
OF “LIFE ETERNAL” AND “ETERNAL LIVES”

JOSEPH SMITH’S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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It is evident upon even a cursory reading of the works produced by Joseph Smith that the King James Bible served a crucial role in their development. As Philip Barlow has noted, “More than fifty thousand phrases of three or more words, excluding definite and indefinite articles, are common to the Bible and the Book of Mormon,” and “sometimes the Book of Mormon employs distinctive KJV phrases far more frequently than the KJV itself,” even though “the Book of Mormon is only one-third the volume of the Bible.”¹ Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss Joseph’s impressive literary corpus as merely a “plagiarism” of the Bible, as some have done.² Rather, Joseph’s primary literary works, the Book of Mormon and, in particular, his revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants exhibit remarkable creativity. When studied closely, it becomes clear that

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Joseph Smith did not simply study the Bible; he interacted with it. He mingled his words and ideas with texts written nearly two millennia ago, believing that these writings were not necessarily solidified and sanctified by time and tradition. It appears quite likely that Joseph understood his literary and theological achievements to function as an “inspired explication”³ of texts both past and present.

With the possible exception of the writings of Isaiah,⁴ nowhere does this “inspired explication” come out more fully than in Joseph Smith’s use of the Gospel of John.⁵ From the beginning of his ministry to the end of his life, the Gospel of John played a highly significant role for Joseph Smith. John’s language is prominent throughout the Book of Mormon and Joseph’s revelations, and its verses provided numerous catalysts for some of Joseph’s most illuminating teachings. In order to illustrate the complexity of this Johannine interaction, this article will proceed with two primary purposes. First, it will examine specific areas where Joseph Smith interacted with the Gospel of John, with specific focus upon Joseph Smith’s revelations and an 1844 discourse given by Joseph Smith. And second, it will consider the implications of Joseph Smith’s reliance upon the Gospel of John, drawing some conclusions as to *why* the Gospel of John may have held such an appeal for Joseph Smith.

The Gospel of John and Joseph Smith’s Revelations

On two separate occasions (in D&C 7 and 93), Joseph Smith produced portions of the Gospel of John as they read in an earlier, presumably unredacted state. The first of these two occasions concerned the original ending of John’s Gospel. While translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith and his scribe Oliver Cowdery engaged in a discussion regarding the eventual fate of John. Not reaching an agreement, the two men “mutually agreed to settle it by the Urim and Thummim.”⁶ Below is John 21:20–23 as it reads in the King James Version:

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Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?

Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do?

Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.

Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?

Below is the first part of what Joseph Smith received through the Urim and Thummim, with the text of common phrases bolded and italicized:

And the Lord said unto me: John, my beloved, what desirest thou? For if you shall ask what you will, it shall be granted unto you.

And I said unto him: Lord, give unto me power over death, that I may live and bring souls unto thee.

And the Lord said unto me: Verily, verily, I say unto thee, because thou desirest this thou shalt tarry until I come in my glory, and shalt prophesy before nations, kindreds, tongues and people.

And for this cause the Lord said unto Peter: ***If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?*** For he desired of me that he might bring souls unto me, but thou desiredst that thou mightest speedily come unto me in my kingdom.

I say unto thee, Peter, this was a good desire; but my beloved has desired that he might do more, or a greater work yet among men than what he has before done. (D&C 7:1-5)

There are three things to note when comparing these two passages. First, and perhaps most striking, is the use of the first person in section 7. Joseph Smith's query about John did not result in a simple answer. Rather, it resulted in a text proposing to be an original writing

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In April 1829, Joseph Smith dictated the following revelation, which in its first publication was described as the translation of an ancient parchment written by the apostle John. Courtesy of Joseph Smith Papers Project.

of John, where the ambiguous references to “the disciple whom Jesus loved” are replaced with “I” and “me.” Joseph Smith’s interaction with John 21 is direct and primary, rather than indirect and secondary. He is not attempting to produce mediated information; instead, he is producing actual words as they were written by John himself.

Second, the biblical account of this episode leaves some ambiguity regarding the fate of John.⁷ In a trend that would occur with increasing fashion, Joseph not only picked up on this ambiguity but also provided a concrete answer, one that eliminated any vagueness.

John, Joseph is told, was allowed to “tarry until I come in glory.”⁸

Third, the reception of the parchment of John came as a result of discussing the Bible and musing upon its meaning. Revelation did not generally come to Joseph unprompted. It appears, at least in this case, that he had to wrestle with the text of the Bible, reading between the lines and working through the knots before he could receive the bursts of inspiration that could produce an answer to his query.

While it remains difficult to ascertain just how Joseph theologically received revelation,⁹ several subsequent revelations would

also employ the language of the Fourth Gospel. In the earlier revelations, the presence of Johannine language is limited largely to what could be called a language of “divine introduction,” reminiscent of ancient aretalogies.¹⁰ Jesus also employs this language when he identifies himself to various recipients of revelations. For example, in a revelation given to Joseph Smith in 1829, Jesus announces himself:

Behold, I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I came unto mine own, and mine own received me not.

I am the light which shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not.

I am he who said—Other sheep have I which are not of this fold—unto my disciples, and many there were that understood me not.

And I will show unto this people that I had other sheep, and that they were a branch of the house of Jacob. (D&C 10:57–60)

Here the reader encounters quotations from John 1:5 and 11, as well as 10:16. Readers encounter similar introductory language strewn throughout other early revelations:

To Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. Behold, I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I am the same that came unto mine own, and mine own received me not. I am the light which shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not. (D&C 6:21; cf. John 1:5, 11)

To Hyrum Smith. For, behold, it is I that speak; behold, I am the light which shineth in darkness, and by my power I give these words unto thee.

Behold, I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I am the life and the light of the world.

I am the same who came unto mine own and mine own received me not;

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But verily, verily, I say unto you, that as many as receive me, to them will I give power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on my name. (D&C 11:11, 28–30; cf. John 1:4–5, 11–12)

To Orson Pratt. My son Orson, hearken and hear and behold what I, the Lord God, shall say unto you, even Jesus Christ your Redeemer;

The light and the life of the world, a light which shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not;

Who so loved the world that he gave his own life, that as many as would believe might become the sons of God. Wherefore you are my son. (D&C 34:1–3; cf. John 1:4–5, 12; 3:16; see also 32:5; 45:7–8)

The Gospel of John contains some of the richest images and unique language found in the Bible—metaphors and titles of deity such as light and darkness, rejection and acceptance, Father and Son. By couching his introduction in these terms, Jesus Christ—as presented in Joseph Smith’s revelations—establishes himself as someone who may have been scripturally silent for centuries, yet is not a foreign or unfamiliar deity. He is still, first and foremost, the biblical Jesus and, more specifically, the Johannine Jesus.

