

CHAPTER SIX

JOSEPH SMITH AND ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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In a letter to his friend John Stuart, dated March 1, 1840, Abraham Lincoln wrote that Joseph Smith had recently passed through Springfield, Illinois. In a tantalizingly brief report, Lincoln told Stuart that “Speed [another close friend] says he wrote you what Jo. Smith said about you as he passed here. We will procure the names of some of his people here and send them to you before long.”¹ The nature of Joseph’s comment on Stuart can only be surmised. Joseph had spent the winter in Washington D.C., vainly seeking compensation for the Saints’ losses in Missouri in 1839. He was returning to Nauvoo in the early spring when he passed through Springfield. John Stuart was Lincoln’s law partner and a member of Illinois’s congressional delegation. The Illinois delegation had gone out of their way to assist Joseph and his legal counselor Elias Higbee in making their case in Washington. Likely Joseph was grateful to Stuart and said so in Springfield.²

The letter is a reminder that Smith and Lincoln resided in the same state for five years before Joseph’s death in 1844. In 1840 Lincoln was completing his third term in the state legislature, where he was the Whig floor leader. Joseph was recovering from the Mormons’ expulsion from Missouri and organizing a new gathering place in Illinois. The Prophet was a little over three years older than

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Lincoln, who had been born February 12, 1809. Though they probably never met face to face, the two men illustrate the possibilities for obscure men to reach great heights in the swarming confusion and institutional fluidity of antebellum America. Both were plungers and seekers, and both struggled to understand how God worked His will in human affairs.³ A comparison of their lives is one way to measure the accomplishments of each of these extraordinary men. Joseph, usually viewed within the Mormon context, may appear in a new light when brought onto a larger stage.

BEGINNINGS

Abraham Lincoln was the middle South and Joseph Smith was the Yankee version of back-country men who transcended their origins and went on to eminence and notoriety on the national scene. They took entirely different paths, Lincoln in law and politics and Joseph in religion and church leadership. Their religious beliefs stood at the opposite ends of the spectrum too. Lincoln did not believe in the redemption of Jesus Christ, was not known to pray, and attended church haphazardly. His God was an ominous presence who controlled events down to the finest detail but was beyond human influence. Joseph's God spoke to him, forgave him, and led His people like a kind, demanding father with ambitions for His children. Lincoln's deity was remote and impersonal, Joseph's intimate and involved.

The family histories of the two men followed roughly similar patterns. The first Lincolns immigrated from England to Massachusetts in 1637, just one year before Robert Smith, Joseph's first American ancestor, landed in Boston. Over the generations, the Lincolns migrated southward, first to New Jersey, then to Pennsylvania and Virginia. Probably because the Smiths stayed put in Topsfield, Massachusetts, while the Lincolns kept moving, none of the Lincolns achieved the eminence of Joseph's great-grandfather Samuel Smith, who was town meeting moderator and representative to the General Court. Lincoln's ancestors were plain farmers and planters, respectable but of no particular distinction.⁴

Despite the spatial separation and differences in stability and mobility, family patterns converged again with Lincoln's and Joseph's grandfathers. Their lives tracked so closely that one is inclined to think they followed a common pattern for this generation of

Americans. Lincoln's grandfather, also an Abraham Lincoln, moved west from Virginia to Jefferson County, Kentucky, in 1782, nine years before Joseph's grandfather Asael left coastal Massachusetts for Tunbridge, Vermont. The West was the way to go in the late eighteenth century. Abraham's son Thomas, the future president's father, then moved from farm to farm in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, just as Joseph Sr. moved seven times in fourteen years in Vermont and New Hampshire before settling in Manchester, New York. The narrow margin between success and failure in early American farming, combined with the plentitude of land, made frequent migration both a possibility and a necessity for families on the lower edge of the rural economy.

Both the Lincolns and the Smiths went through a decline in fortunes over their lifetimes. Thomas Lincoln at one time owned three farms. When he purchased more land, he paid in cash. But his circumstances steadily worsened as he moved from Kentucky to Indiana and then to Illinois. His Kentucky properties turned out to have precarious titles, and he sold them at a loss before moving to Indiana. There he farmed remote frontier lots with little access to markets and grew poorer and poorer. Similarly, Joseph Smith Sr., as a young man, owned a substantial farm and a store in Vermont and then lost both through a failed business venture. Both the Smiths and the Lincolns purchased land on credit late in life. The Lincolns did a little better at the end. They completed payment on half of their Indiana land and sold it for \$125 before they made their final move to Illinois in 1830. The Smiths lost their Manchester property when they could not meet the mortgage payment and thereafter were dependent on their children and friends. Both families were caught in the downward economic trend that ensnared many rural families—contrary to the American myth of ever-increasing prosperity.

