

EMERGENCE OF A FUNDAMENTAL: THE EXPANDING ROLE OF JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION IN MORMON RELIGIOUS THOUGHT



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One of the barriers to understanding history is the tendency many of us have to superimpose upon past generations our own patterns of thought and perceptions of reality. This is partly the result of giving too little thought to the historical development of ideas. In Mormon history, for example, we are well aware of the many changes that have taken place in Church organization and practices in the past 150 years, but we are tempted to assume that ideas and perceptions have remained relatively unchanged, especially since the death of Joseph Smith. Only recently have Mormon historians begun to study in detail the historical development of ideas within the Church, but such a study, if complete, could provide valuable

insight into why some concepts have changed from generation to generation while others have remained constant as pillars of the faith. It would also demonstrate the relationship of ideas to each other, and the changing role of basic concepts in such important functional activities as testimony building, missionary work, and the development of teaching programs. This paper explores one example of changing perceptions within the Mormon community: its growing awareness and changing use of Joseph Smith's First Vision.

Next to the Resurrection of Christ, nothing holds a more central place in modern Mormon thought than that sacred event of 1820. It is celebrated in poetry, song, drama, and nearly all the visual arts; it forms the basis for the first missionary discussion; no Latter-day Saint publication that touches on early Church history leaves it out; sermons and lessons expounding upon the doctrine of God almost invariably use the vision to illustrate several aspects of that doctrine. Because it is the most sacred event in Church history, a belief in its literal reality is fundamental to belief in Mormonism itself. But the First Vision was not always so well known or frequently used by the general membership of the Church. 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.

Let me clarify at the outset that when I use the term "First Vision" here, I am referring to detailed *accounts* of the vision—accounts that specifically call attention to Joseph Smith's initial religious quest, his prayer in the grove, and the grand theophany he experienced there. References to a common understanding that Joseph had received instructions from God, or had even experienced his presence, do not demonstrate that the details of the vision were fully known. It is the detailed

accounts that concern us here, and the question is when and why the vision as a descriptive report began to assume its present role in Mormon thought.¹

The First Vision occurred in 1820—a historic reality. But it did not become a *perceived* reality by the general Mormon community until that community heard about it and understood it. Clearly, we have no way of knowing what every Mormon knew or believed at any given moment, for contemporary journals simply are not that complete on this issue. Nor do we know all that Joseph Smith was publicly teaching, for so many of his sermons went unrecorded. But to the degree that printed sources reveal what Mormons generally understood, we can at least begin to appreciate how and why their awareness of the First Vision went through a significant metamorphosis in the first century of Latter-day Saint history.²

In the 1830s, long before historical accounts of the vision were circulated generally among the Saints, it was a common understanding among them that Joseph Smith had received direct and personal communication from God. References to this appeared often, but in the context of the times, they did not necessarily imply to the Saints the details of the vision as they are known today. Only later, with the benefit of the published accounts, could these early statements be seen as clear allusions to that specific event of 1820. A basic revelation in 1830, for example, declared of Joseph Smith: “For, after that it truly was manifested unto this first elder, that he had received a remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world; but after truly repenting, God ministered unto him by an holy angel.”³ This certainly was no description of the vision, but the allusion to receiving a remission of his sins conformed exactly with Joseph Smith’s later detailed accounts. There are many such oblique references in contemporary sources, including an anti-Mormon statement in the

Palmyra Reflector in 1831 that Joseph Smith “had seen God frequently and personally.”⁴

It is significant that early anti-Mormon literature did not attack Joseph Smith on the basis of his recitals of the First Vision, notwithstanding the abundance of Mormon statements originating a half century later to the effect that bearing testimony of it was what caused his greatest trouble.⁵ Though he was criticized for telling the story when it first occurred, in later years, the persecution heaped upon the Mormon prophet was associated with other things, and the vision was of little or no significance in the minds of those who were the persecutors.⁶

Beyond the possibility that Joseph Smith wanted to keep the details of his great theophany private because they were so sacred, there were at least two factors within the Mormon community of the 1830s that helped make it unnecessary or even inappropriate to lay out the vision as precisely as became the practice in the 1840s and thereafter or to use it for the didactic purposes that are common today. One was a conscious effort among Mormon founders to avoid creeds and dogma.⁷ To the degree that the First Vision could lend itself to creating or supporting even a loose creedal statement about the personal characteristics of God, it simply would not have fit the rather open attitude toward doctrine that characterized the early years of the Church. When the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants was being prepared for publication, some Church members objected on the grounds that it could become too much like a creed.⁸ Joseph Smith nevertheless apparently felt it important to make certain carefully selected revelations generally available, though even in doing so he implied that everything in the publication was not necessarily binding on the conscience of the whole Mormon community. The preface stated, “We have, therefore, endeavored to present, though a few words, *our* belief, and when we say this, humbly trust, the faith and principles

of this society as a body.” Nothing in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants could be construed as a creedal statement about the nature of God, though certainly the “Lectures on Faith,” bound in the same volume, came close. Even they, however, were not confessions or articles of faith—only transcriptions of lectures delivered before a theological class in Kirtland. Joseph Smith, moreover, continued to oppose the idea of rigid confessions of faith, even after he had allowed the First Vision to be published and had written his own “Articles of Faith.” As he told Josiah Butterfield in 1843, “The most prominent difference in sentiment between the Latter-day Saints and sectarians was, that the latter were all circumscribed by some peculiar creed, which deprived its members of the privilege of believing anything not contained therein, whereas the Latter-day Saints have no creed, but are ready to believe all true principles that exist, as they are made manifest from time to time.”⁹

Later, he even criticized the high council in Nauvoo for trying Pelatiah Brown simply for making a doctrinal error.¹⁰

When this lack of emphasis on creeds is coupled with a second factor in the early Mormon community, then the inappropriateness of using the First Vision as a device for teaching the nature of God seems apparent. That factor was the general perception of God which, in the 1830s at least, was different in several respects from the doctrines advanced by Joseph Smith in the 1840s and built upon in later years by other Church leaders. We don’t pretend to know when Joseph Smith formulated the advanced doctrines he taught in the 1840s or when he became convinced that the need to know God meant also the need to know of his finite, corporeal nature. We know only that he allowed other ideas to be circulated and saw no need publicly to contradict them until the 1840s.

