, they will be directed to a reading list including Nathan Hatch's *Democratization of American Christianity*, Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, and John Wigger's *Taking Heaven by Storm*. I would even hope that Professor Wigger may have seen a small uptick in book sales from curious readers of our Church History Topics!

7. The Church operates a museum where the story of the Church is experienced through artifacts, documents, textiles, and art. We also use multimedia displays in the museum to share Church history. In the museum, our permanent exhibit highlights the First Vision, including an art glass window depicting the Father and the Son appearing to Joseph Smith. Visitors are able to watch a seven-minute video depiction of the vision that immerses viewers in a theater experience surrounded by a wide curved screen with surround sound.<sup>27</sup> This is designed to be more than a film; it provides a sensory experience with 204 channels of surround sound featuring ambient sounds recorded in the Sacred Grove. The cinematography takes viewers into the grove with young Joseph, and they witness the events as recorded in the various accounts of the First Vision. As visitors exit the theater, they are able to read the text of the different accounts in an interactive display. I should note that we recognize it is impossible to capture a sacred religious experience through either a narrative history or a film. Joseph Smith said his vision defied all description, and it is impossible to truly depict a theophany in film.

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26. Organized alphabetically at Church History Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/adam-ondi-ahman?lang=eng>.

27. "Ask of God: Joseph Smith's First Vision," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/video/2017-01-0100-ask-of-god-joseph-smiths-first-vision>.

To get the full effect of the 240-degree screen and surround sound, you will need to come to the museum, but it can also be viewed in the Gospel Media section of [ChurchofJesusChrist.org](http://ChurchofJesusChrist.org).

8. In describing the Church History Museum experience, I used the phrase “Sacred Grove.” As you probably know, this is the term that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints use for the grove of trees in Upstate New York where we believe the First Vision took place. The wooded area and the adjacent Smith farm are among the numerous historic sites the Church owns and maintains. Joseph Smith’s family lived on the farm at the time of the First Vision. His family left the farm a few years later, gathered with the main body of the Church in Ohio, and then went on to other places. In 1905, Joseph F. Smith, Joseph Smith’s nephew and then President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, visited the farm and the grove. Starting with that visit, Church leaders began considering the possibility of purchasing the property. In 1907, George Albert Smith, an Apostle and another relative of Joseph Smith, acted as agent on behalf of the Church to purchase the farm, grove, and other land for \$20,000. On the day of the purchase, Elder Smith recorded, “The property is in good condition and is a beautiful farm. I[t] is where the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph the Prophet.”<sup>28</sup>

Once the Church obtained the land, members and missionaries began visiting the site in greater numbers. Religious services and other meetings came to be held in these woods. A small clearing was developed in the center of the grove with benches, a pulpit, and, eventually, a sound system. Over time, it was determined that the Sacred Grove could serve its purpose better if it was not used as a meeting place but was rather preserved as a place where people could come and reflect about the sacred experience of God the Father and Jesus Christ appearing to the Prophet Joseph Smith. The meeting benches, pulpit, and sound system were removed from the grove to restore authenticity to the site. Meetings now take place outside of the grove rather than in it. Efforts were and are made to help the grove look and feel, as much as possible, as it would have looked and felt in 1820 when the First Vision took place. Foresters help with this important work. We do not know the precise spot where Joseph knelt to pray, but we consider the entire area to be sacred. Visitors frequent the grove and can walk on designated paths through the area or sit on benches adjacent to the paths.

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28. George Albert Smith, journal, June 10, 1907, Church History Library.

The farm portion of this property includes a few buildings. The log home in which the family lived at the time of the First Vision has been reconstructed on its original foundation. The frame home that the family later built on the farm has also been restored. Both homes are furnished with period pieces and are open for free tours. Volunteers at the site provide visitors with historical information about the Smith family and the First Vision.

Of course, there are many other ways that the First Vision is shared and remembered. Countless talks and articles have discussed and explored this remarkable vision over the years. Songs have been composed and movies have been made concerning it. Many artistic renderings have been created, including woodcarvings and stained glass windows that adorn some of our buildings.

The First Vision remains an important part of our Church's history. Millions of people around the globe have been impacted for good by it as it has been shared by Joseph Smith and the church that was restored through him. I am one of those millions.

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Walter Rane, *If Any of You Lack Wisdom*, 2004, oil on board. © Walter Rane.

# Raising the Stakes

## How Joseph Smith's First Vision Became All or Nothing

*Steven C. Harper*

Joseph Smith (1805–1844) inhabited a visionary world and belonged to a visionary family.<sup>1</sup> At about age twelve, he began to worry about his soul and started searching the Bible. As he compared the scriptures to the Christian denominations where he lived in western New York State, he found discord. For two or three years, he worried about “the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind.” He became “exceedingly distressed” and “convicted” of his sins, a problem compounded by his inability to find any “society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament.”<sup>2</sup>

Finally, he went to the woods and “cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and obtain mercy.” Joseph Smith’s earliest known account of what happened next says “a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the <Lord> opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph <my son> thy sins are forgiven thee.”<sup>3</sup>

He recorded at least four accounts of this experience between 1832 and 1842, and a few of his contemporaries wrote secondary accounts during his lifetime. Generally speaking, however, the earliest Latter-day Saints did not know much, if anything, about Joseph Smith’s first vision. It was not typically taught by missionaries or regarded as a point

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1. See Richard L. Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–1998): 183–204.

2. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 2, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/2>.

3. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3.

of orthodox belief. That changed gradually after it was canonized in 1880. In 2002, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley stated, “We declare without equivocation that God the Father and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, appeared in person to the boy Joseph Smith.” He added, “Our whole strength rests on the validity of that vision. It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens.”<sup>4</sup>

Clearly the stakes have been raised over time. Joseph Smith’s first vision is exponentially more important to Latter-day Saints now than it was when the Church was restored in 1830. Perhaps as an effect of that newfound importance, today the vision is a battleground—people negotiate their identities and relationships relative to it as they join or leave the Church, as they fight for or against the faith. How were the stakes raised?

What follows is not the whole story; this focuses on a few historical hinges in the larger story. These turning points may seem inevitable. It would be unwise, however, to assume that Joseph Smith’s first vision would automatically become common knowledge to Latter-day Saints, or that they would inevitably consider it scripture, or that it would, by default, become the faith’s genesis story. Many contingent choices combined and compounded to raise the stakes.

## 1: Joseph Smith Overcame Reluctance to Tell and Record His Experience

Joseph Smith did not have to tell anyone about his vision. He did not have to record it. If he had chosen not to do either, there would have been no stakes to raise. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would have a different point of origin, probably the angel calling Joseph to the work of bringing forth the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith reported that a few days after his first vision, he “happened to be in company” with a Methodist preacher who had stirred many souls (including his). “I took occasion to give him an account of the vision,” Joseph remembered eighteen years later. “I was greatly surprised at his behaviour, he treated my communication not only lightly but with great contempt.” The minister said the story was of the devil, visions had ended with the Apostles, and there would never be another one.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith,” *Ensign* 32, no. 11 (November 2002): 80.

5. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 3–4, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/3>.

“Telling the story,” Joseph eventually explained, “had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion and was the cause of great persecution.”<sup>6</sup> So apparently he turned inward and thought much about whether to tell, whom to tell, and how to tell his experience.

After years of what he called “serious reflection,” he embraced the identity of the persecuted visionary. He was as Paul before King Agrippa when Paul was relating “the account of the Vision he had when he saw a light and heard a voice, but still there were but few who believed him, some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad, and he was ridiculed and reviled, But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. . . . So it was with me,” Joseph Smith declared.<sup>7</sup>

For much of the time between the vision and the recording of his manuscript history beginning in 1838, Joseph Smith felt torn between revealing and concealing his vision. In the early 1830s, he had no problem preaching the Book of Mormon as new scripture—he published five thousand copies, and he planned to publish ten thousand copies of the Savior’s revelations to him. His first vision was different, however. To Joseph, the Book of Mormon and the revelations were not his compositions—he was a translator and a revelator only, not an author. As such, he remained reluctant to tell his own vision story. He felt compelled by his own revelations to document his past, yet he felt incapable of doing so. But in the summer of 1832, when Sidney Rigdon claimed that God had vested Joseph’s authority in him instead, Joseph confiscated Sidney’s preaching license and declared, “I myself hold the Keys of this last dispensation and I forever will hold them in time and in eternity.”<sup>8</sup> In that context, Joseph decided to tell his story, starting with his first vision.

With his counselor Frederick Williams as scribe, Joseph began “A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr. an account of his marvilos experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Ch[r]ist the son of the living God of whom he beareth record and also an account of the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time according as the Lord brought forth and established by his hand.”<sup>9</sup>

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6. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 4.

7. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 4.

8. On Rigdon’s claim, see Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 560–64; Philo Dibble, “Early Scenes in Church History,” in *Four Faith Promoting Classics* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 74–96; and see the following at the Church History Library in Salt Lake City: Reynolds Cahoon diary, 5–17 July 1832; Charles C. Rich, “History Charles Coulson Rich,” MS, 3–4.

9. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

Williams listed four impressive events in Joseph's life that readers could expect to learn about in the pages that followed, beginning with his earliest experience with God. At that point, Joseph picked up the pen and finished the thought, referring to himself in the third person, as Williams had been doing, then dragged the pen across the page, making a line to separate the introduction from what came next. Below that line, Joseph started referring to himself in the first person, and all the confident language of the introduction vanished, replaced by an explanation as to why what followed was bound to be disappointing now that he was writing his own narrative. "Suffice it to say," he concedes, "I was mearly instructid in reading and writing and the ground <rules> of Arithmatic which const[it]uted my whole literary acquirements."<sup>10</sup>

Joseph Smith then wrote of his first vision in raw, vivid, and sincere terms, but he apparently did not share this 1832 autobiography. The men he had appointed to keep the Church's history seem to have known nothing about it. I interpret these facts to mean that he felt he had to record his experience, but in the wake of the minister's rejection he still found it hard to do. However, at around the same time in the early 1830s, he began telling his vision orally to friends and believers. That seems to have come easier to him than putting it in writing. Considerable evidence now shows that Joseph Smith told the vision repeatedly, perhaps often, in private settings, earlier and more frequently than has been previously thought.<sup>11</sup>

In the aftermath of the Saints' 1838 war with Missouri, Joseph recorded a defensive, resolute account of his vision that would, over time, significantly shape the Saints' shared story. "Owing to the many reports which

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10. "History, circa Summer 1832," 1.

11. Milo Andrus, 17 July 1853, Papers of George D. Watt, MS 4534, box 2, disk 1, May 1853–July 1853, images 231–256, partial transcript in CR 100 317, box 2, folder 15, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, October 3, 2012, corrected October 2013; Joseph Curtis, "History of Joseph Curtis," 5, MSS 1654, Church History Library; Edward Stevenson, "The Life and History of Edward Stevenson," MS 21, Church History Library; William W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, June 2, 1835, MS, Church History Library; "Journal, 1835–1836," 36–37, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/37>; Parley P. Pratt to Latter-day Saints in Canada, November 27, 1836, MS, Church History Library; M. Isabella Horne, "The Prophet Joseph Smith, Testimony of Sister M. Isabella Horne," *Relief Society Magazine* 38 (March 1951): 158–60; A. Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson, eds., *The Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, vol. 1 (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 455. For what had been previously thought, see James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 51–52.

have been put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons in relation to the rise and progress of the Church of Latter day Saints,” he began, the words sounding as if he spat them out in defiance, “I have been induced to write this history.” He had “to disabuse the publick mind, and put all enquirers after truth into possession of the facts.”<sup>12</sup>

It was not inevitable that Joseph would remember or report or record his first vision in these ways. If he had chosen not to, our knowledge of it would be different at best and nonexistent at worst.

## 2: Orson Pratt Keeps the Memory of Joseph’s Vision Alive until the 1838 Account Is Canonized in the Pearl of Great Price

Orson Pratt was the first to publish an account of Joseph Smith’s first vision. Pratt’s *Interesting Account* (1840) marks the end of any remaining reticence on Joseph’s part; he liked how Orson told the story, and it was encouraging to Joseph to find receptive believers in the 1830s. Together, he and these believers published the vision beginning in the 1840s, and then he started telling it to journalists and historians, hoping—perhaps knowing—that they would circulate it in print.<sup>13</sup>

In the nineteenth century, no one worked harder or more effectively than Orson Pratt to make Latter-day Saints aware of the vision and install it as their founding event.<sup>14</sup> Pratt apparently coined the term *first vision* in 1849. In the decades that followed, almost no one preached on the topic besides Orson Pratt, but he preached it effectively and often. By 1880, he would ensure that a mere mention of that pair of words evoked a shared meaning in the minds of many Saints. Even so, in the half century between 1830 and 1880, though Orson Pratt developed

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12. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 1, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2-1>.

13. Orson Pratt, Edinburgh, Scotland, to George A. Smith, London, England, September 24, 1840, George Albert Smith Papers, Church History Library. See Addison Pratt’s journal entry for September 17, 1844, in *The Journals of Addison Pratt*, ed. S. George Ellsworth (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 197. See also Karen Lynn Davidson and others, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 519 nn. 7–9, 489–516; Erastus Snow, “Danish Mission summary, 1849 October 19–1854 August 28,” Erastus Snow Journals, 1835–1851, 1856–1857, Church History Catalog, [https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE561751](https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE561751).

14. Milton V. Backman Jr., “Defender of the First Vision,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: New York*, ed. Larry C. Porter, Milton V. Backman Jr., and Susan Easton Black (Provo, Utah: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1992), 33–48.

and repeated a narrative of the vision based largely on Joseph's 1838–39 account, that version of the Church's origins was not universally shared, not even by Pratt's fellow Apostles.<sup>15</sup>

Early in 1850, thirty-year-old Franklin Richards, an Apostle for a little over a year, arrived in Britain to lead more than 30,000 British Saints. He brought with him an idea for a new "collection of revelations."<sup>16</sup> Published in 1851 as the *Pearl of Great Price*, the salmon-colored booklet included revelations Joseph had published in periodicals but had not canonized or put in a book. These included his 1838–39 account of his first vision.<sup>17</sup>

Three decades later, at the Church's semiannual conference in October 1880, Joseph F. Smith, Joseph Smith's nephew and a counselor to Church President John Taylor, proposed that the *Pearl of Great Price* become canon, and the assembled Saints unanimously consented.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Joseph Smith's 1838 account of his vision became scripture. Canonization requires a community.<sup>19</sup> "Scripture is scripture," wrote Stephen Stein, "only insofar as it is recognized and understood as such by a given community."<sup>20</sup>

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15. George A. Smith, November 15, 1864, Ogden Tabernacle, Papers of George D. Watt, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, May 13, 2009. Compare to George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 11:1 (November 15, 1864), which was heavily edited and infused with extensive quotes that are not in the shorthand. See Brigham Young, March 25, 1855, Papers of George D. Watt, MS 4534, box 3, disk 1, images 142–53, Church History Library, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, July 2009, used by permission; Brigham Young, July 8, 1866, Papers of George D. Watt, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, December 10, 2008, corrected April 13, 2012. See also John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:127 (March 1, 1863); John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:167 (March 2, 1879); and John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:65 (January 4, 1880).

16. Franklin D. Richards to Dr. Levi Richards, February 1, 1851, excerpted in Rodney Turner, "Franklin D. Richards and the Pearl of Great Price," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: British Isles*, ed. Donald Q. Cannon (Provo, Utah: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1990), 180.

17. *The Pearl of Great Price: Being a Choice Selection from the Revelations, Translations, and Narrations of Joseph Smith* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1851).

18. Journal History of the Church, October 10, 1880, 65, Church History Library (chronology of typed entries and newspaper clippings, 1830–present), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=3d758b21-a34a-4fb4-a356-d8ed-ed113e96&crate=0&index=64>.

19. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), ix.

20. Stephen J. Stein, "America's Bibles: Canon, Commentary, and Community," *Church History* 64, no. 2 (June 1995): 171.

Sixty-nine-year-old Orson Pratt, now with snow-white hair and beard, the longest-tenured of the Apostles, watched with great satisfaction as Latter-day Saints assembled in a general conference and raised their hands in support of the proposal to add Joseph's first vision to their canon.<sup>21</sup>

If not for the combination of Pratt's persistence, inclusion of the vision in the Pearl of Great Price, and its eventual canonization, the vision as it is known to Saints today would not have become so commonly known. This is perhaps best observed via John Taylor, who became President of the Church in 1880, at the same time Joseph Smith's excerpted manuscript history was canonized in the Pearl of Great Price. In the 1860s and early 1870s, John Taylor spoke occasionally and briefly of the vision, as Brigham Young and others had before him, blurring events and revelations Joseph Smith remembered as distinct and speaking vaguely of the revelation coming via "an angel."<sup>22</sup> Then, influenced by Pratt and the Pearl of Great Price, John Taylor gave increasingly specific sermons that depended on and finally aligned with Joseph's 1838 account of the vision.<sup>23</sup>

### 3: Joseph F. Smith Shifts Emphasis from Joseph Smith's Last Revelation to His First Revelation

After Joseph F. Smith became the prophet and President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in autumn 1901, he routinely visited Sunday School classes and asked one of the fourteen-year-old boys to stand next to him "to give the children an object lesson of the prophet's

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21. Orson Pratt had substantially revised Latter-day Saint scriptures into new editions in anticipation of the proposal. Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985), 247–86.

22. For example, in 1863 Taylor reportedly preached, "How did this state of things called Mormonism originate? We read that an angel came down and revealed himself to Joseph Smith and manifested unto him in vision the true position of the world in a religious point of view. He was surrounded with light and glory while the heavenly messenger communicated these things unto him." John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:127 (March 1, 1863). In 1872, Taylor reportedly preached, "Joseph Smith came forward telling us that an angel had administered to him, and had revealed unto him the principles of the Gospel as they existed in former days, and that God was going to set his hand to work in these last days to accomplish his purposes and build up his kingdom, to introduce correct principles, to overturn error, evil, and corruption, and to establish his Church and kingdom upon the earth. I have heard him talk about these things myself." John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:365 (March 17, 1872).

23. See John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:167 (March 2, 1879); John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:65 (September 21, 1878); John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:116–17 (November 28, 1879); and John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:161 (December 7, 1879).

age when he received the first vision.”<sup>24</sup> Joseph F. played an immense role in elevating Joseph Smith’s vision to a resilient shared origin story and transmitting it from one generation to the next.

During the first week of March 1904, Joseph F. sat in the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., before a U.S. Senate committee that took advantage of petitions against Reed Smoot, the Apostle newly elected to the Senate, to “investigate” his church and compel its members to be monogamous.<sup>25</sup> Senators interrogated Joseph F. about whether polygamy continued among his people. The primary issue, however, was whether Saints would ultimately obey their government or their God. In the words of Kathleen Flake, Joseph F. had “to find a way to rationalize convincingly the subordination of prophecy to democracy” if he wanted to keep the Protestant establishment from crushing his church.<sup>26</sup>

That task may have been the easier of his two problems. The second was, in Flake’s words, “to remove his people’s faith in one revelation without undermining their confidence in all revelation, as well as the revelator, namely, Joseph Smith and himself as prophetic successor.”<sup>27</sup> Joseph F. Smith succeeded in his first task—convincing the committee that he did not consider himself above the law—but that made the second one even more precarious. He returned to Utah and to the resource best suited to the task—Joseph Smith’s canonized narrative of his first vision—and began in earnest the work Flake described as “re-placing memory.”<sup>28</sup>

Just as his prophet uncle had done, Joseph F. brought a persecuted past to bear on the persecuted present. He raised the profile of Joseph Smith’s first vision and its position as the beginning of the Saints’ narrative.

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24. Anthon Lund, diary, Sunday, September 21, 1902; Friday, September 26, 1902; Sunday, November 16, 1902; Sunday, September 6, 1903; Sunday, September 13, 1903; and Sunday, September 4, 1904, in MS 2737, box 62–63, Church History Library.

25. Reed Smoot to C. E. Loose, January 26, 1904, Reed Smoot Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; unsigned letter by Franklin S. Richards to First Presidency, January 18, 1904, Reed Smoot Collection; Joseph F. Smith to Reed Smoot, January 28, 1904, in *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Richard E. Turley Jr., 2 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), vol. 1, DVD 30; Charles W. Nibley, “Reminiscences of President Joseph F. Smith,” *Improvement Era* 22, no. 3 (January 1919), 195.

26. Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 77–78.

27. Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, 110, 118.

28. Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, 109–37. See also Kathleen Flake, “Re-Placing Memory: Latter-day Saint Use of Historical Monuments and Narrative in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Religion and American Culture* 13, no. 1 (2003): 69–109.

He led the effort to replace the proximate, polygamous past with an ultimate and original, persecuted past. As he toured congregations, Joseph F. continued instructing youth by calling on a fourteen-year-old boy to stand and represent youthful Joseph Smith while he told the story of his vision and “the persecution which followed immediately.”<sup>29</sup>

On December 18, 1905, Joseph F. and an entourage of Church leaders (excluding those still summoned to testify before the Senate committee) boarded an eastbound train and chugged up and over “the mountains behind which they had fled as children,” headed for locations where they would memorialize their founding prophet.<sup>30</sup> For nearly a year, they had planned and prepared for the celebration of Joseph Smith’s one hundredth birthday, having approved the purchase of the property where he was born in rural Vermont and the erection of a monument there. On the anniversary date, Saturday, December 23, they packed into the cottage built for the occasion and listened to the impressive story of constructing the monument.<sup>31</sup>

Joseph F. stood and offered a solemn prayer, dedicating the monument and describing it as he went—a concrete foundation on bedrock, signifying apostles and prophets; a granite base “typifying the rock of revelation”; inscriptions including “Sacred to the memory of Joseph Smith, the Prophet,” “In the spring of the year of our Lord, 1820, The Father and the Son appeared to him in a glorious vision, called him by name and instructed him,” and the text of James 1:5; and thirty-nine tons and nearly that many feet of polished granite shaft.<sup>32</sup> Cumulatively, this was a massive monument signaling the move away from Joseph Smith’s last revelation, the one on plural marriage, and toward his first vision.

After spending Christmas morning in Boston, Joseph F. and his party boarded the train again and set out to sacralize a grove. They disembarked the next day in Palmyra, New York, and hired carriages to take them a few miles to Manchester and the Smith homestead. They walked

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29. Anthon Lund, diary, September 6, 1903; Sunday, September 13, 1903; and Sunday, September 4, 1904, Church History Library.

30. The quote is from Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, 111. A detailed account of the trip by one who was there is in Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith: Sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 355–56.

31. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 358–60.

32. *Proceedings at the Dedication of the Joseph Smith Memorial Monument* (Salt Lake City, privately published, 1906), 9–27. The interpretation here closely follows Flake, “Re-Placing Memory,” 69–109. See also Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, 109–37.

into the nearby woods and sang George Manwaring's hymn "Joseph Smith's First Prayer." Anthon Lund picked up a stick as a memento and later wrote in his diary, "I felt as if walking on hallowed ground."<sup>33</sup> Two years later, the Church purchased the grove.<sup>34</sup>

After Joseph F.'s experience in the Smoot hearings, his uncle's persecution-dominated narrative of the 1820 vision resonated with him. "The greatest crime that Joseph Smith was guilty of," Joseph F. declared in a sermon in London, "was the crime of confessing the great fact that he had heard the voice of God and the voice of His Son Jesus Christ, speaking to him in his childhood; that he saw those Heavenly Beings standing above him in the air of the woods where he went out to pray. That is the worst crime he committed, and the world has held it against him."<sup>35</sup> Joseph F. even asserted that his uncle's 1820 vision led to his 1844 murder.<sup>36</sup>

In the turn-of-the-century turmoil that threatened to undermine the Latter-day Saints, Joseph F. Smith transitioned the Saints away from Joseph Smith's last revelation and focused them on his first vision. In this process, the story became "preeminently the event" of the latter days, "the most important event in the history of the world, excepting only the revelation of Godhood in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>37</sup>

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33. "Tuesday December 26th [1905] We arrived at Palmyra in the morning. Here we hired carriages which took us to Manchester to a Mr. Chapman who lives in the house built by Joseph Smith. Sr. and was the farm on which Joseph (76) labored. . . . We went out into the grove where Joseph is said to have received the first vision. The company sang the hymn: 'Joseph's first prayer.' It was very interesting to see these places and I felt as if walking on hallowed ground I brought away a stick from there. Mr. Chapman and family were very pleasant and accommodating to us." Anthon Lund, diary entry, Edyth Romney transcript, Church History Library. See Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 370.

34. Donald L. Enders, "Sacred Grove," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1247. See also Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 370.

35. *Two Sermons by President Joseph F. Smith: What It Is to Be a Latter-day Saint. Divinity of the Mission of Joseph Smith* (Chattanooga: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Southern States Mission, 1906), 3.

36. "Is it true that God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son came to the earth in the spring of the year 1820 and revealed themselves to the Prophet Joseph Smith? Is that true? If it is you ought to know it, we ought to know it. Joseph declared that it was true. He suffered persecution all the days of his life on the earth because he declared it was true. He carried his life in his hands, so to speak, every moment of his life until he finally sacrificed it in Carthage jail for the testimony that he bore. . . . He knew that the Father had spoken to him, and, pointing to the personage by His side, had declared: 'This is my beloved Son, hear him.' Joseph knew this." *Two Sermons by President Joseph F. Smith*, 3–6.

37. According to a textbook written for use in Sunday Schools. John Henry Evans, *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1905), 18.

## 4: Accepting and Teaching the Vision as a Historical Event Becomes Fundamental for Church Educators

In April 1906, the Church's General Board of Education chose Horace Cummings to be the general superintendent of Brigham Young University. He protested that he lacked the advanced education needed for the job, but the board members knew that Cummings shared their first priority: "to teach and train the students in the principles of the gospel."<sup>38</sup> He set to work outlining a religion curriculum to be implemented in the fall.

Joseph Peterson, a psychology professor, came the following year as the first faculty member with a PhD at Brigham Young University. He was followed by a few other scholars who added academic credibility to the campus. Soon Peterson and other psychologists, philosophers, and scientists were teaching theology as well as their disciplines.<sup>39</sup> Many students appreciated how they squared the restored gospel with biblical source criticism, Darwin's theory of evolution, and Jamesian pragmatism, including the idea that visions like Joseph Smith's were better understood as subjective experience than as historical events.

Not all the students liked the new ideas. "Complaints soon began to come to me against these teachings," Cummings noted. He visited the campus, explained what he'd heard to the faculty and students, pled with them for orthodoxy, and reminded them that the "school was established to teach the gospel of Christ and not its opposite, to destroy faith."<sup>40</sup>

Following this occasion, however, more faculty accepted the "new thought," more students embraced the teaching, more such ideas spread to other Church schools, and more complaints reached headquarters.<sup>41</sup> In January 1911, the board sent Cummings to investigate. "I spent about nine days," he wrote, "visiting classes, talking with teachers and students, and in the evenings I visited some of the parents to see what they thought of the situation."

Cummings submitted his written report to the board "concerning the nature and effect of certain theological instructions given, mostly

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38. Horace Cummings, Autobiography, chaps. 36 and 50, Perry Special Collections.

39. Gary James Bergera, "The 1911 Evolution Controversy at Brigham Young University," in *The Search for Harmony: Essays on Science and Mormonism*, ed. Gene A. Sessions and Craig J. Oberg (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 23–41.

40. Cummings, Autobiography, 41–42.

41. General Board of Education, Board Minutes, February 3, 1911, 180–86, quote on 182, Church History Library. See also Cummings, Autobiography, 3, 41–42.

by the College professors.” The report included ten unorthodox teachings Cummings observed, including the idea that “visions and revelations are mental suggestions. The objective reality of the presence of the Father and the Son, in Joseph Smith’s first vision, is questioned.”<sup>42</sup> When Cummings pressed this point, he found that some of the faculty “strenuously denied” a historical, corporeal visit of God and Christ to Joseph Smith.<sup>43</sup>

Cummings also discovered that for every student or parent who objected to the unorthodox instruction, others liked it. He spoke with many who described a painful reorientation process. He noted that the theology classes had never been so popular, and he felt caught between the demands of orthodox patrons and those of students and faculty who accused him of destroying “academic liberty” and killing their school.<sup>44</sup>

In February 1911, the board listened to Cummings and appointed a subcommittee to hear Joseph Peterson and two other professors answer for their teaching. They “admitted teaching everything I had charged in my report,” Cummings noted. “It was decided that, since they would not promise to refrain from such objectionable teachings in the future, that their services be dispensed with.”<sup>45</sup> Most of the student body protested and signed a petition “endorsing the teaching of the professors, and praying for their retention by the Board.”<sup>46</sup> The three professors were fired, and like-minded faculty members resigned or did not receive renewed contracts.

That quieted the controversy until a summer day in Utah in 1938. The Church’s faculty who taught the faith to its youth were camped with their families for six weeks of instruction and some relaxation in a spectacular mountain setting. Then on a rainy morning, J. Reuben Clark—formerly a Washington, D.C., lawyer, then a diplomat, and at the time a counselor to Church President Heber J. Grant—addressed the teachers about a topic he and other Church leaders had worried about for several years: the need for orthodox instruction.<sup>47</sup>

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42. Board Minutes, February 3, 1911, 183.

43. Cummings, Autobiography, 41–45.

44. Cummings, Autobiography, 41–45.

45. Cummings, Autobiography, 41–45.

46. *Deseret News*, March 11, 1911; *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 12, 1911; Chamberlain Oral History, 8, cited in *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith*, 143 n. 23, 426.

47. Scott C. Esplin, “Charting the Course: President Clark’s Charge to Religious Educators,” *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 7, no. 1 (2006): 103–19. Just one week after the Aspen Grove address, Joseph Fielding Smith, acting as Church

The next day, the *Deseret News* carried excerpts and characterized Clark's talk as "an official pronouncement of the First Presidency of the Church," giving "direct counsel" to its religious educators.<sup>48</sup> Within a week, the *News* printed the entire talk, and within a month the Church's *Improvement Era* published it again, but before the sun set on the day Clark spoke, those who heard him had segregated themselves over it.<sup>49</sup> "There was considerable discussion about it around our campfires," one of them remembered. "We divided ourselves up pretty quickly into liberal and conservative camps." One person even rose from an impassioned discussion and announced that he was going to resign.<sup>50</sup>

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Historian, wrote to President Clark and informed him that he had "been hoping and praying for a long time for something of this kind to happen." Smith continued, furthermore, to support the First Presidency's decision to deliver the address, claiming that he had personally spoken to many teachers as well as to the Church's commissioner of education, he "realizing thoroughly the need of such counsel and wisdom." In a response to Smith dated that same day, Clark wrote that the First Presidency had "felt for some time—as you say you have felt—that something of this sort should be said." Joseph Fielding Smith to J. Reuben Clark Jr., August 15, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers, Perry Special Collections; and J. Reuben Clark Jr. to Joseph Fielding Smith, August 15, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers. In a written reply to BYU student Merrill Y. Van Wagoner, who had responded to President Clark's address with a letter voicing his perception of BYU's failure in teaching doctrine, Clark affirmed to Van Wagoner that his was "not the only statement of this sort that comes to us" and that it would be valuable to the First Presidency in its attempt to remediate the current "difficult situation" within the Church's educational system. J. Reuben Clark Jr. to Merrill Y. Van Wagoner, September 3, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers. Jesse W. Richins of the Twin Falls Idaho Stake Presidency wrote to President Clark on September 5, following Clark's address, expressing his surety that the message had been "not only very timely but very much needed." Jesse W. Richins to J. Reuben Clark Jr., September 5, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers. Writing from the Louisville office of the Central States Mission, Mission President William T. Tew responded to Clark's address (which he had obtained via the *Improvement Era*) with sentiments similar to Smith and Bischoff: "Many of us who have been in this system for years have long since recognized the need of such a barometer in our teachings." William T. Tew to J. Reuben Clark Jr., September 8, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers. Jacob P. Trayner, superintendent of the LDS Hospital at Idaho Falls, wrote to President Clark on September 14, inquiring whether the First Presidency might consider issuing the Aspen Grove address in pamphlet form. Jacob H. Trayner to J. Reuben Clark Jr., September 14, 1938, and J. Reuben Clark Jr. to Jacob H. Trayner, September 22, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers.

48. "Pres. Clark Sets Forth Church Seminary Policies," *Deseret News*, August 9, 1938, clipping included in MSS 303, box 215, folder 8, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers.

49. "First Presidency Sets Standards for Church Educators," *Deseret News*, August 13, 1938.

50. Sterling M. McMurrin and L. Jackson Newell, *Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion* (Salt Lake City:

Clark had drawn a polarizing line around orthodoxy, around “two prime things that may not be overlooked, forgotten, shaded, or discarded.” First, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the crucified and risen Christ. “The second of the two things to which we must all give full faith is that the Father and the Son actually and in truth and very deed appeared to the Prophet Joseph in a vision in the woods,” Clark said.<sup>51</sup>

Clark consciously described the vision as a *fundamental* of the faith.<sup>52</sup> For Latter-day Saints, Clark declared, the line was drawn at Joseph Smith’s first vision, and that significantly raised the stakes.

## 5. Dale Morgan’s Source Criticism of the First Vision Is Circulated in Fawn Brodie’s Biography of Joseph Smith

Two days after J. Reuben Clark made belief in the canonized version of Joseph Smith’s first vision a test of orthodoxy, Dale L. Morgan, just graduated from the University of Utah, began work as a historian as part of the New Deal.<sup>53</sup> Raised as a Latter-day Saint and already a gifted writer, Morgan was haunted by meningitis-induced deafness that struck just as he was coming of age. In college he traded faith-based explanations for psychological ones and began to view his society through a sociological lens. He was “undergoing a wholesale revision of all [his] beliefs,” he said, just as he went to work surveying records and compiling county histories.<sup>54</sup>

In his spare time, Morgan began research for a history *magnum opus*. He dug into the canonized part of Joseph’s manuscript history and

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Signature, 1996), 115. See also N. L. Nelson to J. Reuben Clark, September 2, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers.

51. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” address to seminary and institute of religion leaders at the Brigham Young University summer school in Aspen Grove, Utah, on August 8, 1938 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992), 1–2, [https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/ldsorg/manual/seminary/32709\\_000.pdf](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/ldsorg/manual/seminary/32709_000.pdf).

52. Clark framed his talk in terms that situated it relative to debates about Protestant fundamentalism. A good survey of the controversy is George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), especially see pp. 56–61.

53. Richard Saunders, “‘The Strange Mixture of Emotion and Intellect’: A Social History of Dale L. Morgan, 1933–42,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 48.

54. Saunders, “Strange Mixture,” 49, cites Morgan to Jerry Bleak, May 22, 1938, Bleak Letters, in n. 30, but on the page says it was May 1939. Morgan to Jerry Bleak, November [December] 31, 1938, Bleak Letters, quoted in Saunders, 50 n. 34.

compared it closely with Oliver Cowdery's historical letters, becoming an early, serious source critic of the Saints' genesis story, the first to ask when and why the sources were created and how they compared to each other, among the first to ask questions about the historical memory of Joseph Smith and his followers.

Almost no one knew at the time that there were a couple of primary but unpublished accounts of the vision in the Church's archive: a brief 1832 autobiography and an 1835 journal entry. Morgan thus felt sure "that no man in his church, not even Joseph himself, suspected in 1835 that he had been visited in his youth by the Father and the Son."<sup>55</sup> The later discovery of those sources and others would prove Morgan wrong on that point and raise the stakes even higher.

Morgan knew that the laity accepted the canonized story at face value, while outsiders simply dismissed Joseph's story as either ridiculous or evidence of psychosis. Morgan thought metaphorically of the source texts as a mural whose visible layer obscured "underpaint."<sup>56</sup> He was first to painstakingly peel back the layers insofar as the available sources allowed and was behind only Orson Pratt and B. H. Roberts in seeing dissonance between and in these sources.<sup>57</sup>

He concluded "that the idea of a visitation from the Father and the Son was a late improvisation" by Joseph Smith, "no part at all of his original design."<sup>58</sup> Morgan's source criticism led to his conclusion that Joseph Smith enlarged his story over time, that there was no 1820 vision and only Joseph's later "conception investing him with an ineffable dignity, for in all recorded history, to what other men have the Father and the Son appeared?"<sup>59</sup>

Morgan's claims had potential to wreak havoc on Latter-day Saint understanding of the first vision, but only potential. They made little difference so long as they remained in Morgan's mind, unarticulated by a man who had much to say but who could not hear, rarely spoke, and had thus far not written his arguments except possibly in early drafts.

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55. John Philip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 249.

56. Morgan uses this metaphor throughout his draft chapter. See Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 245–61.

57. For more on Pratt and Roberts as source critics, see Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 98–99, 151–54.

58. Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 247. See p. 255 for Morgan's awareness that he was first to make such observations.

59. Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 253.

Then Fawn McKay Brodie, a friend and protégé of Morgan's and a niece of Apostle David O. McKay, unleashed the potential.

In 1945, the publishing house Knopf published Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*. Brodie had persuaded Knopf of her "attitude of complete objectivity," but she had confided to Morgan about her psychological need to understand Joseph Smith's life and escape his influence. She reflected later that writing the biography enabled her to assert her independence, providing the resolution to what she called her "compulsion to liberate myself wholly from Mormonism."<sup>60</sup>

Brodie followed but simplified Morgan's interpretation, completely rejecting the orthodox position Clark stated in 1938 "that the Father and the Son actually and in truth and very deed appeared to the Prophet Joseph in a vision in the woods."<sup>61</sup> Instead, Brodie argued in lucid prose that Joseph had no theophany in 1820 but simply combined his past—a "half-remembered dream" induced by the anxieties of revival culture—with his late 1830s present—the need for the credibility inherent in divine authority.<sup>62</sup>

She set forth the ideas so boldly that Morgan was "struck," as he told her, "with the assumption your MS [manuscript] makes that Joseph was a self-conscious imposter." She was not a careful historian, and he worried about what he called her "bold judgments on the basis of assumptions," a critique shared by later reviewers.<sup>63</sup> Brodie wrote for the public, however, not for source critics. In abridging the argument, she made it accessible and interesting, giving a wider audience than ever a plausible alternative to orthodox belief. In the wake of Brodie's biography, rumors spread through the laity that Joseph Smith "evolved his doctrine from what might have been a vision, in which he is supposed to have said that he saw an angel, instead of the Father and the Son. According to this theory, by the time he was inspired to write the occurrence in 1838, he had come to the conclusion that there were two Beings."<sup>64</sup> Brodie's book began a war of words. It had to be refuted. The sacred narrative of a people was at stake.

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60. Newell G. Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie: A Biographer's Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 80, 95, 105, 115.

61. Clark, "Charted Course," 2.

62. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 25.

63. Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie*, 87, 95, 105.

64. S. Dilworth Young, "The First Vision," *Improvement Era* 60, no. 6 (June 1957): 436.

## 6. Apologetics, Polemics, and Growing Awareness of Source Suppression

Hugh Nibley, a professor of ancient history at Brigham Young University, published a polarizing, satirical review of Brodie's biography in 1946.<sup>65</sup> In 1961, Nibley weighed in again with a four-part essay titled "Censoring the Joseph Smith Story."<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, a young newlywed named Sandra Tanner was distancing herself from her childhood faith. Her mother had been traumatized by reading Brodie's biography, and Tanner had tried to help her keep the faith but had then lost her own in the process. When Tanner read Nibley's essay, what she noticed was an aside from his argument. He said his great-grandfather wrote a journal entry about hearing Joseph Smith tell his vision. "Because it was a sacred and privileged communication," Nibley said, his ancestor's journal entry "was never published to the world and never should be."<sup>67</sup>

Tanner wrote to Nibley, asking for access to the entry. "The day my great-grandfather heard that remarkable account of the First Vision from Joseph Smith," Nibley replied, "he wrote it down in his journal: and for 40 years after he never mentioned it to a soul. Therefore, when I came across the story unexpectedly I handed the book over to Joseph Fielding Smith and it is now where it belongs—in a safe. The prophet did not like to talk about the First Vision," Nibley reasoned, "and those to whom he told the story kept it to themselves. It was only when inevitable leaks led to all sorts of irresponsible reports that he was 'induced' to publish an official version."<sup>68</sup>

Sandra Tanner wrote to Apostle and Church Historian Joseph Fielding Smith, asking for access. He replied, "Private journals are filed in this office with the understanding that they will be available to members of the family, but not to the general public."<sup>69</sup> Nibley wrote to Sandra again,

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65. Hugh Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History: A Brief Review of Mrs. Brodie's Reluctant Vindication of a Prophet She Seeks to Expose* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946). On Nibley being enlisted to write a rebuttal, see David J. Whittaker's foreword to his anthology of Nibley essays, *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass: The Art of Telling Tales about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), ix–xxi, where he claims twice that Nibley was asked by leaders.

66. Hugh Nibley, "Censoring Joseph Smith's Story: Part I," *Improvement Era* 64, no. 7 (July 1961): 490–92, 522–26.

67. Nibley, "Censoring Joseph Smith's Story: Part I," 522.

68. Hugh Nibley to Sandra Tanner, March 8, 1961, in Pauline Hancock, *The Godhead: Is There More Than One God* (Independence, Mo.: Church of Christ, n.d.), 12–13.

69. Joseph Fielding Smith to Sandra Tanner, March 13, 1961, in Hancock, *Godhead*, 13.

revealing the name of his ancestor, saying, “The reason that Alexander Neibaur told no one of his experience for forty years is that it was strictly confidential and should remain so. I think we should respect his confidence. Actually, the last time I asked permission to see the Journal, I was refused. Any attempt to reproduce it at this time is out of the question.”<sup>70</sup>

## 7. Dramatic Growth and New History

The stakes of Joseph Smith’s first vision were raised substantially in the 1960s. When Church President David O. McKay told the world’s 1.3 million Saints in 1954 “to proclaim . . . that the Church is divinely established by the appearance of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ to the Prophet Joseph Smith,” they shared a single, scriptural memory of their origin story.<sup>71</sup> By 1970, there were 1.6 million more Saints, two newly discovered primary accounts of Joseph Smith’s vision, and a contested new historiography.

In the 1950s and especially the 1960s, Latter-day Saint missionaries baptized more than a million converts worldwide, many of whom were inspired by the story of Joseph Smith’s first vision. In Baltimore, however, the missionaries narrowly missed a couple of converts, thanks in part to a teen named Wesley Walters,<sup>72</sup> who had only recently been “captivated by the marvelous love of God who would provide such a great salvation, and the love of the Lord Jesus, who would die for such a miserable sinner.”<sup>73</sup>

Unbeknownst to him at the time, Wesley Walters’s conversion to evangelical Christianity and his “rescue” of friends from Latter-day Saint missionaries started a cascade of events that would profoundly raise the stakes on Joseph Smith’s first vision. Walters pursued a seminary education and ordination. By 1960, Walters and his wife, Helen, were parents of four children, and he was pastor of a United Presbyterian congregation in Marissa, Illinois. Then out of the blue came an invitation for him to publish an essay in the popular new periodical

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70. Hugh Nibley to Sandra Tanner, March 21, 1961, in Hancock, *Godhead*, 13–14.

71. David O. McKay, in *The One Hundred Twenty-Fourth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1954), 25.

72. Helen Walters, “Wesley Walters, Sleuth for the Truth,” 2, unpublished manuscript in Presbyterian Church of America Historical Archives, St. Louis, Missouri.

73. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 2. On Barnhouse’s appearance and voice, see Margaret N. Barnhouse, *That Man Barnhouse* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1983).

*Christianity Today*.<sup>74</sup> Editor Carl Henry had recruited heavyweights to write about the standard constellation of cults—Jehovah’s Witnesses, Adventists, Christian Scientists—but could think of no one to write the essay on Latter-day Saints until an old professor recommended Walters based on a paper Walters had written for class.

That essay launched Walters into a career-long combat with Joseph Smith’s first vision. When he began his quest, widely known sources were limited to the canonized account and Oliver Cowdery’s 1834–35 letters to William W. Phelps. Joseph Smith had confidently placed the vision in the spring of 1820. Cowdery, however, claimed that the religious excitement “in Palmyra and vicinity” occurred in Joseph’s seventeenth year, not fifteenth.<sup>75</sup>

Which date was right? Walters wondered, strategizing that he could not disprove a vision, but that he could verify the facts Joseph Smith had set forth as context for it.<sup>76</sup> He searched back issues of *Methodist Magazine*. He worked his way through the 1819 issues, finding plenty on revivals but nothing in Palmyra. He found nothing for 1820, nor 1821, and so on. Finally, in the March 1825 issue, he discovered Reverend George Lane’s account of a Palmyra revival that started the preceding summer.<sup>77</sup> The discovery elated Walters.<sup>78</sup> It stimulated and focused further research on the discovery of evidence of the 1824 Palmyra revival to the point that Helen wondered whether it was overkill.<sup>79</sup>

While Wesley Walters was scouring archives in the American Midwest and East, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints hired Dean Jessee to help catalog manuscripts piled in boxes behind a screen of wire mesh in the basement of the Church Administration Building in Salt Lake City. Jessee loved it in “the cage,” as he called it, screened off from the world, surrounded by Joseph Smith’s papers. He traced Joseph Smith’s Manuscript History to the sources behind it,<sup>80</sup> and

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74. For the history of the periodical *Christianity Today*, see Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian: An Autobiography* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1986).

75. “History, 1834–1836,” 61, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed August 26, 2018, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1834-1836/65>.

76. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 4–5.

77. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 5.

78. Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1967): 231.

79. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 6.

80. See source note for “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” at <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/1#source-note>.

there discovered Joseph's 1835 journal entry, in which a scribe recorded Joseph's telling of his vision to a visitor.<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile, James Allen earned a PhD in history from University of Southern California in 1963 and joined the history department faculty at BYU in 1964. Soon thereafter a graduate student named Paul Cheesman approached him excitedly and said he wanted to write his thesis on the First Vision. "I think I can prove that it really happened," he said.<sup>82</sup>

"What makes you think that?" Allen asked, believing in the vision but not that it could be proved by the historical method.<sup>83</sup>

"I have found another version of Joseph Smith's first vision," Cheesman answered.<sup>84</sup> It was an undated manuscript in the voice of Joseph Smith, written apparently by a scribe in the early 1830s on the first six pages of a ledger book before being cut out. Cheesman had been shown the document in the Church Historian's office; Allen went there promptly.<sup>85</sup> As he read, Allen began formulating a new research agenda.<sup>86</sup> When did Joseph Smith begin to tell this story? he wondered. When did he stop telling it, or did he stop telling it? He wanted to know when Saints began to know the story of Joseph Smith's first vision.<sup>87</sup>

Cheesman finished his master's thesis in 1965. It included Joseph Smith's 1832 vision account in an appendix, the first time the document had ever been printed. "This thesis is not an effort to prove beyond all doubt that Joseph Smith was telling the truth," a wiser Cheesman began, "for this cannot be done by empirical methods." He wrote candidly about "the various sources" that had emerged. He argued that Joseph Smith told a generally consistent story over time and offered plausible reasons why Joseph apparently did not write or tell about the vision for years after it occurred.<sup>88</sup>

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81. Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 275–94. Dean C. Jessee, interview by Samuel A. Dodge, copy in author's possession.

82. James B. Allen, interview by Samuel A. Dodge and Steven C. Harper, 2009.

83. Allen, interview, 2009.

84. Allen, interview, 2009.

85. Paul R. Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965), 126; Jessee, "Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," 275–94; Davidson and others, *Joseph Smith Histories*, Volume 1, 2–23; Allen, interview, 2009.

86. Allen, interview, 2009.

87. Allen, interview, 2009.

88. Cheesman, "Analysis of Accounts," 1–2, 126.

Very soon afterward, Sandra Tanner and her husband printed their pamphlet, *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision*. They copied Cheesman's transcription of the new source document—claiming it had been “suppressed for 130 years”—but otherwise disagreed with Cheesman's every argument. He had sought to minimize dissonance in the historical record. They tried to maximize it and to prove that Joseph Smith “did not see the father and the son in 1820.”<sup>89</sup>

James Allen, meanwhile, tried to understand the historical record. He presented his research in Logan, Utah, to a group of scholars who were thinking of forming a Mormon history association. Allen showed them that the first vision was not a factor in the conversions of early Saints, nor was it common knowledge among them or their critics. Joseph was telling it, however, earlier than Fawn Brodie had claimed, some late reminiscences suggested, and as the new document seemed to confirm.<sup>90</sup>

Meanwhile, by 1967 the Evangelical Theological Society had been defending the idea of an inerrant Bible for nearly two decades. That fall, the society's periodical published an unheralded essay but, in retrospect, a highly significant one. Titled “New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival,” it was the fruit of several years of determined research, a paper delivered the previous December at a society meeting, authored by Rev. Wesley P. Walters.<sup>91</sup>

The essay made a cool, historical argument. Granting that he could not prove whether Joseph Smith envisioned divine beings in the woods of western New York, Walters asserted that he could use historical records to check Joseph's claim that unusual religious excitement in his region led him to seek answers and ultimately led to the spring 1820 vision. Having scoured the records, Walters made the case that historical evidence disproved any sizeable revival in Joseph's vicinity in 1820 and therefore that he made up his story later, situating it in the context of a well-documented 1824 revival. “The statement of Joseph Smith, Jr. *can not be true* when he claims that he was stirred up by an 1820 revival

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89. Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision* (n.p., n.d. [1965]).

90. Allen, interview, 2009. Also see James B. Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought,” *Dialogue* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 29–45.

91. *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10, no. 4 (1967). See Wesley P. Walters to James B. Allen, November 3, 1967, Wesley Walters Papers, Presbyterian Church of America Historical Archives, St. Louis, Missouri.

to make his inquiry in the grove near his home,” Walters concluded.<sup>92</sup> His thesis and his method were altogether novel. He rightly concluded that as a result of his work, “all students of Mormon history will be forced to reconsider the reliability of Joseph’s first vision story.”<sup>93</sup>

To that end, Walters had also submitted his essay to *Dialogue*, a brand-new periodical published by Latter-day Saint academics. It had recently featured James Allen’s research on the first vision, including a discussion of the accounts recently discovered by Cheesman and Jesse.<sup>94</sup> *Dialogue*’s editors postponed publication of Walters’s research until they could muster a response.<sup>95</sup> By submitting his essay to *Dialogue* in 1967, Walters awakened a faithful intelligentsia, among whom it caused “consternation.”<sup>96</sup>

Truman Madsen wrote to Church President David O. McKay in April 1968, “The first vision has come under severe historical attack.”<sup>97</sup> Like Walters, Madsen was in his early forties. He was a Harvard-educated philosophy professor and director of the Institute of Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University. Madsen gathered a “steering committee or advisory council.” He recruited forty-year-old James Allen.<sup>98</sup> Another member of the committee was thirty-six-year-old Richard Bushman, whose newly published dissertation, *From Puritan to Yankee*, was about to win the Bancroft Prize.<sup>99</sup>

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92. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins,” 227–44, quote on 228.

93. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins,” 241.

94. Allen, “Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision,’” 29–45.

95. “The Question of the Palmyra Revival,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 59–100.

96. Richard L. Bushman, “The First Vision Story Revived,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 83–93, reports “consternation” on p. 83. James B. Allen had been aware of Walters and his research since at least 1966. See James B. Allen to Rev. Wesley P. Walters, December 6, 1966; Rev. Wesley P. Walters to Dr. James B. Allen, October 23, 1967; Allen to Walters, October 30, 1967; and Walters to Allen, November 3, 1967, in Walters Papers.

97. Truman G. Madsen to First Presidency, April 17, 1968, Truman G. Madsen Papers, Wheatley Institution, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as TGM Papers). Truman G. Madsen to John Wilde, January 4, 1967, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Craig A. Hanson, October 22, 1968, TGM Papers.

98. Allen, “Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision,’” 29–45.

99. James B. Allen and Leonard J. Arrington, “Mormon Origins in New York: An Introductory Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 241–42; Truman G. Madsen to Dallin H. Oaks, January 25, 1968, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Stanley B. Kimball, January 25, 1968, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Frederick G. Williams, February 22, 1968, TGM Papers; Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Exploring the First Vision* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2012), xii; Bushman, “First Vision Story Revived,” 83; Truman G. Madsen to

This team planned a variety of publications. Along with the dialogue to be published in the aptly named *Dialogue*, they wrote monologues for the spring 1969 issue of *BYU Studies*, including the two newly discovered accounts of the vision, and an accessible summary of all the known vision accounts for the *Improvement Era*, trying to coordinate a nearly simultaneous release of the two publications.<sup>100</sup>

At a symposium at Southern Illinois University in 1968, Madsen and Walters coincidentally crossed paths. “Wesley Walters!” Madsen said, eyeing the Reverend’s nametag. “So you’re the one who dropped the bomb on BYU!” The two struck up a conversation, and Madsen thanked Walters: “They’re giving us all the money we want to try to find answers to you.”<sup>101</sup>

The next spring, *Dialogue* lived up to its name when it featured a three-part exchange between Walters and Richard Bushman.<sup>102</sup> An editor’s preface explained why the journal had postponed publication of the Walters essay, and why it was taking the unusual step of republishing it now.<sup>103</sup> After the Walters essay in the publication came Bushman’s, “The First Vision Story Revived,” and then Walters’s “A Reply to Dr. Bushman.”

Bushman had been chosen to respond because he seemed to Madsen and others the least likely to be too defensive.<sup>104</sup> Bushman’s cool, reasoned response matched Walters’s paper in tone and acknowledged the Reverend’s success at avoiding tired issues and genuinely puzzling the Saints’ historians. Even so, Bushman casually predicted a positive result for his

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Ruth Shinsel, October 30, 1967, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Robert B. Flanders, January 24, 1968, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Ruth Shinsel, October 20, 1967, TGM Papers.

100. Truman G. Madsen to Richard L. Bushman, October 18, 1968; and Truman G. Madsen to Ruth Shinsel, November 25, 1968, TGM Papers.

101. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 1, emphasis in original.

102. This exchange included a brief introduction, “The Question of the Palmyra Revival,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 59–60; and the following articles: Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 60–81; Richard L. Bushman, “The First Vision Story Revived,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 82–93; and Wesley P. Walters, “A Reply to Dr. Bushman,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 94–100.

103. Joe Jeppson of *Dialogue* sent Walters word in February 1969 that the journal planned to publish his essay in the next issue, followed by Bushman’s reply (which Jeppson included), and invited Walters to reply to Bushman. He informed Walters, “Bushman is a Harvard PhD who taught at B.Y.U. until he won the ‘Bancroft Prize’ . . . & moved to a full professorship at Boston Univ. He’s LDS & pretty orthodox.” Joe Jeppson to Wesley Walters, February 17, 1969, Walters Papers.

104. Truman G. Madsen to Richard L. Bushman, October 18, 1968, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Eugene England, October 16, 1968, TGM Papers.

side since the essay had galvanized research. “Without wholly intending it,” Bushman understated, “Mr. Walters may have done as much to advance the cause of Mormon history within the Church as anyone in recent years.”<sup>105</sup>

As Bushman noted, Walters arrived at his conclusion largely by trusting Oliver Cowdery’s memory while impugning Joseph’s—or, rather, asserting that Joseph did not misremember the experience and instead manufactured it later using elements of an 1824 revival (that Cowdery remembered accurately) but projecting them back to 1820. Bushman responded that it was more Oliver than Joseph who “scrambled the two events, putting together parts of two stories to make one,” and faulted Walters for trusting Cowdery’s memory as “virtually Joseph’s own personal narrative.”<sup>106</sup>

As Walters argued that the evidence for revivalism was too little and too far from Joseph Smith in 1820 to meet “the standard,” Bushman repeatedly reminded him that there was no objective standard; there was only Joseph Smith’s subjective description.<sup>107</sup> Walters had oversimplified objectivity, Bushman contended, making himself the subjective judge of “how near is near and how big is big” when it came to Joseph’s subjective experience of unusual religious excitement in his region.<sup>108</sup>

Bushman’s article emphasized inescapable subjectivity inherent in historical subjects, including Joseph Smith. But in the late 1960s, and perhaps even now, many more Latter-day Saints shared Walters’s view of static memory and objective history. Walters had begun his essay by citing the Saints’ own authorities affirming the vision’s significance as second only to Christ’s resurrection and ministry.<sup>109</sup>

“Wes,” Helen once complained, “you are beating a dead horse. . . . Why do you keep on looking for more evidence?” He paused, then soberly explained his rationale. “When liberals come up with what they claim are contradictions in the Bible we don’t give up on our faith right away. We look for any possible explanation or way out. And even if we can’t explain one contradiction, or two, we don’t give up on our faith in God’s word. . . . Mormons are the same way.”<sup>110</sup>

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105. Bushman, “First Vision Story Revived,” 83.

106. Bushman, “First Vision Story Revived,” 85.

107. Bushman, “First Vision Story Revived,” 83–85.

108. Bushman, “First Vision Story Revived,” 86.

109. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins,” 227.

110. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 6.

Wesley Walters understood what was at stake. So did James Allen and the editors of the *Improvement Era*, who published in the April 1970 issue “Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision: What Do We Learn from Them?”<sup>111</sup> It was a sophisticated yet accessible synthesis of the historical record and recent scholarship. Milton Backman followed with a monograph in 1971, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, including evidence for religious excitement in western New York State through 1820 and the texts of the vision accounts—Joseph Smith’s four and five others from contemporaries, including the Alexander Neibaur journal entry.<sup>112</sup> Neither Walters’s landmark efforts to undermine Joseph Smith’s first vision nor the responses of believing historians raised the stakes much at the time, however. Too few members of the laity knew about them to make much difference. The potential of the newly discovered records and of ways of interpreting them was waiting for an information age to unleash it.

## 8. Joseph Smith’s First Vision in the Information Age

Grant Palmer’s 2002 book, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*, worked like Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*.<sup>113</sup> They are both poor examples of the historical method, but some readers gained from them an identity-stabilizing relationship to the past. Jan Shipps described this phenomenon. “In some (perhaps many) instances,” she wrote, “study of the community’s history appears to be a surrogate for lost faith. In other instances, however, it becomes an effort to find hard evidence that can serve as justification for abandoning the community’s creedal base. If it is the latter and if the interest in history becomes a preoccupation that leads to writing about the community, very often the outcome is history that is tendentious in the extreme—history the community dismisses as ‘apostate.’”<sup>114</sup>

In *An Insider’s View*, Palmer reassured readers that he had no agenda but truth. With disarming potency, he cast considerable doubt on the Saints’ simple narrative. He didn’t just question Joseph Smith’s vision;

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111. James B. Allen, “Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision: What Do We Learn from Them?” *Improvement Era* 73, no. 4 (April 1970): 4–13.

112. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971).

113. See Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2002), vii–x.

114. Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 179–80.

Palmer confessed that his own heartfelt youthful feelings of the Holy Spirit had been a delusion, or at least a misguided way to discern truth.<sup>115</sup>

Around the same time, President Gordon B. Hinckley delivered his 2002 sermon on the all-or-nothing historicity of Joseph Smith's first vision. He called out "a so-called intellectual who said the Church was trapped by its history."<sup>116</sup> Palmer—the type of person President Hinckley had in mind—advocated that the Church should follow the example of the Independence, Missouri-based Community of Christ (the second-largest church under the restoration umbrella), which was distancing itself from Joseph Smith's first vision, in contrast to President Hinckley's stand.<sup>117</sup>

Critiques like Palmer's multiplied online, where more and more Saints encountered claims that disrupted their shared memory. Why are there no accounts of the vision at the time it occurred? Why does the 1832 account only mention the Lord? Why are there so many accounts, and why do they make conflicting claims about Joseph Smith's age, what he was worried and praying about, and what he learned from God?

Of the Saints who learned of the newly selected and related knowledge, many dismissed or disregarded it. Many others, however, experienced dissonance that led to deeper investigation. Some successfully incorporated new knowledge and consolidated a more complex but still orthodox memory. For others, however, a high degree of unresolved dissonance eroded their faith. They could no longer believe that Joseph Smith experienced a vision, but because it had become the seminal event underpinning their faith, they could agree with President Hinckley: "It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud."<sup>118</sup>

Apologetic websites situated new knowledge in support of the collective memory, adding complexity and resolving dissonance with little disruption. Critical sites selected and related information in ways that undermined the standard story. Bloggers and vloggers and tweeters and trolls weighed in, some posing as objective analysts, others blatantly partisan.

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115. Palmer, *Insider's View*, 131–32, 235–54.

116. Hinckley, "Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith," 80.

117. Palmer, *Insider's View*, 263. On the RLDS/Community of Christ historical shift, compare Joseph Smith III and Heman C. Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 4 vols. (Lamoni, Ia.: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1908), 1:6–12, with Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820–1844* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 51–67.

118. Hinckley, "Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith," 80.

An anonymous person who later posed as an objective analyst wrote, “I was very distraught when I started learning these things. At first I felt as if my entire world had collapsed.” This person began studying for a few hours a day, trying to figure out whom to trust. Deciding that “both sides are guilty of making errors and misrepresenting the facts,” they started [mormonthink.com](http://mormonthink.com) as a place to post pro and con arguments along with a personal point of view.<sup>119</sup> In this environment, the Church could not wisely quarantine information about the vision.

The Joseph Smith Papers put it all online. Building on Dean Jessee’s pioneering work, by 2005 the project had institutional support from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and generous funding from Larry H. and Gail Miller. The resulting volumes have been critically acclaimed for meeting the highest standards of documentary editing. What they lacked, however, was accessibility. The books were large and expensive. Some volumes sold extremely well but were not generally or widely digested.

Then, in October 2013, all of the first vision accounts in the known historical record were published together in a new open-access website, [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org). These documents were already online elsewhere and in print volumes of the Joseph Smith Papers, but pulling them together made them easier to access and signaled to Latter-day Saints and others that the Church was forthright. Relatively few Latter-day Saints or anyone else knew of the documents, however, or paid attention to efforts to publicize them.

Then, without fanfare, on November 20, 2013, the Church published “First Vision Accounts” on [lds.org](http://lds.org). It was an unattributed essay including candid statements of all the issues raised over the years, counterarguments to Brodie and Walters, links to images of all the known accounts, and the epistemology Grant Palmer disputed: “Neither the truth of the First Vision nor the arguments against it can be proven by historical research alone. Knowing the truth of Joseph Smith’s testimony requires each earnest seeker of truth to study the record and then exercise sufficient faith in Christ to ask God in sincere, humble prayer whether the record is true. If the seeker asks with the real intent to act upon the

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119. D. Jeff Burton, “Anonymous Confessions of an LDS Webmaster,” *Sunstone*, no. 150 (July 2008): 67–69.

answer revealed by the Holy Ghost, the truthfulness of Joseph Smith's vision will be manifest.”<sup>120</sup>

The essay had been in the works for a few years. By the time it was published, more people than ever before were firm in the faith of Joseph Smith's first vision. At the same time, probably more people than ever before were experiencing increasing doubt that the vision had happened as Joseph described, along with distrust of the Church as a reliable source of truth on the matter. The stakes were higher than ever.

As had always been the case, many options existed for how the Church could proceed. All kinds of contingent choices could be made. The Church could maintain its line in the sand. Or it could adopt the “evolutionary development” interpretation of Mark A. Scherer, the Community of Christ World Church Historian, who argued in 2013 that spiritual truths, not historicity, are the more important product of Joseph Smith's vision accounts.<sup>121</sup>

In the end, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints did not choose only to tell the old story in new ways, nor only to maintain unequivocally that Joseph Smith saw God and Christ in the grove in 1820, nor only to emphasize the spiritual message in the historical record. It chose, instead, to do all these and more.

In February 2016, Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles gave the annual address by a senior Church leader to Church educators. He declared that they should stop handling complex issues in an old-fashioned way:

As Church education moves forward in the 21st century, each of you needs to consider any changes you should make in the way you prepare to teach, how you teach, and what you teach if you are to build unwavering faith in the lives of our precious youth.

Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, “Don’t worry about it!” Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church. . . .

It was only a generation ago that our young people’s access to information about our history, doctrine, and practices was basically

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120. “First Vision Accounts,” part of the Gospel Topics Essays series, originally published November 2013, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.lds.org/topics/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>.

121. Scherer, *Journey of a People*, 65–67.

limited to materials printed by the Church. Few students came in contact with alternative interpretations. Mostly, our young people lived a sheltered life.

Our curriculum at that time, though well-meaning, did not prepare students for today—a day when students have instant access to virtually everything about the Church from every possible point of view.<sup>122</sup>

Elder Ballard explicitly directed the educators to seek, and help their students seek, accurate history from experts and acknowledged that he did so as well. “Please,” he said, “before you send them into the world, inoculate your students by providing faithful, thoughtful, and accurate interpretation of gospel doctrine, the scriptures, our history, and those topics that are sometimes misunderstood,” including “different accounts of the First Vision.”<sup>123</sup>

Elder Ballard said that the Church had made “extraordinary efforts to provide accurate context and understanding” and pointed to the Gospel Topics essays as “a prime example of this effort.” Then he told the teachers, “It is important that you know the content of these essays like you know the back of your hand.”<sup>124</sup>

In a May 2016 worldwide broadcast to young adults, Nancy and Richard Maynes modeled the new approach. Nancy Maynes spoke from the packed Tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City. She told them about when she was their age and lacked purpose and direction. She was a believer in Jesus Christ. She attended different churches, “hoping to find some answers,” and finally knelt at her bedside and asked God for help. Then she met Richard Maynes, who introduced her to the Church.<sup>125</sup>

“The First Vision was an important part of my conversion,” she said. “I felt a connection with Joseph Smith because he had the same question that I had: Where do I find the truth? Heavenly Father answered his

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122. M. Russell Ballard, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century,” address to CES Religious Educators, February 26, 2016, Salt Lake Tabernacle, accessed online August 25, 2018, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century?lang=eng>.

123. Ballard, “Opportunities and Responsibilities.”

124. Ballard, “Opportunities and Responsibilities.”

125. Nancy J. Maynes, “Finding My Purpose,” Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults, May 1, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2016/01/finding-my-purpose?lang=eng>.

sincere prayer, and He answered my prayer.”<sup>126</sup> Nancy Maynes’s auto-biographical testimony showed a rising generation anew how Joseph Smith’s first vision contributed to conversion and modeled a gospel-based epistemology.

Her husband, Elder Richard J. Maynes, a General Authority Seventy, then did something no General Authority had ever done before in that space: he cited and quoted extensively from “First Vision Accounts,” reviewing the four primary accounts in detail, noting variation and differences but emphasizing their “consistent, harmonious story.”<sup>127</sup>

Elder Maynes ended his address by testifying of Joseph Smith’s first vision and inviting audience members to share their thoughts and feelings about it on social media, noting that missionaries all around the world were sharing the same “sacred information” that converted Nancy years earlier.

Richard Bushman spoke to students at BYU–Hawaii in November 2016. He chose as a topic “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?” He began by guiding the students on a virtual tour of a brand-new exhibit at the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City. It tells “the story of the Restoration,” he said, a story of people who “yearned for revelation and direction from heaven and could not find it. Then the exhibition displays a picture of Joseph Smith searching the scripture and invites you into a theater where the First Vision is reenacted in film. The film is projected in a round room to show a wooded grove surrounding you about 240 degrees. A tall young man walks into this grove, prays, and the light appears. The revelation that was looked for by so many seekers has at last come.”<sup>128</sup>

Bushman described other exciting new aspects of the old story. “As the film begins, words appear on the screen explaining that there are nine versions of the First Vision and this presentation draws on all of them.” That represented a major departure from earlier films, which drew on multiple accounts without revealing the fact to viewers. Moreover, as Bushman described to the students, “on a stand as you exit the theater is a notebook containing all of these accounts in full, with the parts that are

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126. Maynes, “Finding My Purpose.”

127. Richard J. Maynes, “The Truth Restored,” Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults, May 1, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2016/01/the-truth-restored?lang=eng>.

128. Richard L. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?” devotional address given at Brigham Young University–Hawaii, November 15, 2016, accessed August 25, 2018, <https://devotional.byuh.edu/node/1514>.

incorporated into the film script printed in bold. That is a new addition to the story—nine accounts of the First Vision when previously we had known only one, the one that appears in *Pearl of Great Price*.<sup>129</sup>

Bushman then told a detective story. “I thought you might be interested in hearing how it came about that we have these other accounts when for so long there was just one. Even more important, how does this new knowledge affect our understanding of Joseph Smith and the Gospel?”<sup>130</sup> This was Richard Bushman at his best as selector and relator of “new knowledge.”

The problem, Bushman said, was Fawn Brodie’s thesis that Joseph made up the vision story later. “Church historians of course could not leave that challenge unanswered. They thought Brodie made a weak argument but without evidence of an earlier account, her conjecture might persuade some. And so the hunt was on.”<sup>131</sup>

In Bushman’s telling, newly discovered accounts solved the problem. The 1832 and 1835 accounts “effectively dispelled” Brodie’s argument, he said, “but the acquisition of other records of the First Vision had an added value.” In Bushman’s telling, differences in the accounts were interesting, expected, and revealing. He noted that the 1832 account was incomplete, but he liked it for what it had, not what it lacked. It had forgiveness. “The first thing the Savior did was forgive Joseph and urge him to repent,” Bushman noted. “The first act of the restoration was to put the soul of the Lord’s prophet in order. After granting forgiveness, Christ went on to remind Joseph of the atonement.”<sup>132</sup>

“This account throws new light on the Restoration,” Bushman declared. “The 1838 account, the traditional one, emphasized the problem of churches; which church is true? The 1832 story brings redemption to the fore—forgiveness and atonement. Even the prophet of the Lord stands before God in need of forgiveness.” Bushman was offering a new memory of the seminal story. In the twenty-first century, it could be less about feeling embattled and persecuted and debating the nature of the one true church. Attention could shift instead to the universal message of redemption through Christ. Bushman emphasized the second point very much. “Likely no more than a handful of Latter-day Saints had even heard of the First Vision before 1839,” he said. The message of the

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129. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

130. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

131. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

132. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

restored gospel, Bushman declared, was Christ, as the Book of Mormon proclaimed on its title page. “That is what Joseph would want to come out of his work: for us to believe in Christ.”<sup>133</sup>

The problem, Bushman noted, is that “some people’s faith is based more on Joseph Smith than on Jesus Christ. When they begin to question the Prophet, they lose faith in the Savior. We all know of Latter-day Saints whose faith is shaken by new facts, such as the existence of the alternate accounts of the First Vision which I have talked about today. When this new information builds up, they grow concerned. Could it all be wrong? Their consternation goes so far that they consider leaving the church, painful as that would be.”<sup>134</sup> He said he had tried for a long time to answer the specific questions of those who worried about having different accounts of the vision, but he had changed his approach. “I have taken to asking the doubters a question. How do you feel about Jesus Christ?” He told the students the following:

Those who lose faith in Christ because they have lost faith in Joseph Smith have things backward. Joseph’s mission was to increase faith in Christ, not in himself. He thought of himself as one of the weak things of the world who came forth that faith might increase in the earth and that Christ’s everlasting covenant might be established. He would want us to develop faith in his teachings, in Christ and the atonement, in prayer and adhesion to high moral standards, not in him as a man. He would want us to believe in the principles independent of the man, as the Saints in the first decade did. We honor him as a prophet, to be sure, but as one who testified of the Savior. His revelations pointed beyond himself to Christ and the Father. I believe in Joseph Smith as a prophet of God, and most of you here today do too. But we must place our faith first in Christ, and believe in him apart from our faith in his messenger. Christ should be the anchor when we struggle and question.

We now benefit from having not just one but many accounts of the First Vision, each one offering a different perspective. The Vision is a powerful source of faith. It helps my faith to know that someone in our own era saw God. But we should keep in mind the Vision’s purpose: it was to testify of the Lord. That Christ will come first in our faith, that he will be the foundation, that we will enjoy forgiveness and renewal through His atonement, I pray in Christ’s name, amen.<sup>135</sup>

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133. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

134. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

135. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

On May 31, 2018, the Church-owned *Deseret News* published “Defending the Faith: The Supposed Scandal of Multiple First Vision Accounts,” an essay by Daniel Peterson. He dismissed the widespread criticisms that the multiple accounts show that Joseph Smith “simply couldn’t get his story straight” and that “the LDS Church has sought to hide these differing accounts.”<sup>136</sup>

Comments on the article began to accumulate. Most attacked Peterson’s premises. One found Joseph Smith’s accounts “very inconsistent.” Some said Peterson should have faulted Joseph Fielding Smith for suppressing evidence and credited Gerald and Sandra Tanner with finding it. Soon the commenters were waging a war of words about Joseph Smith’s memory and about whether Joseph Fielding Smith really suppressed evidence and about whether God has a body and whether anyone had ever seen God.