The two families' ways of living were much the same. When the Lincolns moved to Indiana in 1816 (the same year the Smiths moved to Palmyra), eight people crowded into their rough-hewn cabin; a few years later, after contracting for a farm, the Smiths stuffed ten family members into their Manchester log house. Both Lincoln and Joseph cleared land and helped their fathers plant crops. Lincoln followed a horse along the furrows as he plowed; the Smiths probably

owned animals but not necessarily draft animals. They may have used hoes like the first settlers or borrowed oxen from the neighbors.⁵

CULTURE

Neither boy spent much time in school. Lincoln's stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston, who replaced Lincoln's deceased mother, Nancy Hanks, when he was ten, sent the two Lincoln children and her own three to school, but Lincoln had less than a year of sporadic instruction as a boy, probably about the same as Joseph. Of the two, Lincoln was the more avid learner. He could spell down anyone in the school and did all the writing and ciphering for the family while still a teenager. Later stories were told of his taking a book to the fields for reading while the horse rested at the end of a furrow. He did not have access to many books but read a few avidly—Weems's *Life of Washington*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Aesop's *Fables*, and the Bible. Joseph could have obtained books from the Manchester lending library or the Palmyra bookstores, but he had little interest. One early acquaintance said he read a few adventure stories, but he was not bookish. The family studied the Bible, and, like Lincoln, Joseph must have spent time with the scriptures. But according to Joseph's mother, her son did not share Lincoln's appetite for reading.⁶

Lincoln began to experiment with language early. While a teenager he composed a piece of doggerel for his copybook:

*Abraham Lincoln
his hand and pen
he will be good
but god knows When.*⁷

When he was about nineteen, he wrote a humorous account of his sister Sarah's wedding night in biblical language, titling it "The Chronicles of Reuben." This and other satirical sallies showed Lincoln's affinity for coarse, frontier humor and his interest in words. While living with his father, he spent time at the village store trading quips and developing a reputation as a teller of tales. The scraps of writing revealed his wish to hold on to those words and make them work better. In this way, he was far ahead of Joseph, who is not known to have written a word until he was in his twenties. Joseph's

wife said when she married him at age twenty-one he could not compose a decent letter. To the end of his life he made spelling errors.

Joseph's mind turned more to religious questions and the supernatural. Before he was thirteen, he was questioning the state of his soul and asking how he could find forgiveness. The babble of preaching in the burned-over district confused him and prevented him from enjoying a stable religion. He did not turn to books for his answers but to spiritual inquiries and prayer. Lincoln probably went to church with Thomas Lincoln, who joined the Pigeon Creek Baptist Church when Lincoln was fourteen, the very age when Joseph's questioning was reaching a crisis, but in Lincoln's case, exposure to his father's religion did not result in conversion or even faith. He did not ask God for help or come to any resolution in his soul. Sarah Bush Lincoln said that Abraham "had no particular religion—didn't think of that question at that time, if he ever did—He never talked about it."⁸ He would not even sing religious songs. He relied on his own reasoning and even tried to close down religious emotions. Joseph was awash in religious anxieties that he quieted through prayer.

Lincoln lived in an environment as electric with superstition and the supernatural as Joseph's, but he never took to folk magic. Joseph found a seerstone when he was sixteen or seventeen, which he used to find lost objects and help his father on treasure quests.⁹ Lincoln's rationality raised a wall against the supernatural searches of his neighbors. He never took an interest in the magical or yearned to get in touch with unseen powers. His adolescent mind went to books, while Joseph's was caught up in visions and seerstones. Lincoln's reason kept the supernatural at bay. His mind was not furnished with the treasure lore that awakened Joseph to the play of supernatural forces and the possibility of unseen worlds.

And yet religion did seep into Lincoln's mind. He wrote the words of an Isaac Watts hymn into his copybook, and as a boy he would parody Sunday sermons by repeating them "word for word" on a stump when back home after service, "mimacing the Style & tone of the old Baptist Preachers."¹⁰ Protestant language and thus Protestant thought shaped his fundamental categories of understanding. Through regular attendance at his father's and mother's Baptist church, Lincoln may have had more knowledge of religion than Joseph, whose parents did not regularly attend church. When

his mother, Lucy, joined the Presbyterians, Joseph Jr. stayed home with his father. Joseph possessed religious sensibilities that Lincoln lacked but had less exposure to doctrine and Christian culture.

