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Changing Latter-day Saint Emphases on Joseph Smith's First Vision

Richard E. Bennett

Professor James B. Allen, distinguished scholar of Joseph Smith's First Vision accounts, wrote the following in a 2012 article: "The writing of Mormon history has only begun. As in the case of other institutions and movements, there is still room in Mormonism for fresh historical scholarship. . . . What is needed, simply, is the sympathetic historian who can approach his tradition with scholarship as well as faith and who will make fresh appraisal of the development of the Mormon mind."¹ The purpose of this presentation is to provide such a "fresh appraisal" of Joseph Smith's 1820 theophany, less perhaps in terms of the vision itself and more with what I am calling the "reclamation of revelation," or the rediscovery of what it taught and why it became so meaningful to Latter-day Saints over time. I will also attempt to show that the First Vision was actually a part of a series of visions and that the vision of Moroni overshadowed it in importance for almost one hundred years.

The so-called "First Vision," in which Joseph Smith claimed to have seen both God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, in a secluded grove of trees near Rochester, New York, two hundred years ago this spring, is of utmost importance to the truth claims of the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Gordon B. Hinckley, late President of the Church, came right to the point: "This is the pivotal thing of our story. Every claim that we make concerning divine authority, every truth we offer concerning the

1. James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 2012), 303–4.

validity of this work, all finds its root in the First Vision of the boy prophet. Without it we would not have anything much to say.” And, he continued, “if the First Vision did not occur, then we are involved in a great sham.”² President Ezra Taft Benson referred to it as “bedrock theology.”³ Howard W. Hunter, who was the fourteenth President of the Church and a longtime stake president here in Pasadena, preached that Joseph Smith’s greatness consists of “one thing—the truthfulness of his declaration that he saw the Father and the Son and that he responded to the reality of that divine revelation.”⁴ The current President, Russell M. Nelson, in his recent rallying call to the several million members of the Church worldwide to celebrate the First Vision at the April 2020 general conference, referred to it as the “hinge pin” of the Restoration of eternal truths.⁵

However, Joseph’s theophany was not always so regarded or even emphasized. In fact, it took at least sixty years for this seminal event to march to the front of the line in Latter-day Saint thought and discourse. There is ample precedent in Christian history for this concept of reclaiming past visions and revelations, or at least reinterpreting their meaning. For example, the writers of the four Gospels took years, if not decades, to record their experiences with, and understanding of, Christ and his life and mission. Martin Luther’s remembrance of his February 1505 thunderbolt experience, or “frightful call from heaven,” to borrow Erik Erikson’s phrase, was an early call to the ministry that Luther continually revisited throughout his life, reinterpreting and reassessing its meanings.⁶ In Latter-day Saint history, Joseph F. Smith’s famous 1918 vision of the dead in the spirit world (D&C 138) was not canonized until fifty-eight years later in 1976, the same time a Kirtland Temple revelation of Joseph Smith’s (D&C 137) was also canonized. One can even make a strong argument that the Church did not reconnect with

2. *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 226–27.

3. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 101.

4. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter: Fourteenth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2002), 190–91.

5. Letter from President Russell M. Nelson in an email from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the entire membership of the Church, January 8, 2020. Also available at “My 2020 Invitation to You: Share the Message of the Restoration of the Savior’s Gospel,” January 1, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/blog/my-2020-invitation-to-you-share-the-message-of-the-restoration-of-the-saviors-gospel>.

6. Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), 92.

its own Book of Mormon until later in the mid-twentieth century under the administration of Ezra Taft Benson. Thus, the reclamation of revelation has place in Latter-day Saint history. Our initial question, therefore, is, Why was this so in regard to such a foundational event as the First Vision? And in lieu of this foundational event, what else claimed priority billing for so long and among so many rank-and-file Latter-day Saints?

“And I Saw Another Angel Fly in the Midst of Heaven”

To those not well versed in matters of early Mormon history, the First Vision is really but the first of four cornerstone visions Smith claimed to have received during the 1820s in what Latter-day Saints celebrate as the Restoration. It began with the First Vision, which this conference commemorates. The second vision was really a series of visions with the angel Moroni beginning in 1823 and recurring until June 1829. The third was the vision of John the Baptist in May 1829 restoring the lesser, or Aaronic, priesthood on the banks of the Susquehanna River in upstate Pennsylvania; the fourth and last vision was the subsequent restoration of the higher, or Melchizedek, priesthood.⁷ These three later visions were often referred to in nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint dialogue as the “administration of angels” and for almost a century received far more attention than did the First Vision. Taken together, these four foundational visions form the cornerstone of Latter-day Saint Restoration theology, even though other significant visions occurred later in or near Kirtland, Ohio.