Then a commenter identified as apm22 from Sparks, Nevada, interrupted to post a lament and to ask a question. “I was never aware of differing 1st vision accounts,” he said, though he had been a missionary and later served in two bishoprics and had read all seven volumes of *History of the Church*. Peterson’s article emphasized how early and often the accounts had been published and publicized by the Church, yet this mainstream member repeated, “I never knew about the differing accounts.” He expressed sadness and wondered, “Why don’t the leaders write articles in the *Ensign* or speak about the details of these things in General Conference?”<sup>137</sup>

Commenter IronChild9 from Boise, Idaho, had also responded to Daniel Peterson’s *Deseret News* article, saying that by emphasizing how scholars had known of the vision accounts for half a century he had obscured the fact that the laity did not know. “When was the last time this was discussed from the pulpit, Sunday school lesson, or visiting teaching visit? Why is it only mentioned in an essay that is essentially buried deep on the church website? Sure, this info can be found by those that go looking, but why should they have to go looking? Why isn’t this part of the standard narrative that is taught from primary onwards?”<sup>138</sup>

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136. Daniel Peterson, “Defending the Faith: The Supposed Scandal of Multiple First Vision Accounts,” *Deseret News*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/900020151/the-supposed-scandal-of-multiple-first-vision-accounts.html>.

137. Peterson, “Defending the Faith,” see comments at <https://www.deseretnews.com/user/comments/900020151/the-supposed-scandal-of-multiple-first-vision-accounts.html>.

138. Peterson, “Defending the Faith.”

In a devotional address days later, Apostle Quentin L. Cook announced a new standard narrative. In his June 12, 2018, address to BYU–Idaho students, Cook declared, “For the first time in nearly a hundred years, a new multi-volume history of the Church is being issued under the direction of the First Presidency.” Titled *Saints*, it had been in the works for a decade, he told them, and the first few chapters had already been serialized online and in the Church’s magazines. Cook described it as a narrative history—“the true story of ordinary people who became saints.” He said the first volume was being translated into fourteen languages for worldwide distribution beginning in September 2018.<sup>139</sup>

The new history would now begin with the spring 1815 cataclysmic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia, signaling “to God’s children everywhere” by its opening scene and worldwide distribution “that it is the story of their covenant with God, who knows their hardships” and who would, despite cataclysmic or private tragedies, “endow our lives with transcendent meaning, promise healing through the Savior’s Atonement, and assure us that relationships we cherish here on earth can endure in eternity, coupled with eternal joy.”<sup>140</sup>

Elder Cook told the students that *Saints* was not old-fashioned but a story for them and about them, one that located them relative to the epic story of God renewing his covenant to redeem mankind because of love. “As you read, you will discover new insight and meaning even in stories you have heard before.” He then illustrated this point by selecting and relating Joseph Smith’s first vision in a new way, drawing on the way Bushman related the 1832 and 1838 accounts and adding an interpretation that resolved the problem B. H. Roberts had once tried to address by simply deleting a troublesome line—before the world could access high-resolution images of all the original accounts with a search engine and a few mouse clicks.<sup>141</sup> Elder Cook explained,

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139. Quentin L. Cook, “Out of Obscurity: How Merciful the Lord Has Been,” devotional address, Brigham Young University–Idaho, June 12, 2018, Rexburg, Idaho, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.byui.edu/devotionals/elder-quentin-l-cook-spring-2018>.

140. Cook, “Out of Obscurity.”

141. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 1–4. Compare to “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 11 (April 1, 1842): 748; Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 706. On p. 3 of his “History of Joseph Smith from the Millennial Star,” Roberts wrote the following in pencil: “contradiction with statement in Wentworth letter [one illegible word]—see preceding.” *History of Joseph Smith*, 3 vols., in B. H. Roberts collection, MS 1278, Church History Library.

No scene in Church history is better known than Joseph Smith's First Vision, but *Saints* helps us better understand how Joseph struggled to reconcile what he felt in his heart with what he thought in his mind. Joseph's heartfelt desire to feel the Savior's forgiveness had gone unfulfilled because he observed that none of the existing churches taught "the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament."<sup>142</sup> In his mind Joseph pondered which church was right, or if they were all wrong. In his heart he desperately hoped that one of them was right so he could find the peace he sought. With his head and his heart at odds, Joseph discovered that he could ask of God. He went to the woods to pray. There he saw the Father and the Son, who forgave him and resolved his dilemma in a way he had never imagined.<sup>143</sup>

Indeed, as Elder Cook indicated, Joseph Smith's first vision is the inciting incident in this new narrative. The first chapter sets it up. Joseph Smith is an appealing protagonist. Like many others in his world, he is afflicted by disease and disruption. Like many others, he wonders if his sins have displeased God, and he seeks to be reconciled to God lest he be damned at death. He is frustrated until he discovers a new way to read an old verse. Chapter 2 shows the young hero going to the woods to pray for wisdom. He is opposed by an unseen power but prevails at the last moment, when "a pillar of light appear[s] over his head" and descends, "filling him with peace and unspeakable joy."<sup>144</sup>

Joseph sees God in the light, who calls him by name and introduces his Beloved Son, who says, "Joseph, thy sins are forgiven." Joseph asks, "What church shall I join?"

"Join none of them," Christ answers. "They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof." They converse further; Joseph sees a host of angels and is finally left looking into heaven. The narrative is captivating and blends the accounts harmoniously, drawing on the most descriptive and dramatic elements of each. The next passage tells how Joseph's story was rejected by the minister.<sup>145</sup>

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142. "History, circa Summer 1832," 2.

143. Cook, "Out of Obscurity."

144. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 15, also available at <https://www.lds.org/languages/eng/content/history/saints-v1/02-hear-him>.

145. *Saints*, 16–17.

Then comes some exposition, explaining that Joseph kept the vision to himself after being rejected and later tried to record it. “He wrote the words out himself, in halting language, trying earnestly to capture the majesty of the moment.” He recorded it again later, with help from scribes, saying “less about his own search for forgiveness and more about the Savior’s universal message of truth and the need for a restoration of the gospel. With each effort to record his experience, Joseph testified that the Lord had heard and answered his prayer.”<sup>146</sup> In the new narrative, the answer to Joseph Smith’s prayer launches a quest that transforms him from an obscure boy into a prophet with power from God to seal relationships so that they transcend even death.

Joseph Smith inhabited a visionary world and belonged to a visionary family. It was still bold of him, and unpopular, to declare that he had seen a vision. He stuck with that story. “Why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen,” he said, “for I had seen a vision, I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dare I do it.”<sup>147</sup> Thankfully, if not inevitably, he recorded the experience repeatedly and resolutely. Over two centuries, the stakes of his claim have been raised. Joseph Smith’s first vision is now all or nothing. The Latter-day Saints’ April 2020 bicentennial celebration of the vision indicates it will remain so, not inevitably, but because of many contingent choices to believe “that the Father and the Son actually and in truth and very deed appeared to the Prophet Joseph in a vision in the woods.”<sup>148</sup>

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146. *Saints*, 18–19.

147. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 4.

148. Clark, “Charted Course,” 2.

# The First Vision as a Prehistory of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

*Kathleen Flake*

Most scholarly attention to the First Vision is dedicated to determining whether it happened or whether whatever happened is reliably described in the few primary accounts we have of it. My interests lie in a different direction. I am interested in the First Vision accounts insofar as they tell us something about religion, not about history, and not least because my wager is that this story, as a story, exceeds the limits of history, especially when it becomes understood as scripture. Which is to say, I want to better understand the work done by this story among the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

For this analysis of Smith's representation of his quest and its positive resolution, I will rely chiefly on the 1832 and 1838 manuscripts as the most intentional of the four accounts. They not only share a historiographical purpose but also are related in their production, the 1838 manuscript having used the 1832 account as a base for its narrative structure and descriptive detail of events. In contrast, the intervening 1835 account is a report of a conversation with a sole interlocutor observed by a notetaking third party. It less useful as a primary source for Smith's understanding of the larger significance of his initial spiritual experience. The 1842 Wentworth letter is as intentional as the other church histories but relies on secondary accounts for much of its content. Finally, because of its canonical status, the 1838 manuscript is not merely authoritative but generative of the faithful reader's religious convictions. Therefore, it is uniquely relevant to this analysis of the First Vision's meaning and function among the Saints.

## History and Prehistory

Joseph Smith defined his 1832 history as an account of “the rise of the church of Christ” and limited its story to four events that preceded the Church’s organization.<sup>1</sup> Six years later, when he returned to the unfinished 1832 manuscript and enlarged upon it, his purpose remained the same: to give an account of “the rise and progress of the Church.”<sup>2</sup> The word “progress” was a general reference to the fact that he had formally organized “according to law” the Church of Christ eight years prior.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, his personal focus remained on the Church’s prehistory, not its progress.<sup>4</sup> Later, others would take over the task of describing the progress of which they were a part. Smith, however, had a unique vantage point on the four events that he credits with constituting the Church’s “rise,” its coming into being. They are listed in the prologue to his first draft: “Firstly . . . receiving the testimony from on high seconndly the ministering of Angels.”<sup>5</sup> The words “testimony from on high” are a reference to what is today called the “First Vision.” The text later makes clear that “the ministering of Angels” is a reference to what is today understood as Moroni’s visit and tutelage. Smith’s accounts allow for other angels to have been a part of this event; hence, the plural “Angels.” Finally, Smith promises to give an account of “the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of—Aangels to adminster the letter of the Gospel—the Law and commandments as they were given unto him—and the ordinencs, [and] forthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of God confered upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c—.”<sup>6</sup> These third and fourth events are the appearance of John the Baptist and, subsequently, of Peter, James, and

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1. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 24, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/1>.

2. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 1, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 24, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/1>.

3. “Book of Commandments, 1833,” [1], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-commandments-1833/5>.

4. Events subsequent to the Church’s organization were later included in the 1835 Book of Commandments and in what became the official history of the Church, which is still being written.

5. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

6. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

John to confer, respectively, the Old and New Testament priesthoods.<sup>7</sup> Today these priesthoods are denominated Aaronic and Melchizedek but have the same scope of action: the first over temporal concerns, or the “Law and commandments,” and the second holding the keys to the spiritual blessings of the Church.<sup>8</sup> Thus, “the testimony,” or First Vision, as its name suggests, is only the first part of the story and implicitly serves as the introduction to the events that followed. As with first part of any story, this one directs the reader to the end of the story, and even discloses the reason for the story as an institutional history.

While it can be said that Joseph Smith began his religious life wanting to know which church was true, it is more accurate to say he wanted to know which church could truly save him. “My mind [had] become,” he wrote in 1832, “exceedingly distressed for I became convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found that . . . there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ[,] . . . and I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, in the 1832 account of the First Vision, the first declaration or “testimony” of the Lord was an assurance: “Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee.” This was followed by a simple exhortation to “go thy way walk in my statute” and a relatively long and universal indictment of the world: all to the effect that “none doeth good no not one.” With this, the Lord’s instruction ends, and Smith is portrayed as satisfied, even joyful: “My soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy.”<sup>10</sup> He had obtained the forgiveness he sought, and his quest for salvation was complete.

In contrast, the 1838 account is more institutionally oriented, both in its definition of Smith’s quest and in the words he heard. “My object,” he wrote, “in going to enquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects . . . to join.”<sup>11</sup> Though this version does not contradict the first account, it marks a distinctive shift in narrative focus, from personal sin to institutional authority to offer relief from sin. This shift is emphasized in the narrative when God twice forbade Smith to join any church. Moreover, in this account, not the world but religious institutions were faulted.

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7. For the history of so identifying the angels that conveyed this priestly authority, see Gregory Prince, *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 4–10.

8. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1; see *Doctrine and Covenants* 84 and 107.

9. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 2.

10. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3.

11. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3.

Specifically, Smith was told that “all their Creeds were an abomination, . . . that those professors were all corrupt.”<sup>12</sup> The scriptural indictment from the first account is repeated in the 1832 manuscript: “they draw near to me to with their lips but their hearts are far from me.” But what the 1832 account implied, the 1838 makes explicit. The churches did not have the power to save Smith; they did not even seek the power. “They teach for doctrines the commandments of men,” he was told, “having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof.”<sup>13</sup> By 1838, with the benefit of Joseph Smith’s Kirtland experience and especially the experience of the temple, characterization of the churches as powerless had become his point, or “the testimony.”

Nevertheless, the phrase “having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof” is ambiguous. Typically, the phrase is today read as a denial of modern revelation. The text supports this interpretation by showing how Smith’s reports of this testimony were not believed specifically “because [he] continued to affirm that [he] had seen a Vision.”<sup>14</sup> But it seems to me the content of that vision would have been even more disturbing than the fact of its occurring, especially since, as Richard Bushman has shown, Smith was not alone in being a visionary.<sup>15</sup> Other scholars have agreed that this society and its progenitors lived in a “world of wonders” and folkways that variously informed and competed with the more formal expressions of Christianity.<sup>16</sup> In addition, one can imagine how aggravating it would have been to hear the young man say that all the churches were sinners and, even worse, impotent. For the New Light Evangelicals especially, it would have been insulting to be

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12. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3.

13. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3; see Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:8; and 2 Timothy 3:5.

14. As I mentioned, the 1832 account notes both the personal joy of the experience and the disappointment at the rejection of it by others. In the 1838 account, Smith goes into much more detail: his accounts of the vision were treated “with great contempt” and excited “great persecution which continued to increase,” and “this was common among all the sects: all united to persecute me” in “a spirit of the bitterest persecution and reviling.” “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3–4.

15. Richard Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–98): 183–204. See also Jeremy Talmage, “Effusions of an Enthusiastic Brain: Joseph Smith’s First Vision and the Limits of Experiential Religion,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 25–48.

16. See David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

deemed formalists. Even so, Smith was so young and these insults so similar to what the revivalists were saying of each other that we can join Smith in thinking it unusual that they took him, “an obscure boy,” so seriously, at least with respect to his heresy.<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, some have suggested he may have been a little paranoid here and reasonably so, given that he was writing in Missouri in the spring of 1838, during the rigors of the Missourians’ war upon the Saints.

For an alternative explanation for Smith’s harsh judgment against the churches of his day, let me return to my initial wager—namely, that the narrative structure of this account, not merely its historical context—is a source for understanding Smith’s intentions and meaning. From this perspective, the addition of the phrase “the power of Godliness” in the 1838 account goes beyond an indictment of mere religious formalism and doctrinal error.<sup>18</sup> It expresses his primary concern: which of all the competing churches offered salvation?<sup>19</sup> The centrality of divine power to Smith’s story is further evidenced in the next three events that compose the history and are shown to rectify the problem identified in the First Vision. They explain the “rise” and “progress” of the Church not only in revelatory experience but endowments of sacramental authority to mediate “the power of Godliness,” to not only hear God but to act for him. After the First Vision and four years of instruction by Moroni, Smith did the “mighty act” of producing the Book of Mormon as the word of God.<sup>20</sup> Next came John the Baptist, who ordained Smith to the holy priesthood pertaining to the letter of the gospel, making him a high priestly judge in the pattern of ancient Israel. As if that were not mighty enough, this ordination denominated him a lawgiver, possessed of the power of administration of “the Law and commandments *as they were given unto him.*”<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that the 1832 history was written a year after Smith received the commandment to “go to the Ohio,” with the promise that “there I will give unto you my law” (D&C 38:32). Presumably, this would have informed his retrospective understanding of the meaning of this event and contributed to the force it carries in the characterization of the lesser priesthood in his introduction to this first version of the Church’s history.

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17. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 4.

18. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3.

19. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 2.

20. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

21. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1, emphasis added.

The fourth and final evidence that “the Lord brought forth and established by his hand the church of Christ in the eve of time” by giving it divine power was the restoration of a higher priesthood. This event was defined in the 1832 account as bestowing “the Keys of the Kingdom . . . the continuation of the blessings of God.”<sup>22</sup> The same revelation that promised the Saints the law in Ohio also promised “there you shall be endowed with power from on high” (D&C 38:32). Just as the experience of administering the law in Kirtland arguably informed Smith’s description of the keys restored by John the Baptist “to administer the letter of the Gospel—the Law and commandments,” so also the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in 1836 arguably informed his 1838 account of the higher priesthood in terms of the relationship between the messengers who ordained him.<sup>23</sup> Though the three events that follow the First Vision in Smith’s “history of the Church” were revelatory, in the sense that they involved communication with heavenly messengers, their ecclesiastical significance is—like the First Vision—much greater than their experiential media, as revelation. In each of the three events, divine power was conveyed and made executable. Thus, the problem identified in the First Vision was solved: the “power of Godliness” was restored and institutionally available to humanity.<sup>24</sup>

Still, the story of Smith’s history ends at a liminal moment between Smith’s mid-1829 restoration of the higher priesthood and the formal incorporation of the Church in spring 1830. This in-between period is described in the 1838 history but not included in its canonized version. The excluded material introduces the possibility and necessity of proselytizing now that power had been received from on high. After receiving these three dispensations of authority and “feeling it to be

22. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1. In an 1835 revelation, Smith defined this gift as “the keys of all the spiritual blessings of the church—To have the privilege of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, to have the heavens opened unto them, to commune with the general assembly and church of the Firstborn, and to enjoy the communion and presence of God the Father, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant” (D&C 107:18–19).

23. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 18. “The messenger who visited us on this occasion and conferred this priesthood upon us said that his name was John, the same that is called John the Baptist in the new Testament, and that he acted under the direction <of> Peter, James, and John, who held the keys of the priesthood of Melchizedek, whi[c]h priesthood he said should in due time be conferred on us.”

For the dedication of the Kirtland Temple and receipt of additional power from heavenly messengers, see *Doctrine and Covenants* 109.

24. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3.

[their] duty,” Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery “commenced to reason out of the scriptures, with [their] acquaintances and friends, as [they] happened to meet with them.”<sup>25</sup> The 1838 narrative describes the visit of Samuel Smith and how his older brother Joseph and Oliver Cowdery “reason[ed] with him out of the Bible,” “showed him” parts of the Book of Mormon, “informed him of what the Lord was about to do for the children of men,” and “labored to persuade him” in every way possible. But not until Samuel “retired to the woods, in order that by secret and fervent prayer he might obtain of a merciful God, wisdom to enable him to judge for himself” and “obtained revelation for himself” was he convinced. This revelation, or “testimony,” like his brother’s First Vision, was merely a precedent to power. Only after baptism did Samuel “[return] to his father’s house greatly glorifying and praising God, being filled with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>26</sup> Another brother, Hyrum, appears next in the record and to the same effect. Person by person, the process was repeated until approximately twenty persons gather for the formal organization of the Church the next year.

Thus, such doctrinal intentions as this history may have had were in anticipation of and associated with the organization of a church sufficient to mediate salvation. Smith’s history is designed to tell the reader why a church was necessary and how that necessity was accomplished through the bestowal of “the power of Godliness.” Therefore, I would go so far as to say that the First Vision and the three subsequent events are less theological and more ecclesiological in their intent, less descriptive of the nature of God than about the nature of “the Church of Christ in the eve of time.”<sup>27</sup> Smith’s history is also less autobiographical than institutional. His brief 1832 prologue does indeed promise to speak of “his marvelous experience.”<sup>28</sup> But his role in the story is largely as an object, not an agent of those experiences that constitute the history. Such agency and effect belong to God and his messengers. Likewise, though the 1838 account refutes falsehoods, it does so “in relation to the rise and progress of the Church.” Ultimately, Smith’s history is not an accusatory complaint. It is, as he said when he first put pen to paper in 1832, an account of “marvelous experience” and “mighty acts.”<sup>29</sup>

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25. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 18.

26. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 19.

27. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

28. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

29. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

Thus, even this analysis of the First Vision and its associated events would benefit from more attention to the historical context, not so much of these four events—whether they happened or whether what happened is adequately described—but of what Smith had experienced between 1832 and 1838 that shifted this narrative so dramatically from a personal to an institutional story without changing its plot. Possibly the answer is too obvious and lies in greater appreciation for the effect of Kirtland and especially the dedication of its temple on Smith. Many years later, speaking of the encounter with another heavenly messenger during that dedication, Smith pronounced, “Now the great and grand secret of the whole matter, and the *summum bonum* of the whole subject that is lying before us, consists in obtaining the powers of the Holy Priesthood. For him to whom these keys are given there is no difficulty in obtaining a knowledge of facts in relation to the salvation of the children of men, both as well for the dead as for the living” (D&C 128:11).

### Metanarrative and Mythos

Any effort to account for the function of the First Vision among the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is also well served by considering its status as a metanarrative, or a story that provides the pattern for other stories. The Bible, for example, is a metanarrative for stories of creation, fall, and redemption, restoration, and consummation. Consider the less-complicated version of Smith’s historical narrative in which he is burdened by sin and ignorance, redeemed and enlightened, and finally, empowered and able to empower others. Note the narrative’s application to Samuel Smith’s story, especially if we were to include his becoming the Church’s first missionary. In Mormonism, there are innumerable stories after the pattern of the First Vision.

Moreover, as a canonized prehistory of the Church, Smith’s account has achieved for many the power of myth. It is, or at least resembles in its effects, an origin myth, one of those culturewide narratives of primordial events, events that occurred “in the beginning” or “once upon a time,” when chaos was given order, and that therefore offer to explain the relations between time and eternity, between God and humanity. The effect on the believing reader can be the same, bringing new order to a disrupted present. “In recounting how these things began and how they will end,” writes Ricoeur, “the myth places the experience of [the reader or listener] in a whole that receives orientation and meaning from the narration. Thus, an understanding of human reality as a whole operates through the myth by means of a reminiscence and an

expectation.”<sup>30</sup> That is to say, through their myths of origin, believers are able to order or give directional purpose to the present, use the past to imagine a horizon of future possibilities, and orient present action toward that future, not only finding opportunity but also negotiating crises. Though more recent scholars have doubted that modernity can provide such believing readers, religion continues to thrive on myth and metanarrative.<sup>31</sup> Smith’s account of the First Vision is a prime example, though it was not put to general use until more than a half-century after Smith’s death.

In the words of James B. Allen, author of the most extensive study, the First Vision “was not a matter of common knowledge, even among church members, in the earliest years of Mormon history.”<sup>32</sup> Though used in a sermon as early as 1883, the First Vision did not reach a turning point in its status until the administration of Joseph F. Smith. The story was first used in Latter-day Saint Sunday School texts in 1905, in priesthood instructional manuals in 1909, as a separate missionary tract in 1910, and in histories of the Church in 1912. In 1916, the Church took ownership of the Smith family farm in Palmyra, New York. A grove of trees on the site where Joseph Smith was assumed to have had the First Vision became an increasingly popular pilgrimage site, culminating in centennial celebrations in 1920. By midcentury, Joseph Smith’s account of his theophany was denominated “The Joseph Smith Story.” Eventually, this story would be granted the status of “the beginning point, the fountainhead, of the restoration of the gospel in this dispensation.”<sup>33</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere, Joseph Smith’s prehistory of the Church captured the attention of Progressive Era Church members because it oriented them at a time of chaos intensified by the Reed Smoot

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30. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 6.

31. “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv. See also W. Taylor Stevenson, “Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness,” in *Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness*, ed. Lee W. Gibbs and W. Taylor Stevenson (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975), 1–17.

32. James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–61.

33. Milton V. Backman Jr., “First Vision,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:515–16.

hearing.<sup>34</sup> As “*The Joseph Smith Story*,” Smith’s prehistory not only gave order to the Saints’ contemporary experience of crisis with authority but also provided hope for the future in its promise that their bond with the sacred would not be broken. Like the stories of Moses and Abraham, with which it was eventually printed, the 1838 account could be read as a prophet’s story, describing his calling, preparation, and labor of inaugurating a new aeon or dispensation of the gospel power. Probably the most extravagant and comforting of such promises was John the Baptist’s that the authority by which the Church was organized (and, implicitly, capable of being reorganized) “shall never be taken again from the earth” until it accomplished its purpose of latter-day preparation for a millennial reign of Christ (D&C 13:1). The believing reader of the Joseph Smith story is thereby assured that Smith’s restoration was permanent, that there would always remain in the Church the “power of Godliness” necessary and sufficient to administer salvation, temporal and spiritual.

Thus, Progressive Era changes to the Church were ordered within Smith’s cosmology of divine promise and fulfillment. This lent stability to efforts to revoke the theocracy, economic communalism, and plural marriage of the previous generation. Member confidence in that cosmology may have been shaken by the defensive and casuistic testimony of Church witnesses at the Smoot hearing, by the confusion and disarray in Church policy, and by the judgment and removal of Apostles John W. Taylor and Matthias F. Cowley.<sup>35</sup> Yet the constructive capacity of Smith’s mythos of pre-Church origins and its unbreakable bond with the sacred helped restore confidence in most members. By inscribing their present experience onto Joseph Smith’s, believing readers could appropriate a future in which failure was impossible. In these first years of the twenty-first century, with its own tensions and fissures within the Church, the celebratory bicentennial year of the First Vision could not have been better timed.

Let me make one final point about the First Vision in relation to my hypothesis that the Church is for Smith primarily a locus of power, not merely a deposit of right doctrine. This point has to do with empowerment of others.<sup>36</sup> Like Lehi, the initial protagonist in the Book of

34. For a discussion of the use of the First Vision during the Smoot hearing, see Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 109–35.

35. See Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, 91–94, 104–7, 144.

36. No wonder, then, that the idea of a “first vision” has achieved primacy in the imagination of all would-be Saints.

Mormon, Smith was a “visionary man.” The fact that he had so many visions reminds us to moderate our emphasis on his First Vision by remembering it was *only* the first. Nevertheless, the First Vision attains among contemporary Saints insofar as it is paradigmatic. It is rightly honored as providing the pattern for obtaining faith and, therefore, a chief duty for the faithful. Here I ask you to consider the ways in which Smith’s First Vision has become enacted, even ritualized, within the Saints’ formal worship services, as well in their ordinary conversations.

### Ritualization

The First Vision story fits into not only the history of seekerism and evangelism but also early American Bible-reading and religion-making efforts to participate in salvation history. Like the Puritans and especially radical Puritans, Latter-day Saints have always wanted to live within a society bound by biblical covenants and ordinances.<sup>37</sup> They seek not only to know which church is true but to experience holiness. Though culturally more characteristic of Smith’s time and place, the desire to be holy is no less central to the religious life generally. Regardless, it is certainly the central wager of Mormonism, then and now, what Smith sought to realize through a restoration of the “power of Godliness.” Seen from this vantage point, his organizational efforts to found a church were nothing less than an effort to create a tool by which others, notwithstanding their ordinariness, could experience the divine. Though awash in word and text, Mormonism is a fully embodied religion. Its core convictions are to be experienced in everyday life and are guided by ritual expression.

All four of the Smith’s accounts of his first vision covey sense impression, not merely words or mental impressions. They emphasize his having seen a great light, as great as and even brighter than the sun at “noon day” and as a “pillar of flame which was spread all around.”<sup>38</sup> The light “rested upon” him and bathed the world in a fire that did not burn, but “filled [him] with the spirit of god.”<sup>39</sup> The 1838 account adds that darkness engulfed him immediately after he voiced “the desires

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37. See Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

38. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3; “Journal, 1835–1836,” 24, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 16, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>.

39. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3.

of my heart to God." The darkness was "thick" and "overcame" and "gathered around" and bound him by some great power of "astonishing influence."<sup>40</sup> When the pillar of light or flame appeared, it expelled the darkness. Then, the aural dimension—or what Smith heard—becomes the focus of his narrative, and the testimony begins. Such originating moments of the Church's history, or of any religion's history for that matter, are maintained and made present not only by such writing but also by embodiment in rituals. Think, for example, of the New Testament's description and nearly two thousand years' observance of the Last Supper.

There are other, more ordinary rituals, too, which order the life of believers and believing communities and signify the possibility of spiritual transformation. The amount and centrality of ritual to the Latter-day Saints in their ordinary lives and religious activities, from family prayer and family home evening to temple endowments and sealings, evidence this fact. Hence, not surprisingly, Smith's narrativizing of the vision that began it all has become ritually performed and provides a source of personal and collective renewal from generation to generation, a pattern to be repeated and internalized.

On the first Sunday of every month, the Saints leave their pews and stand before their congregations to articulate a "spiritual experience," an experience that is a testimony to them of some religious reality from which a religious conviction has been distilled. To my knowledge, anthropologist David Knowlton has provided the most complete analysis of this practice as a ritual. Noting the presumed spontaneity of the moment, he observes, "It may surprise some Saints, but our bearing of testimonies is as much a structured ritual as the high Catholic mass. . . . [or] the Andeans who ceremoniously [present objects] . . . as an offering to the mountains and the earth." The difference between these and the Saints' formal testimony bearing is only, he writes, the "kinds of signs and symbols we privilege. . . . Words become our stones, our llama hair, our sugar. . . . When we combine these emblem-words in meaningful ways within ritual settings, they not only create referential meaning (an understanding of the intended message), they also invoke spiritual significance. . . . It is the ritual of testimony—the structured, public speaking of a shared rhetoric—which makes the metaphor of testimony tangible and immediate."<sup>41</sup> Such testifying does not merely

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40. "History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2]," 3.

41. David Knowlton, "Belief, Metaphor, and Rhetoric: The Mormon Practice of Testimony Bearing," *Sunstone* 15, no. 1 (1991): 20–27.

describe. It performs and marks the modern seeker's progress along the path modeled by Smith himself, from naïve questioning to manifestation of power. Also, like Smith, they find in this experience the legitimacy of the Church as a locus of divine power.

I would add to Knowlton's analysis more recent theoretical insight that rituals, for all their structure and repetition, are also relatively flexible and constructive. They create in the performer a kind of "mastery that experiences itself as relatively empowered, not as conditioned or molded."<sup>42</sup> As such, ritualization facilitates and even enables both participation in and resistance to the larger socio-cultural dynamics within which it operates. In other words, rituals make not robots but players within a field of social power. Thus, the Saints' formal testifying, as a ritual, both reiterates the First Vision and pushes it in new directions. This, too, is consistent with the ways in which Smith's testimony enacted and contested the conversion narratives of his day.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that Smith's testimony has become memorialized and is ritualized in a manner that reinforces the Saints' conviction that the power of godliness is at work in the world, their world, and by them, as well for their benefit. Thus, the 1832 manuscript's witness to personal salvation through divine act and the 1838 manuscript's measure of institutional legitimacy through endowments of divine power are joined and renewed by successive generations who witness to a divine power at work in the Church. These accounts, whether or not on the first Sunday of every month or by ordinary believers or prophets, are more than a history of events, though that may be the only way we can perceive them scientifically. Understanding them, however, requires acknowledging that this is religious activity. It is an attempt to explain the "marvelous," the sense of something not material but no less real.<sup>43</sup> It is the work of all religions, and this is one of the ways Mormonism does that work, from generation to generation. Hence, the canonization of Smith history, which made it formally the rule or measure and *regula* or order of faith.

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42. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 221. Bell further describes this "relative empowerment" as a "practical knowledge [which] is not an inflexible set of assumptions, beliefs, or body postures; rather, it is the ability to deploy, play, and manipulate basic schemes in ways that appropriate and condition experience effectively." See also Catherine Bell, "The Ritual Body and the Dynamics of Ritual Power," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4, no. 2 (1990): 299–313.

43. "History, circa Summer 1832," 1.

## Conclusion

No doubt, when seeking to distinguish themselves from other branches of Christianity, the Saints will continue to find it convenient to use the First Vision to argue that God is not trinitarian. Smith's accounts of the event show, however, that this was not a pressing issue for him. Rather, he was anxious to find the church that could enable him to obtain forgiveness of his sins. When he did receive forgiveness, however, it was by divine intervention. As for finding a church, he left the grove empty-handed. Smith's story then turns to showing how, because it could not be found, such a church had to be founded—through Smith becoming a prophet and being ordained a high priest. In these events, we find the answer to Smith's naïve first prayer and the story of his own maturation, in addition to "the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time."<sup>44</sup> Thus, to the extent that it can be reduced to a doctrinal proposition, the First Vision stands largely for an ecclesiological one. In telling the reader how The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came into being, Smith's history tells the reader something essential, even definitive, about the Church. Or, in other words, he gave the reasons for the Church's existence: its having "the power of Godliness" to save souls.

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44. "History, circa Summer 1832," 1.

# First Vision Controversies

## Implications for Accounts of Mormon Origins

*Ann Taves*

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When I accepted this invitation to speak, I expected that I would focus on the methods that Steven Harper and I used to compare and discuss the different accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision. We were both quite pleased with the process because we found that careful juxtaposition of the accounts allowed us to agree on the historical data and present a case for our different interpretations. If you look at the published version of our conversation, however, you’ll see that when we attempted to date events that Smith mentioned in his 1838 history, Steve tended to argue for 1820 and I tended to argue for the 1830s.<sup>1</sup> That’s an oversimplification, but it is fair to say that we didn’t consider dating anything between 1823 and 1828.

That changed for me last summer as I worked on a lecture I gave at the meeting of the John Whitmer Historical Society in September. The theme for their conference was not the First Vision *per se*, but the emergence of Mormonism in the context of the revivals in upstate New York in the 1820s. Preparing that lecture plunged me into the debates

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1. Ann Taves and Steven C. Harper, “Joseph Smith’s First Vision: New Methods for the Analysis of Experience-Related Texts,” *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 53–84.

that attempted to locate Smith's histories in relation to events of the 1820s and, most specifically, the debate over the dating of the revival that Smith associated with his First Vision. That debate centered to a great extent on whether that revival took place in 1820, as his 1838 account suggests, or in 1824, as Lucy Smith's history would suggest.

In this talk I want to revisit some of the things Steve and I attempted to date—such as when Smith became concerned about which church was right, when he got the idea that he had to inquire of the Lord, and when and to whom he reported his visions and revelations—and reconsider the possibilities in light of the evidence from the 1820s.

Before delving into that evidence, let me indicate the questions and presuppositions that I brought to our discussions, which took place in the context of working on my book *Revelatory Events*.<sup>2</sup> I wrote the book because I wanted to understand the emergence of new spiritual paths that are premised on claims about unusual experiences or events. I assumed that the meaning of unusual experiences and events is not necessarily obvious to people and typically is a matter of discussion and debate. I wanted to see if I could surface the process of figuring things out—the meaning-making process—as it unfolded. To reconstruct this meaning-making process, though, we can't start with how insiders (or outsiders) *later* interpreted events in light of what they concluded happened; we have to do our best to reconstruct how people interpreted events as they unfolded in their own—often uncertain and conflictual—terms.

This is the way I approached the emergence of Mormonism in *Revelatory Events*. I didn't begin with Smith's histories, which were written in the 1830s, but with the best real-time sources, which were the early revelations, the first of which was recorded in July 1828 in the midst of translating the plates. Participants in the translation process were privy to these revelations as they were received and to the Book of Mormon narrative as it was dictated and transcribed. The publication of the Book of Mormon in March 1830 and the founding of the Church of Christ the next month (April 1830) initiated two major interconnected shifts. The first was from producing new scripture to evangelizing based on it, and the second, from the revelation-guided production of scripture to recounting the history of the Church. In this new context, Smith and his followers had to explain not only how this new scripture and newly

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2. Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Movements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 17–22.

restored church had come into being but also why they were needed. The Church's history had to offer reasons for insiders and outsiders to accept the new book as revelation, the new church as authentically restored, and Smith's role and function as seer, prophet, revelator, and first elder of the newly founded church. Smith and his followers could not simply claim that all the churches were wrong and that the Bible was incomplete; they had to explain how they knew this.<sup>3</sup>

This is the context in which I analyzed Smith's histories. For me, the striking thing was that up until 1830, the story began with the appearance of an angel of the Lord who announced the presence of an ancient record preserved on golden plates. This is how Joseph Smith recounted the story in his letter to his father's family in 1828; how his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, recounted it in her letter to her siblings Solomon and Lydia in 1831; and, generally, how it was understood by insiders in the early 1830s.<sup>4</sup>

The first hint of an earlier beginning appears in the Articles and Covenants (ca. April 1830 [D&C 20]), which tell us that, after Smith "had received remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world, but after truly repenting, God visited him by an holy angel."<sup>5</sup> I argued that Smith started offering more detailed accounts of

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3. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 72–73.

4. In a letter from Jesse Smith (Joseph Smith Jr.'s uncle) to Hyrum Smith in 1829, Jesse refers to a (now-missing) 1828 letter that Joseph Smith Jr. wrote to Asahel Smith. In Jesse's recounting of the earlier letter, the story begins with the discovery of the plates. See Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:551–54. In January 1831, Lucy Mack Smith also began the story with the recovery of the plates in her letter to her brother Solomon Mack and sister Lydia Mack Bill. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:216. According to editors from the Joseph Smith Papers Project, "the history of the church, as it was then generally understood [in the early 1830s], began with the gold plates." Karen Lynn Davidson and others, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1932–1844*, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 6. Sentence appears in Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 73.

5. Michael Hubbard MacKay and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 121, as quoted in Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 73. When Peter Bauder interviewed him in October 1830, some six months later, Smith apparently did not mention this experience. Indeed Bauder reported, "He [Smith] could give me no christian experience, but told me that an angel told him he must go to a certain place in the town of Manchester, Ontario Country, where was a secret treasure concealed, which he must reveal to the human family." Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:17. In her letter to her siblings, Lucy briefly described how the new revelation came forth, rehearsing Moroni's burial of the plates and their recovery by her son Joseph, who, "after repenting of his sins and humbling himself before God[,] was visited by an holy Angel." Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 70.

this experience in which his “sins were remitted” in the context of proselytizing because—as he later elaborates—this was the context in which he said he first started to wrestle with the question of which church was right. Elaborating on this experience, I argued, thus helped him explain to ever wider audiences how he and his followers knew that all the extant churches were wrong and why the Bible, which they already had, was insufficient.<sup>6</sup>

In working with the histories, I saw no reason to doubt that Smith struggled with the question of which church was correct as a young teenager, and I thought his description of the denominational competition for converts in the context of revivals rang true. I also was willing to assume that Smith had a conversion-type experience in the early 1820s that formed the basis for his 1832 account, but I did so without having looked into the First Vision controversies that investigated his accounts in relation to the events of the 1820s. This skewed Steve’s and my discussion. He was most concerned with what happened in 1820, and I was most concerned with what happened in the late 1820s and the 1830s. Neither of us was thinking much about the years between 1823 and 1828. But, as I indicated at the outset, there is a case to be made for locating the revival that Smith associated with his First Vision in 1824 rather than in 1820.

Rather than rehash the evidence in detail, I want to ask what difference it would make for our understanding of the emergence of Mormonism if the revival that Smith was remembering in his 1838 account took place in 1824 instead of 1820. We can think of this as a thought experiment that explores what difference it would make if we were to adopt Lucy’s chronology, which places the revival after the revelation of the plates, rather than Joseph’s timeline, which places it before.

I’m going to argue that the change in order has significant consequences: it maintains 1823 as the beginning of the Mormon story, grounds the story in a visionary treasure-seeking milieu populated with supernatural presences, and brings the problem of discerning “who is present” in the context of religious revivals to the fore. In terms of supernatural presences, Joseph’s history is framed in terms of an encounter with deities (the Father and the Son); Lucy’s draft history is a story of encounters with an intermediary—a messenger who is also an angel, a spirit, and an ancient Nephite. Historically speaking, I think Lucy’s history is closer to the story that insiders—and outsiders—heard as the events unfolded, whether they embraced Smith’s claims or not. Joseph’s history, I would

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6. Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 72–73.

argue, reflects an understanding of divine presence that likely emerged in the context of translating the plates and then was used to reinterpret what happened earlier. In relation to Steve's and my discussions of the First Vision, I think the "First Vision controversy" adds more options that need to be considered in relation to the issues we debated.

I'll explore this alternative approach to Mormon origins in three steps. First, I'll review the First Vision controversy to highlight the central role that Lucy Smith's chronology played in the debate. Second, I'll discuss the supernatural appearances in Lucy's history to indicate what Mormon origins looked like from her point of view. Finally, I'll consider competing interpretations of the intermediaries Lucy described and indicate the point at which I think Smith began to claim he was communicating with deities rather than intermediaries.

### The First Vision Controversy: A Recap

Here is the description of the revival that Joseph Smith associated with his First Vision in his 1838 account and published in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842.

Sometime in the second year [1821] after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodist<s>, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country, indeed the whole district of Country seemed affected by it and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division among the people, Some Crying, "Lo, here" and some Lo there. Some were contending for the Methodist faith, Some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist. . . .

I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My Fathersfamily was <were> proselyted to the Presbyterian faith and four of them joined that Church, Namely, My Mother Lucy, My Brothers Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and my Sister Soph[r]onia.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 208; see also Joseph Smith, "History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): 727. The Joseph Smith Papers editors note that the "excitement [that] commenced with the Methodists" indicates that "Methodists held camp meetings at Palmyra in June 1818 and at Oaks Corners, near Vienna and within six miles of Palmyra, in July 1819." Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 208–9 n. 41. Three sources are cited for this: E. Latimer, *The Three Brothers: Sketches of the Lives of Rev. Aurora Seager, Rev. Micah Seager, Rev. Schuyler Seager* (New York: Philips and Hunt, 1880), 12; George Peck, *Early Methodism* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1860), 502; and Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting for Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books,

As you presumably all know, Latter-day Saints traditionally assumed this revival took place in 1820, since Smith said he was fifteen at the time. Fawn Brodie called this dating into question with the publication of *No Man Knows My History* in 1945, and Wesley Walters, a Presbyterian minister, marshaled considerable evidence to suggest that the revival in question actually took place in 1824–25.<sup>8</sup> Walters submitted his article to *Dialogue* in 1967, but it did not appear there until Latter-day Saint historians were prepared to respond to it some two years later. In his recent book on the First Vision, Steven Harper provides a detailed account of Walters's efforts, the consternation it aroused among Latter-day Saint intellectuals, and the immediate efforts made to mobilize Latter-day Saint scholars

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2009), 128–30. Latimer, as quoted by D. Michael Quinn, gives evidence of a Methodist camp meeting in Palmyra in June 1818. D. Michael Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience of a Methodist ‘Camp-Meeting’ in 1820,” *Dialogue Paperless*, E-Paper #3, December 20, 2006, 2–3 [Dialogue Paperless and this article are no longer available online]. It reads: “I [the Methodist itinerant, Aurora Seager] received, on the 18th of June, a letter from Brother [Billy] Hibbard, informing me that I had been received by the [eastern] New York Conference, and, at my request, had been transferred to the Genesee Conference. On [Friday,] the 19th [of June 1818,] I attended a camp-meeting at Palmyra [nearly fourteen miles from Phelps]. The arrival of Bishop Roberts, who seems to be a man of God, and is apostolic in his appearance, gave a deeper interest to the meeting until it closed. On Monday [at Palmyra’s camp-meeting,] the sacrament was administered, about twenty were baptized; forty united with the [Methodist] Church, and the meeting closed. I accompanied the Bishop to Brother [Eleazer] Hawks, at Phelps, and on the 14th of July [1818,] I set out [from Phelps] with Brother [Zechariah] Paddock for the Genesee conference, which was to hold its session at Lansing, N.Y.” As Quinn indicates, Seager’s home was in Phelps, which is presumably why he wanted to be transferred to the Genesee Annual Conference. The camp meeting in Palmyra was not connected to the 1818 annual conference, which met in Lansing, New York, which is near Ithaca, not Palmyra. The 1819 annual conference was held in Vienna (now Phelps), but there is little evidence for a camp meeting or a revival in conjunction with the 1819 annual conference (for a discussion of this and Staker’s misinterpretation of Peck, see note 22 herein).

The JSP also adds a note on Smith’s family joining the church. It reads, “Lucy Mack Smith and three of her children, Hyrum, Sophronia, and Samuel, attended the Western Presbyterian Church in Palmyra. Lucy wrote that their affiliation began following the death of her son Alvin in November 1823, or near the end of JS’s eighteenth year.” “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 2 n. 7, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 28, 2020], <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/2#foot-notes>. No attempt is made to reconcile the differences in Smith’s age (and thus the date) in relation to the two presumably connected events (the “excitement” and his family joining the church).

8. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 21–25. Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1967): 236.

to investigate the early history of the Church in upstate New York.<sup>9</sup> The results of their research were published in a special issue of *BYU Studies* in 1969.<sup>10</sup> Shortly thereafter, Walters's article was published in *Dialogue*, with a response by Richard Bushman and a reply by Walters.<sup>11</sup>

If we look at the major histories of early Mormonism, we find that Bushman incorporated the research of the late sixties in *Joseph Smith and Early Mormonism*, published in 1984. In it, he offered a more historically nuanced account of Mormon origins, while preserving the traditional chronology. In doing so, he made two important moves. First, he reconciled the difference between Smith's 1832 and 1838 histories by taking a developmental approach, arguing that by 1838 "aspects [of his First Vision experience] took on an importance they did not possess at first."<sup>12</sup> Second, he maintained the conventional dating of the First Vision by associating the revival with the meeting of the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Vienna (later Phelps) near Palmyra in July 1819 and by indicating that Lucy joined the Presbyterian Church in Palmyra "at some unspecified date," probably "before 1823."<sup>13</sup> He did not mention the evidence for the 1824 revival in Palmyra or Lucy's statement that she joined the church in the context of a revival that took place there after her son Alvin's death in 1823.

Ten years later, Michael Marquardt and Wesley Walters published *Inventing Mormonism*, which summarized the results of their intensive research into Mormon origins.<sup>14</sup> Although Bushman generally applauded their research efforts and their "generous, fair-minded tone" in his review of their book, he highlighted a key instance in which he thought their efforts to separate fact from interpretation fell short. In their timeline, he wrote, "the authors list under 1825 the admission of Lucy and three of the Smith children into the Palmyra Presbyterian church as if this were a well-attested fact. But the authors have no direct

9. Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 219–28.

10. The special issue, edited by Truman G. Madsen, contained articles by James B. Allen and Leonard J. Arrington, Dean C. Jessee, Milton V. Backman Jr., Larry C. Porter, T. Edgar Lyon, and Marvin S. Hill. See full issue, *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969).

11. Wesley P. Walters and Richard L. Bushman, "Roundtable: The Question of the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 59–81.

12. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 57.

13. Bushman, *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 53.

14. H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994).

evidence that this highly contested event occurred in 1825.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast to Bushman, Latter-day Saint historian Marvin Hill found Lucy Smith’s chronology compelling. As he writes, “[Lucy] said she attended the revival with hope of gaining solace for Alvin’s loss. That kind of detail is just the sort that gives validity to Lucy’s chronology. She would not have been likely to make up such a reaction for herself or the family or to mistake the time when it happened. I am persuaded that it was 1824 when Lucy joined the Presbyterians.”<sup>16</sup>

Ten years later, Dan Vogel was also convinced. In *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, Vogel followed Lucy’s chronology, arguing that, while Smith may have concluded at an early age that all the churches were corrupt, this would have “conformed to the religious views of both parents.” It was in response to his mother’s decision to join the Presbyterians in the context of the 1824 revival, Vogel contends, that the “subject of which church was true became extremely important.” Vogel thus concludes that “Joseph twice lifted the revival out of its historical context, pushing it back to 1823 [in revising Cowdery’s history], then to 1820 [in his 1838 history].”<sup>17</sup> Vogel also observes that Smith’s statement that a Methodist preacher treated his vision with contempt makes more sense in 1824–25 than in 1820, especially if we consider the possibility that “Smith actually related his 1823 and 1824 encounters with the heavenly messenger”—that is, the revelation of the plates—to the minister rather than the Lord’s forgiveness of his sins.<sup>18</sup>

Vogel’s account precipitated a lengthy response from D. Michael Quinn in defense of the 1820 date of the revival, which Vogel found unconvincing.<sup>19</sup> In a 2012 essay, Steven Harper summarized the evidence for dating the “unusual excitement on the subject of religion” in 1820 or earlier in an effort to support the traditional chronology.<sup>20</sup> In

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15. Richard L. Bushman, “Just the Facts Please,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon, 1989–2011* 6, no. 2 (1994): 131, 133.

16. Marvin Hill, “The First Vision Controversy: A Critique and Reconciliation,” *Dialogue* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 39. Hill adds, “Indicating that the angel had told Joseph of the plates prior to the revival, Lucy added that for a long time after Alvin’s death, the family could not bear any talk about the golden plates, for the subject had been one of great interest to him and any reference to the plates stirred sorrowful memories.”

17. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 60.

18. Vogel, *Making of a Prophet*, 64.

19. Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience of a Methodist ‘Camp-Meeting’ in 1820.” For Vogel’s response, see Dan Vogel, “What Is a Revival?” *Dialogue* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2008): viii–x.

20. Steven C. Harper, “Evaluating Three Arguments against Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 2 (2012): 25–26.

*Rough Stone Rolling*, Bushman incorporates Smith's 1835 history without significantly altering the account of Mormon origins he proposed in his earlier work. He also acknowledges the 1824 revival and debates over the First Vision in the notes but doesn't discuss them in the text.<sup>21</sup>

Here is a brief summary of the evidence for each date. In 1820, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists were present in the Palmyra area. The 1819 Methodist Annual Conference was held in nearby Vienna. The Rev. George Lane, who is mentioned in Cowdery's account and was then the presiding elder for the Susquehanna District (in Pennsylvania), was present at the 1819 annual conference. Annual conferences brought all the preachers together to receive their new assignments, but revivals were more often associated with the quarterly conferences of the circuits than with annual conferences of the itinerant preachers.<sup>22</sup> Lane also

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Harper mistakenly cites the Seager diary as evidence for "a weekend camp meeting in Palmyra in June 1820," although the diary actually states it took place in 1818 (for more on Seager's diary, see note 7 herein).

21. See Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 35–41. For his acknowledgement of the debates, see 570 nn. 27, 30.

22. Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 29. They add, "In 1826, when a camp meeting was actually held, the conference minutes contain reference to the ministers who were put in charge of the arrangements for the meeting. No indication of any such arrangement appears in the 1819 minutes." Peck provides a summary of proceedings of the annual meetings of the Genesee Conference, which involved the passage of resolutions on church matters and, above all, the review and reassignment of the itinerant preachers who were members of the conference. Peck, *Early Methodism*, 496–512. With the establishment of geographically defined annual conferences in 1796, they became closed meetings, largely limited to the itinerant preachers. This limited the potential for associated revivals. Russell Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 52–61. It is possible, as Bushman indicates, "that either during the conference or as it broke up, these ministers preached in nearby towns." Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 89.

After 1800, revivals of religion were typically associated with quarterly meetings, which were held four times per year on every circuit. They brought together all the members of the society, including the local preachers, exhorters, and class leaders (none of whom were members of the annual conference), along with the presiding elder for the district and the itinerants assigned to the circuit. Itinerants from neighboring circuits might attend as well. Some business was conducted, but most of the two-day meeting was devoted to preaching and worship, including typically communion and a love feast. Nonmembers, who were welcome at all but the business meeting and the love feast, often participated in large numbers. In suggesting that the revival Smith described could have taken place in conjunction with the 1819 annual conference in Vienna, Staker conflates annual and quarterly conferences, noting that "one devout woman regularly traveled forty or fifty miles to attend *these conferences* every chance she could." Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People*, 130, emphasis added. The source actually states, "She [Mrs. Lee]

participated in a meeting in Richmond on the Bloomfield Circuit (about thirty miles from Palmyra) on his way to the 1820 annual conference in Lower Canada.<sup>23</sup> The Methodists did hold camp meetings on the Vienna Road just outside of Palmyra, and as Bushman notes, “Orsamus Turner, a newspaperman in Palmyra who knew the Smiths personally, recalls that Joseph caught ‘a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting’ somewhere along the road to Vienna.”<sup>24</sup> In his response to Bushman, Walters agreed that Turner likely made these observations prior to 1822 and suggests that a camp meeting experience “may have provided the one core of truth around which [Smith] later wove his various vision stories.”<sup>25</sup> From the Williams diaries, we also know that claims to have experienced the presence of God were not all that rare at the time. Finally, Lucy Smith indicates that she changed her course, presumably in relation to joining a church, when her oldest son, presumably Alvin, “attained his 22<sup>nd</sup> year,” which would have been in 1820, but she does not offer any details.<sup>26</sup>

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was present at all *the quarterly meetings* within her reach, often going forty and fifty miles, and driving her own carriage, or riding on horseback.” Peck, *Early Methodism*, 317, emphasis added. For a discussion of quarterly meetings, see Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000); and Russell Richey, “From Quarterly to Camp Meeting,” *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 21–32.

23. Benajah Williams diaries, American Religious Collection (ARC MSS 85), Special Collections, University of California at Santa Barbara. Benajah Williams was a Methodist preacher who was assigned to the Bloomfield circuit in 1820. The Bloomfield circuit was adjacent to, but did not include, Palmyra, where the Smiths were living. The Williams diaries not only illuminate the revival context but also include a reference to Rev. George Lane, the minister to whom some historians have speculated Joseph Smith recounted his First Vision. Though Williams does not mention a communion service or business meeting, this two-day meeting, which included preaching, exhorting, a prayer meeting, and a love feast, had the general form of a quarterly meeting.

24. Bushman, “The First Vision Story Revived,” 89. Bushman adds, “Since Turner left Palmyra in 1822, we can presume that the camp meeting and Joseph’s awakening occurred before that date. All told, there can be little doubt that the Methodists were up to something in 1819 and 1820.” The full quote, as cited in Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 29, reads, “After catching a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting, away down in the woods, on the Vienna road, he [Smith] was a very passable exhorter in evening meetings.”

25. Wesley P. Walters, “A Reply to Dr. Bushman,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 99.

26. In her draft history, Lucy Mack Smith indicates that, while they were still living in Vermont, she “covenanted with God [in the context of a serious illness] if he would let me live I would endeavor to get that religion that would enable me to serve him right whether it was in the Bible or where ever it might be found even if it was to be obtained

The 1824–25 revival in Palmyra—by way of contrast—is attested by Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist membership records.<sup>27</sup> Rev. Lane, who was appointed as presiding elder of the Ontario District (that included Palmyra) in 1824, published a lengthy account of the revival the following year.<sup>28</sup> Not only does Lucy place the revival and her decision to join the church in the wake of Alvin's death in 1823,<sup>29</sup> but Joseph's brother William said Joseph got the idea of asking God what church he should join from a sermon preached by Rev. Lane in the context of “a joint revival in the neighborhood between the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians . . . [in which] the question arose which church should have the converts.”<sup>30</sup> According to William, the Presbyterian minister Rev. Stockton said that “they ought to join the Presbyterians,” but the next night, Rev. Lane “preached a sermon on ‘what church shall I join?’ And the burden of his discourse was to ask God, using as a text [James 1:5].”<sup>31</sup> Denominational sources for 1824 confirm that Stockton was the minister of the Western Presbyterian Church in Palmyra. Neither Stockton nor Lane had appointments anywhere near Palmyra prior to 1824.

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from heaven by prayer and Faith.” Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:240. After much searching, she concluded, “there is not on Earth the religion which I seek.” As a result, she decided, “I will hear all that can be said read all that is written but particularly the word of God shall be my guide to life and [salvation which] I will endeavor to obtain if it is to [be] had by diligence in prayer[.] This course I pursued for many years till at last I [concluded] that my mind would be easier if I were baptized and I found a minister who was [willing] to baptize me and leave me free from membership in any church after which I [pursued] the same course [to “continued to read the Bible as formerly” (1853 ed.)] until my oldest attained his 22<sup>nd</sup> year.” Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:242. She does not indicate what she did after this time.

27. For an extended discussion of the evidence, see Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 15–27.

28. George Lane, “Revival of Religion on Ontario District: Letter from the Rev. George Lane, dated Wilkesbarre, January 25, 1925,” *Methodist Magazine* 8 (1825): 158–61.

29. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:306–7.

30. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:513.

31. According to Alexander Neibaur, Smith—at times anyway—linked his First Vision with the revival meeting in which his mother and siblings “got religion,” but he did not and, instead, thinking of James 1:5, went to the woods to pray: “Br Joseph tolts us the first call he had a Revival Meeting his Mother & Br & Sister got Religion, he wanted to get Religion too wanted to feel & shout like the Rest but could feel nothing, opened his Bible the first Passage that struck him was if any man lack Wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all Men liberallity & upbraidet not went into the Wood to pray.” “Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract,” [23], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 21, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/alexander-neibaur-journal-24-may-1844-extract/1>.

Two things surprised me when I dug into these sources. Above all, I was surprised at how much evidence there was for a revival in 1824 of the sort Smith described in his 1838 account, especially given how little I had heard about it and how sketchy the evidence was for 1820. Beyond that, I was surprised at how long it took me to realize that I didn't have to privilege Joseph's histories over Lucy's or seek to reconcile them. I could use her account to help me think through alternatives to the official origin story.<sup>32</sup>

### Mormon Origins: Lucy's Version

If we compare Joseph's and Lucy Smith's histories, both depict Joseph as wrestling with a similar problem, that is, determining which church was right, and in both cases, one or more supernatural beings appeared, and in one way or another, Joseph learned that all the churches were wrong. They differ, however, with respect to the number of events, the context in which the issue arose, when and how he learned all the churches were wrong, and the number and type of supernatural being(s) that appeared. Most notably, in Joseph's history, these things take place in two events: one in 1820 and one in 1823; in Lucy's history there is only one event, in 1823.<sup>33</sup>

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32. The seeds of this approach were planted by a paper on Lucy Smith given by Rachel Cope at a conference on Joseph Smith's translations in 2014; it has just been published in Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020).

33. See the source notes and introduction to Lucy's history in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:227–30, and the source notes and historical introductions to the draft version and the extant fair copy of Lucy Mack's history published by the Joseph Smith Papers. “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845>; “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/1>. According to the Joseph Smith Papers, Lucy Mack Smith dictated a rough-draft version of her history to Martha Jane Knowlton Coray (with some additional scribal help from Martha's husband, Howard) beginning in 1844 and concluding in 1845. In 1845, the Corays used the rough draft and other notes and sources to create two revised, or “fair,” copies. The sole extant fair copy is titled “The History of Lucy Smith Mother of the Prophet.” The other fair copy (no longer extant) was printed in England under the title *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations, by Lucy Smith, Mother of the Prophet* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853). The draft version—Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845; handwriting of Martha Jane Knowlton Coray and Howard Coray; 240 pages—is held by the Church

Joseph Smith's three versions of his history, although differing in specifics, all distinguish between a "First Vision" in which deities appeared and a subsequent event in which an "angel of the Lord" informed him of the existence of the ancient records. All the accounts of the First Vision indicate that Smith was distressed in the context of contention between the churches, albeit for different reasons. In the earliest account, he was distressed because he was "convicted of [his] sins" and turned to the Lord for mercy because, based on Smith's own reading of scripture, he concluded that all the churches had apostatized. In his 1835 and 1838 accounts, he was "wrought up . . . respecting the subject of religion" because he didn't know "who was right and who was wrong" (1835). In 1838, this uncertainty arose in the context of the revival we have been discussing. In the latter two accounts, he didn't search the scriptures for an answer; instead, he had "a realizing sense" that he should "ask of God" which of the churches was right. In the first account, he figures out that all the churches were wrong based on his own reading of scripture; in the later accounts, he acquired this information on much higher authority: two divine personages—the Father and the Son—weighed in to proclaim that all the churches were wrong.<sup>34</sup>

In Lucy's draft history, there is only one vision, and the question of which church was right was a topic that had long interested both her and her husband and was a topic of discussion within the family the evening the angel appeared. As she tells the story:

One evening [in September 1823] we were sitting till quite late conversing upon the subject of the diversity of churches that had risen up in the world and the many thousand opinions in existence as to the truths contained in scripture[.] . . . After we ceased conversation he [Joseph] went to bed <and was pondering in his mind which of the churches were the true one.> ~~an~~ but he had not laid there long till <he saw> a bright <light> entered the room where he lay[.] He looked up and saw an angel of the Lord ~~stood~~ <standing> by him.<sup>35</sup>

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History Library in Salt Lake City. The draft version is printed in parallel with the published version in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:227–450. The draft version and the fair copy are available on the Joseph Smith Papers website at the above links.

34. For a comparison and discussion of the versions, see Taves and Harper, "Joseph Smith's First Vision." An annotated list of many of the primary accounts of Smith's First Vision is available online: "Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Deity," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision?p=1&highlight=first%20vision>.

35. "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," [10], bk. 3.

In her account, Joseph did not search scripture or ask of God. The “angel of the Lord” simply appeared and said to him, “I perceive that you are enquiring in your mind which is the true church[.] there is not a true church on Earth[.] No not one ~~Nor~~ <and> has not been since Peter took the Keys <of the Melchesidec priesthood after the order of God> into the Kingdom of Heaven[.] the churches that are now upon the Earth are all man made churches.”<sup>36</sup>

In Lucy’s draft account, “an angel of the Lord” appeared because Joseph was “pondering in his mind,” and the angel informed him not only that there was no true church on earth but also that there was a record that he must recover buried in a nearby hillside that was “to bring forth that light and intelligence which has long been lost in the Earth.”<sup>37</sup> In the final (1853) version of Lucy’s history, the editors inserted the *Times and Seasons* account of Joseph’s vision of the Father and Son that gives the impression that she described two visions and two Palmyra revivals, one in 1820 and another after Alvin’s death in November 1823.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the 1853 edition of her history substituted Joseph’s account of his 1823 vision for Lucy’s, eliminating her description of the family’s discussion. It simply stated that “he retired to his bed in quite a serious and contemplative state of mind,” whereupon he “brought himself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God.”<sup>39</sup>

If, at the time of the 1824 revival, Joseph’s encounters with this messenger were foremost in his mind, Vogel’s suggestion that Smith might have related this visionary encounter to Rev. Lane seems worth considering. If Smith told a Methodist minister that an angel of the Lord had informed him that there was no true church on earth and that he had been instructed to recover an ancient record that would restore the true church, the minister would most likely have told him, “Sorry, the Methodists have things right, the canon of scripture is closed, and no new revelation is needed.”

If we now turn to the supernatural appearances in Lucy’s book, we find that an “angel of the Lord” is the primary supernatural being that appears and speaks to Joseph. There are references to God and the Lord, but they do not appear or speak directly. At most, they speak through an angel, which she sometimes refers to as a “personage” or a “divine messenger.”<sup>40</sup>

36. “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845,” [10], bk. 3.

37. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:289–90.

38. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:288 n. 87.

39. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:289.

40. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:297. She also reports that “a personage” appeared to Lucy Harris in a dream and showed her the plates, such that she “then

The first set of references to the angel appears in Lucy's discussion of the revelation of the buried record in 1823.<sup>41</sup> The angel appeared again in 1827 to chastise Joseph for his negligence in recovering the buried record.<sup>42</sup> The angel then appeared in conjunction with the actual recovery of the record,<sup>43</sup> at which point the angel directed him to keep it safe from "wicked men." The next set of references occurs after Joseph and Martin Harris began translating the record in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and Joseph allowed Harris to take the translated portion of the manuscript home to Palmyra. While Harris was away, Emma Smith gave birth to their first child, who died the same day. But Emma, worried about the lack of news from Harris, encouraged Joseph nonetheless to go to Palmyra to find out what had happened. At the dining table in the Smith's home in Manchester, Harris confessed that the manuscript had disappeared, and Lucy provided a graphic eyewitness account of Joseph's anguished realization that he had disobeyed the angel's instructions.<sup>44</sup>

Two months later, in September 1828, Lucy and Joseph Sr. visited Harmony to find out what had happened after Joseph returned. According to Lucy, Joseph recounted, "After I arrived here I commenced humbling myself in mighty prayer before the Lord and [as] I poured out my soul in supplication to him that if possible I might obtain mercy at [his] hands and be forgiven of all that I had done which was contrary to his will—As I was doing this an Angel stood before me and answered me saying that I had sinned in [delivering] . . . the manuscript into the hands of a wicked man."<sup>45</sup> Lucy then adds, "Soon after this he received [a following] revelation from the Lord," whereupon the text of the July 1828 revelation, published as *Doctrine and Covenants 3* (1844 edition), is inserted into both the draft and edited versions of Lucy's history.<sup>46</sup>

An angel continued to play a critical role in Lucy's history, laying the plates before the Three Witnesses,<sup>47</sup> transporting the plates from one place to another, and generally withdrawing and returning them as needed.<sup>48</sup>

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described the record minutely," after which she offered Joseph "28 dollars that her mother gave her just before she died when she was on her death bed." Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:347–48.

41. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:289–98.

42. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:325.

43. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:338.

44. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:356–65.

45. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:369–70.

46. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:370, and n. 179.

47. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:347.

48. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:370–71, 391.

## Distinguishing Presences in a Folk Christian Treasure-Seeking Milieu

Although Lucy's history was recounted long after the events occurred, Joseph's histories and the first-person accounts of his brother William also refer to an angel, messenger, and/or personage.<sup>49</sup> In light of the crucial role the angel played in the events Lucy recounted, we can ask who she thought the angel was and how it was characterized by others. Although the later tradition identifies the angel as Moroni, one of the ancient Nephites, he remains unnamed in Lucy's draft history. Joseph's 1838 account of the angel's appearance, which was inserted into the edited version, indicates "his name was Nephi."<sup>50</sup> Since Lucy reports that Joseph regaled the family with accounts of the "ancient inhabitants" of the Americas that the angel had presumably recounted to him, Lucy probably assumed that the angel was an ancient Nephite, whether Nephi or Moroni. She also indicated that an "ancient Nephite," presumably also an angel, brought the plates to the grove so that the Eight Witnesses could handle them.<sup>51</sup>

There has been extensive discussion on whether Smith initially understood the personage who he claimed appeared to him in 1823 as an angel, a spirit, or a treasure guardian.<sup>52</sup> Willard Chase testified in 1833 that "in the month of June, 1827, Joseph Smith, Sen., related to me the following story: 'That some years ago, a spirit had appeared to Joseph his son, in a vision, and informed him that in a certain place there was a record on plates of gold, and that he was the person that must obtain them.'"<sup>53</sup> According to Chase, Smith's father said the spirit was "the spirit of the prophet who wrote this book, and who was sent to Joseph Smith, to make known these things to him."<sup>54</sup> Abigail Harris, Martin Harris's sister-in-law, offered similar testimony based on a conversation with Joseph's parents at Martin Harris's house in winter 1828. According to Abigail, the Smiths said that "the report that Joseph, jun. had found golden plates,

49. For Joseph's references, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:28–30, 44, 66; for William's, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:478–79, 496.

50. For evidence that Joseph used the names Nephi and Moroni interchangeably as late as 1838, see D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 198–99, 508–9 n. 186.

51. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:395–96.

52. For an overview of the discussion, see Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, 1989–2011 18, no. 1 (2006): 77–100.

53. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:66.

54. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:67.

was true, and that he was in Harmony, Pa. translating them.” Joseph’s parents explained that the plates were “revealed to him by the spirit of one of the Saints that was on this continent, previous to its being discovered by Columbus.”<sup>55</sup> Quinn also cites local newspaper accounts from 1829 that reported that Smith claimed to have been visited by a “spirit.”<sup>56</sup>

Mark Ashurst-McGee points out, however, that Jesse Smith’s letter of 1829 is the earliest relevant source.<sup>57</sup> Jesse’s letter indicates that in 1828 either Joseph or his father had written that “the Angel of the Lord has revealed to him [Joseph] the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge, even divine revelation, which has lain in the bowels of the earth for thousands of years.”<sup>58</sup> But as Michael Quinn notes and others generally agree, “It was not customary to use ‘angel’ to describe a personage who had been mortal, died, and was returning to earth to deliver a message to someone.”<sup>59</sup> Although insiders’ initial characterizations may have vacillated between “spirit” and “angel,” the earliest sources nonetheless indicate that by the time the plates were recovered, Joseph and his parents viewed the messenger as the spirit of a long-deceased person—an ancient Nephite—who was in some way connected to the Lord, whether as a prophet, saint, or an angel, and to “hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

The Smiths’ claims did not go uncontested. Two alternative interpretations of what they had found or done allow us to embed the process of discernment more deeply in the revival context: thus, some claimed that he had simply found treasure, which led them to characterize the supernatural presence as a “treasure-guardian” or “treasure-spirit.” Others claimed that he was engaging in necromancy, which led them to characterize it as a “ghost.”

Some of Smith’s fellow treasure seekers held the first view. When Willard Chase and other local treasure seekers brought in a “conjuror” to help find the plates,<sup>60</sup> and when Willard’s sister Sally Chase claimed to have found the plates with her “green glass,”<sup>61</sup> they were viewing the plates simply as “gold treasure” (not as a “gold bible”) and using established

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55. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:32.

56. Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 138.

57. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:55.

58. Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian,” 56. See also “Letter-book 2,” 59, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 6, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letterbook-2/64>.

59. Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 140.

60. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:331.

61. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:342–43.

folk practices for locating it. From a treasure-seeking perspective, the supernatural entity that revealed and guarded the treasure was likely conceived as a “treasure-spirit,” and Smith’s initial inability to recover the plates was chalked up to “enchantment.”<sup>62</sup> Treasure seekers did not necessarily view their efforts as antithetical to Christianity. The Chases were Methodists, and it does not appear that they viewed treasure seeking per se as incompatible with their religion.<sup>63</sup> For orthodox Christians, the heterodoxy lay in Smith’s claim that he had recovered a “gold bible” and, thus, new scripture.

Others viewed Smith as engaging in necromancy, that is, attempting to conjure up the spirits of the dead. This was the view of some in Smith’s extended family, including Emma’s Methodist cousins Joseph and Heil Lewis and Joseph’s devoutly Calvinist uncle Jesse. Emma’s cousins, who were slightly younger than Joseph, lived near her parents in Harmony when Joseph and other treasure seekers boarded at the Hales in 1825 and when Joseph and Emma returned to live there from December 1827 until June 1829. Her cousins, like the rest of her family, were Methodists, and her cousins’ parents hosted class meetings in their home. When Smith attended one of these Methodist class meetings in June 1828 shortly after the death of his son, he apparently added his name to the Methodist “class book.” Emma’s cousins were appalled. As they wrote many years later, they “thought it was a disgrace to the church to admit a practicing necromancer, a dealer in enchantments and bleeding ghosts” and told him that they would initiate an investigation of his conduct if he didn’t withdraw his name from the Methodist class book.<sup>64</sup> Joseph’s uncle Jesse had similar thoughts. In his 1829 letter to Joseph’s brother Hyrum, Jesse claimed the “gold book [was] discovered by the necromancy of infidelity, and dug from the mines of atheism.” Jesse Smith was incensed to learn that he had interacted with, and perhaps even conjured up, spirits of the dead that Jesse viewed as “[of the] Devil” rather than “of the Lord.”<sup>65</sup>

Whether they initially used “spirit” and “angel” interchangeably, the immediate Smith family clearly shifted to “angel” as the preferred

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62. On treasure seeking and enchantment, see the 1826 court record and the account of Smith’s father-in-law, Isaac Hale. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:251, 284.

63. Lucy Smith indicates that Willard Chase was a Methodist class leader. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:331. After the Wesleyan Methodists broke with the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844, Chase was ordained as a Wesleyan Methodist preacher. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:64.

64. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:311.

65. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:552.

designation for the manifestations of long-dead “ancient Nephites,” who had once inhabited the Americas. They did so most likely because references to “spirits” more easily conjured up notions of “necromancy” while “angel,” and especially “angel of the Lord,” emphasized the messenger’s connection to deity. Angels, however, were still intermediaries, and I think that the real-time evidence offered by the earliest recorded revelations suggests that it was in 1829 that Smith began recounting revelations that he claimed came directly from the Lord rather than through intermediaries.

If we look at the first recorded revelation, which Smith proclaimed in July 1828 in the wake of the loss of the manuscript, we find that the speaker does not disclose its identity. It addresses Smith directly in the first person but refers to God and the Lord in the third person. The speaker refers ambiguously to “my People the Nephites [sic] and the Jacobites and the Josephites and the Lamanites.”<sup>66</sup> If “my people” refers only to the Nephites and not to all the peoples listed, it suggests that the speaker is a Nephite. In subsequent revelations announced by Smith in March and April 1829, the speaker explicitly self-identifies as the Lord, God, or Jesus Christ,<sup>67</sup> leading some to assume that the Lord was speaking in the first revelation as well.<sup>68</sup>

According to the passage already quoted from Lucy’s history, however, Joseph told her that when he returned to Harmony and humbled himself in prayer “before the Lord,” asking to be forgiven for all that “[he] had done which was contrary to his will[,] . . . *an Angel stood before me and answered me* saying that I had sinned in that [I] had delivered the manuscript into the hands of a wicked man.”<sup>69</sup> After recounting this appearance of the angel, Lucy inserted the text of the 1844 version of *Doctrine and Covenants* 3. In his 1838 history, Smith himself indicated that “*the former heavenly messenger*” mediated this first revelation by appearing and handing him “the Urim and Thummin [sic],” which then enabled him to “enquire of the Lord through them.”<sup>70</sup>

Rather than viewing the appearance of the intermediary and the revelation as two separate events, I think it is more likely that the text of the July 1828 revelation was obtained through a prayer-induced visionary experience of “a heavenly messenger.” Such an interpretation is

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66. MacKay and others, *Documents*, Volume 1, 9.

