

The (True) Light of Christ in Joseph Smith's Revelations

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What is light? This apparently simple question was a major puzzle motivating the development of quantum physics in the early twentieth century. Scientists knew a great deal about light at a practical level— its role in earth life, how to split its wavelengths, how to harness its energy, how to interpret the light radiating from distant stars. What wasn't clear was what light actually is. Generally, light seemed like a wave, such as might strike a seashore. These were the waves of electromagnetism familiar from radio communication. But several experiments suggested that light was more like pellets fired from a gun than it was like a wave on the sea. "Wave-particle duality" was a shorthand for this philosophical conflict for decades, with a more recent turn to "quantum field theory" to try to sidestep the problematic dualism. Physics still isn't entirely sure what light is.¹

The twentieth-century questions about light were concerned with the study of merely physical matter and the attempt to wrangle light

into strictly material terms. But for most of recorded history, physics was only half the story. There was also what stood beside physics, “metaphysics” in the traditional language borrowed from Aristotle. Starting in the early modern period but with dramatic intensification in eighteenth-century Europe and America, Western intellectuals have tended to steer clear of metaphysics. Anti-metaphysical ideologies have come under various banners: Deism, materialism, physicalism, modern paganism. Each of these views and ideologies included different specifics, but most converged on one area of agreement: only the physical world exists. God, if such a word had any meaning at all, was hopelessly far away from the world of human endeavor. The chasm between physics and whatever metaphysics there might be was too great even for God to bridge. Even human beings were merely material objects, best understood as biological machines.² According to these ideologies, souls or spirits were illusions at best, exploitive frauds at worst. The philosopher Charles Taylor describes this family of philosophies as commitments to a closed, *immanent* frame for existence, where *immanent* is the opposite of *transcendent*.³

Even Latter-day Saints—a faith community notable for its commitments to heaven, angels, and a divine potential for earth and its inhabitants—are often described as modern materialists and strict immanentists when it comes to God’s identity.⁴ With reference to revelations and sermons from Joseph Smith that actively undermined traditional Christian theologies, writers have often emphasized that in Restoration theology, there is only physicality: Smith described coarse and fine matter, corresponding to the old dualism of body and spirit. This understanding of Restoration theology has emphasized the importance of the world, the immanence of God, and the material reality of spirit.⁵ Some observers have classified this version of Smith’s account of the integrity of the world as philosophical monism, the opposite of dualism. Others have expressed appropriate skepticism about the equation of Latter-day Saints and materialists or monists.⁶

These traditional accounts of Latter-day Saint theology have been the source of longstanding ideas about inescapable conflict between creedal and Latter-day Saint Christians. One standard story has held that the God of the Christians is wholly other, utterly beyond earthly existence. That God is absolute, perfect, a Platonic Form of goodness, power, and wisdom. Blaise Pascal famously referred to this (in his view, sterile) entity as the “God of the philosophers.”⁷ The God of the Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, is a deified human, purely immanent, perfectly integrated into the life of the world. That Latter-day Saint God has more in common with the anthropomorphic God of the Bible, what Pascal called more warmly and plaintively “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.” Both creedal Christians and the Latter-day Saints have tended to agree that divine transcendence is a central point of irreconcilable difference between their competing traditions: creedal Christians embrace divine transcendence, while Latter-day Saints ostensibly reject it.⁸

The significant question is whether that familiar distinction is in fact secure. Revelations from the early 1830s, concerned with the metaphysics of light, suggest that in fact the Latter-day Saints do believe in aspects of divinity that share a great deal with the God of the philosophers. They just don’t believe that this divinity exhausts the nature of God, even as they point out the difficulty of separating these aspects from each other. This divine essence is called by various names: law, priesthood, and—crucially—light (see below).

This sense of divine light, generally termed the “light of Christ,” has been understood in two complementary ways in Restoration theology. On the one hand, it’s the inborn conscience by which humans judge good from evil. On the other, it’s a power, essence, or force that exists beyond the merely material world.⁹ This light is particularly associated with Jesus, especially in his premortal life, but it appears to also exist beyond Jesus as a matrix in which he and his divine parents live and breathe and have their being.

Four revelations from 1832 to 1833 are crucial to understanding the Light of Christ (also known as the “true light” in the early

Restoration): sections 76, 84, 88, and 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants. These revelations reread, revise, and recast the Gospel of John, especially its mystical, expansive Prologue (see John 1:1–18).¹⁰

The Gospel of John argues that Jesus is an entity known from Jewish tradition, the *Memra Yahweh* or Word of God. This word of God was a special being, perhaps the generally female divine figure called Wisdom. This Wisdom existed beside God and carried out God's will.¹¹ The Word was a being or essence that could mediate between God's ultimate remoteness and the mortal world of humans. This theme of eternal perfection, mortal imperfection, and a sacred being that mediates between them is at the core of Restoration Christology.