Additionally, one can perceive in these introductory statements another aspect of Johannine language: the *ego eimi* formula. While scholars continue to debate whether these statements are theophanic or simply grammatically necessary,¹¹ on several occasions throughout the Fourth Gospel Jesus self-referentially proclaims, “I am (*ego eimi*) the bread of life” (John 6:35), “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12), “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11, 14), “I am the resurrection, and the life” (John 11:25), and “I am the true vine” (John 15:1). Occasionally these statements occur without a predicate nominative, as when Jesus declares, “I am,” such as with the Samaritan woman (see John 4:26), skeptical Jews (see John 8:58), or the officers sent to arrest him (see John 18:5, 8).

At various times throughout Joseph Smith's revelations, Jesus again speaks with this same *ego eimi* formula. Examples include "I am" plus "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (D&C 6:21; 10:57; 14:9; 35:2), "the light" (10:58; 11:11), "the true light" (88:50), "the life and the light" (11:28), "the light and the life" (12:9; 34:2; 45:7), "the good shepherd" (50:44), "the Great I Am" (29:1; 38:1; 39:1), "endless" (19:4, 10), "advocate" (29:5; 32:3; 110:4), "the stone of Israel" (50:44), "the first and the last" (110:4), "he who said—Other sheep I have which are not of this fold" (10:59), "the beginning and the end" (19:1; 35:1; 38:1; 45:7), and "Alpha and Omega" (19:1; 45:7; 63:60; 68:35; 84:120; 112:34; 132:66). With only a few exceptions, the majority of these passages occur, as do the statements of "divine introduction," in the early revelations, suggesting that these statements are primarily incorporating specific Johannine language as a means of introducing Jesus in a recognizable fashion, while also linking the Mormon prophet with the biblical authors.

While the early revelations of Joseph Smith primarily utilize Johannine language to provide this divine introduction, Joseph's later revelations demonstrate a more complex use of the Gospel of John. Instead of providing a language of introduction, the language of the Fourth Gospel becomes a vehicle for deeper, more complex doctrines. On February 16, 1832, while living in Hiram, Ohio, Joseph Smith witnessed the heavens opened to him, an experience now canonized as Doctrine and Covenants 76. At the time it was simply termed "The Vision." Much of what Joseph Smith had received thus far in his revelations consisted primarily of the practical concerns of the Church intermingled with the occasional "burst" of divine light.¹² Yet section 76 produces an "explosion" of light as the heavens themselves are opened up before Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon: "By the power of the Spirit our eyes were opened and our understandings were enlightened, so as to see and understand the things of God—Even those things which were from the beginning

before the world was, which were ordained of the Father, through his Only Begotten Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, even from the beginning” (D&C 76:12–13).

Furthermore, Joseph and Sidney witnessed “the glory of the Son” (D&C 76:20), the holy angels “sanctified before his throne” (76:21), and the fall of Satan himself (76:25–27). “The Vision” described an elaborate, multitiered heaven, where the truly righteous dwell in a “celestial” kingdom, the good and honest in a “terrestrial” kingdom, and the formerly wicked in a “telestial” kingdom. Yet even this last kingdom was such a glorious place that it “surpasses all understanding” (76:89). Only those who knowingly fight against Christ and align themselves with Satan, called “sons of perdition” (76:32), will be cast into “the lake of fire and brimstone” (76:36). This cosmological elaboration marked a new direction in Joseph Smith’s prophetic role. In Joseph’s mind, preparing his followers for the postmortal celestial kingdom and the promise of potential exaltation became priorities, along with the building of the earthly kingdom of Zion. Following section 76, he would receive in quick succession sections 84, 88, and 93, which together with the temple ordinances introduced a decade later from the peak of Joseph Smith’s revelatory experience.

While the language of the Fourth Gospel is clearly noticeable throughout the written form of “The Vision,” Joseph relates that the catalyst for this vision was actually his study of John 5:29. John 5:29 is a succinct, tantalizingly short statement by Jesus regarding the eschatological fate of both the righteous and the wicked: “And [they] shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.” Apparently, Joseph was dissatisfied with such a thoroughly dualistic approach to salvation when other scripture, as well as common sense, told him otherwise. He wrote that “it appeared self evident from what truths were left, that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body, the term ‘heaven,’ as intended for

the Saints' eternal home, must include more kingdoms than one."¹³ Joseph intuited that behind John 5:29 lay greater and grander truths, and as a result he and Sidney Rigdon "meditated upon these things," a pondering that was rewarded when "the Lord touched the eyes of our understanding and they were opened, and the glory of the Lord shone round about" (D&C 76:19).¹⁴

The Gospel of John would continue to play a central role in subsequent revelations, particularly the revelations in sections 88 and 93. Consider the following verses. The first is a passage from Jesus' farewell discourse in John 14: "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you" (John 14:16–17).

In these verses, Jesus reassures the Apostles that his departure will not bring a conclusion to their interaction with God. On the contrary, they will be led by the Holy Spirit, who "will lead the disciples into all truth, stand by them in their witness to Jesus and in their confrontation with the world, and show them the way to the future."¹⁵ Now compare Jesus' words in John 14 with these intended for his modern Saints in Doctrine and Covenants section 88: "Wherefore, I now send upon you another Comforter, even upon you my friends, that it may abide in your hearts, even the Holy Spirit of promise; which other Comforter is the same that I promised unto my disciples, as is recorded in the testimony of John. This Comforter is the promise which I give unto you of eternal life, even the glory of the celestial kingdom; which glory is that of the church of the Firstborn, even of God, the holiest of all, through Jesus Christ his Son" (D&C 88:3–5).

Section 88 takes the language of John 14 and expands upon it, adding nuances to the nature of this other "Comforter," more clearly defining what its function will be within the scope of the Mormon

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Restoration and the crucial role the Holy Spirit is to play in one’s individual progression towards exaltation.¹⁶ Significantly, Joseph Smith is not presenting any doctrine or teaching that contradicts or challenges John 14. Instead he senses a certain ambiguity or opaqueness in these particular verses from Jesus’ farewell discourse—theological space waiting to be filled or more clearly explicated, questions that can be answered by inspired revelation.

Further on in section 88, readers encounter a similar elaboration upon certain verses from John 1 regarding the true nature of “light.” First, consider these two verses from John’s prologue: “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. . . . That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:5, 9).

John 1 adopts two universal images, “light” and “darkness,” to describe the significance Jesus was to have for humanity. “Light” could variously designate “the presence of God,” the “‘life’ given to people through God’s word,” or “knowing God through faith in Christ.”¹⁷ One of the values inherent within John’s dualistic images is that these images “focus their meaning without completely delimiting it.”¹⁸ This next statement represents Joseph’s explication of John 1:5, 9: “The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not; nevertheless, the day shall come when you shall comprehend even God, being quickened in him and by him. Then shall ye know that ye have seen me, that I am, and that I am the true light that is in you, and that you are in me; otherwise ye could not abound” (D&C 88:49–50).