67. MacKay and others, *Documents*, Volume 1, 39.

68. For a fuller discussion, see Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 26–33.

69. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:369–70, emphasis added.

70. Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 246, emphasis added.

congruent with the third-person references to “God” and “the Lord” in the recorded revelation, with Lucy’s account of an angelic appearance, and with Joseph’s account of the appearance of “the former heavenly messenger,” that is, the ancient Nephite who appeared in his 1823 vision.

If this reconstruction is accurate, there is then a marked difference between the first recorded revelation and those Smith proclaimed in March and April 1829. In July 1828, I am suggesting, Smith portrayed his revelation as being *from* an ancient Nephite (a “heavenly messenger” and “an angel of the Lord”) much as he did in September 1823. By the following spring, his revelations were portrayed instead as coming directly from the Lord, God, or Jesus Christ, thus receiving revelations *like* an ancient Nephite.

Other scholars, including Jan Shipps, Richard Bushman, and Dan Vogel, also view the crisis precipitated by the loss of the manuscript as a major turning point.<sup>71</sup> However, they note the shift in Smith’s status and self-understanding without linking it to a shift in the identity of the supernatural speaker and, by extension, the source of the revelation. If we don’t assume that Smith claimed from the outset that he was in direct communication with deity, as the later introduction of the First Vision suggests, we can detect a shift in who was communicating in early 1829. Prior to that time, the Smiths and their close collaborators were directly engaged with lesser beings—intermediaries—whose identity was hotly disputed by others. When the translation resumed in 1829 with the arrival of Oliver Cowdery, Smith began reporting revelations that came directly from the Lord. Lesser beings still appeared to Smith and his followers, but the authenticity of such appearances could be checked by directly inquiring of the Lord himself.

Historians have acknowledged that Joseph’s self-understanding changed over time, that he made a transition first from a village seer, to a seer who was greater than a prophet or revelator, and then to a prophet. But under the weight of Joseph’s histories, which launch the Church’s history with the First Vision, they haven’t acknowledged that the supernatural beings who were said to appear changed over time as well. Lucy’s history brings this to the fore and suggests that the Lord began speaking directly in 1829, not 1820. This shift in who was speaking, I argue, led in time to a reimaging of Mormon origins such that the Lord—not an angel—spoke to Smith directly from the start.

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71. See Jan Shipps, “The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading to a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith,” *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974): 17; Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 69; Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, 129.

## Conclusion

The First Vision controversy has generated several options for locating the revival that Joseph Smith described in his 1838 history. Those advocating 1820 or earlier variously locate it in upstate New York generally (Backman), at a Methodist annual conference in 1819 (Staker, Bushman), and/or at one or more Methodist camp-meetings in or around Palmyra (Harper). Note that, in light of the Turner evidence that Smith got “a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting” somewhere along the road to Vienna,” Walters and Bushman *agree* this could have been the “seed” of his later accounts. Walters, Marquardt, Hill, and Vogel all locate a revival (not just a camp meeting) in Palmyra in 1824–25. Quinn vigorously defends the 1820 date but thinks Smith blended memories from 1820 and 1824–25.

Whatever happened in 1820 or thereabout, the evidence for a revival in 1824–25 of the sort that Smith described is sufficiently strong that we need to consider it as a possible context in which some of the events he described occurred. It thus opens up interpretive possibilities that Steven Harper and I did not consider in our published conversation about the First Vision. The table below indicates the possibilities we discussed (in regular type) and the new possibilities opened up by the First Vision controversy (in italics).

### Interpretive Possibilities Opened by the First Vision Controversy

**When did Joseph Smith become concerned about which church was right?**

- pre-1823; in the context of early revivals/camp meetings (Joseph’s 1838 history) *or from his parents (Lucy’s history)*
- 1823; *family discussion (Lucy’s history)*
- 1824; *Palmyra revival (William’s recollection of Lane’s sermon)*
- *All of the above*

**Who told him visions and revelations had ended with the apostolic age? On what grounds?**

- 1820; Lane or some other Methodist—on grounds Methodism was right; on grounds of seeing God the Father and God the Son (Harper)
- 1824; *Lane; in context of Palmyra revival based on recounting of 1823 revelation of plates—on grounds Methodism was right and no new revelation*

- 1828; *Methodists in Harmony* who kicked him out of class meeting—on grounds that he was conjuring up spirits of the dead (necromancy) and claiming new revelation
- 1830s; critics of new revelation who thought their church was right (Taves)

When did Smith get the idea he had to “inquire of the Lord,” rather than just consult scripture?

- 1820 (Harper)
- 1823–24; *Lucy’s history and William’s recollection of Lane sermon*
- 1830s (Taves)

When he inquired, who responded? Who did he think was present?

- pre-1828 (D&C 3); the presences were lesser beings, whose identity was hotly disputed—that is, ancient Nephites, messengers of the Lord, angels, spirits, ghosts.
- 1828 and after; the Lord, God, or the Son as attested in subsequent revelations.

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# Of Contrasts, Apologies, and Authenticity

## The First Visions of Joseph Smith and Ellen White in Comparison

*David F. Holland*

In the antebellum United States, a young American Christian was confused by the conflicting religious messages that swirled through the surrounding culture. The teenaged seeker sought the Lord in prayer, pleading for a message of light and love to break through the darkness. This plea was answered with a mighty vision, a revelation that brought both immediate peace and the promise of further guidance. The experience not only marked the visionary awakening of an earnest adolescent supplicant; it also eventually helped anchor the messaging of a global religious movement that would come to boast millions of members around the world. The adherents to that movement eventually began calling this epiphany the “first vision.” Various narrations of the vision were recorded by the prophet at different moments in time, critics arguing that the variations conveniently reflected doctrinal evolutions within the emerging church. Such criticisms notwithstanding, a familiar form of the experience has settled into the culture of the faith, serving as an orienting narrative in explaining the rise of a new church, a church ordained to usher in the millennial day.

The outlines of this story should sound rather familiar to Latter-day Saints. But in this case, the young prophet at the heart of the account was not Joseph Smith but Ellen White; the church that coalesced around this revelation was that of the Seventh-day Adventists rather than that of the Latter-day Saints; and the year in which the vision took place was 1844—six months after Smith’s passing. There are, then, two monumental “first visions” on the religious landscape of the United States, each one lying at the heart of a major American religious movement’s origin story, and

each serving as the great inflection point in the biography of a nineteenth-century prophet. The similarities between the structure of the Adventist story of adolescent theophany and that of its Latter-day Saint counterpart seem almost to overdetermine a juxtaposition of the two experiences, and yet close scholarly comparisons have been hard to come by.

There are various possible reasons for the absence of such comparisons. One may be the relative historiographical invisibility of Ellen White. It is difficult to explain why more students of American history have not been attracted to a visionary woman who helped found a church in the mid-nineteenth century that now boasts some 20 million adherents worldwide—and features a highly respected global hospital system, a network of colleges and universities, and recently a prominent U.S. presidential candidate—but that neglect may well account for the fact that few scholars have thought about comparing these first visions.<sup>1</sup> Another contributing element to the lack of comparison undoubtedly derives from the fact that neither religious tradition is very interested in being linked to the other. We cannot know what Joseph Smith would have thought about being paired with Ellen White, but we certainly know what Ellen White thought of the pairing. She hated it, and she worked assiduously to distance her work from that of the Latter-day Saints.<sup>2</sup> So, with the scholarship looking in other directions and the churches themselves disinclined to recognize resemblances in one another, the two have rarely drawn explicit comparison.

### Note on Comparison as Method

The lack of such a seemingly obvious form of analysis may also reflect a postmodern skepticism about religious comparison as a legitimate academic enterprise. In our overdue moment of postcolonial awareness, the comparative study of religion has been aggressively challenged as an approach that has tended to judge one religion by the standard of

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1. For membership statistics, see Office of Archives, Statistics and Research of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, *2019 Annual Statistical Report*, available at <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2019A.pdf>. A sense of White's historiographical neglect can be generated by a survey of references in *The Journal of American History*. Joseph Smith appears in the full run of that journal some 140 times. The founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, appears 24 times. Ellen White appears twice.

2. Ellen White, *Selected Messages: Book 1* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2007), 32; Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2002), 410; Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts, My Christian Experience* (Battle Creek, Mich., 1860; Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing, 1945), iv.

another—usually judging the rest of the religious world, with greater or lesser degrees of self-awareness, by the values of Protestant Christianity—doing violence to the particularities of non-Western peoples by cramming their distinctive practices and beliefs into categories constructed by the culture to which they were compared.<sup>3</sup> The practitioners of comparative religion have scanned disparate phenomena and then placed them in seemingly universal slots labeled with words like *scripture* or *god* or even *religion*, rarely realizing that those terms came out of specific theological histories that exercised a significant and—perhaps more importantly—unrecognized refraction on the scholarly perceptions of the cultures under consideration.<sup>4</sup> This tarnished history of comparative religion as an academic field suggests that in our effort to locate points of comparison across cultural forms, we have a tendency to normalize what we find familiar while marginalizing other elements, making our own culture the categorical paragon of the thing we seek in others and then necessarily finding them to fall short of that standard.

I see much truth in this critique and, subsequently, reasons to be wary in the comparative enterprise. I do not, however, see an absolute imperative to abandon it. One specific note of caution and hope comes from the unbowed comparativists Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, who have argued that comparison can escape its most dangerous pitfalls when we accept it “as an indeterminate scholarly procedure that is best undertaken as an intellectually creative enterprise, not as a science but as an art—an imaginative and critical act of mediation and redescription in the service of knowledge.” Though Patton and Ray necessarily retain a place for shared categories, I take from such a statement that we should set down the scientist’s taxonomic rigidities; to borrow Patton and Ray’s invocation of “art,” I find that comparison is

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3. See, for instance, David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Michael Bergunder, “Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity: A Postcolonial Perspective on Comparative Religion,” in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Andreas Nehring (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

4. Note the burgeoning scholarship that seeks to challenge these categories as vestiges of a colonial past. For example, Thomas B. Coburn, “‘Scripture’ in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 3 (1984): 435–59; James L. Cox, *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies* (Durham, Eng.: Acumen, 2014); and Timothy Fitzgerald, “A Critique of ‘Religion’ as a Cross-Cultural Category,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9, no. 2 (1997): 91–110.

most useful when we simply set the artistry of various religious forms in revelatory relief. Patton, Ray, and others argue that when duly guarded against its abuses, comparison can still be put to profitable purposes.<sup>5</sup>

At its most useful, comparison reminds me a bit of my own strategies for dealing with my moderate color blindness. Sometimes I cannot quite see if an article of clothing is blue or black, green or gray until I set it against another article. Then its color becomes clearer to me. (That very act of comparison also runs the risk of imposing a disturbingly flat category—of making a multishaded aquamarine shirt simply “blue” when it sits against a black jacket—but every form of analysis comes with its liabilities.) With its methodological limitations squarely in mind, we might yet make explicit comparison of religious phenomena, by which we can sharpen our necessarily dulled historical vision and better appreciate the distinguishing qualities of each rather than force false connections or let one sit in judgment of the other.

That said, two aspects of the discussion that follows might seem to flirt with the violation of the above warnings against (1) imposing artificial categories of comparison and (2) using comparison for apologetic purposes. It does something of the former at the outset and then something like the latter in conclusion. I hope in the end, however, that through careful qualification it can yet yield some of comparison’s benefits and avoid its most damaging effects.

### **The Similarities of Prophetic Profile and the Problems of Apologetic Comparison**

Ellen White and Joseph Smith do share an important categorical distinction. Amid a striking array of differences, the thing that Smith and White most conspicuously had in common was their remarkable ability to transition from teenaged visionaries (of which there were many in their environments) to the founders of enduring religious traditions (of which there were very few). In an influential article on the religious culture of the early American republic, Richard Bushman once wrote that Joseph distinguished himself from the visionary world around him by organizing a church, publishing revelatory texts that attracted a lasting readership, and inspiring people to alter their lives in dramatic fashion in obedience to his revealed teachings. Bushman argued that when scholars compare Smith with the scores of American visionaries who

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5. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 3–4.

proclaimed an encounter with divinity but left little institutional legacy, “the differences are so great that we can scarcely even say Joseph was the most successful of the visionaries; taking his life as a whole, he was of another species.”<sup>6</sup> Bushman’s observation is as compelling today as it was two decades ago. Joseph was different. But in *this* respect, it was a difference he shared with at least one other. The rarity of that distinction has drawn me to the American figure that most resembles his prophetic profile. White and Smith may not have represented the same visionary species, but in their ability to persist and build a canonizing community around their inspirations they certainly shared a genus. I do not think it distorts either story to recognize in them this particular rare and shared accomplishment.

The very similarities that justify a common analytical category can also trigger an exaggerated apologetic instinct. Sigmund Freud wrote famously of the “narcissism of small differences,” the tendency to fixate on the relatively minor variances we have with otherwise similar people and to work diligently to turn those into an amplified sense of superiority.<sup>7</sup> Putting two phenomena in a comparative framework—especially when those phenomena are held in sacred reverence by two evangelizing churches—may be to set them on an apologetic collision course. Apology through a comparison of these first visions, however, would be problematic for many reasons. Consider, for instance, the example of their comparative publication histories.

One of the first things to note in a comparison of first visions is the obvious differences in the processes by which they came to wide circulation. Joseph Smith apparently made his earliest recorded account of his theophany some twelve years after his encounter with divinity, and there was no published account until a decade after that.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, Ellen White penned a narrative of her vision no more than one year after she experienced it, and it was published just one month later. The rapidity of its publication helped ensure that subsequent iterations did not vary drastically from White’s first telling, though there were some revisions. A phrase that some believed was supportive of the “shut door” doctrine—which held that God would not accept any who had not

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6. Richard Lyman Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997): 193.

7. Freud first put forward this idea in Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag Wien, 1930).

8. The best work on the publication history of Joseph Smith’s first vision is Steven C. Harper, *First Visions: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford, 2019).

believed in the apocalyptic predictions of Millerism—was dropped in later versions even as that position was likewise downplayed in Seventh-day Adventists theology. Similarly, a portion of White's vision that could be seen as undermining her later-revealed doctrine of seventh-day Sabbath keeping was also cut. Across various versions, furthermore, certain words were adjusted to soften or sharpen the tone of the narrative for particular audiences.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding those alterations, however, it is accurate to say that the variations in White's accounts are less fundamental than some of the differences we see across Joseph Smith's narrations of his vision. Without a comparably early publication of his story, Smith's memory and environment offered more room to explore different elements and emphases of his theophany. For many critics of Smith's ministry, the delay in recording his experience and the deviations in his accounts undermine the authenticity of his experience and of his claim to a prophetic call; the corollary of such an argument would afford more credence to the relative speed and stability with which White's visionary history appeared in writing. Conversely, however, Bushman's analysis of the early republic's visionary culture has read Smith's delay differently, arguing that it speaks to a prophetic ministry that focused more on establishing Zion than on presenting charismatic bona fides, a kind of early kingdom building that cannot be so easily mapped onto and—by implication—explained by Smith's environment.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in a comparison of publication histories, we have on one hand a rather swift and steady accounting that resembles other visionaries in White's surroundings, and on the other we have a delayed and more uneven history of narrations that suggests a certain novelty and cultural transcendence. In a comparative debate about whether either revelatory experience was authentic, we are faced with competing standards of authenticity: consistency or originality. Comparison in this case is rather unhelpful for ranking the credibility of claims and even less so for defining the essence of a true prophetic archetype. It is useful, however, for seeing the characteristic features of these two revelatory accounts in sharper definition.

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9. The best work on the publication histories of Ellen White's visions is Ronald D. Graybill, *Visions and Revisions: A Textual History of Ellen G. White's Writings* (Westlake Village, Calif.: Oak and Acorn, 2019).

10. Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," 195–97.

## The Distortions of Category and the Details of Ellen's Experience

As noted above, the very categories that facilitate comparison can also cause distortion. One place where the comparative impulse has the potential to distort rather than clarify is in the fact that both these phenomena have been slotted into the shared category of *vision*. Joseph and Ellen both used the word to describe their experiences, so this is not an example of the imposition of subsequent scholarly terms. However, despite this common title, Smith's and White's experiences actually represented two very different kinds of spiritual phenomena. Whereas Joseph's amounted to a personal appearance and dialogical exchange with divine beings, figures whom he apparently understood to be really present in the grove where he knelt, Ellen's vision showed her scenes far removed in time, space, and even conceptual structure from the little domestic altar at which she was kneeling when the vision struck.

To appreciate the specifics of Ellen's epiphany, one must first understand something of the historical context in which she experienced it. A sickly sixteen-year-old Ellen Gould Harmon (she would not become Ellen White until she married James White about twenty months after her first vision) had just endured the religious trauma that came to be known as the Great Disappointment. Like tens of thousands of others who believed in William Miller's millennial message, the Harmon family was shocked and disoriented on October 22, 1844, when Christ's failure to appear on earth proved that something about Miller's biblical calculations had been faulty. The Millerite disappointment was so profound as to splinter the movement into a number of "Adventist" groups—a term retained by people who still believed in the reality of an imminent return of Jesus but had to recalibrate Miller's original timing and conception of that second advent.<sup>11</sup>

In early December, a few weeks after the Great Disappointment, Ellen and a group of unsettled Adventists gathered in a home in southern Maine and together offered up their morning prayers. In the middle of her devotions, Ellen began to fall into an entranced vision. She found

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11. For more on the Great Disappointment, see Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993). Before the Disappointment, the titles *Adventist* and *Millerite* were used quite interchangeably. After the Disappointment, the term *Millerite* fell into disuse for obvious reasons, leaving *Adventist* as the designation of choice for a variety of groups that retained some revised version of the original millennial message.

herself surrounded by light before she felt herself to be “rising higher and higher from the earth.” She spiritually ascended up and out of her immediate circumstances until she gained some critical distance on the world below her and could see many things that were not immediately present in the place where she physically knelt. She had a panoramic view of a great global metaphor of the world’s progress toward the millennium; she seemed to understand intuitively that she was looking at an abstract representation of sacred history.<sup>12</sup>

Her initial impulse when reviewing the images in front of her was to locate what she called the “Advent people,” those faithful souls who had endured such antagonism from their surrounding culture because of their fervent belief in Christ’s imminent appearing. When Ellen searched the scenes for her post-Disappointment people, she could not see them until she heard a voice that said, “Look again, and look a little higher.” She recorded, “At this I raised my eyes and saw a straight and narrow path, cast up high above the world. On this path the Advent people were traveling to the city, which was at the further end of the path. They had a bright light set up behind them at the first end of the path, which an angel told me was the Midnight Cry.<sup>13</sup> This shone all along the path, and gave light for their feet that they might not stumble.”

In other words, she saw God’s people on the move. This motion served as an allegorical representation of movement into end times, a shared experience of inexorable advancement toward the Millennium. She saw that these pilgrims on the path of time remained steady in their progress “if they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus, who was just before them, leading them to the city.” But as she watched this story unfold, she noted that not every traveler stayed on the path. Some soon “grew weary, and they said the city was a great way off, and they expected to have entered it before. Then Jesus would encourage them by raising His glorious right arm, and from His arm came a light which waved over the advent

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12. All quotations related to Ellen White’s first vision will be taken from Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts: My Experience, Views and Labors in Connection with the Rise and Progress of the Third Angel’s Message* (Battle Creek, Mich.: James White, 1860), 30–35. For a helpful, concise biography of Ellen White, see Jerry Moon and Denis Kaiser, “For Jesus and Scripture: The Life of Ellen White,” in *The Ellen White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2013), 18–95.

13. This is a reference to the Millerite message, which drew heavily from the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25. Christ was coming soon, just as the bridegroom had showed up at midnight. The vision’s suggestion that the “midnight cry” continued to illuminate the millennial path of Adventists was to say that Miller’s message was not to be entirely abandoned.

people, and they shouted Hallelujah!”<sup>14</sup> She continued, “Others rashly denied the light behind them, and said that it was not God that had led them out so far. The light behind them went out, leaving their feet in perfect darkness, and they stumbled and got their eyes off the mark, and lost sight of Jesus, and fell off the path down into the dark and wicked world below.”

As Ellen described a scene in which some faithfully persevered and others fell off the path, her pronouns shifted from third-person plural to first-person plural: “Soon we heard the voice of God like many waters, which gave us the day and hour of Jesus’ coming. The living saints knew and understood the voice, while the wicked thought it was thunder and an earthquake. When God spake the time, he poured upon us the Holy Spirit, and our faces began to light up and shine with the glory of God as Moses’ did when he came down from mount Sinai.”

The striking imagery of conflict, the vivid clash of light and dark, and ultimate vindication increased in intensity as the vision proceeded: “At our happy, holy state the wicked were enraged, and would rush violently up to lay hands on us to thrust us into prison, when we would stretch forth the hand in the name of the Lord, and the wicked would fall helpless to the ground. Then it was that the synagogue of Satan knew that God had loved us, and they worshiped at our feet.”

From this account of the saints overcoming the forces of evil on earth, the vision turned to the arrival of Jesus Christ himself. In an image drawn from scripture, the second advent began with the appearing of a small cloud in the distance: “We all in solemn silence gazed on the cloud as it drew nearer, and became lighter, glorious, and still more glorious, till it was a great white cloud. The bottom appeared like fire; a rainbow was over it, and around the cloud were ten thousand angels singing a most lovely song. And on it sat the Son of man.”

Ellen’s vision then rose to its revelatory apogee, a description of the glorified Christ:

His hair was white and curly and lay on his shoulders. And upon his head were many crowns. His feet had the appearance of fire, in his right hand was a sharp sickle, in his left a silver trumpet. His eyes were as a flame of fire, which searched his children through and through. Then all faces gathered paleness, and those that God had rejected gathered

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14. The word used in earlier versions of the vision was *hallelujah*; later versions used *alleluia*. This is one of the examples Graybill cites in arguing that later iterations of the vision adopted more respectable phrasing. See Graybill, *Visions and Revisions*, 30.

blackness. Then we all cried out: "Who shall be able to stand? Is my robe spotless?" Then the angels ceased to sing, and there was some time of awful silence, when Jesus spoke: "Those who have clean hands and pure hearts shall be able to stand; My grace is sufficient for you." At this our faces lighted up, and joy filled every heart. And the angels struck a note higher and sung again, while the cloud drew still nearer the earth.

As the cloud lowered Jesus to earth, he called upon the sleeping Saints to arise from their graves with a shout of "Awake, Awake, Awake." The redeemed replied with another "Hallelujah!" as they "recogniz[ed] their friends who had been torn from them by death, and in the same moment we were changed and caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air." After this rapture of the great reunion, Jesus placed crowns of glory on each redeemed head as the vision moved across a sea of glass and toward the gates of heaven. Entering the gates, Ellen saw a river of pure water flowing out from the throne of God and running through the golden Tree of Life. The vision drew to a close with another Hallelujah shout, with the echoes of angelic harps, and with a reminder that no earthly tribulation could overshadow the glory of the heavenly city. The journey was worth it.

### A Study in Visionary Contrasts

Joseph Smith and Ellen White each had what they and their respective communities call first visions, but the contrasts between their two revelatory experiences could hardly be starker. Take, for instance, the locational specifics of their events: Ellen was pulled up and out of that down-east farmhouse in order to encounter the divine, whereas for Joseph divinity came down into the grove, where he remained rooted to the earth. The location of Ellen White's first vision has not become the pilgrimage site for Seventh-day Adventists the way the Sacred Grove has become for Latter-day Saints; there are a variety of reasons for that difference, to be sure, but some of the explanation undoubtedly has to do with the fact that the particular venue for Ellen White's vision immediately passed into insignificance and even nonexistence during her vision, while Joseph Smith—at least in some tellings—reported seeing his heavenly visitors in among the very trees that surrounded him.<sup>15</sup> Where Ellen was transported, Joseph was visited.

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15. Consider, for instance, the line from Joseph's 1835 journal entry, which draws attention to the fact that the flames filled the surrounding area "yet nothing consumed." The phrasing indicates some surprise that the woods were not affected by the fire that he

Not only did Ellen White's vision detach her from the particularities of place, moving her to a universalized vantage point from which the stylized earthly drama could be viewed, but it also broke her out of her time. Her vision was historical in the sense that there was temporal movement to the events she witnessed, but she experienced prospective events in precisely the same way she experienced those that had recently transpired. Past, present, and future played out before her. She witnessed things yet to be as though they had already been. Strikingly, her visionary account addresses the coming second advent in the past tense because she had already seen it. Jesus "descended on the cloud, wrapped in flames of fire."

Joseph, by contrast, never left his moment in time. Indeed, in some renditions, he was quite conspicuously stuck there. When his visitors spoke of things to come, they did so in the future tense. And whereas White's vision carried a sense of synchronic totality, Smith's experience seemed very much to emphasize his lack of foreknowledge. In the Wentworth letter, he recalled receiving a "promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me."<sup>16</sup> Future time loomed beyond his adolescent reach. His vision was explicitly in the now. Where Ellen saw the great culmination of the millennial message, Joseph was temporally rooted at the beginning of a restorative process.

In keeping with its effect of raising Ellen White to a place beyond her embodied time and space, her experience also freed her from the literal and opened her to scenes of symbolic meaning. In saying this, it would be misleading to suggest that hers was an entirely allegorical vision. For people who believed in the actual return of Jesus Christ to earth, a vision depicting his arrival—especially one describing the curl of his hair and the sound of the angelic voices around him—always had an element of literalness to it. Nonetheless, symbols abounded across this panorama. The trail was temporal progression rather than an actual footpath. The light behind was the millennial messages of the past. The world below was spiritually under the Adventists, not bodily beneath

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perceived to be present in the grove. "Journal, 1835–1836," 24, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 15, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>. The version in the Wentworth letter states that Joseph's "mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded," suggesting both a mental refocusing and a persisting sense of presence. "Church History," 1 March 1842, 706, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 17, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/1>.

16. "Church History," 1 March 1842, 707.

them. The synagogue of Satan represented all those who fought against the Adventist message rather than an actual building or congregation. Some images that came before Ellen are difficult to place exclusively in either the literal or the symbolic category; for instance, she saw Jesus with a sharp sickle in one hand and a silver trumpet in the other. Those may have been material realities as well as representative of judgment and warning. Either way, however, they mark the kind of imagery that is strikingly absent from Joseph's description of his encounter with the Father and the Son.

This is one of the contrasts of the visionary accounts that sticks out most dramatically from the comparison. When set against Ellen White's first vision, Smith's appears notably devoid of any symbolic presence. For a figure obviously capable of elaborate symbolic thought—a man who developed intricately representational temple rituals and spoke regularly of crowns and thrones as the markers of godhood—his encounter in the grove is remarkably austere. His accounts carry none of the symbolic accoutrements of sign, token, or emblem. No metaphoric images, no allegorical presences, no swords of justice or books of life. Other than the angels that appear in some of the accounts, his narrations describe just personages, bathed in light, engaged in conversation.

This element of Smith's theophany is particularly notable in light of the visionary accounts he had recently published in the Book of Mormon. Indeed, Ellen White's first vision looks more like the revelatory events that occupy the opening book of Nephi, such as the symbols of Lehi's dream or the imagery of Nephi's angelic flight into the future. As with Ellen's vision, Lehi's dream is full of symbols: trees and rivers and people along a path. As with Ellen, an angel tells Nephi where to look amid the scenes playing out before him. As with Ellen, time collapses for Nephi into a shared temporal frame. As with Ellen, Nephi sees both literal history (such as the birth of Jesus) and symbolic images (such as the whore of Babylon).<sup>17</sup> Some elements of Lehi's, Nephi's, and Ellen's experiences, in fact, are so similar as to have drawn charges of plagiarism from anti-Adventist polemicists.<sup>18</sup> Such antagonizing claims of copying are not very convincing, but the similarities they point to are undeniably remarkable.

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17. See 1 Nephi 8–14.

18. See Dale Ratzlaff, "The Mormon Connection: Did Ellen White Copy from Joseph Smith?" *Proclamation Magazine* (Summer 2015), <http://www.lifeassuranceministries.org/proclamation/2015/2/themormonconnect.html>.

In fairness, one could argue that Joseph's first vision is somewhat more like Lehi's first vision described in 1 Nephi 1—where the heavens opened to reveal the Father and the Son, the latter coming to stand before Lehi in his room—but from there Lehi's vision expands into something much more comprehensive, a revelation of secret abominations and of impending judgments. Lehi's visuals are also quite different from Joseph's: God sits on a throne and Jesus proffers a book of prophecies. Neither first vision in the Book of Mormon—Lehi's nor, especially, Nephi's—matches all that well with Joseph's. This point becomes especially clear in light of the fact that in many respects they match much better with Ellen's. When Nephi describes his first visionary experience as being “carried away” by the Spirit, he certainly sounds more like Ellen than Joseph.<sup>19</sup>

This is hardly the only such sharpening contrast borne out by comparison. Whereas Joseph Smith's impulse in the run-up to his vision was to query about the state of his own soul or get information on his search for a true church, Ellen White's concern was for the status of a people. That is, in comparison, Joseph's vision was a rather individualistic experience, while Ellen's—like Lehi's and Nephi's—was about a collective. Research into the conversion experiences recorded in the early American republic suggests that there may be sociological explanations for this difference. Men and women were conditioned to think differently about the relative prominence of the individual and the community at the beginning of their quests for conversion.<sup>20</sup>

There may also be more specific biographical explanations for this difference, given that by the time Ellen White had her vision, she had years of experience as a member of a marginalized and belittled group. She had lived through massive expectation and deep disappointment with the Advent people, and her vision of hope spoke to that community as a community. Joseph Smith, by contrast, had neither a peculiar

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19. 1 Nephi 14:30; 2 Nephi 4:25.

20. See Susan Juster, “In a Different Voice: Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America,” *American Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1989): 34–62. Juster's research only fits partially with the difference between these two visions. She holds that the completion of the conversion process tended to bring women out of a beginning point of deep community embeddedness into a state of relative individualization. The point here is not that Juster fully explains the difference we see in these visions but that her emphasis on the ways that gendered conditioning shapes the communitarian-individualized element of spiritual experience should alert us to the fact that Ellen and Joseph were coming at their visions with differently gendered identities and contrasting socializations.

people to whom he belonged nor a sense of shared global significance in his search for divine guidance. These things would come later. Indeed, in 1820 he was at an age when one's egocentrism factors more prominently than in later stages of life; Ellen essentially shared that age but with countervailing social concerns.<sup>21</sup> Particular moments in their own life stories seem strikingly reflected in the kinds of visions they experienced. The biographical contexts of the two experiences certainly help account for their differences in form and structure. Even the very setting of their prayers speaks to their contrasting circumstances: Joseph knelt in a seeker's isolation, while Ellen gathered in shared sorrow with other disappointed Adventists.

Surely, too, the sorts of theological crises that were on their minds informed their sense of what God showed them. Ellen White was thinking intently about the Millennium, and there is considerable evidence to suggest that the visionary experiences of nineteenth-century millenarians tended to come in something like the form that Ellen's first vision took: panoramic views of significant scope with literal and symbolic images mixed, drawing on the models of apocalyptic imagery provided in the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation.<sup>22</sup> By way of contrast, we have no evidence that Joseph Smith had given great thought to millennialism at the time of his vision. He had much more personal kinds of concerns, and the experience he received in return spoke to that set of preoccupations. His focus was on the state of his own soul and his early exercise of religious agency, the resulting vision reflecting the relatively muted place of millennialism in his set of theological concerns. In the 1832 account, Christ tells Joseph that he is coming quickly, but the young visionary got no more information on the

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21. This is not the place to dive into the complex and often contradictory research on adolescent egocentrism, except to note that some studies have seen it to peak around age 14–15. Others see it continuing or even rising into one's mid-twenties. See Angelica P. Galanaki, "Adolescent Egocentrism," *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Abnormal and Clinical Psychology*, ed. Amy Wenzel (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2017), 49–52; and Kristina D. Frankenberger, "Adolescent Egocentrism: A Comparison among Adolescents and Adults," *Journal of Adolescence* 23, no. 3 (June 2000): 343–54.

22. See, for instance, Nimrod Hughes, *A Solemn Warning to All the Dwellers upon the Earth* (New York: Largin and Thompson, 1812); Samuel Ingalls, *A Dream or Vision by Samuel Ingalls of Dunham in the Province of Lower Canada on the Night of Sept 2 1809* (Windsor, Vt.: n.p., 1810); and William E. Foy, *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy, Together with the Two Visions He Received in the Months of Jan. and Feb. 1842* (Portland: J. and C. H. Pearson, 1845).

coming culmination.<sup>23</sup> Two very different visions seem reflective of two very different circumstances and two contrasting sets of questions.

### Conclusion: A Modest Apology

As I noted at the outset, despite the apologetic impulses that have often flowed—frequently unacknowledged—into comparative religion, I consider the comparison of Ellen White and Joseph Smith to give the lie to the usefulness of such. The comparison does not confirm the superior authenticity of one over the other. Furthermore, from a personal standpoint, I cannot even say that one clearly surpasses the other for its visionary artistry, in part because—though they are both called *visions*—they are in fact such categorically divergent experiences. Different questions, different answers, different cultures of vision. I can see certain features of each more clearly when I position them against one another, but they defy any sort of facile assessment of one's superiority over the other. This comparison will not be put to apologetic purpose—with one possible, modest exception.

The comparison, in ways I did not fully expect at the outset, did eventually come to speak to a question of authenticity—not in the sense of one appearing more authentic than the other but in the sense that the results of the comparison speak to a set of specific questions that have circulated around Joseph Smith's account. Specifically, they touch on this persisting question of whether the narrating of this vision in the 1830s and early 1840s—many years after its purported occurrence—was an effort to bolster Joseph's prophetic authority rather than an honest recounting of an actual experience.

I did not appreciate until I laid these visions side by side how much Joseph's accounts did not include. When he began recounting this experience, he had published the Book of Mormon, but *his* first vision looked little like Lehi's and nothing like Nephi's. When he began recording his vision, he was enmeshed among a people who had shared the experience of persecution and were then struggling mightily for collective survival and a cohering story, and yet the vision had little to offer by way of common purpose or identity. By the time he was recording this experience, he had reason to seek to consolidate his prophetic authority, and yet rather than claim a kind of panoramic comprehensiveness, his vision amplified the piecemeal and personal nature of revelation. By the

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23. "History, circa Summer 1832," 3, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 17, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>.

time he began recording these experiences, he had spent a lot of time thinking and writing about the specifics of the Millennium—and had published epic and sometimes symbolic scriptural depictions of grand, global sweep—but in this first vision, there is no scene of global conflict, no guide to world events, no apocalyptic emblems to unravel. Again and again, the vision that Joseph began recording in the 1830s seems to disregard the pressing issues of that period in his prophetic career and focus instead on the preoccupations of a young soul seeking personal comfort and direction. This point becomes especially clear in contrast to Ellen White's very different first vision.

While the comparison of Joseph Smith's vision to Ellen White's does not elevate one over the other in their competition for credibility, it has drawn my attention to certain absences in Joseph's accounts of which I had previously been only dully aware. This awareness, sharpened in comparative context, has accordingly nudged me toward the conclusion that the first vision as it is recorded in the 1830s and 1840s looks more like the sort of experience the adolescent Joseph would have sought than the sort of vision the adult Joseph might have conjured. This is, to be sure, comparison-as-art rather than comparison-as-science, but its results seem nonetheless vivid.

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# New Age, Old Revelation

## Reflections on the Millennial Contexts

*George M. Marsden*

First let me say something about my point of view—which I can do with a personal story. I first met Richard Bushman in 1974 when I was spending a semester in the Boston area, and in order to get area library privileges, I had a nominal affiliation with Boston University. Someone arranged a meeting for Richard and me at his impressive office. I knew him only as the author of an excellent book on Colonial America. So when we met, we did what historians do and exchanged accounts of what we were working on. I said I was working on American fundamentalism and how it was shaped by its cultural setting. He said that he was working on the origins of Mormonism. I said that was a fascinating topic, and so he asked me how I explained it. I told him I thought that Mormon teachings could be explained largely by their cultural setting since it was a very creative amalgamation of many of the current religious ideas out there in the Burned-Over District. I think I may have been a bit dismissive, but he received that very genially. As he continued, though, he began to drop into his account little phrases like “we believe” regarding some things that he thought could not easily be explained. Then the truth began to dawn on me. He *is* a Mormon! The conversation went smoothly after that, and I think we even talked about what it is like as a believer to do the history of one’s own tradition.

But our difference in outlooks has always struck me as one of the best examples of the role point of view plays in doing history—and that has been confirmed by his wonderful books on Joseph Smith. His Joseph Smith, no matter how judiciously presented, and my Joseph Smith are very different characters. His Smith is active and creative in

some respects and has some flaws, but he is most essentially obedient and passive, waiting to receive revelations from God before he makes any big claims. My Joseph Smith is a creative genius, a bit of a rogue, a charismatic leader, and an opportunist. Richard's question is, How was God using this admittedly imperfect man for such great things in those turbulent times? My first question is, How did he get away with it? And my larger historical questions have to do with how his outlooks both reflected and spoke to the religious and cultural concerns of the times.

So I realize well that what I have to say today on the millennial contexts of the times does not prove anything one way or another as to where Joseph got his ideas. It may be the contexts just suggest that God suited the revelations to the times and that helps account for the remarkable Mormon successes. In other words, this same contextual material can easily fit into a believer's framework, even though that differs very much from my own framework.

What I am here offering are some reflections on the millennial contexts that shaped various American religious views at the time of Joseph's revelations. The most widespread and influential of these views were postmillennial—teachings that the world would get progressively better as the preaching of the gospel spread through missions throughout the world and that human history would culminate in a millennial golden age *after* which Jesus would personally return. But there were also some mainstream Protestant and other premillennial views that held that—as in Mormon teaching—Jesus would personally return to set up his millennial kingdom. Joseph Smith and all the other early Mormon leaders would have been familiar with both of these views. In fact, in the United States during the early Republic, millennial views were probably more prominent than at any other time during the nation's history. So let me say something about the contents of these views, and I think you will see its relevance to the Mormon story.

There have been a variety of millennial views throughout the history of the Christian church. Since the early days of the church, there have been literal premillennial teachings expecting Christ's return at any minute to set up a literal millennial kingdom that will last an actual thousand years. Premillennial views have reemerged in various forms throughout the history of the church. Sometimes believers in such literalistic views have seen their own group as in the forefront of preparing the way for Christ's kingdom not only spiritually but also literally by engaging in military action against the wicked forces that had to be defeated to prepare the way. That happened, for instance, right after the Reformation among the radical Anabaptists at the city of Münster. And

more relevant as an American precedent, military action was conducted during the English Puritan Revolution of the mid-1600s, which was a precursor for the American Revolution. That unprecedented popular seventeenth-century revolution against a king and his subsequent execution set off high expectations for a new age. The most famous millennial movement was that of the Fifth Monarchy Men, whose members saw their movement as the one predicted after the fall of the four monarchies in the book of Daniel. They expected Christ's return by the year 1666, calculated according to the biblical numbers 1,000 and 666.

Just to cover the broader Christian church background, I should mention that while premillennial views have been susceptible to such literalistic expectations, what are called *amillennial* views typically see the millennium of the book of Revelation as not a literal thousand years but as symbolic of an era of the reign of Christ in the church. Augustine held to a version of this view and something like it persists today among Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and many Protestants, such as Anglican and their Methodist offshoots. Though such Christians affirm a literal return of Christ, they do not regard the Bible as containing an exact scenario of events leading to the return.

Postmillennial views have developed mainly in the modern era. In England, they too first appeared prominently at the time of the Puritan revolution, when there were high hopes for both spiritual and political progress. In the subsequent Puritan tradition, which did the most to shape outlooks in America, there were both premillennial and postmillennial views. But in the eighteenth century, postmillennial views emerged as the most common. Jonathan Edwards became one of the most prominent proponents of postmillennialism. Edwards and his disciples were immense influences in shaping the next generations of American millennial thought through the era of the American Civil War.

Edwards saw the history of redemption as being progressively realized in the Old and New Testaments and then in church history. An especially important development in that redemptive history was that Constantine brought Christianity to the Roman Empire and to Europe. Since the time of the Reformation, true Christianity was spreading through the world and into the New World. The revivals and awakenings of his own time, Edwards believed, were precursors of a new era in the accelerating spread of the gospel. The spread of the true gospel, he believed, would be accompanied by all sorts of moral improvements in the world and eventually the ending of tyrannies and oppressions. As the morality of Christian civilization continued to spread, populations would continue to grow, as they already were in the eighteenth century. Yet these advances would always

come in the face of tribulations, disasters, and setbacks as apocalyptic passages of scripture described. Satan was still on the loose and would counter every good development with a counterfeit to undermine it. The most evident work of Satan was the Church of Rome, which Edwards was sure was the Antichrist. Edwards tended to read the Bible literally and believed that, if understood in the right framework, the prophecies would be seen as being fulfilled in contemporary events. So the Reformation was the crucial modern event challenging the power of the Antichrist. Edwards expected the Roman Catholic empire to be destroyed within a century or so.

As you can see from this sketch, there was definitely a political dimension to this largely optimistic scenario. Edwards lived in a tiny Protestant corner of America where Catholicism was the dominant European power. He regarded the British nation, for all its religious faults, as having been raised by God to be the principal champion in fighting the Antichrist. Missions were one of the great concerns for postmillennialists, since the spread of the gospel to all nations was a necessary preparation for the millennial age. Edwards himself was especially concerned for the conversion of the American Indians, and he even became a missionary to them for a time. But such missions required the British armies to protect the missionaries against the French. Edwards always made a clear distinction between the church and the nation, but national powers were necessary for revivals.

Another dimension of these modern postmillennial views was that, while they were very optimistic about the progress of the gospel and of civilization in the long run, they also expected there to be many trials and tribulations in the meantime. Satan would counter every step of this progress. Every true revival would be met with a counterfeit one. There would be wars, rumors of wars, and natural disasters. So the postmillennial view involved both reading the signs of the progress of God's great work of redemption and reading the negative apocalyptic signs of the times. Edwards believed that at the end of this period of both spiritual progress and conflict the millennium would begin as the last great age in world history. He thought (based on Bishop Usher's chronology that dated the creation at around 4000 BC) that the millennial age might begin around the year 2000 and last for a literal thousand years. That last great age of human history would involve the virtually universal spread of true religion together with all its moral benefits. Since the human population would expand exponentially during that thousand years, most of the people who would ever have lived would have been saved. At the end of the millennium, Christ would return in judgment and institute the "new heaven" and the "new earth" (see Rev. 21:1).

Whatever the exact details, it is easy to see that such optimistic and progressive views fit with the prevailing American mentality that emerged after the American Revolution. Like the British in the era of the English Civil War, Americans saw their nation as playing a leading role in introducing a new era of history (except that this time the new regime lasted). During the revolution itself, patriotic American preachers often invoked millennial imagery in support of the American cause. In their rhetoric at least, they often blurred the line between church and nation. Americans were fighting for “the *sacred* cause of liberty.” And the British Empire, since it had become a source of oppression, could even be identified with the Antichrist.<sup>1</sup> (In fact, the chief ally of the United States was France, a Roman Catholic power—but who ever said that humans’ political views were logical?)

And even though most Americans did not hold these specifically biblical millennial views, the whole national enterprise took on a sacred aura, whatever the specific religious belief of various Americans. All sorts of religious-like symbols and ceremonies emerged with the new nation. The clearest example of the millennial dimension of these is in the great seal of the United States, designed in 1782, which you can find on the back of your dollar bills. The seal, although theistic, is not Christian but rather Masonic in symbolism. In any case, the motto suggests a secular millennium—“*novus ordo seclorum*,” a new order for the ages.

During the next generations, many Americans in the New Republic were caught up in this cultural optimism that involved most every sort of religious and nationalistic theme. Some made clear distinctions between the church and the nation, but others tended to conflate the two in varying degrees.

Nathan Hatch, in his account of what he calls “The Democratization of American Religion” in this era, remarks that “judging by the number of sermons, books and pamphlets that addressed prophetic themes, the first generation of United States citizens may have lived in the shadow of Christ’s second coming more intensely than any generation since.” Hatch highlights the views of the radical Baptist New England evangelist of the era, Elias Smith. Though a Baptist, Smith did not mind mixing the church with politics. Many of his more respectable Federalist and Congregationalist New England counterparts thought that Thomas Jefferson was anti-Christian and so not fit for the presidency. Smith disagreed. After

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1. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977).

Jefferson's second election in 1804, Smith, while acknowledging that Jefferson had his faults, believed that God had raised him up like Cyrus "to dry up the Euphrates of mystery Babylon." In Smith's view, the foundations for Christ's millennial kingdom had been laid in the American and French revolutions, which were leading to the bringing down of false human monarchies. "The time will come," Smith proclaimed, "when there will not be a *crowned head* on earth."<sup>2</sup>

Another of the most radical evangelists of the day, Methodist Lorenzo Dow, also mixed the political and the evangelical. In England, Dow had refused ordination because it involved an oath of loyalty to the king. But in the New World, he saw what God was doing in the last days. Earlier Americans had speculated that God had kept the New World hidden from Christendom until after the Reformation so that a new work might begin in this hemisphere. And Jonathan Edwards, for instance, had at one point suggested that America might play a leading role in the awakenings and accompanying events leading to the millennium. Dow, writing in 1812, carried that idea further and related it to the political developments of the American Revolution in an exposition of "The Dawn of Liberty." It was, said Dow, "as if the Creator's wisdom and goodness had a 'NEW WORLD' in reversion for a new theatre for the exhibition of new things." While the Old World suffered from "the galling yoke of Tyranny and priest-craft," America opened the prospects for new beginnings, a land of liberty that would open a new chapter in salvation history.<sup>3</sup>

Other evangelists saw the turmoil and political upheavals of Europe as specific signs of the approaching millennial age. In 1809, Thomas Campbell, in the first manifesto of the Disciples movement, declared that these were the signs of the time of the approaching millennial age, as "these awful convulsions and revolutions . . . have dashed and are dashing the nations like a potter's vessel."<sup>4</sup>

Postmillennial expectations also became one of the most prominent parts of the Disciples movement. Alexander Campbell titled his magazine *The Millennial Harbinger*. Campbell hoped to counter the division of the churches by returning to the primitive practices of the New Testament church and thus establishing the one simple "Church of Christ." He referred to his movement for church reformation as "a declaration of

2. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 185, emphasis in original.

3. Hatch, *Democratization*, 185–6.

4. Hatch, *Democratization*, 185.

independence of the kingdom of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> The liberated Church of Christ would lead to the spread of the gospel and eventually to “THE MILLENIUM, which will be the consummation of that ultimate amelioration of society proposed in the Christian Scriptures.”<sup>6</sup>

Such views were not simply those of radical new populist movements or simply the preserve of religious outsiders. Many of the elite leaders of American Protestantism of Joseph’s day taught such views. For instance, these views were common among the New School Presbyterians, who were allied with the New England Congregationalists and instrumental in settling, evangelizing, and educating the expanding northern tiers of the nation, of which western New York State was an important first stop for settlers when Joseph Smith was growing up.

Lyman Beecher (the father of the famous Beecher clan), for instance, probably did as much as anyone to shape the Presbyterianism of what is now the upper Midwest. Beecher was typical of some of the most culturally influential religious leaders, educators, and social reformers of the era. Among the forces driving his evangelistic and moral reform efforts were his millennial expectations—pretty much in the tradition of Jonathan Edwards. So Beecher declared in 1812, in a characteristic statement, “If we endure a little longer, the resources of the millennial day will come to our aid.” He read the political signs of his days, particularly the convulsions in Napoleonic Europe as a sign that “the day of his vengeance is wasting the earth. The last vial of wrath of God is running out.” And then he concluded on a positive note, “The angel having the everlasting Gospel to preach to men has begun his flight: and . . . is calling to the nations to look unto Jesus and be saved.”<sup>7</sup>

So the evangelistic and political outlooks of the day were thoroughly mixed together. This was also the era of the founding of major evangelical missionary movements. The bringing down of monarchs and tyrants around the world was seen as clearing the way for the dramatic spread of the gospel, and both were signs that the millennial days were near. The United States was in the forefront of these developments. Social reforms such as Sabbath legislation, temperance, and antislavery were also typically presented as evidences of the approaching millennial days.

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5. Hatch, *Democratization*, 186.

6. As quoted in Jon R. Stone, “Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Millennialisms,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 498. Details on any of the millennial views mentioned in this article may be found, among other places, in this volume.

7. George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), 186–87.

Timothy L. Smith observed long ago in his classic study, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, “that clergymen identified the popular belief in America’s mission with the Christian hope.”<sup>8</sup>

Also, in this era, among the mainstream Protestant groups, such as the Presbyterians, a minority held premillennial views. These groups differed from their postmillennial coreligionists, mainly concerning the timing of Christ’s return, but they did not differ much in expecting cultural progress and the spread of missions, as well as tribulations, as signs of the end times.<sup>9</sup>

Evangelical identifications of Christ’s kingdom with social and political advances were largely a northern phenomenon and varied, of course, according to political affiliations. Perhaps the best evidence that millennial motifs had become simply part of a common cultural heritage is seen in the North in the Civil War era. Ardent abolitionists saw the ending of slavery as one of the most important precursors of the millennium that they should be working for. And perhaps the best-known example of how easily the millennial could be mixed with the national and the militaristic is found in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Even Julia Ward Howe in Unitarian Boston could have a number-one hit by invoking the violent imagery of the book of Revelation to glorify the advances of the Union Army.

In order to complete my account of the ongoing millennial contexts, I need to include what has become since the early twentieth century by far the most common type of premillennialism that one will find among American Evangelicals and fundamentalists. This view is called “dispensational premillennialism,” which became the dominant view among biblicist Evangelicals after the Civil War era. I think these views reached their peak of popularity in the later twentieth century with hugely best-selling books like Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. The twentieth-century popularity of these views highlights, by way of contrast, the early nineteenth-century story, since dispensational views are culturally pessimistic and arise among biblicist Evangelicals when it appears that the world is not becoming better but increasingly secular and immoral.

And directly relevant to our topic is that, even though dispensational premillennialism did not catch on widely until the late nineteenth century, it was first developed in Ireland by a close contemporary of Joseph Smith, John Nelson Darby (b. 1800). Darby was one of the founders in the

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8. Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon, 1957), 236.

9. Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, 190–98.

late 1820s of the Plymouth Brethren movement, another group hoping to get beyond denominations by returning to the pure practices of the New Testament church. Without going into detail, this view holds that during this present dispensation of the church age, the world—and the churches themselves—are not getting better, but worse (one might compare it to Latter-day Saint views on the “general apostasy”). In this setting, God is saving a faithful remnant. For dispensationalism, it is urgent to preach the gospel, which must be at least heard by every nation. But things will continue to get worse and worse until a series of dramatic events will occur, beginning with the return of Christ in Jerusalem. In the meantime, one of the signs of the times will have been the return of the Jews to Jerusalem.

These culturally pessimistic premillennialists always emphasize that the events leading to the return of Christ are likely to come in the next few years of their own time. In that sense, they bear a resemblance to the most radical of the premillennial views to develop in Joseph’s day, William Miller’s prediction of the literal return of Jesus in 1843, leading his followers to sell their worldly goods and go to the mountaintops. But unlike them, contemporary premillennialist almost always hedge their bets, buying insurance and planning for the long-term even while predicting the end at any moment.

So how does this all relate specifically to Joseph’s First Vision and to Mormonism? It is easy to relate it to the First Vision since that is the first occasion when Joseph realized that he was the prophet to whom the true details of a new dispensation for the church and the true “new order of the ages” were to be revealed.

But as to specific resemblances of Mormon teachings to these other millennial views, I am not expert enough in the Mormon views, and so I can only report on what some others have said. I think the most important observation related to this contextual material I have been describing is this: strictly speaking, the Mormon view of the millennium is clearly premillennial—Jesus will personally return to earth to set up a millennial kingdom. But as Jon R. Stone observed, drawing largely on Klaus Hansen, I think, even during Joseph’s lifetime the views progressed as Mormonism evolved from being a tiny sect to a large and growing community with substantial political concerns and aspirations. That degree of optimism can be seen most sharply if one sets Joseph’s views, as is often done, against the contemporary views of William Miller. Joseph’s views, though still premillennial, had evolved into a “kingdom-building” that Stone suggests is “quasi-postmillennial.”<sup>10</sup> In that sense, Mormon views bear a resemblance

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10. Stone, “Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Millennialisms,” 499.

to some mainstream evangelical Protestant views of the era, such as the Presbyterian premillennialists, who were also culturally optimistic kingdom builders. The kingdom in both cases would have social and political as well as ecclesiastical dimensions. But kingdom building for the Latter-day Saints also differed from that of their contemporaries. For one, they were not building Christ's kingdom in America on existing foundations. Rather, they were to lay the foundations of a unique new church and kingdom in a specific American place. Another big difference was that this new ecclesiastical order, based on direct revelations, would be far more authoritative than was found in the many conflicting views of Protestantism.

Mormons read apocalyptic signs of the times in earthquakes, famines, wars, and disasters, much as did other millennialists of the time, both premillennialists and postmillennialists. But like some of the most confident evangelical millennialists of their day, Mormons were tremendously optimistic, even in the short run. They were especially optimistic regarding the spread of the gospel to every nation. According to Joseph's revelation concerning the "Stakes of Zion," the center stake might be in Jackson County, Missouri, but the supporting stakes would spread so that the kingdom would cover North and South America and eventually the world.<sup>11</sup>

I am sure that most readers are much better than I am at seeing the parallels with the optimistic millennialist Protestantism of the era and also in pointing out the differences. As I said, the number of parallels neither proves nor disproves the legitimacy of the Mormon revelations. Some may see the resemblances as helping to explain where Mormon doctrines came from. But those who see those doctrines as divine revelations can just as easily say that parallels simply demonstrate how well the revelations were suited to answering the questions raised by the cultural settings and by the religious longings of the day.

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11. Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 9–10.

# Joseph Smith and Modernism

*Richard Lyman Bushman*

One of the questions we ask about Joseph Smith's First Vision is, What did visions mean in those days? How did Smith understand his encounter with God? The most established interpretation is that questions about the churches prompted Smith to pray. He was confused by the melee of voices coming from ministers of various denominations and wanted guidance. When the heavenly personages appeared, he asked them which church to join, and they replied none of them. His prayer was answered.

That is the story of the account drafted in 1838. Initially, however, Smith may have understood the vision differently. His first account, written in 1832 and discovered in the archives in the 1960s, suggests that earlier Smith may have understood the experience as about the state of his soul. He was looking for forgiveness, as were others who flocked to the revivals in his neighborhood. In the 1838 reading of the story, the "unusual excitement on the subject of religion" and the clergy who were "active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling" led to "confusion and bad feeling."<sup>1</sup> Smith did not know which minister to follow. The 1832 account tells more about how the preaching brought on anxiety about his soul. At about age twelve, he reported, "My mind [had become] seriously imprest with regard to the all importent concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul." As he put it, "[I was] convicted of my sins," meaning he feared for his salvation. In 1832, the

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Lynn Davidson and others, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 208.

first words Joseph heard from the divine being who visited him were “Thy sins are forgiven thee”; by 1838 Smith had come to see the vision as the founding event of a new dispensation.<sup>2</sup> He wanted to explain how this great Restoration had begun and to emphasize the need for an entirely new church.

These two contexts for understanding the First Vision—denominational confusion and revival religion—are two ways of explaining how Smith understood his startling experience at different times in his life. To these two, I would like to add a third: Smith may have also been affected by an encounter with skepticism, one element in the coming of modernism, the word we use to summarize the broad reorientation of human culture over the past three or four centuries. One effect of modernism has been to drain away belief in the supernatural, leading to the famed disenchantment of the world. I believe that the touches of skepticism tinging Joseph Smith’s 1832 account suggest that faith-eroding modernist currents had reached his world by the time of the First Vision.

Religious doubt seems a long way from the passionate preaching of the Palmyra revivalists, but a passage written in Smith’s own hand in the 1832 account offers a classic deist answer to religious doubt. Deism, one form of modernist rationalism, rejected the Bible and revelation and found God instead in the regularities and beauties of the natural world. Here are Joseph Smith’s words as he approached his description of the First Vision:

For I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their magesty through the heavens and also the stars shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in magesty and in the strength of beauty whose power and intiligence in governing the things which are so exceeding great and marvilous even in the likeness of him who created him <them> and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said the <it is a> fool <that> saith in his heart there is no God.<sup>3</sup>

The last phrase, “there is no God,” though taken from Psalms, implies that somewhere in his young life Joseph Smith had encountered religious doubt (Ps. 14:1). To believe, he needed a reason. The question of

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2. Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 11, 13.

3. Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 12.

God's existence had affected him enough to have learned the classic defense: God was to be found in the beauties of creation.<sup>4</sup>

It would not be unusual for a young man in a small New York town to have encountered skepticism. Deism in various forms was the religion of the political elite in the late eighteenth century; Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin all subscribed to a dilute form of Christianity with a deist tinge. Harvard and Yale were caught up in skepticism in the 1790s. At the same time, skeptical attitudes were filtering into the backcountry. One of the classic deist texts, *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man*, was written by Ethan Allen, a Vermont military hero and land speculator. Lyman Beecher complained that even boys "that dressed flax in the barn . . . read Tom Paine and believed him."<sup>5</sup> William Miller, a country boy subsequently famous for predicting the Second Coming in 1844, lost faith in the Bible during a twelve-year period from 1804 to 1816. In Poultney, Vermont, where Miller moved in 1803, he had no trouble finding skeptical authors in the public library: Voltaire, David Hume, Thomas Paine, and Ethan Allen. Many of the leading citizens of Poultney were deists, making it more socially acceptable to doubt than to believe.<sup>6</sup> When Asael Smith, Lucy Smith's universalist father-in-law, objected to her inclination to follow a Methodist revival preacher, Asael is said to have thrown a copy of Paine's *Age of Reason* into the house and demanded that she and Joseph Sr. read it as an antidote to revivalist religion.<sup>7</sup>

Joseph Smith may have encountered skepticism in the discussion group he joined in Palmyra sometime after 1816. A few local printers formed a "juvenile debating club," which gathered in the red schoolhouse on Durfee Street, to "solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics."<sup>8</sup> Oliver Cowdery later hinted that before his visions Smith may have questioned the existence of God.<sup>9</sup> In the debating club, he could have heard the deist answer to skepticism. The sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, and

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4. The well-worn "disenchantment" impulse in modernism has recently been challenged by Jason A. Josephson-Storm in *Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

5. Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 5, 16.

6. Christopher Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 328.

7. Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 291.

8. Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 3:49–50.

9. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 56.

man “walking forth upon the face of the earth in magesty . . . all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power.”<sup>10</sup> A few years later, the men in Zion’s Camp were surprised at how well Joseph grasped the case for skepticism. One Sunday, when the marchers were trying to disguise their Mormon identity before a crowd of curious onlookers, Joseph spoke for an hour pretending to be a “liberal free-thinker,” a category that included atheists and agnostics among its numbers. According to George A. Smith, “Those present remarked that he was one of the greatest reasoners they ever heard.”<sup>11</sup>

The pull of popular skepticism in the aftermath of the Enlightenment was strong but not enough to win over large segments of the population. It was more frequently a youthful prelude to a later conversion. After being tempted by doubt, young men and women came back to belief. William Miller, after his skeptical youth, decided to put the Bible to the test and found it accurate in every detail. His faith returned to the point that he believed the Bible predicted exactly the time of the Second Coming.<sup>12</sup> Orestes Brownson, another Vermont-born seeker, wandered from skepticism, to universalism, to socialism, and to reform and finally converted to Catholicism.<sup>13</sup>

That general line of development became typical. The novelist Charles Brockden Brown followed an arc from doubt to belief dramatized in his novel *Jane Talbot*—the same arc spanning the early life of Joseph Smith.<sup>14</sup> The New Yorker Charles G. Finney, while never totally skeptical himself, interpreted his vision of Christ as a return from a youth of irreligion and uncertainty about the Bible. Neither of his parents were professors, and “among our neighbors,” he said, “there were very few religious people.” He could not make up his mind concerning “the truth or falsehood of the Gospel and of the Christian religion.” The failure of his prayers in this anxious period “would almost drive me into skepticism,” he wrote. Desperate, in the fall of 1821, he went to the woods where he sometimes walked and crept between two fallen trees to pray. Overcome by emotion, Finney accepted the promises of the gospel. That evening, alone in his law office, he saw the Lord in person: “It seemed

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10. Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 12.

11. George A. Smith, “My Journal,” *Instructor* 81 (April 1946): 182.

12. Grasso, *Skepticism*, 328–29; compare 330–31 for Miller’s listeners’ conversions from freethinking.

13. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Orestes A. Brownson: A Pilgrim’s Progress* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963).

14. Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt*, 78–82.

to me that I saw him as I would see any other man.”<sup>15</sup> Doubt was vanquished, and the very next day, he began evangelizing everyone in the street, a campaign that continued to the end of his life.

Joseph Smith’s account of his vision falls into this common pattern: the misled, skeptical seeker comes to God.<sup>16</sup> This perspective adds another dimension to the story of the First Vision. Besides the anxious youth “convicted” of his sins and seeking forgiveness and the confused youth uncertain about which church to join, we have the skeptical youth questioning God’s existence and finding an affirmation of a divine reality.

The depth of Smith’s doubt should not be exaggerated. It would be a mistake to think that the young Joseph Smith was overcome by rational skepticism. Robert Hullinger went too far in saying that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon as an answer to skepticism.<sup>17</sup> It is more accurate to think of Smith as being exposed to freethinking rather than embracing it. His writings as a whole, his translations, revelations, and sermons, were not so much a rejoinder to skepticism as a commentary on the implications of emerging modernism. The pretended freethinking discourse on the road with Zion’s Camp best characterizes his mentality. The skeptical arguments were in his mind but were not his convictions. It was enough for him to speculate on what the world would be like if it were disenchanted, if all the supernatural effects—visions, miracles, prophecies—were drained away. Not everywhere, but here and there his writings commented on the nothingness, chaos, and disbelief that came with the modernist mentality.

In places, Smith did share the perspective of rationalist skeptics. Part of the answer to his First Vision question about the true church had a skeptical flavor. The heavenly beings who appeared to him informed him that all the religious creeds were an abomination, that those professors

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15. Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney: Written by Himself* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1876), 4, 9–20.

16. The argument for God gave Smith sufficient faith to pray, and the vision banished all doubts—or seemed to. In his 1838 narrative he insisted, “I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak (un)to me.” Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 218. But in his time of early visions, passing uncertainties occasionally seized him. When he went to the hill after the vision of Moroni, he was troubled by his inability to retrieve the plates from the stone box. In that instant, he was “exceedingly frightened” and for a moment “supposed it had been a dream of Vision” but then immediately knew it was real. *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:29. From then on, he moved forward in perfect confidence that he was being led by God.

17. Robert N. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1980).

were all corrupt, and that they had a form of godliness but denied the power thereof.<sup>18</sup> The entire ecclesiastical system, Catholic and Protestant, had to be replaced. The sweeping finality of the condemnation has been an embarrassment to present-day Latter-day Saints. It seems so harsh and comprehensive, so lacking in tact—those professors were all corrupt! But it was the way skeptics spoke of religion. Tom Paine condemned all churches wholesale: “All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.”<sup>19</sup> The priests were all corrupt, the doctrines all incoherent and immoral. For Paine, there was nothing there to redeem. Joseph Smith stopped short of Paine’s summary judgment, but the boldness, the willingness, to condemn religion wholesale, the abandonment of the whole ecclesiastical structure at once, was very much in the skeptical vein.

For the most part, however, Smith was critical of modernism. He could never go along with rationalist reasoning about revelation, for example. All we needed to know, the deists argued, could be derived through reason from nature in its beautiful regularities. Nature was a complete and final revelation. Miracles, Emerson said, were an alien intrusion, not at one with the harmonies and beauties of everyday life. “The very word *Miracle*,” he exclaimed, “as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is *Monster*. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.”<sup>20</sup> Paine went further in protesting that revelations were positively dangerous. “The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries, that have afflicted the human race,” he wrote, “have had their origins in this thing called revelations, or revealed religion.”<sup>21</sup>

Smith could never sympathize with such a dismissal when his religious life began with an overpowering vision of God. His First Vision not only put him at odds with deists but with the Christian clergy in his own neighborhood who doubted his revelation. Smith was stung by the refusal of a Methodist clergyman to take his vision seriously. When Smith approached him for counseling, the man “treated [Joseph’s]

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18. Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 214. Abner Kneeland, the radical theologian, wrote in 1831 that the clergy were the most useless people in the nation. Abner Kneeland, *A Review of the Evidences of Christianity* (Boston: Office of the Investigator, 1831), 6.

19. Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason* (London: Freethought, 1880), 2.

20. Alfred Riggs Ferguson, ed., *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Volume 1; Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971), 81.

21. Paine, *Age of Reason* (1880), 142.

communication not only lightly but with great contempt, saying it was all of the Devil, that there was no such thing as visions or revelations in these days.”<sup>22</sup> Smith was dumbfounded and outraged. He did not know that in consulting a Methodist, he had inadvertently stepped into the denomination’s backlash against visions. A decade earlier converts were reporting so many visionary and other extreme experiences that the Methodist clergy lost faith in extravagant claims and began squelching such reports. Smith’s experience, being all too familiar, received the same treatment.<sup>23</sup> The dismissal hurt Smith, leading him to feel he was being persecuted. In his later account, he repeated over and over that “it was nevertheless a fact, that I had had a Vision.”<sup>24</sup>

Smith’s history expressed only his hurt at being scolded by the minister for claiming revelation. The Book of Mormon offered a deeper analysis. It claimed that abandoning visions and miracles was the first step toward eliminating God. Moroni, the last prophet to write in the book, addressed future readers who “deny the revelations of God” and who say all heavenly gifts are done away (Morm. 9:7). Moroni insisted that the God of the Bible was always a God of miracles and he has not changed. If he changed, the results would be disastrous: in Moroni’s words, “He would cease to be God.” In a rather startling leap, Moroni argues that a god without miracles and revelations was no god at all (Morm. 9:19)! In his personal history, Smith did not say that the clergy who rebuffed him in effect obliterated God, but in the Book of Mormon, Moroni did. Another prophet, Nephi, spoke of priests in the latter days who “teach with their learning, and deny the Holy Ghost.” They “deny the power of God” and say, “Hearken unto us, and hear ye our precept; for behold there is no God today, for the Lord and the Redeemer hath done his work, and he hath given his power unto men” (2 Ne. 28:4–5). In an example of startling bravado, these Book of Mormon characters link the Christian clergy to skepticism by claiming that the denial of miracles and revelation in effect erases God.

The Book of Mormon critique parallels an argument that modern scholars have recently elaborated. Charles Taylor and Louis Dupré, among others, have said that belief did not wither because science moved in and drove out religion, as we commonly think. It was rather

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22. Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 216.

23. For Methodist attitudes toward visions, see John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

24. Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 216.

that religion itself shed so much of its belief in divine intervention, making God so transcendent and beyond comprehension, that in time this attenuated faith offered little resistance to secularism. Protestants cast aside demons, saints, and magic, along with visions and miracles, labeling them all superstition, and by so doing emptied the world of supernatural energy. At the same time, God became more transcendent, more remote, more indiscernible, paving the way for dropping God altogether. As the author of a recent analysis of current historical literature reports, “A consensus has emerged that the expanding distance between God and creation ultimately detached temporal relations from sacred hierarchies, thus opening up conceptual space for a self-regulating universe and a self-fashioning individual subject.”<sup>25</sup> These works see, as Moroni and Nephi did, that the denial of miracles and revelations—putting distance between God and creation—allowed room for humans to claim divine power for themselves. A miracle-free clergy substituted their own words for God’s action and thus, in effect, brought to pass the death of God.

Parenthetically, let me acknowledge that my way of speaking here may puzzle some readers. Bringing Moroni and Nephi into an account of Joseph Smith and modernism may confuse the picture. Who was speaking in the Book of Mormon? Moroni and Nephi? Or Joseph Smith? Were the book’s prophets speaking against modernism from out of the dust, ancient voices engaging in a modern controversy? Or were they spokesmen for Joseph Smith? I leave each listener to decide this question and simply observe that the Book of Mormon, indubitably part of Joseph Smith’s writings, offers a surprisingly trenchant commentary on modernism. Writers in the book’s pages glimpsed the dark edges where the rationalist project played itself out and had to be resisted.

In this, Smith was, of course, not entirely alone. Friedrich Hegel contemplated the pain that comes with “the feeling that God Himself is dead,” and others through the nineteenth century reflected on a world without God.<sup>26</sup> But in Smith’s early years, American rationalists (people who relied on reason rather than scripture or tradition for finding truth) happily cast aside scripture, clergy, and tradition with no sense of loss. Thomas Paine confidently claimed, “My own mind is my own church.”<sup>27</sup> He could abandon everything else because he lived in a sunny world

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25. Charly Coleman, “Resacralizing the World: The Fate of Secularization in Enlightenment Historiography,” *Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 2 (June 2010): 371.

26. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophische Abhandlungen* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1845), 153.

27. Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason* (Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publishing Group, 1974), 50.

with a God who had created a marvelous universe for humans to enjoy. Rid the world of formal religion and only happiness and hope remained. Enlightened reason promised liberation and manly boldness. Kant's famous definition of enlightenment was a person's "release from his self-incurred tutelage."<sup>28</sup> Kant's enlightened self used his or her reason "without direction from another," the Bible, the Church, or the past and was stronger as a result. The use of reason marked humanity's coming of age. The independent, reasoning man was free, bold, confident, and liberated from institutional bondage and infantilizing faith.

The question posed by the Enlightenment was this: Can reasoning humans flourish on their own without prophets, scripture, tradition, church, or God? Kant and Paine said yes; Smith's Book of Mormon warned of the dangers. The book's prophets saw in Kant's independent self the seeds of the man who would put himself in the place of God. Instead of the notion that independent reason leads to a culmination of human development, the Book of Mormon foreshadowed the emergence of a moral monster who lived without restraint and trampled on law, order, and morality.

One of the book's great creations, the overreaching Korihor, was a deep skeptic who trusted only his own senses and, in the end, overthrew law and order to live in a world free of moral shackles. "In the latter end of the seventeenth year," the Book of Mormon relates, "there came a man into the land" who was "Anti-Christ" (Alma 30:6). Korihor's initial question about Christ echoed Kant in linking skepticism to freedom: "O ye that are bound down under a foolish and a vain hope, why do ye yoke yourselves with such foolish things?" (Alma 30:13). For Korihor, beliefs were a form of subjection. They turned believers into beasts of burden, yoked with fantasies about a future their priests could not possibly foresee. Prophecies were only the "foolish traditions of your fathers" (Alma 30:14). Throwing off the prophets would liberate the mind.

Korihor envisioned a self-sufficient subject. He bluntly told his listeners to trust only their own senses: "Ye cannot know of things which ye do not see." The "traditions of your father" will only "lead you away into a belief of things which are not so." The religious teaching about remission of sins "is the effect of a frenzied mind," and this "derangement" comes "because of the traditions of your fathers" (Alma 30:15–16). False beliefs were literally driving people mad.

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28. Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 4 (December 1784): 481–94.

Once rid of religious fantasies and trusting only what could be sensed, the self could carry forward a life. In Korihor's world, it was every man for himself. "Every man," he said, "fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength" (Alma 30:17). The fate of the weak and the helpless was to go down before the strong and the canny, bringing down the moral order with it. Korihor taught that "whatever a man did was no crime" (Alma 30:17). Sexual restraint was swept away along with all law and morality. Korihor led away the hearts of many, "yea, leading away many women, and also men, to commit whoredoms" (Alma 30:18). Nothing was to constrain freedom.