PERSONAL GROWTH

Until he was twenty-two, Lincoln gave few signs of unusual ambition or particular genius. At age seventeen, he got a job helping an Ohio ferryman sixteen miles from his father's Spencer County, Indiana, farm. Two years later Lincoln constructed a flatboat with a friend and floated a load of farm produce down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans, where he experienced the excitement of the nation's most cosmopolitan city. But he returned only to sink once more into the dull routine of farm work and odd jobs. One biographer, Benjamin Thomas, says of this period that Lincoln "seemed to be drifting into the same unimaginative life of a pioneer farmer or hired hand that had become the lot of his father and those about him." Later Lincoln called himself "a piece of floating driftwood."¹¹

Lincoln's one daring step was to break free from his father's household. When, after a hard winter, Thomas Lincoln moved once more, this time to Coles County, Illinois, Abraham was not in the party. Instead, he made plans for another flatboat excursion to New Orleans with two friends. He got as far as St. Louis and then returned to New Salem, a village on the Sangamon River that they had visited on their way downstream. Lincoln had been offered a job as a storekeeper there, and, on reflection, he considered this a better opportunity than the New Orleans voyage.

In New Salem in 1831, Lincoln's ambition kicked in. For the next three years he turned himself into a politician headed for Whig party leadership and eventually the presidency. He began studying grammar and mathematics to improve his writing and thinking. His skill in frontier rhetoric and competence in storekeeping won the admiration of locals, who elected him captain of the militia. He was chosen postmaster, took up surveying, and began reading law. Gaining confidence and finding politics fascinating, he ran for the state legislature unsuccessfully in 1832, but then in 1834 he was elected. In three short years, from age twenty-two to twenty-five, he suddenly bloomed. A man who knew him well said Lincoln had "a strong

conviction that he was born for better things than then seemed likely or even possible."¹² That vision of himself took over in New Salem.

Joseph's adolescence had a different character than Lincoln's, but the years from age twenty-two to twenty-five were also his time of blossoming. Until 1827 when he turned twenty-two, Joseph had been a seeker who had actually done little. God and Christ had appeared to him, he had been visited by an angel, the grand mission to translate had been declared to him, and he was ready, but all was anticipation rather than accomplishment. He may even have been uncertain and confused about when he was to begin and how he was to go about his work. How was he, a barely literate boy, to translate? It must have seemed like a mysterious and forbidding task.

Then, as he turned twenty-two, the work began. He obtained the plates and the interpreters, and with Emma scribing at first and then Martin Harris, he started to dictate. After the loss of the first manuscript, he wrote the rebuke he received from the Lord, the first of the written revelations to comprise the Book of Commandments. For a year and a half, from the winter of 1828 to the summer of 1829, words poured from him in a flood. The bulk of the Book of Mormon was translated in three months: more than five hundred pages of sermons, prophecies, visions, wars, miracles, journeys, and admonitions. The young man who was not known to have read a book or preached a sermon produced a book full of sermons and theological declarations. In March 1830, three months after his twenty-fourth birthday, the Book of Mormon was published. A few weeks later, he organized a church with himself as the first elder. That summer he received the revelation of Moses that commenced the revision of the Bible. In the fall he dispatched missionaries to locate the site of the New Jerusalem where the City of Zion was to be built in preparation for the Lord's Second Coming. When he arrived in Kirtland, Ohio, a month after his twenty-fifth birthday, he could present himself as Joseph the Prophet with a string of accomplishments to support the claim.

The same three years in the life cycle, from twenty-two to twenty-five, launched the careers that would bring Lincoln and Joseph to their eminent positions in the political and religious histories of the nation. Lives that had been obscure, private, and in Lincoln's case unpromising, suddenly entered the public scene. James

Gordon Bennett, the bustling New York reporter who visited Palmyra in 1831, would write a report on Joseph that began, "You have heard of MORMONISM—who has not?"¹³ This was the time of emergence for both men. But there the similarities cease; from then on, the shape and character of their careers differed drastically.

Lincoln began his ascent at the bottom, as the American myth of personal progress required. He developed skills as a storekeeper, public speaker, surveyor, and lawyer, and then ran for office. He failed the first time but did not give up. On the next try he was elected. He ascended gradually as would be expected for one climbing a tall peak. Not so with Joseph. He burst onto the public scene with a masterpiece, the Book of Mormon, one of the world's most influential books. He made no preparations, did not attend school, did not experiment with smaller writings, and did not read in preparation. Under inspiration, he precipitously dictated a 584-page book. Then, without pause, he went on to the book of Moses and the heaven-daring task of revising the Holy Bible. Rather than ascending gradually, taking a few small steps at first, Joseph made a series of grand gestures, including the organization of a new church, which he said was the one true church among all others. The curve of his achievements, instead of rising gradually, ascended almost vertically in the first three years, making him prophet and seer from the beginning rather than as an accumulation over time. Instead of working his way up, Joseph catapulted into prominence.