Oliver Cowdery, Joseph Smith’s trusted scribe in the translation process of the Book of Mormon, who was often referred to as the “Second Elder” of Mormonism, published as early as February 1834 a well-known, detailed description of the opening days of the Restoration. Surprisingly, he never even acknowledged that such a First Vision ever occurred; rather, Oliver indicated that in answer to Smith’s “fervent prayer” in September 1823 in his upstairs bedroom, a “light above the brightness of the sun” appeared “on a sudden” and “a personage stood before him”—the aforementioned Moroni, an ancient Book of Mormon prophet. It was by way of this angelic minister, through a series of annual visits, that Smith eventually received the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon

7. It should be noted that the First Vision did not bestow authority, even though Joseph Smith claims that he was directly called of God in the vision. Priesthood restoration would not occur for another nine years and then only by the visitation of angels.

was translated into English.⁸ Even upon Cowdery's surprise return to the Church in 1848 after a ten-year excommunication, in recounting his previous experiences he omitted any reference to the First Vision but gave fervent testimony of the appearance of the "angels."⁹

Early Latter-day Saint missionaries rarely mentioned the First Vision in their proselyting efforts but certainly told of Moroni. "Some time in July 1831. Two men came . . . & held an evening meeting," William E. McLellin recorded in his journal. "They said that in September 1827 an Angel appeared to Joseph Smith . . . and showed to him the confusion on the earth respecting true religion. It was also told him to go a few miles distant to a certain hill. . . . He went as directed and found plates . . . containing reformed Egyptian Hieroglyphical characters which he was inspired to translate and the record was published in 1830 and is called the Book of Mormon. . . . I examined the book, the people, the preachers and the old scriptures and from the evidences which I had before me I was bound to believe the book of Mormon to be a divine Revelation."¹⁰

James Allen has argued convincingly that "if Joseph Smith told the story [of the First Vision] to friends and neighbors in 1820, he stopped telling it" by 1830, and it was not widely circulated until at least 1838. "It is apparent," he insists, "that belief in the vision was not essential for conversion to the Church" in most of the nineteenth century.¹¹ Indeed, not until 1880 was it even canonized in Latter-day Saint scripture. Richard Bushman, in his biography of Joseph Smith, shows that throughout his life Smith was generally "reluctant" to talk about the vision.¹² Jan Shipps has noted that the vision was practically unknown and not emphasized until it was later published in 1842.¹³ And Kathleen Flake

8. Oliver Cowdery, "Letter IV," *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 5 (February 1835): 78–79; reprinted in the *Millennial Star* 1, no. 2 (June 1840): 42; and later in the *Improvement Era* 2, no. 6 (April 1899): 421.

9. Reuben Miller's account reads, "I was also present with Joseph when the Melchizedek Priesthood was conferred by the holy angels of God." Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Reuben Miller, Recorder of Oliver Cowdery's Reaffirmations," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1968): 278. See also Pottawattamie [Kanesville, Iowa] High Council Minutes, November 4–5, 1848, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

10. *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836*, ed. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies; Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1994), August 4, 1832, 79–80, underlining in original.

11. James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (1966): 44.

12. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005), 39.

13. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 31–33.

has demonstrated that the First Vision did not really come into play until the demise of plural marriage after 1890, when it was fastened upon as a new “sense of otherness,” a Latter-day Saint distinction separate and apart from plural marriage.¹⁴

My own independent research, which has included studying hundreds of sermons and thousands of pages of Church articles and conference addresses, largely substantiates the truth of what my colleagues have already stated. Rarely does the term “First Vision” appear in Latter-day Saint nineteenth-century dialogue, and practically never is it capitalized. This is not to say that there are no references to this founding vision. For instance, John Taylor said in general conference in 1882 what other leaders occasionally said: “A message was announced to us by Joseph Smith, the Prophet, as a revelation from God, wherein he stated that holy angels had appeared to him and revealed the everlasting Gospel . . . ; and God the Father, and God the Son, both appeared to him; and the Father, pointing, said, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, hear ye him.”¹⁵ I could include several other similar references. But it was on the lower end of the piano keyboard, just one of many notes in the compositions of the nineteenth-century Church, and not at all the dominant or overarching chord.

References in the last half of the nineteenth century to the First Vision are more of an undercurrent, treating it as more of a personal revelation than a doctrinal statement of belief. Brigham Young said relatively little about the First Vision but much more about “the angels” who restored ancient truths and priesthood. “The first light of the morning, in this age, and time referred to by the Savior,” Young’s First Presidency proclaimed, “was the angel, who had the everlasting gospel, which was to be preached to all people, preaching and ministering to Joseph Smith Jun., and commanding Joseph to preach and administer to others, even as he had received of the angel.”¹⁶

14. Kathleen Flake, “Re-placing Memory: Latter-day Saint Use of Historical Monuments and Narrative in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Religion and American Culture* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 69–100, quote on 84.

15. “President John Taylor,” *Millennial Star* 44, no. 22 (May 29, 1882): 337. Even in this account, “holy angels” takes first billing.