Joseph Smith had quoted John 1:5, 9 on several occasions in earlier revelations, but those passages read somewhat awkwardly, lacking a full integration into the larger revelation. What is startling about Doctrine and Covenants 88:49–50 is how these very same verses from John 1 can be woven into a much more complex tapestry, one where “light” becomes a pivotal ontological link unifying humanity

and Jesus. What Joseph Smith's doctrine of exaltation could offer was the literal and temporal realization of this unity, the "true light," whether through the construction of temples, where man would be brought into the symbolic presence of God, or through preparing the earth for the Millennium, when God would be manifest physically upon the earth.

With section 93, Joseph produced, as he had done with section 7, an unknown version of the Gospel of John. In this, one of Joseph's richest and most profound revelations, readers encounter what seems intended to be the earliest version of the Johannine prologue:

And he bore record, saying: I saw his glory, that he *was in the beginning* [John 1:1], before the world was;

Therefore, *in the beginning the Word was* [John 1:1], for *he was the Word* [John 1:1], even the messenger of salvation—

The light and the Redeemer of the world; the *Spirit of truth* [John 14:17; 16:13], who came into the world, *because the world was made by him* [John 1:3], *and in him was the life of men and the light of men* [John 1:4].

The worlds were made by him; men were made by him; *all things were made by him* [John 1:3], and through him, and of him.

And I, John, bear record that I *beheld his glory, as the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth*, even the *Spirit of truth*, which came and dwelt *in the flesh, and dwelt among us* [John 1:14].

And I, John, saw that he *received not of the fulness* at the first, but received *grace for grace* [John 1:16];

And he *received not of the fulness* at first, but continued from *grace to grace*, until he received a fulness;

And thus he was called the Son of God, because he *received not of the fulness* at the first.

And I, John, bear record, and lo, the heavens were opened, *and the Holy Ghost descended upon him in the form of a dove, and sat upon*

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him [John 1:32], and there came a voice out of heaven saying: This is my beloved Son. (D&C 93:7–15)¹⁹

There are several items of note here. First, not only is there a strong similarity of language between John 1 and section 93, but there is also a strong correlation between the order in which the verses are read. With the exception of the title “Spirit of Truth” in 93:9, which shares a point of contact with John 14:17 and 16:13, both John 1 and Joseph’s “record of John”²⁰ employ similar phrases in the same order, which strongly indicates a common origin. Second, as with John’s parchment in D&C 7, Joseph Smith has a revelation explicating upon the present text of the Fourth Gospel. The KJV prologue of John says very little about the progression of Jesus Christ, only that he was “God” (John 1:1), the “only begotten of the Father” who had, for a time, “dwelt among us” (John 1:14). In section 93, readers learn that even Jesus received “grace for grace” (D&C 93:12) and progressed “from grace to grace” (D&C 93:13), providing humanity with an example of how they can similarly receive “grace for grace” if they are willing to “keep my commandments” and eventually “receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:20). Finally, section 93, as well as section 7, witnesses to the brazenness of Joseph Smith’s revelations. Coincidentally or not, both John 1 and 21 have been called into question by some who see both the prologue of John and his concluding chapter as later additions, perhaps from a redacted hymn (in the case of the prologue)²¹ or a later editor (in the case of John 21).²² However, sections 7 and 93 jointly attribute both an early origin and Johannine authorship to the texts that lay behind John 1 and 21. Demonstrating an admirable confidence, Joseph cut through textual knots that have perplexed New Testament scholars for the last two centuries.

What is perhaps more significant, however, is *how* Joseph Smith engaged the text of John in this revelation. While section 93 contains many clauses and titles that have Johannine parallels, the crux of

the Johannine portion of section 93 (verses 12–14) appears counter-intuitive to the Christology developed in the Gospel of John. In this Gospel, Jesus is the “logos,”²³ the “Only-begotten Son,”²⁴ the agent of the Father,²⁵ and even “God” himself (John 1:1). These titles all strongly suggest a unity, an indivisible link between Father and Son, one that reaches its most clear definition in John 10:30: “I and my Father are one.”²⁶

In like manner, the first part of section 93 establishes a similar link, but instead of linking Father and Son, section 93 links Jesus Christ and humanity. According to section 93, Jesus did not “receive of the fulness” in the flesh. Rather, Jesus went through a progression that would eventually lead to his “receiving of a fulness,” but only after continuing “grace for grace” and “from grace to grace.”²⁷ These crucial verses define the relationship between the Father and Jesus, as well as the relationship between the Father and humanity: Jesus was “in the beginning with the Father” (D&C 93:21) and promises that “all those who are begotten through me are partakers of the glory of the same” (D&C 93:22), for “ye were also in the beginning with the Father” (D&C 93:23).²⁸ Because it is Jesus who receives “grace for grace” from the Father, who likewise has a “fulness,” section 93 establishes a paradigm for all to follow who wish to “come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:19). Just as one of the primary purposes of the Fourth Gospel is to emphasize that Jesus is like God, one of the primary purposes of section 93 is to demonstrate that humanity is like Jesus. It becomes clear that section 93 is not merely a two-dimensional facsimile of the Johannine prologue, but an attempt to enlarge and expand John’s theology and ideas. In some ways, it is as if much of section 93 is an epilogue to John’s own prologue, an explication upon the first three words of John’s Gospel, illustrating what reality was like “in the Beginning,” where not only did Jesus progress, but “man was . . . with God” (93:29), “intelligence . . . was not created or made” (93:29),

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“man [was] spirit”(93:33), and “the elements [were] eternal” (93:33). As with section 7, section 93 reveals Joseph’s belief that the Bible was incomplete, that it contained deficiencies, buttressing his conviction that there was a place and a need for additional scripture. Due to his calling as God’s prophet, it was his task to replace what had been lost through negligence or faulty transmission. Not content with simply studying John’s Gospel, Joseph aspires to rewrite it, restoring to antiquity what he senses to be the truth of the present. He studies the ancient world not only to learn from it but also to correct it.

Having established a unifying link between God, Jesus, and humanity through an alternate version of the Johannine prologue in section 93, Joseph Smith would find additional fertile ground in John 17, a discourse that represents, in the words of Raymond Brown, “one of the most majestic moments in the Fourth Gospel.”²⁹ Here, Jesus will turn to his Father in prayer and plead on behalf of his disciples “that they also may be one in us . . . I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one” (John 17:21, 23). At the beginning of the prayer, Jesus alludes to how this unity might be realized: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). Simple in its language but complex in meaning, Jesus asserts that “eternal life, eschatological life, involves an intimate relationship with the Father and the Son.”³⁰

Again, Joseph sees untapped potential in John’s words, and he attempts to further delineate how this “intimate relationship” might be fully realized. Continuing the logical flow begun in sections 88 and 93, Joseph’s solution was to interpret John 17:3 in terms of familial relationships.³¹ “Who is God?” “He is a Father.” “How does one know what it is like to be a Father?” “One has children.” This inspired explication of John 17:3 represented a further theological breakthrough for Joseph. In a revelation signifying the zenith of his familial theology, Joseph included a passage modifying the language

of John 17:3: “But if ye receive me in the world, then shall ye know me, and shall receive your exaltation; that where I am ye shall be also. ***This is eternal lives—to know the only wise and true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent.*** I am he. Receive ye, therefore, my law” (D&C 132:23–24).