The spirit and motive of the two emergences had a different cast, too. Lincoln was driven by ambition coupled with a thrilling sense of his own powers. In New Salem, he began to glimpse his own destiny and yearned to fulfill it. He took steps to acquire the skills, put himself forward for public office, and sought out promising friendships. He was ambitious in the best sense of the word, aggressively carving the path he wished to follow.

Joseph may have been ambitious, but that is not the impression left in his writings. He sought forgiveness and understanding, but he did not seek office or elevation. These came to him; in a sense, they were thrust upon him. Instead of being the product of diligence, talent, and calculation, Joseph's work was given to him. He sought help from God but always received more responsibilities than he bargained for. Asking at age seventeen if his sins were forgiven, he was

told he was to translate the Book of Mormon. He learned to look in a seerstone for lost objects and then was given a Urim and Thummim to translate reformed Egyptian. He asked which church was right and was told to organize a new one. The work kept inflating beyond his expectations. Everything he took up exceeded his initial projection. Rather than being driven by personal ambition, he worked under divine command.

CONFLICT

While taking divergent paths, Joseph and Lincoln passed through the same dark plain early in life. They both struggled with skepticism about the scriptures and the Christian religion. Lincoln's encounter is more fully documented and had a more lasting effect, but there is good evidence Joseph also had a bout with what was then called "infidelity." The term referred to a conglomerate of beliefs put forward by Thomas Paine in *The Age of Reason*, Ethan Allen in *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, David Hume in *On Miracles*, C. F. Volney in *Ruins of Civilizations*, and other works in a similar vein. The upshot of this complex body of writings was to throw the authenticity of the scriptures into question and to undermine belief in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of mankind. Some writers verged on atheism; others ended up with differing varieties of Deism that found God in nature rather than the Bible.

Both Lincoln and Joseph explored these ideas in informal discussion societies modeled roughly after Benjamin Franklin's Junto Society a century earlier. All around the country, ambitious young men gathered to read and talk with the aim of "improving" themselves. In these informal gatherings, they could try out ideas too scandalous for discussion in church or family. These small circles had been forming at various levels of society throughout the eighteenth century, and by the 1820s they had sprung up in tiny villages like Palmyra and New Salem among people with as little education as Joseph Smith and Abraham Lincoln. In Joseph's case, local printers, men in touch with wider currents of thought, formed a "juvenile debating club," which gathered in the red schoolhouse on Durfee Street to "solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics."¹⁴ In Lincoln's New Salem, intellectually oriented young

professionals-in-the-making got together to read their writings to each other.

Among his friends, Lincoln was able to express doubts that had probably been forming since attending church with Thomas Lincoln's Pigeon Creek Baptists. How much he read of infidel writings is not known, but he came to question the inspiration of the Bible and to reject the efficacy of Christ's redemption, just as if he had absorbed Thomas Paine. At the end of his wrestle with skepticism, however, Lincoln did not come out in the glowing sunshine of Paine's Deism. Paine doubted the Bible but had infinite faith in nature, which he thought bore constant witness to the benevolence and might of the Creator. The evidence of God's handiwork was everywhere, Paine thought, and it was the privilege and joy of mankind to contemplate nature's wonders. Lincoln found only determinism in nature—the iron law of necessary causes. The God that remained for him after the Bible, as one commentator has put it, was the Calvinist God of predestination and indifference to human wishes, without a redeeming Christ or a comforting Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Lincoln fused the scientific doctrine of necessity—that everything, even human thought, was caused and therefore predetermined—with the Calvinist principle of predestination. Lincoln's God was less the Creator of glorious nature than a distant Providence that ruled and determined all human affairs without visible concern for anyone's happiness or will.