16. Sixth General Epistle of the First Presidency, September 22, 1851, accessed April 16, 2020, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=67b4c1e2-4dd6-4d1b-84c2-c28655191d89&crate=0&index=1>; see also Reid L. Neilson and Nathan N. Waite, eds., *Settling in the Valley, Proclaiming the Gospel: The General Epistles of the Mormon First Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 137. Wilford Woodruff once went so far as to say that it was the angel Moroni “who informed him [Joseph] that all the sects were wrong” and that “he should be an instrument in the hands of the Lord in

For decades, the prime messenger of the Restoration was an angel. If Joseph's first vision announced, the second vision pronounced; if the first introduced, the second elaborated and gave much greater emphasis and instruction. It was "an angel! an angel!!" as Orson Hyde stated in 1842, who was "commissioned from the Almighty [who] descended, and rolled back the curtains of night."¹⁷ It was Moroni, as Parley P. Pratt's famous hymn "An Angel from on High" (in the 1844 hymnal) attested, who parted the heavens and "the long, long silence broke."¹⁸ In yet another hymn, "See the Mighty Angel Flying," composed by Robert B. Thompson in 1896 and arranged by the well-known Latter-day Saint composer Evan Stephens, we see once again that for most nineteenth-century believers it was the angel who authored the Restoration:

See! The mighty angel flying,
See, he speeds his way to earth,
To proclaim the blessed gospel,
And restore the ancient faith,
And restore, and restore the ancient faith.¹⁹

Several editorials in the England-based *Millennial Star* were stating as late as 1865 that when Joseph Smith was fourteen years old it was the angel—and not God—who appeared before him.²⁰

It was the angel, the "voice of a celestial messenger from the courts of glory," who delivered "the everlasting gospel in its fulness to a young man."²¹ George Q. Cannon, as First Counselor in the First Presidency, said as much in 1881: "A young and illiterate man testified that he had seen an angel from heaven, and that the old Gospel, its gifts and the everlasting

establishing His kingdom upon the earth." Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 13:324 (September 5, 1869).

17. This declaration was from the introduction to a booklet titled *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste* that Orson Hyde published in Germany on his way to Palestine. He included a portion of the introduction in English in a letter to Joseph Smith. Brent M. Rogers and others, *Documents, Volume 8: February–November 1841*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2019), 171.

18. Parley P. Pratt, "An Angel from On High," *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 13.

19. Robert B. Thompson, "See the Mighty Angel Flying," *Improvement Era* 2, no. 3 (January 1899): 240; see also "See, the Mighty Angel Flying," *Hymns*, no. 330.

20. Editorial, *Millennial Star* 27, no. 51 (December 23, 1865): 809. Significantly, not even in anti-Mormon literature such as *Mormonism Unveiled* by E. D. Howe or John C. Bennett's *History of the Saints* are found references to the First Vision.

21. W. C. Dunbar, in "Letters to the Editor," *Millennial Star*, July 15, 1850, 222.

priesthood, were to be restored.”²² It was the angel, as first revealer,²³ who came, as President Wilford Woodruff said in 1889, to fulfill prophecy—who came “in fulfillment of the declaration of St. John . . . [and] who has delivered the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the inhabitants of the earth, [and who] revealed unto them the world of the Lord.”²⁴ It was the angel, in his capacity as custodian of his own ancient record, who delivered the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated to Joseph in 1827. It was the angel, flying “in the midst of heaven,” who “came to earth, and committed the Gospel to Joseph Smith.”²⁵ As one English convert phrased it in 1885, “The Latter-day Saints testify that the Gospel has been restored to them by an angel who appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith, and revealed unto him the will of God concerning the establishment of his Church and kingdom.”²⁶ And as George Teasdale said in a general conference in 1898, “We testify that this angel has come, that this everlasting Gospel has been restored.”²⁷ Finally, as one Scottish convert put it, it was God who “sent his angels to deliver to man again the fullness of the Gospel. One angel in particular we refer to is he that John [the Revelator] saw as recorded in Revelations, who was to bring the Gospel.”²⁸

A computer search of Latter-day Saint general conference addresses between 1850 and 1929 confirms the point. A search for the specific phrase “angel flying through” in reference to the scripture found in Revelation 14:6—“And I saw another angel flying through the midst of heaven”—shows thirty-four instances where this particular phrase was used. This phrase was selected for my search because it was so often cited in connection with Moroni’s appearances. Most of them occurred before 1900, and fourteen of them in the 1870s.

Considering all these proclamations, expositions, lyrics, and testimonials that could be multiplied by scores, it is hardly surprising that a

22. *Deseret News Weekly*, April 3, 1881; see also “Fifty-first Annual Conference,” *Millennial Star* 43, no. 18 (May 2, 1881): 276.

23. Provo Stake General Minutes, vol. 15, December 21, 1901, Church History Library.

24. *Deseret News Weekly*, April 7, 1889.