Instead of emphasizing “eternal life,” like in John 17, Joseph created a new category, “eternal lives,” by which he meant the procreation of spiritual offspring by an exalted husband and wife. Joseph would later state that “those who are married by the power and authority of the priesthood in this life, and continue without committing the sin against the Holy Ghost, will continue to increase and have children in the celestial glory.”³² The language behind the construction of the passage is clearly John’s; but the explication is clearly Joseph’s.

The Gospel of John in the King Follett Discourse

If these later revelations demonstrate how closely Joseph Smith engaged with the Gospel of John in the early years of his prophetic career, the King Follett discourse reveals that this engagement did not dissipate with the passage of time. In April 1844, while speaking at the funeral of his friend King Follett, Joseph Smith delivered a discourse that has been called his “greatest sermon.”³³ In this discourse, Joseph expounded upon such hefty doctrines as the kinship between man and God, the eternal nature of God, the possibility that humankind can progress toward “godhood” themselves, the fallacy of creation *ex nihilo*, and the necessity of performing ordinances that would bring hope of salvation to those who had died. As with the revelations, much of the King Follett discourse finds Joseph actively engaged with the Gospel of John. However, unlike the revelations, Joseph does not claim to be revealing God’s voice or message; rather, Joseph speaks here for himself. Consider the following excerpts:

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I wish I had the trump of an archangel; I could tell the story in such a manner that persecution would cease forever. What did Jesus say? (Mark it, elder Rigdon!) Jesus said, “As the Father hath power in himself, even so hath the Son power.” To do what? Why, what the Father did. The answer is obvious—in a manner to lay down his body and take it up again. Jesus, what are you going to do? To lay down my life as my Father did, and take it up again. If you do not believe it, you do not believe the Bible. The scriptures say it, and I defy all the learning and wisdom, all the combined powers of earth and hell together, to refute it.³⁴

In illustrating the relationship between the Father and the Son, Joseph is drawing upon John 5:26 and John 10:17–18:

For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself;

Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again.

No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.

A second example from the King Follett Sermon:

What did Jesus do? Why, I do the things I saw my Father do when worlds came rolling into existence. My Father worked out His kingdom with fear and trembling, and I must do the same; and when I get my kingdom, I shall present it to My Father, so that He may obtain kingdom upon kingdom, and it will exalt Him in glory. He will then take a higher exaltation, and I will take His place, and thereby become exalted myself.³⁵

Here Joseph is again expanding upon a passage from John 5, in this case verse 19:

Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.

In his application of John 5, Joseph further demonstrates his inspired explication of scripture. In its original setting, the discourse recorded in John 5 was an attempt by Jesus to rebut charges made by the Jews: “Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18). Jesus begins with an explanation of how he is *not* like the Father by constructing an analogy of the relationship between a father and a son. Just as a father typically teaches his son how to act, showing him how to behave, so the Father has provided a similar example for the Son. Thus, “Jesus is not claiming rank equal with the Father, but rather that he acts in obedience and on delegated authority.”³⁶ However, Joseph Smith reads these verses and sees within them the potentiality for a *similarity* between the Father and the Son: “My Father worked out His kingdom with fear and trembling, and I must do the same.” Joseph’s understanding of the meaning of John 5 goes against the grain, so to speak, presenting listeners and readers with a “creative misreading” of the present text of John 5.³⁷

Finally, Joseph Smith returns to John 17:3. First, Joseph rhetorically asks his audience:

I want to ask this congregation, every man, woman and child, to answer the question in his own heart what kind of a being God is. What kind of a being is God? Does any man or woman know? Have any of you seen him, heard him, communed with him? Here is the question, perhaps, that will from this time forth occupy your attention. The apostle [John] says, “This is life eternal”—to know God and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent. If any man, not knowing what kind of a being God is, inquires to know if the declaration of the apostle is true—and searches diligently his

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own heart—he will admit that he has not eternal life; for there can be no eternal life on any other principle.³⁸

Then, after a lengthy elaboration regarding the progression and journey of God the Father, Joseph offered one of his most provocative statements on the divine potential of humanity:

Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God. And you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves—to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done—by going from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you are able to sit in glory as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.³⁹

Again, Joseph sees deeper truth hidden behind the language of John’s scripture. In this case, what does it mean to “know God”? In section 132, knowing God meant “eternal lives,” as Joseph ambitiously outlined the potential future awaiting those followers willing to eternally link themselves with a celestial family unit. But with this statement here, again an expansion upon John 17:3 (as well as section 93, itself an expansion upon John 1), Joseph opens a door to the past. Exaltation and “eternal lives” are not simply the promises and blessings made to faithful Mormons. Rather, they represent a system that has been in place for all eternity, a course followed not only by *God* but by *Gods*. Throughout his engagement with the Gospel of John, Joseph is actively combing the text, poking and prodding, looking for theological “knots” which only he, the Mormon Prophet, could untie, pushing the meaning and nuance of the text further and deeper, dissatisfied with anything less than penetrating the impenetrable and fathoming the unfathomable.

Why John’s Gospel?

Having examined *where* the Gospel of John impacted the writings of Joseph Smith, attention now must be turned to the question of *why*. While it is impossible to discern to what extent Joseph Smith’s

“inspired explication” of the Gospel of John was due to a conscious misprision of the New Testament or to a subconscious recognition of open theological space, what is clear is that the Gospel of John is present. This presence evolves in Joseph Smith’s writings from the biblicizing voice of Jesus to a full-blown deconstruction and reconstruction of John’s Gospel, yielding an elaborate familial theology. Two characteristics of the Gospel of John that may explain its ubiquity and impact are its Christology and language.