Joseph passed through the rigors of skepticism without being scarred or frightened. He may have first encountered infidelity at the Palmyra debating society. Oliver Cowdery spoke of a time when Joseph questioned the existence of God.¹⁶ The sure evidence that he had encountered skepticism was the passage in his 1832 history about nature testifying to God's existence. The sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, and man "walking forth upon the face of the earth in majesty . . . all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power."¹⁷ The sentiments are pure Deism and would have been recognized by anyone who had stood up to infidelity as Lincoln and Joseph did. Later the men in Zion's Camp were surprised at how well Joseph grasped the case for skepticism. One Sunday when the marchers were trying to disguise their Mormon identity before a crowd of curious onlookers, Joseph spoke for an

hour pretending to be a “liberal free-thinker.” According to George A. Smith, “Those present remarked that he was one of the greatest reasoners they ever heard.”¹⁸

Joseph quickly passed beyond Deism, overcome by his “marvelous experience,” as he called it in the 1832 history.¹⁹ The presence of heavenly angels left no room for further doubt. But the skeptical arguments remained in the background of his mind. The “constitution” of the church, written soon after the organization, named the overcoming doubts about the Bible as one purpose of Joseph’s revelations. The Book of Mormon, the revelation said, proved to the world “that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work” (D&C 20:11).

AMERICA AND GOD

Lincoln thus entered adult life with belief in a God as a controlling will, standing over all existence, determining every outcome but showing no empathy or compassion. Joseph, on the other hand, had experienced the presence of a speaking God. Joseph’s God mingled His will with human exertion, had plans for the human race, and responded to questions and desires. He punished and rewarded, blessed and withheld, rebuked and revealed. Joseph’s God was as immanent as any God in nineteenth-century religion.

Lincoln’s idea for America was, not surprisingly, empty of religious purpose. He did not believe that the nation could please the withdrawn Calvinist Being who ruled everything. God did not instruct the nation in how to conduct itself. Although He controlled everything that transpired, He did not necessarily manifest Himself in any government, house of worship, religious creed, body of doctrine, or righteous work. He was above all human striving and belief. A righteous God, He brought the nation to righteousness in His own way and in His own time.

Lincoln’s chief hope for the nation was to establish a justice that would allow human beings to thrive in purely worldly terms. He embraced Whig hopes for a prosperous, industrious people who would labor and be rewarded for their work. He wanted to fashion an economy where workers would not be drawn into the downward spiral of poverty that had trapped Thomas Lincoln. He believed that the development of the market economy would enable an individual

to rise from hired laborer to independent worker to employer—in a factory, store, or farm. The happiness of extracting oneself from the mire of poverty was the best that Lincoln hoped for Americans. He hated slavery for denying captive workers the benefits of their own labor. “Unrequited toil” was the sin of slavery.²⁰ He feared that certain forms of factory work would enslave white laborers in the same injustice. He had a Hamiltonian vision of a people fulfilling themselves through creative and rewarded labor. A properly functioning, justly organized market economy was for Lincoln the essence of the good society.

Joseph’s revelations passed judgment on the market economy and found it wanting. One revelation said quite radically that men were to be equal in earthly property that they might be equal in heavenly goods (see D&C 78:5–6). The world lay in sin because of gross economic inequality (see D&C 49:20). One revelation proposed a system of consecrating property and redistributing it to assure work and the elimination of poverty (see D&C 42:30–39). But these egalitarian principles were not ones Joseph would die for. He attempted a thorough consecration of property in Jackson County, Missouri, from 1831 through 1833; partially in Far West, Missouri, in 1838; and not at all in Nauvoo, Illinois, after its settlement in 1839. Equality of property was an ideal rather than a functioning necessity. If the poor could be cared for through capitalist enterprise, no objections would be raised. In Nauvoo, he encouraged the men of property to set up mills to employ the poor and said nothing about redistributing the profits. His main concern was to provide employment and a comfortable life for all his people.

Joseph’s greater concern was for the Saints’ spiritual education. He once wrote that nothing could prevent divine knowledge from pouring from heaven on the heads of the Latter-day Saints (see D&C 121:33). In his plat for the original City of Zion, he placed twenty-four temples at the center, saying nothing about shops, factories, or theaters. The dominant structure in Nauvoo was its huge temple, far out of proportion to the means of the people and any other architecture. Joseph put spiritual instruction above all other values in his city, believing that virtue would flow from this knowledge. By the end of his life, he hoped to cover the country with such cities and temples. His vision of America was a nation of Zion cities,

prosperous, to be sure, but also righteous and divinely instructed. He wanted his people to grow in divine intelligence by contemplating the words of God in scripture and reading from all good books on every possible topic. This young man who may never have read a book before age twenty, and who had minimal schooling, made education and divine instruction the premier value of his Zion cities.