25. J. H. Donnellon, “Ecclesiastical Corruption and Apostacy [sic],” *Millennial Star* 27, no. 24 (June 17, 1865): 374.

26. John Nicholson, “Has an Angel from the Heavens Visited the Earth in This Age of the World?” *Millennial Star* 47, no. 21 (May 27, 1865): 322.

27. George Teasdale, in *Sixty-Eighth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1898), 51 (misprinted as page 15).

28. Peter Sinclair, quoted in “Glasgow Conference,” *Millennial Star* 37, no. 17 (April 26, 1875): 257.

sixteen-foot gold-plated statue of the angel Moroni, sculpted by Cyrus Dallin, adorned the highest pillar of the Salt Lake Temple at its dedication in April 1893—and still does. While the current Church emphasis is on Christ as the central figure of the gospel as well as on the Christ-centered name of the Church, the fact remains that Moroni is the angel still perched at the top of most, if not all, of the 159 dedicated, functioning modern Latter-day Saint temples worldwide.²⁹

A Changing Emphasis

This emphasis on Moroni began to change in the late nineteenth century, for a variety of reasons. One might well make the argument that the Church was so preoccupied during the last quarter of the nineteenth century with defending plural marriage and then again well into the early twentieth century with the Reed Smoot trials that it had little time or energy to devote to other theological controversies. Suffice it to say that the judicial crusades launched against the Church and the strenuous and expensive efforts to defend itself against them were an all-consuming, torturous contest that disrupted families, sent hundreds of men (including General Authorities) to prison, and deflected the Church from other pressing priorities. It eventually ended with President Wilford Woodruff's 1890 Manifesto signaling his intention to bring an end to this most controversial practice.

There are several evidences for the recovery of the First Vision. Although the year 1870 was the fiftieth anniversary of the First Vision, little was said of it by way of celebration, although Orson Pratt referenced it probably more often and more fervently than did any of his contemporaries in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.³⁰ In 1879–80, C. C. A. Christensen,

29. The angel Moroni is not displayed in any of the stunning new mural paintings in the Rome Temple Visitors' Center.

30. See Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 15:181 (September 22, 1872), and 17:279. It was under Orson Pratt's direction that several (twenty-six) early revelations of Joseph Smith were first published in the 1876 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Four years later, an expanded 1880 edition of the D&C, published with electrotype plates, was voted upon and ratified by the Church membership as canonized scripture, along with an expanded version of the Pearl of Great Price containing Joseph Smith's History of his official 1838 First Vision account. See Robert J. Woodford, "The Story of the Doctrine and Covenants," *Ensign* 14, no. 12 (December 1984): 32–39. George Q. Cannon was also in the forefront of reclaiming the First Vision, especially after his call to the First Presidency in 1883.

Some members took exception to the story of the First Vision on the doctrinal grounds that for one to see God, one would have to hold the priesthood. Orson Pratt dismissed this argument in a talk he gave in 1880, explaining that even though Joseph's account of the First Vision has troubled those who have taught one must have the

well-known painter and illustrator, embarked upon a Churchwide tour with his 175-foot canvas “Mormon Panorama” of Church history-based paintings, the first panel of which featured Joseph Smith’s first prayer in the Sacred Grove—a long-since-lost painting called “The Vision.”³¹ Christensen inspired young twenty-four-year-old George Manwaring to compose the hymn “Oh How Lovely Was the Morning” (now known as “Joseph Smith’s First Prayer”), initially sung by a young woman named Sarah Ann Kirkman in the Salt Lake City 14th Ward in 1878, just before Christensen went on tour. It became an instant favorite. Then, in 1886, Assistant Church Historian Andrew Jenson published five thousand copies of his *Church Chronology*, in which the very first entry after Joseph Smith’s birth was his 1820 “first vision,” and then embarked upon an official Church History lecture tour throughout many congregations in the West. In 1893, the Church commissioned and installed a stained-glass depiction of the First Vision in the Salt Lake Temple.

Joseph F. Smith, nephew of the founding prophet and sixth President of the Church (1901–1918), set about purchasing important historical sites, including the Sacred Grove in Upstate New York, in order to emphasize the significance of history in the minds of young Latter-day Saints and to secure a legacy of reverent respect for the Church’s founders. His “selection, relation, and repetition of the story of his uncle’s first vision helped them navigate their way to a new narrative, one in which plural marriage could be relinquished without eroding faith in revelations received by prophets past or present.”³² In 1890, the same year he proclaimed the Manifesto ending plural marriage, President Wilford Woodruff emphasized the First Vision in a way he may not have ever done before when he said, “Joseph Smith was administered with in a way that I have found no record of. . . . This was an important revelation which has never been manifested in the same manner in any dispensation.”³³

priesthood to see the face of God, Joseph was able to see God because “the Priesthood was conferred upon Joseph [in the premortal life] before he came here.” Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:27 (October 10, 1880).