What *did* the Mormons believe about the nature and character of God in the 1830s? Professor Thomas G. Alexander deals

significantly with this subject in another context,¹¹ but we must say enough about it here to illustrate why a detailed account of the First Vision, as Mormons think of and use it today, would have been unnecessary in the belief system of the Mormon community of the 1830s, and may even have been disturbing to some of the newly converted Saints. It is not beyond possibility, of course, that Joseph Smith deliberately kept it from public circulation partly for this reason.

Perhaps the most significant observation to be made about the pre-Nauvoo concept of God held by ordinary Mormons is that it was not radically different from some other Christian perceptions, and that newly converted Saints probably did not need to change their image of God very much just because they had become Mormons. There may, in fact, have been several concepts of God within the popular Mormon community.

The traditional Christian view, still held by mainline Protestant theologians, was Trinitarian—that is, belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God, indivisible in substance yet manifesting himself three different ways. By the time Mormonism arose, however, some liberal Protestant thinkers had already departed from Trinitarianism, taking the ancient Arian position that Christ was distinctly separate from God. He was less than God, but more than man—he was a preexistent divine being.¹² William Ellery Channing declared in 1815 that “there is only one person possessing supreme Divinity, even the Father,” and that the Son was sent by the Father.¹³ In 1819, in a famous ordination sermon, he made the distinction between the two persons even more clear.¹⁴ His definition of the nature of the Father bore no resemblance to the God Joseph Smith preached about in Nauvoo, but at least Channing and other liberal Protestants separated the persons of the Father and the Son. So also, apparently, did a few evangelical Protestants of Joseph Smith’s day.¹⁵ One suspects that whatever creeds or dogmas

remained, they were not highly emphasized to the popular audiences. Many ordinary Christians, caring little for the niceties of theology, probably thought of God and Christ as separate entities, though they may not have thought of the Father as having corporeal existence (i.e., a tangible body of flesh). Some, at least, emphasized the idea that God was a *person*, though in the mind of the distinguished Henry Ware this did not imply physical shape, form, or place. Rather, preached Ware, “consciousness, and the power of will and action constitute him a person.”¹⁶

Converts to Mormonism in the early and mid-1830s would find little, if any, discomfort with the concept of God set forth in the teachings of their new religion, no matter which Christian tradition they came from. The lack of a creedal definition left them somewhat free to retain traditional views, and Mormon writings were not drastically different in tone on this issue than the teachings of other groups. Several passages in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, for instance, could be interpreted as supporting the traditional view that God and Christ were the same entity: “And he said unto me, Behold the virgin which thou seest, is the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh”;¹⁷ “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father”;¹⁸ “Yea, the Everlasting God was judged of the world”;¹⁹ “The Lamb of God is the Eternal Father and the Savior of the World.”²⁰ These passages were modified in the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon so that they no longer seemed Trinitarian, but enough remained unmodified that, without the benefit of Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo teachings or the exposition on the Father and the Son published by the First Presidency in 1916, the convert from a Trinitarian tradition could find a familiar idea. Consider, for example, this passage from Mosiah: “I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God,

and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son—the Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and the Son—and they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth” (Mosiah 15:1–4; see also Alma 11:38–39, 44).

This and other passages were capable of causing doctrinal difficulties in later years and had to be reconciled with the Mormon doctrine of God by later Church members, but at least in the mid-1830s they were not likely to form a stumbling block for converts from traditional Christianity.

At the same time, Mormon writings also lent themselves to comfortable interpretation by those who saw the Father and the Son as distinct and separate identities with a oneness of will and purpose: “And behold, the third time they did understand the voice which they heard; and it said unto them: behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name—hear ye him” (3 Nephi 11:6–7; see also vv. 10–11).

Many such passages are found in the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Book of Moses, parts of which were published as early as 1831–32. But even when they separate the persons of the Father and the Son, they do not necessarily imply that the Father is the corporeal being revealed in the story of the First Vision—or, at least, in the standard interpretations of that story. This was true also of the “Lectures on Faith,” which were not removed from the Doctrine and Covenants until 1921. The fifth lecture specifically separated the persons of the Father and the Son, though in terms that did not impute corporeality to the Father. The lecture, in fact, implied quite the opposite:

There are two personages who constitute the great, matchless, governing and supreme power over all things. . . . They are the Father and the Son; The Father being a personage of spirit, glory and power: possessing all perfection and fulness: The Son, who was in

the bosom of the Father, a personage of tabernacle, made, or fashioned like unto man. . . . And he being the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, and having overcome, received a fulness of the glory of the Father—possessing the same mind with the Father, which mind is the Holy Spirit.²¹

The distinction between the Father as a “personage of spirit, glory and power” and the Son as a “personage of tabernacle” certainly suggests that the Father was not thought of as having a physical, material body. The concept of God thus presented in these lectures was not drastically different from the ideas new converts brought with them and clearly did not lend itself to illustration by use of the First Vision. But the Mormons were being prepared for a radically unorthodox view of God that would, eventually, open the way for the First Vision to be employed as evidence.

This does not mean that some Mormons did not believe in a corporeal God—only that there was still no credal statement to that effect and that there was room for diversity of belief. It is likely that many Mormons held an anthropomorphic view, and one anti-Mormon writer even included in his 1836 denunciation of the Saints in Kirtland a statement that they believed that “the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts.”²² But this and other ideas about God had not yet found their way into the Mormon press, and their profound significance was certainly not a part of the general Mormon consciousness.