Christology of the Gospel of John. We have already examined portions of Joseph Smith’s revelations where Jesus introduces himself or offers a description of himself in Johannine language. The reason for this annexation of Johannine Christology could simply be, as Raymond Brown observes, that “most Christians, even if unconsciously, have had their views of Christ massively shaped by John; often they assume John’s high Christology to be that of the whole N[ew] T[estament].”⁴⁰ A second possibility is that Joseph Smith came to see John’s Christology as useful in constructing his exaltation theology, either because the Gospel of John gave an identity and a voice to theology he believed had been divinely revealed to him, or because the text of John served as a catalyst or prompt for Joseph’s inherent creativity. As Paul N. Anderson has noted, there is a certain tension inherent to Johannine Christology. On one hand, “Nowhere in the canonical scripture is Jesus’ *divinity* portrayed more graphically than in John.”⁴¹ The Johannine Jesus is equal or coequal with God (John 1:1), the *monogenes* (1:14, 18) who existed “before Abraham” (8:58). He serves as the agent of the Father (3:16–17; 5:22, 26), constantly predicting his eventual ascent as the glorified “son of man” (3:14; 6:62; 8:28). Yet, at the same time, “Nowhere in the canonical scriptures is Jesus’ *humanity* portrayed more extensively than in John.”⁴² John’s Jesus is subordinate to the Father (5:19; 14:28) and incarnate (1:14; 6:51–56). He is clearly capable of emotional reaction, as his reaction to the death of Lazarus suggests (11:33, 35, 38), as well as

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discomfort, proclaiming from the cross that “I thirst” (19:28). Most importantly, he consistently proclaims his love for his own (11:3, 5; 13:1, 23, 34; 15:19; 21:7, 20).

Joseph Smith understood Jesus in a similar fashion. Jesus is God,⁴³ who existed from the beginning (D&C 76:13; 93:7) and who is the “Only Begotten” Son (Alma 5:48; 9:26).⁴⁴ Yet, as noted earlier in the discussion on section 93, Joseph also believed that Jesus “received not of the fulness at first but progressed “from grace to grace” (D&C 93:12). The logic behind section 93 is that Jesus is closely linked with both God and humanity, providing the ultimate model or example for men and women to follow as they pursue their own exaltation. John’s Christology, with its depiction of Jesus both as God and man, provided a framework for Joseph Smith to adhere to and a text that also appreciated the dual role played by Jesus. Stephen Prothero has written of Joseph Smith that “more than any other great American thinker, with the possible exception of Emerson, Smith blurred the distinction between divinity and humanity. ‘As God once was, man is,’ Mormonism now affirmed. ‘As God is, man may become.’”⁴⁵ It was the Christology of John, seen most clearly in section 93, that provided the framework for Joseph’s theological expansion on the divine potential of humanity, providing a biblical justification for the Mormon idea that humanity not only shares its origins with God, but has the potential to become like him.

Language of the Gospel of John. It is within this Christological framework that the second Johannine contribution to Joseph’s exaltation theology can be understood, namely the *language* of John. Three important Johannine terms, “fulness,” “light,” and “truth,” appear a total of eighty-nine times throughout the pivotal revelations canonized as sections 76, 88, and 93. For John, these three words were important for his understanding and relaying the mission of Jesus Christ: Members of the community received his “fulness,” his “light” shone in the darkness and was the “life of men,” and he was

the ultimate source of “truth.” Joseph Smith, on the other hand, takes these three terms and employs them in his construction of the eternities and humanity’s potential for exaltation. When Joseph Smith uses “fulness” in these three revelations, he appears to have in mind something synonymous with exaltation, as he states that those who dwell in the celestial or highest kingdom are “they into whose hands the Father has given all things—They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory” (D&C 76:55–56). On the other hand, those who are placed in a lower kingdom, such as the terrestrial kingdom, are “they who receive of his glory, but not of his fulness” (76:76). The teleological goal of all humanity is to receive this fulness: “I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness. For if you keep my commandments you shall receive of his fulness, and be glorified in me as I am in the Father; therefore, I say unto you, you shall receive grace for grace” (93:19–20).⁴⁶

“Light” undergoes a similar expansion. In the prologue to John’s Gospel, the author said of Jesus that “In him was light, and his light was the life of man.” Later in the Gospel, Jesus said of himself, “I am the light of the world.” This Johannine combination of “light” and “life” appears to have piqued the interest of Joseph Smith, and out of these two words he constructs something akin to a “theology of light.” For Joseph, “light” and “life” are not merely two different adjectives used to describe Christ, but are a progression toward exaltation. Because Jesus is the “light” that fills the expanse of the universe, he has the power to grant “life” to all those who believe. He is the “life” because he is the “light”: “The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things” (D&C 88:13). This “life” is described in the next verses: “Now, verily I say unto you,

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that through the redemption which is made for you is brought to pass the resurrection from the dead. And the spirit and the body are the soul of man. And the resurrection from the dead is the redemption of the soul. And the redemption of the soul is through him that quickeneth all things, in whose bosom it is decreed that the poor and the meek of the earth shall inherit it. Therefore, it must needs be sanctified from all unrighteousness, that it may be prepared for the celestial glory” (88:14–18).

True “life” is a “quickened” or “resurrected” body and, significantly, the “redemption of the soul” cannot fully take place until the body has been restored. Again, one sees Joseph’s desire to construct a high anthropology at the center of this concept. Men and women, Joseph believed, will be the creators and propagators of “worlds without number,” and in order to accomplish this they require new and improved “enlightened” bodies. In fact, Joseph stated that the primary purpose behind the existence of a celestial kingdom is so that perfected men and women have a kingdom in which to dwell: “for this intent was it made and created, and for this intent are they sanctified” (D&C 88:20). Joseph’s expansion upon the term “fulness” now returns into play as “light” and “life” become crucial in Joseph’s three-tiered heaven, for only those enlightened by celestial light will dwell in a “celestial kingdom” (D&C 88:20), while those who are “not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory” (D&C 88:22) and must either dwell in the terrestrial or telestial kingdoms (D&C 88:23–24). “Light,” then, for Joseph becomes more than just a description of Jesus’ place amongst blind unbelievers who dwell in the dark. Rather, the “light of Christ” becomes the means and power by which the universe maintains order, by which men and women learn and grow, and finally the measure by which they are judged and allotted a heavenly kingdom. It flows out from the presence of God into the most intimate of spaces, bringing life to all who receive it.

In section 93, “light” becomes linked closely to “truth,” as Joseph introduces a new term: “intelligence.” Through arguments both ontological and teleological, Joseph will essentially arrive at the conclusion that exaltation equals the accumulation of intelligence. But this “intelligence,” while it may have included “knowledge” in the sense of facts or data, went in Joseph’s mind beyond the natural and empirical. This “intelligence” was a “capacity for comprehension and insight, accounting for past, present, and future, grasping the moral and spiritual meaning of things, and radiating power. . . . That capacity for seeing and comprehending supernaturally—with a spiritual mind, as he called it—was to him the zenith of human experience.”⁴⁷ This relexicalization of a term like *intelligence* becomes important for this discussion when it is noted how Joseph defines *intelligence*: “The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, *light and truth*” (D&C 93:36; emphasis added).⁴⁸

The significance of the Johannine language to Joseph Smith is that it allowed him to create and develop a “vocabulary of exaltation.” Consider the following passage:

