

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# SIX VISIONS OF ETERNITY (D&C 76)

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Perhaps the most comprehensive vision of this dispensation, as well as others, was given to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon on February 16, 1832, at Hiram, Ohio, in the upper story of the Johnson home. Perhaps others have seen the same or similar vision, but there are only two other men recorded in our present-day scriptures to whom this great revelation was revealed: Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel (see Genesis 28:10–12), and Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles (see 2 Corinthians 12:1–7). And even our knowledge of these two men having seen such a vision is dependent upon a statement by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

“Paul ascended into the third heavens, and he could understand the three principal rounds of Jacob’s ladder—the telestial, the terrestrial, and the celestial glories or kingdoms, where Paul saw and heard things which were not lawful for him to utter.”<sup>1</sup>

While several men have seen a vision of the beginning of the world to the end thereof (for example, see 1 Nephi 14:26), Joseph Smith’s vision went beyond the scope of this world and into the eternal worlds of varying degrees of glory. It is also possible that Joseph Smith was the one privileged to record this vision for the inhabitants of this telestial world just as John the Revelator was the one ordained to record the vision to the end of the world (see 1 Nephi 14:25, 27). Although the brother of Jared also recorded his vision of the beginning of the world to the end thereof (see 2 Nephi 27:6–11), his record

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is apparently reserved for the Millennium, when only those of a terrestrial or celestial nature will be living on the earth. Although Jacob saw a vision of the degrees of glory, the present text of Genesis provides only this meager account: "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12).

Paul's account is not much fuller, and although it sounds as if he is speaking of someone else, a careful reading of verses 5 through 7 reveals this man to be himself. "And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (2 Corinthians 12:3-4).

Although Paul mentions a third heaven, the Prophet Joseph's explanation does much to clarify what he intended. Paul's treatise of the three different types of resurrection, recorded in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, was undoubtedly based on his vision. Note also that Paul was forbidden to reveal his revelation. It should again be acknowledged that since Joseph and Sidney were working on "the translation of the Scriptures" when this vision was given, this knowledge could have once been in the Bible and was being restored through Joseph (see the preface to section 76). Whether Joseph was the only one who recorded it or if he was restoring knowledge that had previously been recorded, the fact remains that he is the one who has given this generation the knowledge of the varying degrees of glory.

In language almost identical to Isaiah's opening sentence (see Isaiah 1:2), the Lord addresses the inhabitants of the heavens as well as the earth. As to why the inhabitants of the heavens are included one can only speculate; however, inasmuch as they are invited to rejoice, it seems the Lord may be making them aware that He is revealing information to the earth's inhabitants that has long been withheld from them. Certainly those in the heavens are desirous that the earth's inhabitants know that "the term 'Heaven' . . . must include more kingdoms than one" (preface to section 76).

Another purpose for including the heavens is implied in verses 5 through 7, which state that the Lord honors those who serve Him and will reward those who do so by revealing the mysteries of the kingdom to them. If the heavens, as used here, refers to beings who

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once lived on this earth and now serve the Lord as His messengers but have not yet received their eternal status or blessings, it may be that they are also being shown and enlightened by the power of the Lord's spirit (see D&C 76:10).

Before analyzing the recorded portion of this vision, it should be noted that Joseph and Sidney wrote very little of what they actually saw and heard. Over eleven years later, the Prophet said, "I could explain a hundred fold more than I ever have of the glories of the kingdoms manifested to me in the vision, were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive them."<sup>2</sup> Importantly, some parts of the vision were recorded while yet in the Spirit (see D&C 76:28, 80, and 113) and under the Lord's command (see D&C 76:115), while other parts were not recorded by direction of the Lord's command (see D&C 76:115). Either those things that were not recorded were unlawful for man to utter, or man was incapable of receiving them; such things are only seen and understood by the power of the Holy Spirit (see D&C 76:115–16). Rather than worrying about what *was not* recorded, we should carefully ponder what *is* recorded. Are the inhabitants of the earth, and particularly the members of the Church, prepared to receive what is recorded? What some people today may esteem as deep doctrine that should not be discussed was considered by the Lord to be basic doctrine necessary to prepare the people for some of the actual deeper doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ. These deeper doctrines the Lord would readily reveal if the people were prepared to receive it. The more basic doctrines will be analyzed in this paper.