One important step came in 1838, when Parley P. Pratt published one of his early defenses of Mormon doctrine. This interesting document included the first printed description in Mormon sources of an anthropomorphic, corporeal God. “We worship a God,” wrote Pratt, “who has both body and parts: who has eyes, mouth and ears, and who speaks when he pleases, to whom he pleases, and sends them where he pleases.”²³ This was quickly followed by other such statements. Samuel Bennett’s

1840 defense of Mormonism decried the notion that God could not be seen by man and declared that “he hath in a multitude of instances shown himself to the children of men (chosen witnesses), in different ages of the world, and especially in these last days hath his bodily presence been manifested, and his voice hath sounded in the ear of mortal man, without consuming him. . . . To say that it was the *similitude*—*figurative, metaphorical*, etc., is nothing but an evasion.”²⁴

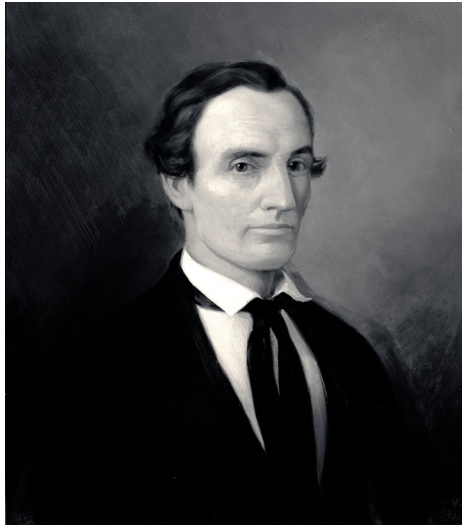
The idea that God showed himself to certain chosen witnesses foreshadowed frequent Mormon statements in later years that the purpose of the First Vision was to establish a testator for his existence and nature. That same year, Orson Pratt published the first printed account of the vision of Scotland, and two years later, three more accounts, including Joseph Smith’s, appeared in print. In 1843 Joseph Smith declared unequivocally that “the Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also” (D&C 130:22), and a year later he preached his most famous sermon on the doctrine of God that said, in part, “It is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with Him as one man converses with another, and that He was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ Himself did.”²⁵

The revolutionary implications of that statement for Mormon doctrine were tremendous, and it helped provide the framework for many additional doctrinal innovations. The 1835 teachings about God did not make such knowledge a necessity of faith, but in the 1840s it became fundamental to the faith.

None of this provides any conclusive reason why Joseph Smith withheld the vision from the public eye until 1840, though another bit of curious circumstantial evidence suggests that withholding the account was so deliberate by Joseph Smith that in 1834 he actually intervened to prevent it from being printed.

The first published history of the Church was in a series of letters by Oliver Cowdery printed in the *Messenger and Advocate* in 1834–35. In the third letter, Cowdery told of Joseph Smith’s initial quest for religious truth, including the religious revival and the young man’s desire to know which church was right. The story was told in terms strikingly similar to those used by Joseph Smith in his accounts of the First Vision. Cowdery even said that it took place in the thirteenth year of Joseph’s life. (In Joseph Smith’s 1832 account, he said his quest began when he was twelve and continued until he was fifteen, while in the 1838 account he said he was in his “fifteenth year” when the vision occurred.) Elements of both the 1832 and 1838 accounts of religious turmoil before the vision can be seen in Cowdery’s letter, and he promised to continue the history in the next letter.

When the next letter was printed, however, Cowdery did not proceed with the vision story but rather made an amazing self-correction by asserting that he had made a mistake on the date of the revival. It should have been the seventeenth year of Joseph’s life, he said, “which would bring the date down to the year 1823.” Then, without further reference to the religious excitement, he proceeded with the account of the visitation of Moroni. One of two things had happened. Either Oliver Cowdery had made an honest mistake in dating or, upon reflection or instruction, he had decided it inappropriate to tell the story of the vision and simply used this device to get on to the next important episode. What argues convincingly for the possibility that he originally intended to recount the vision is that the third letter contains material remarkably similar to Joseph Smith’s own written introductions to that sacred event. Could it be that Joseph had his personal reasons for not wanting the story circulated at the time and so simply instructed Oliver Cowdery not to print it? We will never know, but in light of what has been said earlier, such a conclusion seems logical.²⁶ Joseph



Oliver Cowdery published the first history of the Church in a series of letters in the Messenger and Advocate in 1834–35. (Oliver Cowdery portrait, Lewis A. Ramsey, Courtesy of Church History Museum)

finally decided to publish it himself, he wrote in 1838, in order to “disabuse the public mind, and put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts.”²⁷

It is worth noting that Joseph Smith himself never used the First Vision to illustrate his own expanded teachings about God. It appears, in fact, that he seldom referred to it at all, except in private conversation, even after it was published. But the fact that it *was* published provided a ready tool that his followers would later use in every conceivable way to teach about the God that he defined for them in Nauvoo. With the opportunity finally there, it may seem surprising that more Mormon writers did not rush in with enthusiasm between 1840 and 1880 to use the vision as a proof text for Mormon doctrine. But they did not. Only a few, in fact, referred to it at all during those forty years.

One reason for not using the First Vision then may have been that the first generation of Mormon theologians placed so much emphasis on the idea that the Restoration of the gospel began when the angel Moroni delivered the Book of Mormon. This event, after all, was depicted from the beginning as fulfilling the prophecy in Revelation 14:6, where John declared: “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth.” Even Orson Pratt, who first published the vision in 1840 and was one of the most meticulous of the early Church leaders in his effort to systematize doctrine, continued to emphasize the idea that the Restoration was inaugurated by the *angel*. In an 1848 tract, he asked the question “In what manner does Joseph Smith declare that a dispensation of the gospel was committed unto him?” His answer was that Joseph Smith testified of the visit of an angel of God and that this claim was in fulfillment of biblical prophecy: “Though Mr. Smith had taught a perfect doctrine, yet if he had testified that this doctrine was not restored by an angel, all would at once have known him to be an imposter. . . . John testifies that when the everlasting gospel is restored to the earth it shall be by an *angel*. Mr. Smith testifies that it was restored by an *angel*, and in no other way. *This is another presumptive evidence that he was sent of God.*”²⁸ Since much, if not most, of this early doctrinal material was published in works intended for non-Mormon consumption, it may be that the emphasis continued to be placed on the angel and the Book of Mormon because they fulfilled biblical prophecy, while the First Vision took a backseat in the literature only because it did not fulfill the prophecy.