When John 1 states, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1), it is repurposing traditions about the *Memra Yahweh* to argue that the premortal Jesus was that Word. The subsequent statement, that "all things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3), further connects Jesus and the *Memra Yahweh* while emphasizing the creative role this Word played at the origins of the universe. The Prologue then transitions to a discussion of the ways the Word of God became flesh to dwell among humans. In this text, the incarnation of Jesus as the Christ bridges the distance between heaven and earth.

Discussions about light follow. John says that in Jesus "was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:4–5). This special light overlaps in some important way with Christ as the Word. It came to earth, and the world could not understand or extinguish it. (The Greek term, *katalambano*, can mean "apprehend"—in the sense of either comprehend or seize—take control of, extinguish, or several other concepts. Joseph Smith often sided with the King James translators' preference for "comprehend," but a complementary reading sees the world trying to extinguish that light, amassing its full power in the attempt to do so at Golgotha, juxtaposed to the obvious

persistent power of the flame on Easter morning.)¹² A few verses later, John continues to explain that Christ, as opposed to John the Baptist, is “the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (1:9). The Gospel of John moves through many related stories from Jesus’s life, death, and new life, exploring what it means for the Word of God to be made human, what it means for the True Light to burn brightly in the universe.

As Joseph Smith reread and retranslated John’s Prologue in the early 1830s, he explored the complex relationships between God, Jesus, and the moral order of the universe. In his considerations of the Word and the Light and their relationships to the Godhead, he elaborated a theology of the “true light” that is much more complex than has traditionally been thought. Usual theological and historical writing on the Light of Christ has largely depended on Protestant framings of the questions relevant to the nature of divinity, mostly emphasizing the sense of individual conscience.¹³ There is much room for a Restoration-based alternative that is more open to metaphysical richness. Working from within a Restoration worldview, I explore the nature of Christ, divine light, heavenly parents, and the human recipients of the light. I consider the philosophical context, the relevant revelation texts, and then the implications of Smith’s theology of light.

Philosophical Contexts: Illumination and Emanation

Questions about the metaphysics of light weren’t new with the Latter-day Saint Restoration. Whether it’s true or not (and some skepticism on this point is reasonable given precedents in other thinkers), Plato is held to be the key figure in these philosophical debates. He does so both in his writings and more importantly in how others have interpreted those writings over the years, in schools of thought called Platonism or Neoplatonism. The main concept associated with Plato tends to be a duality of perfect, changeless Forms (or Ideas) and the

imperfect, changing world where the Forms are manifest. Goodness or beauty or justice for Plato were not just words people use—they were real. They existed as perfect Forms of those attributes. While mortals could manifest goodness, they were not themselves the Good. How Plato understood what we would call God is more complex than many people realize¹⁴—it’s not clear whether God was the Forms taken together, one Form among many, or a being who operated within the cosmic order established by the Forms. Whatever Plato’s original intent, in the hands of later Christian interpreters, God was the Forms taken together, an absolute wholeness of perfect being. This was the God without body, parts, or passions (each word carrying the imprint of centuries of theological discussion) that the early Latter-day Saints loved to mock.¹⁵

The Neoplatonists (in pagan and then Christian variants) emphasized the interplay between Plato’s eternal Divine Unity and the temporal world of matter and perception.¹⁶ Some focused on the distance between the Forms and the material world, even veering toward gnostic-sounding notions that the world is inherently evil and our quest as humans is to escape the world.¹⁷ Others, following Plato’s teaching about a *demiurge* (the “builder” of the world), saw spanning the distance as important and achievable.¹⁸ This demiurge, a figure in the dialogue *Timaeus*, was the divine worker who was able to mediate between changeless perfection and the changing world of mortals, thus solving a logical puzzle—how could changeless Forms interact with, let alone organize, the world we know?

Especially in pagan Neoplatonism, a vital mode of such connection was light emanating from the divine presence as the force that suffuses the mortal world. Through this emanating light, divine perfection could extend between the divine and human realms.¹⁹ Light, in a manner of speaking, did the work of Plato’s demiurge—spanning heaven and earth—on an ongoing basis.