The interpretation of these basic doctrines may also need to be clarified. What one may consider to be a fundamental doctrine taught in the revelation, another may consider to be an erroneous interpretation of doctrine. Correct interpretations can be ascertained by appealing to other revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, the other standard works, and modern apostles and prophets. In addition to these sources, there is another primary source from which one may confirm interpretation. In a reply to a poem written by W. W. Phelps, the Prophet Joseph dictated a poetic answer based upon the revelation of the three degrees of glory.<sup>3</sup> The wording of this poem often confirms or dictates the interpretation that should be given to

the revelation. With this background, an analysis of the vision may be undertaken.

As indicated in the title of this paper, “the Vision” is really a series of six visions. The first of these visions is a vision of the glory of the Son on the right hand of the Father. Very little is said about what they saw; the emphasis is upon what they heard. What they saw, however, is important. Verse 20 states that they “received of his fulness.” From the poetic version published in the *Times and Seasons*, we learn that this meant that they saw the Son was “in a fulness of glory and holy applause,” not that Joseph and Sidney received of the fulness. Second, they saw that those giving the holy applause consisted of holy angels and those who were sanctified. While this may sound like Hebrew parallelism, the poetic version qualifies that these are two separate groups: holy angels (implying those who were assigned to this world) and “sanctified beings from worlds that have been.” This is the first indication of the vision including other worlds. What Joseph and Sidney heard further enlightens this concept. They testify that through the Only Begotten other worlds were created, and the inhabitants of those worlds were also saved. The poetic version is even more descriptive:

By him, of him, and through him, the worlds were all made,  
Even all that career in the heavens so broad.  
Whose inhabitants, too, from the first to the last,  
Are sav’d by the very same Saviour of ours;  
And, of course, are begotten God’s daughters and sons.  
By the very same truths and the very same powr’s.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that other worlds were created by Jesus Christ, under the Father’s direction, is a prevalent New Testament teaching, although it is often not recognized (see John 1:3, 10; Colossians 1:16–17; Hebrews 1:1–2). This doctrine is also confirmed in the Pearl of Great Price (see Moses 1:33), which source also reminds us, “Only an account of this earth and the inhabitants thereof, give I [the Lord] unto you” (Moses 1:35). Perhaps this is why nothing is said in the New Testament about the Atonement covering the inhabitants of other worlds. On the other hand, perhaps it did originally but was lost with many other plain and precious things (see 1 Nephi 13:24–29). The Doctrine and Covenants confirms that Jesus Christ

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atoned for other worlds as well. In speaking of the many kingdoms and the inhabitants thereof existing in the universe, the Lord likened them unto a man having a field, sending his servants into the field, and promising to visit each man in his own hour and in his own order (see D&C 88:37, 51–61). After quoting these verses in section 88, President John Taylor wrote: “That is, each kingdom, or planet, and the inhabitants thereof, were blessed with the visits and presence of their Creator, in their several times and seasons.”<sup>5</sup> Also, in the 1879 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, Elder Orson Pratt wrote the following footnotes to verses 51 and 61: “Each planetary kingdom is visited by its Creator in its time and season,” and “The inhabitants of each planet [are] blessed with the presence and visits of their Creator.” Therefore, just as the Nephite prophets had their prophecies and signs of Christ’s birth and Atonement verified by the Savior’s visit among them, it seems logical that the other planets or kingdoms that were created and covered by the Savior and His Atonement received a verification of the Atonement when He visited them. Recognizing that the Lord has through His vision enlarged our understanding of the Savior’s mission, let us examine another of the visions.