31. See *Ogden Junction* 8, no. 96 (February 11, 1880): 1. The scroll of Christensen’s paintings was stored for decades until “rediscovered.” “The paintings were cut apart to more easily display them separately. Unfortunately, this resulted in the loss of the painting of the First Vision, but all other paintings from the scroll survived.” Keith L. Brown, “C.C.A. Christensen, Mormon Artist,” *History of Mormonism*, July 18, 2012, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://historyofmormonism.com/2012/07/18/c-c-a-christensen-mormon-artist/>.

32. Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 137.

33. From an address by President Wilford Woodruff, April 4, 1890, *Deseret News Weekly*, 40:525.

References to the First Vision in general conferences began to multiply almost exponentially starting in the 1880s. According to yet another computer search, although there were fifty-one references in the 1850s to the exact phrase “the Father and the Son” and another sixty-seven in the 1860s, none of these references were in context of, or referring to, the First Vision. This trend continued in the 1870s. Most were in the context of prayer, ordination, the Godhead, and so forth. However, of the forty-four references to the above phrase from the 1880s, eighteen of them (approximately 40 percent) were clearly in the context of the First Vision. This changing emphasis continued to increase thereafter: 19/46 or 41 percent in the 1890s; 44/60 or 73 percent in the first decade of the twentieth century; and by the 1920s, as high as 80/104 or 76 percent.³⁴

Instead of the angel Moroni introducing the Restoration, ecclesiastical leaders were now referencing the First Vision as “the *beginning* of this great latter-day work . . . when the Father and the Son revealed themselves to the Prophet Joseph Smith,” as Charles W. Penrose said in 1881.³⁵ It was “the Father and the Son [who] came from the mansions above to *introduce* this work,” averred George Q. Cannon in 1896.³⁶ And, “Mormonism rises or falls upon that tremendous platform, that in *its origin* it goes back to God the Father and God the Son,” said Adam S. Bennion in 1925.³⁷ Thus, by the early twentieth century, in Latter-day Saint vernacular the First Vision was no longer sounding in a minor key but rather as a major chord.

“The Disappearance of God”

There may have been, however, other factors at play that contributed to a rising emphasis on the First Vision, matters that had very little to do with the Church itself and everything to do with what was transpiring more broadly in Christian circles in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. I speak of the rising controversy over science and religion, that “New Reformation” in thought that led almost inexorably to what one

34. “Corpus of LDS General Conference Talks, 1851–2019,” LDS General Conference Corpus, <https://www.lds-general-conference.org>.

35. Charles W. Penrose, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:71 (January 30, 1881).

36. George Q. Cannon, in *Millennial Star* 58, no. 35 (August 27, 1896): 546, italics added.

37. Adam S. Bennion, in *Ninety-Sixth Semi-annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1925), 47, italics added.

scholar has called “the downing of religious orthodoxy.”³⁸ As John Morley wrote as early as 1874, “The souls of men have become void; into the void have entered in triumph the seven devils of Secularity.”³⁹

This controversy was spurred on by Charles Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, and in particular by his emphasis on natural selection and the “eat or be eaten” theory of the survival of the fittest, and also by Marx’s economic arguments, by Freud’s godless psychological penetrations, and later by Nietzsche’s claim that God, if he ever lived, was now almost certainly dead. All these and many other voices gave rise to the oft-discussed modernist controversy that came to question the historicity, indeed the very authority, of the Holy Bible. Such arguments led to a rapidly rising secularism that first encroached upon, then rapidly engulfed, much of European society.

Of this rapid transformation, Jacques Barzun commented further: Darwin, Marx, Wagner, and others became “representatives of the dominant tradition we live by.” Feeling, beauty, and moral values, so celebrated by Coleridge, Wilberforce, and others not that long before, had become mere “illusions for which the world of fact gave no warrant.” This new agnostic, if not atheistic, age of “mechanical materialism” became a “cold world in which man’s feelings are illusory and his will powerless.”⁴⁰ He continued, “The notion of a Deity or Providence of Life Force having a tendency of its own . . . was ruled out. . . . Purpose, especially the purpose of Providence or of man himself, had nothing to do with progress.”⁴¹ Following the lead of scientific opinion, Edward J. Larson has shown that science educators soon “began adding evolutionary concepts to high-school textbooks almost immediately and had fully incorporated the doctrine into biology teaching materials by the turn of the century.”⁴²

J. Hillis Miller, in his provocative book *The Disappearance of God*, argues that the effects of this philosophical tsunami were keenly felt in the literature of the time. “All we can say is that a whole set of changes, both spiritual and material, happened more or less simultaneously, like a great wave breaking on the shore, and that by the nineteenth century

38. Jacques Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage* (Garden City, N.Y. Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), 56.

39. Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, and Wagner*, 87.

40. Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner*, 2–3, and 7.

41. Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner*, 11, 28.