In stepping outside the bounds of civility and morality, Korihor evokes the tradition of massive egos descending from Milton's Lucifer and leading on to Nietzsche's "Übermensch." Nietzsche foresaw that the disappearance of God would require man to assume God's role. With God dead, nihilism, the absence of all meaning and value, loomed. The Übermensch—overman, or superman—must rise to the occasion by inventing his own morality, imposing his will, and creating meaning for lesser souls. Far from Kant's noble man of reason, these mythic superior beings transcended personal morality and lived by the law of their own wills. Korihor foreshadows a world with God absent and man alone in charge. As a modern scholar has put it, the Enlightenment prepared the way for the emergence of the human mind as the sole "source of meaning and value."<sup>29</sup> Korihor was both an Übermensch and an Ahab, driven by his passion for self-assertion against all dominating forces both in society and in the cosmos. In Milton's terms, Lucifer, Ahab, and Korihor were studies of "revenge, immortal hate, / And courage never to submit or yield."<sup>30</sup>

Before his descent, Korihor is given a moment to strut about the stage. Brought before Alma, the high priest, Korihor did "rise up in great

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29. This idea is depicted in Louis Dupré's analysis of the Enlightenment. Coleman, "Resacralizing the World," 388.

30. Henry F. Pommer, *Milton and Melville* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1970), 32. Melville, one writer has argued, "helped establish the conception of the Luciferian antihero as an American type who invents his own rules" but eventually learns that "extreme self-invention inevitably leads to the ultimate form of alienation: a radical distance from God and from fellow humans." John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Franklin Edgar Farley (Chicago: Scott Foresman, 1898), 81. In the Book of Mormon, Korihor is eventually "cast out, and went about from house to house begging for his food" (Alma 30:56).

swelling words" against the priests and judges, "accusing them of leading away the people after the silly traditions of their fathers." He accuses the rulers of a desire to keep the people down that they "may glut [themselves] with the labors of [the people's] hands, that they durst not look up with boldness" (Alma 30:27, 31). The Book of Mormon gives Korihor great lines. He is one of the book's most strongly etched figures, just as Lucifer is Milton's greatest creation and Ahab dominates *Moby Dick*. All these authors betray their fascination with dark, luminous heroes who glow with satanic fire before their fall.

Flashes of extreme thinking flare up throughout the Book of Mormon. At points, the text says boldly that the alternative to faith is a world without meaning, assurance, and governance. In one of the strangest and most perplexing passages, nihilism, the conviction that the world has no meaning at all, comes to the surface. Father Lehi, who ripped his family from the comforts of life in civilized Jerusalem and carried them into the wilderness, was one who seems to have ruminated on a godless world. His blessing on his son Jacob begins with a conventional explanation of the Atonement: People are subject to law and consistently fail to conform; by the law they are cut off. Their only hope is in Christ, who answers the ends of the law. Abruptly in the middle of this standard discourse, Lehi breaks off into a lengthy and somewhat mystifying argument about the necessity of opposition. Lehi asks what would the world be like with no law and no punishment, that is, with no morality. Law, he says, defines an elemental opposition: disobedience to law and the consequent punishment versus obedience to law and the resulting happiness. At first the passage reads like a commonplace observation that the world is filled with good and evil; those who obey will prosper, and those who transgress will suffer. But Lehi goes a step further to assert that the opposition of happiness and misery constitutes the foundation of existence. Without obedience and disobedience or reward and punishment, there would be nothing, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. There might be physicality but no life.

Without law and punishment, existence collapses. "All things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility. . . . Wherefore, it must needs have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the end of its creation. Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes." And, of course, if these are not, "there is no God,"

and we and the earth are not, “wherefore, all things must have vanished away” (2 Ne. 2:11–13). That is nihilism. Lehi goes beyond mere deism to imagine a world without structure, a world without law and order, and, of course, a world without God. The universe would be an eternal, featureless nullity, as good as vanished away. In a rebuke to modernist doubt, Lehi lays out the terrifying consequences of removing God and his laws from the universe.

In place of this emptiness, Lehi offers a world of conflict: happiness versus misery, good versus evil, choice versus emptiness, agency versus paralysis, existence versus nonexistence. The fall that in Christian lore brought good and evil into the world, he ends up arguing, also bestowed life and happiness. Rather than a flat, compound world without opposition, there was a world of conflict and vivacity. Opposition was so vital to human well-being that God himself introduced conflict into the garden. Otherwise there could be no real existence: “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Ne. 2:25). And all of it began with the introduction of a law.

This view is ultimately profoundly optimistic. It turns all the sorrows of good and evil into positive potential. Through law, opposition, punishment, and sin come joy and life. It is not the happy world of the deists with their smiling harmonies and their rage against religion. Lehi arrived at joy only after considering a world without law, without God, without structure. He celebrates a world based on struggle, on opposition in all things. I cannot imagine where these thoughts came from or in whom they originated. But I see in them a mind willing to break through the surface, to contemplate extremes, to imagine an existence without order of any kind, to face up to one of the nightmares of modernism—the absence of all meaning.

My central argument is that the 1832 account of Joseph Smith’s First Vision points toward a third dimension in the vision’s cultural context. We have long understood that Smith’s question about which church to join arose out of the denominational confusion of his time, and more recently we have added concern for the state of his soul coming out of the revivals. I have drawn attention to a third context for understanding Smith’s vision: a brush with modernism. The brief reference to a deist argument for God in the 1832 account of Smith’s First Visions suggests an exposure to the questions of early modern skepticism. In that passage, Smith recognizes that doubt had to be answered with reason.

Touches of rationalist thinking turn up here and there throughout Joseph Smith’s writings. The total dismissal of the religious establishment

of churches, clergy, and creeds, for example, was a deist way of thinking. “That all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt” is something Thomas Paine would have enthusiastically endorsed (JS–H 1:19).

If we turn to the Book of Mormon, Smith’s writings comment still more extensively on modernist thought. Deists believed revelation to be unnecessary and positively dangerous, the source of much evil in the world. The Methodist clergyman whom Smith told about his First Vision likewise denied that revelation was possible today. In response to both, Moroni and Nephi in the Book of Mormon warn that the denial of revelation endangers belief in God. By reducing the power of God to reveal himself today, humans assume the right to speak for God, in effect acting as if God were dead.

Here and there, Smith’s writings go even further in commenting on the perplexities and pains of modernism. Rationalism’s foundational assertion was that the rational mind, freely choosing for itself, will find happiness and freedom. Kant wrote of a heroic rationalist, capable of discovering truth on his or her own without guidance from tradition and scripture. To this, the Book of Mormon’s Korihor offers a sobering rejoinder. Korihor starts with an Enlightenment call for independent judgment, freed from the shackles of prophets, priests, and scripture, but he ends as a heedless egoist who brooks no constraints on will and passion and without regard for law other than his own desires. His will takes the place of God’s will; his mind, the divine mind. He becomes God. Korihor, the book seems to be saying, is where total dependence on rationality ends.

Korihor is not the end of these plunges into modernist extremes. Lehi in the Book of Mormon imagined a world without law where there was no good and evil and thus no God and no happiness. Existence becomes a compound in one, as Lehi said, with no punishment and thus no mercy and no joy. Like other modernists, he saw nihilism—pure meaninglessness—as the inescapable outcome of a universe without law. Lehi believed that God had to inject sin and punishment into the world in order for man to be and have joy.

Latter-day Saint thinkers have struggled with the darker implications of these passages in Smith’s writings. They seem beyond comprehension, too extreme to be engaged. Perhaps the most compelling response is found in Smith’s own writings. In the Book of Abraham, God encounters a material universe waiting to be organized by force of divine will and intelligence. He offers his children a glorious world as

Moses was allowed to view it in Moses 1. But the universe is also hard earned and incomplete, always in need of further creations. Beyond the bounds of creation, there remain, it would seem, realms of unorganized matter awaiting organization. The implication of Smith's creation stories is that there are expanses of disorder where God does not reign, where all things are still a compound in one, and human joy is not found. Lehi, Moses, and Abraham offer hope that a creator can bring order and joy wherever he chooses to act.

Korihor's egoism and Lehi's reflections on nihilism, which I have elaborated on today, are not the end of Joseph Smith's encounters with modernism. Rationalist themes were actually woven deep into his own theology. He foresaw a future for humans that was akin to the modernist belief that ultimately men take the place of God. At the end of his life, Smith spoke of a God who is an exalted man and a model for what humans can become. This God is not supplanted by humans, but his very purpose is to share his godhood with his children. By binding themselves to him, they can receive of his fulness (D&C 93:20). If they covenant properly, says one of Smith's revelations, "all that my father hath shall be given unto them" (D&C 84:38). In fulfillment of the Enlightenment dream, humans can become gods. With this stroke, Smith presented himself as both a critic of the Enlightenment and its fulfillment. While his writings denounced Enlightenment hubris, his theology embodied the high hope that humanity can rise out of its stupor and become as God. They do not ascend in Korihor's way, by an assertion of will and ego, but by making agreements and commitments, which put them, as Latter-day Saints say these days, on the covenant path to exaltation.

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# “Though We or an Angel from Heaven”

## Evangelicals and the First Vision

*Richard J. Mouw*

**A**t a small luncheon gathering of evangelical and Mormon scholars during an annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion shortly after the turn of the century, Richard Bushman issued a challenge to the Evangelicals in the form of a question posed directly to me: “Is Joseph Smith *possible* for you?” In an essay that I published in 2009, I organized my remarks on Joseph Smith as a response to Bushman’s question.<sup>1</sup>

While there is nothing that I wrote back then that I want now to retract, I have kept thinking about Bushman’s challenge. The invitation to speak at this wonderful conference gives me an opportunity to explore some further thoughts on the subject.

In that earlier essay I responded to Bushman’s challenge by focusing primarily on issues dealing with Joseph’s character. I had been intrigued by my recent reading of Rodney Stark’s treatment of the topic. While Stark did not take at face value Joseph’s account of his encounters with supernatural beings, neither did he see the need simply to choose between what he labeled the “psychopathological interpretation” and the view that Joseph was a “conscious fraud.”<sup>2</sup> Instead he argued for the need to develop “a theory of revelations” that allowed for a third category

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1. Richard J. Mouw, “The Possibility of Joseph Smith: Some Evangelical Probing,” in *Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 189–99.

2. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, ed. Reid L. Neilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 32.

for people like Joseph Smith—he labeled this alternative category the “revelator.” Religious leaders who deserve this label, Stark argued, offer us what they sincerely believe are “communications . . . from a divine being,” and they do so with a “creative imagination” that connects in deep ways with popular spiritual yearnings.<sup>3</sup>

While I was intrigued by Stark’s case, I was nervous about simply following him in granting “revelator” status to Joseph. We Evangelicals, like others who hold to the basic tenets of traditional Christian teaching, have obvious misgivings about some of the things that Joseph claimed to have received by direct divine revelation. We certainly are not inclined to give credibility to his report in his First Vision account that the divine Personage had said, speaking about the existing churches, that “all their creeds were an abomination in his sight.”<sup>4</sup>

Nothing in those misgivings, however, has compelled me to choose between the options that Joseph was either a deliberate deceiver or sincerely deluded. My adult efforts to make nuanced sense of Joseph’s character have been influenced by my initial encounter with his First Vision testimony, which occurred as I was just entering my own teenage years, when our family took a car trip from our home in upper New York state to California.<sup>5</sup> One of our stops along the way was in Salt Lake City, where we visited Temple Square and heard the tour-guide presentations.

Since we public-school students in New York state were required to learn some of the basics of New York history, I was already familiar with a few things about Joseph Smith’s experiences in Palmyra, but the Salt Lake City visit—which for my evangelical parents was simply a passing encounter with a non-Christian cult—stimulated my interest in Mormonism. As we headed further west, I sat in the back seat of our car reading “Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story,” a pamphlet that we had received at the visitors’ center that set forth the Pearl of Great Price version of the First Vision narrative.

For me, the most intriguing part of the story was Joseph’s description of his state of mind just before he was visited by the divine beings. His spiritual distress over “the confusion and strife among the different

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3. Stark, *Rise of Mormonism*, 56.

4. My quotations from the First Vision narrative in this essay are all from the Pearl of Great Price version of the 1838 account. Joseph Smith—History 1:19.

5. I am repeating a personal account here from Richard J. Mouw, *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 5–7.

denominations" was very similar to my own at that stage in my life. As I listened to adult Evangelicals argue over baptism, predestination, and interpretations of the book of Revelation, I also found it "impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong" (JS-H 1:8).

I found especially gripping Joseph's poignant expression of despair: "In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?" (JS-H 1:10).

It is no exaggeration to say that I felt like I had discovered a friend in Joseph Smith. Here was someone who understood my own confusions and yearnings, ones that I had been reluctant to express to the adults in my life—and even a bit fearful of admitting to myself. Ever since then, as I have articulated in my adult career serious theological disagreements with Joseph, I have never forgotten, nor discounted, that early sense of spiritual kinship with him.

### Evangelical Hostility

I did not say anything to my parents about what was for me the positive experience of reading Joseph's First Vision testimony. In the evangelical world in which I was raised, Mormonism was seen as a sinister cult that had its origins in Joseph Smith's deceptions. The antagonism toward The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was being reinforced at the time by the emergence of an energetic "counter-cult" movement, in which Walter Martin was to become the best-known crusader. Martin began speaking to evangelical audiences in the mid-1950s about Mormonism as the most threatening of the non-Christian cults. He soon expanded his influence with his first book, *The Rise of the Cults*,<sup>6</sup> published in 1957, to be followed in 1965 by his bestseller, *The Kingdom of the Cults*.<sup>7</sup>

On a theological level, Martin basically employed a doctrinal check-list approach in assessing a movement's theology. Do they believe in the Bible's supreme authority? The Trinity? Classic understandings of the person and work of Christ? And so on. But he also

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6. Walter R. Martin, *The Rise of the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955).

7. Walter R. Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965).

often encouraged conspiracy elements, and this was especially the case with Mormonism. Other evangelical critics of Mormonism expanded on Martin's efforts with speculations about how Joseph Smith might have plagiarized the Book of Mormon from fictional texts that were available at the time but have long since been lost. In their 1982 film, *The God Makers*—and in a book by the same name appearing two years later—Dave Hunt and Ed Decker wove a narrative about Joseph Smith dabbling in the occult.<sup>8</sup>

While this kind of portrayal of Mormonism has not stood up in the light of serious historical scholarship, the basic elements of the counter-cult approach are still widely disseminated in the evangelical world. Those of us who have attempted to correct the record with our fellow Evangelicals are frequently accused of being taken in by the deceptions that gave rise to Mormonism from its very beginnings.

Why the relentless evangelical hostility toward Mormonism? Other branches of traditional Christianity—mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy—have not, for the most part, engaged in the same level of what Joseph reported as the “great contempt” shown by the Methodist pastor to whom he originally reported his First Vision experience (JS-H 1:21). One obvious factor for Evangelicalism’s often passionate denunciations of Mormonism is that we, like the LDS folks, actively compete for souls—both movements are deeply committed to evangelism. And for Evangelicals, Mormonism’s proselytizing efforts pose a threat, and this has been so from the beginning. Furthermore, Mormonism’s growth—its transition from a local New York state phenomenon to a global religious presence—requires an explanation. And as has often been the case, Evangelicals have mined the explanatory resources of demonizing portrayals of those with whom we disagree.

While this commitment to viewing Mormonism in sinister terms is obviously regrettable, it does have the benefit of being an answer to an important question: what is the power of Mormonism as a global movement that had its origins in the spiritual struggles of a teenage boy in nineteenth-century rural New York state? This bicentennial commemoration of Joseph’s First Vision provides an excellent opportunity for us, Mormon and non-Mormon alike, to explore further this important question.

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8. *The God Makers*, directed by Ed Decker and Dave Hunt (Irvine: Harvest House, 1984).

## Social Embodiments

I take my point of departure in pursuing this question from an important observation made by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his now-classic 1981 book, *After Virtue*. There MacIntyre makes the intriguing suggestion that every “moral philosophy . . . characteristically presupposes a sociology,” such that “we have not yet fully understood the claims of any moral philosophy until we have spelled out what its social embodiment would be like.”<sup>9</sup> This means, says MacIntyre, that in addition to engaging in the typical logical analyses of the basic principles of, say, utilitarianism or a deontological ethic, we must also ask ourselves what it would look like if a society patterned its complex life in consistent conformity to John Stuart Mill’s principle of utility, or to Kant’s Categorical Imperative.

I am convinced that MacIntyre’s “social embodiment” test also applies to systems of religious teaching. What would it look like, for example, if a community patterned its complex life in a manner consistent with the theology of Paul Tillich or Karl Barth? Fortunately, in the case of Joseph Smith’s teachings, we have a visible social embodiment that we can point to in answering our question. Such a community would look like The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I will put my point bluntly: the way a community lives out a founder’s teachings can tell us something significant about that founder’s character. I draw encouragement for taking this test seriously in the case of Joseph Smith from a similar treatment of Mohammed by one of my theological heroes, the influential nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper, who was well known in the Netherlands for his advocacy of Calvinist orthodoxy. Kuyper was also an important political figure who served in the Dutch Parliament as the leader of a Christian party, and in the early years of the twentieth century, he served a term as the Dutch prime minister.

When Kuyper retired from his political career, he embarked upon a two-year (1905–1907) tour of the Mediterranean countries, during which he wrote extensively about his firsthand impressions of Islam. These reflections have recently been published in an English translation, a four-hundred-page volume entitled *On Islam*.

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9. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 22.

Kuyper's firsthand encounter with Islam during his Mediterranean tour leads him to express admiration for the social impact of Muslim life and thought. Prominent in Kuyper's case is his observation about the character of Islam's founder. "By what magic," Kuyper asks, "did Mohammed radiate such an unparalleled charisma" that his "imprint is still very evident," even in the "remotest areas" of the Middle East? Kuyper cannot believe that the Muslim prophet was simply engaged in "a deliberate act of deception." Religious perspectives that are set forth by leaders who want to deceive their followers have no sustainability, he says. "Charlatans live a lie," observes Kuyper, and typically "the sudden flaring . . . of the visionary's brilliance does not provide the power that rules the ages."<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, Kuyper argues, Mohammed seems to have possessed "a spiritual power of the first order," and even if there were "factors of a lower order" also at work in extending his influence, Kuyper saw something in Mohammed's message that spoke to even deeper places in the human spirit. An effective spiritual vision, Kuyper argues, "stirs the deepest longings within our very being, more powerfully than any other single factor through the passage of one's personal life and throughout the history of humanity."<sup>11</sup> And in Kuyper's estimation, Mohammed clearly had that kind of power.

I believe that the same kind of assessment can apply to Joseph and his impact on the community that embodies his vision. By setting aside the conspiratorial aspects that have long characterized the evangelical assessment of Mormonism, not only can we Evangelicals get a better grasp of the power of Joseph's impact, but we can even learn more about our own spiritual quests.

### Angelic Visits

The title that I have given to this essay contains a direct allusion to a biblical text that has been frequently quoted by counter-cult opponents of Mormonism: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8 KJV). This Pauline warning has often been cited against Mormonism, as if the very appeal to angelic visitations is

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10. Abraham Kuyper, *On Islam*, ed. James D. Bratt with Douglas A. Howard, trans. Jan van Vliet (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham Press, 2017), 167.

11. Kuyper, *On Islam*, 168.

out of bounds as an authentic faith claim made after the closing of the biblical canon. But such a stricture rules out too much.

While I was preparing my earlier essay on the Joseph Smith phenomenon, I also happened to be reading Kenneth Silverman's 1984 biography of Cotton Mather, where Silverman reports on Mather's testimony regarding an angelical visitation. In 1693, thirty-year-old Mather was struggling to grasp the will of God for his life. Then one night, in his bedroom, he had what he described as this "strange and memorable thing": "After outpourings of prayer, with the utmost fervor and fasting . . . there appeared an Angel, whose face shone like the noonday sun . . . ; He was completely beardless, but in other respects human, his head encircled by a splendid tiara; . . . On his shoulders were wings: . . . His garments were white and shining; his robe reached to his ankles; and about his loins was a belt not unlike the girdles of the peoples of the East."<sup>12</sup>

Mather did not record the details of the message that the angel delivered to him, but he did testify that the angel prophesied that he, Cotton Mather, would accomplish great things and that his intellectual influence would reach to the European continent.<sup>13</sup>

Nothing in that account is incompatible with evangelical thought. Nor should Joseph's encounter with divine and angelical beings simply be dismissed out of hand. Indeed, there are good reasons to pay theological attention to reports of angelic visitations, even if we can question some elements in those reports.

In her 2008 study of encounters with angels, the Presbyterian theologian Susan R. Garrett puts it well. "At the heart of any discussion of angels," she says, is a deep concern about "the extent and modes of God's presence in the world."<sup>14</sup> In contemporary life, she argues, "much of the talk about angels is a reaction against the alleged distance of God from the world, and against the related tendency in Western culture toward separation of creator from creature." Popular reports of visitations, then, typically come from people who have been liberated from living "under

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12. Mather recounted this experience, not in his diary, but in a separate document, and he described the visitation in Latin. The translation here is found alongside the original Latin in Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 127–28.

13. Silverman, *Cotton Mather*, 128.

14. Susan R. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 39.

the pall of a deity portrayed to them as removed, detached, and coldly indifferent to the suffering his judgments imposed.”<sup>15</sup>

This sense of liberation obviously had something to do with the reception of Joseph’s reports of his visitations. This enthusiasm was captured in a delightful way by the Latter-day Saint poet W. W. Phelps in the hymn he composed for the 1836 dedication of the temple in Kirtland:

The Spirit of God like a fire is burning!  
The latter-day glory begins to come forth;  
The visions and blessings of old are returning,  
And angels are coming to visit the earth.<sup>16</sup>

This way of viewing the early years of Mormonism is confirmed in the biography of Parley P. Pratt by Terryl Givens and Matthew Grow. They point out that Pratt was unusual among early Mormon converts in that his conversion was occasioned by his reading of the Book of Mormon. “Up to this point,” Givens and Grow report, “the vast majority of converts to Mormonism had been drawn from the Smiths’ immediate circles,” folks who had “first encountered Joseph Smith and his revelatory claims and then read the Book of Mormon,” with the book functioning in their minds primarily “as a sign of a divinely sanctioned restoration.”<sup>17</sup>

What all of this clearly seems to indicate is that a key factor in the emergence of Mormonism was a widespread popular religious desire to connect the supernatural to present realities in rather concrete ways. Richard Bushman puts this point well in discussing what he describes as the “unbounded enthusiasm” of Joseph’s 1842 account of his various revelations, during what was in fact an especially difficult time in his career. This account—recorded in *Doctrine and Covenants* 128:20–21—gets at the heart of the restoration, says Bushman, in its “mingling [of] the names of ‘divers angels’—Michael, Gabriel, Raphael—with special, mundane places that one could locate on a map—Fayette, Seneca County, Colesville, Broome County, and the banks of the Susquehanna River.”<sup>18</sup>

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15. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel*, 239.

16. William W. Phelps, “The Spirit of God,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1985), no. 2.

17. Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33, 90.

18. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 478.

This desire to encounter the divine in concrete ways in venues that have local zip codes is a continuing spiritual preoccupation in American popular culture. *Guideposts* magazine, established by Norman Vincent Peale in 1945, is currently one of the most widely circulating popular spirituality periodicals in the United States, with a present circulation of close to a million subscribers. When after the first couple of decades the Peale ministry people realized that their readers were especially responsive to accounts of angelical encounters, they established a spin-off magazine, *Angels on Earth*, which currently has a circulation of over a half-million subscribers.

To dismiss on theological grounds continuing stories of angelic appearances on “the banks of the Susquehanna” is to fail to probe important and enduring spiritual realities. Evangelicalism has given much attention in recent decades to ways that it can appeal to “seeker sensitive” realities in its worship patterns and evangelistic outreaches. To ignore the appeal of Mormonism—inspired by Joseph’s original “restoration” message that was grounded in turn in his own personal testimonies of supernatural encounters—is not only to fail to understand the global impact of the Mormon message, but also to miss out on lessons that need to be learned about spiritual currents that run deep in the human quest. It is not insignificant, I think, that Steven C. Harper makes significant use of the “seeker” theme in his fine study of the various accounts of the origins and impact of Joseph’s First Vision.<sup>19</sup>

### Reducing the Distance

So, back to Richard Bushman’s question to me: “Is Joseph Smith *possible* for you?” It should be clear from what I have said here already that the Joseph Smith of the First Vision is very possible for me personally. He took seriously the apostolic charge to seek wisdom from God. He prayed for deliverance from the evil that afflicts our personal lives. He asked legitimate questions about how to discern the truth about matters of faith in the midst of highly vocal controversies about doctrinal differences.

To acknowledge the legitimacy of Joseph’s spiritual quest from an evangelical perspective is not, of course, to endorse the answers that he claimed to have received in his First Vision. But it does point to new ways for more productive engagement between the two communities.

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19. Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012).

My own approach to promoting better understanding between Evangelicals and Mormons has been to reduce the distance between the two faith communities. As I have already observed, one reason why Mormon-Evangelical relations have been characterized by so much hostility over the past two centuries is that the two communities compete with each other in evangelistic efforts—a factor that does not play a significant role in, say, Mormon relations with Presbyterians or Episcopalians. This explains why Evangelicals have often resorted to magnifying the differences between their own perspective and that of Mormonism.

The opportunity to focus on the First Vision account provides a good occasion for reducing the areas of disagreement. Given the fact that most Evangelicals would not simply rule out the Cotton Mather story on theological grounds, it is difficult to understand why Joseph Smith's reports of encounters with divine and angelic beings should be automatically suspect from an evangelical perspective. I found it significant that while I was working on this paper, I attended an evangelical gathering where an expert on Middle East ministries told of angels visiting Muslim women in Iran, encouraging them to worship Jesus as the true source of salvation.

And what about Joseph's insistence that the creeds of the churches of his day were an "abomination" in the sight of the divine visitors? Similar assessments—with various degrees of harshness—are often expressed by evangelical pietists who point to what they see as the spiritual hypocrisy of those who subscribe to "cold orthodoxy." This antipathy toward precise doctrinal formulations often takes evangelical shape in "No creed but Christ" manifestos. And even when credal affirmations are prominent in communions within the broad Christian tradition, it has not been uncommon for one group to condemn another group's creeds as heretical. An obvious case in point here is the actual warfare that has occurred in the past between churches of the East and West regarding the introduction of the *filioque* ("and from the Son") clause in the Nicene Creed.

What is legitimately of theological concern for Evangelicals about the First Vision is the way it set in motion a religious perspective that featured extrabiblical teachings associated with claims about the restoration of the ancient office of prophet. For Evangelicals, the fundamental issue at stake here is the rejection of the Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

Even here, though, we have to acknowledge that we Evangelicals have argued persistently with others *within* the broader Christian community

about this topic. Our differences with Catholicism are an obvious case in point. Catholics believe that they must accept as authoritative certain truths—truths they believe come from God—whose explicit content goes beyond anything we can find in the Bible. Where Catholicism differs from Mormonism, of course, is on how the community is given access to these extra-biblical teachings. In Catholic thought, authoritative pronouncements are arrived at by means of the office of the *magisterium*. Ecclesiastical authorities arrive at new teachings by a process of explicating data found in the Bible.<sup>20</sup> The Immaculate Conception of Mary is a case in point. This dogma has developed by means of reflection on the biblical account of Jesus being born of a virgin. Historically, Catholicism came to insist that God, knowing that Mary would someday give birth to the Incarnate Son of God, prepared her for it by seeing to it that she herself was born without being affected by original sin, so that she could carry the sinless Babe in her womb.

The prophetic office in Mormonism differs significantly from this teaching office in Catholicism. When Latter-day Saint leaders declared that it had been revealed to them that, for example, plural marriage was no longer permissible and that the priesthood would now be open to males of black African descent, these teachings did not “grow out of” earlier prophetic deliverances—it reversed them. God directly conveyed something different, not contained in previous revelations—through the Church’s prophet.

Here, too, however, it is helpful to ask the Bushman question. Is even *this* way of advocating for postbiblical revealed “truths” in any way possible for Evangelicals? Terryl Givens offers a necessary word of caution for those of us who might want to issue a clear no on this subject. He observes that even in Christian communities where the formal theologies insist upon “historically delimited inspiration, rather than continuing utterance,” there persist “certain forms of personal, unmediated knowledge of God and his truths.” Givens finds this occurring in the strain of “Primitive Christian or affirmative mysticism” that places a strong emphasis on “the open revelation of God to man,”<sup>21</sup> and it is

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20. For the classic case for this understanding of doctrinal development, see John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845; 2d ed., London: Longmans, Green, 1878).

21. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 229.

not difficult to see it at work in various manifestations of popular Evangelicalism. It is certainly to be found in contemporary Pentecostal and charismatic communities.

Actually, Pentecostalism provides an interesting reference point for comparative analysis on the subject of the role of prophetic activity. The Pentecostal scholar John Christopher Thomas observes that while both communities stress “the continuing presence and function of the gift of prophecy in the contemporary world,” Pentecostalism differs from Mormonism in encouraging “a somewhat democratized view of the prophetic” with an insistence on “the role of the community in assessing and discerning prophetic words and proclamations.” Mormonism, in contrast, “appears for the most part to focus on individual prophets and their roles around which the faithful gather and against which the unfaithful rebel.” Thus, Thomas argues, Mormonism “views the community as being subject to the prophet’s own sense of calling and directives.”<sup>22</sup>

Thomas’s point is a good one. There are, however, strands in Pentecostalism that come closer to the Mormon understanding of the prophetic role, particularly where the apostolic and prophetic functions are closely aligned. In many smaller Pentecostal groups, for example, the decidedly non-“democratic” authority of the church leader is frequently associated with what are seen as the leader’s “five ministry offices”: apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher.<sup>23</sup>

### Doubting the Doubters

I conclude now with a final reflection on Richard Bushman’s challenge.

David Guterson’s 2003 novel, *Our Lady of the Forest*, tells a story about a sixteen-year-old runaway girl, Ann, living in the woods in Washington state, who claims to be experiencing encounters with the Virgin Mary.<sup>24</sup> When I read that narrative, I found it fascinating, so much so that I wondered whether I might be engaging in a bit of spiritual voyeurism. And that certainly may have been a factor in my fascination. The more I thought about it, though, I sensed that I was also voyeuristically

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22. John Christopher Thomas, *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Cleveland, Tenn.: CPT Press, 2016), 384–85.

23. Randall Grier, “Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors, Teachers,” Randall Grier Ministries, <https://rgm.me/apostles-prophets-evangelists-pastors-teachers/>.

24. David Guterson, *Our Lady of the Forest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

observing the voyeurs who were also characters in Guterson's telling of the story. While Guterson treats his young visionary with much respect, he also gives sympathetic portrayals of some other characters—one of them a Catholic priest—who have serious doubts about the legitimacy of Ann's reports of her encounters with the Blessed Mother. But their doubts were different from my own, since Guterson's fictional doubters tend to be either unbelievers or liberal Catholics. In my reading of the novel, then, I had to struggle with my distance from *their* doubttings, even as I wrestled with my own questions.

I struggle with similar tensions in my wrestling with Joseph's First Vision. Earlier I described my fascination—indeed, my empathy—with the teenage Joseph's testimony as I read it for the first time in the back-seat of our family car. Nothing in that experience inclined me to consider becoming a Mormon—my empathy has always been mixed with some significant doubts. But those doubts have typically been accompanied by my doubts about other doubters.

Truth be told, in reading David Guterson's story of the teenage Ann, I actually lean heavily toward seeing her in terms of what Rodney Stark labels in his discussion of Joseph Smith the "psychopathological interpretation." But in Joseph's case, I have consistently refused to be forced by other doubters into choosing between the simple binary of "a liar or a lunatic."<sup>25</sup>

In an important sense, the way in which Joseph Smith is possible for me as an Evangelical is closely linked to what Richard Bushman insists is at the heart of the restoration that Joseph claimed to embody in his spiritual leadership: the "mingling [of] the names of 'divers angels'—Michael, Gabriel, Raphael—with special, mundane places that one could locate on a map—Fayette, Seneca County, Colesville, Broome County, and the banks of the Susquehanna River."<sup>26</sup>

This portrayal of angelic visitations to very mundane settlements along a river in Pennsylvania points me to yet another link between an angel and a river. In the opening verses of Revelation 22, the apostolic Seer testifies that an "angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. . . . On each side of the river stood the tree of life. . . . And the leaves of the

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25. Mouw, "Evangelical Probings," 198.

26. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 478.

tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse" (Rev. 22:3 NIV).

That angelic witness to the healing powers of the heavenly river is good news these days for folks who live, for example, along "the banks of the Susquehanna River" and for me also, which is why in my own evangelical way I can take hope in that poetic declaration by W. W. Phelps:

The Spirit of God like a fire is burning!  
The latter-day glory begins to come forth;  
The visions and blessings of old are returning,  
And angels are coming to visit the earth.

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# Methodism as Context for Joseph Smith's First Vision

*John Wigger*

When I started looking at early American Methodism thirty years ago, the first thing that struck me was how full of vibrant supernaturalism it was. Early American Methodists lived in a world where visions, prophetic dreams, and supernatural impressions were everywhere. God spoke to them directly. They talked about these things openly, without embarrassment. Supernaturalism was a part of everyday life and central to their connection to one another.

The second thing that struck me about this supernaturalism, often denounced as enthusiasm, was that it had a trajectory. It was more central to the Methodist Episcopal Church in the eighteenth century and first decades of the nineteenth than it was after 1820. It declined as Methodism became more respectable and trended toward the emerging middle class. In general, it faded first in wealthier, urban congregations, though it was by no means ever limited to the frontier or camp meetings. It would eventually be linked to the divide between the Holiness movement and mainline Methodism, and more strongly to the divide with Pentecostalism. The Methodism of Bishop Francis Asbury, who died in 1816, looked and felt much different than the Methodism of Matthew Simpson, who served as a bishop from 1852 to 1884 and was a close friend of Abraham Lincoln's.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Darius L. Salter, *God Cannot Do without America: Matthew Simpson and the Apotheosis of Protestant Nationalism* (Wilmore, Ky.: First Fruits Press, 2017), 1, 309–15, 368–69, 391–403, 607. On the myth of the frontier camp meeting, see John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 318–26.

Joseph Smith and his family had considerable contact with Methodism in the years surrounding his first vision, as Richard Bushman has described. Lucy and Joseph Sr. attended Methodist meetings while the family lived in Vermont. In Palmyra, Joseph Jr. reportedly attended Methodist camp meetings, where he experienced “a spark of Methodism,” and joined a class meeting of the Palmyra Methodist Church. Willard Chase, one of Joseph’s treasure-hunting associates in Palmyra, was also a Methodist class leader. Later, Chase hired a “conjuror,” and he and his sister Sally used her “green glass” in an attempt to find where Joseph had hidden the gold plates, which apparently did not violate his Methodist scruples. During the time that Joseph translated the plates into the Book of Mormon, he and his wife, Emma, attended Methodist meetings, and Joseph reportedly joined a class.<sup>2</sup>

Joining a class meeting was significant. It defined one as a member of a Methodist society. Anyone could attend public meetings, but joining a class implied a deeper level of commitment. Classes met once a week, usually in someone’s home. They were supposed to include about a dozen members, a size thought best to promote intimacy, openness, and discipline, though they often ballooned to two or three times that number. Class meetings were not preaching occasions. After singing and prayer, the leader would usually examine each member in turn, asking them to reveal their troubles and triumphs in front of their neighbors. The leader recorded attendance and contributions weekly. Attending a class meeting would have given Joseph Smith an inside look at all that it meant to be a Methodist.<sup>3</sup>

The Smiths were of course not the only Mormons with Methodist roots. Brigham Young joined the Methodist Episcopal Church at age twenty-three, though he later made light of his connection, as John Turner notes, and a number of his siblings joined the Reformed Methodist Church, a small splinter group established in Vermont in 1814.

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2. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 25, 37, 48–50, 60, 69. According to Bushman, Emma had an uncle who was a Methodist “lay minister” and a brother-in-law who was a class leader in Harmony, Pennsylvania. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 69. Scholars have debated the date of Joseph’s first vision for more than fifty years, ranging from Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1967): 227–44, to Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

3. John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; paperback, University of Illinois Press, 2001), 80–87.

The Reformed Methodists fully embraced Methodism's supernaturalist impulse. Christopher Jones estimates that roughly "one-third" of the first generation of converts to Mormonism "came from Methodist backgrounds," as did the Church's first three presidents and eight of the original twelve Apostles. Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright recorded a conversation he had with Joseph Smith in Illinois, after Smith fled Missouri. "He believed that among all the Churches in the world the Methodist was the nearest right," recounts Cartwright. According to Cartwright, Smith told him, "We Latter-day Saints are Methodists, as far as they have gone, only we have advanced further."<sup>4</sup>

The Methodism that the Smith family experienced during the years surrounding Joseph's first vision was in the midst of a deep and enduring transition, a contest over the core identity of the church. Differences between the two sides would eventually lead to a division between Old School and New School Methodism, as B. T. Roberts, one of the founders of the Free Methodist Church, put it in a famous 1857 essay that got him expelled from the Genesee Conference in western New York. The divide was part of the context in which Joseph Smith's first vision took place. He could see Methodism turning away from the path that appealed most to him, and he in turn turned away from Methodism, but probably not before absorbing some of the possibilities that had been so much a part of the church. Richard Bushman has written that Joseph Smith's "natural constituency" consisted of "thousands of kindred spirits among unsophisticated Christians, who longed for visions, visitations, inspired dreams, revelations, and every other outpouring of the Spirit." The same had been true for early Methodists and still was in parts of western New York in the 1810s and 1820s.<sup>5</sup>

From the start, Methodist supernaturalism knew no geographical boundaries. It was central to the church's development north and south,

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4. John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 15–19, 24–25, 27; Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Cranston and Curts, 1856), 342; Christopher Jones, "'It's Like Methodism, Only More': Mormon Conversion and Narratives of the Great Apostasy," Patheos, February 4, 2013, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/peculiarpeople/2013/02/its-like-methodism-only-more-mormon-conversion-and-narratives-of-the-great-apostasy/>; Christopher C. Jones, "Mormonism in the Methodist Marketplace: James Covel and the Historical Background of Doctrine and Covenants 39–40," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2012): 67–98.

5. Kevin M. Watson, *Old or New School Methodism? The Fragmentation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 163–82; Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 6.

east and west. In October 1789, Thomas Wallcut, who was from Massachusetts, took a journey of twenty-five days from Baltimore, Maryland, to Muskingum, Ohio. Everywhere he went, one topic dominated conversation: the growth of Methodism. “I found that the spread of Methodism in Virginia & Maryland is unparalleled and astonishing—some go so far as to say that full half the People are Methodists already & that Methodism will be the established Religion of Virginia in a few years,” Wallcut wrote to a friend in Boston. Wallcut was no fan of Methodism, noting that its “influence is principally felt among the Negroes & poorer & lower classes of the People.” What really bothered Wallcut about Methodism was its enthusiasm. He attended several “evening meetings,” reporting that they were “attended with all that confusion, violence and distortion of the body, voice & gestures that characterizes such a boiling hot religion . . . no Jack Tar in his cups [i.e., no drunken sailor] appears to me more irreverent in professing the name of the Deity than these noisy bellowers when they call upon him.” So far as Wallcut could tell, only the Shakers exceeded the Methodists in their intemperate zeal. Even after we make allowances for Wallcut’s bias, it is clear that the ecstatic intensity of Methodism was one of its defining characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

What Wallcut observed in his journey from Maryland to Ohio was equally evident in New England and New York. To direct her life, Fanny Newell relied on dreams, visions, and impressions, some so powerful that it seemed that God was speaking to her in an audible voice. Born in 1793 in Sidney, Maine, about two hundred miles from where Joseph Smith was born, Newell experienced conversion in 1808 after a series of dramatic visions. Shortly afterward, she had an impression that the preacher who had led her to Christ, Henry Martin, would soon die, which in fact he did a few weeks later. Later, in another dream, a woman who had died sometime before appeared to Newell, telling her that she was to take up Martin’s mantle and preach, much as Elisha had taken up the mantle of Elijah, which she did. Newell explained God’s “special dealings” with her through dreams, writing, “That which I cannot comprehend when awake, as Job said, he revealeth to me, when deep sleep locks up the mental faculties.” Newell married a Methodist preacher, and the two traveled together for several years, with Fanny often exhorting after her husband’s sermons.<sup>7</sup>

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6. Thomas Wallcut to James Freeman, October 31, 1789, Thomas Wallcut papers, box 2, folder 1, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

7. Fanny Newell, *Memoirs of Fanny Newell; Written by Herself, and Published by the Desire and Request of Numerous Friends, Third Edition, with Corrections and*

On one occasion in 1811, Newell had a dream in which a “tall slender man” revealed to her that the child of an acquaintance would soon die. The next day, she found the child’s mother sewing her a gown. “You are making a garment for that child, but she will never put it on,” Newell said. When the woman asked her what she meant, Newell replied, “Your child will not live long.” That night the girl took sick, and twelve days later she died. Newell’s preaching and prophetic gifts were so well known that at least ten thousand copies of her autobiography were sold after her death, making it the equivalent of a best seller at that time.<sup>8</sup>

New York proved even more fertile ground for Methodist supernaturalism than New England, where the influence of proper Congregationalism was still more evident. In 1795, a Methodist society was formed at Troy, New York, and included at least one black family. When Phebe Curtis and her family rented a house in Troy in 1802, their landlords were a “German” couple. Soon after they moved in, the woman “warned my mother against Methodism, saying that it was a dangerous religion, that Methodists were witches, and that if a person were to go among them he could not get away from them until he had joined them.” When Curtis’s mother told their landlord that they were, in fact, Methodists, she was “terrified by this unexpected information” and “hurried out of the house without ceremony lest a spell might be put upon her before she could take her leave.”<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps no one demonstrated the persistence of Methodist supernaturalism in New York better than James P. Horton. Horton was born in 1769 in Fishkill, sixty-five miles up the Hudson River from New York City. His mother died when he was young. When his father remarried, Horton was apprenticed at age eleven, eventually becoming a

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*Improvements* (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam, 1833), 22, 23, 30, 31, 40, 41, 55–56, 64–65, 108–9, 110, quotation on p. 42. From 1810 to 1818, Ebenezer Newell was appointed to circuits in Vermont and Maine. He quit itinerant preaching and settled down in 1819. See Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773–1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 188, 202, 215, 233, 250, 264, 286, 301, 317, 322.

8. Newell, *Memoirs*, 103–4. Newell died in 1824. An advertisement accompanying the 1833 third edition of Newell’s memoirs says that ten thousand copies had been sold “within a few months.” Nancy Caldwell (b. 1781) was another New Englander whose life was guided by dreams, visions, and impressions. See Nancy Caldwell, *Walking with God: Leaves from the Journal of Mrs. Nancy Caldwell*, ed. James O. Thompson (Keyser, W.V.: Mountain Echo, 1886).

9. Joseph Hillman, *History of Methodism in Troy, N.Y.* (Troy, N.Y.: Joseph Hillman, 1888), 12, 13–14, 16. This account was evidently based on an earlier history of Methodism in Troy written by Phebe Curtis. See pp. 12–13.

shoemaker. As a young man, he spent fifteen months in jail, the result of a drunken brawl. His conversion and call to preaching involved a series of dreams, impressions, and what sound like visions. Once, after eating and sleeping but little for three weeks, he stole away to pray in the woods, where “words seemed to be spoken to me” by God. “Whether in the body or out of the body, the Lord knows, but it appeared to me [as] if I had been taken right up into glory,” Horton later recounted. During another visionary experience, as he later recalled, “it appeared to me that I was taken up into heaven, and there I saw the Lord upon his great white throne, and he spoke to me in melting language.” He also believed that he had been divinely healed on at least two occasions.<sup>10</sup>

For more than thirty years, Horton divided his time between preaching as an unpaid local Methodist preacher and working at his trade just enough for his family to survive. Horton married at age twenty-one and had thirteen children, all but one of whom lived to maturity, but his wife and children are barely mentioned in his autobiography. He spent weeks at a time away from home preaching, setting his itinerary spontaneously based on dreams and impressions he received from the Lord. When one of his converts offered him a horse, Horton declined. “I found it more convenient to be on foot, for I could visit all the houses I saw from the road, without the trouble of letting down bars, and opening gates,” he later wrote. “I thought but little of traveling forty or fifty miles on foot in the course of one day, and stopping a dozen or twenty times at different houses along the road to sing a hymn, and pray in each, and sometimes give an exhortation to the people.” He preached among blacks as easily as whites. On one occasion, he left home to preach, intending to be gone only for the weekend, but ended up staying away for five weeks.<sup>11</sup>

Horton built up a following among New York Methodists. He traveled and preached with Lorenzo Dow. The prominent Methodist preacher Freeborn Garrettson supported him financially and gave Horton land on his estate that he could farm to support his family. Garrettson and his wife, Catherine Livingston Garrettson, were wealthy by virtue of Catherine’s share in the Livingston family fortune and owned a large estate near Rhinebeck, New York, but they too were Old School Methodists, for whom dreams and visions formed the core of their religion. Freeborn was the son of a Maryland planter and one of the first

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10. James P. Horton, *A Narrative of the Early Life, Remarkable Conversion, and Spiritual Labors of James P. Horton, Who Has Been a Member of the Methodist Episcopal Church Upwards of Forty Years* (n.p.: Printed for the Author, 1839), 3, 10, 23, 85, 135–36.

11. Horton, *Narrative*, 47, 60, 83, 102, 165, 193.

Methodist preachers to free his slaves, which he did in June 1775, shortly after his conversion. Garretson defended looking to dreams and visions for guidance, writing, “I know, that both sleeping and waking, things of a divine nature have been revealed to me.” His dreams were graphic, and he took great care to record them in his journal. Likewise, after describing one particularly vivid vision in her autobiography, Catherine added, “Many would say it was the power of imagination, enthusiasm, wild-fire, but no, it was wonderful, yet true, and I shall ever think it a most gracious display of mercy, love, and power.” Her marriage to a penniless Methodist preacher scandalized her mother, but the bonds of a shared piety held Catherine and Freeborn together.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these connections, or perhaps because of them, Horton increasingly became an embarrassment to Methodism’s emerging respectable middle class, among whom he was known as Crazy Horton. As Horton himself wrote, “I made such a dreadful time of it, according to their notions, whenever I prayed, or exercised. I hallooed so loud it would frighten the devil’s children. They felt ashamed of me; and some were afraid the cause of God would be injured rather than receive advantage by my public exercises.” But he “knew I was powerfully operated upon by some supernatural influence.” People shouted and fell to the ground when he preached, “like men slain in battle.”<sup>13</sup>

More respectable Methodists tried a number of strategies to rein in Horton and others like him. They set a ten o’clock curfew at camp meetings, after which there was to be “no singing, no praying, unless in silence.” When this did not work, they tried holding invitation-only prayer meetings. The “handsome prayers” offered in these meetings did little good, as far as Horton could tell, except to “quiet the mischievous by putting them to sleep.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite the suspicions of fashionable Methodists, Horton had his supporters, among whom he became known as Uncle Jimmy. In 1838 a group of his New York friends urged him to write an autobiography and commissioned a portrait to accompany the volume, which was published the following year.<sup>15</sup>

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12. Horton, *Narrative*, 27–31, 73, 86, 105, 111–12; Wigger, *American Saint*, 177–81; Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 135, 106–7, 167; Catherine Livingston Garretson, untitled autobiography, TMs, Drew University Library, Madison, N.J.

13. Horton, *Narrative*, 25, 31, 43, 52, 75.

14. Horton, *Narrative*, 93, 137, 144–45, 195.

15. Horton, *Narrative*, 118, 165–66, 173–74. On Horton, also see Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel, Containing an Account of His Experience of Religion; and of His Call to the Ministry for Nearly Thirty Years*

Horton's memoir was among the first in a genre of circuit-rider autobiographies designed to call the church back to the zeal of its earlier, less refined days. So common were complaints about Methodism's lost zeal that dissidents became known by the widely recognized label of "croakers." Though mostly written after 1840, almost all these accounts focus on the period before 1820. Unlike the earlier Puritan jeremiads, Methodist croakers were not reacting against a loss of prestige or respect. Just the opposite. They were also more likely to blame their fellow preachers than the people for what they clearly perceived as a loss of real spiritual power. The preacher James Quinn liked to tell the story from Methodism's early days of a man whose chickens "took fright and ran into the weeds" whenever a preacher rode up. But in later years, the chickens lost their fear because "the preachers appear so much like lawyers that the chickens don't know them." Like most jokes, this one was funny because it contained a grain of truth.<sup>16</sup>

No one had more credibility among New York Methodists than Free-born Garretson, who had begun circuit preaching in 1776 when there were less than five thousand Methodists in America. Writing in 1826, at the age of seventy-three, Garretson affirmed his loyalty to Wesley's theology but wondered "what his people will be a hundred years hence." "They may be a numerous and a learned people, but it is possible that by slow degrees they may retrograde, until they have very little of the spirit of old Methodism." Garretson, who was by this time wealthy, nevertheless worried that Methodists were trading the power of the Spirit for a comfortable respectability. This was particularly true of the preachers. "The fall of the primitive church began with the clergy, and should we fall, our declension will begin here," wrote Garretson.<sup>17</sup>

The Methodist itinerant preacher Billy Hibbard (never William or Bill) was born in Norwich, Connecticut, in 1771. His father was a tanner and a shoemaker. From his childhood on, Hibbard's life was filled with

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(New York: J. C. Totten, 1825), 249. Sampson Maynard was another New York Methodist whose life was guided by an endless series of dreams, visions, and impressions. See Sampson Maynard, *The Experience of Sampson Maynard, Local Preacher of the Methodist E. Church (Written by Himself) to Which Is Prefixed an Allegorical Address to the Christian World, or, a Thimble Full of Truth, to Blow Up the World of Error* (New York: Printed for the Author by Wm. C. Taylor, 1828).

16. Quinn, *Sketches*, 183–84. On the croakers, see Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 180–88; Wigger, *American Saint*, 402–3, 410.

17. MEC, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 7; Richard E. Herrmann, *American Methodist Pioneer: The Life and Journals of the Rev. Freeborn Garretson, 1752–1826*, ed. Robert Drew Simpson (Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books, 1985), 30–31.

dreams and supernatural impressions, some so vivid that they appeared more like visions. At age twelve, Hibbard had a series of these visionary experiences that he remembered for the rest of his life. In one of these, though he had never heard of Methodism at this point, God revealed to him that there was a people from England that “teach clearly from the scriptures” and who “did not consider a college education, as the essential qualification for a minister.” God also revealed to him that he would become a traveling preacher until, at age thirty-six, “I should meet with something like death that year.” God also told him that one day he would preach in the house of “deacon K.” and that “Mr. P. Watkins,” who was “wicked and intemperate,” would be converted as he preached. Years later, all of this came true. Of course, Hibbard’s wife knew all about his visions. When he reached age thirty-six, she “began to feel uneasy respecting the event that was to take place this year.” But instead of Hibbard, it was his son John who died.<sup>18</sup>

When Methodist preachers began preaching at his father’s house, Hibbard resisted falling in with them. “I wanted to be a Congregationalist, and to be respectable. But I wanted the love and seriousness of the Methodists,” he later wrote in his 1825 autobiography. After a period of intense spiritual struggle, Hibbard suddenly realized that the Methodists were the people from England revealed to him in his vision at age twelve. Soon after, he joined a class meeting.<sup>19</sup>

Hibbard’s brand of Methodism knew no social boundaries. Once, after a gathering in a cold meetinghouse, Hibbard ducked into a tavern to get warm. There, a “gentleman” was “strutting” through the room, “in ruffles and gloves, and swearing profanely, seemingly to the full approbation of all present,” according to Hibbard. When the gentleman walked past, Hibbard tapped him on the shoulder and asked him to stop swearing. “Why Hibbard,” the gentleman replied, “you used to be a likely, bright young man, till you met with these Methodists; but they have made a d--n fool of you.” As everyone laughed, he advised Hibbard not to “reprove gentlemen.” Hibbard bowed in response, saying, “Mister, I ask your pardon, I believe I have crowded a little upon that rule of Scripture, where it says, cast not your pearls before swine, lest they turn

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18. Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel, Containing an Account of His Experience of Religion, and of His Call and Labours in the Ministry, for Nearly Thirty Years: In Which Are Recorded Many Important, Curious and Interesting Events, Illustrative of the Providence and Grace of God* (New York: J. C. Totten, 1825), 5, 39, 42–43, 123–25, 260–63, 337.

19. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 66, 81–82.

again and rend you; but I have done it ignorantly, for I did not know that you were a hog.”<sup>20</sup>

For a few years, Hibbard farmed and preached as an unpaid local preacher. Then, in 1798, he was admitted to the traveling connection of itinerant preachers and assigned to the Dutchess circuit in New York. For the next twenty-five years, Hibbard rode circuits in the New York Conference. When he preached, his listeners sometimes “fell as one shot down in battle, and would lay without strength from half an hour, to two hours,” before they recovered their ability to speak and move. On one occasion, as Hibbard preached on the terrors of hell, his audience began to cry out, and Hibbard had to shout to be heard over the uproar. Those outside the meetinghouse later said that he could be heard half a mile away. Even so, his voice was soon “lost in the out-cry.” When the tumult reached a fevered pitch, “those in the gallery took fright, and ran down stairs so fast, that many fell at the foot of the stairs.” As the fallen lay in a “heap,” others trampled them in their rush to escape. Despite the chaos, Hibbard could not have been more pleased. This was what the real power of the Spirit looked like.<sup>21</sup>

Like all Methodist itinerant preachers, Hibbard’s base salary was \$64 a year before 1800, when it was raised to \$80 a year. In fact, preachers often got a good deal less once the offerings from each circuit were divided among them. For one quarter in 1811 or 1812, Hibbard received just eight cents. One of his first circuits, the Cambridge circuit, was five hundred miles around. He was expected to complete the circuit every four weeks, with sixty-three preaching appointments per round. Though he had little formal education, he was a voracious reader, which eventually led him to conclude that a college education did not guarantee wisdom. “I often thought that if a man entered College a blockhead, he would come out a blockhead,” wrote Hibbard. He finally retired in 1824, when he could no longer take the physical stress of constantly traveling and preaching, and sat down to record his experiences.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 100.

21. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 140, 153, 226–27.

22. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 129, 143, 186, 310, 341, 367. For Hibbard’s conference appointments from 1798 to 1823, see MEC, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 77, 83, 88, 94, 100, 106, 113, 121, 133, 141, 151, 163, 174, 186, 201, 214, 233, 249, 263, 285, 300, 316, 335, 350, 371, 390, 398. Hibbard’s wife worked to support the family by spinning and weaving and, during one three-year stretch, running a school with thirty students, which earned her three hundred dollars. See Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 161, 236. Freeborn and Catherine Garretson supported Hibbard financially, including offering to pay up to one thousand dollars to send Hibbard’s son, John, to college. See Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 258.

Like his fellow croakers, Hibbard was inspired to write his autobiography by the widening chasm between the Old and New School Methodists. “Some are religious for the Lord’s sake, and some for their own sake.—Some to repair a lost reputation, and some to save their souls. Some to get money; and some to serve God,” wrote Hibbard. For many, religion had become a vehicle for social advancement. “How solemn they appear, how plain they dress, and yet how they will lie or equivocate to get a good bargain.”<sup>23</sup>

The divide between the brand of Methodism practiced by Newell, the Garretts, Horton, and Hibbard and that of their more refined counterparts became a source of growing contentiousness in western New York during the 1810s and 1820s. Ithaca is a good example. The village, which is only seventy miles from Palmyra, was settled in the late eighteenth century. The Methodist itinerant William Colbert, who was appointed to the Northumberland circuit in Pennsylvania, preached there in 1793. A year or so later, a group of converts formed a class meeting with eighteen members. But the vine withered, and by 1800 the Ithaca Methodists had disbanded.<sup>24</sup>

In 1817 David Ayres moved to Ithaca from New York City. Ayers, who was twenty-three years old at the time, arrived in Ithaca with a letter of introduction from Nathan Bangs, the most prominent Methodist preacher in New York City and an advocate for the refinement of the church. Ayres had been converted to Methodism four years earlier and was “full of ambition.” Ambitious, but also decidedly respectable.<sup>25</sup>

Ayres partnered with a Methodist local preacher, Jesse Merritt, to form a class meeting and society in Ithaca. From the start, Ayres was determined that Ithaca Methodists would be as respectable as the Presbyterians. So, despite only modest growth in membership, he set out

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23. Hibbard, *Memoirs*, 273. Charles Giles was another croaker with New York connections. See Charles Giles, *Pioneer: A Narrative of the Nativity, Experience, Travels, and Ministerial Labors of Rev. Charles Giles, with Incidents, Observations, and Reflections*. (New York: G. Lane & P. P. Sandford, 1844), 301–2, 324–25.

24. C. D. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Andrus, Gauntlett and Co., 1852), 14–26; Methodist Episcopal Church [MEC], *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years 1773–1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 51. On Colbert, see Wigger, *American Saint*, 254, 345–49. William Colbert’s ten-volume manuscript journal is housed at Garrett Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois.

25. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 31–32. On Nathan Bangs, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 201–4; Wigger, *American Saint*, 407; Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 189–90.

to construct an impressive church building. As the nineteenth-century historian of Ithaca Methodism put it, Ayres and the church board concluded that “unless they could erect as good and respectable a church as the Presbyterians, they could not secure a respectable congregation.” The building they had in mind would have galleries and a steeple, at a cost of five thousand dollars.<sup>26</sup>

Ayres began collecting subscriptions, accosting everyone he met, and recording the results in a red morocco blank book. The book itself became an object of local fascination. It was said that “men feared to encounter it.” When local resources ran dry, Ayres and his associates branched out to Albany and New York City. Governor DeWitt Clinton gave ten dollars, as did Daniel D. Tompkins, the current vice president of the United States under James Monroe. It took more than two years before the building was finally completed in 1820 and its steeple bell rang out.<sup>27</sup>

And yet Methodism in Ithaca remained sluggish. No sooner had they dedicated the new building than Ayres and Merritt had a falling out, with the result that Ayres was actually expelled from the church. The choir became involved in the dispute, and attendance “dwindled down to a mere handful” as “the citizens turned away with disgust from the scene of bitterness.” Ayres was eventually reinstated, but the church remained mired in contentiousness.<sup>28</sup>

Then something unexpected happened, unexpected at least to David Ayres. Ithaca Methodism experienced a revival of a most disreputable nature. At the 1826 annual conference, Benjamin Sabin was appointed to the circuit that included Ithaca. Sabin was an Old School Methodist preacher, with little formal education, whose “theme in every place was experimental religion,” the kind of religion that connected the believer directly to God, without mediation, and led to shouting, weeping, and falling, slain in the spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Under Sabin’s influence, Ithaca Methodists partnered with the Presbyterians, and to some extent the Baptists, to hold joint meetings. A black class meeting formed, which met independently. A camp meeting was scheduled for August near the Asbury meetinghouse.<sup>30</sup>

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26. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 39, 41–42.

27. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 42, 46, 51.

28. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 56.

29. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 63–64; MEC, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 502.

30. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 64–65, 67–68, 69.

The prospect of a camp meeting did not please Ayres. Up to that point, as the historian of Ithaca Methodism wrote in 1852, Ayres “had courted the smiles of the world, and thought nothing so desirable as a society wealthy and respectable, in an earthly sense.” Among Ayres and his allies, even “to respond Amen, in the meetings, or speak out the praises of God, was decidedly objected to.” They were in for a rude awakening.<sup>31</sup>

Since he could not prevent the camp meeting, Ayres decided that the Ithaca Methodists would attend, but that they would hold separate, private prayer meetings, where everything would be done “decently and in order.” That way, according to Ayres, “if the Methodists from the country become disorderly, we will not suffer, as the public can see the difference between the Ithaca Methodists, and the ranting Methodists from the country.” Alas, there was one problem with Ayres’s plan. He did not anticipate becoming one of the ranters himself, which is exactly what happened.<sup>32</sup>

At one of his own prayer meetings, Ayres was overcome and fell to the ground, unable to move or to speak, next to a black worshipper who was similarly slain in the spirit. The news spread like a prairie fire before the wind, such that “hundreds, who knew his sentiments with reference to that very thing, ran to gaze upon the sight.” They stared at him in wonder, as he lay unable to respond. When he finally did recover the ability to move and speak, Ayres was reportedly a changed man, acknowledging his “pride of heart” and thanking God “that he had deeply humbled him.”<sup>33</sup>

This “pento-costal outpouring of the Holy Ghost” continued intermittently for several months, filling believers with “new wine” and causing them to “shout aloud for joy.” Methodist membership in Ithaca increased from 96 to 349 over the course of the conference year. Between them, the Methodists and Presbyterians counted more than 700 converts. The revival became so noteworthy that the 1828 Genesee annual conference, which by that time included nearly 32,000 members in western New York and northeast Pennsylvania, was held in Ithaca. In 1831, Ithaca Methodism was again rocked by controversy when a female itinerant Baptist prophet, aided by a group of Methodist supporters, seized the church pulpit for an hour and a half, preaching on Revelation 12:1: “And there appeared a great

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31. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 68–69.

32. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 70.

33. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 72–74.

wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.”<sup>34</sup>

The 1826–1827 revival at Ithaca described here was not an isolated incident, particularly in western New York. The divide between respectable and ranting Methodists had been conspicuous for more than a decade. Nothing would have seemed more unattractive to someone like Joseph Smith than the divisions and contentious formality of pre-revival Ithaca Methodism. What came after would have been far more appealing. To hold off the one and recapture the other required something radical, perhaps an entirely new beginning. For Methodists, that new beginning was the Holiness movement and eventually Pentecostalism. For Joseph Smith, it was Mormonism.

What was at the heart of the division between the ranting and refined Methodists? Perhaps no one provided a better answer to this question than the African American Methodist Jarena Lee. Born in Cape May, New Jersey, in 1783, Lee left her parents at age seven to become a domestic servant. She was converted in part by Joseph Pilmore, one of the first preachers John Wesley sent to America, and attended Richard Allen’s Bethel church in Philadelphia, which he had established as an independent black church within the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1794 with Francis Asbury’s backing. Lee was bold and persistent, describing herself as “naturally of a lively turn of disposition.”<sup>35</sup>

In her autobiography (there were two, the first published in 1836 and a second, expanded edition in 1849), Lee wrote that she was called to preach by an audible voice. “To my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understood, which said to me, ‘Go preach the Gospel!’” But when she related her

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34. Burritt, *Methodism in Ithaca*, 83, 90, 96, 98, 103–4; MEC, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, 501, 536, 572.

35. Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Printed and Published for the Author, 1849), 4, 5. Also see Jarena Lee, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Printed and Published for the Author, 1836), in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). On the establishment of Bethel church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), see Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen: To Which Is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (1793, reprint, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 31–35; Wigger, *American Saint*, 244–52. Allen broke away from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816, after Asbury died, to form the AME.

calling to Richard Allen two days later, he turned her aside, telling her that the Methodist church did not allow for female preachers. Lee was not convinced. “If a man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman? seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one?” she later wrote. She nevertheless relented, married, and had two children.<sup>36</sup>

Eight years later, after her husband had died, Lee was again in Allen’s Philadelphia church, listening to the Rev. Richard Williams stumble through a sermon on Jonah 2:9 (the passage is part of Jonah’s prayer while in the belly of the great fish), during which “he seemed to have lost the spirit.” In an instant, without thinking about what she was doing, as Lee later wrote, “I sprang, as by an altogether supernatural impulse, to my feet, when I was aided from above to give an exhortation on the very text which my brother Williams had taken.” She told the stunned congregation that for eight years she had been like Jonah and had “delayed to go at the bidding of the Lord” to preach to those who were “as guilty as were the people of Ninevah.”<sup>37</sup>

When she finally sat down, “scarcely knowing what I had done,” she was sure she would be expelled from the church. Instead, Allen rose and told the congregation how he had met with Lee eight years earlier but had put her off, telling her that women were not permitted to preach. What he had just seen changed his mind, and he now believed that Lee was as called to preach as any of the men present.<sup>38</sup>

What followed for Lee was a ministry full of visions, impressions, people shouting and falling to the floor, and other “signs and wonders,” by which “God’s spirit was poured out in a miraculous manner.” Lee preached fearlessly before slave holders and slaves, in the free North and the slave South. During one four-year stretch she traveled 1,600 miles preaching the gospel, 211 of which she walked on foot. During another year, she traveled 2,325 miles and preached 178 sermons. On one occasion, while walking alone to a preaching appointment, she decided to give up and turn around. She got about three miles before she heard a voice saying, “If thou goest home thou will die.” She paused for a moment before continuing toward home anyway, only to feel a tapping on her shoulder. When she turned around, there was no one there. It

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36. Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 10–11. Lee is not specific about the timing of this call, saying only that it occurred “between four and five years after my sanctification.”

37. Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 17.

38. Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 17.

brought to her mind the story of Balaam and his talking donkey, which saved him from death by the sword of the angel of the Lord. This time she got the message and headed back the other way.<sup>39</sup>

By the time she wrote her autobiography, Lee understood that many would scoff at the supernaturalism in her account. She saved her final page to answer their objections. “As to the nature of uncommon impressions, which the reader cannot but have noticed, and possibly sneered at in the course of these pages, they may be accounted for in this way,” wrote Lee. The blind, she observed, have a “sense of feeling [that] is exceedingly fine, and is found to detect any roughness on the smoothest of surface, where those who can see find none. So it may be with such as I am, who has never had more than three months schooling; and wishing to know much of the way and law of God, have therefore watched the more closely the operations of the Spirit, and have in consequence been led thereby.” She could not see, because of her lack of education, so God gave her the ability to feel for the Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

This analogy perfectly captures the tension between the Old and New School Methodists as it existed by the 1820s. The relatively uneducated and unsophisticated Old School Methodists had learned to feel the leading of the Spirit through dreams, visions, and impressions because they lacked the advantages of education and social privilege that would have allowed them to see. The New School Methodists rejected this reliance on feeling as backward and a hinderance to the necessities of progress.

Was it possible to both see and feel? The division between the Old and New School Methodists seemed to suggest that the answer was no. As Methodists learned to see, they steadily lost their ability to feel. Supernaturalism and modernity have never been an easy fit. Joseph Smith’s first vision occurred just as this divide was becoming readily apparent in western New York.

This is not the same as saying that Methodist supernaturalism led directly to Smith’s first vision. Correlation does not imply causation. But correlation can demonstrate context, and movements need a receptive context in which to take root. The divide between the supernaturalism of early Methodism and the respectability of middle-class Methodism formed a backdrop against which Smith’s audience could situate his visions and revelations. Whether they believed him or not, they would

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39. Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 33, 36, 45, 48, 51, 63. The story of Balaam and his ass is told in Numbers 22:21–33.

40. Lee, *Religious Experience* (1849), 97.

have understood that he stood in a long line of visionaries who also had their critics.

The trajectory of Methodist supernaturalism provides a context not only for the career of Joseph Smith but also for the path that the broader Mormon church followed. Methodism had its beginnings in America about sixty years before Smith launched Mormonism. The Methodist turn toward middle-class respectability also seems to have preceded a similar shift in Mormonism by about sixty years. The number is imprecise, given the unevenness of the process, but the general trend seems clear.

What does this say about the two movements? In part, it reflects both churches' success in their cultural setting. They succeeded in moving from ranting to respectability, from feeling to seeing, though there were those who saw the process more as decline than progress. Along the way, both churches' constituencies moved from the margins to the center of American society. The Methodists began building colleges and universities in earnest during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Brigham Young University was established in 1875. Whether this transition from enthusiasm to refinement has been an entirely good thing or not is beyond the scope of this essay. What is clear is that it provided a backdrop for Joseph Smith's first vision and subsequent revelations during the church's New York sojourn.<sup>41</sup>

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41. On Protestantism and the establishment of American universities, see George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

## Rock of Promise

When storms from thine opposer  
Entice our hearts to fear,  
O God, thou great disposer  
Of blessings, bid us hear

Thy promise of safekeeping  
Upon the rock unworn.  
The weak and wretched, weeping,  
Refresh with strength, as borne

Upon Christ's sure foundation  
Established, as of old.  
Let us that holy nation  
Be, which thy seers foretold.

—K. D. Taylor

# Not the First but the Second

## Changing Latter-day Saint Emphases on Joseph Smith's First Vision

*Richard E. Bennett*

Professor James B. Allen, distinguished scholar of Joseph Smith's First Vision accounts, wrote the following in a 2012 article: "The writing of Mormon history has only begun. As in the case of other institutions and movements, there is still room in Mormonism for fresh historical scholarship. . . . What is needed, simply, is the sympathetic historian who can approach his tradition with scholarship as well as faith and who will make fresh appraisal of the development of the Mormon mind."<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this presentation is to provide such a "fresh appraisal" of Joseph Smith's 1820 theophany, less perhaps in terms of the vision itself and more with what I am calling the "reclamation of revelation," or the rediscovery of what it taught and why it became so meaningful to Latter-day Saints over time. I will also attempt to show that the First Vision was actually a part of a series of visions and that the vision of Moroni overshadowed it in importance for almost one hundred years.

The so-called "First Vision," in which Joseph Smith claimed to have seen both God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, in a secluded grove of trees near Rochester, New York, two hundred years ago this spring, is of utmost importance to the truth claims of the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Gordon B. Hinckley, late President of the Church, came right to the point: "This is the pivotal thing of our story. Every claim that we make concerning divine authority, every truth we offer concerning the

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1. James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 2012), 303–4.

validity of this work, all finds its root in the First Vision of the boy prophet. Without it we would not have anything much to say.” And, he continued, “if the First Vision did not occur, then we are involved in a great sham.”<sup>2</sup> President Ezra Taft Benson referred to it as “bedrock theology.”<sup>3</sup> Howard W. Hunter, who was the fourteenth President of the Church and a longtime stake president here in Pasadena, preached that Joseph Smith’s greatness consists of “one thing—the truthfulness of his declaration that he saw the Father and the Son and that he responded to the reality of that divine revelation.”<sup>4</sup> The current President, Russell M. Nelson, in his recent rallying call to the several million members of the Church worldwide to celebrate the First Vision at the April 2020 general conference, referred to it as the “hinge pin” of the Restoration of eternal truths.<sup>5</sup>

However, Joseph’s theophany was not always so regarded or even emphasized. In fact, it took at least sixty years for this seminal event to march to the front of the line in Latter-day Saint thought and discourse. There is ample precedent in Christian history for this concept of reclaiming past visions and revelations, or at least reinterpreting their meaning. For example, the writers of the four Gospels took years, if not decades, to record their experiences with, and understanding of, Christ and his life and mission. Martin Luther’s remembrance of his February 1505 thunderbolt experience, or “frightful call from heaven,” to borrow Erik Erikson’s phrase, was an early call to the ministry that Luther continually revisited throughout his life, reinterpreting and reassessing its meanings.<sup>6</sup> In Latter-day Saint history, Joseph F. Smith’s famous 1918 vision of the dead in the spirit world (D&C 138) was not canonized until fifty-eight years later in 1976, the same time a Kirtland Temple revelation of Joseph Smith’s (D&C 137) was also canonized. One can even make a strong argument that the Church did not reconnect with

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2. *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 226–27.

3. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 101.

4. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter: Fourteenth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2002), 190–91.

5. Letter from President Russell M. Nelson in an email from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the entire membership of the Church, January 8, 2020. Also available at “My 2020 Invitation to You: Share the Message of the Restoration of the Savior’s Gospel,” January 1, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/blog/my-2020-invitation-to-you-share-the-message-of-the-restoration-of-the-saviors-gospel>.

6. Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), 92.

its own Book of Mormon until later in the mid-twentieth century under the administration of Ezra Taft Benson. Thus, the reclamation of revelation has place in Latter-day Saint history. Our initial question, therefore, is, Why was this so in regard to such a foundational event as the First Vision? And in lieu of this foundational event, what else claimed priority billing for so long and among so many rank-and-file Latter-day Saints?

### **“And I Saw Another Angel Fly in the Midst of Heaven”**

To those not well versed in matters of early Mormon history, the First Vision is really but the first of four cornerstone visions Smith claimed to have received during the 1820s in what Latter-day Saints celebrate as the Restoration. It began with the First Vision, which this conference commemorates. The second vision was really a series of visions with the angel Moroni beginning in 1823 and recurring until June 1829. The third was the vision of John the Baptist in May 1829 restoring the lesser, or Aaronic, priesthood on the banks of the Susquehanna River in upstate Pennsylvania; the fourth and last vision was the subsequent restoration of the higher, or Melchizedek, priesthood.<sup>7</sup> These three later visions were often referred to in nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint dialogue as the “administration of angels” and for almost a century received far more attention than did the First Vision. Taken together, these four foundational visions form the cornerstone of Latter-day Saint Restoration theology, even though other significant visions occurred later in or near Kirtland, Ohio.