Joseph and Sidney next behold the fall of Lucifer from the presence of God. Although this fall is documented in the Bible (see Isaiah 14:12; Revelation 12:7–9), and in the Pearl of Great Price (see Moses 4:14; Abraham 3:27–28), there are many additional things about Satan and his fall revealed in section 76. That he was in a position of authority in the beginning is amplified in the poetic version by the descriptive “authority great.” The titles given him in section 76 are revealing. That he was called “Perdition” explains why the heavens wept over him. According to the dictionary, the word means utter destruction, loss, eternal damnation, hell.”<sup>6</sup> As Isaiah also said, he was Lucifer, a “son of the morning” (Isaiah 14:12). According to President Joseph Fielding Smith, *Lucifer* means “a torchbearer.”<sup>7</sup> “Son of the morning” is usually interpreted to mean he was one of the early-born spirit children of Elohim. Thus, as one of the older of the children of God and someone in a position of authority, the title of Lucifer implies he was not only rebelling against God but was also leading others to do likewise; therefore, he is designated a torchbearer or crusader against God. In fact, as both Isaiah (Isaiah 14:13–14) and

this section teach, he “sought to take the kingdom of our God and his Christ.” (D&C 76:28; see also Isaiah 14:13–14) To do this “he maketh war with the saints of God, and encompasseth them round about” (verse 29). In other words, his primary function on the earth is to oppose the work of the Church and its members. He spends considerable time and effort upon Church members. Therefore, we may be assured that whenever members of the Church are individually or collectively assembled to further their own spiritual progress or that of the Church, the devil will be there in opposition. In the words of Joseph Smith, “In relation to the kingdom of God, the devil always sets up his kingdom at the very same time in opposition to God.”<sup>8</sup>

Having seen the glory of God and the fall of Satan, Joseph and Sidney are now shown the eternal destinies of the earth’s inhabitants in a series of four visions. The order of the next four visions is interesting. As members of the Church, we usually speak of the various kingdoms in the descending order of celestial, terrestrial, telestial, and those who qualify for none of the above, the sons of perdition. In this revelation, the sons of perdition are treated first and then the celestial, terrestrial, and telestial kingdoms. There may be purpose for this order. The sons of perdition had known and experienced the principles of exaltation necessary for the celestial kingdom and had rejected them, choosing to follow Satan. Therefore, laws designed for exalting God’s children will result in one’s becoming a son of perdition if he meets the requirements for exaltation and then commits the unpardonable sin. This concept is supported by the insertion of a definition of the gospel (see D&C 76:40–43) within the description of the vision concerning the sons of perdition. By comparison, the division of the terrestrial and telestial peoples is caused by their following or failing to follow lesser portions of the laws that are given to make men honorable but not like unto God.

What was seen in the vision of those who were overcome by Satan (sons of perdition) was not recorded. However, what the Lord said about the vision was recorded. From the Lord’s description, we learn that those who were overcome had not only come to a *knowledge* of the power of the Lord but had *experienced* that power in their lives. The Lord also explained that these people had *chosen* to follow Satan; they had suffered (allowed) themselves to be overcome. The poetic version says they were guilty of “despising my [Christ’s] name.”

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Having had such a spiritual experience, their rebellion means they “deny the truth and defy my power.” This further substantiates their willful disobedience.

Many years after he had seen this vision, the Prophet Joseph commented:

“The contention in heaven was—Jesus said there would be certain souls that would not be saved; and the devil said he could save them all, and laid his plans before the grand council, who gave their vote in favor of Jesus Christ. So the devil rose up in rebellion against God, and was cast down, with all who put up their heads for him.