The doctrine of emanations continued in various threads over the centuries, especially in Western esoteric thought. With various complexities, alleys, and tangents, the divine light continued to be a

bridge between perfection and imperfection. In parallel it also held open the possibility of a theistic response to pantheism. Where pantheism held that God is only and identically the universe itself, a theist could respond that the pantheist has confused the emanation with its source.

The divine emanations were known well into the nineteenth century, including among African American Protestants, Edwardsians, and contemporary evangelicals.²⁰ Charles Buck, author of Joseph Smith's preferred theological reference, provided a reasonable summary in his account of mystics, whose Platonic traditions taught that "the divine nature was suffused through all human souls," "the faculty of reason . . . was an emanation from God into the human soul."²¹ Some of the ancient sects associated with emanations (thus, for example, Buck's reading of Priscillianists and Sabellians) denied the divinity of Christ, favoring the emanations in his stead.²² However heretical, these antique sects drew attention to the similar roles played by Christ and the Platonic emanations in spanning the distance between the divine and human realms.

The relationship between the Restoration and Plato/Platonism is complex and usually misunderstood. In the past, many writers assumed that the Latter-day Saints were strict anti-Platonists, and indeed Christian Platonism was the very definition of early Christian apostasy.²³ More recent thought has opened up the possibility that the Restoration has affinities with at least some aspects of Platonic thought. Terryl Givens has recently argued for an emanationist view of Restoration theology, extending work by others who see Platonism as less theologically threatening than it once seemed to be.²⁴ One Latter-day Saint doctoral dissertation has recently proposed genealogical ties between Christian Platonism and Restoration theology in a celebration of both. While that proposal lacks high-quality documentary evidence, it does draw attention to impressive parallels and points to broader traditions of textual or paratextual connection.²⁵

Latter-day Saint resonances with at least some (heavily modulated) strains of Neoplatonism and Western mysticism seem reasonably

apparent. Attempts to connect the Restoration with esoteric traditions are longstanding and have generally suffered from a lack of a credible trail of explicit documents.²⁶ Historically, the approach carried polemical implications, which Latter-day Saints naturally rejected.²⁷

The nature of the relationships may benefit from metaphors drawn from biological evolution. Evolutionary theorists distinguish between homology and analogy. Homology means that features derive from the same genetic source (for example, the fins of dolphins and whales), while analogy means addressing similar problems in similar ways without a shared genealogy (for example, the wings of bats and birds). The lack of obvious documentary connections between the Restoration and formal Platonism means that historians cannot prove homology, but at a minimum the analogy seems clear. I thus do not assume that Smith was a formal Neoplatonist, only that at a minimum his theological solutions get at problems that concerned Neoplatonists and use concepts in similar ways. (My personal hunch is that there's at least some homology, but we do not need to solve that evidential problem to appreciate resonances. Theology does not require homology the way history does.)

This context of Platonism, Neoplatonism, emanations, and divine light is important to understanding Joseph Smith's revelations of the early 1830s. While Smith was not himself an obvious or self-avowed Neoplatonist, the background philosophical questions of God, perfection, the human world, and mediation among them are important context for the Restoration theology of divine light. Smith explored these themes in revelations spread over a little more than a year, from 1832 to 1833.

The Vision of February 1832

In early 1832 Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were grappling, as part of their work on the new translation of the Bible, with the possibility of multiple resurrections raised by the spare language of John

5:29—people “shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.” They had a vision—early Latter-day Saints called it “The Vision”—later canonized as section 76. The Saints and their observers tended to focus on the universalistic implications of the degrees of afterlife glory (a polyphonic amplification of the two resurrections of John 5:29), which said that what the Protestants called hell was actually part of an expansive, multi-tiered heaven. The universalism of the Vision stunned those who heard it, but the revelation was textually as multilayered as the heavenly glories it disclosed.²⁸

After a prologue promising enlightenment to those who fear and serve God (see Doctrine and Covenants 76:1–10), Smith and Rigdon clarify that they are illuminating the “things of God . . . which were from the beginning before the world was” (76:12–13), followed immediately by their report of a vision of Jesus (see 76:14). They bear record that “by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created” (76:24), explicitly echoing John’s Prologue. After an excursus on Lucifer’s fall and the sons of perdition who follow him (see 76:25–38), Smith and Rigdon then describe at length (76:39–112) and with substantial resonance with other scriptures—especially John’s Revelation and Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians—the various grades of the afterlife that Protestants called heaven and hell, including the promise that the righteous are “gods, even the sons of God” because “they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (76:58–59). These verses reveal Restoration universalism, including a promise of equality with God, as mediated in some way by Christ, by whom creation occurred. Light has a role to play as the matrix within which three grades, or degrees, of heaven exist. This is clear in the interwoven treatment of the classes of celestial bodies from 1 Corinthians 15—sun, moon, and stars—itself reflecting Paul’s interpretation of Genesis 1–3. The degree of glory in heaven’s kingdoms is proportional to the luminosity of the celestial bodies whose creation is a centerpiece of the first three chapters of Genesis. The “highest of all” is God, whose “glory is that of the sun” (76:70). The full glories of heaven and hell