There were exceptions to this pattern of emphasis, but they were in literature designed more specifically for the Saints. In 1849, Orson Pratt referred briefly to the vision in a *Millennial Star* article to demonstrate that the Father and the Son were two distinct persons—the first such doctrinal use of the First Vision

we have discovered so far.²⁹ Then in 1851, Willard Richards published the *Pearl of Great Price* that contained, as he said, several items that had been published earlier but, due to limited circulation of Church journals, were “comparatively unknown at present.” Among these was Joseph Smith’s 1838 account of the First Vision, and it is significant that the publication was intended specifically for believers and not, the editor said, “as a pioneer of faith among unbelievers.” But though the vision was becoming more widely known among the Saints, its use would still be limited. Even *Key to the Science of Theology*, published by Orson Pratt’s brother Parley in 1855, completely ignored the vision in its extensive treatment of the Godhead. When Willard Richards published his *Compendium of the Faith and Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* in 1857, he also failed to use the vision as a proof text for the nature of God. He used it only as an illustration in his section on the “Names, Titles and Characters” given to Jesus.

The major use made of the vision over the next several years was simply to illustrate, for the benefit of the Saints, the initial historic authority and calling of Joseph Smith. This is the way the founding prophet himself used his theophany, and this was the use that continued until after the death of Brigham Young.³⁰ Orson Pratt was the major purveyor of the story, but even he did not enlarge upon it for any great doctrinal purposes.³¹

Then in the 1880s appeared a second generation of Church writers and theologians. When Orson Pratt died in 1881, only two General Authorities remained alive and in the Church who had been ordained to office during the lifetime of Joseph Smith: John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff. Many Saints remained alive who had known the Prophet, but there were more in the Church who had never seen him, including many second- and third-generation Mormons. These people, moreover, were going through a period of intensive religious crisis, as new federal laws

stepped up antipolygamy prosecution and seemed to challenge the very existence of the Church. The time was ready-made for the outpouring of a new identity with the founding prophet—new reminders to the Saints of what their heritage really was and of what Joseph Smith’s testimony really meant to them personally. The First Vision was a natural tool for such a purpose, and a new generation of writers could hardly fail to use it.

Beautifully symbolic of this new direction was the fact that it seemed to begin with art and music—certainly among the most effective means of popularizing an idea. In 1869, C. C. A. Christensen, a Danish convert and immigrant to Utah, began to paint significant incidents from Mormon history onto large canvases. In 1878, he sewed together the first group of eight paintings, rolled them on a long wooden pole, and began touring Utah, giving illustrated lectures on the history of the Church.³² Among these was a painting of the First Vision, and among those who listened to the artist was young George Manwaring, who eventually became the author of several well-known Mormon hymns. Manwaring was inspired by the painting, and it was not long before he wrote “Joseph Smith’s First Prayer.” Set to music composed by Adam Craik Smyth, it appeared in the *Deseret Sunday School Union Music Book* in 1884 and ever since has been one of Mormonism’s most well-loved hymns.³³ The title was later changed to “Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning.” 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.

The printed word and public sermons, meanwhile, began to play an increasingly significant role. George Q. Cannon was a sort of transition figure between first- and second-generation Mormon writers, and as early as 1880, he suggested that the vision could be used to teach children about the nature of their

Creator.³⁴ In 1883, he gave one of the first sermons to expand upon the vision by using it to demonstrate the need to restore a true knowledge of God. This, his sermon implied, was in fact the major purpose for the vision, and therein Cannon formulated the essential approach to the meaning of the vision that would be used in the Church for at least the next one hundred years. “The first that we knew concerning God,” he said, “was through the testimony of the Prophet Joseph. Even the personality of God was doubted.” He then stated what has become a standard Mormon perception of the world’s view of God, “that His center was nowhere, and His circumference was everywhere. . . . Even ministers of religion could not conceive of the true idea.” This led to his announcement of the grand purpose of the vision:

But all this was swept away in one moment by the appearance of the Almighty Himself—by the appearance of God, the Father, and His Son Jesus Christ, to the boy Joseph. . . . In one moment all this darkness disappeared, and once more there was a man found on the earth, embodied in the flesh, who had seen God, who had seen Jesus, and who could describe the personality of both. Faith was again restored to the earth, the true faith and the true knowledge concerning our Creator. . . . This revelation dissipated all misconceptions and all false ideas, and removed the uncertainty that had existed respecting these matters. The Father came accompanied by the Son, thus showing that there were two personages of the Godhead, two presiding personages whom we worship and to whom we look, the one the Father, and the other the Son. Joseph saw that the Father had a form; that He had a head; that He had arms; that He had limbs; that He had feet; that He had a face and a tongue with which to express His thoughts; for He said unto Joseph: “This is my beloved Son”—pointing to the Son—“hear Him.”

Now, it was meant that this knowledge should be restored first of all. It seems so, at least, from the fact that God Himself came; it seems that the knowledge had to be restored as the basis for all true

faith to be built upon. There can be no faith that is not built upon a true conception of God our Father. Therefore, before even angels came, He came himself, accompanied by His Son, and revealed Himself once more to man upon the earth.³⁵

The metamorphosis was complete: from the vision experience itself in 1820, to Joseph Smith's decision not to publicize it, through the 1830s when the Saints knew little or nothing about it, through the 1840s when the vision was told and Joseph Smith's expanded concept of God was made known to the Saints, through a generation when it was used primarily to establish Joseph Smith's prophetic authority, to the beginning of a period in which both the new concept of God and the vision would be considered central to the faith.

In a way, George Q. Cannon was a logical person to complete that metamorphosis. Converted in England in 1840, he migrated to Nauvoo in 1843 and was therefore acquainted with Joseph Smith for only a year before the Prophet's death. The First Vision had just become a part of Mormon literature when Cannon was converted, and he probably was not fully sensitive to the fact that Saints for at least a decade had exercised faith without knowing of either the new definition of Deity or the vision that illustrated it. He became an Apostle, a member of the First Presidency of the Church, superintendent of the Sunday School, and editor of the *Juvenile Instructor*, all of which put him in a position of authority capable of exercising important influence on Mormon thought.

