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First Principle: One Does Not Speak Too Openly About Sacred Things

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AN EXTRAORDINARY FRIENDSHIP

Joseph Smith's relationship with Moroni was not that of a docile young man and an angel without a personality. Moroni was a prophet and a general who had watched his people destroy themselves because they would not obey the Lord. Joseph was an intelligent, strong-willed teenager who liked to do things his way. So there were times when there were conflicts.

It might have been easier if the angel had "broken" and trained Joseph the way one might break and train a spirited young horse. But if Joseph were to be trusted with the powers of priesthood, he must also be trusted to exercise those powers in the full strength of his own personality. A prophet obeys God. If he does not obey, he is not a prophet; but if he is not free to disobey, he is only a puppet. A prophet and a puppet are not the same thing. A prophet obeys because he chooses to obey.

Joseph would be successful only to the degree that the enormous potential he brought with him into this world was allowed to fully develop.¹ Joseph had to be taught to be obedient without taking away his sense of individual worth, without warping his strong personality, and without

violating the law of his own being. In short, he was to be taught how to obey, but he was not to be “broken.”

The extraordinary friendship that developed between the angel and the boy was molded by their mutual respect, and then forged and tempered by Joseph’s need to keep his balance—to not be overwhelmed by it all. On the one hand, Joseph walked with angels and knew their purposes; on the other, he was only a boy struggling to become a man. Moroni was patient but would not be diverted from his objectives: to prepare Joseph to receive the plates of the Book of Mormon, to teach him how to translate them, and ultimately to teach him how to be a prophet. The angel’s studied patience suggests he was working on this principle: just as one can not be tempted beyond one’s ability to withstand,² so it is true that one can not be given spiritual experiences and insights more quickly than one is willing and able to assimilate them.³

THE FIRST VISION

Joseph was no weakling. He was a tall, athletic, self-assured, good-looking lad who enjoyed physical labor and vigorous play. He worked on his father’s farm and earned some money by “hiring himself out” to work for neighbors. One of those neighbors was Martin Harris, a well-to-do farmer who recalled that after hoeing corn all day, Joseph liked to relax by wrestling. Martin’s report that he and

Joseph often wrestled with each other shows that there was a pleasant and easy friendship between them.⁴

Joseph had very little formal schooling, but his learning was adequate for the time. His father had been a school teacher,⁵ and the family frequently read together. The Bible was the best-selling book on the New England frontier, and the Smiths, like their neighbors, read the Bible. Joseph did not read as much as other members of his family; he spent more time thinking—“given to meditation and deep study” is the way his mother described him.⁶

Joseph was only fourteen years old when he became the focal point of one of the most important events of human history. There are four versions of his First Vision that can be attributed directly to him. The most important is the one in the Pearl of Great Price, but the others are interesting also. The following are excerpts from all four of them:

16. But, exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction—not to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being—just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.

17. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose

brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*

18. My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join.

19. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.”

20. He again forbade me to join with any of them; and many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time. (J.S.-History:16-20a).⁷

Another version reads:

I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord while fervently engaged in supplication my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly

resembled each other in features, and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day.⁸

A third version reads:

A pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day came down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of God; and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying, “Joseph, my son, thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way, walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments. Behold I am the Lord of Glory. I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have eternal life. Behold the world lieth in sin at this time, and none doeth good, no not one. They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments. They draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me; and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to this ungodliness, and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Apostles. Behold and lo, I come quickly, as it is written of me, in the cloud, clothed in the glory of my Father. And my soul was filled with love, and for many days I could rejoice with great joy, and the Lord was with me but I could find none that would believe the heavenly vision.”⁹

The final version reads:

Information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called on the Lord for the first time in the place above stated, or in other words, I made a fruitless attempt to pray. My tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter. I heard a noise behind me like some one walking towards me. I strove again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer. I sprang upon my feet and looked around, but saw no person, or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking. I kneeled again, my mouth was opened and my tongue loosed; I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head; which presently rested down upon me, and filled me with unspeakable joy. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first: he said unto me, “Thy sins are forgiven thee.” He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. I saw many angels in this vision. I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication.¹⁰

While Joseph’s accounts of the First Vision redefine the traditional Christian concept of God, he actually wrote very little about what he saw or about what he was told. One cannot know the full story of the First Vision because Joseph chose not to tell it. His accounts contain enough detail that one may know the events immediately preceding it and know its conclusion—that no church had the true

gospel and that it would be Joseph's responsibility "to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Apostles." However, concerning the particulars of the vision itself, Joseph preserved a reverent silence.

There are many accounts in the scriptures of visions in which prophets of old were told about their own foreordinations and calls to serve. In some accounts the prophets mention angels gathered in a heavenly temple, singing praises to their God.¹¹ Joseph's "I saw many angels" may be a reference to that kind of experience.

One wonders how much like the visions recorded by the ancient prophets Joseph's might have been, and a comparison is interesting. It would be a mistake to try to superimpose their accounts of their visions on young Joseph's First Vision. However, the following comparison is relevant, if to do nothing more than teach about the modest and unpretentious personality of Joseph Smith.