are beyond human comprehension, beyond even words (see 76:45–47, 89–90, 114–15). Only the direct revelation of God, making people “able to bear his presence in the world of glory,” can facilitate such revelation (76:118). Readers are left, then, with images of an ineffable glory that structures life and afterlife and promises a special relationship between humans and God, mediated by Jesus, who partakes of that ever-ramifying glory. This glory can be described in terms of light.

Within a few months, Smith would draw these revelatory reshaping of Corinthians and Genesis into a more robust exegesis of the Prologue of John. That ultimately came in the Olive Leaf revelation of December 1832 to January 1833. Along the way Smith further developed images of light and order in a revelatory exploration of priesthood in September 1832.

The Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood (Doctrine and Covenants 84)

Doctrine and Covenants 84, a portion of which is sometimes called the oath and covenant of the priesthood, played a role in an early phase of the establishment of Zion, the preparatory work for the Kirtland Temple, the establishment of global evangelism, and the endowment of power. In it Smith predicts that a temple will be built and then filled with glory and priesthood (see 84:4–18). He describes that priesthood, echoing language from the letter to the Hebrews, as “without beginning of days or end of years” (84:17). This priesthood will transform the Saints by sanctifying their bodies until they become the literal children of Moses (see 84:33–34). The text describes a covenant that God makes through priesthood: recipients of the priesthood must obey that covenant. In that context comes an equation of truth, light, and the spirit of Christ (see 84:45–46). The language in these verses sounds both esoteric and assiduously Christian: “Whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ.” That “spirit giveth light to every man

that cometh into the world: and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world.” The text doesn’t spell out where light ends and spirit begins (and how the two relate to priesthood), but truth, light, and spirit appear to be forces permeating the universe. And those forces are intimately associated with Jesus. Further details regarding the intersection of light and spirit came in the more expansive and thorough Olive Leaf revelation that Christmas season.

The Olive Leaf Revelation (Doctrine and Covenants 88)

The Olive Leaf was part of the ongoing development of the School of the Prophets, the new translation of the Bible, and Smith’s work to deepen Restoration theology. More proximately, it was a return to the Vision and the cultivation of seeds sown there, especially the possibilities of salvation and the nature of the light cast by celestial bodies. It also came days after a revelation on the coming war between the states and the miseries that were inevitable before Christ’s impending return (Doctrine and Covenants 87). The Olive Leaf is thus a deeply apocalyptic text, worrying over what it means for the world to “comprehend not” (see John 1:5) the Light of Christ.²⁹

Smith begins the Olive Leaf with a brief introduction and then a promise of “another Comforter” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:3) that he ties explicitly back to John 14:16. He then says that this Second Comforter is “the promise which I give unto you of eternal life, even the glory of the celestial kingdom” (88:4), with a reference to the “church of the Firstborn” (88:5) that had featured in the Vision’s account of the community of the celestial kingdom. This possibility of participation in heaven is mediated by Jesus Christ, who is “in all and through all things, the light of truth” (88:6), thus returning to the image of a permeating force or essence that is inextricable from Jesus. The revelation then moves through the list of celestial bodies that had constituted the backbone of the Vision, describing this “light of Christ” as being “in the sun, and the light of the sun, and

the power thereof by which it was made." This "light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings" (88:7, 11). He then clarifies in perfectly emanationist terms that this "light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space" and, crucially, is "the light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things" (88:12–13). This light, synonymously law or power, appears to be a matrix or essence within which God exists. In the Olive Leaf, God resides in "the bosom of eternity" rather than himself being that eternity as creedal Christianity would have it. These references to light, power, law, and eternity mark a complex ongoing merger of the God of the philosophers and the God of the Bible within Restoration theology. The revelations both suggest that light is somehow beyond God, and that the light is in some ways synonymous with God (or Christ).