Cannon and others continued to use the First Vision for its new didactic purposes, and this seemed to open the door for seeing in its proofs or demonstrations of multitudinous other ideas. Cannon even saw it as proof that Darwin was wrong. Every Latter-day Saint, he said, must believe the concept of God taught by Joseph's vision and "if this is so, where is there room found for believing in Darwin's theory?"³⁶

From there, the story of the First Vision as a fundamental theme in the presentation of Mormon doctrine only expanded upon the pattern established by the artists, preachers, and writers of the 1880s. Brigham H. Roberts, the first important systematizer of Mormon thought after the death of the Pratts, helped standardize the approach in print by augmenting what Cannon had begun. In his *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (1893), Roberts listed five reasons why the vision was of “vast importance”: (1) it revealed that God had “both body and parts, that he was in the form of a man, or, rather, that man had been made in his image”; (2) it proved that the Father and the Son are distinct persons and that the oneness of the Godhead spoken of in the scriptures is a oneness of purpose; (3) “it swept away the rubbish of human dogma and tradition” by announcing that none of the churches of Joseph’s day were acknowledged by God; (4) it showed, contrary to the claims of the Christian world, that revelation had not ceased; and (5) it created a witness for God on the earth, thus laying the foundation for faith.³⁷ These themes were repeated in later writings by Roberts³⁸ and eventually became the standard for Church lesson manuals and other publications. “There is nothing in our doctrine of Deity today—but what was germinally present in that first great revelation,” Roberts declared in 1903,³⁹ and the new way of using the vision would amply demonstrate this.

The vision and its attendant uses quickly began to appear in lesson manuals, augmenting the Mormon awareness of its transcendent importance. In 1899, the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association used it to demonstrate that it had ushered in the “Dispensation of the Fulness of Times.”⁴⁰ The vision was thus replacing the angel in Mormon thought as the implementing factor in the Restoration. Nephi Anderson’s history of the Church for young people (1900) used the vision in exactly the same way as Roberts’s *Ecclesiastical History*.⁴¹ When

the first priesthood manuals were printed in 1909, the priests, elders, and high priests all had lessons on the vision. In these and other manuals, it was used specifically to teach certain doctrinal concepts of God as well as give the Saints important spiritual direction. A history written by John Henry Evans in 1905 and used extensively by the Sunday School declared that the vision “will some day be generally regarded as the most important event in the history of the world, excepting only the revelation of Godhood in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴² The vision was thus formulating not only historical perceptions but prophetic images as well.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the First Vision also took a permanent place in the missionary literature of the Church. It had been there before, beginning with Orson Pratt’s *Remarkable Visions* in 1840, but somewhere around 1910, the pamphlet “Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story” was published as a separate tract, and it has remained in print ever since as one of the Church’s major missionary tools.

There were other things happening that would enhance the vision in the Mormon mind. More artistic representations, as Richard Oman has shown,⁴³ were emerging. The Sacred Grove was acquired by the Church in this period, and pilgrimages to the grove became sacred experiences for many Mormons. No one knew the spot where the vision occurred—or even if the trees left standing when the grove was purchased were in the same part of the original grove where Joseph went to pray—but none of that was really important. The grove became the visible symbol of the theophany that inaugurated the Restoration of all things, and from it the visiting Saints would gain spiritual sustenance and greater faith in the reality of the vision itself.⁴⁴

In 1920, the centennial anniversary of the vision, the celebration was a far cry from the almost total lack of reference to it just fifty years earlier. The Mutual Improvement Associations

issued a special commemorative pamphlet,⁴⁵ the vision was memorialized in music, verse, and dramatic representations, and the Church's official publication, the *Improvement Era*, devoted almost the entire April issue to that event. The new emphasis was a fitting symbol of what had happened.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, belief in the First Vision was fundamental to the faith of the Latter-day Saints. J. Reuben Clark Jr., a member of the First Presidency, probably captured best its expanded meaning for the Saints when he told religious educators in 1938 that the second of two essentials to which Mormon teachers must "give full faith" was "that the Father and the Son actually and in truth and very deed appeared to the Prophet Joseph in a vision in the woods," together with all that this and the other visions and revelations Joseph Smith received implied. The reality of the vision was at the center of the whole concept of the Restoration, and, declared President Clark, "no teacher who does not have a real testimony . . . of the divine mission of Joseph Smith—including in all its reality the First Vision—has any place in the Church school system."⁴⁶ When another General Authority declared in 1973 that "the First Vision is the very foundation of this Church, and it is my conviction that each member of this Church performs his duty in direct relation to his personal testimony and faith in the First Vision,"⁴⁷ he was only reflecting the culmination of the emergence of the vision as a Mormon fundamental.

As they began to use Joseph Smith's first religious experience for various instructional purposes, Mormon teachers and writers were also creating certain secondary but highly significant historical perceptions in the minds of the Latter-day Saints. There was no intent to distort or mislead, but what happened was only one example of a very natural intellectual process that helps explain the emergence of at least some basic community perceptions. It seems to be a truism that

whenever great events take place, second- and third-generation expounders tend to build a kind of mythology around them by presuming corollary historical interpretations that often have little basis in fact. In this case, the deepening awareness of the vision, along with a growing community sensitivity for how essential it was to Mormon faith and doctrine, created an atmosphere in which other historical inferences could easily be drawn. These included the ideas that (1) over the centuries, considerable “rubbish concerning religion” had accumulated that only revelation could correct; (2) most, if not all, Christians believed in the traditional Trinitarian concept of God; (3) the Christian world denied the concept of continuing revelation; (4) Joseph Smith told the story of his vision widely; and (5) he continued to be persecuted or publicly ridiculed for it, even to the time of his death. Such historical interpretation, much of it misleading, soon dominated popular Mormon thought. The challenge for individual believers, including Mormon historians, would be to separate the essential truths of the vision experience from corollaries that may not be so essential to the faith.