THEODICY

Of the two men, Joseph seems to be the happy warrior filled with bright hopes and spiritual desires, and Lincoln the glum materialist who had no other dream than to let Americans get rich. At first glance, it appears that Lincoln thought it was hopeless to strive for God because God was out of reach. But this abbreviated caricature does not do him justice, nor is it right to think of Joseph as invariably optimistic and cheerful. Lincoln's spiritual depths were plumbed in the tragedy of the Civil War, and after the Missouri expulsion, a despairing and angry Joseph wondered if God had failed him.

In Lincoln's thinking, the Civil War was proof of God's implacability. Why was the war prolonged while hundreds of thousands died? Justice was clearly on the side of the North; surely a fight against slavery was a battle for the good. He did believe it was God's will that government of the people, by the people, and for the people should be established on the earth and that slavery should end. Why, then, did the North not overcome the South without all the bloodshed? Lincoln could only conclude that the ways of the Almighty were incomprehensible to man. God clearly willed the war to go on, however bloody, though Lincoln could not fathom why, stating, "The Almighty has His own purposes."²¹ Lincoln bowed before this divine opacity in humble incomprehension. He did not call down the wrath of God on the sinning slave owners, self-righteously proclaiming that God was a Yankee. He did not see the Redeemer in the fires of a hundred circling Northern camps. Lincoln's God did not take sides; He was everywhere, North and South.

Out of Lincoln's bafflement came not wrath or vindictiveness but compassion. Because it was God that determined all, no one could judge his enemy or himself. All were helpless before the Divine might. "With malice toward none; with charity for all," he wrote in his second inaugural address in 1865, let us "bind up the nation's

wounds."²² The distance of God reduced Lincoln to utter humility, stripping away all judgment and wish for retribution. In the end, his belief in a distant God ennobled the president. It made him capable, Job-like, of bearing the sorrows of the nation and of solving conundrums of human suffering.

Lincoln's faith in the controlling power of Divine Providence made him look for the hand of God everywhere—in the events of history and even in his own actions. In the course of the war, he came to believe that he was himself an instrument of God. He told a group of visiting clergymen that it was his "earnest desire to know the will of Providence" on freeing the slaves. "*If I can learn what it is I will do it!*"²³ In the extremities of the nation's trial, he longed for personal revelation that would enable him to see clearly, and he believed it came. One associate remembers Lincoln saying:

That the Almighty does make use of human agencies, and directly intervenes in human affairs, is . . . one of the plainest statements of the Bible. I have had so many evidences of his direction, so many instances when I have been controlled by some other power than my own will, that I cannot doubt that this power comes from above. I frequently see my way clear to a decision which I am conscious that I have no sufficient facts upon which to found it. But I cannot recall one instance in which I have followed my own judgment, founded upon such a decision, where the results were unsatisfactory. . . . I am satisfied that when the Almighty wants me to do or not to do a particular thing, he finds a way of letting me know it.²⁴

Toward the end he relied more and more on the inner light, an occasional "presentiment" of revelation, and possibly his own dreams.²⁵ In a biblical culture, the logic of revelation overcame his sense of God's indifference to human wishes. As one scholar has said, under the duress of war Lincoln came to think of himself as a "latter-day Moses learning God's will on the presidential mountain and bringing it down to the people."²⁶ "I should be the veriest shallow and self-conceited blockhead upon the footstool [of the earth]," Lincoln said to Noah Brooks on election day in 1864, "if, in my discharge of the duties which are put upon me in this place, I should hope to get along without the wisdom which comes from God and

not from men."²⁷ Revelation did not clarify God's purposes for Lincoln—the prolonged, bloody war still baffled him—but he believed that Providence had made the president an instrument of its will.

Joseph's God, though immanent and communicative from the start, was no less perplexing. After directing the Saints to build Zion, after requiring them to sacrifice so much, why did He not come to their defense against their persecutors? Rather than making defeats easier to bear, this made them all the more perplexing. Why should the Saints' enemies be allowed to frustrate God's own work? Having confidence that God was on their side made the triumph of their enemies more confusing. John Corrill, an early Kirtland convert and leading figure in Missouri, left the Church in 1839 and explained to Joseph exactly why: Everything he attempted had failed. Wherever the Saints had founded a city under God's direction, they had been attacked and expelled. When nothing went right, how could one say God was in it?²⁸

In his public letters, Joseph offered constant reassurance to the Saints. They were not abandoned; their cause was just; God would soon come to their aid. But in his private contemplations, Joseph brought the same questions to his prayers: Why had they been driven? Why was he separated from his family? Where is thy pavilion, O God? The answer was as difficult as Lincoln's: It is all for your experience, my son, Joseph was told. Remember that I the Lord descended below all things too. Are your sufferings greater than mine? The answer to Joseph was, You must bear it. I did, and so must you. In the end you will see it all had a purpose in giving you experience (see D&C 121:1–8; 122:1–8).²⁹ Lincoln's ponderings led him to reflect on God's imponderable will. Joseph's revelations told him that life was an inescapable trial that brought suffering even to Christ.