After a return to discussions of resurrection, the Olive Leaf defines the Vision's kingdoms in terms of the "glory by which your bodies are quickened" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:28). The promise is that whereas in life people are animated by "a portion of the celestial glory," the righteous will receive at judgment "even a fulness" of that glory (88:29). For each kingdom, that animating glory will be expanded appropriate to the glory of the kingdom they inherit. One hears both resonances of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (13:9–10) and the power of divine emanations and their capacity to give life both on earth and in heaven. Light continues to be an essence that structures and animates the cosmos.

Then, after an aside that recurs to the eternal law that exists beyond the heavenly kingdoms (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:34–39), comes a recurrent mention of God's power permeating the cosmos, which is "through all things" (88:41). All bodies in the universe have received a law from God, including their decreed orbits, and "they give light to each other in their times and in their seasons"

(88:44). Of the stars, Smith says in especial eloquence that they “give their light, as they roll upon their wings in their glory, in the midst of the power of God” (88:45). Just as this glorious light intermingles with God and Jesus, so does it permeate, animate, and identify the other bodies that constitute the universe. Once again, light governs celestial hierarchies.

Smith then returns to his exegesis of the Prologue of John. Here he uses the language of John 1:5, clarifying that the world didn’t comprehend God (favoring *katalambano*’s resonance with apprehension as comprehension) but that disciples quickened by him and in him would comprehend. Specifically, “then shall ye know that ye have seen me, that I am, and that I am the true light that is in you. . . . Otherwise ye could not abound” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:50). A few verses later, he lays out the path to the fulfillment of the promise: “if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things” (88:67). Smith thus ties light directly to understanding at the same time that he sees it as an essence or force that can “fill” bodies. He is thereby setting up a possibility he promptly explores further. This light is somehow connected—physically, metaphysically, or both—to the genesis of our mental lives and the eternal substance of our beings. In the connections between Jesus, humans, a permeating cosmic light, moral agency, and the ultimate outcome of human development, the Olive Leaf becomes the story of what later Saints called the plan of salvation, painted with strokes of light rather than sequential moral examinations. As human beings encounter the light of truth, they are drawn into communion with God and cosmic order. Through Christ and in extension of the bare hints in Doctrine and Covenants 76:58, they become gods themselves as they allow their bodies to be filled with light.

This divine light maintained its connection to Jesus, the encompassing universal force, eternal human intelligence, and the moral order of the universe as it continued to develop in Restoration scripture, with an efflorescence the following May in another revelation

that even more explicitly and thoroughly engaged the Prologue to John.

The True Light Revelation (Doctrine and Covenants 93)

Smith returned to the themes of the true light in May 1833, in a revelation (Doctrine and Covenants 93) that quibbles with and extends John's arguments. I've proposed that we call this revelation the "True Light," a case I extend here.³⁰ John largely depicts Christ as the eternal Word and light by which God brings life and truth to humanity, while Smith seems to have proposed a view of Christ as the best and purest vessel for a light beyond us all. Smith thereby seems to have suggested that John had committed a metonymic error: the ancient apostle had unwittingly merged the light and its purest vessel.³¹

Smith's division of the true light into Christ and a power beyond Christ—admitting that bringing their distinction into focus happens in a context in which differences between them are continually blurred—corrects John's mistaken metonymy. The "true light" (Doctrine and Covenants 93:2) exemplifies the *agape*—true, pure love—that unites individuals (see 93:3–4). All power arises as God and Christ dwell in each other (see 93:17), a mutuality made possible by the true light, which appears to have an existence beyond the two divine beings thus united. Smith clarifies that humans can grow toward divinity as they participate in a Christly relationship of mutuality guided by that light (see 93:20–22). He gestures to the concept as the "Spirit of truth" (93:23–24), arguing that light and truth belong together (see 93:29–30, 36) and are uncreated. He then maintains that this light is logically and chronologically anterior to human meaning: "here is the agency of man . . . because that which was from the beginning [the true light] is plainly manifest unto them" (93:31). There must be moral illumination, in other words, or there is no capacity for humans to choose. The light thus suggests a self-revealing moral order. Throughout the revelatory exegesis in Doctrine and Covenants

93, Smith describes true light as both the source and metric of goodness, truth, and morality. This light appears to exist beyond time and beyond any specific incarnation, of which there are many, although Jesus holds pride of place. In Doctrine and Covenants 93, the fresh reassortment of the attributes of the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob moves to another level.

In Doctrine and Covenants 93, Smith revisits the possibility that intelligence—the apparently personal (or personalizable) substance out of which human beings are made in their premortal existence—is a synonym for the true light. “Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made” (93:29). Shortly comes a related reference to the fact that “the glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (93:36). This intelligence stands outside the flow of creation that depends on the Word, and it also overlaps, perhaps completely, with the “light of truth” somehow synonymous with Christ. This further expansion of uncreated essences places human beings alongside Christ in the flow of true light and mental being.