Once the vision assumed its predominant place in Mormon writing and preaching, it became much more than Joseph Smith’s personal experience—it became a shared community experience. Every Mormon and every prospective convert was urged to pray for his or her own testimony of its reality—in effect, to seek a personal theophany by becoming one with Joseph in the grove. Latter-day Saints did not forget the importance of the angel Moroni, but gradually the First Vision took precedence over the visit of the angel as the event that ushered in the Restoration of the gospel. It was only a short step from there to the expanded use of the vision as a teaching device whenever the doctrine of God or the principle of revelation played any part in the discussion. As the years passed, the

list of lessons, truths, principles, and historical interpretations taught or illustrated by the vision grew longer. Each writer or preacher saw it as fundamental, but each also had his or her own private insight into what it could illustrate or portray. A partial list of what people have said since 1880 about what the First Vision teaches, how it may be used, or why it is significant would include at least the following:

1. The Father and the Son are two distinct “person-ages alike in form, substance, and glory,” God the Father has a physical body with all the parts possessed by man, and the Father and the Son look exactly alike.⁴⁸
2. Joseph Smith had priesthood authority when he had his vision, for no man can see the face of the Father and live unless he has the priesthood. He had received this priesthood before the world was made.⁴⁹
3. The traditions of men respecting God were false, but “all this was swept away in one moment” by the appearance of the Father and the Son, and “faith was again restored to the earth, the true faith and the true knowledge concerning our Creator.” The world has thus profited as vagueness, doubt, and uncertainty have been eliminated.⁵⁰
4. Joseph Smith “startled the world. It stood aghast at the statement which he made, and the testimony which he bore” of having seen God.⁵¹
5. Since a true knowledge of God did not exist in 1820, the purpose of the vision was so that God “might have a testator upon the earth.”⁵²

6. Through the testimony of the testator, people would be educated in a correct manner so that they would “cease to worship the bodiless, immaterial, unnatural, nonentity, and be turned to the worship of the living—and true God.”⁵³
7. Revelation had not ceased, or, as some writers put it, “the Heavens were no longer brass.”⁵⁴
8. The vision is evidence of God’s existence, not just proof of his personality.⁵⁵
9. The vision ushered in the “Dispensation of the Fulness of Times.”⁵⁶
10. The vision impeded the progress of Satan.⁵⁷
11. Joseph Smith learned that God and Christ sympathized with him and loved him.⁵⁸ By implication, this meant they loved all the rest of God’s children, too.
12. The vision was the greatest declaration Joseph Smith ever made to the world.⁵⁹
13. As a result of the vision, there lived in 1820 “one person who knew that the word of the Creator, ‘Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness,’ had a meaning more than in metaphor.”⁶⁰
14. “It shows that the Son is appointed by the Father to direct in the affairs of this world.”⁶¹
15. It shows that God grants blessings to those who seek.⁶²
16. God answers prayers in ways often unlooked for.⁶³

17. The vision opened the way for the dead as well as the living to hear the gospel.⁶⁴
18. The fact of the Great Apostasy was first announced in this vision.⁶⁵
19. It established “the fact that God can and will speak to man, whenever He chooses so to do, in any age.”⁶⁶
20. Satan is always ready to stop the Lord’s work.⁶⁷
21. God has almost invariably selected young boys for his special messengers, and the vision holds true to this pattern.⁶⁸
22. Joseph Smith’s prayer in the grove was “the first real faith cry that had gone up from this cold, superstitious world since the dense darkness of the middle ages had driven truth from the altar and living belief from the human heart. It marked the beginning of an epoch. It was the beginning of the real modern spiritual renaissance.”⁶⁹
23. “When this boy walked out of that sacred grove, that day, he was greater than the most learned theologians and profoundest philosophers.”⁷⁰
24. The vision was at once the most complete revelation of the powers of both heaven and hell.⁷¹
25. The vision is evidence of Joseph Smith’s divine mission.⁷²
26. The Church is a necessary result of the vision.⁷³
27. The vision is evidence for the Resurrection.⁷⁴
28. Knowledge gained from the vision is saving knowledge for mankind.⁷⁵

In 1980, the children of the Primary organization presented a special sesquicentennial program in every ward and branch of the Church. Here was a perfect example of how deeply the First Vision had become rooted in the conscience of the Mormon community. The theme of the presentation was “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God”—the quotation from James 1:5 that led Joseph Smith to the grove 160 years before. The program portrayed a father and a mother talking to their children about the Restoration of the gospel, and the first event discussed was Joseph Smith’s First Vision. As the mother told of Joseph going into the grove, a children’s chorus sang “Oh, How Lovely was the Morning.” As the story progressed, the father asked, “What great truths about our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ did Joseph Smith learn from this divine appearance?” The answers, coming from three different children, were “He learned that God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, are two separate beings”; “Joseph got to see what Heavenly Father and Jesus really looked like”; and “Joseph learned that our heavenly Father hears and answers our prayers.”⁷⁶

George Q. Cannon’s merest suggestion in 1880 that the vision could be used to teach certain truths to children was more than fulfilled in the next hundred years. The vision was no longer just Joseph Smith’s personal experience, nor was it rehearsed simply to establish the initial prophetic authority of the founder of the Church. In the twentieth century, it became a shared community experience—one that every Mormon must respond to personally, and one that every teacher could use appropriately to verify a multitude of doctrines and historical concepts. It was indeed not just Joseph Smith’s theophany, but the great Mormon theophany.

NOTES

The author expresses appreciation for the research assistance of Leonard Grover.

1. I asked this question, along with others, in an article printed over forty years ago. See James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (Autumn 1966): 28–45. The other questions raised there have been answered rather fully by me and other students, but this one was treated only briefly and perfunctorily. It has continued to intrigue me, and this essay is an attempt to put the issue in a more complete and interpretive framework than I had time to do or was capable of doing then. See also Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971); Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 275–94; Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 373–404; James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision: What Do We Learn from Them?," *Improvement Era*, April 1970, 4–13; Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 60–81; Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 82–93.

2. This paper is based on a study of *contemporary* sources rather than reminiscences, which could have been affected by the tendency of the writers to read their current understanding into past experiences. There are a few reminiscences, written many years after the events discussed here, that, if accurate, would at least partially negate some of the ideas presented here. The reminiscences of Edward Stevenson, for example, suggest that Joseph Smith was publicly telling the story of his First Vision in great detail in the early 1830s. The reminiscence was written, however, some fifty years later, and on this issue it runs directly counter to all the available contemporary evidence. No one questions the personal integrity of Stevenson, but it is likely that after fifty years, his memory played tricks on him by combining things he heard in one period with things he heard at other times. Another possibility is that he heard Joseph relate the account privately, to a select group, even

though he was not proclaiming it publicly. See Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet, and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: printed by author, 1893), 4.