The Spirit of *truth* is of God. I am the Spirit of *truth*, and John bore record of me, saying: He received a *fulness of truth*, yea, even of all *truth*; And no man receiveth a *fulness* unless he keepeth his commandments. He that keepeth his commandments receiveth *truth* and *light*, until he is glorified in *truth* and knoweth all things. (D&C 93:26–28)

As we saw earlier in our discussion of the Johannine prologue, Joseph Smith astutely reworked it to construct a model whereby (1) Jesus progressed to become God, and (2) humanity can follow Jesus in progressing to become like God. This passage, with its assortment of Johannine vocabulary, makes a similar argument. But what makes Joseph’s reconstructed prologue or statements like the one cited above so remarkable is how easily Joseph can reconstruct the language. It flows almost seamlessly from Joseph’s hand, as he uses John’s words

to craft his own argument, bending and in some cases redefining the language, but always careful not to push the words too far beyond their scope. Could Joseph have made a similar statement without using John’s distinctive terminology, without employing “fulness,” “light,” and “truth”? Perhaps. But the power and presence of John’s language, as well as the connecting link joining Joseph’s revelations to the Bible, would be lost or at the very least dimmed. In constructing a doctrine of exaltation, Joseph provided the mortar and the artisan’s unique vision, but it was John who provided the bricks.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Whether one approaches the revelations and teachings of Joseph Smith from a believing or from a skeptical viewpoint, it is undeniable that the Gospel of John is inextricably linked to the writings of Joseph Smith. Early in Joseph’s career, the Christology of John provided an identity for the God who stood at the head of the Mormon movement. Quickly this identity morphed into the use of the Johannine Jesus as a model for individual progression toward exaltation that Joseph trumpeted so loudly. As Joseph’s revelations gained greater depth and scope, the distinct vocabulary of John’s Gospel became more prominent, providing a “vocabulary of exaltation” to accompany and explicate upon the Johannine Jesus’ “model for exaltation.” Joseph claimed that as a boy of fourteen years, he had been told that the creeds of Christianity “were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt.”⁵⁰ His mission was not merely to tinker with or even renovate Christianity; rather, he intended to fully dismantle and reconstruct it. The Gospel of John provided Joseph with key building blocks for his new foundation, a way to go outside the box while still remaining inside the book.⁵¹ Yet it remains crucial to note that Joseph Smith did not merely copy or restate the words of John’s Gospel. Clearly the vocabulary and even some of the ideas of John are present throughout Joseph’s revelations, but his interaction with John is neither artificial nor inorganic. What John (or

his editor) left incomplete, Joseph could finish. What John left ambiguous, Joseph could clarify, all while being careful not to seriously violate or negate John's text. Joseph Smith respected scripture as the word of God, but he was not necessarily beholden to the boundaries of its original setting and context, or of traditional interpretation.⁵²

But the uniqueness of Joseph Smith comes not necessarily in *what* answers he provides, but in *how* he provides the answers. Contemporaries of Joseph such as William Ellery Channing and Charles G. Finney were great thinkers, but they were forced to provide answers to their questions from within the Bible. Joseph Smith wasn't. By claiming the role of prophet, he felt empowered to take scripture from the Bible, sometimes phrases and sometimes passages, and reimage them. He could answer the great philosophical questions not because he was intelligent but because he was prophetic. Because when he needed an answer, he believed God would provide one, whether through revelations or through ancient texts or, as was often the case, both.

Notes

1. Philip Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*, updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27–28.
2. See, for example, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith's Plagiarism of the Bible in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 2010), 47–148.
3. Many students of Joseph Smith's works have attempted to define in a single, pithy phrase the interaction Joseph Smith has with the biblical text. These include "midrashic-like re-workings," "creative literalism," and "marvelously literal." Anthony A. Hutchison, "A Mormon Midrash? LDS Creation Narratives Reconsidered," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21, no. 4 (1998): 31; Richard Cummings, "Quintessential Mormonism: Literal Mindedness as a Way of Life," *Dialogue* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 91–102; Samuel B. Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 110. Instead, I suggest

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“inspired explication,” where “inspired” means “of such surpassing brilliance or excellence as to suggest divine inspiration,” which, based upon the popularity of Mormonism, Joseph Smith’s writings clearly are for many, and where “explication” means “to make clear or explicit; explain” or “to formulate or develop (a theory, hypothesis, etc.).” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2009); *Collins English Dictionary: Complete and Unabridged* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).

4. For the role of Isaiah in the development and formation of the Book of Mormon, see *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998); David P. Wright, “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 157–234.
5. Others have noted the significance of the Gospel of John in Mormon studies. Charles R. Harrell wrote that “In some ways, Doctrine and Covenants 93 is an expansion on ideas found in the Gospel of John and ascribes to all individuals what was originally ascribed uniquely to Christ. In John, only Christ was ‘in the beginning with God’ (John 1:2); in Doctrine and Covenants 93, ‘man was also in the beginning with God’ (1: 29). In John, only Christ was uncreated and ‘all things were made by him’ (1:3). In Doctrine and Covenants 93, neither Christ nor man ‘was created or made.’” Charles R. Harrell, “*This Is My Doctrine*”: *The Development of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 224. Blake T. Ostler has explored the role of the Gospel of John, in particular John 17, in the development of the Mormon concept of deification. See Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought, Volume 3: Of God and Gods* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008), 184–90, 395–402, 420–23.
6. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 284; hereafter *JSP*, H1.

7. As Raymond Brown notes, the result of John 21:23 was that “imaginative traditions grew up about John, identified as the Beloved Disciple, for instance, that he has been wandering through the world throughout the centuries, or that he sleeps in his grave at Ephesus and the movement of the earth’s surface above it attests to his breathing.” Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 2:1110.
8. Joseph Smith was not alone in his belief that John would remain on the earth until the Second Coming. Adam Clarke’s popular biblical commentary, which references John 21:23, notes that “some have concluded from these words, that John should *never die*. Many eminent men, ancients and moderns, have been, and are of this opinion.” Adam Clarke, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; Containing the Text, Taken from the Most Correct Copies of the Present Authorized Translation, Including the Marginal Readings and Parallel Texts, with a Commentary and Critical Notes* (London: J. Butterworth and Son, 1817), 134. The idea that John remains upon the earth today is also a popular belief among Mormons. However, that this was the intent of Jesus’ original statement in John 21 is not the view of the majority of biblical scholars today. As Craig Keener firmly states, “In supposing that the beloved disciple would remain alive until Jesus’ eschatological return, the other disciples misunderstood what Jesus was saying.” Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 1238.
9. The problem is summed up well by H. Michael Marquardt: “While Smith did not comment on the manner in which he perceived God’s mind, the linguistic idiosyncrasies are assumed to be his own. Whether he believed that the ideas or the words themselves were God’s is not completely understood.” H. Michael Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text and Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), xiii. Further complicating the question is the fact that Joseph Smith often altered the language of the revelations, which suggests that he understood himself as having a role in the reception of the revelations beyond simply being a passive recipient. However, he may have felt it was his privilege as God’s prophet to alter or “expand upon” the words of God. See Robert J. Woodford, “Joseph Smith and the Revelations: From Manuscripts to Publication,” in *MHS* (Fall 2005): 135–44.