42. Edward J. Larson, *Trial and Error: The American Controversy over Creation and Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 8–9.

the starting place for a writer was likely to be the isolation and destitution of Mathew Arnold or of the early Hopkins.”⁴³

The Christian Response

The impact of Darwinism on Christianity bears more than cursory examination and may be highly instructive to the Latter-day Saint historian. Initial response to Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was guarded but not overwhelmingly negative. While many viewed his transmutation hypothesis—with its belief in random variation from species to species—as patently absurd, several more liberal-minded intellectuals argued that a close scientific study of nature itself was not to be shunned but rather welcomed, that such a study would inevitably add testament to the divine. Believing in a “special divine creation,” writers like William Paley in his *Natural Theology* and Samuel Harris, Yale professor and Congregationalist clergyman, argued that the glories and beauties of nature prove that there is a “benevolent, supernatural Designer,” a “superintending Providence,” and that a study of nature was nothing more than a study of theology.⁴⁴ It was only “common sense,” they and so many other religionists asserted, to believe in a God that had created such a sublime creation.⁴⁵ America’s leading nineteenth-century botanist, Asa Gray, for instance, saw Darwinism’s theories as possible but maintained that God remained supreme Creator.

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic response was also multifaceted, if not a bit puzzling. Pope Pius IX (1846–1878) had been recalcitrant in his ardent belief that there could be no reconciliation of any kind between the Holy Roman Church and modern society. His successor, however, Pope Leo XIII, took a much more enlightened approach and sought to make Roman Catholicism more welcoming to modern thought and progressive ideas. Father J. A. Zahm, professor of physics at the University of Notre Dame in America, declared in his best-selling book, *Evolution and Dogma*, “There is much in Evolution to admire, much that is ennobling and inspiring, much that illustrates and corroborates the truths of faith, much that may be made ancillary to revelation and religion, much that throws new light on the mysteries of creation, much . . . that exalts our ideas of creative power and wisdom

43. Miller, *Disappearance of God*, 4.

44. Jon H. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 8, 11.

45. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 40.

and love, much, in fine, that makes the whole circle of the sciences tend, as never before, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*.”⁴⁶

Such a liberal attitude, however, soon brought down the wrath of Rome’s more conservative defenders of Catholic dogma—*La Civiltà Cattolica*, a group of Roman Jesuits who claimed that Zahm represented “a truly American lack of restraint” and that “evolution . . . was a tissue of vulgar paralogisms,” a series of “arbitrary suppositions unsupported by facts and indeed contradicted by them, fantastic aphorisms and subterfuges that are a disgrace to the seriousness of science.”⁴⁷ At their insistence, Zahm withdrew sales of his book and recanted many of his main arguments. The Sacred Congregation finally decided in the late 1890s that evolution theory was “temerarious” (reckless or rash) and not to be upheld by the Catholic faith. However, it must be pointed out that subsequent official statements of the popes and other official teachers in the Catholic Church have reflected a gradual easing of remaining concerns about theories of evolution and their potential impact on Catholic doctrine. The church leaves the doctrine of evolution of the human body from already existing and living matter as an open question for experts, while the Catholic faith requires that the human soul is immediately created by God.⁴⁸

Darwin’s so-called “bulldog” and populist, Thomas Henry Huxley, exacerbated tensions when he published extensively what Darwin had long maintained privately but was at first hesitant to print: that man himself, though the highest form of species, had evolved over millions of years from lower life forms. It was the British philosopher Herbert Spencer who popularized the terms “evolution” and “survival of the fittest” while condemning religion as outdated and irrelevant superstition. Finally, in 1871, Darwin published his *The Descent of Man* in which he stated unequivocally that man is a “product of the evolutionary process.” The lines were now starkly drawn, and, as Andrew Preston Peabody of Harvard noted, religion’s battle with science had become the “Armageddon—the final battlefield.”⁴⁹

Jon A. Roberts sees 1875 as a watershed moment in the ongoing conflict between Protestant Christianity and rising scientific “materialism.”

46. Father J. A. Zahm, as quoted in Barry Brundell, “Catholic Church Politics and Evolution Theory, 1894–1902,” *British Journal of the History of Science* 34, no. 1 (March 2001): 89.

47. Brundell, “Catholic Church Politics,” 89–90.

48. Brundell, “Catholic Church Politics,” 89–90.

49. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 64.

Religious defenders, feeling “increasingly uneasy,” saw ever more clearly the evolution controversy as an atheistic threat to the very doctrine of sin and the Fall, the redemption of Christ, and personal salvation.⁵⁰ Their defense was therefore no longer just a reference to common-sense theology or the beauties and divinities of nature but a reliance on the fundamental theologies of Christianity: the historicity of the Fall, the existence of God, the nature of God, and his relationship to his creation.⁵¹

To the growing chorus that there was no God or, at the very least, that he was an impersonal, totally “unknowable God,” there came a veritable torrent of response in defense of the God of the Bible who could be known and worshipped—a God who had periodically intervened in the affairs of humankind throughout history and could do so again. Such Protestant intellectuals as J. E. Barnes, a Congregationalist clergyman, responded that God, though beyond human comprehension, is, “in the highest sense, a Father and a Friend.”⁵² And many Protestants vigorously defended prayer and the means of true communion with a very personal God. Mark Hopkins of Williams College emphasized his belief in an “anthropomorphic” God in whose very image man was—or had to have been—created, not the image of some lower life form “but one remove above the brute.”⁵³ There was every possibility, if not necessity, of continuing “revelation of God,” for divinity to intervene in the natural world.