3. *A Book of Commandments for the Governance of the Church of Christ* (Zion [Independence, MO]: W. W. Phelps, 1833), 24:6–7. Cf. D&C 20:5–8. See also D&C 1:17.

4. *Palmyra Reflector*, February 14, 1831.

5. Such statements leave the impression that all of the Prophet's persecution was based largely on his telling of the vision. In 1906, for example, one Church leader even attributed Joseph Smith's death to his testimony of the vision: "The greatest crime that Joseph Smith was guilty of 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. . . . Joseph Smith declared that it was true. He suffered persecution all the days of his life on 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." Joseph F. Smith, "Two Sermons by President Joseph F. Smith," Sermon Tract No. 1 (published by the Southern States Mission, Chattanooga, TN, 1906).

6. See Kenneth W. Godfrey, "Causes of Mormon Non-Mormon Conflict in Hancock County, Illinois, 1839–1846" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1967), for a discussion of causes for persecution. See also Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy: The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975). Even Joseph Smith's own account of persecution related to the vision refers specifically to the period immediately after it happened—that is, around 1820. Neither that nor his extended history, edited in collaboration with some of his closest associates, suggests any later criticism specifically because of the vision story. See Joseph Smith—History 1:22–26. The extended history became *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period 1: Joseph Smith*, ed. B. H.

Roberts, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902–12). For details regarding the authenticity of this history, see Dean C. Jessee, “The Reliability of Joseph Smith’s History,” *Journal of Mormon History* 3 (1976): 23–46; and “The Writing of Joseph Smith’s History,” *BYU Studies* 9 (Spring 1971): 439–73.

7. Professor Peter L. Crawley has developed this idea fully in an unpublished manuscript currently under revision. Copy in possession of author.

8. This led the editors (Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams) to write in the preface: “There may be an aversion in the minds of some against receiving anything purporting to be articles of religious faith, in consequence of there being so many now extant; but if men believe a system, and profess that it was given by inspiration, certainly the more intelligibly they can present it, the better. It does not make a principle untrue to *print* it, neither does it make it true not to print it.” *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter-day Saints* (Kirtland, OH: F. G. Williams, 1835), 111.

9. *History of the Church*, 5:215.

10. “I did not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks too much like the Methodist, and not like the Latter-day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be asked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammelled. It does not prove that a man is not a good man because he errs in doctrine.” *History of the Church*, 5:340.

11. Thomas G. Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” *Sunstone* 22 (July–August 1980): 24–33. See also James B. Allen, “Line Upon Line,” *Ensign*, July 1979, 32–39.

12. Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New York: Image Books, 1975), 1:476.

13. As quoted in Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 479–80.

14. The sermon is reproduced in H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, eds., *American Christianity: An*

Historical Interpretation, with Representative Documents (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 1:493–502; see especially 496.

15. The sermons of Charles G. Finney, for example, show no particular concern with defining the nature of God, but his emphasis on the *sonship* of Christ clearly suggests that he thought of the Son as distinct from the Father. See Charles G. Finney, *Sermons on Gospel Themes* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1876).

16. Henry Ware Jr., *The Personality of Deity* (Boston: James Munroe, 1838), 7. This is a printed version of a sermon preached in the chapel of Harvard University, September 23, 1838.

17. Book of Mormon, 1830 ed., 25, line 3. Cf. with present 1 Nephi 11:18.

18. Book of Mormon, 1830 ed., 25, line 10. Cf. with present 1 Nephi 11:21.

19. Book of Mormon, 1830 ed., 26, line 9. Cf. with present 1 Nephi 11:32.

20. Book of Mormon, 1830 ed., 32, line 10. Cf. with present 1 Nephi 13:40.

21. "Lectures on Faith," bound with 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, 52–53.

22. Truman Coe, "Mormonism," letter in the *Ohio Observer*, August 11, 1836, as reproduced by Milton V. Backman Jr., "Truman Coe's 1836 Description of Mormonism," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 347–55. It is important to note that just because an anti-Mormon charged in derision that the Mormons believed in this kind of God does not prove that this is what they really believed. Coe and other anti-Mormon writers frequently made charges that were either distorted or downright untrue.

23. 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.

24. 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 & Guilpert, 1840), 11.

25. From the famous King Follett funeral discourse, available in several places with minor variations but most readily available in *History of the Church*, 6:305. We can only speculate what impact either this new doctrine of God or the First Vision would have had if they had been publicly announced in the 1830s. I suspect they would have had little, if any, effect so far as conversions and loyalty to the Church are concerned. When they were finally announced, most Saints were prepared to accept them along with everything else the Prophet taught—their confidence in Joseph Smith simply made it natural for them to accept whatever claims he made. When one English convert first read the vision in 1840, he simply remarked in his diary that he “felt it good.” See James B. Allen and Thomas G. Alexander, eds., *Manchester Mormons: The Journal of William Clayton, 1840 to 1842* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1974), 158.

26. Cowdery letters, published in *Messenger and Advocate*, December 1834 and February 1835. There are some additional problems in these accounts that could provide different kinds of speculation. In the first printing of the December 1834 issue, the dating we have identified above as thirteenth year was actually obscured in printing. It was set in roman numerals, but the “13” cannot clearly be made out. When the paper was reprinted in 1840, however, it was spelled out as “thirteenth.” However, in the next letter Cowdery said that he identified the time as the 15th year of Joseph’s age, and it should have been 17th. Another problem lies in the identifying of the religious reformation with the visit of a certain Reverend Lane in the area. The evidence for when this minister actually visited that vicinity is obscure. Richard L. Anderson discusses the problem of these letters in detail in his “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision.”

27. Joseph Smith—History 1:1.

28. Orson Pratt, *Divine Authority or the Question, Was Joseph Smith Sent of God?* (Liverpool: R. James, 1848), 4.

29. *Millennial Star*, October 15, 1849, 310.