Oliver Cowdery, Joseph Smith’s trusted scribe in the translation process of the Book of Mormon, who was often referred to as the “Second Elder” of Mormonism, published as early as February 1834 a well-known, detailed description of the opening days of the Restoration. Surprisingly, he never even acknowledged that such a First Vision ever occurred; rather, Oliver indicated that in answer to Smith’s “fervent prayer” in September 1823 in his upstairs bedroom, a “light above the brightness of the sun” appeared “on a sudden” and “a personage stood before him”—the aforementioned Moroni, an ancient Book of Mormon prophet. It was by way of this angelic minister, through a series of annual visits, that Smith eventually received the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon

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7. It should be noted that the First Vision did not bestow authority, even though Joseph Smith claims that he was directly called of God in the vision. Priesthood restoration would not occur for another nine years and then only by the visitation of angels.

was translated into English.<sup>8</sup> Even upon Cowdery's surprise return to the Church in 1848 after a ten-year excommunication, in recounting his previous experiences he omitted any reference to the First Vision but gave fervent testimony of the appearance of the "angels."<sup>9</sup>

Early Latter-day Saint missionaries rarely mentioned the First Vision in their proselyting efforts but certainly told of Moroni. "Some time in July 1831. Two men came . . . & held an evening meeting," William E. McLellin recorded in his journal. "They said that in September 1827 an Angel appeared to Joseph Smith . . . and showed to him the confusion on the earth respecting true religion. It was also told him to go a few miles distant to a certain hill. . . . He went as directed and found plates . . . containing reformed Egyptian Hieroglyphical characters which he was inspired to translate and the record was published in 1830 and is called the Book of Mormon. . . . I examined the book, the people, the preachers and the old scriptures and from the evidences which I had before me I was bound to believe the book of Mormon to be a divine Revelation."<sup>10</sup>

James Allen has argued convincingly that "if Joseph Smith told the story [of the First Vision] to friends and neighbors in 1820, he stopped telling it" by 1830, and it was not widely circulated until at least 1838. "It is apparent," he insists, "that belief in the vision was not essential for conversion to the Church" in most of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, not until 1880 was it even canonized in Latter-day Saint scripture. Richard Bushman, in his biography of Joseph Smith, shows that throughout his life Smith was generally "reluctant" to talk about the vision.<sup>12</sup> Jan Shipps has noted that the vision was practically unknown and not emphasized until it was later published in 1842.<sup>13</sup> And Kathleen Flake

8. Oliver Cowdery, "Letter IV," *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 5 (February 1835): 78–79; reprinted in the *Millennial Star* 1, no. 2 (June 1840): 42; and later in the *Improvement Era* 2, no. 6 (April 1899): 421.

9. Reuben Miller's account reads, "I was also present with Joseph when the Melchizedek Priesthood was conferred by the holy angels of God." Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Reuben Miller, Recorder of Oliver Cowdery's Reaffirmations," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1968): 278. See also Pottawattamie [Kanesville, Iowa] High Council Minutes, November 4–5, 1848, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

10. *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836*, ed. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies; Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1994), August 4, 1832, 79–80, underlining in original.

11. James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (1966): 44.

12. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005), 39.

13. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 31–33.

has demonstrated that the First Vision did not really come into play until the demise of plural marriage after 1890, when it was fastened upon as a new “sense of otherness,” a Latter-day Saint distinction separate and apart from plural marriage.<sup>14</sup>

My own independent research, which has included studying hundreds of sermons and thousands of pages of Church articles and conference addresses, largely substantiates the truth of what my colleagues have already stated. Rarely does the term “First Vision” appear in Latter-day Saint nineteenth-century dialogue, and practically never is it capitalized. This is not to say that there are no references to this founding vision. For instance, John Taylor said in general conference in 1882 what other leaders occasionally said: “A message was announced to us by Joseph Smith, the Prophet, as a revelation from God, wherein he stated that holy angels had appeared to him and revealed the everlasting Gospel . . . ; and God the Father, and God the Son, both appeared to him; and the Father, pointing, said, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him.”<sup>15</sup> I could include several other similar references. But it was on the lower end of the piano keyboard, just one of many notes in the compositions of the nineteenth-century Church, and not at all the dominant or overarching chord.

References in the last half of the nineteenth century to the First Vision are more of an undercurrent, treating it as more of a personal revelation than a doctrinal statement of belief. Brigham Young said relatively little about the First Vision but much more about “the angels” who restored ancient truths and priesthood. “The first light of the morning, in this age, and time referred to by the Savior,” Young’s First Presidency proclaimed, “was the angel, who had the everlasting gospel, which was to be preached to all people, preaching and ministering to Joseph Smith Jun., and commanding Joseph to preach and administer to others, even as he had received of the angel.”<sup>16</sup>

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14. Kathleen Flake, “Re-placing Memory: Latter-day Saint Use of Historical Monuments and Narrative in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Religion and American Culture* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 69–100, quote on 84.

15. “President John Taylor,” *Millennial Star* 44, no. 22 (May 29, 1882): 337. Even in this account, “holy angels” takes first billing.

16. Sixth General Epistle of the First Presidency, September 22, 1851, accessed April 16, 2020, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=67b4c1e2-4dd6-4d1b-84c2-c28655191d89&crate=o&index=1>; see also Reid L. Neilson and Nathan N. Waite, eds., *Settling in the Valley, Proclaiming the Gospel: The General Epistles of the Mormon First Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 137. Wilford Woodruff once went so far as to say that it was the angel Moroni “who informed him [Joseph] that all the sects were wrong” and that “he should be an instrument in the hands of the Lord in

For decades, the prime messenger of the Restoration was an angel. If Joseph's first vision announced, the second vision pronounced; if the first introduced, the second elaborated and gave much greater emphasis and instruction. It was "an angel! an angel!" as Orson Hyde stated in 1842, who was "commissioned from the Almighty [who] descended, and rolled back the curtains of night."<sup>17</sup> It was Moroni, as Parley P. Pratt's famous hymn "An Angel from on High" (in the 1844 hymnal) attested, who parted the heavens and "the long, long silence broke."<sup>18</sup> In yet another hymn, "See the Mighty Angel Flying," composed by Robert B. Thompson in 1896 and arranged by the well-known Latter-day Saint composer Evan Stephens, we see once again that for most nineteenth-century believers it was the angel who authored the Restoration:

See! The mighty angel flying,  
 See, he speeds his way to earth,  
 To proclaim the blessed gospel,  
 And restore the ancient faith,  
 And restore, and restore the ancient faith.<sup>19</sup>

Several editorials in the England-based *Millennial Star* were stating as late as 1865 that when Joseph Smith was fourteen years old it was the angel—and not God—who appeared before him.<sup>20</sup>

It was the angel, the "voice of a celestial messenger from the courts of glory," who delivered "the everlasting gospel in its fulness to a young man."<sup>21</sup> George Q. Cannon, as First Counselor in the First Presidency, said as much in 1881: "A young and illiterate man testified that he had seen an angel from heaven, and that the old Gospel, its gifts and the everlasting

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establishing His kingdom upon the earth." Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 13:324 (September 5, 1869).

17. This declaration was from the introduction to a booklet titled *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste* that Orson Hyde published in Germany on his way to Palestine. He included a portion of the introduction in English in a letter to Joseph Smith. Brent M. Rogers and others, *Documents, Volume 8: February–November 1841*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2019), 171.

18. Parley P. Pratt, "An Angel from On High," *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 13.

19. Robert B. Thompson, "See the Mighty Angel Flying," *Improvement Era* 2, no. 3 (January 1899): 240; see also "See, the Mighty Angel Flying," *Hymns*, no. 330.

20. Editorial, *Millennial Star* 27, no. 51 (December 23, 1865): 809. Significantly, not even in anti-Mormon literature such as *Mormonism Unveiled* by E. D. Howe or John C. Bennett's *History of the Saints* are found references to the First Vision.

21. W. C. Dunbar, in "Letters to the Editor," *Millennial Star*, July 15, 1850, 222.

priesthood, were to be restored.”<sup>22</sup> It was the angel, as first revealer,<sup>23</sup> who came, as President Wilford Woodruff said in 1889, to fulfill prophecy—who came “in fulfillment of the declaration of St. John . . . [and] who has delivered the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the inhabitants of the earth, [and who] revealed unto them the world of the Lord.”<sup>24</sup> It was the angel, in his capacity as custodian of his own ancient record, who delivered the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated to Joseph in 1827. It was the angel, flying “in the midst of heaven,” who “came to earth, and committed the Gospel to Joseph Smith.”<sup>25</sup> As one English convert phrased it in 1885, “The Latter-day Saints testify that the Gospel has been restored to them by an angel who appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith, and revealed unto him the will of God concerning the establishment of his Church and kingdom.”<sup>26</sup> And as George Teasdale said in a general conference in 1898, “We testify that this angel has come, that this everlasting Gospel has been restored.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, as one Scottish convert put it, it was God who “sent his angels to deliver to man again the fullness of the Gospel. One angel in particular we refer to is he that John [the Revelator] saw as recorded in Revelations, who was to bring the Gospel.”<sup>28</sup>

A computer search of Latter-day Saint general conference addresses between 1850 and 1929 confirms the point. A search for the specific phrase “angel flying through” in reference to the scripture found in Revelation 14:6—“And I saw another angel flying through the midst of heaven”—shows thirty-four instances where this particular phrase was used. This phrase was selected for my search because it was so often cited in connection with Moroni’s appearances. Most of them occurred before 1900, and fourteen of them in the 1870s.

Considering all these proclamations, expositions, lyrics, and testimonials that could be multiplied by scores, it is hardly surprising that a

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22. *Deseret News Weekly*, April 3, 1881; see also “Fifty-first Annual Conference,” *Millennial Star* 43, no. 18 (May 2, 1881): 276.

23. Provo Stake General Minutes, vol. 15, December 21, 1901, Church History Library.

24. *Deseret News Weekly*, April 7, 1889.

25. J. H. Donnellon, “Ecclesiastical Corruption and Apostacy [sic],” *Millennial Star* 27, no. 24 (June 17, 1865): 374.

26. John Nicholson, “Has an Angel from the Heavens Visited the Earth in This Age of the World?” *Millennial Star* 47, no. 21 (May 27, 1865): 322.

27. George Teasdale, in *Sixty-Eighth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1898), 51 (misprinted as page 15).

28. Peter Sinclair, quoted in “Glasgow Conference,” *Millennial Star* 37, no. 17 (April 26, 1875): 257.

sixteen-foot gold-plated statue of the angel Moroni, sculpted by Cyrus Dallin, adorned the highest pillar of the Salt Lake Temple at its dedication in April 1893—and still does. While the current Church emphasis is on Christ as the central figure of the gospel as well as on the Christ-centered name of the Church, the fact remains that Moroni is the angel still perched at the top of most, if not all, of the 159 dedicated, functioning modern Latter-day Saint temples worldwide.<sup>29</sup>

### A Changing Emphasis

This emphasis on Moroni began to change in the late nineteenth century, for a variety of reasons. One might well make the argument that the Church was so preoccupied during the last quarter of the nineteenth century with defending plural marriage and then again well into the early twentieth century with the Reed Smoot trials that it had little time or energy to devote to other theological controversies. Suffice it to say that the judicial crusades launched against the Church and the strenuous and expensive efforts to defend itself against them were an all-consuming, torturous contest that disrupted families, sent hundreds of men (including General Authorities) to prison, and deflected the Church from other pressing priorities. It eventually ended with President Wilford Woodruff's 1890 Manifesto signaling his intention to bring an end to this most controversial practice.

There are several evidences for the recovery of the First Vision. Although the year 1870 was the fiftieth anniversary of the First Vision, little was said of it by way of celebration, although Orson Pratt referenced it probably more often and more fervently than did any of his contemporaries in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.<sup>30</sup> In 1879–80, C. C. A. Christensen,

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29. The angel Moroni is not displayed in any of the stunning new mural paintings in the Rome Temple Visitors' Center.

30. See Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:181 (September 22, 1872), and 17:279. It was under Orson Pratt's direction that several (twenty-six) early revelations of Joseph Smith were first published in the 1876 edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants*. Four years later, an expanded 1880 edition of the *D&C*, published with electrotype plates, was voted upon and ratified by the Church membership as canonized scripture, along with an expanded version of the *Pearl of Great Price* containing Joseph Smith's History of his official 1838 First Vision account. See Robert J. Woodford, "The Story of the *Doctrine and Covenants*," *Ensign* 14, no. 12 (December 1984): 32–39. George Q. Cannon was also in the forefront of reclaiming the First Vision, especially after his call to the First Presidency in 1883.

Some members took exception to the story of the First Vision on the doctrinal grounds that for one to see God, one would have to hold the priesthood. Orson Pratt dismissed this argument in a talk he gave in 1880, explaining that even though Joseph's account of the First Vision has troubled those who have taught one must have the

well-known painter and illustrator, embarked upon a Churchwide tour with his 175-foot canvas “Mormon Panorama” of Church history-based paintings, the first panel of which featured Joseph Smith’s first prayer in the Sacred Grove—a long-since-lost painting called “The Vision.”<sup>31</sup> Christensen inspired young twenty-four-year-old George Manwaring to compose the hymn “Oh How Lovely Was the Morning” (now known as “Joseph Smith’s First Prayer”), initially sung by a young woman named Sarah Ann Kirkman in the Salt Lake City 14th Ward in 1878, just before Christensen went on tour. It became an instant favorite. Then, in 1886, Assistant Church Historian Andrew Jenson published five thousand copies of his *Church Chronology*, in which the very first entry after Joseph Smith’s birth was his 1820 “first vision,” and then embarked upon an official Church History lecture tour throughout many congregations in the West. In 1893, the Church commissioned and installed a stained-glass depiction of the First Vision in the Salt Lake Temple.

Joseph F. Smith, nephew of the founding prophet and sixth President of the Church (1901–1918), set about purchasing important historical sites, including the Sacred Grove in Upstate New York, in order to emphasize the significance of history in the minds of young Latter-day Saints and to secure a legacy of reverent respect for the Church’s founders. His “selection, relation, and repetition of the story of his uncle’s first vision helped them navigate their way to a new narrative, one in which plural marriage could be relinquished without eroding faith in revelations received by prophets past or present.”<sup>32</sup> In 1890, the same year he proclaimed the Manifesto ending plural marriage, President Wilford Woodruff emphasized the First Vision in a way he may not have ever done before when he said, “Joseph Smith was administered with in a way that I have found no record of. . . . This was an important revelation which has never been manifested in the same manner in any dispensation.”<sup>33</sup>

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priesthood to see the face of God, Joseph was able to see God because “the Priesthood was conferred upon Joseph [in the premortal life] before he came here.” Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:27 (October 10, 1880).

31. See *Ogden Junction* 8, no. 96 (February 11, 1880): 1. The scroll of Christensen’s paintings was stored for decades until “rediscovered.” “The paintings were cut apart to more easily display them separately. Unfortunately, this resulted in the loss of the painting of the First Vision, but all other paintings from the scroll survived.” Keith L. Brown, “C.C.A. Christensen, Mormon Artist,” *History of Mormonism*, July 18, 2012, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://historyofmormonism.com/2012/07/18/c-c-a-christensen-mormon-artist/>.

32. Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 137.

33. From an address by President Wilford Woodruff, April 4, 1890, *Deseret News Weekly*, 40:525.

References to the First Vision in general conferences began to multiply almost exponentially starting in the 1880s. According to yet another computer search, although there were fifty-one references in the 1850s to the exact phrase “the Father and the Son” and another sixty-seven in the 1860s, none of these references were in context of, or referring to, the First Vision. This trend continued in the 1870s. Most were in the context of prayer, ordination, the Godhead, and so forth. However, of the forty-four references to the above phrase from the 1880s, eighteen of them (approximately 40 percent) were clearly in the context of the First Vision. This changing emphasis continued to increase thereafter: 19/46 or 41 percent in the 1890s; 44/60 or 73 percent in the first decade of the twentieth century; and by the 1920s, as high as 80/104 or 76 percent.<sup>34</sup>

Instead of the angel Moroni introducing the Restoration, ecclesiastical leaders were now referencing the First Vision as “the *beginning* of this great latter-day work . . . when the Father and the Son revealed themselves to the Prophet Joseph Smith,” as Charles W. Penrose said in 1881.<sup>35</sup> It was “the Father and the Son [who] came from the mansions above to *introduce* this work,” averred George Q. Cannon in 1896.<sup>36</sup> And, “Mormonism rises or falls upon that tremendous platform, that in *its origin* it goes back to God the Father and God the Son,” said Adam S. Bennion in 1925.<sup>37</sup> Thus, by the early twentieth century, in Latter-day Saint vernacular the First Vision was no longer sounding in a minor key but rather as a major chord.

### “The Disappearance of God”

There may have been, however, other factors at play that contributed to a rising emphasis on the First Vision, matters that had very little to do with the Church itself and everything to do with what was transpiring more broadly in Christian circles in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. I speak of the rising controversy over science and religion, that “New Reformation” in thought that led almost inexorably to what one

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34. “Corpus of LDS General Conference Talks, 1851–2019,” LDS General Conference Corpus, <https://www.lds-general-conference.org>.

35. Charles W. Penrose, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:71 (January 30, 1881).

36. George Q. Cannon, in *Millennial Star* 58, no. 35 (August 27, 1896): 546, italics added.

37. Adam S. Bennion, in *Ninety-Sixth Semi-annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1925), 47, italics added.

scholar has called “the downing of religious orthodoxy.”<sup>38</sup> As John Morley wrote as early as 1874, “The souls of men have become void; into the void have entered in triumph the seven devils of Secularity.”<sup>39</sup>

This controversy was spurred on by Charles Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, and in particular by his emphasis on natural selection and the “eat or be eaten” theory of the survival of the fittest, and also by Marx’s economic arguments, by Freud’s godless psychological penetrations, and later by Nietzsche’s claim that God, if he ever lived, was now almost certainly dead. All these and many other voices gave rise to the oft-discussed modernist controversy that came to question the historicity, indeed the very authority, of the Holy Bible. Such arguments led to a rapidly rising secularism that first encroached upon, then rapidly engulfed, much of European society.

Of this rapid transformation, Jacques Barzun commented further: Darwin, Marx, Wagner, and others became “representatives of the dominant tradition we live by.” Feeling, beauty, and moral values, so celebrated by Coleridge, Wilberforce, and others not that long before, had become mere “illusions for which the world of fact gave no warrant.” This new agnostic, if not atheistic, age of “mechanical materialism” became a “cold world in which man’s feelings are illusory and his will powerless.”<sup>40</sup> He continued, “The notion of a Deity or Providence of Life Force having a tendency of its own . . . was ruled out. . . . Purpose, especially the purpose of Providence or of man himself, had nothing to do with progress.”<sup>41</sup> Following the lead of scientific opinion, Edward J. Larson has shown that science educators soon “began adding evolutionary concepts to high-school textbooks almost immediately and had fully incorporated the doctrine into biology teaching materials by the turn of the century.”<sup>42</sup>

J. Hillis Miller, in his provocative book *The Disappearance of God*, argues that the effects of this philosophical tsunami were keenly felt in the literature of the time. “All we can say is that a whole set of changes, both spiritual and material, happened more or less simultaneously, like a great wave breaking on the shore, and that by the nineteenth century

38. Jacque Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage* (Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), 56.

39. Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, and Wagner*, 87.

40. Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner*, 2–3, and 7.

41. Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner*, 11, 28.

42. Edward J. Larson, *Trial and Error: The American Controversy over Creation and Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 8–9.

the starting place for a writer was likely to be the isolation and destitution of Mathew Arnold or of the early Hopkins.”<sup>43</sup>

### The Christian Response

The impact of Darwinism on Christianity bears more than cursory examination and may be highly instructive to the Latter-day Saint historian. Initial response to Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was guarded but not overwhelmingly negative. While many viewed his transmutation hypothesis—with its belief in random variation from species to species—as patently absurd, several more liberal-minded intellectuals argued that a close scientific study of nature itself was not to be shunned but rather welcomed, that such a study would inevitably add testament to the divine. Believing in a “special divine creation,” writers like William Paley in his *Natural Theology* and Samuel Harris, Yale professor and Congregationalist clergyman, argued that the glories and beauties of nature prove that there is a “benevolent, supernatural Designer,” a “superintending Providence,” and that a study of nature was nothing more than a study of theology.<sup>44</sup> It was only “common sense,” they and so many other religionists asserted, to believe in a God that had created such a sublime creation.<sup>45</sup> America’s leading nineteenth-century botanist, Asa Gray, for instance, saw Darwinism’s theories as possible but maintained that God remained supreme Creator.

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic response was also multifaceted, if not a bit puzzling. Pope Pius IX (1846–1878) had been recalcitrant in his ardent belief that there could be no reconciliation of any kind between the Holy Roman Church and modern society. His successor, however, Pope Leo XIII, took a much more enlightened approach and sought to make Roman Catholicism more welcoming to modern thought and progressive ideas. Father J. A. Zahm, professor of physics at the University of Notre Dame in America, declared in his best-selling book, *Evolution and Dogma*, “There is much in Evolution to admire, much that is ennobling and inspiring, much that illustrates and corroborates the truths of faith, much that may be made ancillary to revelation and religion, much that throws new light on the mysteries of creation, much . . . that exalts our ideas of creative power and wisdom

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43. Miller, *Disappearance of God*, 4.

44. Jon H. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 8, 11.

45. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 40.

and love, much, in fine, that makes the whole circle of the sciences tend, as never before, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*.”<sup>46</sup>

Such a liberal attitude, however, soon brought down the wrath of Rome’s more conservative defenders of Catholic dogma—*La Civiltà Cattolica*, a group of Roman Jesuits who claimed that Zahm represented “a truly American lack of restraint” and that “evolution . . . was a tissue of vulgar paralogisms,” a series of “arbitrary suppositions unsupported by facts and indeed contradicted by them, fantastic aphorisms and subterfuges that are a disgrace to the seriousness of science.”<sup>47</sup> At their insistence, Zahm withdrew sales of his book and recanted many of his main arguments. The Sacred Congregation finally decided in the late 1890s that evolution theory was “temerarious” (reckless or rash) and not to be upheld by the Catholic faith. However, it must be pointed out that subsequent official statements of the popes and other official teachers in the Catholic Church have reflected a gradual easing of remaining concerns about theories of evolution and their potential impact on Catholic doctrine. The church leaves the doctrine of evolution of the human body from already existing and living matter as an open question for experts, while the Catholic faith requires that the human soul is immediately created by God.<sup>48</sup>

Darwin’s so-called “bulldog” and populist, Thomas Henry Huxley, exacerbated tensions when he published extensively what Darwin had long maintained privately but was at first hesitant to print: that man himself, though the highest form of species, had evolved over millions of years from lower life forms. It was the British philosopher Herbert Spencer who popularized the terms “evolution” and “survival of the fittest” while condemning religion as outdated and irrelevant superstition. Finally, in 1871, Darwin published his *The Descent of Man* in which he stated unequivocally that man is a “product of the evolutionary process.” The lines were now starkly drawn, and, as Andrew Preston Peabody of Harvard noted, religion’s battle with science had become the “Armageddon—the final battlefield.”<sup>49</sup>

Jon A. Roberts sees 1875 as a watershed moment in the ongoing conflict between Protestant Christianity and rising scientific “materialism.”

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46. Father J. A. Zahm, as quoted in Barry Brundell, “Catholic Church Politics and Evolution Theory, 1894–1902,” *British Journal of the History of Science* 34, no. 1 (March 2001): 89.

47. Brundell, “Catholic Church Politics,” 89–90.

48. Brundell, “Catholic Church Politics,” 89–90.

49. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 64.

Religious defenders, feeling “increasingly uneasy,” saw ever more clearly the evolution controversy as an atheistic threat to the very doctrine of sin and the Fall, the redemption of Christ, and personal salvation.<sup>50</sup> Their defense was therefore no longer just a reference to common-sense theology or the beauties and divinities of nature but a reliance on the fundamental theologies of Christianity: the historicity of the Fall, the existence of God, the nature of God, and his relationship to his creation.<sup>51</sup>

To the growing chorus that there was no God or, at the very least, that he was an impersonal, totally “unknowable God,” there came a veritable torrent of response in defense of the God of the Bible who could be known and worshipped—a God who had periodically intervened in the affairs of humankind throughout history and could do so again. Such Protestant intellectuals as J. E. Barnes, a Congregationalist clergyman, responded that God, though beyond human comprehension, is, “in the highest sense, a Father and a Friend.”<sup>52</sup> And many Protestants vigorously defended prayer and the means of true communion with a very personal God. Mark Hopkins of Williams College emphasized his belief in an “anthropomorphic” God in whose very image man was—or had to have been—created, not the image of some lower life form “but one remove above the brute.”<sup>53</sup> There was every possibility, if not necessity, of continuing “revelation of God,” for divinity to intervene in the natural world.

### “Joseph, This Is My Beloved Son”

To this warring controversy, Latter-day Saints began to realize more keenly, perhaps, than they had ever done before that they, too, had something to offer, something in their arsenal of doctrines that, albeit highly critical of both Catholic and Protestant Christianity, might nonetheless speak to the evolution debate then raging. That “something” was the First Vision, in particular what it had to say about evolution, creation, the moral reality of sin, Christ as Redeemer, and God the Father and his relationship with humankind. In one of the first references to the evolution controversy given in general conference, President George Q. Cannon relied upon the First Vision as a response when he remarked upon the issue in April 1889:

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50. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 108.

51. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 99–101.

52. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 76.

53. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 104–5.

The first revelation that was given in our day, in answer to the prayer of the boy, Joseph Smith, Jun., and seemingly the most necessary one that could be given to lay the foundation of faith in the human mind, was the appearance of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. . . . Men talk about evolution. This is the true [theory of] evolution—being such as we are and developing and advancing and progressing in that upward and onward career until we shall become like Him, in truth; until we shall possess the powers that He possesses and exercise the dominion that He now exercises.<sup>54</sup>

While Latter-day Saint doctrine emphasized more the moral ascendancy of humans and less the descendants of the Fall, and more the benevolent than the malevolent consequences of Adam's sin, both Latter-day Saint and traditional Christian views nevertheless saw the Fall as imperative. Christ's resurrected appearance in the Grove was evidence of that doctrine.

One might also look to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 as another possible watershed moment.<sup>55</sup> That was also the year of the famous World's Columbian Exposition, when the World Parliament of Religions convened as part of the fair. Snubbed by conference organizers because of their long and very recent commitment to plural marriage, Church leaders were stunned that they were not invited to participate in any of the main sessions.<sup>56</sup> Still, Elder Franklin D. Richards, President of the Quorum of the Twelve, and others such as Elder B. H. Roberts of the Seventy prepared articles and papers that, if they could not be given at the conference, could at least be disseminated to the press and to Church membership. Among the very first things Richards referred to was the "revelation and commandment of the Most High God, who, with Jesus Christ, His Son, had appeared to Joseph Smith in heavenly vision."<sup>57</sup> This revelation of a living, immanent God anew in this modern age was in and of itself a direct response to the encroaching atheism implied in Darwinian thought.<sup>58</sup>

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54. George Q. Cannon, "Discourse," *Deseret Weekly*, May 25, 1889, 675–76, reporting an address given on April 7, 1889.

55. *Church Chronology: Or a Record of Important Events Connected with the History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Territory of Utah*, comp. Andrew Jenson (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1886).

56. Reid L. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). The Latter-day Saints were finally invited to make a presentation in "Hall 3," a side room that could accommodate only a relatively small number of people.

57. Franklin D. Richards, "The Mormon Church," *Improvement Era* 2, no. 4 (February 1899): 245.

58. B. H. Roberts published his study *The Doctrine of Deity* in 1903, in which he defended the existence of God, his involvement in human affairs, and his readiness

A few years later, another Latter-day Saint observer, A. Wooton, writing in the *Improvement Era* in 1900, referred to the laboratory method of instruction and the scientific learning then gaining ascendancy in American schools, to which he said divine revelation was a far superior way of knowing the truth. “After this manifestation” of the First Vision, he pointedly said, “Joseph Smith knew more of the personality of the Father and the Son than he could have known by reading volumes of written works on the subject.”<sup>59</sup> Alma O. Taylor, writing of the First Vision that same year, specifically applied it to the scientist when he wrote, “During this period of time . . . new theories in the known sciences were advanced; new ideas of God were formed,” but the First Vision “gave food to the skeptic; it became a more valuable study to the scientist than the mere disciple. . . . The vision was indeed the earthquake which dried up the rivers of unbelief.”<sup>60</sup>

In August 1908 while speaking at yet another Parliament of Religion, this time in New Jersey, Professor James E. Talmage, a geologist by profession, asked of his audience, “What then has ‘Mormonism’ to offer the world as to its conception of God? . . . The God that spake to Adam and to Noah, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, speaks today. . . . His voice is not silenced. . . . ‘Mormonism’ embraces the entire plan of divine evolution. It proclaims progression and advancement.”<sup>61</sup>

Appearing in the April 1908 edition of the *Improvement Era* was an article by John A. Widtsoe, professor of agricultural science and then president of the Utah Agricultural College, in which he praised the recently deceased William Thompson (Lord Kelvin), a leading British mathematician and staunch opponent of Darwin’s theories. Kelvin, Widtsoe insisted, was one who had “no sympathy with the idle notion of the day that life began upon this earth and will disappear with death. . . . Does ‘Mormonism’ agree with the sane talks of Lord Kelvin? All who understand it will say, yes. The science of the world is, and can be no more than one phase of the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ which embraces all truth.”<sup>62</sup>

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to answer prayer. B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts–Van der Donckt Discussion, to Which Is Added a Discourse, Jesus Christ: The Revelation of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1903).

59. A. Wooton, “Revelation by Works and Word,” *Improvement Era* 3, no. 5 (March 1900): 337.

60. Alma O. Taylor, “The First Vision,” *Improvement Era* 3 no. 9 (July 1900): 683, 686.

61. James E. Talmage, “‘The Message of Mormonism’ to the World of Today,” *Improvement Era* 11, no. 12 (October 1908): 907–12.

62. John A. Widtsoe, “Lord Kelvin, The God-Fearing,” *Improvement Era* 11, no. 6 (April 1908): 402, 406. *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:200. One might also argue that

Former Brigham Young University professor James R. Clark, compiler of the multivolume *Messages of the First Presidency*, has argued that the controversy over evolution, and particularly Widtsoe's article in praise of Lord Kelvin who had assailed it, may well have formed the basis of the 1909 official statement of the First Presidency of the Church on "The Origin of Man." "Since the *Improvement Era* was an official organ of the L.D.S. Church and widely read throughout the Church," Clark argued, "some of the statements in the Widtsoe article may have been responsible for some of the 'Inquiries . . . respecting the attitude of the Church . . .' on the matter."<sup>63</sup>

In their statement, the First Presidency relied on the First Vision as pillar and authority for its declaration that humanity, though fallen, are nevertheless spiritual children of God, that Christ is the Son of God, that he lives, and that he is in the express image of the Father. "It was in this form that the Father and the Son, as two personages, appeared to Joseph Smith, when, as a boy of fourteen years, he received his first vision."<sup>64</sup> This important proclamation went on to assert the Latter-day Saint belief in a one-time, nonpolygenist, divine creation of man and woman, in the fall of Adam as "the first man of all men" and "primal parent of our race," in the resultant necessary redemption of Christ, and in a personal, loving God. Two years later, the First Presidency had the opportunity to tell the Church's story in a special issue of the *Oakland Tribune*, in which they recounted the history and doctrines in such a way that placed the "first vision" at the forefront of Joseph Smith's prophetic call.<sup>65</sup>

Yet another doctrine stemming from the First Vision, at least so claimed by the Latter-day Saints, is that in calling Joseph by name, as he once did Abraham and Moses, God revealed anew that he knows his sons and daughters intimately. Smith's account certainly supports the claim of some contemporary religionists that an immediate personal

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Talmage's appointment as a Church Apostle in 1911 and Widtsoe's a decade later—both scientists—are of themselves something of a Latter-day Saint nod to the fact that there can be reconciliation between faith and science. See also Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins*.

63. *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 4:199 (November 1909).

64. Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund, "The Origin of Man," in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:199–206 (November 1909).

65. Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, and John Henry Smith, "An Empire in the Desert," in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:231–51 ("first vision" mentioned on 232), printed in the *Oakland Tribune*, October 15, 1911. "The privilege of telling . . . our own [story] in the columns of the *Oakland Tribune* . . . is one that we greatly appreciate."

communion with God was indeed possible, that man was in the image of God, that Joseph “conversed with Him as a man may speak with his friend.”<sup>66</sup> In short, the First Vision, despite the ongoing debate over it, revealed God anew not as some distant overseer but as one immanent and fully invested in the affairs of his creation and immediate to the time—in some respects the very kind of Father God some other religionists of the day were asserting as answer to the heated controversies of the day.

## Conclusion

In summary, this paper has attempted to show that the visions of angels, and not the First Vision, were primary to Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the pattern of the reclamation of past revelation has place in Latter-day Saint history, specifically, that the First Vision came to be understood for reasons immediate to the changing times. I have neither time nor space to extend my argument further into the twentieth century, to include the modernist controversy at Brigham Young University in 1911 or the so-called University of Chicago controversy of the 1930s that pitted certain liberal-minded Latter-day Saint professors against Church leaders. Nor can I explore the statement of J. Reuben Clark in 1938 entitled “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” in which adherence to the belief in Smith’s First Vision was an expectation, indeed a requirement, of all Latter-day Saint religious educators. Nevertheless, the Church was not immune to the evolution controversy of the later nineteenth century that affected both Protestant and Catholic thought. And the evidence is mounting to show that the rising emphasis on Smith’s 1820 vision played a pivotal role in confronting that controversy, a vision that has staying power “200 years on.”

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66. B. H. Roberts, “The Justification of Faith,” *Improvement Era* 2, no. 3 (January 1899): 200.

# “Experimental Proof of the Ever Blessed Trinity”

## Personal Encounters with the Divine

*Rachel Cope*

Due to his interest in the experiential elements of religion and his desire to gain a greater understanding of holiness or sanctification, John Wesley wrote letters to some of his followers in the late eighteenth century, asking if they had “experimental proof of the ever blessed Trinity.”<sup>1</sup> Fascinated by accounts he had read of de Renty’s encounter with the distinct persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Wesley wanted to know if others had experienced divine redemption in a similarly relational manner.<sup>2</sup> Several individuals responded to his missive in the affirmative; they reported that they had received “a clear revelation of the several persons in the ever-blessed Trinity.”<sup>3</sup>

The responses Wesley received to his intriguing question, combined with Joseph Smith’s 1838 and 1842 First Vision accounts that refer to

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1. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 27, ed. Ted A. Campbell (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 275–76.

2. *The Life of the Baron de Renty; or, Perfection in the World Exemplified* (London: Burns & Oats, 1873); Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure, *An Extract of the Life of Monsieur de Renty, a Late Nobleman of France* (Philadelphia, 1795), microfiche. Wesley emphasized conversion and sanctification through physically experiencing the divine and was inclined to facilitate and publish these occurrences whenever possible. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 423–28.

3. John Wesley, *The Letters of Rev. John Wesley: December 11, 1777 to March 1780*, vol. 6, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 265–66. See also Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

his encounter with separate divine beings, have caused me to reflect upon similar manifestations and experiences in the lives of ordinary people across Christian traditions in the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Atlantic world.<sup>4</sup> Who did indeed receive proof, or a witness, of the Trinity? How and when did people commune with the divine? And was that communion tangible or ethereal? Did God speak in audible ways, or did his voice just reach spiritually attuned ears? Did the divine only appear in the context of visions and dreams, or was sacred presence manifest in a plethora of ways? Did the means and form of communication vary across culture and tradition? Did God individualize manifestations? And, finally, what made people seek and expect a personal experience with the divine? What circumstances brought seekers to their knees? What events made them plead for mercy, grace, relief, comfort, and hope? Indeed, what role did suffering play, and how did this suffering impact the quest to experience union with the holiest of beings?

In this article, I am going to consider how these kinds of questions play out in the lives of three deeply religious women: Ann Lee was a Shaker (1736–1784); Catherine Livingston Garrettson was a Methodist (1752–1849); and Elizabeth Bayley Seton was a Catholic (1774–1821). Although each woman lived in eastern New York between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, their personal backgrounds and their divergent religious traditions suggest that they had very little in common. Ann Lee, a poor and illiterate working-class woman from Manchester, England, became a radical visionary and founder of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, more commonly known as Shakers. She believed that God had called her to immigrate to the Albany, New York, area so she could establish a celibate commune in a chosen land.<sup>5</sup> Catherine Livingston Garrettson was the offspring of the colonial elite, a wealthy heiress whose family owned

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4. "History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2]," 1–4, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/2>; Joseph Smith, "Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (1 March 1842): 706–7. For several accounts of visionary experiences contemporary to Joseph Smith, see Richard Lyman Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 1 (1997): 183–204.

5. Tisa J. Wenger, "Female Christ and Feminist Foremother: The Many Lives of Ann Lee," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 5–7; Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

much of the Hudson River Valley area. Upon being drawn to the idea of sanctification, Catherine chose to convert to Methodism and, to the chagrin of her family, marry an itinerant preacher.<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Bayley Seton was a well-educated upper-middle-class woman from New York City, a wife and mother, who converted to Catholicism and eventually founded the first Catholic girls school and the first congregation of religious sisters in the nation. She would become the first American-born canonized Saint.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the deep economic, social, cultural, and denominational differences that distinguished Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth from one another, a common thread is laced throughout their spiritual narratives. Each of their life stories was shaped by the kind of suffering that their society overlooked—suffering often unique to the female experience. Hidden burdens included possible sexual, physical, and emotional abuse; broken marriage; shame and fear of the female body; infertility; miscarriage; stillborn babies; childlessness; insecurity; death; loss; mourning; single parenting; and the struggle to provide for a family. As these women attempted to process tragic life events that simply did not make sense—and that typically remained unacknowledged in their external worlds—they, like many sufferers before them, turned inward, turned Godward, hoping for clearer vision, for sight of the spiritual kind, for redemption from the sorrows that plagued them.<sup>8</sup> And each was primed to understand how God might alleviate that suffering. The results, while structurally similar, were different in content and form. Indeed, in the search for divine presence, each woman envisioned and encountered God in personally meaningful ways—God’s voice, God’s form, and God’s love spoke to and met their individual needs, expectations, and desires. In their efforts to overcome suffering, in their quests to reframe their lives after experiencing God’s redemptive power, Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth became nineteenth-century visionaries—visionaries who experienced God in their own ways and within

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6. Diane Helen Lobody, “Lost in the Ocean of Love: The Mystical Writings of Catherine Livingston Garretson,” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1990), 31–65; Clare Brandt, *An American Aristocracy: The Livingstons* (New York City: Doubleday, 1986); John L. Brooke, *Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 371–74.

7. Catherine O’Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton: American Saint* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Three Hills, 2018).

8. A special thank you to my doctors, Rick McWhorter and Shelly Savage, whose compassion and care this past year have helped me endure my own experiences of female suffering—experiences that influenced my approach to this article.

the context of their own religious traditions, visionaries whose narratives hint at the myriad of stories in which encounters with the divine occurred in nineteenth-century New York and beyond.

The uniqueness of Ann's, Catherine's, and Elizabeth's narratives broadens the scope of and adds nuance to the visionary world of the Second Great Awakening, thus underscoring the importance of considering "inner history"—the personal, the private, the hidden, the invisible, the forgotten, and the overlooked—when defining the larger historiographical themes through which we interpret American Christianity. Indeed, by turning to accounts about women's private lives, by seeing complexity in their seemingly simple biographical sketches, and by considering how daily living, and the suffering woven into daily living, influenced personal and collective religiosity, it becomes possible to enter the overlooked spaces of history. By reading women's writings thoughtfully and creatively, we discover complexity in narratives we thought we already knew and thus begin to see beyond the shadows of female experience. A contextualized study of inner history encourages us to consider how ordinary individuals helped frame larger movements and how they fit into those movements.<sup>9</sup> In the cases of Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth, we see how life's challenges, replete with suffering and loss, led each woman to different understandings of what it meant to encounter the divine. Each longed for the presence of an embodied God, and each encountered that presence in a form and a manner that met her particular needs and desires. God revealed himself, it seems, to an array of seekers in need of answers to the questions that plagued their particular experiences. And such individuals would have undoubtedly answered John Wesley's question, "Have you an experimental proof of the ever blessed Trinity?" in the affirmative.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Gerda Lerner shares specific experiences from her life as an Austrian Jew during World War II to demonstrate how her inner history adds depth to both the larger events of her life and to Jewish and WWII history in general. Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1–17. For examples of this kind of history, see John Fea, *The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); and Brett Malcolm Grainger, *Church in the Wild: Evangelicals in Antebellum America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

10. Wesley, *Works*, 27:275–76. For experiences with the divine contemporary to Lee, Garrettson, and Seton, see Phyllis Mack, "The Unbounded Self: Dreaming and Identity in the British Enlightenment," in *Dreams, Dreamers, and Visions: The Early*

## Ann Lee

Due to limited manuscript source material, it is difficult to uncover the historical Ann Lee.<sup>11</sup> Since the primary sources that do exist must be read with a skeptical eye, it is important to approach them thoughtfully, creatively, and contextually, as well as critically. When they are read in these ways, narrative accounts about Ann reveal a complex figure whose life experiences pushed her into the role of visionary—a visionary whose rejection of the physical body (most poignantly manifest in her revelation that proclaimed celibacy the only means to purity and wholeness) hints at complex life experiences that shaped her distaste for physicality. Although several scholars have proposed that she played a significant role in shaping a more egalitarian Christianity, they have overlooked how her personal background might have shaped her role as religious leader.<sup>12</sup> I propose that, when contextualized, Ann Lee’s story seems to suggest that she found communion with God and unity with her Savior as she overcame deep personal pain. For her, redemption meant rejecting her physical form and redefining herself as a spiritual being and, ultimately, as a spiritual mother to all.

Ann Lee’s early life story encapsulates invisible female suffering—suffering that devalued a woman’s worth. Like many children born into a poor, working-class family in Manchester, England, during the eighteenth century, Ann began working in the textile mills within the first decade of life; her labors began at the tender age of eight.<sup>13</sup> Children

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*Modern Atlantic World*, ed. Ann Marie Plane and Leslie Tuttle (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 207–25; Rachel Cope, “Salvific Significance in Personal Life Stories,” *Magistra: A Journal of Women’s Spirituality in History* 20, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 21–58; Ann Kirschner, “‘Tending to Edify, Astonish, and Instruct’: Published Narratives of Spiritual Dreams and Visions in the Early Republic,” *Early American Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 198–229; and Henry Rack, “Early Methodist Visions of the Trinity,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 46, no. 2 (May 1987): 40–42.

11. Most documentation about Ann Lee’s life comes from the pens of her followers in narrative accounts written thirty years following her death. Although it is essential to acknowledge and consider the problems of memory inherent in such sources, it is also important to avoid dismissing any kind of source that documents a woman’s life. Wenger, “Female Christ,” 5–6.

12. Wenger, “Female Christ,” 5; Jean M. Humez, “Ye Are My Epistles’: The Construction of Ann Lee Imagery in Early Shaker Sacred Literature,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, no. 1 (1992): 84.

13. Nardi Reeder Campion, *Mother Ann Lee: Morning Star of the Shakers* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1990), 3. On average, children began laboring in the mills at the age of ten. Emma Griffin, *Liberty’s Dawn: A People’s History of the*

employed in such settings not only received assignments that exceeded their physical capacities, but they also encountered dangerous, difficult, and unpleasant working conditions; long and strenuous hours; and minimal compensation. They were, as one scholar dubbed them, the “white slaves” of England.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the physical strain mill work placed on young children, it also positioned them in vulnerable situations. Working children, particularly female children, found themselves in powerless contexts where they became victims of abuse, manifest in an array of forms.<sup>15</sup> Little girls were surrounded by rough men who flogged and beat them and by cruel men who molested and raped them.<sup>16</sup> Their bodies became objects that were acted upon, and their hearts and minds inevitably accepted the labels that came with such awful acts.<sup>17</sup> While it is impossible to know whether, how, and when Ann was abused, her adult distaste for female physicality and her eventual rejection of sexual relations certainly hint at the possibility.<sup>18</sup>

Ann’s encounters with physical trauma, and with experiences that devalued women, continued into adulthood. When she reached her mid-twenties, her father (a blacksmith) insisted that she marry his apprentice, Abraham Standerin (Stanley).<sup>19</sup> Ann had no desire to marry, but as a poor, working-class woman, she had no choice but to obey.<sup>20</sup> Culture and the common law of coverture defined her as property that

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*Industrial Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 60. See also Seth Y. Wells, ed., *Testimonies Concerning the Character and Ministry of Mother Ann Lee and the First Witnesses of the Gospel of Christ's Second Appearing: Given by Some of the Aged Brethren and Sisters of the United Society, Including a Few Sketches of Their Own Religious Experience* (Albany: Packard & Van Benthuysen, 1827).

14. Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn*, 58–60.

15. For the conditions of child laborers in Victorian England, see Eric Hopkins, “Working Hours and Conditions during the Industrial Revolution,” *International Review of Social History* 19, no. 3 (1974): 401–25; and Peter Kirby, *Child Workers and Industrial Health in Britain, 1780–1850* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell Press, 2013).

16. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 307.

17. Louise A. Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 89.

18. For a source that suggests Ann Lee may have had a history of child abuse, see Humez, “My Epistles,” 88–89.

19. Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 3.

20. While urbanization and migratory patterns were circumventing the established traditions of courtship and marriage, the established traditions of parental control remained in force for the majority of adults. See Tanya Evans, “Women, Marriage and

could be passed from father to husband.<sup>21</sup> Ann's body—the physical, the spiritual, the emotional—did not legally belong to her.

During her early married life, Ann encountered further bodily trauma—fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth all proved to be complicated, painful, and devastating.<sup>22</sup> In a short span of time, she experienced four difficult pregnancies: Ann had three stillborn children, and the fourth, Elizabeth, died in infancy.<sup>23</sup> Feeling that her body had failed her once again—indeed, crushed by the very fact that she could not be a mother in a world that equated womanhood with reproduction and motherhood—she seems to have further internalized her physical form as problematic.<sup>24</sup> Like many women of the time, she feared that the deaths of her children were a sign of judgment, a price paid for the mother's sins.<sup>25</sup> The female body appeared to be the very root of pain, sorrow, and sin. While mourning the loss of her babies, Ann turned to intense asceticism as an escape from the pain that had riddled so much of her life.<sup>26</sup>

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the Family," in *Women's History: Britain, 1700–1850*, ed. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Routledge, 2005), 57–77.

21. Tim Stretton and Krista J. Kesselring, ed., *Married Women and the Law: Courtesy in England and the Common Law World* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 4.

22. For general experiences with fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth in eighteenth-century England and America, see Jennifer Evans and Sara Read, "'Before Midnight She Had Miscarried': Women, Men, and Miscarriage in Early Modern England," *Journal of Family History* 40, no. 1 (January 2015): 3–23; Jennifer Evans and Ciara Meehan, eds., *Perceptions of Pregnancy from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century* (Cham, Switz.: Palgrave, 2017); and Catherine M. Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society: 1650–1850* (New York: New York University Press, 1985).

23. Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 3.

24. Regarding the connection between womanhood and motherhood and the importance of reproduction to both, see Katarzyna Bronk, "From One Father to Another: William Cobbett's Advice on Motherhood and Maternity," *Women's History* 2, no. 5 (Summer 2016): 5–10; Marilyn Francus, "The Monstrous Mother: Reproductive Anxiety in Swift and Pope," *ELH* 61, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 829–51; Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society*.

25. Mothers were charged by religious and civil leaders alike with providing proper morals and teachings to their children. The events of a child's life were therefore a reflection of the mother's efforts and worthiness. See Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society*, 77–79.

26. For Ann Lee's ascetic practices, see Humez, "My Epistles," 94–95. See also Lucia McMahon, "So Truly Afflicting and Distressing to Me His Sorrowing Mother":

Ann's spiritual quest and her eventual visions, dreams, and revelations allowed her to encounter a divine figure who slowly released her from the physical burdens she felt as a woman—from the guilt and pain she associated with the female body. This spiritual journey began to take shape in approximately 1758, when she joined a group known as the Shaking Quakers, a sect founded by Jane and James Wardley of Bolton (near Manchester), known for its charismatic excesses and shared ministry between the sexes.<sup>27</sup> At this time, Ann began to focus intently on becoming cleansed from her sins. She longed for personal purity. And she believed she found it by refusing to have a conjugal relationship with her husband.<sup>28</sup>

Ann's ongoing quest for spiritual transformation, her followers suggest, ultimately resulted in her receipt of visions and revelations from God. She did not just want to be delivered from sin; she longed to overcome "the very nature of sin."<sup>29</sup> She wanted to escape enslavement to her body. As she made efforts to enter a sinless state, her mind and soul suffered within the redemptive framework of Christianity. At times, her followers recalled, her suffering even caused "blood to perspire through the pores of her skin."<sup>30</sup> Through visionary means, they reported, she escaped the evil, the corruption, the innate sinfulness of the body and became one with, and one like, Christ.

Ann's visionary experiences continued to focus on spiritual regeneration; through ethereal means she concluded that the pathway to holiness required a complete rejection of sexual relations. In one of her most noteworthy visions, as recalled by her followers, the Lord Jesus appeared to her and revealed "the depth of man's loss, what it was, and the way of redemption."<sup>31</sup> From this encounter with her Savior, Ann learned that human depravity had originated in the Garden of Eden; sexual intercourse, she explained, was the original sin.<sup>32</sup> Overcoming innate human sinfulness so one could enter a pure Edenic state required

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Expressions of Maternal Grief in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Journal of the Early Republic* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 27–60.

27. Stein, *Shaker Experience in America*, 4; Wenger, "Female Christ," 6–7.

28. Wenger, "Female Christ," 6–7.

29. Wells, *Testimonies*, 4.

30. Wells, *Testimonies*, 4.

31. Wells, *Testimonies*, 38.

32. For Ann's teachings on Eve, see Wenger, "Female Christ," 13. For similar views among Protestants and Catholics in the eighteenth century, see Beverly Prior Smaby, "Female Piety among Eighteenth Century Moravians," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 64 (Summer 1997): 159.

complete confession of sins and obedience to God’s law—it was “the only possible way of recovery”; it was the only means of redemption.<sup>33</sup>

Ann’s conception of holiness required celibacy—a departure from the “lustful gratifications of the flesh, as the source and foundation of human corruption.”<sup>34</sup> This interpretation, which she supported with the biblical injunction that we “neither marry, nor are given in marriage” (Matt. 22:30), allowed her to recast her own life story and the larger Christian narrative within a redemptive framework that resonated with her. By defining and interpreting holiness in a personally meaningful way, she shifted her story from that of sinner (one who caused lust) to savior (one who helped redeem others from lust). As Marjorie Proctor-Smith has suggested, “She chose to transform and thereby redeem her experiences by re-experiencing them as spiritual.”<sup>35</sup> For Ann, redemption literally meant a new beginning; she could step away from her corporeal self and become her real self, her spiritual self. No longer a symbol of physical impurity, Ann came to see herself as purified. Ultimately, then, her visions and revelations protected her from physical corruption. In order to attain salvation, God required her—and everyone—to avoid the kinds of physicality that had hurt her most. Eventually, her followers would even come to equate Ann’s rejection of her body with her reembodiment as a Christ figure. By overcoming her physical form—a form that she associated with pain—she came to house the divine. She became a holy vessel.<sup>36</sup>

As Ann shared her visionary experiences with a small group of believers, they accepted her emerging revelatory authority. Over time, her followers came to consider her the “first spiritual Mother in Christ”—a symbol that Ann’s spiritual self could do what her physical self could not do. She had overcome her body; she had overcome her mortal limitations. She could be a mother. She could provide life of the spiritual kind, if not of the physical kind.<sup>37</sup> In a world that had stripped everything from her, Ann discovered a way to make her life purposeful and meaningful.

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33. Wells, *Testimonies*, 5.

34. Wells, *Testimonies*, 5.

35. Marjorie Proctor-Smith, “Who Do You Say That I Am?: Mother Ann as Christ,” in *Locating the Shakers: Cultural Origins and Legacies of an American Religious Movement*, ed. Mick Gidley and Kate Bowles (Exeter, U.K.: University of Exeter Press, 1990), 86.

36. See Wenger, “Female Christ,” 9–18.

37. Wells, *Testimonies*, 49.

In 1774, Ann saw a vision of the people of God in America; Jesus asked her to find them and organize them into a perfected church that could usher in the Millennium. As a result of this vision, she led a small group of her followers from Manchester, England, to the Albany, New York, area, where they eventually established a communal farmstead in nearby Niskeyuna.<sup>38</sup> In America she would figuratively give birth to a “community of the saints, or the elect.”<sup>39</sup> Although Ann had long internalized her body as a problem, as the source of pain and sin and sorrow, she finally recast her identity into a spiritual framework and made efforts to lead others to purity and wholeness. She wanted all of her “children” to experience the end of suffering by encountering the joys of redemption.

### Catherine Livingston Garrettson

While Ann Lee’s suffering centered on her various physical struggles and led to her eventual rejection of the temporal body, Catherine Livingston Garrettson’s suffering emerged from feelings of emptiness while surrounded by wealth and abundance and from a deep sense of loneliness upon losing those she loved. Catherine longed for meaningful relationships. Upon learning about the Methodist doctrine of sanctification shortly following her conversion experience in 1787, she felt a spark of hope that ignited within her a desire for direct communion with her God. As she became deeply committed to religious life, she discovered divine presence and its accompanying promise of redemption in the context of powerful dreams and visions. Like other Methodist women of her time, she eventually came to experience a “clear revelation of the several persons in the ever-blessed Trinity.”<sup>40</sup> Encountering the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ultimately enabled her to recast her story into a redemptive framework—indeed, it invited her directly into the salvific narrative of Christianity, thus alleviating the deep loneliness and loss that she felt. Hope in sanctification helped her redefine her seemingly

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38. Upon their arrival, Ann likely found employment as a domestic laborer. When her husband became ill, she quit working and nursed him back to health. Following his recovery, Abraham Stanley reportedly associated with the “wicked,” opposed the faith, and insisted that Ann had to “live in the flesh” with him and “bear children.” She rejected his mandate—her sense of spiritual leadership had given her a sense of sexual empowerment—and the couple separated. Wells, *Testimonies*, 8.

39. Marjorie Proctor-Smith, “Who Do You Say That I Am?” 89.

40. Wesley, *The Letters of Rev. John Wesley*, 6:265–66; Rack, “Early Methodist Visions of the Trinity,” 40–42; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 420–36.

solitary story into a narrative grounded in relationships, human to human as well as human to divine.

Although Catherine lived in privileged circumstances and engaged in social events regularly, she found herself feeling particularly empty inside as she entered her thirties. The deaths of several close family members within a relatively short span of time only heightened this sense of emptiness and inspired her to read the “word of God with more attention.”<sup>41</sup> Catherine shared her renewed interest in religion with her best friend and distant cousin, Mary Rutherford Clarkson. The two women became intimate spiritual friends—a term that Janet Moore Lindman defines as the “ongoing, emotionally intimate relationship with others who shared the same religious principles and who used these friendships to reassure, assist and strengthen one another in their journey toward eternal salvation.”<sup>42</sup> Together, Catherine and Mary engaged in thoughtful theological discussions, contemplated the meaning and purpose of life, and longed for spiritual unity with the divine.<sup>43</sup> They understood each other’s deepest spiritual needs and desires; their “emotional closeness” enabled a “union of the soul.”<sup>44</sup>

On July 2, 1786, Mary Rutherford Clarkson passed away in childbirth. The sudden loss of her closest friend rattled Catherine, who simply wrote, “On Saturday she was well, on Sunday at 2 o’clock I saw her a pale corpse.”<sup>45</sup> The word “pale” and the immediacy of Mary’s death intimates that she may have died of blood loss or hemorrhaging rather than childbirth fever, a condition that usually lingered for a few days before resulting in death.<sup>46</sup> Although her demise was unforeseen, the loss of

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41. Catherine Livingston Garretson, Autobiographical Sketch, 1080-5-2: 41, Garretson Family Papers, United Methodist Archives and History Center, Drew University, New Jersey, 3. For a similar experience, see Brekus, *Osborn’s World*.

42. Janet Moore Lindman, “‘This Union of the Soul’: Spiritual Friendship among Early American Protestants,” *Journal of Social History* 50, no. 4 (Summer 2017): 681.

43. Garretson, Autobiographical Sketch.

44. Lindman, “This Union,” 680–700.

45. Garretson, Autobiographical Sketch.

46. Postpartum hemorrhage becomes life-threatening if untreated for multiple days after delivery from the severe loss of blood. Medicines during the eighteenth century were unreliable to treat complications during childbirth, and thus, the presentation of postpartum hemorrhaging in the eighteenth century would most likely have been fatal. Donna Freeborn, Heather Trevino, and Irina Burd, “Postpartum Hemorrhage,” *Health Encyclopedia*, University of Rochester Medical Center, accessed January 28, 2020, <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content.aspx?ContentTypeID=90&ContentID=Po2486>; Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society*, 26.

women during childbirth was not uncommon in eighteenth-century America.<sup>47</sup> Expectant mothers of the time often approached childbirth with a fear of impending death—a fear that the poet Ann Bradstreet captured when she wrote, “How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend, How soon’t may be thy lot to lose thy friend.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps as many as one percent of all births ended in the mother’s death, often caused by exhaustion, dehydration, obstructed labor, infection, hemorrhage, or convulsions. Since the average woman gave birth to between five and eight children, the possibility of dying in childbirth ran as high as one woman in eight.<sup>49</sup> Giving life meant risking death.

Losing a best friend, a spiritual friend, a person who understood her deepest sensibilities, ignited a personal crisis for Catherine—a crisis that our contemporary world might refer to as depression.<sup>50</sup> In her state of despair, she withdrew from the society of family members and friends and avoided all social engagements and activities for an extended period of time.<sup>51</sup> In a place of utter loneliness—the one person who understood her gone, taken during what should have been one of life’s most beautiful and miraculous moments—Catherine turned to God. She prayed, perhaps, for Mary and Mary’s motherless child, as well as for herself. (As a side note, Mary’s daughter was named Mary Ruth-erford Clarkson, after her mother. Several years later, Catherine named

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47. Scholten, *Childbearing in American Society*, 21.

48. In addition to her anxieties about pregnancy, an expectant mother was filled with apprehensions about the death of her newborn child. The death of a child in infancy was common. For a poet’s musings on the risk of death, see Anne Bradstreet, “Before the Birth of One of Her Children,” in *Poems of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Robert Hutchinson (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 45.

49. L. Lewis Wall, *Tears for My Sisters: The Tragedy of Obstetric Fistula* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 57–58.

50. See also Lauren F. Winner, *A Cheerful and Comfortable Faith: Anglican Religious Practice in the Elite Households of Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, eds., *Women and the Material Culture of Death* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2013), 43–47.

51. Mourning was displayed publicly through distinctive dress and accessories that served to separate the mourners from the remaining society. Withdrawing from society was not generally required, but not uncommon either. Christiane Holm, “Sentimental Cuts: Eighteenth-Century Mourning Jewelry with Hair,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 139–43; Rebecca N. Mitchell, “Death Becomes Her: On the Progressive Potential of Victorian Mourning,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41, no. 4 (2013): 595–620; Lou Taylor, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983). See also Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 40.

her only child Mary Rutherford Garretson.) From Catherine’s writings, one can sense that she longed for solace. For peace. For understanding. For purpose. For answers of the spiritual kind. Her desires for divine comfort and guidance seemed to exceed any of her previous attempts to understand matters of salvation. Catherine longed for a richer and more meaningful life.

While working through her grief, Catherine drew upon language commonly used within the Methodist tradition at the time (language later employed by Joseph Smith); she concluded that she wanted more than a “form” of religion.<sup>52</sup> Once again she turned to the Bible and other religious texts for answers; there she discovered “more plainly the way of salvation” through the “light” that “broke in upon my soul.”<sup>53</sup> Finally, in 1787 she experienced her initial encounter with the divine. After family members retired to bed on a Saturday evening, Catherine prayed for peace. And it finally came. “A gleam of light broke in upon my soul and a measure of confidence and peace sprung up into my heart. It seemed to be said to me: ‘lie down and take your rest,’” she recalled. As a result of this experience, she slept peacefully and arose early the next morning. While engaged in private prayer, Catherine finally had the conversion experience she had been seeking—a moment in which she felt God’s direct presence in her life. Of this powerful occurrence she recalled, “A song of praise and thanksgiving was put in my mouth—my sins were pardoned, my state was changed; my soul was happy. In a transport of joy I sprang from my knees, and happening to see myself as I passed the glass I could not but look with surprise at the change in my countenance. All things were become new. I spent this day alone and needed no other food than what I then enjoyed.”<sup>54</sup>

Catherine quickly recognized that newness did not guarantee completeness. Conversion, or justification, was a “threshold,” not a “finish line.”<sup>55</sup> The focus of her writings soon began to reflect a near obsession with the topic of sanctification. She longed to understand how her daily life intersected with the salvific acts performed by her Savior—indeed, she wanted to know how her personal story fit within the context of

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52. Garretson, Autobiographical Sketch, 5. For a discussion about this language, see Christopher Jones, “The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (2011): 88–114.

53. Garretson, Autobiographical Sketch, 7.

54. Garretson, Autobiographical Sketch, 7.

55. Lester Rush, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality: A Reader* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005), 101.

atonement and redemption.<sup>56</sup> What was her relationship to God? And how could she attain and maintain personal holiness?

As Catherine continued to seek a deeper relationship with the divine in response to her suffering, she received spiritual guidance in the form of dreams and visions. Much of this guidance hinted at the “advances”<sup>57</sup> she could make “in the divine life”; it intimated that she could experience God’s presence, and that she could become increasingly pure, holy, and sanctified.<sup>58</sup> In late 1791 and early 1792, Catherine’s hope for a divine encounter took on a more tangible form. She first had a spiritual dream of the cross and then later a powerful visionary experience in which she encountered the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These experiences illustrated to her the importance of reframing her life story within a larger redemptive context. She slowly recognized that the Crucifixion was more than a biblical narrative; it was an intimate part of the human story, of her story. Indeed, her autobiography figured into the salvific narrative, and the theme of salvation was laced throughout her life experiences.

Three months following her dream of the cross, Catherine prayed for the opportunity to see God’s glory; much like other visionaries, she fully expected a response. A few days later, her request was granted. On March 11, 1792, Catherine had a vision in which she encountered tangible and sensory manifestations of each member of the Trinity. In this most sacred of moments, Catherine had the kind of trinitarian encounter John Wesley asked other Methodists about and that Joseph Smith would later experience—she encountered the Trinity as three separate beings. Although each individual’s interpretation of this type of vision differs—for Wesley it signified sanctification, for Catherine it signified the relational nature of salvation, and for Joseph it signified forgiveness of sin and, ultimately, a restoration of Jesus’s gospel—it is worth noting that there is a redemptive and salvific element at the center of each account.

Indeed, the very essence of Catherine’s vision hinged on the theme of redemption. While praying for divine forgiveness, for personal transformation through the grace of her Savior, Catherine felt overcome by a

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56. Lester Rush has noted that various forms of grace parallel the spiritual states that early Methodists expected to pass through during their salvation journey. These include convincing grace, convicting grace, converting grace, sanctifying grace, and persevering grace. Rush, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality*, 102.

57. Garretson, Autobiographical Sketch, 8.

58. Catherine Livingston Garretson, Diary, 17 November 1787, Garretson Family Papers, United Methodist Archives and History Center, Drew University, New Jersey.

powerful sense of peace. "A way was opened I was received, and encircled in the Arms of divine love," she explained. She marveled as she encountered "a Sin pardoning God"—a God whose "presence . . . was continually with me throughout the remainder of the day." Grasping for words that could capture the power and glory manifest throughout this ethereal experience, Catherine wondered, "How shall I describe or who will believe the report of what the Lord God gracious and merciful, Condescended to reveal to the Eyes of the weakest and least of his creatures." As if in response to her own question, she attempted to explain through sensory language the power she beheld, the love that she felt, and the enlightenment that she experienced while being transformed by the redemptive power of the divine.<sup>59</sup>

While immersed in her visionary experience, Catherine first encountered the presence of Jesus and then the Holy Spirit—both experiences left her with the sense that she had been filled with the love and joy she had been seeking. The emptiness that had long been at the root of her suffering dissipated instantly. While basking in the gift of divine love, she confronted a period of "solemn waiting before God." Eventually, however, the waiting ended; a figurative representation of the conclusion of suffering. "The Father answered a request I had made a few nights before that he would show me his Glory—In wonder and astonishment I gazed—I am not sensible how long. I fell back my hands were raised . . . I was struck down upon my back, lost in solemn awe and wonder." Overcome by the power and glory she witnessed, by things "no pen or tongue can ever describe," Catherine, recognizing her own limitations, called out to her Savior—asking him to be her divine deliverer, her mediator, her intercessor, her all. She then pled with the Son to cleanse her so that she might stand worthily in her Father's presence. Without Jesus's grace, without his strength, his wholeness, his perfection, she concluded, "I must have perished under the great views which I had." Catherine's relationship with her Redeemer took on a new meaning for her; she no longer felt alone.<sup>60</sup>

After recognizing her absolute need for Christ—even more intensely than she had in her dream about crucifixion—Catherine seems to have exited her visionary state. She spent two hours in prayer and then prepared for bed. As she neared sleep, she "was aroused with a visit from my blessed Lord." Again in awe of divine presence, Catherine cried out,

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59. Garrettson, Diary, March 10 and 11, 1792.

60. Garrettson, Diary, March 10 and 11, 1792.

"I am the Temple of the Holy Ghost. I am espoused to Jesus, and in him united to the Glorious Trinity." For hours, Catherine could feel that her Savior had "powerfully deepened his work in my Soul." Through that experience, she came to understand the full magnitude of human redemption, "the profound depths of that Love, the half of which can ne'er be told!" As Catherine came to understand Jesus's saving role in a deeper and more nuanced way, as she felt his redemptive power transform her, she once again beheld the Father. In that instant, she knew that her "Dear Redeemers blood" was the only way such an encounter could even be possible. By experiencing the "sweet communion" of both the Father and the Son, Catherine witnessed the glory of God and the condescension of the Savior, a differentiation that helped her better understand humanity's need for divine grace. It seems that her vision both enriched her understanding of salvation largely conceived and allowed her to engage in personal salvific work.<sup>61</sup>

Catherine's vision ended at Calvary. "I saw the God of the whole universe veiled in human nature and making expiation on the Cross." She also witnessed the wounded hands, feet, and side of her Savior. While describing the adoration she felt at the foot of the cross, she declared, "God is love—I feel it—I know it. I taste, and can and do hourly rejoice in God my savior." This sensory experience—feeling, touching, tasting, and witnessing the salvation story—helped her recognize its magnitude. As she witnessed divinity, Catherine made note of the intellectual, physical, spiritual, and emotional engagement this experience entailed, experiences that "deeply exercised" her mind. In order to become holy, she concluded, she had to willingly surrender all and receive all. "I cannot stand one moment without his support," she declared. "I cannot take one single step in the divine life without this aid and assistance."<sup>62</sup>

Catherine's vision responded to her suffering—it helped heal her soul—by meeting her relational needs. Her renewed understanding of Christ's sanctifying grace made the impossible, such as witnessing the glory of God, seem within reach. The culmination of this visionary experience made Catherine increasingly aware of God's omnipresence, the sanctifying grace made available through her Savior, the sensory nature of spiritual life, and her place within sacred narrative. She belonged. Catherine's story intersected with the events at Calvary. She was a witness to, but also a participant in, the most important moment of the

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61. Garretson, Diary, March 10 and 11, 1792.

62. Garretson, Diary, March 10 and 11, 1792.

salvation story. Her vision taught her about her story’s relevance in relationship to the Atonement. By collapsing sacred distance, the historic past became her present.<sup>63</sup> Her vision helped her see that the Atonement is ongoing; every human being, she concluded, has access to the grace that it provides. Because of Calvary, redemption—both instantaneous and gradual—had the power to influence every story, stories that linked humanity together across time and into eternity. Due to the Atonement of Christ, Catherine believed she could be woven into a web of relationships that connected humans to the divine.

### Elizabeth Bayley Seton

Elizabeth Bayley Seton’s personal writings reveal a woman who turned to God as she encountered deep loss, over and over again, throughout her life. The words she wrote capture the thoughtful way in which she reflected upon religion and encountered the divine in the context of such loss—a heart-wrenching spiritual journey that began in childhood and extended into adulthood. With each demise of a loved one, Elizabeth’s longing to encounter the “intimate presence of an embodied God” grew ever stronger.<sup>64</sup> Unable to do so fully within her Protestant context as Catherine had done, Elizabeth eventually found herself being drawn to Catholicism. A spiritual or visionary dream eventually convinced her that the Eucharist—the tangible body and blood of her Savior—allowed her to encounter divine presence in a way that felt meaningful and healing to her. For Elizabeth, the Eucharist enabled the renewal of creation; it came to symbolize the possibility of healing within the wounded soul. She thus converted to Catholicism in order to bask in the full presence, the embodied presence, of her God—a being who could alleviate her ongoing suffering, the one being who would never abandon her.<sup>65</sup>

Loss began to figure into Elizabeth Bayley Seton’s narrative in early childhood. When she was but three years of age, her mother, Catherine, died. Still weak from recent childbirth, Catherine Bayley did not survive her illness, despite her physician-husband’s efforts to save

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63. For further discussion on collapsing sacred distance, see Terry L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 245; and Allen Hansen and Walker Wright, “All Things unto Me Are Spiritual”: Worship through Corporeality in Hasidism and Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 57–77.

64. Wendy M. Wright, “Elizabeth Ann Bayley and the Art of Embodied Presence,” *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 18, no. 2 (1997): 251.

65. See also Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016).

her. Immediately following their mother's death, Elizabeth and her two sisters stayed with relatives in Long Island. Within a short span of time, their maternal grandfather, the Reverend Richard Carlton, also died. Unsettling change continued to plague Elizabeth's life. Her father quickly remarried a woman who seemed poorly equipped to take on three young children. Shortly thereafter, Elizabeth's baby sister, Kitty, passed away. Kitty's funeral is the first memory that Elizabeth recollects: "At 4 years of age sitting alone on a step of the door looking at the clouds, . . . while my little sister Catherine 2 years old lay in her coffin." She continued, "They asked me did I not cry when little Kitty was dead?—no because Kitty is gone up to heaven." She then concluded, "I wish I could go too with Mamma."<sup>66</sup> This heartbreak statement captures the sentiments felt by a motherless and lonely child. A child who felt abandoned. A child who longed for love, nurture, and compassion. A child who needed to be noticed.

Likely because Elizabeth's father was often absent from home, and because she had a tense relationship with her stepmother, she learned to turn heavenward; she learned to seek a relationship with the divine. This deep longing suggests that she hoped to belong to someone, to feel a connection to a tangible figure.<sup>67</sup> Such feelings are laced throughout several of her childhood memories. On one occasion, for example, while walking through the woods, Elizabeth had an ethereal experience that helped her envision her relationship with the divine. "I thought at that time my Father did not care for me," she explained. "Well God was my Father, my all. I prayed—sung hymns—cried—laughed in talking to myself of how far He could place me above all sorrow then layed still to enjoy the Heavenly Peace that came over my soul."<sup>68</sup> In a moment of utter despair, young Elizabeth found the parental love she needed from a divine source. From that point on, she longed for "that Holyness which will be perfected in the Union Eternal."<sup>69</sup> The power she felt through this experience—an

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66. O'Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton*, 24. See also Regina Bechtle and Judith Metz, eds., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings*, 3 vols. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2000), 1:249.

67. In America, Episcopalians were a fair share of the economic and political elite and had an image as a church of the affluent and educated, which made it a primary target of populist rhetoric. See, for example, E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 235.

68. Elizabeth Seton, *Elizabeth Seton: Selected Writings*, ed. Ellin Kelly and Annabelle Melville (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 41.

69. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 41.

early form of communion with God—would have a lasting impact on her life and her ongoing quest to find a powerful, tangible, and meaningful relationship with the divine.

