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## “Show Them unto No Man”: Part 2. The Book of Moses and the Early Jewish Christian Esoteric Tradition

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**Abstract:** Whether the inspiration for Smith’s theology was divine or mundane, in this contribution I argue that Joseph Smith’s body of esoteric teachings simply could not have been constructed piecemeal from the sorts of sources Harrell proposes. Instead, he must have somehow gained relatively direct access to the early Jewish Christian esoteric tradition. We can be relatively certain of this because the book of Moses is composed in the form of a typical early Jewish and Jewish Christian esoteric text called an “ascent apocalypse.” I will argue that the evidence for this is so compelling that the focus of historians working on early LDS doctrinal history should shift more fully to whether and how Smith could have gotten his hands on early Jewish Christian esoteric traditions.



# “Show Them unto No Man”

## Part 2. The Book of Moses and the Early Jewish Christian Esoteric Tradition

*Barry R. Bickmore*

There can be no question but that the Restoration was in many ways strange for its time and place, and this can make life difficult for anyone attempting to track the history of Latter-day Saint religious beliefs. Its very strangeness makes it difficult for historians who do not believe Joseph Smith’s teachings were divinely inspired to pinpoint plausible, mundane sources of inspiration.

To make matters worse, Smith clearly practiced esotericism—the method of publicly proclaiming some teachings while reserving others for believers, or even a subset of believers. In the previous essay in this series,<sup>1</sup> I noted that together the Book of Mormon and book of Moses represent an incredibly rare phenomenon—an exoteric (publicly taught) and esoteric (hidden) pair of religious documents, dictated near contemporaneously by the same person. On the one hand, the Book of Mormon claims to contain “a lesser part” of the Christian message, which the intended audience “should have first, to try their faith,” after which they might be given “the greater things” (3 Ne. 26:8–11). On the other hand, the book of Moses (written only a few months later) includes two admonitions for Joseph Smith not to show it to anyone but believers until instructed otherwise (Moses 1:42; 4:32). In other words, the documents explicitly claim that important information was being left out of the Book of Mormon, to be disclosed later in subsequent revelations, such as

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1. Barry R. Bickmore, “‘Show Them unto No Man’: Part 1. Esoteric Teachings and the Problem of Early Latter-day Saint Doctrinal History,” *BYU Studies* 62, no. 1 (2023): 29–60.

the book of Moses. Therefore, if Joseph Smith actually was operating as both works explicitly claim, one would expect to find clearer expositions of his early theology in Moses.

And yet I showed that some historians who study early Latter-day Saint doctrinal history often ignore this exoteric-esoteric relationship and consequently make poorly supported interpretations of Book of Mormon passages to depict a series of seismic shifts in belief. For instance, they interpret Book of Mormon theology as a strange sort of modalism (that is, the idea that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are a single person who appears in three guises, rather than the standard Trinitarian formula of three distinct persons in a single divine being), which directly contradicts Moses 4:2–4 (a three-way conversation between the Father, the Son, and Satan, the latter two of which are depicted as subordinate to the Father) and cannot even withstand the totality of evidence from the Book of Mormon itself.<sup>2</sup> They also reject the idea that Book of Mormon teachings are compatible with the doctrine presented in the book of Moses of the premortal existence of the human soul (Moses 3:5; 5:24; 6:51), even though Ether 3:15 asserts that “all men were created in the beginning.” It seems clear that Joseph Smith was *successfully* employing esotericism while he went about his attempt to restore primitive Christianity, as evidenced by the fact that competent historians have so often demonstrably misread the Book of Mormon in ways that would have been impossible if they had prioritized its esoteric counterpart (the book of Moses).

I went on to argue that Joseph Smith appears, from the beginning, to have had in mind a theological framework in which the gap between God, angels, and humans was considerably narrower than commonly depicted in traditional Christian theology. What is more, I demonstrated that every essential point of this framework—an anthropomorphic God, the premortal existence of human souls, the fundamental similarity of God’s spiritual essence to that of angels and human souls, the oneness of the Son and Spirit with the Father as a oneness of will rather than being, the subordination in rank and glory of the Son and Spirit to the Father, creation from preexisting material rather than absolute nothingness, and the ultimate deification of humans—is found in a very narrow set of sources that scholars attribute to the most primitive

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2. See Ari D. Bruening and David L. Paulsen, “The Development of the Mormon Understanding of God: Early Mormon Modalism and Other Myths,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* 13, no. 2 (2001): 109–69.

early Christian sects, collectively known as early Jewish Christianity. Once again, given that Joseph Smith claimed his mission was mainly to restore primitive Christianity and that he demonstrably did gradually roll out a theological framework that would have been at home within early Jewish Christianity, it seems clear that Smith's esotericism was rooted in legitimate insights he had somehow gained into Christian origins.