“All sins shall be forgiven, except the sin against the Holy Ghost; for Jesus will save all except the sons of perdition. What must a man do to commit the unpardonable sin? He must receive the Holy Ghost, have the heavens opened unto him, and know God, and then sin against Him. After a man has sinned against the Holy Ghost, there is no repentance for him. He has got to say that the sun does not shine while he sees it; he has got to deny Jesus Christ when the heavens have been opened unto him, and to deny the plan of salvation with his eyes open to the truth of it; and from that time he begins to be an enemy. This is the case with many apostates of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

When a man begins to be an enemy to this work, he hunts me, he seeks to kill me, and never ceases to thirst for my blood. He gets the spirit of the devil—the same spirit that they had who crucified the Lord of Life—the same spirit that sins against the Holy Ghost. You cannot save such persons; you cannot bring them to repentance; they make open war, like the devil, and awful is the consequence.”<sup>9</sup>

In describing the fate of the sons of perdition, the Lord uses several New Testament phrases (see Matthew 26:24; 12:32; Hebrews 6:6; Revelation 19:20), and concludes with the declaration these are “the only ones on whom the second death shall have any power; yea, verily, the only ones who shall not be redeemed” (D&C 76:37–38). Some conclude from this declaration that the sons of perdition will not be resurrected, basing their conclusion on the next verse, which states that “all the rest shall be brought forth by the resurrection of the dead” (verse 39). A careful reading of section 88 shows that redemption as used here refers to receiving a degree of glory after the Resurrection and not the Resurrection per se (see verses 25–32). The

New Testament and Book of Mormon also repeatedly teach a universal resurrection, and modern-day prophets have confirmed that sons of perdition will be resurrected.<sup>10</sup>

The Lord concluded His remarks about what Joseph and Sidney had seen concerning the sons of perdition by declaring that only those “who are made partakers thereof” (verse 46) or “are ordained unto this condemnation” (verse 48) will ever know the torment, the misery, and the end of such punishment. Therefore, we should not speculate concerning these things. Our goal is to achieve the celestial kingdom, and we would profit more by seeking understanding of how to attain this goal than by speculating about the sons of perdition. Those who are striving for this celestial goal will naturally avoid the pitfalls that lead to becoming a son of perdition. Although a candidate for the celestial kingdom is also a candidate for becoming a son of perdition (if he rebels and defies God), as long as he seeks knowledge and gives heed to the commandments, he will attain salvation. Joseph Smith described it this way:

“A man cannot commit the unpardonable sin after the dissolution of the body, and there is a way possible for escape. Knowledge saves a man; and in the world of spirits no man can be exalted but by knowledge. So long as a man will not give heed to the commandments, he must abide without salvation. If a man has knowledge, he can be saved; although, if he has been guilty of great sins, he will be punished for them. But when he consents to obey the Gospel, whether here or in the world of spirits, he is saved.

“A man is his own tormenter and his own condemner. Hence the saying, They shall go into the lake that burns with fire and brimstone. The torment of disappointment in the mind of man is as exquisite as a lake burning with fire and brimstone. I say, so is the torment of man.

“I know the Scriptures and understand them. I said, no man can commit the unpardonable sin after the dissolution of the body, nor in this life, until he receives the Holy Ghost; but they must do it in this world. Hence the salvation of Jesus Christ was wrought out for all men, in order to triumph over the devil; for if it did not catch him in one place, it would in another; for he stood up as a Savior. All will suffer until they obey Christ himself.”<sup>11</sup>

The knowledge and heed which a person must achieve to receive a



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celestial glory was shown to Joseph and Sidney in their fourth vision, concerning those “who shall come forth in the resurrection of the just,” (verse 50), or as stated in the poetic version, “in the first resurrection of Christ.” The description of these people is based upon what Joseph and Sidney saw and heard. Twelve descriptions of qualifications for people who will be in the celestial kingdom are recorded, each introduced with the introductory phrase “they are they” or “these are they” (see verses 51–70).

The first qualification is receiving and following the principles of the gospel. In the words of President Harold B. Lee: “Conversion must mean more than just being a ‘card carrying’ member of the Church with a tithing receipt, a membership card, a temple recommend, etc. It means to overcome the tendencies to criticize and to strive continually to improve inward weaknesses and not merely the outward appearances.”<sup>12</sup>

The poetic version stresses the trials that have been faced and overcome:

For these overcome, by their faith and their works,  
Being tried in their life-time, as purified gold.  
And seal'd by the spirit of promise to life,  
By men called of God, as was Aaron of old.