Then comes a clear interpretation of John 1:5 that indicts modern blindness in another translation of *katalambano*—“that which was from the beginning is plainly manifest unto them, and they receive not the light” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:31). It is not just that they don’t comprehend, but they won’t allow the light into themselves. Then comes a cryptic line that connects this unreceived intelligence to the “glory of God,” which the Book of Moses (1:39) had associated with God in relationship to human beings. In Moses, “the immortality and eternal life” of humanity is God’s “work” and “glory.” In Doctrine and Covenants 93 God’s exalting glory is light. God and humans are brought together in light, intelligence, and glory. There’s a lot at play here, drawing on the many different threads of divine light, including human conscience, truth, intelligence, and the essence of divine love in which humans and gods live and breathe and have their being. And that light continues to find its weightiest incarnation in Christ.

The Afterlife of a Doctrine

After this burst of revelatory activity on light in 1832–33, Smith spent less time engaging the true light directly. He seems instead to have explored parallel themes. Smith and Rigdon, in the *Lectures on Faith* in 1834–1835, interpreted the book of Hebrews as an infrastructure for teachings on faith and priesthood. There they used familiar language and ideas to suggest that faith was an essence or force that God could utilize in seeking to achieve God’s ends for creation. According to lecture 1, faith is “the first great governing principle, which has power, dominion and authority over all things.” The lectures continue to argue that without faith there is no power in the universe, that even God has faith.³² While they did not connect the dots explicitly, Smith and Rigdon seem in the *Lectures on Faith* to have understood faith as a complementary, uncreated essence that existed beyond the God of the Bible. Faith seems to be an alignment of one’s intelligence with the Light of Christ.

A few years later, Smith pursued two threads of related theology, teachings on the Second Comforter and temple priesthood. While those topics are too diffuse for a thorough treatment here, a brief overview will point out continuities. The themes continued those introduced in the early true light revelations, expanding the core themes of light as a force that unites humans with Christ and transforms them.

A key aspect of the true light was the juxtaposition of revelatory knowledge and Christ. Following the hint in the Olive Leaf (Doctrine and Covenants 88:68), in the late 1830s Joseph Smith explained that a Second Comforter (interpreting John 14:16–17, 21–23) was the personal, physical ministry of Christ. Rather than visits from angels or the Holy Ghost (the First Comforter), those who received the Second Comforter would be visited by Christ.³³ More intensely physical and embodied than its precedents, this later doctrine (a Latter-day Saint answer to the Methodist doctrine of sanctification)³⁴ stayed true to

the roots of the true light, with its juxtaposition of truth, intelligence, revelation, and the person of Christ.

As Smith worked to clarify the doctrines and ordinances of salvation, he focused his energies on the Nauvoo Temple. In that temple, Smith brought to fruition the Light of Christ and a specific ritual promise of the Second Comforter as ordinances that brought the Saints as transformed beings into the divine presence together with their kindred. By the end of his life, Joseph Smith was becoming clearer about the interplay of truth, light, priesthood, and power. He was suggesting that in the temple believers could gain access to this power beyond divinity as part of their growth in becoming something greater than merely human. In April 1842 he preached that “if you wish to go where God is you must be like God or possess the principles which God possesses.”³⁵ Those principles were a structure beyond God, and the mastery of that structure was the promise of Godhood. In the temple these mysteries of Godliness were divulged as manifestations of priesthood and divine intelligence.³⁶ The temple became the ritual location and sacramental infrastructure for the forces beyond Gods and humans, forces which made them what they were. Through the temple, believers finally and fully comprehended the true light.

Conclusions and Implications

Fundamentally, the Restoration doctrine of the True Light is a vista on an old and important question about the coexistence of perfection and imperfection, divine order and human disorder, personality and impersonality. Many different thinkers and communities over the millennia have proposed solutions to these basic, existential problems. What does it mean to aspire to be better than we are? And what shall we do with the sense that there’s more to the cosmos than unrelated tangles of matter? How much of the meaning we see in the universe is impersonal, and how much personal? How does the vast and impersonal affect us as humans?