“Joseph, This Is My Beloved Son”

To this warring controversy, Latter-day Saints began to realize more keenly, perhaps, than they had ever done before that they, too, had something to offer, something in their arsenal of doctrines that, albeit highly critical of both Catholic and Protestant Christianity, might nonetheless speak to the evolution debate then raging. That “something” was the First Vision, in particular what it had to say about evolution, creation, the moral reality of sin, Christ as Redeemer, and God the Father and his relationship with humankind. In one of the first references to the evolution controversy given in general conference, President George Q. Cannon relied upon the First Vision as a response when he remarked upon the issue in April 1889:

50. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 108.

51. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 99–101.

52. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 76.

53. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, 104–5.

The first revelation that was given in our day, in answer to the prayer of the boy, Joseph Smith, Jun., and seemingly the most necessary one that could be given to lay the foundation of faith in the human mind, was the appearance of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. . . . Men talk about evolution. This is the true [theory of] evolution—being such as we are and developing and advancing and progressing in that upward and onward career until we shall become like Him, in truth; until we shall possess the powers that He possesses and exercise the dominion that He now exercises.⁵⁴

While Latter-day Saint doctrine emphasized more the moral ascendancy of humans and less the descendancy of the Fall, and more the benevolent than the malevolent consequences of Adam’s sin, both Latter-day Saint and traditional Christian views nevertheless saw the Fall as imperative. Christ’s resurrected appearance in the Grove was evidence of that doctrine.

One might also look to the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893 as another possible watershed moment.⁵⁵ That was also the year of the famous World’s Columbian Exposition, when the World Parliament of Religions convened as part of the fair. Snubbed by conference organizers because of their long and very recent commitment to plural marriage, Church leaders were stunned that they were not invited to participate in any of the main sessions.⁵⁶ Still, Elder Franklin D. Richards, President of the Quorum of the Twelve, and others such as Elder B. H. Roberts of the Seventy prepared articles and papers that, if they could not be given at the conference, could at least be disseminated to the press and to Church membership. Among the very first things Richards referred to was the “revelation and commandment of the Most High God, who, with Jesus Christ, His Son, had appeared to Joseph Smith in heavenly vision.”⁵⁷ This revelation of a living, immanent God anew in this modern age was in and of itself a direct response to the encroaching atheism implied in Darwinian thought.⁵⁸

54. George Q. Cannon, “Discourse,” *Deseret Weekly*, May 25, 1889, 675–76, reporting an address given on April 7, 1889.

55. *Church Chronology: Or a Record of Important Events Connected with the History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Territory of Utah*, comp. Andrew Jenson (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1886).

56. Reid L. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). The Latter-day Saints were finally invited to make a presentation in “Hall 3,” a side room that could accommodate only a relatively small number of people.

57. Franklin D. Richards, “The Mormon Church,” *Improvement Era* 2, no. 4 (February 1899): 245.

58. B. H. Roberts published his study *The Doctrine of Deity* in 1903, in which he defended the existence of God, his involvement in human affairs, and his readiness

A few years later, another Latter-day Saint observer, A. Wooton, writing in the *Improvement Era* in 1900, referred to the laboratory method of instruction and the scientific learning then gaining ascendancy in American schools, to which he said divine revelation was a far superior way of knowing the truth. “After this manifestation” of the First Vision, he pointedly said, “Joseph Smith knew more of the personality of the Father and the Son than he could have known by reading volumes of written works on the subject.”⁵⁹ Alma O. Taylor, writing of the First Vision that same year, specifically applied it to the scientist when he wrote, “During this period of time . . . new theories in the known sciences were advanced; new ideas of God were formed,” but the First Vision “gave food to the skeptic; it became a more valuable study to the scientist than the mere disciple. . . . The vision was indeed the earthquake which dried up the rivers of unbelief.”⁶⁰

In August 1908 while speaking at yet another Parliament of Religion, this time in New Jersey, Professor James E. Talmage, a geologist by profession, asked of his audience, “What then has ‘Mormonism’ to offer the world as to its conception of God? . . . The God that spake to Adam and to Noah, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, speaks today. . . . His voice is not silenced. . . . ‘Mormonism’ embraces the entire plan of divine evolution. It proclaims progression and advancement.”⁶¹

Appearing in the April 1908 edition of the *Improvement Era* was an article by John A. Widtsoe, professor of agricultural science and then president of the Utah Agricultural College, in which he praised the recently deceased William Thompson (Lord Kelvin), a leading British mathematician and staunch opponent of Darwin’s theories. Kelvin, Widtsoe insisted, was one who had “no sympathy with the idle notion of the day that life began upon this earth and will disappear with death. . . . Does ‘Mormonism’ agree with the sane talks of Lord Kelvin? All who understand it will say, yes. The science of the world is, and can be no more than one phase of the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ which embraces all truth.”⁶²

to answer prayer. B. H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity: The Roberts–Van der Donckt Discussion, to Which Is Added a Discourse, Jesus Christ: The Revelation of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1903).