Events drove both men into the heart of darkness, where the right does not prevail and God absents Himself. Both tried to affirm that God was present, though invisible and inexplicable. Neither was embittered by the miseries they saw. Lincoln advocated charity toward all. Joseph wrote after five months in a Missouri prison that the way of the priesthood, despite the evils wrought by men, was persuasion, love, and long-suffering. He knew that power corrupted nearly everyone—including the men who had beaten and driven his

people—but the answer was not power against power but gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned (see D&C 121:37–44).

ENDINGS

Joseph died in 1844 just as Lincoln, somewhat falteringly, came on the national scene. Lincoln was elected to Congress in 1846 but made no impression. He was an unsuccessful candidate for the United States Senate in 1854 and ran again unsuccessfully against Stephen Douglas in 1858. Though defeated both times, he was on hand to lead the Republican Party as it took form after 1856. He was fifty-one when elected president. Joseph had died at age thirty-eight, the age at which Lincoln first entered the House of Representatives. The Prophet's accomplishments were compressed into sixteen years, from the time he began translating the Book of Mormon in 1828 until his murder in June 1844. No one would remember Lincoln today if he had died at thirty-eight.

They both died significantly. Neither passed from this life by natural causes. Their deaths by assassins' bullets were a culmination, a punctuation mark, on their lives and accomplishments. Lincoln died for breaching the South's slave system, Joseph for claiming divine authority. Their deaths were seen as sacrifices for the causes they lived for, testaments of their works. The form of their deaths hallowed the memory of their lives.

Lincoln was remembered for emancipating the slaves and saving the Union, but that was not his only legacy to the nation. He had defined the core of American values as the individual's right to pursue wealth. The evil of slavery was its denial of the fruits of labor to the people who had labored. Lincoln's aim was to create an economy in which Thomas Lincoln could rise from poverty on his farm, or an enterprising entrepreneur could accumulate goods through a little business—as Lincoln himself had risen through a law practice and politics. That form of economic justice was the highest ideal Lincoln entertained for the United States. His dreams for America were almost solely economic. We fought the war, he said in 1861, to preserve a government whose "leading object is, to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders—to clear the path of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life."³⁰ His ideals led to industrialization,

corporations, consumerism, and unfettered individual ambition—not that he advocated these outcomes, but nothing in his vision stood in their way. His Republican Party sponsored the industrialization of America, and his distant God required nothing particular of the nation. Lincoln could imagine nothing more transcendent than an equal opportunity for everyone to get ahead. “For Lincoln,” writes Gabor Borritt, the foremost scholar of Lincoln’s economic thought, “unobstructed upward mobility was the most important ideal America strove for.”³¹

Joseph’s more complex view of human destiny was far more contentious. He interfered too much in human affairs, disaffected Mormons complained. He insisted on brotherhood and service and the consecration of properties to the greater good in direct contradiction to American individualism. Rather than freeing people from constraints, Joseph bound them together. Joseph’s aim was Zion, an exalted society based on faith and common devotion to a great cause. He wanted his bruised father to become a priest of God and enjoy an inheritance in a promised land. The factories and rail lines of Lincoln’s postbellum America would have interested Joseph only insofar as they facilitated the gathering to Zion and the creation of an equitable society. Lincoln took human nature as he found it, self-interested, ambitious, energetic, and tried to create a social order in which this natural man could enjoy his just deserts. Joseph built institutions to instruct men spiritually, to put them in touch with God, and to help them find the divine potential within themselves. The temple, not the marketplace, was the pivotal institution of his cities.

The two men were opposites and the same. They both rose from the lowest levels of American society to unexpected notoriety and influence. The circumstances of their lives plunged them both into existence’s darkest mysteries. Why does injustice prevail? Where is God when the good suffer? Both retained a belief that, however dark the way, God rules over all. In the end, Lincoln even saw the need for personal revelation. But their beliefs about God and His expectations for humankind divided Joseph and Lincoln fundamentally. One believed that God left people to fend for themselves in a self-interested world. The other believed that God wanted His children to live together in love and to help each other become gods

themselves. Lincoln's program resulted in factories, merchandise, markets, and a population of workers; Joseph's in temples, cities, and a Zion people.