Their being sealed to (eternal) life corresponds with Doctrine and Covenants 131:5: “(May 17th, 1843.) The more sure word of prophecy means a man’s knowing that he is sealed up unto eternal life, by revelation and the spirit of prophecy, through the power of the Holy Priesthood.” Therefore, those people who attain the celestial glory are those who fully live the gospel after receiving it and endure to the end.

Having considered the division of those who know and experience the principles for exaltation, let us examine the division brought about through the lesser portions of the law. The fifth vision shown to Joseph and Sidney was of the terrestrial world. The description of these beings is much shorter, and mention is made only of seeing, not of hearing. Only six qualifications of terrestrial beings are enumerated or recorded, although there may be more. These are likewise introduced with the phrase “these are they who.” Only two of these categories will receive some comment here. Those who “died with-

out law" (D&C 76:72) are further described in the poetic version as "the heathen of ages that never had hope." Thus the law must refer to the law of Christ, and those described in this category are those who were never exposed to that law while living upon the earth. This group included those who were visited in the spirit prison where the gospel was preached to them to give them the opportunity they had missed on the earth. They "received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received it" (verse 74).

Some have erroneously interpreted this verse as saying that those who were preached to in the spirit world could attain no higher than the terrestrial kingdom. However, a careful reading will show that these people did not accept the gospel in the spirit world but only received the testimony of Jesus. A person may receive a testimony of Jesus but reject the principles and ordinances of His gospel. Those in the celestial kingdom accepted both (see verses 51–53). Note also that those in the telestial kingdom are described as receiving not the gospel neither the testimony of Jesus (see verse 82). In other words, the celestial kingdom requires a testimony of Jesus and an acceptance of the gospel, while all that is required for the terrestrial order is to receive a testimony of Jesus either in this life or in the spirit world. Those who reject both the gospel and the testimony of Jesus will be in the telestial kingdom. It is only logical then that those who receive both the testimony of Jesus and the gospel in the spirit world will be able to enter the celestial kingdom when the vicarious work is done for them.

The other description that seems to need some explanation is those "who are not valiant in the testimony of Jesus" (verse 79). This may sound like those who are not keeping the commandments. But those who do not keep the commandments are candidates for the telestial kingdom, not the terrestrial, unless they repent. The word *valiant* means "possessing or acting with bravery or boldness: courageous."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is probably not what they do but what they don't do. In the words of Elder Bruce R. McConkie: "Members of the church who have testimonies and who live clean and upright lives, but who are not courageous and valiant, do not gain the celestial kingdom. Theirs is a terrestrial inheritance."<sup>14</sup> Those who break the commandments and fail to live the lesser portions of the law are described next.

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The sixth and final vision shown to Joseph and Sidney was the glory of the telestial kingdom. The description of what they saw is written in twelve qualifications for people who will be in the telestial kingdom. These are introduced again with the phrase “these are they who.” That these rejected both the gospel and the testimony of Jesus has already been stressed. The other eleven qualifications are easily understood and are not controversial. There are some interesting additions in the poetic version. Those who say they are of various men—Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and others—must be in a different category than the honorable men spoken of in the terrestrial world. In the poetic version, there are some additional names of men whom they followed; namely, “For Luther and Calvin, and even the Pope.” These telestial men were apparently justifying their actions through what they claimed Paul or others had taught. This is implied in both the scriptural and the poetic version. The poetic version states, “They went their own way, and have their reward.” These were obviously not honorable men. The scriptural account again confirms that they received not the gospel nor the testimony of Jesus, and also adds that they did not receive the prophets, neither the everlasting covenant (see D&C 76:101). The poetic version also repeats that they rejected the gospel and the prophetic spirit of the Lord (the testimony of Jesus). It also qualifies the everlasting covenant as that “which Jacob once had.”