Although Elizabeth experienced some stability in early adulthood, a narrative of loss would eventually reemerge in her life. On January 25, 1794, she married William Magee Seton at Trinity Episcopal Church. Together, they would eventually have five children. During the early years of their marriage, the Setons prospered financially. Elizabeth oversaw a considerable household and staff, engaged in the social life of post-war New York City, and helped found a charitable organization.<sup>70</sup> She also entered a new phase of religious enthusiasm under the influence of Reverend John Henry Hobart, a man who guided her spiritual reading practices and encouraged her interest in liturgy and doctrine.<sup>71</sup> Elizabeth held a particularly deep reverence for communion Sunday and was intrigued by the symbolism of the bread and wine, a curiosity that would deepen over time.<sup>72</sup>

As the family business failed and William’s struggle with tuberculosis took a turn for the worse, life shifted dramatically for Elizabeth. Hoping that her husband’s health might improve in a better climate, she insisted that they, along with their eldest daughter, Anna Maria, travel to Italy to stay with friends. During this time of deep uncertainty, Elizabeth learned to rely more and more upon God. Drawn to the corporeal nature of the Eucharist, she allowed it to take on an increasingly central role in her spiritual life. While Catherine Garretson sought a relational God in the context of prayer, Elizabeth, who had suffered the abrupt loss of so many loved ones, sought his constant physical presence. The Eucharist assumed that sustaining role for her. It became a continuous symbol of hope and redemption in her ever-shifting world.

Notwithstanding Elizabeth’s great efforts to save William’s life, his health continued to decline. She noted that his “soul was released” on December 27, 1803.<sup>73</sup> Numb with pain, she buried her husband in a

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70. The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children in 1797.

71. John Henry Hobart was a powerful Episcopalian bishop in New York and a supporter of the High Church movement. Hobart came as assistant minister to Trinity Church in 1800. He later served as bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of New York and was renowned for his evangelical zeal and moving oratory. See Holifield, *Theology in America*, 236; and Seton, *Selected Writings*, 16.

72. Elizabeth’s fascination for Communion was such that she once went from church to church on “sacrament Sunday” with a relative so she could receive it multiple times.

73. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 124.

foreign land. As she slowly processed all that had happened, she faced feelings of intense loss and grief. Abandoned, alone again, she was now a destitute widow, a mother to five fatherless children who would have to depend upon friends and family members for support. The uncertainty of her future proved to be overwhelming.<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth had more questions than answers. Although she often felt the “mercy and consoling presence of my dear Redeemer” during this time, she also continued to experience devastation and uncertainty.<sup>75</sup> How could she manage now?

Just as Elizabeth and her daughter were preparing to return to New York, Anna Maria became ill, thus postponing their trip home by several months.<sup>76</sup> It was during their extended stay in Italy that the course of Elizabeth’s life began to shift in a rather unexpected way; their friends, the Filicchi family, introduced her to Catholicism. As Elizabeth witnessed Catholic sacramentalism, the power of the Eucharist captured her heart and mind; she felt drawn to its more tangible representation of the Savior. And thus she began to wonder if her religious life could be more meaningful. Those feelings only heightened as she attended mass. While participating in and observing Catholic services, Elizabeth wondered about her own spiritual incompleteness; she longed to “possess God in the Sacrament.” Almost envious of those around her, she desired to find the divine presence “in the church as they do.” On one occasion, as the Eucharist passed by her, Elizabeth fell to her knees “without thinking” and then “cried in agony to God to *bless me* if he was there, that my whole soul has desired only him.”<sup>77</sup>

And yet, while being drawn to the Catholic Eucharist, Elizabeth remained uncertain about her religious future. Perhaps fearful of suffering additional losses if she converted, she did not know if she should remain a Protestant or become a Catholic. She thus faced a long and intense spiritual struggle as she sought to determine what beliefs and practices were most meaningful to her. Would Catholicism bring her closer to God? Could she, should she, make such a dramatic change in her life? After all, conversion required an abandonment of things she cherished deeply.<sup>78</sup> In a sense, it required the death of the person she thought she was; conversion

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74. O’Donnell, *Elizabeth Seton*, 123–26.

75. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 125.

76. They did not arrive back in New York until June 4, 1804.

77. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 68.

78. For an example of a work that considers this, see Craig Harline, *Conversions: Two Family Stories from the Reformation and Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

would require the end of her spiritual life as a Protestant. The paradox she encountered—the desire to attain a more meaningful life and the fear of death, loss, and abandonment that had plagued her life up to that point—lay at the heart of Elizabeth’s conversion story.

Elizabeth needed answers; she needed to commune with God. At the center of her indecisiveness lay the question about symbolism and transubstantiation; although she longed for a tangible union with Christ, she also drew upon her Protestant background that suggested that looking at the host might be idolatrous.<sup>79</sup> In January 1805, she turned to prayer. “In desperation of Heart,” Elizabeth “looked straight up to God, and told him since I cannot see the way to please you, whom alone I wish to please, everything is indifferent to me, and until you do show me the way you mean me to walk in I will trudge on in the path you suffered me to be born in, and go even to the very Sacrament where I once used to find you.”<sup>80</sup> While attending an Episcopalian service that afternoon, she received her answer. God’s voice spoke to her heart; he revealed his will to her. At that moment, Elizabeth realized that she lacked faith in the Protestant approach to the Eucharist. She knew she longed for the authority and power she found in Catholicism. Although lingering questions remained, she decided to act on faith. Although “I left the house a Protestant I returned to it a Catholick,” she explained.<sup>81</sup> On February 27, 1805, she walked into St. Peter’s Church and, kneeling before a crucifix, said, “My God, here let me rest.”<sup>82</sup> She formally entered the church on March 14 and made her first communion as a Roman Catholic on March 25. Through that experience, she found her God—she became a visionary who saw the divine with her spiritual eyes. “At last . . . at last—GOD IS MINE & I AM HIS,” she wrote.<sup>83</sup>

The Eucharist remained Elizabeth’s central focus: first, because she did not understand it fully and knew that “at the heart of Catholic dogma was the belief in the Real Presence,” and second, because she wanted to share it with others.<sup>84</sup> Although she lived during an era when frequent communion was uncommon, she approached the altar as often as permitted. Regular participation in this sacrament, combined with a dream that underscored its meaningfulness to her, healed Elizabeth’s wounded

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79. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 67.

80. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 67.

81. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 164.

82. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 27.

83. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 27.

84. Wright, “Embodied Presence,” 255.

soul. Holy communion became the means through which she could become united with and purified through the divine. “Live always in me, and let me live perpetually in thee and for thee as I live only by thee.”<sup>85</sup> She continued, “I offer thee O Divine Jesus! All that thou art pleased to be for the love of me: I offer thee thy most sacred body, thy most pure soul, and thy divinity which is the source of all happiness and Wisdom I offer myself to thy Father by Thee—to Thyself by thy Father, and by thy Father and thee to the Holy Ghost who is the mutual love of both.”<sup>86</sup> It was through the literal presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Elizabeth suggested, that she could “possess him” for eternity—a relationship that would not, that could not, end suddenly.<sup>87</sup>

Elizabeth’s richer and more meaningful understanding of the Eucharist would dramatically alter every aspect of her life. Due to the dreams she had, she no longer worried about whether or not Christ was literally present—she knew he was—but rather she puzzled over those who rejected this presence. As time passed, she increasingly sought to share the means of salvation with others so that they might “enjoy the adored substance in the center of [their] Souls.”<sup>88</sup> She wanted all to experience God’s presence, his healing power, his gift of redemption.

In 1808, Elizabeth moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where she started a school for girls. A year later, she moved to the rural village of Emmitsburg to help organize what would become Saint Joseph College, as well as the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph. She took her religious vows on March 25, 1809. From 1815 until her death in 1821, she focused on inviting others to come to Eucharist and partake of the divine presence so that they, too, could be transformed through Christ. She wrote, “Scarcely the expanded heart receives its longing desire than, wrapt in his love, covered with his righteousness, we are no longer the same.”<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

Although some visionary accounts—those with First Vision status—have worked their way into historiographical interpretations, become well-known narratives discussed by scholars and embraced by believers, and taken on the role of origin stories or the status of community or

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85. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 229–30.

86. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 229–30.

87. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 229–30.

88. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 70.

89. Seton, *Selected Writings*, 71.

denominational history, it is important to remember that each began as an “inner history.” Visions typically came in response to deep personal struggles and thought-provoking questions that affected individual lives. Indeed, within the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New York and beyond, ordinary people—those plagued with poverty and those blinded by wealth, victims of abuse, the ill, the lonely, the suffering, those in mourning, those desperately wanting a child, those unable to feed and care for their children, the young and the old, the educated and the illiterate, the devastated, the hopeful, seekers of forgiveness, seekers of wisdom and truth, seekers of salvation, female and male—made attempts to communicate with the divine, hoping to discover that a real presence, an embodied God, would hear and answer their desperate pleas for redemption. They, like John Wesley, like Ann Lee, like Catherine Livingston Garretson, like Elizabeth Bayley Seton, and like Joseph Smith, longed for a tangible witness of “the several persons of the ever-blessed Trinity,” for an assurance of salvation, for a promise of eternal hope, for divine redemption.<sup>90</sup>

These personal redemptive quests are best understood through a consideration and contextualization of “inner history”—through a perusal of source materials that implicitly and explicitly reveal the private, the hidden, the invisible, the forgotten, and the overlooked. When such an approach is employed, additional voices can be folded into the narratives we already tell; women, children, people of color, the poor, and the unlearned gain a voice, a story, and a place within history. They are recognized as a part of larger movements; they become participants in and shapers of religious culture. Their stories add depth, breadth, and nuance to our understandings of the past; details about their experiences push historical narratives in new directions, thereby demonstrating how ordinary individuals helped frame larger movements and how their life stories fit into those movements. Indeed, recognizing inner history allows us to place forgotten people, forgotten denominations, and forgotten modes of suffering into a story we think we know. Perhaps our understanding of the religious past is best enriched when we allow all—human and divine—to be present.

And thus, accounts about women like Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth are important to consider when seeking to understand early American visionaries such as Joseph Smith. Their stories hint at the ways in which distinct and particular forms of sorrow and suffering encouraged people to

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90. Wesley, *Letters of Rev. John Wesley*, 6:265–66.

seek slightly different relationships with God, relationships shaped by their cultures and backgrounds, relationships that met their particular needs. They also highlight the various ways in which people encountered God, thereby suggesting that visionary experiences came in a variety of forms and contexts. God seemingly responded in a variety of ways—healing wounded hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. Visions of the divine hinged on the quest for redemption and resulted in the possibilities of—the promise of—such a gift. These visionary experiences thus hint at the countless stories yet to be told, remind us of details yet to be discovered, and encourage fresh historiographical interpretations yet to be written. They challenge us to ask new questions when studying broader movements and contexts such as the Second Great Awakening, the Burned-Over District, the First Vision, or the origins of a church. They broaden the scope of what it means to be a visionary, of what it means to encounter or see the divine, of what it means to seek religion, and of what redemption meant within daily and ordinary contexts. Indeed, Ann, Catherine, and Elizabeth remind us that a recognition of inner history can add layers of meaning and significance to how we understand the role and meaning of redemption in the lives of early American Christians.

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# The Visions of Zion

## A Century of Documenting the Latter-day Saint Experience at the Huntington Library

*Peter J. Blodgett*

When Henry Edwards Huntington retired in 1910 from a successful career in railroading and land development, he turned both his great fortune and his vast experience to the advancement of his fondest personal avocation, the collecting of rare books and manuscripts. Already well-known for his accomplishments as a collector, he now applied himself with great effort to this pursuit. By the time of his death in 1927, he had assembled one of the finest private holdings then in existence relating to Anglo-American history and literature. The research library established by Huntington on the foundation of that private collection has remained one of the preeminent resources for scholarship in the United States to this day, and from the beginning it has numbered significant documents of Mormon history among its many treasures.

The earliest Mormon acquisitions by Huntington resulted primarily from his enthusiasm for printed Americana and his decision to buy in their entirety several major libraries owned by other collectors. First and second editions of the Book of Mormon, for example, came to his holdings with the purchase of the E. Dwight Church and Augustin MacDonald collections in 1911 and 1916. The purchase in 1922 of Henry R. Wagner's magnificent array of Western Americana capped this trend, adding seventy-eight volumes concerning Mormonism alone, including a first edition of William Clayton's renowned *The Latter-Day Saints' Emigrants' Guide*. By 1925, Huntington had already gathered a fine collection of printed Mormon titles, focused particularly upon the era of immigration to and settlement of Utah.

In subsequent years, that original assortment of printed works grew enormously in breadth and depth, carefully nurtured by Leslie E. Bliss throughout his lengthy tenure as Huntington librarian. During the 1920s, under Bliss's administration, the library began to expand into the field of unpublished Mormon materials. That pursuit of original sources reinforced Huntington's own interest in collecting the "background materials" necessary for scholarly research, however pedestrian such materials might seem to rare-book collectors. The background materials obtained for the field of western American history included letters, diaries, journals, and reminiscences written by Latter-day Saints both famous and anonymous, as well as by other observant commentators.

As early as 1929, the library added important groups of Mormon manuscripts to its collections of original historical documents. Although not initially pursued with the vigor seen in later years, the acquisition of Mormon manuscripts began with several notable triumphs. In 1929, for instance, the Huntington obtained a series of six original diaries kept by John D. Lee, spanning a period from 1846 to 1876, as well as assorted Lee correspondence and an original diary for the years 1856–1860, initially attributed to Rachel Woolsey Lee. The papers of Jacob S. Boreman, prominent opponent of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and presiding judge at the two trials of John D. Lee, were acquired in 1934.<sup>1</sup> And in 1942, as the New Deal's Works Progress Administration was winding down its operations, the Huntington secured carbon copies of various pioneer reminiscences and histories as well as original historical ephemera brought together by Hugh O'Neil, an editor with the WPA Historic Records Survey in Utah. Measured merely by these three acquisitions, the library had thus gathered a small but crucial collection of Mormon manuscripts that touched upon the end of the formative Nauvoo period, the transcontinental flight to Utah, the colonization of the Great Basin, and the bitter conflict between Gentiles and Latter-day Saints in late-nineteenth-century Utah.

By 1942, of course, the United States had joined World War II, and most of the nation's energies were absorbed by the escalating war effort. At the time, it must have seemed that the preservation of the past would have to give way to the urgent demands of the present. Yet at that very

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1. Jacob Smith Boreman, "Crusade against Theocracy: The Reminiscences of Judge Jacob Smith Boreman of Utah, 1872–1877," ed. Leonard J. Arrington, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (November 1960): 1–45.

moment, a series of coincidental events were about to occur that would thrust the Huntington Library into the forefront of institutions collecting Mormon historical materials.

The first link in that chain of events was forged in 1943 when Robert Glass Cleland, professor of history at Occidental College in Los Angeles, became affiliated with the Huntington's research staff. Cleland, a renowned expert in the history of California and the Southwest, sought ways to promote further research in Southwestern history at the library. Aware of the financial support being given to the study of regional history by the Rockefeller Foundation, Cleland prodded the library into applying for a foundation grant. The foundation's humanities program responded in August 1944 with the offer of an annual award of \$10,000 a year for a five-year term to support fellowships and research grants, as well as the acquisition of both original documents and reproductions of those materials not available for purchase or donation. Under the direction of an advisory committee headed by Cleland, a Southwest studies program took shape at the Huntington and began to attract a distinguished community of scholars to San Marino.

Cleland and the Rockefeller grant gave the library the impetus and the wherewithal to collect original source materials for the history of the Southwest. Leslie E. Bliss, still serving as the Huntington's librarian, faced the challenge of ensuring that the funds devoted each year to acquisitions were well spent. Bliss himself had a well-deserved reputation as an able collector and an intelligent student of Western Americana, but collection on the scale envisioned by the grant suggested the need for a full-time field representative. Thus did the Rockefeller grant serve its most important (if unintended) function by triggering the long and fruitful collaboration between the Huntington Library and Juanita Brooks.

Levi Peterson's 1988 biography of Juanita Brooks tells us much about this relationship.<sup>2</sup> The basic details, however, can be recounted quickly. Brooks had first come into contact with the Huntington in 1944 when she learned of the library's John D. Lee diaries. She visited the library at the invitation of Robert Cleland to consult them for her book on the Mountain Meadows Massacre. After the Huntington had received the Rockefeller grant, Brooks received one of the library's research fellowships in Southwestern history to continue her work. Apparently impressed with

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2. See Levi S. Peterson, *Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), especially chapter 5. See also Juanita Brooks, "Jest Copyin'—Word f'r Word," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 37 (Fall 1969): 375–95.

the caliber of her research and with her personal contacts in the Southwest, Bliss also hired her under the auspices of the grant as a field agent to collect manuscripts on the region's history. Through the remainder of the 1940s and into the 1950s, Brooks scoured Utah and northern Arizona for diaries, journals, letters, account books, and other documents that would illuminate the settlement and the growth of the Great Basin region. During her labors, she harvested an enormous crop of original records that were either acquired outright by the Huntington or copied and returned to the owners. The Rockefeller grant's renewal in 1951 and Brooks's personal friendship with Bliss kept her active as a field agent well into the 1950s.

Juanita Brooks's notable success as a representative of the Huntington made the postwar decade a golden era for the library's acquisition of Mormon historical documents. The accomplishments of the twenty years thereafter in this field under Bliss's direction, although somewhat more modest in scope, maintained the momentum of previous years. Besides a continuing influx of individual diaries, journals, and autobiographies received from Brooks and other sources in Utah, several collections of notable significance were also added to the library's holdings. The 1959 acquisition of the papers of Frederic E. Lockley Jr., Oregon historian, editor, and rare-book dealer, included various letters written by his father, the editor of the *Salt Lake City Tribune* from 1873 to 1875. The senior Lockley's correspondence commented on many aspects of Mormonism as well as on the 1875 trial of John D. Lee, which Lockley attended. In 1965, the Huntington received another collection dealing with a controversial phase of Mormon history when it obtained the original transcripts of Kimball Young's interviews for his examination of polygamy, *Isn't One Wife Enough?* A year later, the Huntington purchased a group of letters and documents concerning the business affairs of Lewis C. Bidamon, second husband of Emma Hale Smith, widow of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. Inspection of that collection revealed that it contained papers of her son Joseph Smith III, eventual leader of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (today known as the Community of Christ). Finally, in the field of printed matter, Bliss achieved his greatest coup with his successful pursuit of the Lou J. Loughran Mormon Library in 1960. The more than fifteen thousand books, pamphlets, and periodicals that composed this collection represented an enormous treasure trove of rare documents, running the gamut from fervent opposition to passionate advocacy, vastly expanding the Huntington Library's resources in the field.

As the 1960s closed, the Huntington could look back on three extraordinarily productive decades of collecting historical Mormon materials. Since then, although the pace of acquisitions has slowed, the library has continued to make significant additions to both the printed and manuscript collections. The purchase or reproduction of original Mormon family diaries and journals has continued, sometimes with the assistance of Brooks or other Mormon scholars, while fugitive copies of important printed texts have been tracked down through dealers and private collectors. A very rare 1845 broadside printed in Nauvoo, for instance, announces the imminent departure of the Saints from that beleaguered city. A run of *Zion's Watchman* (Sydney, Australia) from its inauguration in 1853 through May 1856 includes the announcement of plural marriage to the Australian believers. English emigrant Edgar Jacob wrote of his impressions of Salt Lake City and its Latter-day Saint inhabitants as he passed through the region in 1873, while career army officer Walter Scribner Schuyler, traveling through southern Idaho territory five years later, commented at length about his encounters with Church members and the practice of polygamy. And from the twentieth century, the minute book of members of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers in San Bernardino, California, reflects the efforts of such organizations to preserve the Latter-day Saint story, while the manuscript autobiography of Almeda Perry Brown captures in detail the life story of a twentieth-century Latter-day Saint woman who overcame great obstacles to become a prominent member of Utah State University's faculty at an important stage in its development.

Such a brief sketch can hardly do justice to the intricate history behind the Huntington Library's Mormon collection. It may convey, however, some sense of the great breadth of resources assembled over the last eighty years. But if the mere size of this collection commands our attention, do its contents merit the scholar's interest?

In the field of printed works alone, the library's accumulated holdings represent an exceptionally useful resource for scholars in many fields. Among the foundation texts of the Mormon faith, the Huntington's rare-book holdings possess over one hundred English-language editions of the Book of Mormon, another forty editions in eighteen separate languages, and examples of editions produced by other groups such as the Brooksites and Whitmerites. Supplementing those many texts are first editions of the Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of the Latter Day Saints (Kirtland, Ohio, 1835), the Pearl of Great Price (Liverpool, 1851), and Parley P. Pratt's *A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People* (New York, 1837), as well as many subsequent printings

from the United States and, in the case of *A Voice of Warning*, from overseas as well. Other volumes in the collection include most of the salient writings authored by early Church leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Over time, the library's staff also brought together an extensive file of newspapers and periodicals documenting the Church's first half-century. Especially of note are complete runs of *The Evening and the Morning Star* in both its original 1832–1835 publication and its 1835–1836 Kirtland, Ohio, reissue; the *Latter-Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio, 1834–1837); and the *Elders' Journal of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Kirtland, Ohio, and Far West, Mo., 1837–1838). Other publications inform readers about events during the Nauvoo years (*Times and Seasons*, vols. 1–6, 1839–1846), about the course of the Church's foreign mission endeavors (*Latter-Day Saints' Millennial Star*, Liverpool, 1840–1898), and about the initial settlement of the Great Basin (*Deseret News*, vols. 1–12, 1850–1863, and scattered issues from later periods). The Huntington's microfilm collection reinforces the library's holdings of the *Deseret News* in particular with copies of the weekly paper from 1850 through 1898 and of the daily paper from volume 1, number 1, through volume 4, number 124 (November 21, 1867, through April 14, 1871).

Lastly, the Huntington also numbers in its holdings a great many of the major printed works about the Church. Since Henry Huntington's time, the library has acquired a great assortment of volumes attacking, defending, or merely commenting upon Mormonism. Readers may discover the reminiscences of faithful Church members and bitter apostates, doctrinal works elaborating upon the structures of belief within the Church, the observations of such fascinated travelers as Sir Richard Burton, and the vast popular literature—including dramas and dime novels—that uses Mormonism as the backdrop to adventure.

The Huntington's Mormon manuscript holdings demonstrate similarly impressive breadth and depth. The separate collections previously mentioned—such as the Bidamon, the Boreman, and the Lee papers, and such individual treasures as an 1834–1838 letter book kept by Oliver Cowdery and two volumes of diaries kept by Eliza Roxcy Snow for the years 1846–1847—constitute by themselves a splendid array of original documents focused on the Mormon experience.

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3. See the brief sketch by Peter Crawley, "Mormon Americana at the Huntington Library," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, nos. 3–4 (Autumn–Winter 1971): 138–40.

The heart of the matter, of course, remains the Mormon File, a synthetic arrangement of manuscripts containing a plethora of reels of microfilm, bound photostats and typescripts, original letters, diaries, journals, minute books, account books, business ledgers, and other documents, assembled in large part under the sponsorship of the Rockefeller Foundation nearly seventy years ago. Taken in total, this file now encompasses every phase of Mormon history from the era of the Prophet Joseph Smith through the exodus from Nauvoo, its subsequent relocation to the Great Salt Lake Valley, and the colonization of the Intermountain West by new waves of the faithful. While it would be impossible to comment here upon the content of every manuscript of particular interest, let me offer several examples of the collection's strengths. Mormonism's evolution and the Church's combative relations with its non-Latter-day Saint neighbors (in the state of Missouri, for example) can be followed through a number of sources. Besides Oliver Cowdery's letter book, the Huntington possesses a microfilm copy of David Lewis's account of the Hawn's Mill massacre; Reed Peck's 1839 manuscript description of Mormonism's Missouri period; and original transcripts of the Jackson County, Missouri, court suits filed in 1833 by Edward Partridge and William W. Phelps against the men who tarred and feathered Partridge and looted Phelps's home in Independence.

Of equal significance to other students of the Latter-day Saint experience, the Church's zealous commitment to bring its faith to all peoples is amply reflected in the Huntington's manuscript resources. The Mormon File includes over thirty-five diaries and journals kept by overseas missionaries. While most portray mission work in the British Isles or northern Europe, several describe the search for converts in such distinct locations as Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific islands, as seen in the letters and diaries of Ira Hinckley (New Zealand); the daybook of Peter Hansen (Scandinavia); Albert Jarman's correspondence in the Jarman Family Papers (England); and the diaries of Harvey H. Cluff (Hawaii, Great Britain), John Stillman Woodbury (Hawaii), and Hosea Stout (China). Even those volumes kept by missionaries in the United States, although unfolding in familiar cultural settings, reproduce the various experiences of many dedicated Saints over a five-decade span.

Other documents in the Mormon File and in related collections capture all the steps in the process of gathering the faithful, including raising converts in the foreign missions and then dispersing them across the Great Basin region to hold the land for God's chosen people. Women's voices are heard through the writings of scores of individuals, including

the diaries of Eliza Roxcy Snow, Mary Minerva Dart Judd, Lucy Mack Smith, and Lucy Hannah Flake; the autobiographies and memoirs of Sophronia Moore Martin, Mary Ann Stearns Winters, and Sarah Studevant Leavitt; the poetry of Ellis Reynolds Shipp; and the letters of Maria Bidgood Jarman Ford Barnes, all of which constitute only a tip of the proverbial iceberg, representing a multitude of other journals, reminiscences, and letters that portray the indispensable involvement of women within the sweep of Latter-day Saint history.

We can follow many emigrants through their diaries and autobiographies on the difficult passage from European ports and the eastern states to Utah and realize that despite the helping hand extended by the Church through such mechanisms as the Perpetual Emigrating Fund (PEF), such a journey required great reserves of strength and courage. Drawn together in the Huntington's holdings are manuscripts that trace the stories of Mormon immigrants from England (William Marsden, James Farmer, Benjamin Platt), Scotland (William Richardson), Denmark (John Nielsen), Sweden (Helena Rosbery), Switzerland (Jean Frederic Loba), and Canada (Jesse W. Crosby). The papers of one PEF agent in Missouri, William Young Empey, outline the fund's operations for the 1854 travel season, capturing with unintended pathos the tribulations that might befall the emigrants. In a letter dated April 24, 1854, written from the port of Liverpool, the head of the British mission, Samuel W. Richards, chided Empey for failing to notify him of those emigrants who had died in passage. The lack of news, he sternly reminded Empey, "leaves their friends in this country in terrible suspense." And among Empey's papers are several notebooks containing lists of PEF and 13£Co. passengers, with notations of those who succumbed.<sup>4</sup>

Both within the Mormon File and through related collections such as the diaries of Henry W. Bigler, researchers can find many diaries, journals, and other papers that present the Mormon colonization of the Southwest. There are dozens of journals, diaries, and autobiographies, and multiple collections of personal papers that describe colony building in Nevada, Arizona, and the southern reaches of Utah. Henry W. Bigler's diaries, for example, reach far beyond documenting his celebrated presence at James Marshall's discovery of gold at John Sutter's sawmill on January 24, 1848. Having converted to the Latter-day Saint

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4. 13£Co. refers to 13-pound companies, groups of emigrants whose transportation cost thirteen British pounds.

faith in 1837, Bigler found the subsequent decades of his life crowded with adventures as a member of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican-American War, a missionary for the Church twice in the Hawaiian Islands, and a seeker after gold in California before settling in St. George, Utah Territory. The Edwin Bunker Papers include many personal and business records that highlight efforts to establish the United Order in Bunkerville, Nevada, between 1877 and 1879, as well as Bunker's many responsibilities as a Latter-day Saint bishop in Bunkerville during the 1880s. The United Order is also the subject of "Voices from Within," Emma Seegmiller Higbee's account of life at Orderville. Efforts to advance the economic development of the region can be followed through the Huntington's Frederick Kesler Papers, which include nearly sixty volumes of daybooks and account books discussing the various mills that Kesler, a skilled practical engineer, built or operated all over the territory between 1857 and 1894.

On these and many other topics, Mormon collections at the Huntington offer considerable scope for scholarly investigation. The complex phenomenon that is Mormonism, however, did not exist in a vacuum and should not be studied in one. The Huntington also offers scholars access to a uniquely rich array of collateral materials that establish the essential context of Mormonism's place in western history. Of particular note, the library's superb collection of overland journals furnishes a massive amount of information about the trans-Mississippi West and about westward migration, especially during the height of the California Gold Rush. Some of these manuscripts record the passage of their authors through the new Mormon commonwealth; as a group, they describe the hopes and aspirations of western migrants as well as the experience of overland migration. The papers of other historical actors help to capture perspectives on other crossroads in Latter-day Saint history. Included within the library's extensive holdings on the nineteenth-century exploration of the trans-Mississippi West are the papers of John Williams Gunnison and Edward G. Beckwith. Gunnison's materials include letters written to his wife, Martha, during his travels in Utah with Stansbury's expedition in 1849 and 1850 and his command of the ill-fated 35th Parallel Survey in 1853 as the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers sought out a route for a transcontinental railroad. Beckwith's collection contains the journals he kept as Gunnison's second-in-command as well as letters to his wife about the survey's progress and the disaster that befell it. Among the records of Californian Thomas R. Bard, a founder of Union Oil Company and a United States Senator between 1899 and 1905,

are files concerning polygamy (reflecting in part the controversy over the Utah election of Latter-day Saint Apostle Reed Smoot to the Senate in 1902). And in the papers of Albert Bacon Fall, one of New Mexico's first two senators after statehood in 1912 and an unrelenting opponent of the Mexican revolution, are files relating to the Mormon colonies in Mexico (established in response to the federal government's pursuit of polygamists in the 1880s).

Reaching further into the study of western American history, the Huntington has also incorporated the collections of various scholars whose own research enhances the library's resources. The acquisition of Professor Ralph P. Bieber's research archive, for example, further deepens the Huntington's resources concerning western migration and settlement. Bieber accumulated an enormous body of newspaper transcriptions in the course of his long career spent studying the great 1849–1850 rush to California and the development of the American Southwest. Thousands of handwritten notecards and photostatic copies were made from hundreds of newspapers in every state and many territories documenting the overland trek to California, the opening of the Santa Fe Trail, the Mexican-American War, the organization of the western-range cattle industry, and the establishment of overland trade and communication with the Pacific Slope after the American conquest. Another set of newspaper transcriptions compiled by another leading Western historian gathers together information on the topic "Mormons and the Far West." Dale Morgan drew upon newspapers in every state between 1809 and 1857 to reproduce hundreds of articles that might be useful to historians of Mormonism. His assiduous research, like that of Bieber, saved hundreds of sources residing in private hands or in anonymous local historical collections from near-permanent obscurity.

Still other students of California and the West, delving deep into the history of the lands beyond the Mississippi River, have accumulated collections of sources that illuminate aspects of the Mormon experience. Beyond their careers as public school teachers, George and Helen Beatie dug into the past of Southern California's Inland Empire, including the Mormon colony of San Bernardino in the 1850s. Otis Marston, a pioneering boatman on the Colorado River after World War II, assembled a monumental collection of photographs and documents about the Colorado Basin that would eventually incorporate records about the Latter-day Saint presence in the region. Lastly, the Huntington has acquired for its reference collection hundreds of biographical dictionaries, state and county histories, city directories, and microfilm copies of territorial

records from the federal government pertaining to Utah and several of its neighbors. These reference tools help provide the substratum of facts necessary for much historical research.

Without attempting, therefore, to produce a detailed list that enumerates every item in the Huntington's Mormon holdings, this essay has sought to describe the general contours of the collection and to highlight some of its particular strengths. The individual pieces and specific collections cited here represent only a small portion of the whole.<sup>5</sup> Confronted by this vast assortment of documents, how can contemporary students of Mormonism and of Western American history make sense of it all in undertaking their research at the Huntington?

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, as original and facsimile copies of Mormon manuscripts poured into the library through the efforts of Juanita Brooks and others, the number of acquisitions appears to have overtaxed the resources of the institution to accession, organize, and catalog them rapidly enough to remain current with new materials at a time when large additions were also being made to the holdings in other fields. Although I have found no detailed extant records discussing the library's plans for the Mormon File, it seems likely that the file was created as a temporary expedient to absorb all the Mormon manuscripts into a common grouping. The resulting author card file, providing all too frequently only the barest bones of bibliographic data, thus imposed intractable limits upon access to the Mormon File, limits that generations of researchers struggled against with varying degrees of good humor. Within the last decade, however, a series of concerted efforts on the part of the Huntington has erased nearly all such limits.

As has been true of all major research institutions in the digital age, the Huntington has marked the beginning of the twenty-first century by devoting an ever-increasing share of time, energy, and money to enhancing its presence on the internet. An array of projects that can be grouped generally under the professional heading of "retrospective conversion" has effected the transfer of enormous amounts of descriptive data about many of the library's holdings (including the Mormon File and

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5. For a much more detailed discussion of the Huntington's manuscript resources about the Mormon experience, please see Katrina C. Denman, "A Firm Testimony of the Truth": A Guide to Mormon Manuscripts at the Huntington Library, c. 1805–1995," rev. ed. (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, 2015), accessed February 28, 2020, <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll1/id/9997/rec/5a>.

related collections) into online environments. Of even greater moment has been the Huntington's success in creating permanent records in its online catalog for the vast majority of previously uncatalogued Mormon manuscripts, whether in original or facsimile form (a project begun, I might add, with the generous support of friends at Brigham Young University—such mighty oaks that may grow from carefully planted acorns). With over five hundred records currently representing materials in the Mormon File alone, researchers consulting the library's online catalog now have the welcome opportunity to obtain details such as authorship, date and place of creation, and subject content about thousands of documents concerning the Mormon experience.

The most welcome development of all, however, is surely the Huntington's completion in 2015 of its final project in grappling with the vast Mormon File holdings. Increasingly concerned about the preservation of the nearly two hundred reels of negative microfilm that constitute a significant portion of the Mormon File, the Huntington engaged an outside vendor, Backstage Library Works, to scan these microfilms and generate documents in PDF form to serve as reference copies. As the PDFs came to hand, we were eventually able to retire all the microfilm negatives to serve as a preservation archive. The resulting PDFs also made it possible for the Huntington to undertake a full-fledged item-level cataloging project. Katrina Denman, then Library Assistant for Western American History, began by verifying extant descriptive information; she then greatly expanded the records through subject cataloging of the documents. By the project's conclusion, thanks to Ms. Denman's exceptional industry and skill, hundreds of documents previously accessible in many cases by author name only received detailed records that incorporated subject terms based on internationally recognized archival standards. Building upon these digital documents and digital records, the final stage of the project fed directly into the burgeoning Huntington Digital Library, in which we created a collection (characterized internally by the elegant term "bucket") now known as "Mormonism and the West." Here, researchers with online access anywhere on the planet are able to call up the full text of hundreds of letters, diaries, journals, life histories, autobiographies, and reminiscences that span nearly three-quarters of a century of Latter-day Saint experiences—men and women, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, first-generation converts and pioneers in the Great Basin Kingdom, farmers, homemakers, teachers, mechanics, cobblers, ranchers, masons, and factory workers, capturing the substance of their lives—sometimes with frustrating brevity or sometimes

in staggering detail, made available now to help us comprehend past, present, and future. Here indeed are the records that help us to grasp the truth of the observation by the great English social historian George M. Trevelyan: “The poetry of history lies in the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing into another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghosts at cockcrow.”<sup>6</sup>

The Huntington’s relationship with those who study the Mormon experience has been a long and fruitful one. Since its founding, the library has assembled a collection of Mormon materials with few parallels outside of Utah. It has hosted several generations of scholars who have authored the works that have defined and redefined the parameters of the field. The efforts to enhance the accessibility of the library’s holdings to that global community of researchers have been built and will continue to be built upon the firm foundation laid since the time of the Huntington’s creation, ensuring the library’s ability to assist serious advanced research in Mormon history for generations to come. At this happy confluence of the Huntington’s centenary and the bicentennial of Joseph Smith’s First Vision, let us then bend our shoulders yet again to the wheel and carry on with this great work.

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6. George M. Trevelyan, from “Autobiography of an Historian,” in *An Autobiography and Other Essays* (1949) as quoted in [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/G.\\_M.\\_Trevelyan](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/G._M._Trevelyan), accessed May 17, 2020.

## Even Psalm

Smog today, but I saw your wink in the pink light of the peaks above it, heard your chuckle in the plumes of trumpets and under-the-skin drums of the high school marching band practicing four blocks away. I felt you at church yesterday in the glittering silent air after the last notes of the organ solo, that silent tolling wind that unfurled in the curls of even old snoring Sister Bea, carbonating our blood so that even the teenagers glanced up from their phones, all of us clangng, goose-bumped, rapped. Evening, I sense you, nappy and wild, dancing in the cat's yawn, the cut grass and the moths, lantern-drunk at the windowscreen. Holy jack-in-the-box, strewer of breadcrumbs: when I catch sight of your hem, for a time I fear no evil.

—Darlene Young

# Visualizing the Vision

## The History and Future of First Vision Art

*Anthony Sweat*

*“Art could not be nobler than the religion that gave it life.”<sup>1</sup>*

When a teenage Joseph Smith entered the woods on his family farm to pray over his soul and inquire which church he should join, the vision that burst forth from heaven changed his life and laid a pathway for the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The First Vision is among the scenes of the Restoration most often depicted by artists. Portrayals of the First Vision were published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the *Ensign* magazine 167 times between 1971 and 2019, nearly double the representations of any Restoration theme other than depictions of pioneers.<sup>2</sup> Today in Church curriculum, if we talk about the First Vision, we nearly always have a painting to accompany it.

This abundance of institutional imagery was not always the case, however. It took about a hundred years for the restored Church to regularly use artistic imagery in its institutional publications to portray its founding events and doctrines. From 1832 until 1900, there were fewer than three dozen images dealing with Church history or doctrine published in tens of thousands of pages of Church periodicals, and the First

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1. Frank Bristol, *The Ministry of Art* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1897), 54–55.

2. Compare the First Vision being shown 167 times in the *Ensign* to notable events such as the restoration of the priesthood (101 times), the Book of Mormon translation (55 times), Joseph Smith’s martyrdom/Carthage Jail (40 times), Moroni appearing or instructing Joseph or giving him the plates (33 times), and the Three or Eight Witnesses of the Book of Mormon (18 times). In contrast, artistic depictions of pioneers, Winter Quarters, and the westward migration have been shown almost 500 times.

Vision was not one of them.<sup>3</sup> The first painting of the First Vision was not printed by the institutional Church until 1912, nearly one hundred years after the event occurred.<sup>4</sup>

This essay traces the development of First Vision art and how it has evolved over time, examining how an artistic *symbol* of the First Vision has emerged that can simultaneously enhance but also limit our understanding of the vision. I will first explore how cultural factors influence art, including First Vision art. Next, I will trace in thirty-year periods a chronological development of First Vision artistic imagery and how that imagery has created a recognizable First Vision symbol. Last, I will analyze current cultural forces that might be influencing the way the First Vision is portrayed now and possibly will be in the future.<sup>5</sup>

### Art as Cultural Representation

In the quiet mountains of Ephraim, Utah, a Danish convert to the Church named Carl Christian Anton (C. C. A.) Christensen worked away in his studio behind the old Ephraim Roller Mill on a series of twenty-three religious paintings. His images, each ten feet wide and about seven feet tall, represented prominent moments of Latter-day Saint history. Stitched together into a single canvas scroll about 175 feet long, each new scene could be slowly unveiled to an audience by assistants operating a crank, accompanied by a prewritten narration. Between 1878 and 1888, Christensen's "Mormon Panorama" toured across the Western United States with wide acclaim.<sup>6</sup> Why? Christensen's images were born of and spoke to cultural crosscurrents. When Christensen's panorama

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3. My research assistant Dylan Barton and I have compiled every image dealing with Church history or doctrine published by the Church in *The Evening and the Morning Star*, *Messenger and Advocate*, *Elders' Journal*, *Times and Seasons*, *Millennial Star*, *Gospel Reflector*, *Nauvoo Neighbor*, *Gospel Light*, *The Prophet*, *The New-York Messenger*, *People's Organ*, *Young Woman's Journal*, *Improvement Era*, *Mutual Improvement Messenger*, *Juvenile Instructor* [renamed *The Instructor* in 1930], *The Children's Friend*, and *Relief Society Magazine*.

4. William A. Morton, *From Plowboy to Prophet: Being a Short History of Joseph Smith for Children* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1912), facing page 8.

5. Special thanks to my research assistant Calvin Burke for his help in gathering sources and images for this entire article. His insights and scholarly acumen were invaluable.

6. Paul L. Anderson and Richard Jensen, "C. C. A. Christensen and the Mormon Panorama," *News of the Church*, *Ensign* 9 (June 1979): 80; see also Jane Dillenberger, "Mormonism and American Religious Art," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 187–200.

paintings were created, pressures were again mounting on the Saints, who had been driven to the Rocky Mountains. The transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869, had ended Utah's relative isolation. Utah's practice of polygamy was under attack by new laws from the United States federal government. Brigham Young—the longtime Church President who brought the Church west—had died in 1877, and his successor, John Taylor, was forced into hiding for refusing to comply with polygamy legislation. A new generation of Latter-day Saint children and converts who never personally knew Joseph Smith needed to understand, learn, and embrace their sacred history. Under these cultural forces, Christensen picked up his paintbrush and went to work, producing canvases that reflected a people born by restored revelation and persecuted because of it. The first image in the panorama? Christensen's narration begins, "This scene represents the first vision of Joseph Smith, the prophet."<sup>7</sup> Audiences loved it. Joseph's story was their story.

Christensen's story illustrates what art critic Kerry Freedman explains: art is a "form of social production," and "visual culture creates, as well as reflects, personal and social freedoms."<sup>8</sup> Societal values act like tectonic plates upon artists, creating pressures that collide in creative minds and give rise to their masterpieces. However, this relationship between art and society is often symbiotic. One contemporary author asked, "Does the artist help create the cultural moment they are in, or are they only a reflection of their cultural milieu?" and then answered her own question with an example of an artist who "is both a reflection of our culture and creating culture."<sup>9</sup> C. C. A. Christensen was producing art reflecting his social values, but his art also contributed to new culture. When Christensen was painting *The Vision*, a young musician on a sales call for D. O. Calder's Music Palace came to Ephraim and was invited to Christensen's studio. The musician's name was George Manwaring. Manwaring's son recalls that Christensen "took him into his studio and showed him The Vision which he had just finished. It was a painting of the Father and Son appearing to Joseph Smith in the sacred grove in answer to prayer. It made such an impression on the mind of George Manwaring, then

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7. Lectures as Written by C. C. A. Christensen, Scene One, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, box 8608, A 1 a no. 2440.

8. Kerry Freedman, *Teaching Visual Culture: Curriculum, Aesthetics, and the Social Life of Art* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), xii.

9. Carrie Brumer, "How Do the Arts Reflect Our Culture?" Artist Strong, blog, <https://www.artiststrong.com/how-do-the-arts-reflect-our-culture/>.

about 24 years of age, that he was inspired to compose the song.”<sup>10</sup> That song was “Joseph Smith’s First Prayer,” today sung by millions the world over.<sup>11</sup> As scholar James Allen writes, “It was thus four decades after the organization of the Church that the vision found its way into artistic media, but it was largely through these media that it eventually found its way into the hearts and minds of the Saints.”<sup>12</sup> The monuments created by artists affected by cultural values also serve as new guideposts to look toward and as peaks upon which to stand and see new vistas.

### Cultural Factors Influenced First Vision Art

What, then, were some of the cultural factors that may have influenced the lack of First Vision art in the early Church for members to look toward and stand their faith upon? One influence may have been that early Americans largely eschewed religious art,<sup>13</sup> and Joseph Smith himself was not known to connect visual art with religious instruction or worship. The Kirtland Temple (the only worship building completed in Joseph’s lifetime) was devoid of religious paintings, stained glass art, or sculpture. As Terryl Givens has noted, Joseph Smith was born into a culture of “domestic arts, such as simple portraits, stenciled furniture, and both wall and floor painting,” but “none of [Joseph’s] actions or writings suggest that he paid any notice to an effete art like painting.”<sup>14</sup> The only known reference Joseph Smith ever made to religious art was when Benjamin West’s *Death on a Pale Horse*, depicting the four horsemen of the apocalypse from Revelation 6:8, was exhibited in his reading room, just two weeks before Joseph was martyred.<sup>15</sup>

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10. John H. Manwaring and George Ernest Manwaring, *Brief History of the Life of George Manwaring*, retrieved from <https://familysearch.org/patron/v2/TH-300-44301-24-30/dist.pdf?ctx=ArtCtxPublic>.

11. This hymn is also titled “Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning.” *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 26.

12. James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision of Mormon Religious Thought,” in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 2012), 227–60.

13. Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 40.

14. Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 180.

15. “Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 4, 1 March–22 June 1844,” 157, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-4-1-march-22-june-1844/159>.

The lack of religious art may have been due to the Church's financial constraints (because art is generally considered a luxury, supported and afforded usually by those who are more wealthy), and the simple fact that the Church lacked trained artists in its New York, Kirtland, and Missouri periods. It was not until the Church settled in Nauvoo that the first painters emerged.

These explanations, however, do not sufficiently answer why artistic First Vision imagery did not appear in the Church for most of the nineteenth century, since compositions could have been produced by lesser artists from 1830 to 1850 and by gifted artists such as Dan Wegeland and others who emerged in the 1850s to 1900, including the Paris art missionaries.<sup>16</sup> The single most salient cultural reason is that the First Vision simply was not emphasized by the early Restored Church as a focal point for its historical or theological narrative. Despite the First Vision's doctrinal prominence today in Latter-day Saint history, it has been documented by historians that the First Vision was not well known or circulated among early general Church membership.<sup>17</sup> The early narrative for the initiation of the Restoration was usually the visitation of Moroni to Joseph Smith and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, not Joseph's personal prayer in the grove. Most Saints gathered to the Church in Ohio, Missouri, Kirtland, and Utah without hearing about the story of a fourteen-year-old boy who went to the woods and saw God and Jesus in a vision. Other than an obscure reference to the First Vision in D&C 20:5 in April 1830, the First Vision was not published anywhere in the 1830s. James Allen writes, "Only in 1838 did Joseph Smith prepare an account of it for official publication; not until 1840 did any account appear in print; and not for another half century was it publicly discussed with great regularity or used for the wide variety of purposes to which it lends itself today."<sup>18</sup> Although Joseph Smith told the vision to some in the 1830s, Steven Harper writes that "he did so

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16. John Hafen, Lorus Pratt, John B. Fairbanks, Edwin Evans, and Herman Haag were sent by the Church on a mission to study and learn art at L'Académie Julian in Paris in 1890, returning to complete the murals in the Salt Lake Temple in 1893. Giles H. Florence Jr., "Harvesting the Light: The 1890 Paris Art Mission," *Ensign* 18 (October 1988): 34–41; Rachel Cope, "'With God's Assistance I Will Someday Be an Artist': John B. Fairbanks's Account of the Paris Art Mission," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 3 (2011): 133–59; Linda Jones Gibbs, *Harvesting the Light: The Paris Art Mission and the Beginning of Utah Impressionism* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987).

17. James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (1966): 29–46; reprinted in *Exploring the First Vision*, 283–306.

18. James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Mormon Religious Thought," in *Exploring the First Vision*, 227–60.

privately among small groups of followers.”<sup>19</sup> Joseph had the vision documented in his 1832 history and again in 1835, but these two accounts did not see the light of day until the mid-twentieth century, packed away in a trunk by Willard Richards and forgotten for nearly a hundred years.<sup>20</sup> It would not be until influential apostle Orson Pratt began emphasizing the First Vision in print and discourse that Church members began to use it as a doctrinal Restoration narrative, particularly in the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>21</sup>

In 1880, the Pearl of Great Price was canonized, including excerpts from Joseph Smith’s history, which included his 1838–39 First Vision narrative. The Pearl of Great Price placed an account of the First Vision in the hands of the Saints, who were ready to read, quote, analyze, and apply it as scripture. At roughly the same time the Church canonized parts of its official history, the United States waged literal and ideological war against the Latter-day Saints, largely over their practice of plural marriage, attacking through an army in the 1850s and federal legislation in the 1860s, ’70s, and ’80s.

When the Church formally abandoned the practice of plural marriage at the turn of the century, it also abandoned part of its identity. Scholar Kathleen Flake writes that at this time President Joseph F. Smith (1901–1918) engaged in “re-placing memory” for the Church, acquiring sacred sites such as the Smith family farm in Palmyra-Manchester to solidify Latter-day Saint collective memory and to reestablish its founding stories. Flake writes, “The Latter-day Saints felt the need for ‘places of memory’ at the very time when they felt at risk of a breach with their past. . . . In the First Vision, Joseph F. Smith had found a marker of Latter-day Saint identity whose pedigree was as great as—and would be made greater than—that of plural marriage for the twentieth-century Latter-day Saints. . . . New emphasis on the First Vision maintained a sense of religious difference . . . from social action to theological

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19. Steven Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 51.

20. Harper, *First Vision*, 66.

21. “After Joseph Smith, Orson Pratt made the most significant and substantial choices about how the vision would be remembered and rendered meaningful. This role can hardly be overstated.” Harper, *First Vision*, 75. See Orson Pratt’s sermons: “Mormonism,” *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 12:352–62 (February 24, 1869); “The Fulfillment of Prophecy—The Early History of the Church—The Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Discourses*, 14:137–47 (March 19, 1871); “Review of God’s Dealings with the Prophet Joseph—Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon—Gathering, Etc.,” *Journal of Discourses*, 15:178–91 (September 22, 1872); “Joseph Smith’s First Visions,” *Journal of Discourses*, 17:278–88 (September 20, 1874).

TABLE 1. “First Vision” references by decade, normalized in words per million, taken from [lds-general-conference.org](http://lds-general-conference.org)

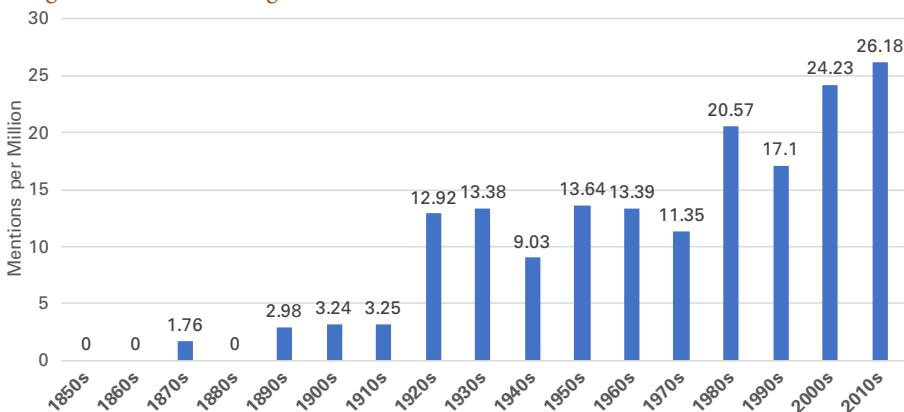
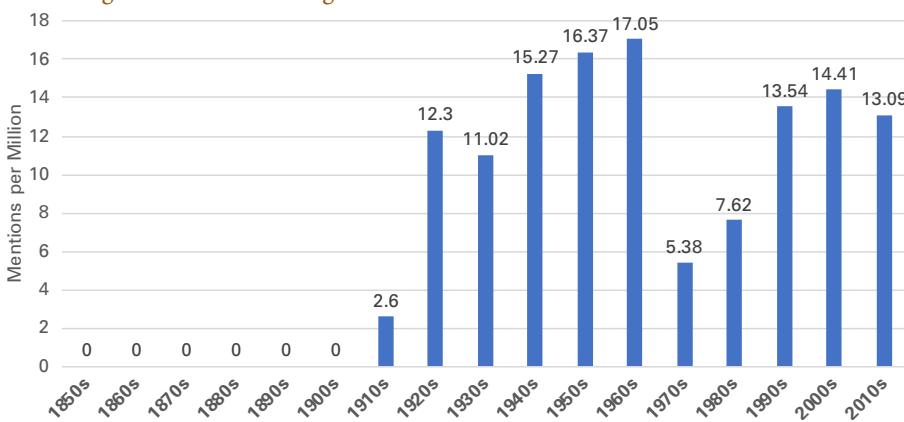


TABLE 2. “Sacred Grove” references by decade, normalized in words per million, taken from [lds-general-conference.org](http://lds-general-conference.org)



belief.”<sup>22</sup> From the mid-1800s through the early 1900s, the First Vision moved from relatively little-known history to Restoration 101 for the Saints. It summarized unique Latter-day Saint doctrine in one sacred story: There was an apostasy, divine authority was lost, new revelation was needed, God spoke to Joseph initiating the Restoration of truth, the heavens are now open, God speaks to a prophet, his authorized Church is back, and God will speak to you about its truth as he did to Joseph. To see this increased narrative emphasis, tables 1 and 2 show the rise of

22. Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 115, 118, 120.

references to the “First Vision” and the “Sacred Grove” in general conference talks by decade.

As the First Vision solidified as a basis of the Saints’ self-representation, its rising importance was echoed in artistic expression.

### The First Known First Vision Image

The first person to visually depict and publish an artistic image representing Joseph Smith’s First Vision was likely Thomas Brown Holmes (T. B. H.) Stenhouse in 1873.<sup>23</sup> Although Stenhouse had been “twenty-five years a Mormon elder” and a pioneering missionary for the Church in Italy, he was now pioneering a new work against the Church in Utah: his book, *The Rocky Mountain Saints*, published in New York in 1873.<sup>24</sup> Stenhouse and his wife had grown critical of the Church’s teachings on plural marriage and of the combination of Brigham Young’s ecclesiastical, economic, and political influence, “a Theocracy which practices polygamy” in Stenhouse’s words.<sup>25</sup> The subtitle of Stenhouse’s book provides one reason why his book was pioneering: *A Full and Complete History of the Mormons, from the First Vision of Joseph Smith to the Last Courtship of Brigham Young*. The book’s many illustrations include a captivating image of the First Vision by an unidentified artist (fig. 1).<sup>26</sup>

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23. I am not the first to make this claim. Richard G. Oman wrote of the Stenhouse image, “This is probably the first depiction of the First Vision.” Richard G. Oman, “Ye Shall See the Heavens Open: Portrayal of the Divine and the Angelic in Latter-day Saint Art,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995–96): 114.

24. T. B. H. Stenhouse, *Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York: D. Appleton, 1873), title page.

25. Stenhouse, *Saints*, iii.

26. There is no name signed on the First Vision illustration in Stenhouse’s book. Throughout *Rocky Mountain Saints*, there are 79 illustrations, or about one every ten pages. There are only fourteen illustrations with attributable names. Two illustrations are signed by two people (Cary and Weville on page 168, and Cary and J. Hoey on page 344), and two are signed by W. M. Avery, three by J. Hoey, and seven by Cary (William de la Montagne Cary, a premier illustrator of the American West who had traveled west multiple times). Some illustrations in *Rocky Mountain Saints* are reprints of lithographs that appeared in *Harper’s Weekly*, and some appear original and produced specifically for Stenhouse’s book. Thus, the artist of this image could have been any of several individuals illustrating for publishing houses and papers at the time. Based on my analysis, if any of the illustrators whose names appear in illustrations for *Rocky Mountain Saints* are responsible for the First Vision image, I would very tentatively lean toward J. Hoey. The image “Mormon Troubles in Missouri Begin” on page 81 carries some similarities with the First Vision image, such as the curly hair of the man who is punching, the style of depicting trees (see also the illustration by Hoey on page 647), and the way faces are rendered. In contrast, Weville’s, Avery’s, and Cary’s styles (while



INCEPTION OF MORMONISM—JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION.

**FIGURE 1.** Engraving of the First Vision, in T. B. H. Stenhouse, *Rocky Mountain Saints*, facing page 1.

A black-and-white engraving with a sense of motion, it shows the Father flying in front of the Son, each with an upraised hand and with rays of light beaming downward from them toward a very boyish, curly haired, and seemingly frightened Joseph Smith in a dense wood. This first visualization of the First Vision is markedly different from the artistic symbol of the First Vision that developed a hundred years later.

### The Damaged C. C. A. Christensen First Vision Painting

The next known artistic depiction of the First Vision was C. C. A. Christensen's painting, created about 1878, as discussed earlier. After a successful touring run, Christensen's panorama paintings were eventually rolled up and put away, forgotten and lost for a time. The panorama was remembered in the mid-twentieth century by a group of Church Educational System employees working on a Church film.<sup>27</sup> The murals are housed today at Brigham Young University's Museum of Art, but unfortunately Christensen's first painting in the series, *The Vision*, is nowhere to be found today. In researching what may have happened to it, I made contact with Alec Andrus,<sup>28</sup> whose father, James Andrus, was chair of the art department at Brigham Young University and was involved in BYU's analyzing and acquiring of the Christensen Mormon Panorama canvases.<sup>29</sup> Alec Andrus recollects Christensen's panoramas being brought to his home. The paintings smelled of mildew and were unrolled to air out and have the damage assessed. Alec recalled that Christensen's First Vision painting was present and part of the large scroll he saw as a child. Acknowledging the faulty nature of memory, Alec Andrus remembered:

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all very similar) do not match as readily (see, for example, illustrations on 378 by "Cary" and on 703 by "W. M. Avery"). I consulted an art dealer who specializes in engraving prints from this time period; after viewing a digital version of the First Vision image, he concluded, "It does not strike me as the work of Cary," but he could not feel confident without seeing the original image in person. When asked if this image is a lithograph, etching, or woodcut, he said, "My guess would be a wood engraving," but again could not be confident without seeing it in person. Private email to author, September 28, 2019.

27. Boyd K. Packer, "The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord," BYU devotional, February 1, 1976.

28. Alec Andrus approached me after a research presentation I made on Latter-day Saint art at Brigham Young University's Education Week in August 2019.

29. James Andrus "joined the faculty of Brigham Young University Art Department in 1940, designed the Printmaking curriculum, and served for many years as Department Chairman." He retired in 1972 and died in 1993. See "Death: James Roman Andrus," *Deseret News*, June 26, 1993, <https://www.deseret.com/1993/6/26/19053175/death-james-roman-andrus>.

My reaction, through the filter of 65+ years later, was that Brother Christensen's painting of the first vision was different than my mental image of the event and I asked dad why. The presentation of the Father and Jesus was not at all what I envisioned. He told me about the use of the display as the Christensen brothers carried it through the LDS communities. . . . I think that may have been the first painting or illustration of the first vision that I had seen and it was not nearly as grand or ethereal as I thought it should be.<sup>30</sup>

What became of the panel of the First Vision? Andrus concludes, "I think the first panel was damaged by mildew and mold and I think that was the first vision panel or it may have just been that the first vision panel that was outside the way the scroll was rolled up in the box and therefore more exposed to the elements. Dad said the collection was in a shed or outbuilding and not well sheltered."<sup>31</sup>

Thus, based on this recollection, it seems that Christensen's *The Vision* may have been present when the scroll was rediscovered but due to damage was likely unrepairable. It is unknown whether this image was discarded in the trash or whether it was separated from the other intact canvases housed at BYU yet remains preserved somewhere today.

### Stained Glass in Temples and Chapels

Perhaps the earliest depiction of the First Vision produced by the institutional Church was a stained glass image. In 1892, the Church began completing the interior of the Salt Lake Temple. They contracted some of the stained glass work with Tiffany Glass & Decorating Company in New York, including one window to be placed in the Holy of Holies. "The subject is the first vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith," wrote Joseph Don Carlos Young to Tiffany.<sup>32</sup> Young gave a highly detailed description of the event of the First Vision, including clear demands for what he wanted it to look like: "A boy in the 15th year of his age clad in the ordinary garb of a farmer's son kneeling in the attitude of prayer. . . . The facial expression should also be modestly turned upward." Young then took some expressive license not found in the historical First Vision

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30. Alec Andrus, "Memories of CCA Christensen's Mormon Panorama." Spelling and grammar as in the original. Prepared for and sent via email to the author, September 7, 2019. Transcript in possession of the author.

31. Andrus, "Memories of CCA Christensen's Mormon Panorama."

32. Joseph Don Carlos Young to Tiffany & Co., September 20, 1892, Joseph Don Carlos Young Letterpress Copybook, 160–71, Church History Library; reproduced in Oman, "Heavens Open," 116–18.



**FIGURE 2.** Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company, stained glass window in the Holy of Holies room in the Salt Lake Temple, 1892. Photo by C. R. Savage Co., 1911, Salt Lake Temple Photographs, Church History Library.

accounts when it came to depicting the Father and Son, requesting "robes of exquisite whiteness, reaching to the ankles, and the arms were covered. . . . The feet were also covered with a sort of shoe. . . . The hair was of snowy whiteness and worn more after the early oriental style. . . . The faces of both these Celestial Beings were adorned with full grown Beards, also, of pure white color. . . . The countenance of the one indicated that He was older than the other. . . . The Son being on the right

hand of the Father.”<sup>33</sup> He then emphatically underlined that “both were without wings.” Although it is unclear where Young received some of this direction, this description set a standard for First Vision art that many future renderings followed. Young asked that Tiffany’s artists send a sketch to be approved, which suggests that Tiffany’s artists composed the scene (fig. 2).<sup>34</sup>

This stained glass window in the Salt Lake Temple serves as a pivot point in Latter-day Saint depictions of the First Vision. Not only was it likely the first depiction commissioned by the institutional Church, but by being placed in its holiest place in the temple the window is evidence of the rising centrality of the First Vision in Latter-day Saint theology. The Tiffany First Vision window also set a pattern that other stained glass images later reproduced and followed. In the early 1900s, stained glass representations of the First Vision were created for a few Latter-day Saint chapels in places such as Salt Lake City, Brigham City, and Los Angeles.<sup>35</sup>

In 1907, the Salt Lake Seventeenth Ward placed a large replica of the Tiffany stained glass window in their chapel, encased in a much grander and ornate window with diamond-shaped sides. The painted portion of the glass was done in Belgium, and the window was designed and constructed by Harry Kimball and the Bennett Paint and Glass Company of Salt Lake City (fig. 3).<sup>36</sup>

In 1908, the Salt Lake Second Ward also placed a replica of the Tiffany First Vision stained glass in a gothic-style arch window with a wonderful decorative background. The vision scene was painted by the LaCross Glass Company of Indiana, and the window was again designed and constructed by Harry Kimball and Bennett Paint and Glass Company (fig. 4).<sup>37</sup> That same year, 1908, the Liberty Ward in Salt Lake City also installed a stained glass inset of the First Vision in a large gothic window in their chapel. The creator of this window is unidentified. The inset is a small window (25" wide by 47" tall) and is based on but is somewhat different than the previous Tiffany copies. Joseph is again clad in dark clothing in the lower right, but now his hands are pressed together in prayer; the Father and Son are more directly above him, wearing unique,

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33. Oman, “Ye Shall See the Heavens Open,” 117–18.

34. Oman, “Ye Shall See the Heavens Open,” 118.

35. Stained glass windows made by Tiffany and other companies were popular in churches throughout the United States during this era.

36. Joyce Athay Janetski, “A History, Analysis, and Registry of Mormon Architectural Art Glass” (master’s thesis, University of Utah, 1981), 170.

37. Janetski, “Art Glass,” 114.

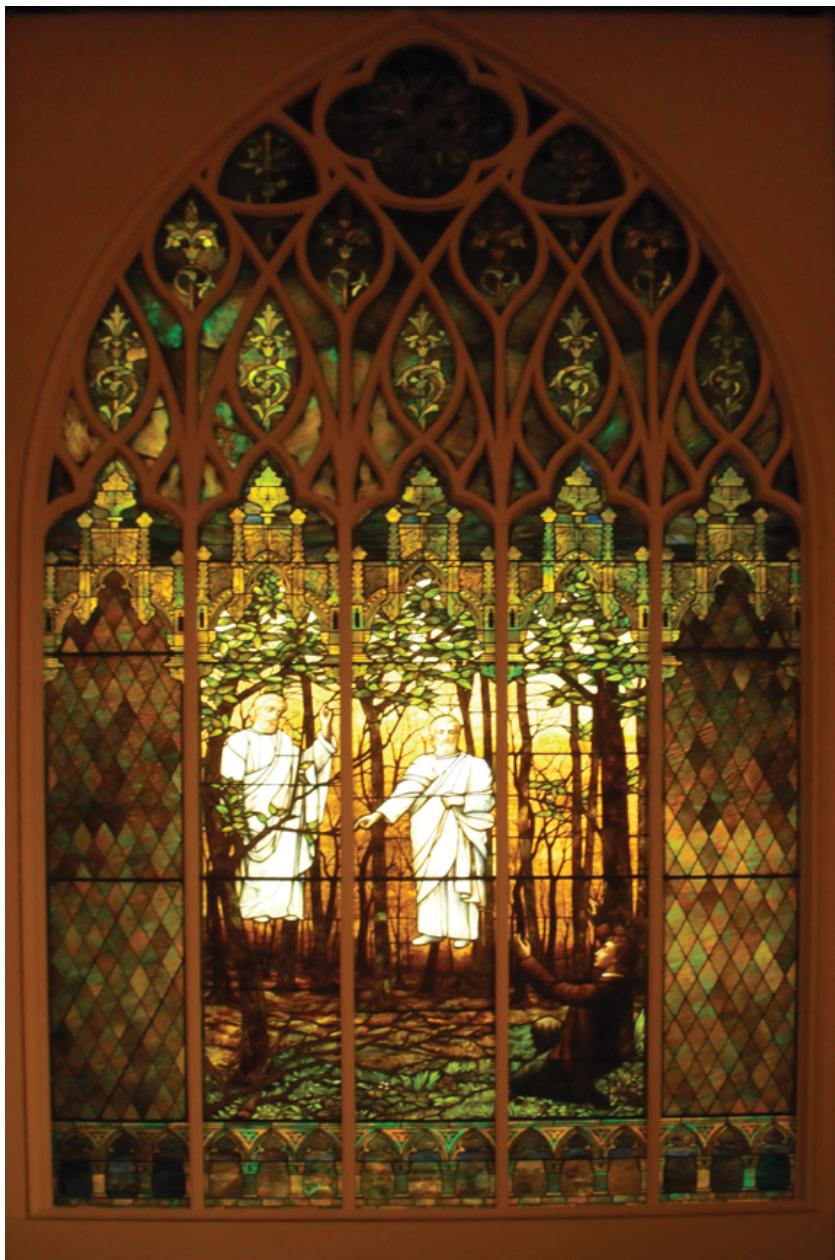
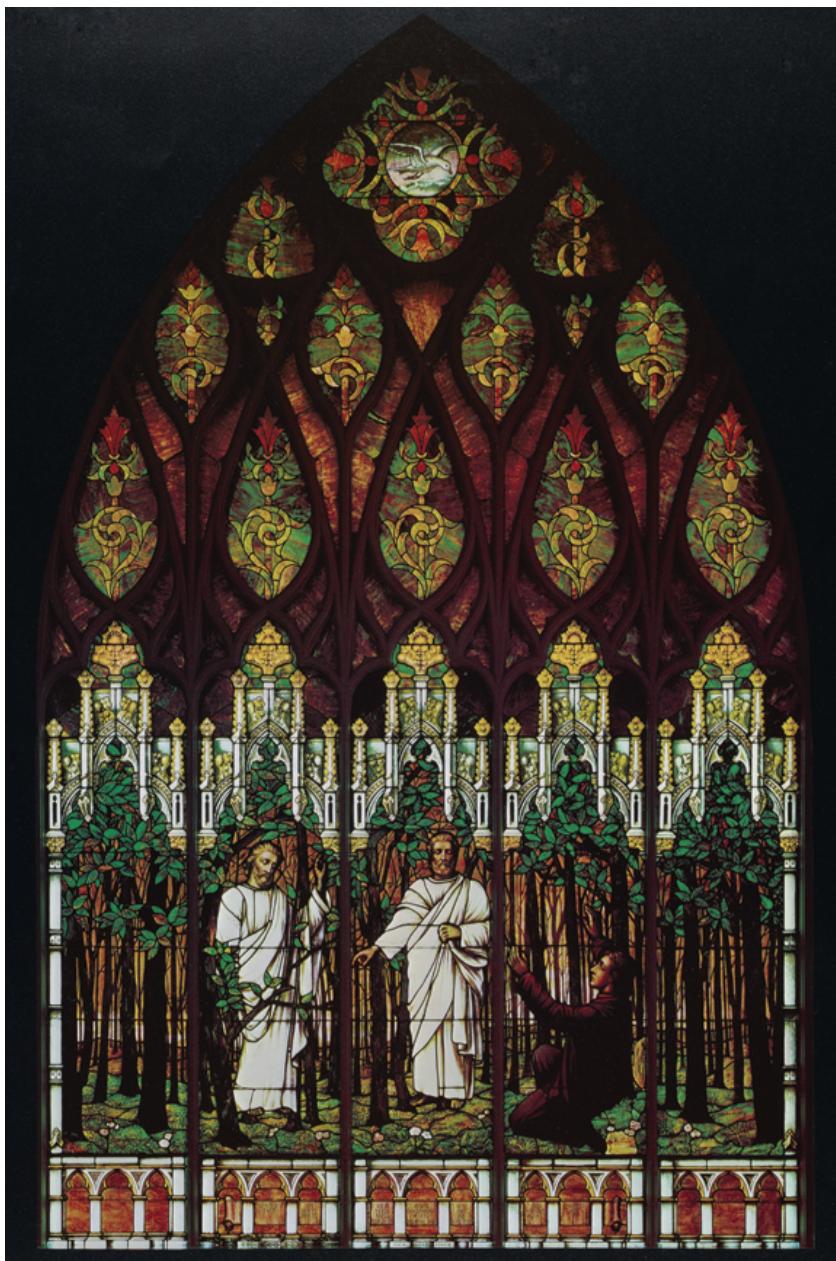


FIGURE 3. Harry Kimball and Bennett Paint and Glass Company, stained glass window, Salt Lake Seventeenth Ward building, 1907. Photo by Bridger Talbot.



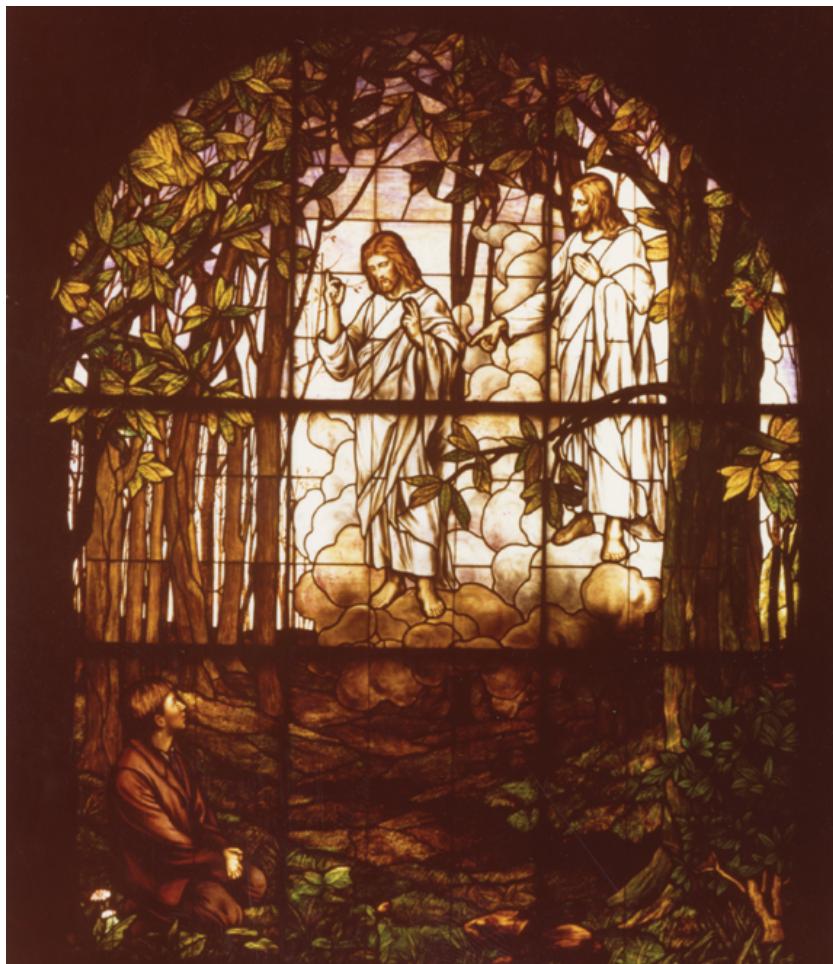
**FIGURE 4.** LaCross Glass Company, Harry Kimball, and Bennett Paint and Glass Company, stained glass window, Salt Lake Second Ward building, 1908. Courtesy Church History Library.