59. A. Wooton, “Revelation by Works and Word,” *Improvement Era* 3, no. 5 (March 1900): 337.

60. Alma O. Taylor, “The First Vision,” *Improvement Era* 3 no. 9 (July 1900): 683, 686.

61. James E. Talmage, “‘The Message of Mormonism’ to the World of Today,” *Improvement Era* 11, no. 12 (October 1908): 907–12.

62. John A. Widtsoe, “Lord Kelvin, The God-Fearing,” *Improvement Era* 11, no. 6 (April 1908): 402, 406. *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:200. One might also argue that

Former Brigham Young University professor James R. Clark, compiler of the multivolume *Messages of the First Presidency*, has argued that the controversy over evolution, and particularly Widtsoe's article in praise of Lord Kelvin who had assailed it, may well have formed the basis of the 1909 official statement of the First Presidency of the Church on "The Origin of Man." "Since the *Improvement Era* was an official organ of the L.D.S. Church and widely read throughout the Church," Clark argued, "some of the statements in the Widtsoe article may have been responsible for some of the 'Inquiries . . . respecting the attitude of the Church . . . ' on the matter."⁶³

In their statement, the First Presidency relied on the First Vision as pillar and authority for its declaration that humanity, though fallen, are nevertheless spiritual children of God, that Christ is the Son of God, that he lives, and that he is in the express image of the Father. "It was in this form that the Father and the Son, as two personages, appeared to Joseph Smith, when, as a boy of fourteen years, he received his first vision."⁶⁴ This important proclamation went on to assert the Latter-day Saint belief in a one-time, nonpolygenist, divine creation of man and woman, in the fall of Adam as "the first man of all men" and "primal parent of our race," in the resultant necessary redemption of Christ, and in a personal, loving God. Two years later, the First Presidency had the opportunity to tell the Church's story in a special issue of the *Oakland Tribune*, in which they recounted the history and doctrines in such a way that placed the "first vision" at the forefront of Joseph Smith's prophetic call.⁶⁵

Yet another doctrine stemming from the First Vision, at least so claimed by the Latter-day Saints, is that in calling Joseph by name, as he once did Abraham and Moses, God revealed anew that he knows his sons and daughters intimately. Smith's account certainly supports the claim of some contemporary religionists that an immediate personal

Talmage's appointment as a Church Apostle in 1911 and Widtsoe's a decade later—both scientists—are of themselves something of a Latter-day Saint nod to the fact that there can be reconciliation between faith and science. See also Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins*.

63. *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 4:199 (November 1909).

64. Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, and Anthon H. Lund, "The Origin of Man," in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:199–206 (November 1909).

65. Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, and John Henry Smith, "An Empire in the Desert," in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:231–51 ("first vision" mentioned on 232), printed in the *Oakland Tribune*, October 15, 1911. "The privilege of telling . . . our own [story] in the columns of the Oakland Tribune . . . is one that we greatly appreciate."

communion with God was indeed possible, that man was in the image of God, that Joseph “conversed with Him as a man may speak with his friend.”⁶⁶ In short, the First Vision, despite the ongoing debate over it, revealed God anew not as some distant overseer but as one immanent and fully invested in the affairs of his creation and immediate to the time—in some respects the very kind of Father God some other religionists of the day were asserting as answer to the heated controversies of the day.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has attempted to show that the visions of angels, and not the First Vision, were primary to Latter-day Saints in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the pattern of the reclamation of past revelation has place in Latter-day Saint history, specifically, that the First Vision came to be understood for reasons immediate to the changing times. I have neither time nor space to extend my argument further into the twentieth century, to include the modernist controversy at Brigham Young University in 1911 or the so-called University of Chicago controversy of the 1930s that pitted certain liberal-minded Latter-day Saint professors against Church leaders. Nor can I explore the statement of J. Reuben Clark in 1938 entitled “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” in which adherence to the belief in Smith’s First Vision was an expectation, indeed a requirement, of all Latter-day Saint religious educators. Nevertheless, the Church was not immune to the evolution controversy of the later nineteenth century that affected both Protestant and Catholic thought. And the evidence is mounting to show that the rising emphasis on Smith’s 1820 vision played a pivotal role in confronting that controversy, a vision that has staying power “200 years on.”

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66. B. H. Roberts, “The Justification of Faith,” *Improvement Era* 2, no. 3 (January 1899): 200.