Where did he get those insights? Smith's environment was awash with Christian primitivists attempting to return to the original, pristine religion,<sup>3</sup> and Charles Harrell has collected evidence that here and there a few people on the fringes of contemporary Christianity expressed beliefs similar to those of the early Jewish Christians just mentioned.<sup>4</sup> The idea that Joseph Smith, on the American frontier, could have plucked these ideas from the sea of contemporary thought to construct a theological framework that would have been at home among the most primitive of early Christian sects seems incredible, however.

Whether the inspiration for Smith's theology was divine or mundane, in this contribution I argue that Joseph Smith's body of esoteric teachings simply *could not* have been constructed piecemeal from the sorts of sources Harrell proposes. Instead, he must have somehow gained relatively direct access to the early Jewish Christian esoteric tradition. *We can be relatively certain of this because the book of Moses is composed in the form of a typical early Jewish and Jewish Christian esoteric text called an "ascent apocalypse."*<sup>5</sup> I will argue that the evidence for this is so compelling that the focus of historians working on early LDS doctrinal history should shift more fully to whether and how Smith could have gotten his hands on early Jewish Christian esoteric traditions.

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3. See Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

4. Charles R. Harrell, "This is My Doctrine": *The Development of Mormon Doctrine* (Sandy, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 133, 137, 206, 231–33.

5. I am hardly the first to point out parallels between the book of Moses and ancient apocalyptic literature. For example, see Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1986); Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *In God's Image and Likeness: Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Book of Moses* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Publishing, 2010); Andrew C. Skinner, "Joseph Smith Vindicated Again: Enoch, Moses 7:48, and Apocryphal Sources," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 373–80.

## Early Christian Esotericism, the Ascent Apocalypses, and Moses

Esotericism was initiated within Christianity by Jesus,<sup>6</sup> who enjoined his disciples to secrecy regarding his identity as the Messiah (Mark 8:30; 9:9), predictions of his impending death (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34), predictions about the coming end of the world (Mark 13), and other specific items of instruction. He taught in parables, not so that common people would understand his full meaning, but so that the unprepared would *misunderstand*. “Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand” (Matt. 13:13). Even his disciples were not given the full truth while Jesus lived. “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Perhaps some of this additional information was given when the resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days “and [spoke] of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:1–3). And yet none of the New Testament writers tell us what was said during that time, perhaps because the Apostles still did not publicly share all the information they had. “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able” (1 Cor. 3:2; compare 1 Cor. 2:6–7; 4:1).

During the next few centuries, Christians often claimed there was a body of esoteric traditions passed down orally from the Apostles and that the Gnostics (Christian splinter groups claiming esoteric knowledge passed down from the Apostles) had corrupted the true “*gnosis*” (that is, hidden knowledge).<sup>7</sup> The major themes of the oral tradition can be reconstructed from a few comments made by second-century Christian writers. Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110 CE), as he was being escorted by soldiers to be martyred in Rome, wrote to the Roman Christians that he knew about “heavenly things,” such as the ranking of heavenly powers, but he would not write about them for fear of causing them “injury.”

I am able to write to you of heavenly things, but I fear lest I should do you an injury. Know me from myself. For I am cautious lest ye should not be able to receive [such knowledge], and should be perplexed. For even I, not because I am in bonds, and am able to know heavenly things, and the places of angels, and the stations of the powers that are seen and

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6. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 125–32.