30. Few books were published for the benefit of the Saints during this time, so the *Journal of Discourses* becomes our major guide to the period. At least one small book compiled for non-Mormons reproduced the Wentworth letter, which told of the vision. See George A. Smith, *The Rise, Progress and Travels of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Office, 1869).

31. In one case, he told the story and then used it to demonstrate the idea that God imparts knowledge only according to individual readiness and capacity, and in another he used it as proof of Joseph Smith's honesty, but there was no doctrinal elaboration of the kind seen so frequently in the Church today. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:354–55, 14:261–62.

32. See Carl Carmer, "A Panorama of Mormon Life," *Art in America*, May–June 1970, for details of the C. C. A. Christensen story.

33. See George D. Pyper, *Stories of Latter-day Saint Hymns: Their Authors and Composers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1939), 33–38.

34. Editorial, in *Juvenile Instructor*, July 15, 1880, 162.

35. George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:371–72.

36. *Juvenile Instructor*, June 15, 1883, 191.

37. B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1893), 307–8. In a footnote on page 307, Roberts seemed to anticipate the objection that even though Joseph said he saw two persons, he did not necessarily describe God in the way Mormons do and that therefore, the vision is not proof that God is like man. Roberts argued: "While the Prophet Joseph in describing this first great vision refers to the Lord and His Son Jesus Christ as two glorious personages without giving at that time any particular description of their persons, it is clear that they were in the form of men." Roberts then quoted the King Follett funeral discourse to prove the doctrine further.

38. See, for example, B. H. Roberts, *A New Witness for God* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1895), 171–74.

39. B. H. Roberts, *Mormon Doctrine of Deity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1903), viii.

40. General Board of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Associations, *Dispensation of the Fullness of Times* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1899), 23.

41. Nephi Anderson, *A Young Folks' History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1900), 16–17. Other histories for young people used the First Vision in a similar manner.

42. John Henry Evans, *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1905), 18.

43. Richard Oman is an art historian in the Arts and Sites Division of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in Salt Lake City. He has put together an impressive collection of slides showing various artistic representations of Joseph Smith's visions.

44. For some interesting comments on the Sacred Grove, see T. Edgar Lyon, "How Authentic are Mormon Historic Sites in Vermont and New York?," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 343–45.

45. General Boards of the Mutual Improvement Associations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *In Commemoration of the Divine Ushering in of the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times through Joseph Smith, the Prophet, In the Spring of 1820* (1920).

46. J. Reuben Clark Jr., *The Charted Course of the Church in Education* (address delivered at Brigham Young University Summer School, Aspen Grove, UT, August 8, 1938), 3, 7. The first of the two essential principles concerned the Atonement of Christ and all its implications.

47. Elder Robert L. Simpson, in *Conference Report*, October 1973, 102.

48. George Q. Cannon, in *Juvenile Instructor*, July 15, 1880, 162; and in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:372, 341.

49. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:29.

50. George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:371, 372.

51. George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:341. See also Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 286, in which Elder McConkie states that Joseph's

account of the vision rocked “the whole religious foundation of the Christian world.”

52. George Teasdale, in *Journal of Discourses*, 25:18.

53. *Juvenile Instructor*, November 1, 1884, 330.

54. George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888), 37. This phrase was picked up by Joseph Fielding Smith in *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1922), 41.

55. William Morton, *The Gospel Primer* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1897), 19.

56. See note 40. One orator grew highly elaborate on this point: “The vision was indeed the earthquake which dried up the rivers of unbelief, which started the fountains of truth and which shook the mountain from whose side the little stone rolled forth to accomplish its destiny of filling the whole earth with the Gospel of purity.” Alma O. Taylor, “The First Vision: An Address Delivered at the Speakers’ Contest, Y.M.M.I.A., Salt Lake Stake of Zion,” *Improvement Era*, July 1900, 686.

57. Taylor, “First Vision,” 686.

58. George Q. Cannon, *The Latter-day Prophet: History of Joseph Smith Written for Young People* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1900), 16.

59. Angus J. Cannon, *A Latter-day Prophet* (Independence, MO: Zion’s Printing and Publishing, n. d.), 5.

60. James E. Talmage, *The Story of Mormonism* (Liverpool: Millennial Star Office, 1907), 9.

61. General Authorities of the Church, *Priest’s Quorum Course of Study* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1909), 27.

62. General Authorities of the Church, *High Priest Course of Study* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1909), 45.

63. General Authorities of the Church, *History of the Gospel: High Priests Course of Study, 1910* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1910), 87.

64. General Authorities of the Church, *Divine Mission of the*

Savior, Priest's Quorum Course of Study for 1910 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1910), 90.

65. Osborne J. P. Widtsoe, *The Restoration* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1912), 18. Here, incidentally, is another case where enthusiasm for the messages of the vision created at least some historical misperceptions. The idea that there had been an apostasy from the ancient church of Christ was very prevalent in Joseph Smith's day, even before the vision.

66. Widtsoe, *Restoration*, 18.

67. General Authorities of the Church, *The Latter-day Prophet*, Course of Study for Deacons, 1918 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1918), 16.

68. J. M. Sjødahl, "Account of Joseph's First Vision Compared with Biblical Records of Divine Manifestations," *Improvement Era*, April 1920, 488–89.

69. Nephi Jensen, "Joseph Smith: An Oration," *Improvement Era*, April 1920, 556.

70. Jensen, "Joseph Smith," 556.

71. Melvin J. Ballard, "One Hundred Years Ago," *Improvement Era*, June 1920, 693.

72. John A. Widtsoe, *The Divine Mission of Joseph Smith* (Independence, MO: Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1926), 9.

73. Joseph F. Merrill, "Why the Mormon Church?" (address delivered over Radio Station KSL, May 22, 1927, printed broadside).

74. Heber C. Iverson, "The Soul's Reality and Resurrection," (address delivered over Radio Station KSL, April 22, 1928, broadside reprinted from *Deseret News*, April 28, 1928).

75. James E. Talmage, "The Unknown God" (address delivered over Radio Station KSL, January 27, 1929, printed in pamphlet form), 7.

76. *If Any of You Lack Wisdom, Let Him Ask of God*, 1980 Children's Sacrament Meeting Presentation (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), 4–6.