FIGURE 5. Creator unknown, stained glass window, Liberty (Salt Lake City) Ward building, 1908. Photo by Bridger Talbot.

complexly folded robing; this time the Son has his left hand down and open, and his right hand up. Symbolic rays from heaven also shoot down behind God and Jesus (fig. 5).

In 1911, the Brigham City Third Ward purchased a large 12' x 8' First Vision stained glass window for their building, created by Henry



**FIGURE 6.** Henry Kimball, Fred Brown, and Bennett Paint and Glass Company, 1911, stained glass window, Brigham City (Utah) Third Ward building, 1911. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Kimball, Fred Brown, and the Bennett Paint and Glass Company. It was hauled up from Salt Lake City to Brigham City in the freezing cold by men holding onto the glass in a truck with no windshield.<sup>38</sup> In this window, Joseph is again in a dark brown overcoat, with God pointing to Jesus, who has his hands upraised, but Joseph is now in the bottom left, the Father and Son are turned at a three-quarter angle, light clouds

38. Janetski, "Art Glass," 55.



FIGURE 7. Creator unknown, stained glass window, Los Angeles Adams Ward building, 1915. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

surround them, and the entire feel of the stained glass is softer. It is marvelously hand painted, whoever did so (fig. 6).<sup>39</sup>

In 1915 in California, the Los Angeles Adams Ward commissioned a much larger version of the Salt Lake Liberty Ward's composition. This window now resides in the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City (fig. 7). In 1930, the San Bernardino Ward placed a First Vision stained glass in their chapel. This image also follows a typical pattern established in prior windows: Joseph again is in the lower right, both arms raised as in the Tiffany window, clad in dark clothing (with a green shawl); the Father's face is nearly an identical copy of the face in the Los Angeles Adams Ward image. But the overall composition is at a unique angle, and Jesus is standing with both arms open in a very receptive manner.

39. Although companies like Bennett Paint and Glass usually cut the glass and constructed the window, "painting on glass not only required a kiln, but demanded advanced skills, neither which Bennetts, nor any enterprise nor individual in the state, possessed." It seems unknown who did the actual art glass painting of this marvelous First Vision scene. Janetski, "Art Glass," 53.

The Father and Son also have reds and golds in their divine clothing. This window resides today in the Redlands California Temple.<sup>40</sup>

Each of these early stained glass windows follows a similar composition based on the Tiffany window: a boy kneeling, three-quarter turned to show the side of his face, in dark brown or black coat and clothing; the Father and Son standing next to each other, usually front-facing the viewer; the Son at the right hand of the Father, wearing white robes. These images were seen and stared at during weekly Church services by an entire generation of early twentieth-century Saints.<sup>41</sup>

It is notable that about a hundred years after the original First Vision stained glass was produced by Tiffany for the Salt Lake Temple, the Church again commissioned a stained glass window of the First Vision, for the Palmyra New York Temple.<sup>42</sup> The Church hired stained glass artist Tom Holdman and his Holdman Studios to produce all the stained glass windows for the building, including a large 5' × 8' stained glass of the First Vision that patrons see upon entering the building. The Holdman Studios First Vision follows patterns similar to those of the early Tiffany and Bennett windows. Tom Holdman said that the Church's Temple Art committee gave him specific instructions and feedback on compositional sketches for the window. Holdman remembers their directions about the Father and Son: "We would like them to be the same height, and that they look really close to each other, but you can tell one is older than the other," repeating nearly verbatim the instruction given by Joseph Don Carlos Young to Tiffany Glass & Decorating Company. When I asked Tom Holdman about his inspiration for the composition and whether he looked to any earlier First Vision imagery, he said he referenced "the one in the Holy of Holies. I also went to that chapel by the Conference Center," likely the Salt Lake Seventeenth Ward

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40. Credit to Bridger Talbot for posting at his blog, *Historic LDS Architecture*, some excellent insights, which I have relied upon in parts of this summary. See "Latter-day Stained Glass: Part 2—First Vision Stained Glass Depictions," *Historic LDS Architecture*, February 12, 2017, <http://ldspioneerarchitecture.blogspot.com/2017/02/latter-day-stained-glass-part-2-first.html>.

41. Likely there are other chapels built in the 1900s not included herein that also included stained glass renditions of the First Vision. For example, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf spoke of his memory of "a stained-glass window that beautified the front part of the chapel [in the Zwickau, Germany, chapel]. The stained glass portrayed the First Vision, with Joseph Smith kneeling in the Sacred Grove, looking up toward heaven and into a pillar of light." Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Fruits of the First Vision, *Ensign* 35 (May 2005), 37. The location of this particular window is unknown.

42. "Sacred Grove, Sacred Light," *Ensign* 31, no. 4 (April 2002): 8–11.

on 142 West 200 North. He said, “I really did . . . analyze those before I went to the temple to get my own inspiration and interpretation.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, the early stained glass images of the First Vision laid a foundation for artistic interpretation of the First Vision that influenced subsequent artists from the nineteenth century through today.

### **First Artistic First Vision Images Published by the Church**

Around the same time as the proliferation of stained glass windows of the First Vision in turn-of-the-century Latter-day Saint chapels, the first known artistic image of the event to be published by the institutional Church appeared. The year was 1912, nearly one hundred years since the First Vision had occurred. William A. Morton wrote and published a book for the Deseret Sunday School Union called *From Plowboy to Prophet: Being a Short History of Joseph Smith for Children*. The 130-page book included eighteen illustrations by the artist Lewis A. Ramsey. The inside sheet is a portrait of the prophet Joseph Smith done in 1910, and the remainder of the book includes illustrations such as Moroni visiting Joseph, Joseph and Oliver receiving the priesthood, the witnesses of the gold plates, and even lesser-known events such as Joseph stopping a runaway coach and his healing of Elijah Fordham. Most interesting for this article, opposite page 8 of the text is the first known image of the First Vision published by the Church (fig. 8).

Ramsey was born in 1875 and came to Utah with his family in 1887. He was trained by the celebrated artist John Hafen and studied at the Art Institute in Chicago and in Paris before returning to Utah to practice and teach art. He worked on commissions from the Church, including painting murals in the Laie Hawaii Temple.<sup>44</sup> Ramsey’s illustration of the First Vision is a simple black-and-white reprint of what appears to be a pastel drawing.

### **The Rise of First Vision Art in Official Church Periodicals**

Although the Church had published a myriad of monthly publications since as early as 1832’s *The Evening and the Morning Star*, it was relatively slow to use imagery to accompany the printed word. As mentioned,

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43. Tom Holdman, interview by the author, September 9, 2019, transcript in possession of the author.

44. “Lewis A. Ramsey,” Utah Artists Project, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, <https://www.lib.utah.edu/collections/utah-artists/UAP-Lewis-Ramsey.php>.



*Joseph Praying in the Grove.*

**FIGURE 8.** Lewis A. Ramsey, illustration for *From Plowboy to Prophet: Being a Short History of Joseph Smith for Children*, by William A. Morton, 1912, facing page 8.

in the nineteenth century the institutional Church printed only a few dozen images dealing with Church history or doctrine in tens of thousands of pages of Church periodicals. Early Church history or doctrinal images are the Book of Abraham facsimiles, profiles of Thomas Sharp and Joseph Smith, the Kinderhook plates, and a diagram of the kingdom of God by Orson Hyde. Overall, artistic imagery was basically non-existent for decades. For example, the *Improvement Era* (1897–1970) is voluminous, with thousands of pages in print, but offers very little visual art. Almost all imagery is photography of people and places. Church publications embraced photography before visual art like painting and drawing<sup>45</sup> and began to circulate George Edward Anderson's classic 1907 photo of the Sacred Grove with a boy standing in the lower right corner among the tall trees—a powerful image.<sup>46</sup>

Compared to how frequently and adeptly national periodicals (such as *Harper's Weekly*) used art during this time to illustrate its pages and engage its readers, Church publications like the *Millennial Star* or the *Improvement Era* needed a lot of improvement when it came to unleashing the communicative power of visual art. As a case in point, the April 1920 edition of the *Improvement Era* was dedicated to the one-hundredth anniversary of the First Vision. It contains three photographs of the Sacred Grove and the land around it, photographs of other places in Joseph Smith's life, a painting of the Hill Cumorah, a drawing of Joseph Smith as an adult, poetry, a cantata, and many articles praising the Prophet in its 112 pages, but no First Vision artwork appears.

The first artistic rendering of the First Vision to appear in a Church periodical came one hundred years after the organization of the Church, when the *Instructor* printed a photograph of the Tiffany stained glass in the Salt Lake Temple Holy of Holies in December 1931.<sup>47</sup> A few years later, in 1933, the *Improvement Era* published an article on the Church's participation at the World's Fair in Chicago and featured a photo of part of the display including a small image of J. Leo Fairbanks's

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45. Early photographs of the Sacred Grove published by the Church include *Improvement Era* 15, no. 3 (January 1912): 240; and *Improvement Era* 20, no. 7 (May 1917): 570.

46. The Church published Anderson's photo multiple times, beginning in 1909 with John Henry Evans's *Birth of Mormonism in Picture: Scenes and Incidents in Early Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1909), 35, and repeatedly in the *Improvement Era*, such as in vol. 23, no. 7 (May 1920): 638. The photo also appears in *Millennial Star* 92, no. 14 (April 3, 1930): 214.

47. *Instructor* 66, no. 12 (December 1931): 750.



FIGURE 9. J. Leo Fairbanks, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, photo of stained glass, *Millennial Star* 100, no. 7 (February 17, 1938): 99.

stained glass of the First Vision.<sup>48</sup> This 6' × 4' stained glass was designed by J. Leo Fairbanks and made by the Drehobl Brothers Art Glass in Chicago.<sup>49</sup> It was created with a companion window of Elijah holding a key in front of the Salt Lake Temple and was later installed in the Salt Lake Temple lobby.<sup>50</sup> In February 1938, the *Millennial Star* printed a slightly larger version of this same image (fig. 9).<sup>51</sup> J. Leo Fairbanks was the son of one of the Paris missionary artists, John B. Fairbanks, who worked on murals in Utah temples. J. Leo Fairbanks was a masterful, well-rounded artist who painted and sculpted, although he became somewhat eclipsed in history by

his more famous sculptor brother, Avard. Together with Avard, J. Leo worked on the Hawaii Temple, creating four sculpture reliefs of 130 life-sized figures. J. Leo also illustrated various Church manuals and book covers and experimented with stained glass, including this stained glass window of the First Vision.<sup>52</sup>

48. "The Church Century of Progress Display," *Improvement Era* 36, no. 14 (December 1933): 34.

49. Janetski, "Art Glass," 257.

50. J. Leo Fairbanks's First Vision window and his Elijah window were installed in the north lobby of the Salt Lake Temple in 1979 after being rediscovered in storage. Joyce Athay Janetski, "Stained Glass Windows: A Latter-day Saint Legacy," *Ensign* 11, no. 1 (January 1981): 34–41. See also Janetski, "Art Glass," 257.

51. *Millennial Star* 100, no. 7 (February 17, 1938): 99.

52. Tom Alder, "The Life and Art of J. Leo Fairbanks," *15 Bytes: Artists of Utah Ezine* (April 2009): 5, <http://www.artistsofutah.org/15bytes/09apr/page5.html>.



FIGURE 10. J. Leo Fairbanks, painting of First Vision, *Millennial Star*, May 14, 1942, cover.

## The Expansion of First Vision Art (1920–1950)

The 1920s, '30s, and '40s were a turning point for the First Vision in the Church, both pedagogically and artistically. The one-hundredth anniversary of the First Vision was recognized in many talks in the April 1920 general conference, and the vision was discussed more often in succeeding conferences than it had been before. In 1938, President J. Reuben Clark told Church Educational System employees that not only was a belief in Joseph Smith's prophetic mission necessary, but also that "in all its reality, the First Vision" was a foundational theology for the Church, and any teacher who did not believe in it "has [no] place in the Church school system."<sup>53</sup>

Another cultural factor that pressed upon how the Saints viewed the First Vision in these decades was the 1945 publication of Fawn Brodie's psychobiography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*. In the book, Brodie claims that the First Vision was a later invention by Joseph Smith in 1838, "some half-remembered dream" or "sheer invention," casting doubt by claiming that nobody knew of the vision prior to 1838.<sup>54</sup> Church leaders and scholars came to the public defense of Joseph Smith and the First Vision.<sup>55</sup>

As the First Vision enlarged in doctrinal and historical importance in the eyes of Church leaders, teachers, and critics, Church magazines increased their visual publishing of artistic imagery related to it. The cover of the February 5, 1942, *Millennial Star* for the British Saints showed the Tiffany stained glass image from the Salt Lake Temple.<sup>56</sup> A few months later, the cover of the May 14, 1942, *Millennial Star* featured a copy of a First Vision oil painting by J. Leo Fairbanks (fig. 10).<sup>57</sup> Discussing the cover painting, the *Millennial Star* calls the First Vision "one of the most outstanding events in the history of mankind. As a matter of fact, it stands alone in religious history." It then states in all caps how the First Vision teaches central doctrine of the Restoration: "GOD IS A PERSON; CHRIST IS OUR REDEEMER."<sup>58</sup>

53. J. Reuben Clark, "The Charted Course of the Church in Education," address to seminary and institute of religion leaders, Brigham Young University summer school, Aspen Grove, Utah, August 8, 1938, [https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/32709\\_eng.pdf?lang=eng](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/32709_eng.pdf?lang=eng).

54. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, The Mormon Prophet*, 2d ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1945, reprint 1995), 25.

55. Harper, *First Vision*, 189–93, 251.

56. *Millennial Star* 104, no. 6 (February 5, 1942): cover.

57. *Millennial Star* 104, no. 20 (May 14, 1942): cover. Thanks to Jonathan Fairbanks and Theresa Fairbanks Harris for their review of this information.

58. *Millennial Star* 104, no. 20 (May 14, 1942): 308.



FIGURE 11. J. Leo Fairbanks, First Vision, compositional painting (year unknown). © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

At an unknown date, J. Leo Fairbanks also created a compositional sketch of the First Vision intended for a building mural. Following patterns established in his other two images, Fairbank's oil-on-board image clothes Joseph in a white shirt and dark pants (fig. 11). This clothing was atypical of prior First Vision imagery, which put Joseph in a dark, heavy overcoat, but (as will be discussed later) Fairbanks's clothing for Joseph later became a standard part of the First Vision symbol recognized today. In June 1957, the *Millennial Star* again showed an artistic image of the First Vision, a photograph of a sculpture by Fairbanks's brother, Avard Fairbanks, accompanied by the text from Joseph Smith—History 2:10–17 (fig. 12).<sup>59</sup> Slowly, artistic images of the First Vision began to be produced and published more consistently in Church publications between 1920 and 1950.

During this period, mural painter Minerva Teichert also undertook depicting the First Vision. Born in 1888, Teichert came of age as an artist just as the First Vision was being established as a foundational Latter-day Saint narrative. Teichert studied art in Chicago and New York, where her mentor, Robert Henri, recognized her brilliance and encouraged her to paint the “great Mormon story.”<sup>60</sup> In her paintings, Teichert embraced her mentor’s admonition to “love reality, but abhor photographic representation.”<sup>61</sup> Her canvases are stylized, loose, colorful, abstracted reality, and painted with thinned-down oil paint (almost at times approaching a watercolor-like wash), and often include hand-painted decorative borders. Her work

59. *Millennial Star* 119, no. 6 (June 1957): back cover.

60. Jan Underwood Pinborough, “Minerva Kohlhepp Teichert: With a Bold Brush,” *Ensign* 19, no. 4 (April 1989): 38.

61. Peter B. Gardner, “Painting the Mormon Story,” *BYU Magazine* (Winter 2008), 29.



**FIGURE 12.** Avard Fairbanks, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, sculpture in marble, detail, photo in *Millennial Star*, June 1957, 197. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

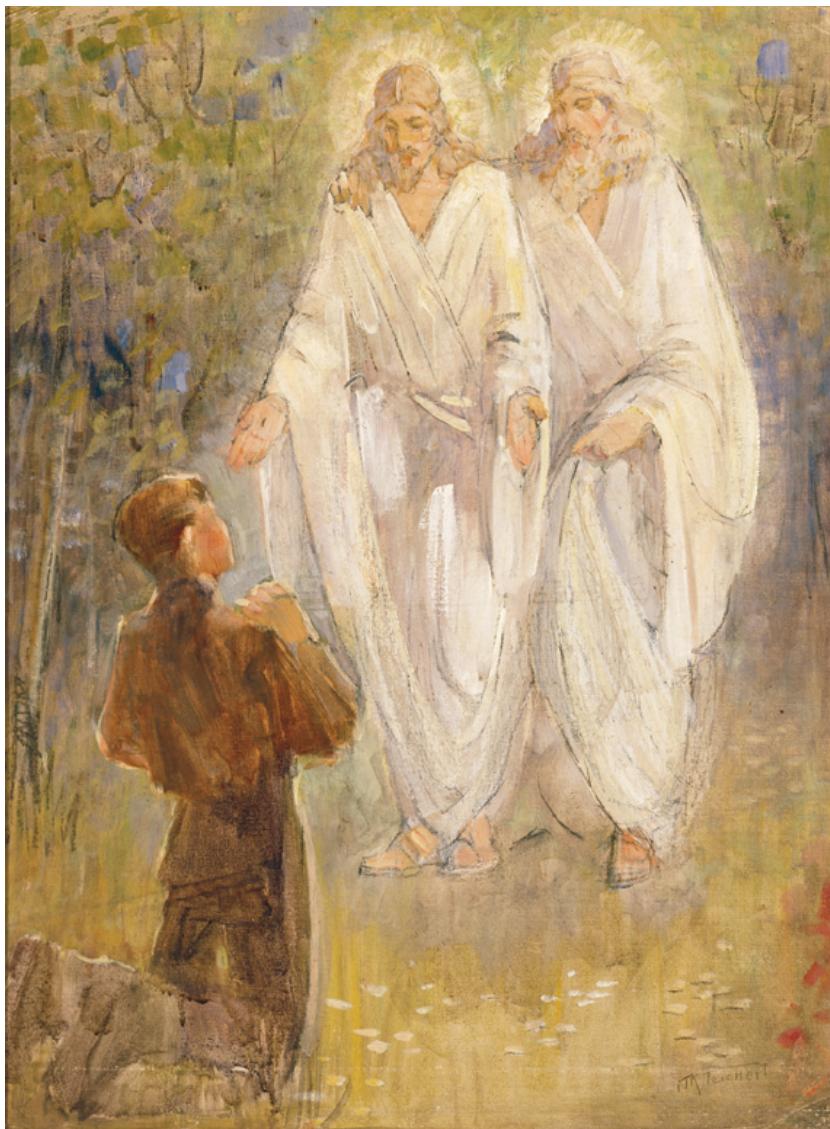


FIGURE 13. Minerva Teichert, *First Vision*, ca. 1930. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

found success in the Intermountain West during the 1930s and 1940s, being hung in schools and churches and civic buildings. It was during this time that Teichert painted at least two known depictions of the First Vision, one circa 1930 (fig. 13), which now hangs in the Brigham City Temple, and another in 1934. Her 1934 painting (fig. 14) was hung in the Montpelier, Idaho, Stake Tabernacle, being donated by Teichert as tithing in

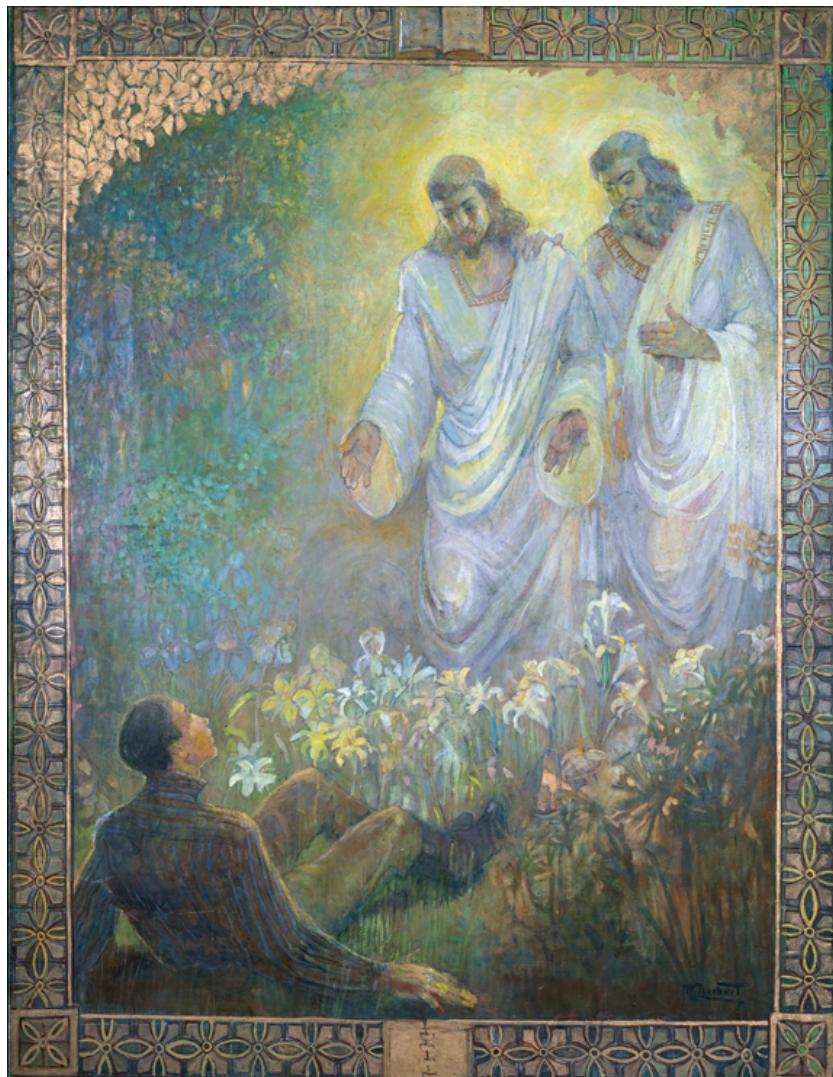


FIGURE 14. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), *The First Vision*, 1934, oil on canvas, 102" x 78". Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

kind.<sup>62</sup> The image is striking and reflects Teichert's independence of style as an artist, breaking from patterns established in the First Vision stained glass at the turn of the century and also from J. Leo Fairbanks's look and

62. "Minerva Teichert: Pageants in Paint," exhibition label, July 26, 2007, to May 26, 2008, Brigham Young University Museum of Art. Sent to the author by Ashlee Whitaker of the BYU Museum of Art.

feel. The Father has his right hand gently placed on the Son's shoulder, who stands open armed and accepting, the marks of the Crucifixion in his palms. They have distinct, non-Euro-American features. Their hair and beards are brown. There are symbolic white lilies in full bloom on the floor of the grove with other blue and purple flowers, and vibrant colors abound. Bright yellow emanates from behind the glorified figures. Joseph, wearing a brown striped shirt, is sprawled on his back, sitting up slightly, his dark hair capping his surprised look. In the hand-painted border, the Book of Mormon golden plates are depicted at the bottom center, and on the top center is the published Book of Mormon. This is a First Vision painting unique from its predecessors in content and style and is simply magnificent in execution and effect.

### The Standard of First Vision Art (1950–1980)

The 1950s and '60s produced a period of artistic renditions that have stood as symbols for the Church ever since, creating a visual artistic canon hitherto unmatched in the Restoration. During these decades more than any others, the institutional Church looked to visual artists to tell their story jointly with the published word. Rejecting popular postmodern and pop-art trends of the time, the Church relied heavily upon illustrators whose realistic artwork could be easily interpreted and used didactically. In the 1950s, Arnold Friberg (whom fellow illustrator Norman Rockwell called the "Phidias [Greek sculptor of the Parthenon] of religious art"<sup>63</sup>) created perhaps the best-known scriptural images in the history of the Church—his twelve Book of Mormon paintings, which were subsequently reproduced millions of times in missionary copies of the Book of Mormon. Friberg also created an image of the First Vision in 1962. Considering Friberg's masterful ability to dramatize, this painting is surprisingly subdued and peaceful for such a grand event. The style, pose, forest greenery, and overall feel of the painting evoke an illustrative, almost fictional scene, punctuated with Joseph on one knee, hands clasped, and head bowed in humble submission, wearing a bold red shirt.<sup>64</sup> Friberg later used his compositional sketches of Joseph bowing in prayer as the basis for George Washington's pose in his famous painting *Prayer at Valley Forge*.<sup>65</sup>

63. Mark Eddington, "Arnold Friberg: Portrait of the Artist," *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 2, 2006, [https://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/faith/ci\\_3663657](https://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/faith/ci_3663657).

64. Arnold Friberg, *The Prayer in the Grove*, in the collection at "First Vision," <https://www.josephsmith.net/exhibit/ja-the-first-vision?lang=eng#mv6>.

65. See Court Mann, "Rare Arnold Friberg Sketches Come to Springville Museum of Art in New Exhibit," *Daily Herald*, February 18, 2017, <https://www.heraldextra.com/>

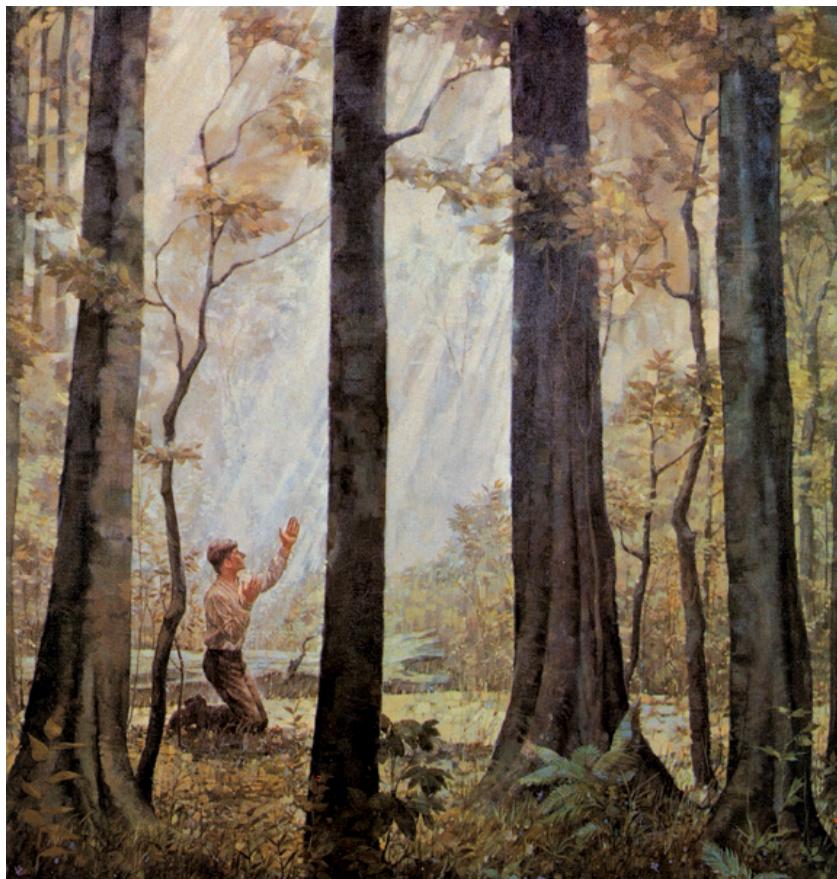


FIGURE 15. Kenneth Riley, *The First Vision*, ca. 1965. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Recently, another Friberg First Vision image has also emerged, completed around 1953 or 1954.<sup>66</sup> This image never saw the light of day, literally. It was drawn on the walls of Friberg's studio in Holladay, Utah. The entire plywood wall was removed and has been subsequently displayed, such as at the Springville Museum of Art in 2017. The 8' × 16' chunk of wall containing

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[entertainment/arts-and-theater/visual/rare-arnold-friberg-sketches-come-to-springville-museum-of-art/article\\_0044e729-523c-550b-84a5-67cab026575f.html](https://www.deseretnews.com/article/entertainment/arts-and-theater/visual/rare-arnold-friberg-sketches-come-to-springville-museum-of-art/article_0044e729-523c-550b-84a5-67cab026575f.html). The caption for photo 3 in that article (a First Vision compositional sketch) says, "Arnold Friberg's most famous painting, 'The Prayer at Valley Forge,' was based off sketches he had done of Joseph Smith."

66. As dated by the Springville Art Museum on their label for the Friberg Studio wall exhibit, based on when his studio was built. Emily Larsen, email to author, January 3, 2020.



**FIGURE 16.** John Scott, First Vision [Joseph Smith Praying in the Grove], 1970. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

standard artistic imagery—namely Harry Anderson, Tom Lovell, Kenneth Riley, and John Scott. Anderson painted the Church's classic biblical scenes still used in churches and temples worldwide, and Lovell made Book of Mormon scenes such as Moroni burying the plates and appearing to Joseph Smith in his bedroom. Among Kenneth Riley's first commissions for the Church was *The First Vision*, circa 1965 (fig. 15). During this time, fellow illustrator John Scott created classic panoramic images such as Jesus teaching in the western hemisphere, the Last Judgment, and in 1970 his own rendition of the First Vision (fig. 16).<sup>68</sup> The Church turning to non-Latter-day Saints to give expression to their

this image weighs more than 600 pounds.<sup>67</sup> It is a compositional black-and-white pencil sketch without a lot of detail that creates an ethereal, mystical feel—the ghostlike images of the Father and Son sketched in white charcoal creating the sensation of a glorious vision. I find this sketch mesmerizing. Friberg's 1962 First Vision painting, however, was not used by the institutional Church, never appearing in the *Improvement Era* or the *Ensign*. During this time, the Church looked to two non-Latter-day Saints to create its most-often-used First Vision images.

In the 1960s, the Church hired a network of illustrators outside the faith to create much of its

67. Mann, "Friberg Sketches."

68. Robert T. Barrett and Susan Easton Black, "Setting a Standard in LDS Art: Four Illustrators of the Mid-Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 24–80.

most iconic images of the time is reminiscent of Tiffany being hired to create artwork for the Church's holy space.

It is notable that both images produced by Riley and Scott during this time period follow a similar pattern: A boy in a white shirt and brown pants in a grove of trees in the full leaves of summer reaches openly upward toward rays of light from heaven. However, in a departure from earlier First Vision imagery, in Scott's and Riley's commissioned images the Father and Son are not directly depicted. Why? Although the reasons are unknown and it may merely be artistic preference, it is possible that emphasis from Church President David O. McKay (1951–1970) could have influenced these commissioned compositions. McKay “wanted church-sanctioned art to avoid literal, physical depictions of God and Christ,”<sup>69</sup> apparently because, according to Arnold Friberg's recollection, President McKay felt “the finite cannot conceive of the infinite.”<sup>70</sup>

Other First Vision images also appeared in print from the Church during these decades. In November 1961, the *Instructor* showed a flannel-board story of Joseph “kneeling in prayer as he asks our Heavenly Father his questions” (fig. 17).<sup>71</sup> In April 1962, an inelegant black-and-white drawing of the First Vision appeared in the *Millennial Star* with no identifier of who created the image other than “an artist's impression of the first vision—in a grove close to Joseph Smith's home.”<sup>72</sup> The image, however, matches a portion of a 1965 panorama painting, “Scenes from Biblical and Mormon History” by Dorothy Handley, almost as though



FIGURE 17. Artist unknown, flannel board image, *The Instructor*, November 1961, 378. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

69. Mann, “Friberg Sketches.”

70. Arnold Friberg, interview by Gregory A. Prince, November 16, 2000, at Friberg's Salt Lake City studio. Transcript used with permission.

71. *Juvenile Instructor* 96, no. 11 (November 1961): insert between pages 378 and 379, 380.

72. *Millennial Star* 124, no. 4 (April 1962): 77.



FIGURE 18. Artist uncertain, possibly Sidney King, diorama, from *Millennial Star* 126, no. 8 (August 1964): 281.

it was a preliminary study for the panorama.<sup>73</sup> Another First Vision depiction appeared in the *Millennial Star* in August 1964, an issue reporting on the Mormon Pavilion at the World's Fair, which showed a diorama depicting the First Vision with a half-sized mannequin figure of Joseph Smith and a background of the grove painted behind it, perhaps by artist Sidney King (fig. 18).<sup>74</sup> Jerry Thompson's 1970 illustration of Joseph looking up into the heavens (again, avoiding depicting Deity) was published in the *Improvement Era* accompanying James Allen's groundbreaking article "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?"<sup>75</sup> Ted Henninger's 1975 image re-introduced direct depictions of the Father and the Son, white robed and bearded, Jesus with open arms, floating directly above Joseph's upheld right hand in a zoomed-back,

73. Dorothy P. Handley, *Scenes from Biblical and Mormon History*, 1965, acrylic, in Artistic Interpretations of the First Vision, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/exhibit/first-vision-art?lang=eng#mv30>.

74. *Millennial Star* 126, no. 8 (August 1964): 281.

75. Jerry Thompson, illustration of the First Vision, *Improvement Era* 73, no. 4 (April 1970): 4.



FIGURE 19. Ted Henninger, *First Vision*, oil on canvas, 1975. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

green-leaved grove. This image was first published in the January 1976 *Ensign* (fig. 19).<sup>76</sup>

In 1979, Gary Smith painted the First Vision, an image often reproduced in later years by Church magazines (fig. 20). One notable aspect of Smith's image is an axe stuck in the stump in the lower left corner of the composition, consistent with Joseph Smith's 1843 interview with David Nye White, in which Joseph said he "went to the stump where I had stuck my axe when I had quit work, and I kneeled down, and prayed."<sup>77</sup> I interviewed Gary Smith about this detail, interested in how and why he consciously chose to include it, since his was likely the first artistic representation of the First Vision to do so, reflecting broadening knowledge of various First Vision accounts (such as were emphasized and published in the 1970 *Improvement Era*). Smith told me, "Yes, the [various First Vision] sources were all important. In fact, I thought the axe was a very

76. *Ensign* 6, no. 1 (January 1976): 18. This image would be published again in the *Ensign* in January 1985, July 1989, January 1997, July 2002, and on the front cover of the February 2012 *Ensign*.

77. "Interview, 21 August 1843, extract," [3], Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/interview-21-august-1843-extract/1>.



FIGURE 20. Gary Ernest Smith, *First Vision*, 1979. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

important part of that because it shows he was familiar with the area. He went to the place he was most familiar with. He didn't walk through the brush and say, 'Oh this is a pretty spot.' But he went to a place he was familiar."<sup>78</sup> Other than that detail, Smith's image follows a growing pattern: Joseph on his back or knees in a white shirt and brown pants, his arm upraised like in Friberg's 1960 sketch, Riley's 1965 painting, and Henninger's 1975 painting. The Father motions to the Son, who is at the right hand of God, his arms open, in a green summer woodland.

<sup>78</sup> Gary Smith, interview with the author, August 9, 2019. Transcript in possession of the author.

These patterns that were becoming normalized for First Vision imagery were occurring simultaneously with another cultural factor that may have influenced the pattern of First Vision art from 1950 to 1980. In 1960, “the modern era of correlation officially began,” says scholar Michael Goodman, going into effect with “fully correlated curricula” in 1967.<sup>79</sup> Although Church correlation took on a much broader task than curriculum, one purpose of correlation was to standardize the Church’s message in its printed materials under the direction of the priesthood across formerly independent auxiliaries and organizations. It should not be surprising that, in these decades of standardization, a standard of First Vision imagery also began to emerge, largely established by commissioned, institutionally approved, and Church-reproduced images.

### The Explosion of a First Vision Symbol (1980–2020)

From 1980 to 2020, four artists’ depictions of the First Vision have accounted for about half of the published *Ensign* images of the First Vision: Greg Olsen’s (1988 and circa 1996) images of the First Vision have been published 24 times, Gary Kapp’s (2000) paintings 21 times, Walter Rane’s series of five First Vision images (circa 2005)<sup>80</sup> 18 times, and Del Parson’s (1987) image 15 times. Since 2010, Rane’s images account for about one out of every three First Vision paintings printed in the *Ensign*.

Parson’s 1987 image has achieved the status of visual canon, being included as the First Vision painting in the Gospel Art Kit, reproduced innumerable times and placed in various Church buildings worldwide.<sup>81</sup> Brilliantly, the viewer is placed behind Joseph Smith and roughly at his eye level, looking up with Joseph at God and Jesus. The Father and Son are identical in appearance, in white robes with grey hair and beards, the Father motioning to the Son at his right, who has his left hand extended. Joseph follows the increasingly normalized pattern, in his white shirt and brown pants with his arm raised (fig. 21).

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79. Michael A. Goodman, “Correlation: The Turning Point (1960s),” in *Salt Lake City: The Place Which God Prepared*, ed. Scott C. Esplin and Kenneth L. Alford (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 263, 276.

80. In 2004, Walter Rane painted *If Any of You Lack Wisdom*, which appeared on the cover of the January 2005 *Ensign*. That year (2004) he also painted *The Desires of My Heart* (fig. 25), which the Church later purchased. Circa 2005, he painted three other unique First Vision scenes using the same model, which have also been used by the Church.

81. See Del Parson, *The First Vision*, Church History—Gospel Art Kit, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/images/the-first-vision-82823?lang=eng>.

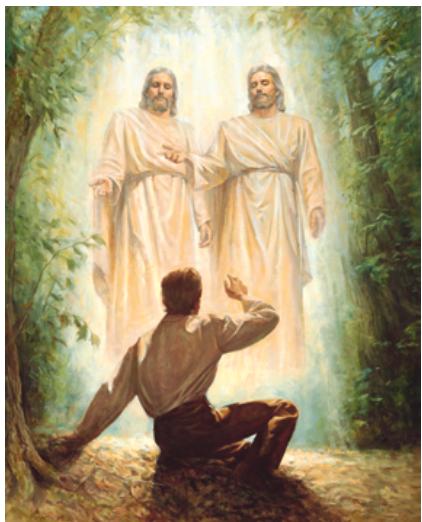


FIGURE 21. Del Parson, *The First Vision*, 1987. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

lowing images, and this list is by no means comprehensive, but the following images exemplify the explosion of First Vision art in this time period and the established accepted expression of the event.

George Handrahan's 1989 piece features not the vision itself but the direct aftermath of the event that changes the course of his life, with Joseph walking calmly on a path out of the green grove back to his home (fig. 22). Conversely, Jerry Harston's 1995 illustration depicts Joseph standing upright as he enters the green leafed grove, prior to offering up his prayer.<sup>83</sup>

William Lee Hill's painting (year unknown) is unique in its pastel portrayal of the event, focused only on the boy Joseph's face, a purplish light cutting diagonally across the composition (fig. 23). Similar to Hill's composition, Liz Lemon Swindle's circa 1998<sup>84</sup> image zooms in only on Joseph, lying on his back amidst green leaves and a few purple flowers, left arm half raised to block the light.

82. Greg K. Olsen, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, 1988, is part of the Gospel Media Library, at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media-library/images/joseph-smiths-first-vision-olsen-186873?lang=eng>.

83. Jerry Harston, *Joseph Smith Entering the Sacred Grove*, illustrated several articles, including Carlos E. Asay, "Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning!" *Ensign* 25, no. 4 (April 1995): 48.

84. Liz Lemon Swindle, *The First Vision*, in several printings, including *New Era* 35, no. 5 (May 2005): cover.

Greg Olsen's 1988 painting has also become a classic, reproduced countless times.<sup>82</sup> This image omits the Father and Son as 1950s and '60s images did, but a soft light (which Olsen is a master at) descends from heaven. Joseph, in white and brown costume, is on his knees, right hand upraised to block the light. Between the popularity of Parson's 1987 image and Olsen's 1988, this look and pose have become cemented as the visual symbol of Joseph Smith's prayer in the grove.

Space will not allow me to elaborate much on each of the fol-



FIGURE 22. George W. Handrahan, *After the First Vision*, 1989. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Leon Parson's 1999 painting<sup>85</sup> takes the opposite approach of Swindle's and Hill's, pulling the viewer further back from the scene, looking through trees from a distance as Joseph sits on the ground and speaks to two heavenly beings. Prominent in the left foreground is a white tail deer looking at the event while its fawn looks directly at the viewer.

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85. Leon Parson, *Joseph, This Is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!* was used to illustrate Ronald O. Barney, "The First Vision: Searching for the Truth," *Ensign* 35, no. 1 (January 2005): 18.



FIGURE 23. William Lee Hill, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, year unknown. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



FIGURE 24. Glen S. Hopkinson, *First Vision*, oil on canvas, © Glen S. Hopkinson, 2005.



**FIGURE 25.** Walter Rane, “*The Desires of My Heart*,” oil on panel, 2004. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Gary Kapp's 2000 painting is one of the most oft-reproduced images in the *Ensign*, with Joseph profiled sitting on the viewer's left, his arm upraised, the Father and Son on the right hand side in a column of light.<sup>86</sup> Realistic and representational in style, it is a prototype First Vision scene.

Glen Hopkinson's 2002 image is highlighted by a bright burst in the middle of the scene, rays shooting through the leaves of the trees, with Joseph leaning back in awe and wonder. The viewer sees no divine beings, just an exploding flash of light (fig. 24).

Walter Rane's 2004 *The Desires of My Heart* is also one of the most oft-reproduced images in modern institutional Church publications (fig. 25). Vertically columnar in shape, Rane's image frames a kneeling Joseph, hands on his knees, between two trees in an early spring, barren brown grove. A few spots of green suggest leaves ready to burst, symbolizing the impending Restoration. Soft light emits from the top left corner, but no visuals of Deity are seen. Joseph's clothes look well-worn and homely, his ruddy face looking upward with an innocent, sublime expression. Of this image, Rane said he "wanted to emphasize the youthfulness of Joseph. Not having him shield his eyes from the light I felt worked to show that there were no barriers to separate him from The Father and Son."<sup>87</sup>

Simon Dewey's 2005 image also captures an innocent looking Joseph, kneeling and looking upward toward beaming light, omitting the Father and Son from the scene. Tightly painted in his signature style, Dewey's composition is horizontal, drawing your eye left to right from Joseph to the light and then down toward yellow flowers and Joseph's overcoat and hat piled against a tree (fig. 26).

Michael Bedard's 2008 painting is composed columnarly, and almost divided in two.<sup>88</sup> On the right Joseph kneels, looking upward from barren trees ready to blossom, and the left half is a white column of light with the Father and Son standing side by side, one being with outstretched arms. The viewer is pulled back and floats slightly above the ground, looking downward to Joseph.

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86. Gary Kapp, *Joseph Smith's Desperate Plea for Deliverance*, 2000, for example in Barney, "The First Vision: Searching for the Truth," 17.

87. Walter Rane, private email to author, used with permission.

88. Michael Bedard, *The First Vision of the Restoration*, oil on canvas, 2008, posted in the collection at "Artistic Interpretations of the First Vision."



FIGURE 26. Simon Dewey, *Let Him Ask in Faith*, © Simon Dewey 2020. Permission Altus Fine Art.

A quick visual review of these images (22–26) reveals that by this time period a standardized Joseph Smith's First Vision look and pose is established: a boy in a white shirt and brown pants on his knees or back usually with one hand uplifted to heaven, as a bright, soft-white light sits above him, often with two floating bearded beings in white clothing surrounded by a green grove. While this symbol may not be historically accurate (as will be discussed in a later section), this has become the common look most artists have employed since 1950. Compare this to the first depiction in Stenhouse's 1873 book, with rays of light coming from the Father and Son as they fly through the air, appearing non-simultaneously to a noticeably young, curly-haired Joseph with arms open and in dark clothing.

Developing a recognizable religious visual symbol is often necessary and almost inevitable over time, as it can communicate quickly, clearly, consistently, and intimately with viewers. A man with a long white beard, a staff, and a red robe with black and white stripes is Moses. A bearded man in a robe holding a set of keys represents Peter. John the Beloved is historically depicted as beardless and younger. Nephi wears a headband. Abinadi is shirtless and old. A man with high cheekbones and shoulder-length brown hair parted down the middle with a forked beard and a robe over one shoulder is Jesus. Joseph Smith wears a white shirt and brown pants, kneeling or reclining on the ground

among the trees, lifting one hand to heaven toward the light.<sup>89</sup> Joseph's costume and pose have been replicated in multiple Church films as well, enhancing the symbol through video, such as in the early 1976 *The First Vision* and 2005 *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration* (revised in 2011). These symbols aren't necessarily based on history or scripture, but they survive and thrive through the natural selection of artistic adoption and reproduction. The symbol has become so ubiquitous that even popular media deploys it, such as Latter-day Saint musician Brandon Flowers in his music video for "Only the Young," where on his knees he lifts his right hand to block a flood of light from above as angelic dancers descend and ascend.<sup>90</sup> Even pejorative cartoons such as *South Park* show Joseph Smith in a white shirt and brown pants with his hand uplifted to block a heavenly light in the grove.<sup>91</sup>

### From Symbol to Abstraction

When a symbol has become commonly accepted and understood for a culture, the symbol allows for artistic abstraction, or the distortion away from realistic representation. In 2010, Jeff Pugh painted a powerful abstracted image of the First Vision that plays on the accepted symbol, omitting common realistic details of typical First Vision paintings and reducing the image down to basic geometric shapes and blocks of color. The Father and Son are simple palette-knife featureless forms of white. Joseph sits on a flat green plane, the rest of the bottom third of the painting a dark mass suggesting that, as Pugh said, "[Joseph] was going to be crushed, like he was alone. . . . And that had to be as dark as I possibly could get, and what happens is that on top of that darkness, it makes the brightness of the Father and the Son just explode" (fig. 27).<sup>92</sup>

When Latter-day Saints see these commonly accepted symbols, even abstracted, it communicates the First Vision. J. Kirk Richards does so

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89. In fact, Joseph Smith wearing a white shirt is not just in First Vision art, but in most art depicting the Prophet in all events of his life. In 205 Church history images published in the *Ensign* from 1971 to 2000, there is not a single image of Joseph Smith in which he is not wearing a white shirt.

90. Brandon Flowers, "Brandon Flowers—Only the Young (Official Video)," BrandonFlowersMusic.com, uploaded October 12, 2010, YouTube video, 3:07, <https://youtu.be/uBENjCPS8LI>.

91. *South Park*, season 7, episode 12, "All about Mormons," directed and written by Trey Parker, aired November 19, 2003, on Comedy Central.

92. Jeffery Robert Pugh, "Jeffery Robert Pugh, Early Spring, 1820," video, 2:48, *Church Media Library*, March 8, 2012.



FIGURE 27. Jeffery R. Pugh, *Early Spring 1820*, oil on canvas, 2010. © Jeffery R. Pugh.



**FIGURE 28.** J. Kirk Richards, *The First Vision*, oil on panel, 2016. Courtesy J. Kirk Richards.

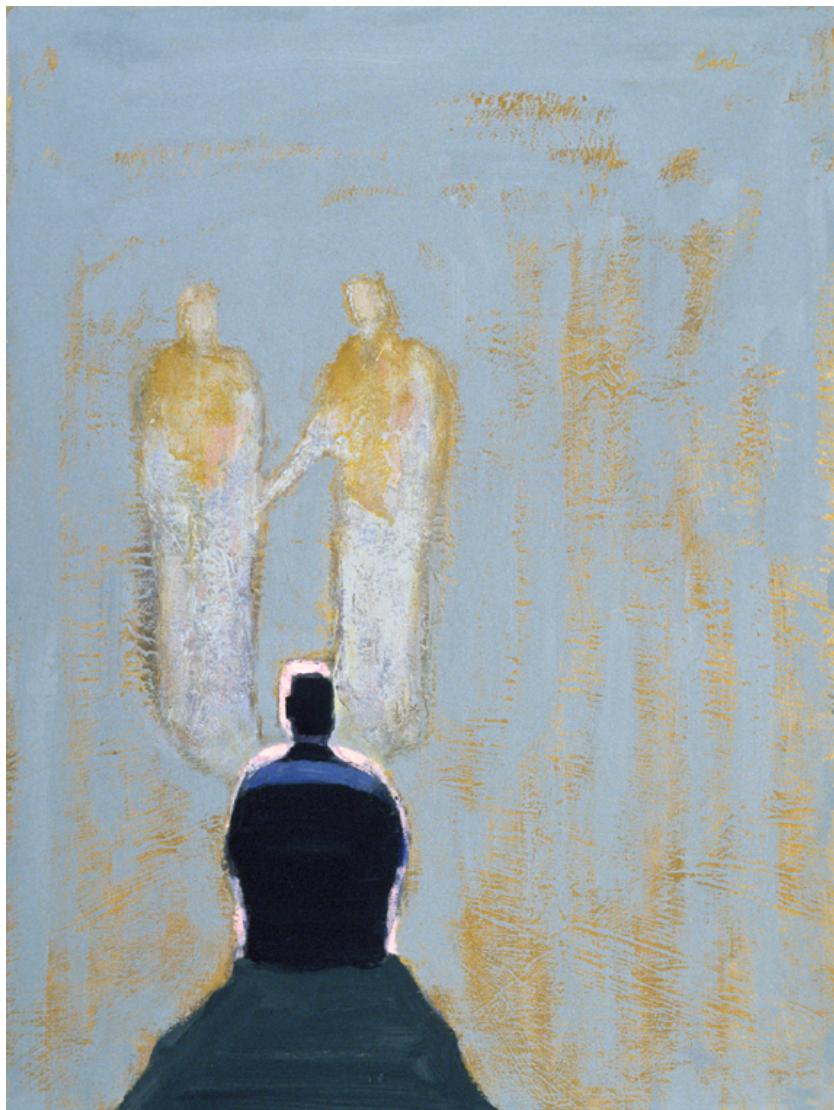


FIGURE 29. Mike Card, *Upon This Rock*, mixed media on panel, 2003. © Mike Card.

similarly, abstracting the Vision with accepted symbols to basic colors and shapes. Faces are not painted in his 2015 First Vision image, yet our minds see the Father and Son through two figures in white, side by side, one motioning to the other on his right, floating above a kneeling boy in a white shirt and brown pants, with sienna-brown vertical lines

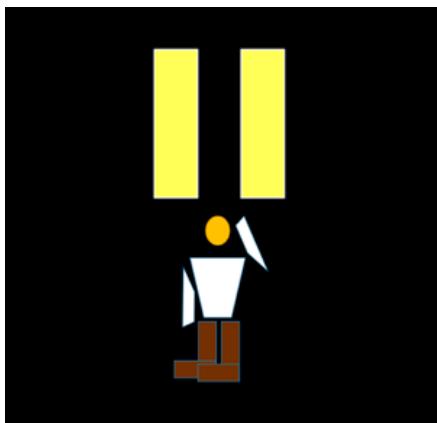


FIGURE 30. Anthony Sweat, *First Vision Symbol*, computer graphic, 2018.

isn't wearing the customary costume of a white shirt and brown pants, nor is he on his knees with his hands uplifted. Instead he sits pensively with his arms wrapped around his legs. But the heavenly forms and positioning of the figures alone tells a Latter-day Saint to see the First Vision in it (fig. 29).

To show the communicative ability of this established First Vision symbol for Latter-day Saints, I created a geometric abstraction on my computer and showed it to random students sitting in the hallways of the Joseph Smith Building at Brigham Young University (fig. 30). Without providing them any context, I asked, "What do you see in this image?" Within a few seconds, each identified it as an image of the First Vision. Here is my conversation with a student named Emily:

Anthony Sweat: What do you see in this image?

Emily: It reminds me of the First Vision.

AS: Why does it remind you of the First Vision?

Emily: [Pauses for a few seconds] Because we always see in pictures of the First Vision Joseph Smith kneeling with his hand to his face and two bright images, or two personages I guess, in the picture.

AS: Anything else?

suggesting trees in a grove.<sup>93</sup> Richards avoids detail, but we don't need it by now. His 2016 First Vision painting follows the same pattern, brilliantly reducing the composition, shapes, poses, and colors to communicate the understood message (fig. 28). Michael J. Card's 2003 painting simplifies the First Vision down to two generic light forms, floating in a blue sky, one motioning to the other on his right, the under-painting's light umber suggesting trees or foliage. The boy

93. J. Kirk Richards, *First Vision*, 2015, oil on panel, <http://art.jkirkrichards.com/viewer/?item=FirstVision413670466>.

Emily: I guess the pants. We always see him in a white shirt and brown pants too.

Another student, Jacob, responded this way:

AS: Tell me what you see in this image.

Jacob: That's Joseph Smith and two personages of light.

AS: Now, why do you say that's Joseph Smith?

Jacob: Um, to be honest, brown pants. . . . Definitely the brown pants. And the arm [*lifts his hand as if blocking a light from above*]. That's why.

Ben Crowder's 2019 image, used on the cover of this issue,<sup>94</sup> is a potent example of reducing the symbol of the First Vision to geometric shapes. Because the shapes suggest a kneeling pose, a column of light, with appropriately colored brown and green shapes, most Latter-day Saints can interpret the image as Joseph's vision in the grove. Such abstraction would likely not communicate the event to someone outside of Latter-day Saint visual culture.

Thus, as artists today continue to create new images of the First Vision, they can rely upon readily understood and accepted symbols of the First Vision to communicate their views of the event.

### Reinterpreting First Vision Symbols

One problem with relying upon accepted artistic symbols of an event, however, is that over time symbols can overshadow sources. Visual imagery has such a powerful effect upon the mind that some learners, even unconsciously, begin to use the accepted imagery based in symbols as the historical and doctrinal reality of the event, which can simultaneously enhance yet also limit understanding. Elise Petersen and Steven Harper have called this phenomenon "source amnesia," writing, "When the Saints rely too heavily on visual or cinematic arts as the catalysts of their memory, the problem of source amnesia can be compounded. . . . It is common to hear Latter-day Saints talk about, even testify of, elements of the vision that are suggested by artistic or cinematic representations."<sup>95</sup>

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94. Ben Crowder, *Let Him Ask of God*, 2019, digital.

95. Elise Petersen and Steven C. Harper, "Forming a Collective Memory of the First Vision," in *An Eye of Faith: Essays in Honor of Richard O. Cowan*, ed. Kenneth L. Alford and Richard E. Bennett (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 15.

For example, although it is an appropriate expression and a commonly accepted artistic First Vision symbol to place the Son at the right hand of the Father, none of the existing historical accounts of the First Vision specify that detail. It seems to stem from Don Carlos Young's directions to Tiffany to position "the Son being on the right hand of the Father,"<sup>96</sup> which visual symbol has subsequently been repeatedly adopted. As another example, a beautiful symbol has been established to commonly depict the column of light in soft or luminous white. However, some contemporary First Vision sources also use the word "fire" to describe the column.<sup>97</sup> Orson Pratt's 1840 version said that Joseph feared the grove would be consumed in flames.<sup>98</sup> What if the "pillar of flame,"<sup>99</sup> to use Joseph's 1835 description, were more firelike and yellow?

Also, there may be visual omissions our commonly accepted and perpetuated First Vision symbols have overlooked. In Joseph's 1835 account of the heavenly vision, he concludes by saying, "I saw many angels in this vision."<sup>100</sup> This rich detail has largely been historically absent in our standard First Vision iconography. Interestingly, perhaps one of the earliest artistic depictions of the First Vision suggests this artistically overlooked element of "many angels" in the First Vision. In the Celestial Room of the Salt Lake Temple, a large statue was placed on a pedestal. It appears to be an artist's concept version of a potential large public monument to Joseph Smith, and the sculpture is beautifully executed. Joseph and Hyrum stand grasping a column underneath cherubic angels and a

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96. Joseph Don Carlos Young to Tiffany & Co.; Oman, "Ye Shall See the Heavens Open," 118.

97. Joseph's 1835 account describes, "A pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon me." "Journal, 1835–1836," 24, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>. Alexander Neibaur's 1844 journal account says Joseph "saw a fire towards heaven came near & nearer." "Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract," [23], Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/alexander-neibaur-journal-24-may-1844-extract/1>.

98. "He expected to have seen the leaves and boughs of the trees consumed." "Appendix: Orson Pratt, *A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*, 1840," 5, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-orson-pratt-an-interesting-account-of-several-remarkable-visions-1840/5>.

99. "Journal, 1835–1836," 24.

100. "Conversations with Robert Matthews, 9–11 November 1835," 24, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/conversations-with-robert-matthews-9-11-november-1835/3>.



FIGURE 31. Statue in Salt Lake Temple by unknown artist, photo by Ralph Savage, 1911. Church History Library.



FIGURE 32. Detail of statue in Salt Lake Temple by unknown artist, photo by Ralph Savage, 1911.

woman holding a torch. The artist is unknown,<sup>101</sup> and sadly the statue is unaccounted for today, the pedestal base having been located but not the sculpture that was once set upon it.<sup>102</sup> Our knowledge of it comes from photographs taken in 1911 by Ralph Savage of C. R. Savage Company (fig. 31). At the base of the statue is a sculpture of the First Vision, among the earliest (if not the earliest) First Vision sculptures executed. Situated below Joseph and Hyrum is a scene of the young boy Joseph Smith, hands clasped together in prayer, with the Father and Son appearing to him on billowing clouds (interestingly, the Son is to the left of the Father). And what is behind the Father and Son? Four angels seated on clouds (fig. 32).

As one who repeatedly teaches about the historical accounts of the First Vision in my role as a religion professor in Church history and doctrine, and also as a practicing artist with a bachelor's degree in fine art in painting and drawing, in 2018 I painted a First Vision scene that attempts to bring together into one cohesive picture a harmony of the nine contemporary First Vision historical accounts, including some of the aspects previously discussed that are not typically depicted in First Vision imagery (fig. 33). In my painting, you see bright yellow fire blazing out from heaven, wrapped around the figures in dramatic fashion, as Joseph's 1832 and 1835 accounts use the word *fire*.<sup>103</sup> The pose of the Father is meant to suggest that the Father has just finished speaking to Joseph and has now turned to the side, opening up Joseph's view to the Savior, who is descending down from heaven, attempting to represent their nonsimultaneous appearance. Joseph's 1835 account describes one divine

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101. In my opinion, the only Latter-day Saint monument artist at the time who was gifted enough to create this sculpture, and whose style somewhat matches, is Cyrus Dallin. Or, it could have been created by someone outside of the Church.

102. Credit to Seth Soha and my BYU colleague Alonzo Gaskill for alerting me to this statue. They tracked down the sculpture base as part of their research for the statue of the woman at the veil in the Salt Lake Temple. See Alonzo L. Gaskill and Seth G. Soha, "The Woman at the Veil: The History and Symbolic Merit of One of the Salt Lake Temple's Most Unique Symbols," in *An Eye of Faith*, 91–111.

103. "A pillar of fire light above the brightness of the sun," in "History, circa Summer 1832," 3, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>. "A pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon my <me>.... a personage appear in the midst, of this pillar of flame which was spread all around." "Journal, 1835–1836," 24.



FIGURE 33. Anthony Sweat, *The First Visions*, oil on board, 2018. © Anthony Sweat.

being appearing followed shortly by another,<sup>104</sup> and David Nye White's 1843 account reports Joseph saying, "Directly I saw a light, and then a glorious personage in the light, *and then another personage*, and the first personage said to the second, 'Behold my beloved Son, hear him.'"<sup>105</sup>

In a departure from one historical account, I purposely painted the skin color of the Father and Son more bronzed, rather than Euro white that we see in most other Christian/Latter-day Saint imagery, to appeal more broadly to people of color across the world.<sup>106</sup> As mentioned, in

104. Joseph's 1835 account says, "A personage appear'd in the midst, of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, *another personage soon appear'd* like unto the first, he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee." "Journal, 1835-1836," 24, emphasis added. Alexander Neibaur's account agrees: "Saw a personage in the fire light complexion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders his right arm bear *after a while a other person came to the side of the first.*" "Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract," [23], emphasis added.

105. "Interview, 21 August 1843, extract," [3], Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/interview-21-august-1843-extract/1>, emphasis added.

106. Alexander Neibaur says Joseph described Deity as "light complexion." "Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract," [23].

Joseph's 1835 account he says, "I saw many angels in this vision."<sup>107</sup> The event may have been far more expansive in scope than we often depict it. Depicted above the Father and Son is a gathering of many types of heavenly angels—female and male and of all races, to signify the global impact of the First Vision—divinely assembled to witness and testify.

Joseph is kneeling on the ground, wearing a light brown overshirt, purple vest, and blue pants to set him apart from the white clothing of the Father and Son and the brown earth tones of the foreground. In the bottom right corner of the painting, there's an axe in a stump, a detail mentioned in David Nye White's 1843 account.<sup>108</sup> In the bottom left corner, Satan is painted fleeing, a flat pillar of darkness being pushed away from Joseph by the vertical pillar of flame. Satan's pose is an homage to Carl Bloch's *Jesus Casting Out Satan*. Last, like in paintings done by Walter Rane in the early 2000s, in my image the grove is depicted without much foliage, instead of being full leafy green. Although we don't know the month and day of the First Vision, the browns and trees suggest an early-spring grove getting ready to burst out of winter's dark slumber, a fitting metaphor for the fruits of the First Vision itself.<sup>109</sup>

It is evident that my image is both a reflection of current cultural values and is symbiotically meant to influence cultural norms by painting some aspects of the First Vision often omitted or not previously shown. It is merely one more way to look at it. My modern access to the nine contemporary accounts through the Joseph Smith Papers website,<sup>110</sup> and my repeated analysis of them in my role as a religion professor, culturally influence how I see, interpret, and paint the event. While I draw heavily on the known historical accounts, I do not mean to imply that this is how it should or must be done. Visual art is about personal expression, communicating to viewers without words through line, balance, contrast, color, texture, shape, rhythm, and other principles and

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107. "Conversations with Robert Matthews, 9–11 November 1835," 24.

108. "Interview, 21 August 1843, extract," [3], Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/interview-21-august-1843-extract/1>.

109. Some have attempted to put the date at the end of March. See John C. Lefgren and John P. Pratt, "Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning: Sun 26 Mar 1820?" reprinted from *Meridian Magazine* (9 Oct 2002), <http://johnpratt.com/items/docs/lds/meridian/2002/vision.html>.

110. For links to documents of all nine of the contemporary First Vision accounts, see "Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Deity," Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>.

elements of design. Being 100 percent historically accurate is usually an unattainable, and at times even an undesirable, artistic ideal.<sup>111</sup>

Why certain aspects of the First Vision are depicted and perpetuated, I cannot say, nor do I judge. It may be that some artists are simply unaware of various elements discussed in the other noncanonicalized accounts of the First Vision. Or maybe they are aware of them and consciously choose not to depict them, such as omitting the adversarial attack (which most paintings do not show) to focus more on Joseph's vision of the Father and Son. It may be that artists reduce the vision to its core elements (boy, praying, Father and Son, grove). It may be that artists simply want to rely on the known and accepted symbols to communicate their message. It may be that there is a sort of artistic "biasing" or "priming" taking place that colors or limits how the visual is imagined—where once an image is seen, it can't be unseen, and it is replicated both consciously and subconsciously. Whatever the potential explanation, I do believe there is room for rich expansion and continued exploration outside the mold of standardized First Vision art perpetuated in the last one hundred years.

### The Future of First Vision Art

So, what will be the future direction of First Vision art in the next one hundred or two hundred years? If the past two centuries are any indicator, it will likely take shifts and turns in emphasis, substance, and style. Cultural priorities and pressures will act upon future First Vision art to push it in new directions, just as they have in the past. As the Church continues to spread and becomes more global, it is likely that First Vision art will reflect that increased diversity. Artistic symbols are

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111. As I've written before, art and history are intertwined entities who need one another, yet their connection more often creates difficult knots instead of well-tied bows that serve both art and history. These knots often result because the aims of history and the aims of art are not aligned, often pulling in entirely different directions. History wants facts; art wants meaning. History wants to validate sources; art wants to evoke emotion. History is more substance; art is more style. History wants accuracy; art wants aesthetics. The two disciples often love, yet hate, one another as they strive to serve their different masters. See Anthony Sweat, "The Role of Art in Teaching Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine," *Religious Educator* 16, no. 3 (2015), 41–57. I do, however, believe that in narrative, representative religious art dealing with the transmission of history and doctrine, "key elements must be depicted" as art historian Richard Oman has said. Oman, "'Ye Shall See the Heavens Open,'" 119.



FIGURE 34. Joni Susanto, *The First Vision*, batik, cotton textile, 1990. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

often incorporated into and are reflective of the culture where they are produced and the people of that culture. Thus, we see Asian and African and Polynesian and Mexican nativity depictions of Jesus. In the future, we will also likely see similar international artistic interpretations of the symbols of the First Vision. Many such have already appeared in the last few decades. Joni Susanto's expressive 1990 batik cotton textile of the First Vision image reflects marvelous Indonesian aesthetics (fig. 34). Emile Wilson's 1992 batik textile employs standard First Vision symbols, but Joseph, the Father, and the Son are each brown skinned, speaking from and to where the image was produced in Sierra Leone (fig. 35).

Although the majority of the corpus thus far has been created by males, as contemporary modern cultures continue to call for and provide better gender equity in all aspects of society, it may be that more future First Vision art will be produced by women, resulting in different views and expressions of the Vision. Or it may be that First Vision



FIGURE 35. Emile Wilson, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, batik, textile, 1992. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

art will depict more women in the grove, either representing Joseph, angels, or Deity.<sup>112</sup> Doctrinal emphases and new revelations may influence this female aspect in the grove. For example, although teachings on Heavenly Mother trace to the early Restoration, there has been a notable emphasis in recent years by the institutional Church on teachings that have to do with “heavenly parents.” The 1995 statement “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” emphasizes that we are children of “heavenly parents.”<sup>113</sup> The Church recently released a Gospel Topics Essay on “Mother in Heaven.”<sup>114</sup> There have been 120 total references in general conference to “heavenly parents” since 1851, but more than half of them (64) have been given since 2010.<sup>115</sup> The 2019 revised Young Women Theme changed the old phrase “We are daughters of our Heavenly Father” to “I am a beloved daughter of heavenly parents.”<sup>116</sup> As doctrinal emphasis in the Church centers more on male and female eternal parents, it is likely our art will reflect that emphasis. Fantasy illustrator Galen Dara created some unique and intriguing images of the First Vision for a 2011 *Sunstone* article.<sup>117</sup> In one of the images, angels fly around a barren grove, entering and exiting the panel. Joseph kneels with his left hand blocking the light as he looks up at not two, but *three* divine beings (fig. 36). They are featureless, white forms, haloed each with a nimbus, and it is impossible to determine who is who. Does the third glorified being in the grove represent our Heavenly Mother, or perhaps the Holy Ghost? The painting is open to “flexible interpretation,”

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112. Remember, art needs to speak to its viewer using common symbols. Although Joseph is obviously male, depictions of a female Joseph that speak to women would be an apt artistic expression. A student of mine at Brigham Young University produced a marvelously choreographed dance film, where the angels were female and the lead dancer representing Joseph was a female, wearing a white shirt and brown pants, of course.

113. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>.

114. “Mother in Heaven,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/mother-in-heaven?lang=eng>.

115. Search “heavenly parents” on LDS General Conference Corpus, <https://www.lds-general-conference.org/>.

116. Church News Staff, “Read the New Young Women Theme,” *Church News*, October 5, 2019, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2019-10-05/general-conference-october-2019-lds-mormon-young-women-theme-163132>.

117. Stephen C. Taysom, “Approaching the First Vision Saga,” *Sunstone*, October 17, 2011 <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/approaching-the-first-vision-saga/>.



FIGURE 36. Galen Dara, untitled illustration, mixed media, circa 2011. Courtesy Galen Dara.

Galen Dara told me, but that “a reference to Heavenly Mother is a very apt translation.”<sup>118</sup> Recently, another female artist, Alice Pritchett, created a unique gilded linoleum print of the First Vision that includes a concourse of male and female angels, and even some animals (horses and dogs). Directly above the Father and the Son is a female figure with a large halo. Alice said she created this image seeking to explore such questions as, “Who fought off the devils who tried to stop [Joseph]?” and, “What was Heavenly Mother’s role during the event?” (fig. 37).<sup>119</sup> Although none of the historical accounts specifically mention Mother in Heaven, doctrinal emphases can cause historical reinterpretation, and prophetic revelations can always add additional understanding.

118. Galen Dara, private email to author, used with permission. See Galen Dara’s website at [www.galendara.com](http://www.galendara.com).

119. Alice Abrams Pritchett, caption to *The Veil o'er the Earth Is Beginning to Burst*, used in Truman G. Madsen, “Fire from Heaven: The First Vision and Its Aftermath,” *BYU Magazine* (Spring 2020): 30.

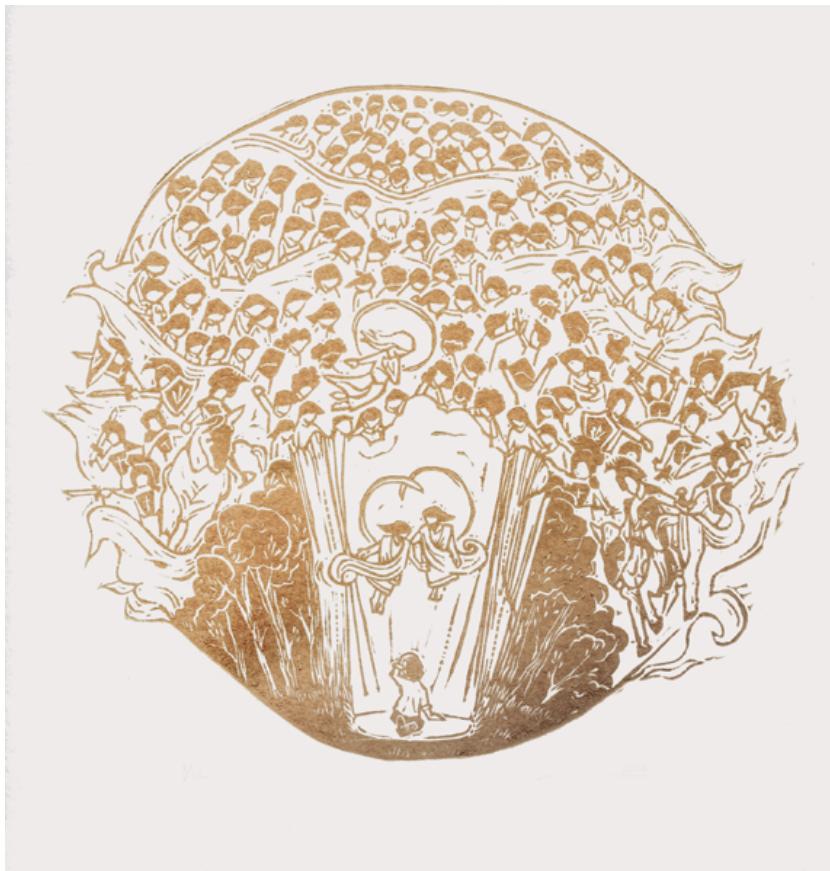


FIGURE 37. Alice Pritchett, *The Veil o'er the Earth Is Beginning to Burst*, original linoleum block print, 2020. Courtesy Alice Pritchett.

Speaking of history, we are at a pivotal point regarding how Church history is being approached by the institutional Church. Efforts like the new narrative Church history *Saints*, the Church's Gospel Topics Essays, the Joseph Smith Papers Project, and new Church Educational System courses such as Foundations of the Restoration are reflective of a transparent and open cultural approach to Church history. The Church and its members are becoming increasingly aware of and open to historical/doctrinal/policy nuances and alternatives that may have been closed off in the past, which opens possibilities for alternative expressions in art

that may have been unacceptable to previous generations. Artist Gary Smith, who has and continues to produce many different paintings of the First Vision, said to me about First Vision art, “If you go too far afield on anything [in a painting], if you go too far outside of what is accepted, then they [the Church or its members] are less likely to use it.”<sup>120</sup> In Church culture, we often associate what is *faithful* with what is *familiar*. As increased familiarity with various historical sources and doctrinal emphases shift, what was once heresy can become associated with orthodoxy and therefore with acceptability (even in art) in Church culture.<sup>121</sup> Understanding the symbiotic nature of art as a reflection of culture but also as a driving factor in changing culture, Gary Smith countered that “the only way we get beyond just acceptability to the truth of things is to [paint] it and then be able to back it up. And then after a few of those paintings have been displayed out there and kind of accepted, that then becomes more of the norm, particularly for the next generation.”<sup>122</sup>

As the Church moves to the next generation of members who are increasingly familiar with our sacred history but also familiar with certain difficulties, nuances, sticking points, and controversies, we may be moving out of a past culture of certainty and into a broader epistemological humility, embracing ambiguity and better acknowledging the limits of what is and is not known.<sup>123</sup> Notice these various elements of

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120. Gary Smith, interview with author.