Lincoln's regard for individual rights led him to plow around the hard, wet, heavy Mormon log rather than split, burn, or move it.³² He did not raise his voice against the Mormons when public animosity was rising dangerously.³³ He looked on with his characteristic compassion—generous, respectful, and uncomprehending. He could find no basis in his religion to do more than leave the Mormons alone, but that was all they wanted. While Lincoln's Republicans fostered industrialization, Joseph's Mormons organized Zion cities in the desolation of the Great Basin as monuments to the vision of their founding prophet.

NOTES

1. Abraham Lincoln to John T. Stuart, March 1, 1840, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 1:206. I am grateful to Val H. Sederholm for this reference.
2. Joseph arrived in Nauvoo on March 4, 1840. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:89. In the fall presidential elections Lincoln ran to be a Whig elector for president and was scratched from many Mormon ballots. The removal of his name from the list of ten electors was not intended as a slight. The Mormons, who were backing William Henry Harrison over Martin Van Buren, wanted to placate the Democrats by writing in the name of Democratic elector, James H. Ralston. Lincoln's name was chosen for deletion because he happened to be at the bottom of the list. He showed no signs of bearing a grudge; in December 1840 he voted with the vast majority in favor of the Nauvoo charter (G. U. Hubbard, "Abraham Lincoln as Seen by the Mormons," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 31 [Spring 1963]: 93–94). John C. Bennett reported all this in *Times and Seasons*, January 1, 1841.
3. Information about Lincoln in this essay comes from Benjamin P. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952); Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1999); and David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). Joseph Smith's life is laid out in Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977), and in Richard Lyman

- Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).
4. John Lincoln (1716–1788), Lincoln’s great-grandfather and of the same generation as Samuel Smith, was the son of a niece of New Jersey’s royal governor. John owned a large farm in the Shenandoah Valley (Donald, *Lincoln*, 21).
 5. Don Enders provided information on the evidence for animals. Archeological evidence points to a possible animal shelter on the Smiths’ Manchester property.
 6. On Joseph’s school attendance, see Mark Ashurst-McGee, “The Josiah Stowell Jr.—John S. Fullmer Correspondence,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 113; Christopher M. Stafford, *Statement* (1885), and John Stafford, *Statement* (1881), in Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 2:194, 122. Michael Quinn refers to the “myth” of Joseph’s ignorance and points to the ample opportunities for extensive reading in the village bookstores and nearby libraries. Michael D. Michael, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd. ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 179–93. On reading cheap fiction, see Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton, 1867), 17. On Joseph’s reading the Bible, see Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool, Eng.: S. W. Richards, 1853), 84.
 7. *Collected Works*, 1: 1.
 8. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, 38.
 9. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 69.
 10. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, 38.
 11. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln*, 18, 20, 24.
 12. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, 120.
 13. Leonard J. Arrington, “James Gordon Bennett’s 1831 Report on ‘The Mormonites,’” *Brigham Young University Studies* 10 (Spring 1970): 357.
 14. Turner, *Gorham’s Purchase*, 214, in *Early Mormon Documents*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 3:49–50.
 15. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, 153.
 16. *Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835, 78.
 17. “History, 1832,” in Joseph Smith, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 11.
 18. George A. Smith, “My Journal,” *Instructor*, January 1946, 182.
 19. “History, 1832,” in *Personal Writings*, 9.

20. Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, in *Collected Works*, 8:333.
21. Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, in *Collected Works*, 8:333.
22. Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, in *Collected Works*, 8:333.
23. *Collected Works*, 5:420, 424.
24. L. E. Chittenden, "Register of the Treasury," in *Recollections of President Lincoln and His Administration* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), 448.
25. The evidence of Lincoln's turn to the supernatural is summed up in Richard N. Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), chap. 3.
26. Melvin B. Endy Jr., "Abraham Lincoln and American Civil Religion: A Reinterpretation," *Church History* 44 (June 1975): 232.
27. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, 462.
28. Corrill, *Brief History*, 48.
29. The complicated meanings of the word "experience" are discussed by Martin Jay in *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
30. Message to Special Session of Congress, July 4, 1861, in *Collected Works*, 4:438.
31. G. S. Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1978), 277. For a discussion of Lincoln and the postwar rise of corporations, see Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, 457–61.
32. The comment was made to T. B. Stenhouse, who was inquiring after the president's attitude toward the Mormons (quoted in Preston Nibley, *Brigham Young, the Man and His Work* [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1936], 369).
33. Hubbard, "Abraham Lincoln," 93; Aryeh Maidenbaum, "Sounds of Silence: An Aspect of Lincoln's Whig Years," *Illinois Historical Journal* 82 (Autumn 1989): 167–76.