7. For several examples, see Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2005), 27–62.

that are not seen, am on this account a disciple; for I am far short of the perfection which is worthy of God.<sup>8</sup>

Clement of Alexandria wrote in the late second century that the true *gnosis* involves the "science of nature," including the Creation and theology (the study of the nature of God). "The science of nature, then, or rather observation, as contained in the gnostic tradition according to the rule of the truth, depends on the discussion concerning cosmogony, ascending thence to the department of theology. Whence, then, we shall begin our account of what is handed down, with the creation as related by the prophets."<sup>9</sup>

Jean Daniélou notes that these themes were drawn from "a specifically Jewish conception" of *gnosis* as presented in apocalyptic writings from that period. Jewish Christianity inherited the same complex of ideas and characterized the *gnosis* as "the knowledge of eschatological secrets, with an especial emphasis . . . on the exegesis of Cosmic mysteries in the opening of *Genesis*; but it is also more than this, it is the knowledge of the fulfillment of these eschatological events in Christ."<sup>10</sup> Their theology was to be understood in terms of history, "but not simply that small section of history constituted by the recorded affairs of nations, and acted out within the horizons of terrestrial sea and land. Its concern is with cosmic history, from the Beginning of things to the End of time, and from the great abyss, through Sheol, earth, firmament, planets, stars to the last infinite Heaven of God. The axis pinning together this immeasurable sphere of things and events is the Incarnation."<sup>11</sup>

These themes are most evident in the "ascent apocalypses"—Jewish and Jewish Christian works thought to have been written between 300 BCE and 200 CE that describe the ascent to heaven of a protagonist, usually a biblical hero such as Adam, Enoch, or Moses. They include *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, the *Testament of Levi*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, the *Ascension of Isaiah*, and *3 Baruch*. Some were Jewish in origin, others Christian, while still others might have been originally

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8. Ignatius, *Romans* 9, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 1:104, brackets in original.

9. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4:1, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:409.

10. Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, trans. and ed. John A. Baker (London: Darton, Longman and Todd; Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964), 365–66.

11. Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 405.



Jewish compositions later edited by Christians. According to Martha Himmelfarb, “there is some debate about which are which.”<sup>12</sup>

In her monograph on the ascent apocalypses, Himmelfarb identifies several critical elements that define the genre. In the following subsections, I will discuss how the book of Moses contains all these elements discussed by Himmelfarb except a few that Joseph Smith introduced to his followers shortly after he dictated the book of Moses.

### The Sacred Mountain

The book of Moses is an expansion of the first several chapters of Genesis, recast as a vision given to Moses “at a time when Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain, . . . the name of which shall not be known among the children of men” (Moses 1:1, 42). Moses also witnessed a vision of Enoch, who “beheld the heavens open” as he stood atop “the mount Simeon” (Moses 7:2–3). The visions in the ancient ascent apocalypses often involved mountains; for example, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* has God instructing Abraham to perform sacrifices “in the place I will show you—on a high mountain.” There God promised Abraham he would “set out for you the secrets of the ages, and tell you hidden things.”<sup>13</sup> In *1 Enoch*, the archangel Michael showed Enoch a mountain where God will make his throne in the eschaton. “This high mountain which you saw . . . is the throne where the Holy and Great One, the Lord of Glory, the Eternal King, will sit when he comes down to visit the earth for good.”<sup>14</sup> God told Baruch the scribe in *2 Baruch* to go to the top of a mountain to receive a vision of the heavens and the entire earth before his assumption into heaven.<sup>15</sup> Himmelfarb links such passages to the ancient Jewish understanding that “the earthly temple was . . . modeled on the god’s house in heaven or on a sacred mountain,” which appears to be linked to the earlier “imagery associated with the mountain of the gods in Ugaritic literature.”<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting to note that the *Book of Jubilees* (a Jewish retelling of Genesis from the same period as the ascent apocalypses) also depicts

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12. Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), vii, 3.

13. *Apocalypse of Abraham* 9:6–9, in *The Apocryphal Old Testament*, ed. H. F. D. Sparks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 375.

14. *1 Enoch* 25:3, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 214.

15. *2 Baruch* 76, in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, ed. R. H. Charles, vol. 2, *Pseudepigrapha* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 519.

16. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 11.

Moses's information about the Creation and what followed as being received in a vision on a mountain (Sinai). "And do you write down everything I tell you on this mountain, the first things and the last things that shall come to pass in all the divisions of the days, in the law and in the testimony, and in the weeks of the jubilees till eternity, till I descend and dwell with them through all eternity."<sup>17</sup>