121. “An element that is one generation’s heresy becomes another’s orthodoxy, and vice versa, even in religions of revelation.” Fenella Cannell, “Mormonism and Anthropology: On Ways of Knowing,” *Mormon Studies Review* 4 (2017): 14.

122. Gary Smith, interview with author.

123. For example, the revised 2013 heading for Official Declaration 2 says of the reasons why Brigham Young restricted Black Africans from priesthood that “Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice.” “Official Declaration 2,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, September 30, 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/od/2?lang=eng>. The Gospel Topics Essay on plural marriage states clearly, “Many details about the early practice of plural marriage are unknown.” “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo?lang=eng>. Numerous Church leaders in general conference settings have discussed how while we have exalting truth, we don’t have the answers to some questions. For examples, see Quentin L. Cook, “The Songs They Could Not Sing,” General Conference, October 2011; Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” General Conference, April 2013; Rihna Mak, “I Don’t Know All the Answers, But I Know Enough,” *Ensign* 48, no. 9 (September 2018, digital only); Chakell Wardleigh, “We Don’t

knowledge, history, humility, and ambiguity coming together in J. Kirk Richard's recent painting of the First Vision (2020) (fig. 38).<sup>124</sup> Set in atypical cool blue undertones, Joseph prays with hands clasped. Behind him high in the air come the Father and Son, surrounded by a concourse of angels flanking either side, reflecting the knowledge of the 1835 "many angels" historical account. Looking closely, ones sees a white line extending from Joseph's head to God and Jesus, surrounding them. Kirk Richards told me:

[This First Vision painting] has this bubble, like a thought bubble, like an umbilicus. The idea behind that was to say, because Joseph himself said he wasn't sure what it [the grove experience] was, in so many words, and that's kind of what the idea behind that is. What is this, is he out of body, is it a visitation, a vision, what is it? I am less interested in exactly what it was, than I am in carving out a space for different people to see [the First Vision] as different things.<sup>125</sup>

To conclude, United States politician and president John Adams once directed the famous artist John Trumbull that in painting history, "Truth, Nature, Fact, should be your sole guide. Let not our Posterity be deluded by fictions under pretence of poetical or graphical Licenses."<sup>126</sup> If the last two hundred years are any guide to the future two hundred years, it is likely that truth, nature, and fact will not be our sole guide in how, why, where, or when the vision is depicted. Culture factors and doctrinal emphases will play a major role. If Joseph Smith and the First Vision remain a central focal point of our doctrinal and historical narrative, which seems highly likely given its emphasis in this bicentennial year, then First Vision art will continue to propagate that foundational story,

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Always Know 'Why,'" *New Era* 49, no. 2 (February 2019). See also chapters in devotional books such as Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, "Productive Ambiguity," in *Faith Is Not Blind* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018); Anthony Sweat, "Embracing Ambiguity," in *Seekers Wanted* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019).

124. Kirk Richards's impressive work will soon permanently reside as a featured exhibit in the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University. The Maxwell Institute's new home in BYU's West View Building, currently under construction, is slated for completion in 2020. Campus visitors thereafter will be able to view the piece in the Maxwell Institute's main lobby.

125. Kirk Richards, interview with the author, October 19, 2019. Transcript in possession of the author.

126. John Adams, "From John Adams to John Trumbull, 18 March 1817," *Founders Online*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6730>.



FIGURE 38. J. Kirk Richards, *The First Vision*, oil on panel, 2020. Courtesy J. Kirk Richards.

as it began to do in earnest in the 1900s.<sup>127</sup> If, however, the focus and telling of our historical narrative and doctrinal message shifts, artistic emphasis will likely equally shift. This would not be to say that the First Vision did not happen or wasn't important, only to say that priorities

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127. President Russell M. Nelson announced to the Church in the October 2019 general conference that “2020 will be designated as a bicentennial year” to “prepare for a unique [April 2020] conference that will commemorate the very foundations of the restored gospel” because of the First Vision. He urged, “You may wish to begin your preparation by reading afresh Joseph Smith’s account of the First Vision as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price.” Russell M. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” General Conference, October 2019.

change, just as the Church from the 1830s to the 1870s had a different focus on which to rally energy and message, largely ignoring the First Vision. We do not paint the angel Raphael or Gabriel conferring priesthood to Joseph Smith very often (see D&C 128:21), do we? That does not mean it did not happen, just that it is not emphasized. Were the significance of the angel Raphael or Gabriel better known or consistently taught, paintings of those angels would probably proliferate, like numerous images of John the Baptist conferring the priesthood, or paintings of the First Vision did throughout the 1900s. Who is to say what cultural and revelatory factors may press upon the Church—and thus upon the artists who tell its story and sound its visual message—in the tricentennial year of 2120, or quadricentennial year of 2220? Depending which revelatory tectonic plates shift, the First Vision may visually recede and crumble into the oceans of the past or be thrust even higher up on the mountaintop of importance. Only time will tell, and undoubtedly there will be a visual record to tell it.

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# Sermon Notes of Jesse Townsend, a Presbyterian Minister in Palmyra, New York

*Introduction by John G. Turner*

After his youthful visionary encounter with God the Father and Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith Jr. recovered his strength and stumbled home. When Lucy Mack Smith, his mother, asked Joseph what the matter was, the boy reported that the church that attracted her and several of his siblings was false. He would not join it. “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true,” the budding prophet informed his mother.<sup>1</sup>

There was little love lost between Presbyterians and Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century. Joseph Smith identified Presbyterians as among his chief persecutors, Latter-day Saints mocked aspects of Calvinist theology, and Presbyterian “home missionaries” sought to convert “deluded Mormons” in the Utah Territory.<sup>2</sup> This mutual religious animosity was not limited to Presbyterianism, of course. Protestants of all sorts denounced Mormonism as imposture, fraud, and heresy. Smith in turn described a religious atmosphere of contention and chaos: “Some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist” (JS-H 1:5). It was all “strife of words and a contest about opinions” (JS-H 1:6). As part of their *raison d'être*, the Latter-day Saints rejected these and all other existing branches of Christianity. Out of a spiritual wasteland of Protestant apostasy, God

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1. On the relationship between Smith, early Mormonism, and Presbyterianism, see John Matzko, “The Encounter of Young Joseph Smith with Presbyterianism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 68–84.

2. R. Douglas Brackenridge, “Hostile Mormons and Persecuted Presbyterians in Utah, 1870–1900: A Reappraisal,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37 (Summer 2011): 162–228.

had finally restored Christ's one true church. Still, Smith singled out Presbyterianism as "not true."

It is difficult for Americans in 2020 to grasp the cultural significance of Presbyterianism two centuries ago. Today, Presbyterians are a tiny, declining religious minority, constituting less than a half percent of the American population. As of 1787, by contrast, Presbyterians stood alongside Congregationalists as the largest denomination in the new republic. Presbyterians and Congregationalists shared a common theological heritage, rooted in the Calvinist (Reformed) wing of the Protestant reformation. That Reformed heritage included an emphasis on divine sovereignty; a very high regard for the authority of scripture above ecclesiastical traditions, human reason, or other sources of revelation; a concern for properly ordered and governed churches, including the need for congregations to exercise moral discipline over their members; and an aversion to anything that smacked of Catholic ritual. Human salvation hinged on the eternal decrees of God. Humans could not in any way earn their salvation, nor could they of their own accord acquire the faith through which God saved them.<sup>3</sup> While Congregationalists emphasized the autonomy of local congregations and remained wary of synodical cooperation and authority, Presbyterian congregations participated in layers of governance by representative assemblies of ministers and elders.

Despite the rapid growth of Methodist and Baptist churches in the early years of the American republic, Presbyterians retained significant cultural authority through both their learned ministry and their evangelistic fervor. They understood themselves as the guardians of both orthodox Christian theology and the new nation's morals. As the minister and historian Sean Michael Lucas has quipped, Presbyterians in the Early Republic were a "church with the soul of a nation."<sup>4</sup> In 1801, Congregationalists and Presbyterians embarked on a cooperative venture to evangelize the American frontier. In what became known as the Plan of Union, Presbyterian or Congregational churches could install each other's ministers. In practice, the arrangement led many Presbyterian

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3. See useful summaries in David D. Hall, *The Puritans: A Transatlantic History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019), chap. 1; and E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), chap. 2.

4. Sean Michael Lucas, "Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Presbyterianism in North America," in *The Oxford Handbook of Presbyterianism*, ed. Gary Scott Smith and P. C. Kemeny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 52.

churches in New York and farther west to install New England-born Congregationalists as their pastors.

It was this arrangement that helped bring Jesse Townsend to Palmyra. Shortly after the Smith family's late-1816 move to Palmyra, fifty-six men and women established Western Presbyterian Church in the village. In keeping with the Plan of Union, Western Presbyterian Church invited a Congregationalist to Palmyra as its prospective minister. Native to Andover, Connecticut, Townsend was a graduate of Yale College and had served Congregational churches in Massachusetts and New York. More recently, he had overseen an academy in Utica, New York; his several moves suggest that his career was not especially illustrious. The members of Western Presbyterian, however, liked him well enough to install him as their pastor in 1817. During Townsend's pastorate, the Presbyterians built and dedicated a church building, the first meeting house in the village itself. Townsend remained in Palmyra for three years, then accepted a commission from the American Home Missionary Society and went to Illinois and then Missouri. Following his time on the frontier, Townsend returned to Palmyra and filled pulpits there and in neighboring towns.<sup>5</sup>

In his later years, Townsend made harsh critiques of Smith and his supporters. In December 1833, Townsend joined other Palmyra residents in denouncing Joseph Smith Sr. and his namesake son as "entirely destitute of *moral character, and addicted to vicious habits.*"<sup>6</sup> Later that same month, Townsend elaborated on his criticisms. He alleged that Smith had duped the once-prosperous Martin Harris into bankrolling the publication of the Book of Mormon. Townsend described Smith as "a person of questionable character, of intemperate habits, and latterly a noted *money-digger.*"<sup>7</sup> Western Presbyterian's former minister did not include any information that indicates that he was personally acquainted with the Smith family or with other early members of the Church of Christ.

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5. On Townsend's background, see Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College* (New York: Henry Holt, 1912), 4:695–96; *New York Observer*, September 1, 1838, 140; Matzko, "Encounter of the Young Joseph Smith with Presbyterianism," 74.

6. George N. Williams and others, December 4, 1833, in E[ber] D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: n.p., 1834), 261–62, italics in original.

7. Townsend to Phineas Stiles, December 24, 1833, in Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1867), 288–91, italics in original.

By contrast, members of the Smith family almost certainly heard Townsend preach. At an unknown date, Lucy Mack Smith and her children Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and Sophronia joined Western Presbyterian. Even if they did so after Townsend vacated its pastorate, they had probably at least visited the church during his years of active ministry. Western Presbyterian Church's 1819 dedication would have drawn a large crowd from the surrounding area.<sup>8</sup> The Presbyterian Smiths stopped attending the church by 1828 at the latest, and the church suspended their access to the Lord's Supper in 1830.

The sermons published here provide us with insight into what messages the Smiths might have heard at Western Presbyterian. At the very least, they provide the opportunity to examine the Presbyterian message—or, rather, one example of it—on its own terms rather than through the vituperative war of words between the early Latter-day Saints and their detractors. The sermons are revealing not because of any unusual eloquence or contribution to Presbyterian theology, but rather because Townsend preached on very typical subjects: the sinfulness of all human beings, the urgency of repentance, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and the sovereignty of God.

Reformed (Calvinist) theologians in the Early Republic argued among themselves about the most biblical and reasonable ways to understand original sin, human agency, and divine sovereignty. Across the board, however, Presbyterian ministers placed a very high value on God's sovereignty, depicting God as the moral governor of the universe. Townsend reminded congregants "that it is God who governs the [world] and all things in it, that the sovereign and absolute disposal of all things is in his hands, that no evil can befall any but at the divine command or holy disposal of God."<sup>9</sup> Thus, when members of the community mourned a death, Townsend reminded them that their loved ones perished not because of a cruel twist of fate, but because God so willed "to bring about some benevolent purpose."<sup>10</sup> For instance, when children or young adults died, it provided the living with a reminder that they should not delay repentance. "Forgiveness must be obtained in the present world," Townsend warned, "or it can never be obtained."<sup>11</sup>

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8. Matzko, "Encounter of Young Joseph Smith with Presbyterianism," 76.

9. Jesse Townsend, sermon, December 13, 1807, Durham, New York; repeated in 1818 in Palmyra.

10. Jesse Townsend, sermon, November 20, 1814, Madison, New York, after the death of Mrs. Judith Taylor.

11. Jesse Townsend, sermon, March 20, 1808, Durham, New York; repeated February 2, 1811, Madison, New York; and May 10, 1818, Palmyra.

The need to console communities in the face of death was a perennial task for ministers, as Joseph Smith would experience during the 1830s and early 1840s. One might compare Townsend's November 20, 1814, sermon with the words of Joseph Smith after the 1844 death of King Follett. Smith offered his followers a very different sort of consolation.

Townsend often commented on the complex relationship between human freedom and divine sovereignty. "Men and angels are," he taught, "and ever will be, like himself [God], free moral agents."<sup>12</sup> At first glance, this resembles Lehi's counsel to his son that humans "have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, . . . free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men" (2 Ne. 2:26–27). Townsend's understanding of human freedom, however, was far more attenuated than Lehi's. No creature, the minister taught, could act "independently of his Creator."<sup>13</sup> Humans did possess the freedom to act on their wills, but those wills did not include what Townsend termed "a self-determining power."<sup>14</sup> Most significantly, humans could not reform their corrupt wills of their own accord. Only God could do so. "If God by his holy Spirit do not change their hearts," Townsend preached, "they will never set about the duties of a religious life, but will persist, all their life long, in the same course of sinning against God in which they are now going, and will die in their sins and be eternally miserable."<sup>15</sup> In other words, humans were free, but only free to keep on sinning unless God converted them. Why then the constant prods toward repentance? Calvinists had ready answers to this objection. God used the Word of God—the words of the Bible and the words of orthodox ministers—to bring his elect to repentance. Those men and women who heeded the Word of God, recognized the depths of their sinfulness, repented of it, and turned toward God were in all likelihood among the elect.

What Townsend preached on human freedom and the human will fits squarely within the Edwardsean New Divinity movement of Reformed theology. Although Townsend graduated from Yale prior to the presidency of Timothy Dwight (a grandson of Jonathan Edwards),

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12. Jesse Townsend, sermon, December 13, 1807, Durham, New York; repeated in 1818 in Palmyra.

13. Jesse Townsend, sermon, December 13, 1807, Durham, New York; repeated in 1818 in Palmyra.

14. Jesse Townsend, sermon, July 8, 1808, Durham, New York; repeated August 6, 1808, Greenfield, New York; May 12, 1811, Madison, New York; and July 6, 1819, Palmyra.

15. Jesse Townsend, sermon, July 8, 1808, Durham, New York; repeated August 6, 1808, Greenfield, New York; May 12, 1811, Madison, New York; and July 6, 1819, Palmyra.

his ideas are a crude reflection of what Edwards had proclaimed in his treatises on *The Freedom of the Will* and *Original Sin*. Like Edwards, Townsend placed a central emphasis on the heart, acknowledged the freedom and even the necessity of the will to act in accordance with its motives, and insisted that only God could reform those motives.<sup>16</sup>

Joseph Smith was one of many religious thinkers in the first half of the nineteenth century to reject what one might charitably term the paradoxes of sovereignty and agency one finds in Townsend's sermons. In Smith's "translation" of the King James Bible, he altered "no man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" to "except he doeth the will of my Father who hath sent me."<sup>17</sup> Smith's successors sounded similar notes. "The volition of the creature is free," Brigham Young preached in 1866.<sup>18</sup> Calvinism was a theological bugbear and foil for the Latter-day Saints, as it was for many other American religious movements in the nineteenth century. Indeed, by the time of the Church of Christ's 1830 founding, Calvinism was decidedly on the wane. Even many Presbyterians, such as the renowned evangelist Charles Finney, dispensed with the careful doctrinal discussions of divine sovereignty and busied themselves with the task of organizing revival meetings and orchestrating mass conversions. Finney and like-minded revivalists employed "new measures"—including savvy publicity and preaching designed to produce an emotional response—to prod hesitant sinners toward repentance. These developments led to a schism within American Presbyterianism, as "Old School" churches more committed to traditional Calvinist verities split from their "New School" counterparts in 1837.

Despite his denunciations of the "Mormonites," Jesse Townsend in many respects was an irenic Presbyterian, not a theological combatant. He opposed the "noise and tumult" that the Latter-day Saints associated

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16. Allen C. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989). For a shorter summary, see Guelzo, "After Edwards: Original Sin and Freedom of the Will," in *After Edwards: The Courses of the New England Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Sweeney (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 3.

17. Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128, citing Joseph Smith's *New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, ed. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 46–47, 69, 456–57.

18. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool and London: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 11:272 (August 19, 1866).

with revival meetings, and, contrary to the stereotype of intra-Protestant competition in Joseph Smith's History, Townsend actively opposed such disharmony. After Townsend's 1838 death, his obituary described him as one of "the *old school* of New England divines," but a minister who favored whatever "measures of the day, whether *new* or *old*, as were instrumental in the salvation of souls."<sup>19</sup> These sermons provide a sense of the measures Jesse Townsend employed during his Palmyra years and, therefore, a clearer sense of the Protestant Christianity that the Smiths encountered during the late 1810s and 1820s.

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## Excerpts from Jesse Townsend Sermon Notes

*Jesse Townsend (1766–1838) served as pastor of the Western Presbyterian Church in Palmyra, New York, between 1817 and 1820. The Church History Library acquired notes Townsend wrote for eight sermons. Many of the sermons were first given by Townsend in Durham and Madison, New York, then used again later in Palmyra.*

*BYU Studies staff members Veronica Anderson, Hannah Charlesworth, Saralee Dunster, and Alec Harding transcribed Townsend's sermon notes. A sample of their transcription is featured here. Digital images of Townsend's sermons are available from the Church History Library at: <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record?id=5c2d7f04-a91f-49a5-a0b3-20187b58bb43&view=summary>. The entire collection of BYU Studies transcriptions are also available from the Church History Library here: <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record?id=72c1b75a-9ceb-445b-af66-0742331bd027&view=browse>.*

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19. Townsend obituary, quoted in Matzko, "Encounter of Young Joseph Smith with Presbyterianism," 75–76, italics in original.

Durham Dec<sup>r</sup> 13<sup>th</sup> 1807-

Palmyra 1818

Jeremiah 13.16. Give glory to | the Lord your God, before he | cause darkness, & before your | feet stumble upon the dark | mountains, & while ye look | for light, he turn it into the | shadow of death, & make it | gross darkness.

God's ancient covenant | people, having apostatized from | him & grown very corrupt; to | warn them of their sin & danger, & to | let them know that their true reformation & nothing short of that ~~wou~~ | ~~would~~ could avert the judgments threatened | against them, God sent to them *this rebel|ious* people his prophet Jeremiah. | The warnings, threatenings, & counsels | given ~~to that people from God~~ ~~<them>~~ by | that prophet, are for our admonition & learning at this age of the [[world]], [pg. [1]] for, God is the same. yesterday to|day & for ever, & the sins of his | people are now as provoking to ~~<him>~~ ~~hi~~ | as ever they were; & he is now as | able to punish them for their sins | as ever, & as desirous of their repent|ance and reformation as ever; he is | still lo[a]th to give any up to destru[c]tion.

In the chapter which contains | our text, we find the prophet at|tempting to awaken that stubborn[n] | & secure people to repentance | by leading them to consider ~~<what>~~ ~~what~~ | judgments of God would ~~<come>~~ ~~could~~ ~~[illegible]~~ | upon them unless they did truly | repent & reform. He gives them | to understand by the sign of a girdle | spoiled, that their pride should be | storied, & by the sign of bottles filled | with wine, he gives them to ~~under|stand~~, that their counsels should be | blasted. In consideration of the | threatenings. denounced against [pg. [2]] them, he calls upon them to repent | & to humble themselves before God.

In the context we find a judgment | threatened against that people; such | an one, as should in a ~~degree~~ ~~<manner>~~ take | away their senses & bring them to | be greatly at a loss what to do <or>, which | way to look for relief from their trou|bles. The evil ~~<then>~~ coming upon them | unless they ~~<repented &>~~ reformed,, is spoken of | under the figure of bottles filled | with wine, & dashed one against | another. See verses 12-15. . . .

This is in the first place, to | own & be sensible, that it is | God who governs the [[world]] & all things | in it, that the sovereign & abso|lute disposal of all things is | in his hands, that no evil | can befall[!] ~~us~~ any but at the | divine command or holy | disposal <of God>; that his kingdom | ~~ruled~~ ~~<rules>~~ over all, & that not a | sparrow falls to the ground | without his notice, or with|out our heavenly Father, by | whom the hairs of our

heads are | all numbered. Without a deep | sense of these things, we cannot | give glory to God, in a day of | adversity. If we are in affliction, to give glory to God <him> in our | affliction, we must be sensible | of the <his> hand of God in our afflictions, & of our dependence | *{illegible character}* <on> him for help in a day of [pg. [11]] trouble, to deliver us from evils, | felt or feared. To glorify God <him>, we | must have a deep felt sense | that it is ~~an~~ absolute <a solemn> truth | that God <he> in infinite wisdom | & perfect justice governs [[the]] | [[world]], & all things in it. He, that | disbelieves this, will never put | his trust in God, nor will he | commit himself & his concerns into the <his> hands of God; | & ~~nor will he~~ leave all, at his wise & holy | disposal. But all, who rightly | believe in the adorable perfections | of God <Jehovah>, & are willing to give glory | to the Lord their God <him>, will cheerfully commit themselves <&> all their | ways into the <his> hands of God, will | trust in him & live to him, | will <and> study to please him, & be | afraid <& fear> to displease him, by | doing any thing dishonorable [pg. [12]] | to his great & holy name. . . . The | fact is no creature can act in | a single instance independently of his Creator. The divine influence extends over all creatures, from the highest angel | down to the smallest & most [pg. [14]] inconsiderable insect. It extends in | the most minute minutely manner to [[the]] | whole natural & to <the> whole moral | [[world]], [[world]], holding all creatures & all events | & all circumstances & appendages | of events at his own most holy | wise, righteous & absolute disposal, but yet all in such a | wonderful manner as <that> men | & ; angels are, & ever will be, | like himself, free moral | agents. No second cause, tho' | ever so powerful, can act independently of the first cause. . . .

Palmyra July 6th 1819— | S. N. M. H. Jr<sup>ry</sup> | 24th 1830<sup>20</sup>

Durham July 8<sup>th</sup> 1808. —

Greenfield August 6<sup>th</sup> 1808

Madison May 12<sup>th</sup> 1811 – Rucusus | 1813—

Acts 24. 25. And as he reasoned of [[righteousness]], temporance [temperance], & judgment to | come, Felix trembled, & answered, “Go thy | way for this time; when I have a convenient season I will call for thee.

Paul the apostle <from a bitter persecutor> was made, by the | grace, of God, a most affectionate friend of the | Lord Jesus [[Christ]] & of his [[church]]. For his zeal | for [[Christ]] & his cause, he <had enemies, by

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20. These few lines were written sideways on the left margin of the page.

whom> became subject to perse|eution <he was persecuted.> While he was at ease & security in | the ways of sin & persecuting the [[church]] of [[Christ]], | he was free from persecution: but when he | had become a friend & follower of [[Jesus Christ]] & | ~~had commenced~~ a preacher of the cross | of [[Christ]], the enemies of the [[Christian]] religion | set themselves to work <attempted> to destroy him; they | went about to kill <him> but not succeeding | in this ~~according to their intentions~~, they | next made their <they> attempted to ruin him | by false accusation; In this Paul stood [pg. 123] upon his defence, this <which> brought him before | the civil powers. Here he answered for | his life & doctrines & preached [[Christ]] to Felix, | the Roman governor & his wife Drusilla; | “& as he reasoned of [[righteousness]], temperance, | & judgment to come, Felix trem|bled, & answered, Go thy way for this | time; when I have a convenient | season I will call for thee.”

While Paul was making his | defence before Felix, the Judge on | the bench felt himself arraigned, by | an accusing conscience, before <at> a higher | tribunal, that he himself, tho' setting | to judge upon one, who was accused to | him of being a disturber of the peace of | society & ~~diserving~~ deserving of the punishment | of the civil law, was indeed guilty | before God of the sin of unrightesous|ness, & of unchastity, & that he had | great reason to expect to be cast in | the judgment of the great day. Feeling | himself self-condemned for his own wick|edness of heart & life, he trembled; [pg. 124] but what did he do, while he had these | convictions? Did he then make enquiry | of the prisoner at the bar, as a minister | of [[Christ]], what he should do to be saved? Did he | show any signs of penitence & of true | reformation? No; these things appear to | have been painful to him; & there|fore he was for putting them off for an|other time. He fancied that the pre|sent time was not so convenient a | season to attend to his soul's concerns | as some other season might be. Perhaps | he was ashamed to have his convictions | known in court; or he might have | been unwilling to become immediately | attentive to the duties of a religious | life. He appears, however, to <have> been ashamed | to avow publicly his opposition of heart to | the <cutting> truths which he had just heard, & there|fore to carry the idea that he was not | callous to conviction, he pretended to | the ~~prisoner~~ prisoner at the bar, that these things | should have his attention at another time. | But “When I have a convenient season I | will call for thee.” But do we hear | any thing further of his convictions, that [pg. 125] he ever after found a season more con|venient than the present in which <to attend> to his | soul's concerns? We find indeed that he

| was such a trimmer that <two' years after> when he went | out of office, willing to shew the Jews a | pleasure he left Paul bound, Perhaps | he did this to secure his reappointment | to office. At any rate, Felix appears as un|regenerated persons' commonly do under the | first stages of awaking & conviction. | with whom a disposition to procrastinate the duty of repentance is ever prevalent, & **that** which originates from the total | indisposition of the heart to divine things. . . .

Now | if this is the present taste of the heart, | & the will has not a self-determin|ing power, & does originate its own | exercises, but acts in the view of motive [pg. [133]] & <the gratification of> its own biases & wrong taste, be a | motive in view of which the will chooses | then, it follows, that, if sin<sup>rs</sup> feel a | present disposition of heart to procras|tinate the duty of repentance toward | God & faith on the Lord [[Jesus Christ]], & a care|ful obedience of the de laws [[Christ]] of [[Christ]]'s | kingdom, that they are at present | in such a condition, & possessed of | such a temper, that ~~unless~~ <if> God | by his holy Spirit <do not> change their | hearts, they will never set about | the duties of a religious life, but | will persist, all their life long, in | the same course of sinning ag<sup>t</sup> | God in which they are now going, & | so will die in their sins & be eternally miserable. If, O sin<sup>rs</sup>, when you | are called upon to repent & believe | the gospel & to set about the du|ties of true religion with a love to | them & with ~~with~~ zeal & engagedness [pg. [134]] of heart, as ~~your~~ <a duty> immediately obligato|rey, you are indisposed to the duty, | & resolved to hazard the experiment | of continuing in the love & practice | of your sins a little longer, with the | delusive hope, that by & by you will | find a season convenient to attend | to your soul's concerns, you hereby | show that your hearts are totally | depraved, entirely of a wrong <disposition> taste, | & that hereafter you will be as | much indisposed to duty as you now are, ~~unless~~ <if> God <do not> <changes your> ~~gave you a~~ | new hearts; that short of the sove|reign grace of God, which you conti|nually abuse, you will never | lay hold on eternal life, but will | pursue the same ,beaten tract | in which you have hitherto been | going, & <it> will land <you> in eternal | misery. The same disposition which | <now> leads sinners to put off the duty [pg. [135]] of repentance toward God & of faith | on the Lord [[Jesus Christ]], will continue unless | God sees fit to removes it by changing | their hearts. And what do sin<sup>rs</sup> | do? Do they do any thing to lay | God under obligation to change their | hearts? No: they roll sin as a sweet | morsel under their tongues, & will | not come to [[Christ]] that they might | have life. . . .



*Tangible as Man's* by Israel Gonzales, charcoal on paper, 8" x 10".

# When Did Joseph Smith Know the Father and the Son Have “Tangible” Bodies?

*John W. Welch*

*The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also. (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22)*

Joseph Smith learned many things in the First Vision—it was a burst of knowledge that poured down upon him in the spring of 1820. Particularly, he was greeted by two divine beings, “whose brightness and glory defy all description.” The first of the two, “pointing to the other,” said, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” (JS-H 1:17). Joseph then listened as Jesus spoke. That experience gave more authoritative answers to questions about the Godhead than anyone in the world had received since the vision of Stephen, who saw a heavenly vision of Jesus, “the Son of man standing on the right hand of God,” only a few years after Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection (Acts 7:55–56).

During his lifetime, Joseph spoke fairly often about his First Vision. Historians have grouped these accounts by author: four written by Joseph, five composed by others, and a dozen later reminiscences by people who heard him tell of the experience.<sup>1</sup> In addressing a variety of audiences, both formally and informally, these accounts consistently speak of the Father and the Son as two separate personages, who are described as having bodies and looking like each other. The Father called Joseph by name. They both spoke to him in English. He was told that his prayers

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1. Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2017), 1–35.

were answered, that his sins were forgiven, that he should not join any of the existing churches, that he should keep God's commandments, and many other things. He was left wholly exhausted but completely filled with love and joy, knowing that God had a work for him to do. In many ways, this experience was both spiritual and physical.

Twenty-three years later, on Sunday, April 2, 1843, in Ramus, Illinois, Joseph spoke more clearly than ever before about the *tangible* nature of the exalted bodies of God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. He also stated how those two divine beings relate to and are different from the Holy Ghost, the third member of the Godhead. He said, "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit" (D&C 130:22).

To best understand these words found in Doctrine and Covenants 130, it helps to consider the context in which these statements were made. The events of that day, April 2, 1843, are reported in detail in the journal kept for Joseph by his scribes, which is now available in the Joseph Smith Papers.<sup>2</sup> It was a conference Sunday, and Apostle Orson Hyde had been asked to speak. It may have been something of a homecoming for him. He had arrived back in Nauvoo only four months earlier, on December 7, 1842, "having been away from his family for 967 days and traveling over twenty thousand miles"<sup>3</sup> on his famous mission to dedicate the Holy Land for the return of the Jewish people. During his almost-three years away, Orson had missed a season of booming growth and soaring doctrinal developments in Nauvoo.

Beginning on page 35 of that journal, we learn that Elder Hyde opened his remarks at the 10:00 a.m. session with words about the Second Coming of Christ found in 1 John 3:2, which reads, "When he shall appear, **we shall be like him.**" Toward the end of his remarks, Elder Hyde spoke about John 14:23, which reads, "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make **our abode with him.**" He then added, "It is our privilege to have **the father & son dwelling in our hearts.**"<sup>4</sup>

2. See "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 2, 10 March 1843–14 July 1843," 35–45, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843/43>.

3. Roy B. Huff, "Orson Hyde: A Life of Lessons Learned," *Religious Educator* 3, no. 2 (2002): 167–83, <https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-3-no-2-2002/orson-hyde-life-lessons-learned>.

4. "Journal," 35. Certain spellings adjusted; bolding, emphasis, and some punctuation added throughout this section.

During the noon hour, Joseph and others had a meal at his sister Sophronia’s home. Joseph kindly said to Elder Hyde, “I am going to offer *some corrections* to you,” to which Hyde **sincerely** replied, “They shall be thankfully received.” Joseph then said, “When he shall appear we shall **see** him as he is. we shall see that he is a man like ourselves.— And that same sociality which exists amo[ng] us here will exist amo[ng] us there only it will be coupled with eternl glory which glory we do not now enjoy.” And then, regarding John 14:23, Joseph added, “The appearing of the father and of the Son in that verse is a personal appearance.—to say that the father and the Son dwells in a mans heart is an old Sectarian notion. and is not correct. There are no angels who administer to this earth but who belong or have belongd to this earth.”<sup>5</sup>

Following the 1:00 p.m. session, the Church authorities had dinner at Benjamin Johnson’s home, gathering there at 7:00 p.m. There Joseph elaborated further, giving more words of revelation that have since been included in Doctrine and Covenants 130: “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life. it will rise with us in the revalatin [revelation], and if a person gains more knowledge and intellignece. through his obedience & diligence. than another he will have so much the advantage in the world to come—There is a law irrevocably decreed in heaven. before the foundation of the world upon which all blessings are predicated and when we obtain a blessing it is by obedience to the law upon which that blessing is predicated.”<sup>6</sup>

At that point, Joseph “again revertd to Elders Hyde mistake.” Joseph said, “**The Father has a body of flesh & bones as tangible as mans** [the manuscript here may also be read as saying “as tangible as ours”] **the Son also**, but the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit.— and a person cannot have the personage of the H G [Holy Ghost] in his heart he may recive the gift of the holy Ghost. **it may descend upon him but not to tarry with him.**<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the dinner, Joseph “calld upon Elder Hyde to get up. & fulfil his covenant [or agreement] to preach  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an hour.” But “Elder Hyde arose & said Brothers & Sisters I feel as though all had been Said that can be said. I can say nothing but bless you.”<sup>8</sup>

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5. “Journal,” 37–38.

6. “Journal,” 42.

7. “Journal,” 42–43.

8. “Journal,” 44.

While the Prophet Joseph spoke politely in correcting Orson Hyde, he was firm in rejecting any idea that God is a spirit who “dwells” or “abides” in our hearts, calling this idea “an old Sectarian notion” that “is not correct.” While the Holy Ghost may “descend” upon us (as occurred at Christ’s baptism), his role is not to “tarry with,” “dwell in,” or “remain” with us.<sup>9</sup> Joseph also said that when Christ appears, we shall see him “as he is”—namely, that he is “a man *like ourselves*,” and that “the Father has a body of flesh & bones *as tangible as mans*.” And regarding the coming of the Father and the Son as promised in John 14:23, Joseph said that those words refer to “*a personal appearance*.” All of these points relate to the central idea that the Father in Heaven has a tangible body, differing from a spirit body.

Over his lifetime, Joseph had come to know the essential, tangible nature of the celestial bodies of God the Father and his Son. Joseph could have learned these things in several ways:

1. Most of all, he had likely learned this from his experience with the Father and the Son during his First Vision in 1820.
2. This certitude was mutually confirmed through his inspired and reasoned work translating the Book of Mormon in 1829 and the Bible in 1832.
3. His knowledge of divine physicality was reinforced by many personal appearances to him by other embodied heavenly messengers from 1823 to 1836. Considering each of these three ways adds to our appreciation of Joseph’s learning process.

## The First Vision

Joseph’s First Vision in the grove in 1820 would seem to be the primary and most likely point in time at which Joseph learned that the Father has a tangible body of flesh and bones. On no other occasion that we know of was Joseph in such close proximity with Heavenly Father.

Joseph’s reports of the First Vision repeatedly emphasize the reality and physicality of that experience. He remarked on the beautiful

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9. It is possible that Joseph was sensitive to the enduring and personal sign of the Holy Ghost that was given especially to Jesus. John testified that God, who had sent him to baptize, “said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, *and remaining* [menon] on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost” (John 1:33), emphasis added. John bore record further that he indeed “saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode [emeinen] upon him” (John 1:32). For other people, however, the Holy Ghost does not tarry, dwell, or remain.

weather that day, where he had left his ax the night before, the trees, and other concrete details. He described the thickness of the darkness of the evil power that bound his tongue and almost killed him, and he especially noted the extreme brightness and high heat of the pillar of fiery light that at first greatly alarmed him. The realities in his account ring true. Joseph does not speak of this visitation as being a dream or an out-of-body experience. As episode 5 of the Joseph Smith Papers podcast states, Joseph was "adamant that this is something more real, that this is something more tangible" than just a vision.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly, Joseph did not say in that 1843 conference that the Father and the Son have "physical" bodies. Saying that they have physical bodies would not be the same as saying that they have tangible bodies. Many "physical" things cannot be touched. For example, something may be too hot to be touched, but it is still physical, or it may be in a gaseous state that cannot be handled. Wind is physical, and air molecules are matter, but one would not call them "tangible," even though one can feel the wind when it blows.

Indeed, the word "tangible," which Joseph did use in 1843, comes from the Latin *tango*, meaning "I touch." At that time, it clearly meant, as it still does today, to be "perceptible by the touch; tactile."<sup>11</sup> The word normally implies some human contact through touch, but because none of Joseph's accounts give any information in this regard, readers are left to ponder what might have calmed the anxious young Joseph as his First Vision unfolded. We can imagine that the voice and nearness of God were gentle and intimate. Because Joseph was called by name, it became clear that this Being knew him personally. The Father may have gestured with open arms; perhaps there was some kind of physical contact. While we don't know, of course, some physical interaction could have happened as they met.

When the Father and Son appeared, the finger of God was extended, pointing toward his Beloved Son. One thinks of the premortal Jehovah extending his finger to touch the sixteen stones of the brother of Jared (Ether 3:6) and of the finger of the great I Am writing the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone for Moses (Ex. 8:19; 31:18). Could the Father have also extended his finger toward Joseph? On February 2, 1893, in St. George,

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10. Christopher Jones, guest, "It Caused Me Serious Reflection," transcript, January 5, 2020, *The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast*, Spencer W. McBride, host, 44:07, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/the-first-vision-podcast-episode-5-transcript?highlight=tangible>.

11. Webster's 1828 Dictionary, s.v. "Tangible," accessed April 6, 2020, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/tangible>.

Utah, John Alger<sup>12</sup> related a little-known account regarding Joseph's experience, which was written down that day in the detailed diary of Charles Lowell Walker.<sup>13</sup> According to Walker, Alger claimed that "God touched his [Joseph's] eyes with his finger and said 'Joseph this is my beloved Son hear him.' As soon as the Lord had touched his eyes with his finger he immediately saw the Savior." This allowed Joseph to turn his attention more particularly to the Son, who then instructed him. According to Walker, Alger had heard Joseph give this account when "he, John, was a small boy" in Kirtland, Ohio, in "the house of Father Smith," which would have been around 1833 when John was about thirteen years old. To make the point that Joseph had felt the touch, Alger went on to say "that Joseph while speaking of it put his finger to his right eye, suiting the action with the words so as to illustrate and at the same time impress the occurrence on the minds of those unto whom He was speaking."<sup>14</sup> While this account is a late and singular recollection, Walker mentions details of Alger's experience clearly and specifically. It is not inconsistent to think that the finger of God first touched Joseph's eyes and then, as the 1838 account mentions, also gestured toward the Son.

Is it also possible that other tangible contacts occurred? Would it have been out of character for Jesus to have lovingly encircled Joseph in his arms? Or, since the Apostle Thomas in Jerusalem and 2,500 people in the Nephite city of Bountiful had been allowed to touch the wounds in the resurrected Jesus's hands, feet, and side, might not Jesus have offered the same to Joseph Smith? This would have been especially poignant, for in Joseph's earliest account Jesus said, "Joseph <my son> thy sins are forgiven thee. . . . I was crucifyed for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life."<sup>15</sup>

As early as August 1836, it was reported by Reverend Truman Coe, a Presbyterian minister in Kirtland, that the Latter-day Saints "believe that

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12. John Alger (1820–1897), no known relation to Fanny Alger, joined the Church in March 1832 at the age of eleven. John married Sarah Pulsipher on January 6, 1842, with Joseph performing their wedding in Nauvoo. They arrived in Utah in 1848 and settled in St. George in 1864. See <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/missionary/individual/john-alger-1820?lang=eng> and <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/KWJZ-5JN>.

13. Charles Lowell Walker, *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, ed. A. Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1980), February 2, 1893, 2:755–56.

14. Walker, *Charles Lowell Walker*, 2:756.

15. "History, circa Summer 1832," 3, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>.

the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts." Other statements by Latter-day Saints around that time confirm Coe's assertion.<sup>16</sup> In Philadelphia in 1840, Orson Pratt and others discussed how God has revealed his corporeality, and how, as Samuel Bennett maintained, "in these last days hath his bodily presence been manifested."<sup>17</sup> As Steven C. Harper concluded based on several sources, Joseph Smith and others "were telling of the vision in the 1830s, and its implications for the trinity and materiality of God were asserted that early"<sup>18</sup>—earlier than people have previously thought—and these implications Joseph made explicitly and unambiguously clear in Ramus, Illinois, in 1843.

In addition, Joseph affirmed on April 2, 1843, that "the *appearing* of the father and of the Son," as mentioned in John 14:23, "is a personal appearance."<sup>19</sup> It would seem that Joseph had in mind here a specific "personal appearance" of the Father and of the Son, and what appearance

16. Truman Coe, "Truman Coe's 1836 Description of Mormonism," ed. Milton V. Backman Jr., *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 8. "Composed of body and parts" stands in direct opposition to the language in the Westminster Confession. Another early assertion of God being embodied is found in Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled: Zion's Watchman Unmasked, and Its Editor, Mr. L.R. Sunderland, Exposed: Truth Vindicated: The Devil and Priestcraft in Danger!* (New York: Parley P. Pratt, 1838), 29.

17. Samuel Bennett, *A Few Remarks by Way of Reply to an Anonymous Scribbler, Calling Himself a Philanthropist: Disabusing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of the Slanders and Falsehoods Which He Has Attempted to Fasten Upon It* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking and Guelpert, 1840), 11.

18. Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 53–57. In addition to the recollection of John Alger (see note 14 above), others reported that Joseph spoke at least briefly about the First Vision on other occasions, including:

(a) in a testimony in 1833, as remembered by Milo Andrus on July 17, 1853. Papers of George D. Watt. MS 4534, box 2, disk 1. May 1853–July 1853 images 231–56, partial transcript in CR 100 317, box 2, folder 15, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, October 3, 2012, corrected October 2013;

(b) to believers in the spring of 1835 in Michigan, as written by Joseph Curtis in 1839. "History of Joseph Curtis," 5, MSS 1654, Church History Library;

(c) in a sermon in June of 1835 in Kirtland, as recalled by William Phelps. William W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, June 2, 1835, MS, Church History Library;

(d) in a personal conversation on November 9, 1835 in Kirtland, as recorded in Joseph's journal. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 87–88; and

(e) to a congregation in the summer of 1837 in Toronto, as reported by Mary Horne. M. Isabella Horne, "The Prophet Joseph Smith: Testimony of Sister M. Isabella Horne," *Relief Society Magazine* 38, no. 3 (March 1951): 158–60.

19. "Journal," 37, italics added.

of the Father and the Son could have been more “personal,” “tangible,” and real to Joseph than his own First Vision?

### Joseph’s Translations

Joseph also learned and consistently taught several things about the tangible nature of the Godhead from the scriptures. From the New Testament, Joseph knew that Jesus had appeared with a tangible resurrected body to many on several occasions before he ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. And from the Book of Mormon, Joseph knew that Jesus had retained his physical resurrected body even *after his ascension* to the Father when Jesus appeared to the Nephites (see 3 Ne. 15:1).

From his work on the Bible, Joseph learned much about the embodiment of God. One such instance comes from his work on John 4:24. Shortly before February 16, 1832, as Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were working through the Gospel of John, they encountered the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well. After Jesus told her that the time was coming when righteous people would no longer worship the Father either on Mount Gerizim in Samaria or on the temple mount in Jerusalem, he revealed that, indeed, the hour had then come “when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him” (John 4:23). Continuing, Jesus elaborated, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (v. 24), or so reads the King James Version and most translations of this verse. In his rendition of these verses, however, Joseph excised the words “*is a*” and revised the statement to read, “For unto such [true worshippers] *hath* God *promised his* Spirit. And they who worship him, must worship in spirit and in truth.”<sup>20</sup> Joseph had learned by his own experiences in communing with God that the Father is not a spirit. And actually, the Greek in this verse, while being ordinary enough, is open to interpretation and elaboration. The Greek simply contains two nouns and tersely reads: *pneuma ho theós* (*pneuma* meaning “spirit,” *ho theós* meaning “God”).<sup>21</sup>

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20. Joseph Smith Translation, John 4:26 (in John 4:24, note a).

21. While the Greek is and can be normally translated as “God is *a* spirit” (emphasis added), it can also be read as saying “God is spirit,” “God is spiritual,” or “God [promises] spirit.” Joseph is not the only one to have noticed the incompleteness of this intentionally cryptic saying of Jesus. See, for example, Marcus Dods, “The Gospel of

Joseph also modified 1 John 4:12. Here the King James Version reads, "No man hath seen God at any time." Again Joseph added an important proviso: "No man hath seen God at any time, *except them who believe.*"<sup>22</sup> Indeed, God the Father had been seen, and would be seen, by Joseph Smith and other believers with him on at least four occasions between 1831 and 1836: namely, on June 4, 1831, at the Morley farmhouse outside of Kirtland, Ohio; on February 16, 1832, in the John Johnson home in Hiram, Ohio (see D&C 76:19–23); on March 18, 1833, in the School of the Prophets, upstairs in the Newell K. Whitney Store; and on January 21, 1836, in the not-yet-completed Kirtland Temple (partially canonized in Doctrine and Covenants 137).<sup>23</sup> However, while God the Father was *seen* on those occasions, nothing indicates that Joseph learned on those occasions that God the Father has a *tangible* body.

Simple points of logic also reinforced Joseph's conclusive understanding of God's tangibility. Since Jesus still has a tangible resurrected body, and since he is "the express image of [God the Father's] person" (Heb. 1:3), then it would follow that the Father has a body every bit as tangible as the Son's. To the same effect, Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). And on April 2, 1843, when Joseph cited 1 John 3:2, which reads, "When he shall appear, . . . we shall see him as he is," he explained that statement by affirming, "We shall see that he is a man *like ourselves.*"

## Heavenly Messengers

Finally, numerous angelic visitations repeatedly confirmed to Joseph that resurrected beings have tangible bodies. While being ordained in May 1829 to the Aaronic Priesthood by John the Baptist and sometime thereafter to the Melchizedek Priesthood by Peter, James, and John, Joseph and Oliver Cowdery felt *hands* placed upon their heads. They spoke often of the physical sensation of those hands upon their heads

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St. John," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 5 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1:728 note to verse 24, who translates this as "God is Spirit," pointing out the comparison with "for God is light," not "a" light (1 John 1:5, *hoti ho theós phōs estin*), and "God is love," not "a" love (1 Jn. 4:8, *hoti ho theós agapē estin*). And after all, Jesus spoke in veiled terms on several encounters, notably as he spoke to the Samaritan woman throughout their encounter at the well in John 4.

22. Joseph Smith Translation, 1 John 4:12 (in 1 John 4:12, note a).

23. See Alexander L. Baugh, "Seventy-six Accounts of Joseph Smith's Visionary Experiences," in Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 280–83.

and the impression upon their souls as priesthood powers were conferred upon them. Seventy such statements are readily compiled at the end of a chapter in *Opening the Heavens* by Brian Q. Cannon.<sup>24</sup> These statements were made between 1829 and 1848, mainly by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery but also by twenty-five other people who could have heard Joseph or Oliver personally describing these supernal events. These documents speak generally and often mention Joseph and Oliver as being “authorized,” given “authority,” “commissioned,” or “ordained,” or as having the priesthood “conferred,” “confirmed,” or “bestowed” upon them as part of their “reception” of the high priesthood. While such words may well imply the transfer of authority by the laying on of hands, many of these accounts specifically mention the “hand” or “hands” that were placed on their heads to bestow upon them the power to administer the ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For example, Oliver’s 1833 patriarchal blessing speaks of him having been ordained to the lesser priesthood “by the *hand* of the angel in the bush,” a reference to the angel John the Baptist; the blessing also makes reference to the holy priesthood being bestowed “under the *hands* of those [Peter, James, and John] . . . who received it under the hand of the Messiah.”<sup>25</sup> In 1836, Joseph spoke directly of “being ordained under the *hands* of the Angel,”<sup>26</sup> and in 1836 he spoke of the messenger from heaven “having laid his *hands* upon us.”<sup>27</sup> In 1844 he said that the angel “laid his *hands* upon my head.”<sup>28</sup> Oliver Cowdery similarly testified in 1834 that they received “under [the angel’s] *hand* the holy priesthood”<sup>29</sup> and in 1836 that it was bestowed on them “by the laying on of the *hands* of those who were clothed with authority.”<sup>30</sup> Others such as Orson Pratt<sup>31</sup>

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24. Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff, “Documents of the Priesthood Restoration,” in Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 247–79. See also several passages in the Book of Mormon; for example, the report that Jesus “touched” all of the twelve Nephite disciples (3 Ne. 18:38) and “laid his hands upon them” and gave them “power that to him upon whom ye shall lay your hands, ye shall give the Holy Ghost” (Moro. 2:1–2).

25. Document 8, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 251.

26. Document 11, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 253.

27. Document 12, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 253.

28. Document 19, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 258.

29. Document 20, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 259.

30. Document 25, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 262.

31. Document 39, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 267; Document 40, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 268.

(1840; 1848), John Taylor<sup>32</sup> (1840), Orson Hyde<sup>33</sup> (1841; 1842), George J. Adams<sup>34</sup> (1849), Warren Foote<sup>35</sup> (1842), William I. Appleby<sup>36</sup> (1848), and Brigham Young<sup>37</sup> (1847) mentioned particularly the *hands* under which the powers and keys of the priesthood were restored. As these hands were felt by Joseph and Oliver on those occasions, they certainly experienced and never forgot the physical weight of those tangible hands upon their heads.

Even earlier, when Joseph first saw Moroni in 1823, he was immediately struck by this angel’s body: “He had on a loose robe. . . . His hands were naked, . . . as were his legs, a little above the ankles. His head and neck were also bare. I could discover that he had no other clothing on but this robe, as it was open, so that I could see into his bosom. . . . His whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning” (JS-H 1:31–32). The materiality of Moroni’s personhood was stunning to Joseph. In vivid details, he remembered this angel’s hands, legs, ankles, head, neck, chest, and face. While Moroni and Joseph apparently did not touch each other on that first occasion, the two of them met on many other occasions. Moroni handed to Joseph (and Joseph returned to Moroni) several tangible physical objects. In these interactions, Joseph could well have touched or encountered Moroni’s physical robe, fingers, and hands, although he never says so. But in order to tell whether or not a purported messenger was truly of God, Joseph counseled his followers on February 9, 1843, to extend a hand. Resurrected messengers from God, he said, will not shy away from such a request for a tangible confirmation, “and you will feel his hand” (D&C 129:4–5). The spirits of just men made perfect, however, will simply stand still, for they cannot deceive (129:7), while the devil will offer his hand, but “you will not feel anything” (129:8). From this it may well be implied that Joseph himself had used that test, with positive results, to separate good messengers from evil ones.

At the conclusion of his remarks on April 2, 1843, it is possible that Joseph was thinking of Moroni, John, and others who had visited him

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32. Document 43, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 270.

33. Document 50, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 272; Document 51, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 272.

34. Document 55, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 274.

35. Document 58, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 275.

36. Document 63, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 276.

37. Document 70, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 279.

when he said, “Angels who administer to this earth . . . belong to or have belonged to this earth.”<sup>38</sup> As Joseph had learned by his experiences, these heavenly beings were once mortal. They were of this human family—physically, tangibly, and literally. The same declaration would equally apply to our incarnate Savior and Elder Brother, Jesus Christ.

Thus, for over twenty years, Joseph had many experiences in which he saw, heard, or even felt the embodied realities of God and his angelic messengers. Few theologians would imagine that God is embodied in any way, let alone with an exalted body of flesh and bones. Long before 1843, Joseph Smith had come to reject the idea that God is simply spirit or a spirit. Instead, he had come to know otherwise—prophetically, dramatically, tangibly, and of a surety.

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38. “Journal,” 38.

*Revelations and Translations, Volume 3:*  
*Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*  
The Joseph Smith Papers  
Edited by Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen  
Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015

*Reviewed by James B. Allen*

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints revere the Book of Mormon as a sacred text that was translated “by the gift and power of God” (D&C 135:3) by Joseph Smith and first published in 1830. Since then it has seen numerous editions, has been translated into around one hundred languages, and is distributed around the world. The story of how the Book of Mormon originated and eventually spread is well known, but the details of its textual history are not widely known.

Anyone seriously interested in that history must be delighted with this important addition to the Joseph Smith Papers, which for the first time makes the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon available, both in print and online, to anyone. Since less than 30 percent of the original manuscript exists, the printer’s manuscript is the closest we will ever come to seeing the full original text of the Book of Mormon. It is virtually a complete copy, missing only three lines of text. In this Joseph Smith Papers volume, carefully prepared transcriptions provide not only a clearly readable text but also important notations and other aids that help the reader understand textual changes made during the lifetime of Joseph Smith.

The editors of this volume are well suited to the task. Royal Skousen, one of BYU’s preeminent Book of Mormon scholars, has spent most of his career studying and writing about the Book of Mormon text. His more than a quarter century of study has produced the highly lauded Critical Text Project. Robin Scott Jensen is an associate managing editor for the Joseph Smith Papers and has been coeditor of three previous volumes.

This very welcome publication provides photographic facsimiles of the full printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon, and opposite each page of the manuscript is a detailed transcription of that page.

Those who peruse this volume will immediately note that in the printer's manuscript there is virtually no punctuation and no division into paragraphs or verses, and capitalization is inconsistent and quite different from the final printed book. Readers will also see the various strikeouts and word changes made by Joseph Smith and others on the manuscript. The editors have carefully color-coded these changes in their transcription in such a way that the reader can identify who made them.

The volume consists of two parts, each of which is a separate book. Part 1 begins with a good introduction to the entire work. There is a short comment about what the Book of Mormon is, followed by a candid discussion of how Joseph Smith obtained the plates and the reaction of some people in the area. It places the reception of Joseph Smith's story in the context of the popular belief in folk magic and buried treasure. The editors attribute, rightly I believe, the fact that Joseph Smith rarely mentioned his own participation in treasure digging to his concern "that his history might prove an obstacle for some to accepting his religious message" (1:xv). There is also a brief but important discussion of several people who actually saw or hefted or somehow felt the plates, including the "three witnesses" and "eight witnesses," whose testimonies appear in all editions of the Book of Mormon.

The editors also discuss the translation of the Book of Mormon and the various ways people reported how it was accomplished. These ways included the use of the "spectacles" (that is, the Urim and Thummim) or a seer stone and Joseph using these items while putting his face in a hat. Over the course of the translation, Joseph used at least seven scribes, at various times, to write the text down as he dictated. Eighty-four percent of the printer's manuscript was inscribed by Oliver Cowdery, about 15 percent was recorded by an unknown scribe (identified in the volume as scribe 2), and a few pages were inscribed by Hyrum Smith. The editors also cover Martin Harris's loss of the original translation of the first part of the book and its consequences as well as the final completion of the translation.

One interesting paragraph comments on various others who visited Joseph's home during the translation process and watched him working with his scribe. The editors observe that the "recollections of these observers suggest that the translation was, in some ways, a shared event, which interested individuals could occasionally witness" (1:xxiv-xxv). This discussion is followed by a brief note on the founding of the Church and then an excellent, though short, section on publishing and

initially distributing the Book of Mormon. Some portions, the editors note, were distributed even before official publication.

The next section of the introduction clearly explains the editorial method, first describing some of the problems involved in transcribing the text. Aging and damaged texts, sometimes imprecise penmanship, and the fact that writers sometimes inadvertently left out letters or formed them imprecisely or incompletely made transcription and verification “an imperfect art more than a science” (1:xxix). Despite these and other problems, the editors clearly have done a marvelous job of rendering a text that reflects the original as closely as possible. As in other volumes of the Joseph Smith Papers, a variety of symbols are used in the transcription to help the reader better understand some aspects of the original text.

One must marvel at the remarkable work of Weldon C. Andersen, the photographer who created the facsimiles of the printer’s manuscript pages especially for this publication. His four-shot, high-resolution photos, taken in 2012, produced highly detailed, accurate images. The resolution had to be reduced for publication, but the original full-resolution files are retained by the Community of Christ archives, and copies are retained by the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Credit must also go to Charles M. Baird, who prepared the images for printing. The work of both Andersen and Baird is detailed in a section titled “Note on Photographic Facsimiles” (1:xxxiv).

The source note at the beginning of the manuscript traces the history of its creation, how it was used in the printing of the Book of Mormon, and the interesting and painstaking process of printing. One of the little-known facts about the manuscript is that to produce it, the scribes used eight different types of ruled paper, of slightly differing sizes but generally close to thirteen inches high and sixteen inches wide. By folding six sheets in half, they created twelve sheets, or a twenty-four-page folio, called a gathering. Those preparing the book made twenty-one of these gatherings. After being written upon, each gathering was sewed together by making four holes in the gutter inside the folio and stitching yarn or string through them. Some of the folios were cut into separate sheets during the printing process, but over half remained in booklet form until separated many years later.

Many of the markings on the manuscript were made by the compositor, John H. Gilbert, and include punctuation, capitalization, and pilcrows (characters indicating new paragraphs). Gilbert made additional

editorial changes while he was setting the type so that much of the punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing incorporated into the early editions of the Book of Mormon are not indicated on the manuscript.

The source note also traces the history of the printer's manuscript as it went through various people, including a manuscript dealer, and finally, in 1903, into the hands of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now the Community of Christ. Interestingly, Joseph F. Smith, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, earlier turned down the opportunity to purchase the manuscript because, he reasoned, the book itself was available in many editions and printings. Since being purchased by the RLDS Church, the manuscript has undergone various preservation and conservation efforts. During the last conservation effort, in 1997, conservators from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in cooperation with RLDS leaders and archivists, "carefully cleaned, washed, deacidified, stabilized, repaired, and encapsulated [the pages] between layers of inert Mylar" (1:7, quoting Ronald Romig, "Community of Christ Church Possession of Book of Mormon Printer's Manuscript," unpublished report).

Part 2 contains no further introductory information but includes, at the end, some worthwhile reference material: a Book of Mormon chronology for the years 1823–30 (from Moroni's first visit to Joseph Smith to the year the book was published); a valuable directory of the scribes and printers involved with the translation and publication of the book; a list of works cited; and an interesting table that provides information about the relationship of the printer's manuscript to the first two editions of the Book of Mormon (1830 and 1837, respectively). The first column provides page numbers, and the second identifies the scribes who wrote on those pages. It is interesting to note that Hyrum Smith's handwriting appears on seven pages, and six of those pages also contain the handwriting of the unknown scribe (scribe 2). The next two columns identify the type of revision made in the two editions, the fifth column identifies the current Book of Mormon chapter that begins on that page, and the last column identifies which of the twenty-one gatherings began on that page.

As readers examine the publication, they will find that each transcription page contains not only an exact textual reproduction of the document but also various interesting and helpful annotations designed to help readers understand the transmission of the text through the various editions of the Book of Mormon printed during Joseph Smith's lifetime (1830, 1835, 1840, and 1841).

Page 49 of part 1 (page 15 of the printer's manuscript) provides a good example of this annotation and other aspects of the editing process. Text at the top of the right side of the page indicates that this page is from chapter 3 in the 1830 edition and 1 Nephi 10:11–11:1 in the current edition. Just below is a box indicating that Oliver Cowdery made the original inscription. This is followed by a color-coded list of individuals who made various revisions. Those revisions are printed in the appropriate color in the transcription. For example, there are a number of strikeouts and word changes on this page, and the color coding lets us figure out who made them. In 1 Nephi 10:11, Nephi speaks of the Jews, saying, in part, “And after they had slain the Messiah, who should come, and after he had been slain. . . .” In the printer’s manuscript, this part of the verse originally read, “& after *that* they had Slain the Messiah *which* should come & after *that* he had been slain . . .” (italics added in this and subsequent references). It was printed essentially that way in the 1830 edition, except that “&” was changed to “And,” and the word “Slain” was not capitalized. However, on the printer’s manuscript both occurrences of the word “that” as well as the word “which” are crossed out and the word “who” is inserted above the line. These changes were made by Joseph Smith himself in preparation for the 1837 edition. He made ten such word changes on this page alone, including the elimination of one “and it came to pass.” One scholar has noted that, in all, Joseph Smith made nearly three thousand changes, mostly minor adjustments to grammar or style, in 1837. They included forty-seven deletions of “and it came to pass” and 952 changes of *which* to *who* or *whom*.<sup>1</sup>

After the color-coded list is a series of notes pertaining to various items in the manuscript. On page 49 of part 1, a symbol on line seven and note 43 explain that a mark on the manuscript corresponds to the end of page 22 of the 1830 edition. Note 44 refers to a pilcrow in the text placed there by an unidentified scribe or possibly the compositor. Note 45 points to the phrase “and the way is prepared from the foundation of the world,” which read, “and the way is prepared *for all men* from the foundation of the world” in the original manuscript and was not changed until the 1840 edition. (It continues to read that way in 1 Nephi 10:18 of the current edition.) The next note refers to the phrase “as well in *this time*,” indicating that it read, “as well in *these times*” in the 1830 edition (see 1 Nephi 10:19 in

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1. Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, Maxwell Institute Study Edition (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2018), xv.

the current edition). Finally, note 47 refers to a pilcrow, possibly inscribed by the compositor, that corresponds to a new paragraph on page 23 of the 1830 edition. In all, there are 687 such notes, numbered consecutively throughout both parts of the publication. In at least one instance there is a mark on the page that, as the editors say in note 156, “serves no known purpose” (1:133).

Those who peruse this two-part volume will no doubt find themselves comparing what they see in the printer’s manuscript with various editions of the Book of Mormon. In the process, they will find more very interesting differences. In some cases, Oliver Cowdery made some changes in the printer’s manuscript before it went to press in 1830. For example, the beginning of Moroni 10:31 originally read, “And awake, and arise from the dust, *O daughter of Zion*,” but Oliver changed *daughter of Zion* to *Jerusalem* (see 2:407). Most changes came after the publication of the first edition, however, and they were mostly grammatical in nature. For example, the last part of what is now Alma 46:40 read, “diseases which *was* subsequent to man” in the printers’ manuscript and in the 1830 printing, but in 1837 it read, “diseases to which men *was* subject,” and in 1840 it was changed to “diseases to which men *were* subject” (2:51). In what is now 2 Nephi 8:2, the printer’s manuscript referred to Sarah as “she that *bear* you” (1:139), but without being marked in the manuscript, it was changed to “she that *bare* you” in the first and subsequent editions. What is now 2 Nephi 20:2 reads, “To turn *away* the needy,” but the printer’s manuscript and the 1830 edition read, “to turn *aside* the needy” (1:169). We could go on almost endlessly with such examples, but enough has been said to illustrate the variety of things the textual sleuth might find.

Finally, I cannot help but comment again on the incredible nature of the Joseph Smith Papers Project as a whole, and especially in this case, what it provides online. The editors of the printer’s manuscript volume have provided references to all four editions of the Book of Mormon published during Joseph Smith’s lifetime. These four have also been reproduced online by the Papers Project, and each is searchable. If, therefore, the reader wishes to follow through on anything, it is easy to do by going to [josephsmithpapers.org](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr4) and selecting “Revelations and Translations,” where they will find the Book of Mormon editions.<sup>2</sup>

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2. See <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr4>.

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James B. Allen was a teacher and administrator in the seminary and institute programs from 1954 to 1963 and then joined the faculty of Brigham Young University. He was Assistant Church Historian, 1972–79; chair of the BYU History Department, 1981–87; and the Lemuel Hardison Redd Jr. Chair in Western American History, 1987–92. He retired in 1992. He has authored, coauthored, or coedited fourteen books or monographs and around ninety articles relating to Western American and Latter-day Saint history. He is married to the former Renée Jones, and together they have five children, twenty-one grandchildren, and twenty-three great-grandchildren. They served a full-time Church Educational System mission at the Boston Institute of Religion, 1999–2000, and served as officiators in the Mount Timpanogos Utah Temple, 2004–13.

*Dime Novel Mormons*, edited and introduced by Michael Austin and Ardis E. Parshall, *The Mormon Image in Literature* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2017)

In *Dime Novel Mormons*, editors Michael Austin and Ardis E. Parshall invite the readers to experience late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century portrayals of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members. Beginning in the 1860s, dime novels gained popularity in the United States. These novels, full of thrilling storylines and heroic characters, often included negative stereotypes of various groups of people. Among them, “Mormons” were often depicted as murderous villains who kidnapped women for polygamist marriages and operated an underground society of Danites—dangerous vigilantes out to kill “gentiles” (x–xi).

After a short but informative introduction, the book presents the full text of four dime novels that include examples of how members of the Church were portrayed in these sensational stories. *Dime Novel Mormons* includes the following novels: *Eagle Plume, the White Avenger. A Tale of the Mormon Trail* (1870), by Albert W. Aiken (1); *The Doomed Dozen; or, Dolores, the Danite’s Daughter* (1881), by Prentiss Ingraham under the pseudonym Dr. Frank Powell (59); *Frank Merriwell among the Mormons; or, the Lost Tribe of Israel* (1897), most likely by Gilbert Patten under the pseudonym Burt L. Standish (149); and *The Bradys among the Mormons; or, Secret Work in Salt Lake City* (1903), by “A New York Detective” (185).

The editors bring combined expertise in both literature and history. Michael Austin, who has a PhD in English literature from the University of California at Santa Barbara, is an author or editor of

seven books and many smaller works. His book *Useful Fiction* was named a CHOICE outstanding academic title in 2011. Ardis E. Parshall is an author, historian, and freelance researcher specializing in Latter-day Saint history. With Paul Reeve, she coedited *Mormonism: A Historical Encyclopedia* and is presently writing a history of the Church told through the lives of Mormon women.

*Dime Novel Mormons* will appeal to readers interested in American and literary history, nineteenth-century pop fiction, and specifically the history of the calumny of the Latter-day Saints.

—Veronica Anderson

*The Saints Abroad: Missionaries Who Answered Brigham Young’s 1852 Call to the Nations of the World*, edited by Reid L. Neilson and R. Mark Melville (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019)

In a specially called conference in August 1852, the First Presidency issued a summons to over one hundred elders, most of whom were husbands and fathers, to serve missions to “the four quarters of the globe” (286). The global reach and large number of these calls were startling at the time and reflected an impressive devotion on the part of the elders, their families, and their leaders.

From the beginnings of the Restoration, taking the gospel message to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people had been contemplated, and in the late 1830s and 1840s, under the leadership of Joseph Smith, the global missionary project was modestly started. This 1852 initiative, however, signaled a turning point for the internationalization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints, and in the twenty-first century, it is now taken for granted that the Church has a wide international scope.

The editors provide a powerful nine-page introduction as to the whys, wherefores, and background to this unprecedented action. This calling of missionaries was “the largest cohort of full-time elders in the Church’s three-decade history” (xxi). Emphasized was “an ongoing tension between the prophetic priorities to settle the valley in Utah and simultaneously proclaim the gospel abroad during this pioneer era” (xxiii). But, as explained in this volume, the Church leaders could not deny their divinely appointed charge to redeem the entire human family. The editors give short shrift to one factor as to why 1852 was chosen for such a sacrifice for the Saints: by the end of that season, nearly all of the straggling Saints who had lived for years in Iowa camps had eventually made their way to Utah and were available for missionary work.

On Saturday morning, August 28, 1852, President Heber C. Kimball of the First Presidency opened this conference “a month earlier than usual” to call scores of elders to virtually every continent to proselytize (286). This August date would allow the elders to be on their way out of the mountain canyons before storms would halt them. One after another, numerous Apostles took the stand to testify of the importance of opening the nations to the everlasting gospel. Orson Pratt, for instance, prophesied, “The way will open before you, and the Lord will visit the hearts of the people before you arrive among them, and make manifest to them by visions and dreams that you are the servants of God before they shall see your faces; and you will receive heavenly visions to comfort you. . . . And you will find that his power will be more conspicuously made manifest through your administrations on these missions than

has ever taken place since the rise of this church” (309).

At midday during this conference, names of elders were read (without any advance notice for most of them), who were called to serve in specific nations and states: England (37 elders), Ireland (2), Wales (3), France (1), Germany (4), the capital of Prussia [Berlin] (3), Norway (2), Denmark (1), Gibraltar (2), Hindoostan [India] (9), Siam (2), China (3), Cape of Good Hope [South Africa] (3), Novia Scotia and British Provinces (4), West Indies (4), British Guiana (2), Texas (3), New Orleans (1), St. Louis (1), Washington, D.C. (1), Iowa (1), and Australia (9). In subsequent weeks, additional elders were called.

President Brigham Young concluded the conference by counseling the newly called elders to give their whole minds and hearts to their new duties. First and foremost, these men must possess “*clean hands and pure hearts*, before God, angels and men” (311, italics in original). Young also urged the missionaries to not fret about their families while away and left assurance that the Church would see to their welfare. To the wives, Young cautioned, “Women should be loyal to the cause of God, and help to build up his kingdom by their husbands, in assisting them to fulfil their missions, and if they do not do it they are not a helpmate to their husbands” (316).

Neilson and Melville clarify a significant irony in this entire episode. During that same conference weekend in August 1852, the Church, through the voice of Orson Pratt, confirmed publicly for the first time the open secret that many Church members practiced plural marriage. As it turns out, three-fourths of the elders called were or would eventually become polygamists, thus showing that entrusted callings in the Church generally went to men who had shown their obedient attitudes by

entering into this order of matrimony. Ultimately, the doctrine of polygamy negatively affected the labors of the elders to the various nations more than any other single factor.

The bulk of this volume consists of eight chapters that chronicle the work and writings of eight elders who served lengthy missions and who wrote intimate details of their labors, mostly in the form of letters to Church publications such as the *Deseret News*, the *Millennial Star*, and the *Juvenile Instructor*. These eight men were Dan Jones in the Wales Mission, Orson Spencer in the Prussia Mission, Edward Stevenson in the Gibraltar Mission, Jesse Haven in the Cape of Good Hope Mission, Benjamin Johnson in the Sandwich Islands Mission, James Lewis in the China Mission, Chauncey West in the Siam and Hindooostan Missions, and Augustus Farnham in the Australia Mission. The editors provide extensive biographical and contextual information about each of these elders and their missions.

The book also contains two appendices: Appendix 1 provides the entirety of the minutes of the August 1852 special conference. Appendix 2 contains biographical sketches for 115 missionaries who were called to serve in 1852, granting present-day family historians valuable data.

Adding immensely to the value of this volume are highly informative footnotes on nearly every page that provide historical, geographical, genealogical, and theological context to events and descriptions of the elders.

This compilation clearly shows that some missionary fields were “white already to harvest” (John 4:35), while others were not ready for unseasoned and unprepared elders, owing to vastly different cultures, races, and languages. In the case of Prussia, for example, unrelenting police intimidation arising

out of a lack of religious freedom precluded any success there. Neilson and Melville also explain, “Compared to the British Isles . . . , the growth of the church in Australia was sluggish. But compared to the missionary efforts in Asia and other parts of Europe, church growth in Australia was substantial” (258).

This compilation is a beneficial contribution to the study of the internationalization of the restored Church. It is definitely worth reading.

—Bruce A. Van Orden

*Utah's 19th Century Stone Quarries*, by William T. Parry (Salt Lake City: E. L. Marker, 2020)

Temples and other structures built in Utah in the nineteenth century required massive amounts of large blocks of limestone, granite, and other stone. *Utah's 19th Century Stone Quarries* documents where that stone came from and the lives of many of the stone masons and quarrymen who worked it. The author is a geologist and professor at the University of Utah and is the great-grandson of one of the major figures in the book, Edward L. Parry.

The book has chapters on the stone deposits near Willard, Beaver, Ephraim, and St. George, and in Salt Lake Valley, Cache Valley, and Price Canyon. The different types of stone quarried from each site are given historical context, and where the stone was used is discussed. Also noted are the methods for quarrying and shaping stone. A number of maps and photographs help illustrate the text.

Though a small book of just over 150 pages, *Utah's 19th Century Stone Quarries* covers an aspect of Utah history not usually mentioned in histories of temples and temple builders.

—Marny K. Parkin

## INSTRUCTION TO AUTHORS

BYU Studies publishes scholarship that is informed by the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Submissions are invited from all scholars who seek truth “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118), discern the harmony between revelation and research, value both academic and spiritual inquiry, and recognize that knowledge without charity is nothing (1 Cor. 13:2).

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- The author knows and clearly conveys what is at stake.
- The submission contributes new knowledge or insight.
- It is accessible to educated nonspecialists.

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