Classically, Christian theologians taught that God as such was wholly perfect, beyond anything human such as body or emotion. As we've seen, this was the Platonically perfect God we know from Augustine and the Christian creeds. Although many critics (and some proponents) emphasize the entire transcendence of that God, the reality is that the incarnation of Jesus was central to Christianity from the beginning. In Jesus, the transcendent God came to illuminate human life. On the opposing side in current culture wars, contemporary secularist thinkers tend to maintain that they believe only in the immanent world of imperfect humans, denying even the possibility of metaphysics. But most of them will still believe in moral principles and "laws of nature" that have a status beyond any specific tangles of matter. The two main poles of modern thought about the relationship between God and cosmos—that God is wholly transcendent or that God does not exist because there can only be the immanent—thus equivocate substantially. The interdigitation of the transcendent and immanent realms seems impossible to deny, even for the most ardent partisans at the philosophical extremes.

Smith seems to have seen through the equivocations and philosophical blind spots. He did so in his characteristic impulse to harmonize what is discordant by blurring dualisms and uniting a fractured cosmos.³⁷ He wasn't afraid to assault Protestant clergy and doctrines to make his point, even as he repurposed familiar concepts into new formulations. The doctrine of emanations, modified slightly, seems to have proved a useful mechanism to blur the theological boundaries between persons and essences.

The True Light theology works toward a merger of the God of the philosophers (the Platonic God of perfection) and the God of the Bible (the personal God familiar to most Latter-day Saints). This merger happens alongside and dependent on an elevation of humanity into a status equal with God. The elevation of humans to divine status is mediated by Christ and patterned on him.

Recognizing emanations and interdigitation as moving together dramatically complicates traditional stories about Restoration theology.

Many Latter-day Saints have seen themselves as anti-Platonists—denying the existence of the world of the Forms and embracing a God who is finite and material rather than immaterial and changeless. The True Light theology suggests that the truth is much more complicated than that.

There's a taxonomic question at play—is Restoration theology Platonist or anti-Platonist, and how does Restoration theology compare to creedal Christian understandings? On the one hand, the light and other essences beyond God sound like Plato's world of the Forms, and God the Father of the Latter-day Saints sounds like Plato's demiurge. On the other hand, the emanations aren't only from God but may also come through him. The Latter-day Saints are idiosyncratic Platonists to say the least. As for creedal Christianity, the True Light sounds an awful lot like their God of the philosophers—it appears to be an essence or force that structures and animates the cosmos. But that essence is embodied not only in Christ but in the heavenly parents and human beings as well. And even as this Restoration theology of incarnation radically democratizes the interface, it is still and always tied to Christ.

Restoration theology also runs contrary to common assumptions about the modern world's separation of the heavenly from the earthly, which mostly expresses an ongoing attempt to exile God entirely from the universe. According to Restoration theology, we live in the midst of realms that are complementary and interwoven. Physicality is central to the story, but the merely physical cannot be the whole story. A deep metaphysics also illuminates the world of coarse matter. The question is how to name the realms, how to imagine them, how to orient ourselves within them, and how to unite them in meaningful ways that do not use them up in the process.

As is so often the case, Smith worked fluidly and impressionistically. Many questions remain unanswered. But the True Light theology does raise important questions about the viability of anti-Platonic views of Latter-day Saint theology, whether framed in traditional or

postmodern terms. The Restoration proves broader, nimbler, and more interesting than we might otherwise have thought.

Notes

1. Adam Becker, *What Is Real? The Unfinished Quest for the Meaning of Quantum Physics* (New York: Basic Books, 2018) provides a hopeful overview to the ongoing puzzles of quantum physics.
2. On these topics, see especially Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Reformation Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2012); Eugene McCarraher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: Capitalism as the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Steven Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).
3. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 550–56, 589.
4. Thus, from often opposing perspectives, the thought of Adam Miller, Terryl Givens, and Blake Ostler. Miller operates from the perspective of Continental philosophy, Givens from a kind of Romantic monism, and Ostler as a Christian heretic, using the language of traditional theology repurposed in a contest with creedal Christianity. See Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2016); and *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2012); Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought; Cosmos, God, and Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought* series (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2001, 2006, 2008). For a somewhat more balanced view, see Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, Signature Mormon Classics repr. ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 5–9, 36; and McMurrin, “The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology,” appendix to *Theological Foundations*, 10, 20, 29. Philosopher David L. Paulsen has argued at length for what he terms