Joseph wrote, "I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me." Through Joseph's words one senses an encompassing serenity in that hovering, blazing pillar. But for Ezekiel, it was like a tornado: "I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire."¹²

Joseph did not share Ezekiel's need to express the dramatic; it was more in keeping with his personality (and perhaps with his culture) to content himself with just being

sure that his record was correct and understandable. On another occasion the young prophet described a “cloud of light” in connection with the visit of John the Baptist, again conveying a sense of peace more than of wonder. For him, all that needed to be said was that, “a messenger from heaven descended in a cloud of light.”¹³

Joseph’s account of his First Vision never takes his readers from the rural setting in which he was most comfortable, and that homespun elegance never loses its sense of reverence. “I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision,”¹⁴ and “when the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air.”¹⁵ Isaiah, on the other hand, transports one to the heavenly temple where he “saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.”¹⁶ Lehi not only told his family about God’s throne, but also about the angels who were there: “He was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.”¹⁷

There are other characteristics that appear in many, but not all, of the accounts of a prophet’s call.¹⁸ Like Lehi’s, the call often takes place during a meeting. The location, when specified, is in the throne room of the Celestial Temple. Members of the Council in Heaven are in attendance, singing hymns of joy to God. At these meetings several things occur: (a) Earth life and the plan of salvation are discussed. (b) There is a vote taken or a covenant made by

which those present express their assent to the proposed plan. (c) Specific assignments, in terms of earth-times, places, and objectives, are made to individual prophets and to those who are foreordained to assist them. (d) In conjunction with those assignments, ordinances¹⁹ and ordinations²⁰ are performed.

In these visions the prophets see their own foreordinations. They are shown that in the heavenly councils they were given assignments that included the authority to speak for God.

When the prophets describe these foreordinations to their readers, they use different symbols. For Jeremiah, that moment was when the Lord put forth his hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth, saying: "I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations."²¹ John the Beloved describes his receiving the authority to speak for God by writing that he was given a little book to eat. That book was symbolic of both his foreordination and his mission.²² Lehi also was given a book, but he was asked to read it. In it he learned of the destruction of Jerusalem and of his responsibility to warn the people.²³ For Isaiah that symbol was a burning light. One of the seraphim took a live coal from the altar of the temple and placed it on Isaiah's lips to purge his iniquity, apparently giving him authority and power to speak the Lord's words to Israel.²⁴

Ezekiel spends about a page explaining the responsibilities of the call he received at that time. Nephi takes a little less space to tell about his father's call. Jeremiah uses 19 chapters to describe his and alludes to it often thereafter.

The candor of Isaiah's reaction to his call is delightful. Isaiah was shown a meeting in the temple in the premortal existence. In the vision, probably while watching himself participate in a discussion about a dangerous situation that was going to develop on the earth in about 750 B.C., he heard, as he had heard eons before, "the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah saw his own response: "Here am I; send me." The Lord reviewed what Isaiah's assignment would be. After a little consideration on Isaiah's part, that assignment looked a bit heavy, and he asked, "Lord, how long?" The Lord gave a straight-forward, but not very comforting, reply: "Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate."²⁵ "Oh. I just thought I would ask," one can almost hear Isaiah sigh to himself.

There is nothing like that in Joseph's story. For him it was sufficient to report that he was told not to join any church and then to add, with a note of solemn self-understanding, "and many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time."²⁶

JOSEPH LEARNS NOT TO TALK TOO OPENLY ABOUT SACRED THINGS

When young Joseph left the grove that day, he must have felt as though all the world lay at his feet. One can feel the memory of his self-assurance in his own report of the conversation between him and his mother. He wrote: "As I

leaned up to the fireplace, mother inquired what the matter was. I replied, ‘Never mind, all is well—I am well enough off.’”

Almost anyone who has ever reared a fourteen-year-old boy need only look to the surface of one’s own imagination to discover the twinkle in Joseph’s eye, the suggestive rise of the eyebrow, and the knowing smile when he added, “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.” (J.S.-History 1:20).

Joseph’s account of his own response to his First Vision brings one quickly back to the realization that, notwithstanding the vision’s magnitude and overwhelming importance, its recipient was still a boy—a vulnerable, tender, young boy.

After the First Vision, his “soul was filled with love,”²⁷ and he soon interpreted that feeling as a need to tell others what had happened. But he was surprised and disappointed to discover that many of his friends reacted by mocking him rather than believing his story:

I soon found, however, that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me...and was the cause of great persecution.... I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? (J.S.-History 1:21-25).

In his enthusiasm to share the great truths he had learned, Joseph was introduced to an eternal principle, that he, like most of us, had to learn the hard way:

The cost of knowing is that one does not tell unless the Spirit says to tell. It is beyond the scope of human ability to teach the mysteries of godliness. Only the Spirit can do that. If our words will help, we are instructed to talk; otherwise we violate a sacred trust when we impose unwanted truth upon those who are not prepared to listen. One does not trifle with sacred things and discuss them as interesting bits for idle conversation. Alma explained that even though it is given to many to know the mysteries of God, those many do not have license to tell whomever they choose. Implicitly, if we insist on talking out of turn and persist in doing so, our hearts will be hardened to the sacredness of the truth. When that happens, we abdicate our right to know, and then we forget. Alma says that not knowing the mysteries of God is called “the chains of hell.” (Alma 12:9-11).

Well before he met Moroni, Joseph learned, by unhappy experience, this most important lesson: Telling about a sacred experience must be as precious as having the experience; otherwise one does not tell at all. Moroni would re-enforce that principle when he explained that Joseph must show the plates to no one until he had permission to do so.