The great number of people who will be in this degree of glory is “as innumerable as the stars in the firmament of heaven, or as the sand upon the seashore” (D&C 76:109). While these will all eventually acknowledge the Savior and have to go through the judgments of God for one thousand years, they will yet receive the glory of the telestial kingdom. But even this glory surpasses all understanding by earth standards and can only be known by revelation (see D&C 76:89–90) “in a world vain as this” (poetic version). The poetic version also gives an interesting comparison of the kingdoms:

The glory celestial is one like the sun;  
The glory terrestrial is one like the moon;  
The glory telestial is one like the stars,  
And all harmonize like the parts of a tune.  
As the stars are all different in lustre and size,  
So the telestial region is mingled in bliss;

From the least unto greatest, and greatest to least,  
The reward is exactly as promised in this.

The vision of the telestial concludes with a declaration that these will “be servants of the Most High; but where God and Christ dwell they cannot come, worlds without end” (D&C 76:112). This seems to say that there is no progression from one kingdom to another, at least from the telestial. And if there is no progression from the telestial, it is only logical that the same is true from other kingdoms. In spite of the apparent varying statements among past and present Church leaders, all that will be considered here is what the scriptures state. Modern scripture lends further support to there being no progression. Section 88 describes a qualitative resurrection for the earth’s inhabitants. Those who attain the celestial kingdom are quickened by a celestial glory to bring about their resurrection. Those who attain either of the lesser kingdoms are quickened by the glory which they attain. This enables them to abide in that kingdom in which they are resurrected. Their spirits and the elements of their bodies are thus inseparably connected (see D&C 93:33); “they can die no more; their spirits uniting with their bodies, never to be divided; thus the whole becoming spiritual and immortal” (Alma 11:45). This implies a permanent status, and while it could be suggested that a higher glory could infuse the already permanent body, there is no scriptural evidence to substantiate this. Until further information is revealed “by the power of the Holy Spirit” to those who are granted the “privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves” (D&C 76:116–17), the concept of no progression from kingdom to kingdom is more scriptural. But first we must grasp the great amount of knowledge about these visions that Joseph was permitted to record.

The last vision shown and recorded was of the telestial kingdom. The end of the revelation concerning the visions that they had seen is a proclamation of the greatness and glory of the Lord. Joseph Smith provided a fitting conclusion in his history following the recording of this revelation:

“Nothing could be more pleasing to the Saints upon the order of the kingdom of the Lord, than the light which burst upon the world through the foregoing vision. Every law, every commandment, every promise, every truth, and every point touching the destiny of man, from Genesis to Revelation, where the purity of the Scriptures

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remains unsullied by the folly of men, go to show the perfection of the theory [of different degrees of glory in the future life] and witness the fact that the document is a transcript from the records of the eternal world. The sublimity of the ideas; the purity of the language; the scope for action; the continued duration for completion, in order that the heirs of salvation may confess the Lord and bow the knee; the rewards for faithfulness, and the punishments for sins, are so much beyond the narrow-mindedness of men, that every man is constrained to exclaim: 'It came from God.'"<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 304–5.
2. Smith, *Teachings*, 305.
3. See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1932–51), 5:288.
4. In 1843 the Prophet Joseph Smith published a poetic version of Doctrine and Covenants 76 as “The Answer,” *Times and Seasons*, February 1, 1843, 82–85. All citations are to this version.
5. John Taylor, *Mediation and Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Steven & Wallis, 1950), 77.
6. *Webster’s Tenth New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “Perdition.”
7. See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), 1:281.
8. Smith, *Teachings*, 365.
9. Smith, *Teachings*, 357–58.
10. See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 2:169.
11. Smith, *Teachings*, 357.
12. Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, April 1971, 92.
13. *Webster’s Tenth New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “Valiant.”
14. Bruce R. McConkie, in Conference Report, October 1974, 44.
15. See Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:252–53.