- Latter-day Saint “finitistic theism”; Paulsen, “Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical (Absolutistic) Theism” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1975).
5. See Jordan T. Watkins and Christopher James Blythe, “Christology and Theosis in the Revelations and Teachings of Joseph Smith,” 123–56, in this volume.
 6. Max Nolan, “Materialism and the Mormon Faith,” *Dialogue* 2, no. 4 (1989): 62–75. Sterling McMurrin also noted the complexities of calling Latter-day Saint theology materialist: McMurrin, *Theological Foundations*, 1, 5–7.
 7. This famous phrase comes from Pascal’s *Memorial*, recovered after his death from the lining of his coat. Martin Buber extended the contrast in his pursuit of religious experience as the encounter of personal beings rather than rationalist theorizing in *The Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (1965; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
 8. For examples, see Francis J. Beckwith and Stephen E. Parrish, *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991); versus David L. Paulsen and Blake T. Ostler, review of *The Mormon Concept of God: A Philosophical Analysis*, by Beckwith and Parrish, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 118–20. See also McMurrin, *Theological Foundations*, 2–3, 9.
 9. I introduced my early thinking on this topic in “Mormons Probably Aren’t Materialists,” *Dialogue* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 39–72. I reuse, revise, and expand aspects of that treatment here.
 10. Connections between John and Restoration scripture are a major theme of Nicholas J. Frederick’s perceptive *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson, 2016).
 11. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 97, 102–9; John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 22, 66–67; William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 199–200, 301–2.

12. I appreciate the urging of an anonymous reviewer to be open to the dual meanings of *apprehend* associated with *katalambano*. I think the connection to crucifixion and resurrection pushes toward the image of extinction, but Joseph Smith's merger of intelligence, truth, and light point toward comprehension. I am comfortable with and see room for both. I'm also echoing N. T. Wright's sense of the meaning of Jesus's life in *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).
13. Brown, "Mormons Probably Aren't Materialists," 16, 19.
14. And much more complex than McMurrin, *Theological Foundations*, 15, acknowledges.
15. Brown, "Mormons Probably Aren't Materialists," 7–8.
16. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), s.v. "Neoplatonism."
17. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 88–91.
18. McMurrin maintains, I think correctly, that many Latter-day Saint models of God place the God of the Bible as an equivalent to Plato's demiurge: *Theological Foundations*, 29.
19. On the emanations, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 106; and Catherine L. Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 51, 178, 347, 260, 464.
20. Brett Malcolm Grainger, *Church in the Wild: Evangelicals in Antebellum America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 4, 8, 98.
21. Charles Buck, *A Theological Dictionary* (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwaite, 1823), 400. On Smith's preference for Buck, see Matthew Bowman and Samuel Brown, "The Reverend Buck's *Theological Dictionary* and the Struggle to Define American Evangelicalism, 1802–1851," *Journal of the Early Republic* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 441–73.
22. Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 489, 530.

23. See, for example, Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), s.v. “Logos”; and James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 100–101, 110.
24. Terryl L. Givens, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 52–53; Daniel W. Graham and James L. Siebach, “Philosophy and Early Christianity,” *FARMS Review of Books* 11, no. 3 (1999): 210–20.
25. Stephen J. Fleming, “The Fulness of the Gospel: Christian Platonism and the Origins of Mormonism” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2014).
26. The best-known are D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987); and John Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
27. Samuel M. Brown, “The Reluctant Metaphysicians,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 115–31.
28. See Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Brent M. Rogers, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 3: February 1833–March 1834*, vol. 3 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2014), 155, for a contemporary response to the Vision.
29. I thank an anonymous reviewer for urging me to consider this connection.
30. Brown, “Mormons Probably Aren’t Materialists,” 17.
31. Frederick, *Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity*, chapter 4, is correct that Doctrine and Covenants 93 elaborates a “lower” Christology than John does, albeit without pointing toward the democratized incarnation. Frederick improves upon his initial treatment of the phrase “grace for grace” (64) in his chapter in the present volume, “Incarnation, Exaltation, and Christological Tension in Doctrine and Covenants 93:1–32,” 11–41.
32. Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, vol. 2 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed.

- Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), 321.
33. See, for example, Brent M. Rogers, Mason K. Allred, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, and Brett D. Dowdle, eds., *Documents, Volume 8: February–November 1841*, vol. 8 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, Matthew C. Godfrey, and R. Eric Smith (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2019), 89; Mark Ashurst-McGee, David W. Grua, Elizabeth Kuehn, Alexander L. Baugh, and Brenden W. Rensink, eds., *Documents, Volume 6: February 1838–August 1839*, vol. 6 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, and Matthew C. Godfrey (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2017), 522, 525, 553.
 34. Paul K. Conkin, *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 70–71.
 35. Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 146–47, transcription mine, Church History Library.
 36. Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), chapter 7.
 37. Philip Barlow, "To Mend a Fractured Reality: Joseph Smith's Project," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 28–50.