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10. While some have seen the “I Am” statements in the Fourth Gospel to have been consciously built upon Isis aretalogies, John Ashton pointedly reminds us to avoid “the assumption that any resemblance must imply a debt.” John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 96; for an example of the Isis aretalogy argument, see Howard Clark Kee, “Myth and Miracle: Isis, Wisdom, and the Logos of John,” in *Myth, Symbol and Reality*, ed. Alan M. Olson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 145–64. While this may be a good rule of thumb for biblical studies, Joseph Smith’s appropriations go beyond “resemblance.” The provenance for passages such as the ones quoted above is clearly the Gospel of John.
11. The reason for the questions regarding the *ego eimi* formula quotations are largely in respect to what Jesus means when he says them. In the Septuagint, Jehovah often uses similar language when referring to himself. To Moses at the burning bush, Jehovah stated, “ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ ὢν” (*ego eimi ho on*), or “I Am he who exists.” Similar examples can be found in Isaiah 41:10; 43:10–12; and 45:18. By using this same language, the questions for readers of John are, “Was Jesus making the claim that he was Jehovah? Or was ‘I Am’ just a means of self-identification devoid of any Old Testament allusions?” For a fuller discussion, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, vol. 29 of the Anchor Bible Series (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 533–38. See also Philip Harner, *The “I Am” of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Johannine Usage and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); David Mark Ball, “I Am” in *John’s Gospel: Literary Function, Background, and Theological Implications*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series 124* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); and Catrin H. Williams, *I Am He*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2, reihe 113* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).
12. “During the previous years, the revelations had dealt primarily with establishing the Church and building the City of Zion. They established policy, made assignments, or dealt with current Church problems. The emphasis was on this world. Gathering to Zion received more attention than preparing for the afterlife. The revelations promised an inheritance on earth with little mention of a reward in heaven.” However, with the reception of “The Vision,” this

earthly emphasis changed: “It was the first of four revelations over the next fifteen months introducing the theme of exaltation. . . . With ‘The Vision,’ exaltation took its place alongside the Zion project as a second pillar of Mormon belief.” Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 195.

13. Letter, January 17, 1836, in *JSP*, H1:183.
14. While Joseph was not the first to attempt pulling back the curtain to offer an illustration of heaven (Emanuel Swedenborg, Alexander Campbell, and Walter Scott all attempted something similar), the impact of Joseph’s vision upon the early Saints was substantial. Mark Staker notes that “The Vision’s long-term effect was to set a distinctive mark on Mormon theology; but its short-term effect was to change the Church’s relationship with the other Christian denominations in the Western Reserve. Although most revelations were given strictly through Joseph Smith, this vision had two witnesses, two testimonies, two resounding affirmations that the Vision was divinely inspired. When it was recorded, both Joseph and Sidney’s names appeared at the end, to affirm that it was a joint witness as found in contemporary legal documents. Joseph Smith recorded the Vision as the first revelation in a new ledger, probably purchased for the purpose, writing parts of it in his own hand.” Mark L. Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith’s Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 325.
15. Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 500. C. K. Barrett adds that “in John the Paraclete reminds the believer not of anything within himself but the spoken, though not fully understood, words of Jesus. There is no independent revelation through the Paraclete, but only an application of the revelation in Jesus.” C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1978), 390.
16. Compare D&C 132:7, where the “Holy Spirit of Promise” is more clearly defined: “All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise . . . are of no efficacy, virtue,

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or force in and after the resurrection from the dead.” Joseph later elaborated further upon this function of the Holy Ghost: “Come to God! Weary him until he blesses you. We are entitled to the same blessings; Jesus, revelations, just men, and angels. Not laying again the doctrine of Christ, go on unto perfection. Obtain that Holy Spirit of Promise, then you can be sealed to eternal life.” Lyndon W. Cook and Andrew F. Ehat, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 14–15.

17. Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 143. Koester calls this “light/dark” imagery of the Fourth Gospel “probably its most striking motif” (Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 141).
18. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 142.
19. The bolded and italicized portion represents language which the two passages have in common.
20. Which “John” is meant here, John the Evangelist or John the Baptist, is the topic of much discussion. Orson Pratt, John Taylor, and Bruce R. McConkie believed this “John” to be John the Baptist. See Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 16:58; John Taylor, *The Mediation and Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1882), 55; and Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 1:70–71. However, this belief appears to be based upon the conclusion that only John the Baptist, and not John the Beloved, had been a witness to the descent of the Spirit as recorded in John 1:32. In actuality, John the Beloved, as a disciple of John the Baptist, could just as easily have been a witness to this event as well and not been strictly reliant upon John the Baptist for its inclusion in his Gospel. Furthermore, as Steven Harper has noted, “all editions of the Doctrine and Covenants since 1921 imply that these were the writings of John the Apostle.” Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 560.
21. The idea that John 1:1–18 represents a redacted version of an earlier “logos hymn” began with Adolf Harnack, and much time and effort has been spent trying to recover the earlier hymn (see in particular the discussion in Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 1:18–23). Adolf Harnack, “Ueber das Verhältniss

- des Prologs des vierten Evangeliums zum ganzen Werk,” *ZTK* 2 (1892): 189–231). There are those, however, who see John 1:1–18 as not only original but essential to understanding the Fourth Gospel. James D. G. Dunn writes: “I find it impossible to regard the prologue of John’s Gospel as redactional. . . . The themes of the prologue are too closely integrated into the Gospel as a whole and are so clearly intended to introduce these themes that such a conclusion is rendered implausible.” James D. G. Dunn, “Let John Be John: A Gospel for Its Time,” in *The Gospel and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 331n78; see also Ed L. Miller, “The Johannine Origins of the Johannine Logos,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993): 445–57.
22. Craig Keener summarizes the issue: “Many regard John 21 as a later addition to the Gospel from a different hand; those who regard it as from the same author as the rest of the Gospel usually also regard it as an appendix, recognizing its anticlimactic nature following the conclusion in 20:30–31” (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1219). However, Keener himself opines that “In the absence of evidence to the contrary . . . it is normally better to view a work as a unity” (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1222). See also discussion in Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2:1077–1100.
 23. The exact nature of how John is using the title “logos” is indeterminable, due to its various uses in both the Hellenistic and Semitic cultures. As Craig Keener notes, “John’s choice of the Logos . . . to articulate his Christology was brilliant: no concept better articulated an entity that was both divine yet distinct from the Father” (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 363). See also Brown, *The Gospel According to John* 1–XII, 519–24.
 24. “As the only-begotten Son Jesus is in the closest intimacy with God. . . . There is no other with whom the God can have similar fellowship. He shares everything with this Son. For this reason Jesus can give what no man can give, namely, the fullest possible eye-witness account of God. He knows God, not just from hearsay, but from incomparably close intercourse with him.” F. Buchsel, “monogenes,” s.v. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 4:740.
 25. “Although the concept of agency implies subordination, it also stresses Jesus’ functional equality with the Father in terms of humanity’s required response:

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- he must be honored and believed in the same way as must be the Father whose representative he is” (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 316).
26. This is not to say, however, that John doesn’t emphasize as well the *subordination* of Jesus to the Father on several occasions. This ambiguity “allows him to explore both Jesus’ unity with the Father and the distinction between them” (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 310).
 27. D&C 93:12–14 is “the first detailed indication in the Restoration scriptures of what has come to be called the principle of progression or of becoming like God.” Stephen E. Robinson and Dean Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 3:181.
 28. Samuel B. Brown writes: “While Americans have famously recast Christ in their own image for centuries, in this case Mormons radically recast themselves in the image of Christ, ‘the great prototype of all saved beings’” (Brown, *On Heaven as It Is on Earth*, 250). Blake T. Ostler adds, “There is in these scriptures the undeniable structure of comparison between humans and Christ, demonstrating that Christ became what we are that we might become what Christ is. The focus of this revelation [section 93] is clear: We are Christified to the extent we receive the glory of God or light and truth. We are deified to the extent that we keep the commandments of God because, to that same extent, we express the love that is definitive of participating in the divine nature. . . . By participating in the light or energies of God, we are also like him in the sense that we participate in the fulness of divine knowledge and power” (Ostler, *Of God and Gods*, 369).
 29. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 744.
 30. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1054.
 31. That Smith would find such fertile ground for his familial theology in the Gospel of John is not surprising. The title “Father” to describe God occurs 122 times in John’s Gospel, the next closest being Matthew, with 45. Leon Morris, *Jesus is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 130. Similarly, the title Son “occupies a central role in the Christology of John’s gospel and letters.” Andreas J. Kostenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 380. Kostenberger also notes the variations on the title as well as the frequency

- of occurrence: “only-begotten Son” (5 times); “Son of God” (15 times); “Son of Man” (13 times); and finally “the Son” (34 times). Kostenberger, *Theology*, 380.
32. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 300–301. Brigham Young would make statements echoing those of Joseph Smith on at least two occasions (see *Journal of Discourses*, 10:5, 355). The Prophet’s relative and future LDS Church President Joseph F. Smith would expound (again in language demonstrating an interplay with John 17) upon this idea: “Those who are married in the temple for all time and eternity obtain the blessing of eternal lives. I put stress on eternal lives. Eternal life is God’s life, that is, to be like him. Eternal lives means eternal increase—the continuation, as the revelation says, of the seeds forever. To be married outside of the temple is for time only.” Joseph F. Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 4:197. See also Orson Pratt, *The Seer*, 37.
 33. See, for example, Donald Q. Cannon, “The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith’s Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 179–92; and Van Hale, “The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 209–225.
 34. “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons*, August 15, 1844, 613.
 35. “Conference Minutes,” August 15, 1844, 614.
 36. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 648.
 37. Harold Bloom, in his study of the LDS faith, wrote that “Smith’s insight could have come only from a remarkably apt reading of the Bible, and there I would locate the secret of his religious genius. He was anything but a great writer, but was a wonderful reader, or creative misreader, of the Bible. Mormonism is a wonderfully strong misprision, or creative misreading, of the early history of the Jews. So strong was this act of reading that it broke through all orthodoxies.” Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 84.
 38. “Conference Minutes,” August 1844, 613.
 39. “Conference Minutes,” August 1844, 614.
 40. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 196.
 41. Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*, 3rd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Publications, 2010), 266.

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42. Anderson, *Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, 267.
43. “I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.” Smith, *Teachings of Prophet Joseph Smith*, 370.
44. This title for Jesus appears a remarkable twenty-five times in the Book of Moses, a text that is only twenty-eight pages long.
45. Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 181. Blake Ostler writes of section 93: “There is in these scriptures the undeniable structure of comparison between humans and Christ, demonstrating that Christ became what we are that we might become what Christ is. The focus of this revelation is clear: We are Christified to the extent that we receive the glory of God or light and truth. We are deified to the extent that we keep the commandments of God because, to the same extent, we express the love that is definitive of participating in the divine nature. . . . This revelation illustrates the profound sense of sonship and being like Christ that is expressed in 1 John 3:1–4. However, this revelation adds that, by participating in the light or energies of God, we are also like him in the sense that we participate in the fulness of divine knowledge and power.” Ostler, *Of God and Gods*, 369.
46. Blake Ostler defines Joseph Smith’s understanding of “fulness” as “the fulness of life and glory that is given by the Father to the Son and which is received by grace from one glory to another in a process of growth and progression. It is this same fulness of glory and life that quickens those who accept Christ and continue to grow in his grace from one glory to another.” Ostler, *Of God and Gods*, 366–67.
47. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 208.
48. This creative use of “intelligence” introduces an enticing but hazardous proposition. Building upon the sociological work of M. A. K. Halliday (“Anti-Languages,” *American Anthropologist* 78, no. 3 [1975]: 570–84), a few Johannine scholars have argued that the language of the Gospel of John provided a buffer between the Johannine community and their opponents by serving as an “anti-language.” See Norman R. Petersen, *The Gospel of John and the Sociology*

- of Light: Language and Characterization in the Fourth Gospel* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993), 80–109; Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 46–47. While the reality of a Johannine community and the extent of their insider/outsider dynamic remains theoretical, it is possible that Joseph Smith, the constructor of his own “community” with a prominent insider/outsider dynamic, employed the language of John to provide a buffer between his Mormon followers and their opposition in a similar fashion as a first-century Johannine community may have done.
49. This penchant for developing theological ideas out of Johannine language would remain with Joseph throughout his life. For example, in 1841 Joseph stated that certain individuals in the celestial kingdom will “enjoy a fulness of that light Glory & intelligence.” Cook and Ehat, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 109.
 50. *JSP*, H1:214.
 51. Samuel Brown, speaking of Joseph Smith’s early career as a treasure seeker, writes, “Why, then, did the Mormon prophet retain the title that would identify him to some contemporaries as a treasure seeker, even as he distanced himself from the stigma of the treasure hunt? The biblical precedent mattered a great deal. Joseph Smith took few positions he could not justify from biblical exegesis, however idiosyncratic.” Brown, *On Heaven as It Is on Earth*, 119.
 52. David Holland writes that “Though Joseph Smith, Jr.’s teenaged quest for religious assurance left him disillusioned with the ‘Bible Alone’ mantra of his time, it was still to the Bible that he turned to find a way out of his dilemma. To question its sufficiency was not necessarily to question its truth, its power, or the obligation of obedience to its directives.” David Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 144–45.