## Transfiguration and Theophany

The ascent apocalypses assert that to survive both the journey through the heavens and the sight of God, the visionary must himself be transformed into a heavenly being.<sup>18</sup> As Isaiah traveled upward through the seven heavens in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, for instance, he noticed that "my face was becoming brighter and brighter as I went up from heaven to heaven."<sup>19</sup> In the fifth heaven, an angel explained to him that after he died, he would be given "the garment. . . . And then will you become equal to the angels of the seventh heaven."<sup>20</sup> After Isaiah was initially denied entrance to the seventh heaven, Jesus intervened to allow him in. Isaiah's angelic guide explained, "No man who is to return into a body of that world has ever come up here and seen what you see, what you have seen, and what you will see."<sup>21</sup> In the seventh heaven, Isaiah saw "all the righteous from the time of Adam. . . . [And they were] stripped of the garments of the flesh; and I saw them in their garments of the world above, and they were like angels, standing there in great glory."<sup>22</sup> Isaiah also reported, "And the eyes of my spirit were open, and I saw the Great Glory; but I could not then look upon him, . . . nor could any of the angels I had seen worshipping my Lord. Yet I saw the righteous gazing intently upon the Glory." The same phenomena occur in the Enoch literature; for example, in *1 Enoch*, Enoch saw God, whose "raiment was brighter than the sun. . . . And no angel could enter, and . . . no creature of flesh could look."<sup>23</sup> Later, Enoch saw all the spirits standing before God and praising him, whereupon Enoch was transformed. "And my face was changed; for I could no longer behold."<sup>24</sup>

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17. *Jubilees* 1:26, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 13.

18. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 29–46.

19. *Ascension of Isaiah* 7:25, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 799.

20. *Ascension of Isaiah* 8:14–15, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 801.

21. *Ascension of Isaiah* 8:11, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 801.

22. *Ascension of Isaiah* 9:1–18, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 802–4.

23. *1 Enoch* 14:20–21, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 202.

24. *1 Enoch* 39:14, in Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, 2:211.



Enoch was told how the risen faithful will be given “a garment of life from the Lord of Spirits; and your garments will not wear out, and your glory will not fail before the Lord of Spirits.”<sup>25</sup> Likewise, when Enoch was brought to the seventh heaven in *2 Enoch*, Michael was instructed to “take Enoch and take off his earthly garments, and anoint him with good oil, and clothe him in glorious garments. . . . And I looked at myself, and I was like one of the glorious ones, and there was no apparent difference.”<sup>26</sup> In *3 Enoch*, he was clothed in a robe and crown and then described how the transformation felt. “At once my flesh turned to flame, my sinews to blazing fire, my bones to juniper coals, my eyelashes to lightning flashes.”<sup>27</sup> Peter, in the early Jewish Christian *Clementine Homilies*, explained why such a transformation must occur. “For I maintain that the eyes of mortals cannot see the incorporeal form of the Father or Son, because it is illumined by exceeding great light. . . . For he who sees God cannot live. For the excess of light dissolves the flesh of him who sees; unless by the secret power of God the flesh be changed into the nature of light, so that it can see light.”<sup>28</sup>

The book of Moses provides a similar explanation. Moses “saw God face to face, and he talked with him, and the glory of God was upon Moses; therefore Moses could endure his presence” (Moses 1:2). God explained, “Wherefore, no man can behold all my works, except he behold all my glory; and no man can behold all my glory, and afterwards remain in the flesh on the earth” (Moses 1:5). “But now mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes, for my natural eyes could not have beheld; for I should have withered and died in his presence; but his glory was upon me; and I beheld his face, for I was transfigured before him” (Moses 1:11). Moses also records Enoch saying something similar about his vision, “I beheld the heavens open, and I was clothed upon with glory; And I saw the Lord; and he stood before my face, and he talked with me, even as a man talketh one with another, face to face” (Moses 7:3–4).

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25. 1 *Enoch* 62:16, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 245.

26. 2 *Enoch* 9:17–19, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 337–38.

27. 3 *Enoch* 15:1, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 1, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 267.

28. *Clementine Homilies* 17:16, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:322–23.

## The Secrets of Creation

Himmelfarb writes, "Prominent among the secrets revealed to the visionaries of the apocalypses, often after they have taken their place among the angels, are accounts of creation and the phenomena of the created world."<sup>29</sup> Moses for the most part reproduces the Genesis account of creation, but resolves apparent differences in the accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 by positing a spiritual creation (including human souls), followed by the physical creation. "For I, the Lord God, created all things, of which I have spoken, spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth" (Moses 3:5). Moses was also given a vision of the entire earth and all its inhabitants.

Moses cast his eyes and beheld the earth, yea, even all of it; and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold, discerning it by the Spirit of God. And he beheld also the inhabitants thereof, and there was not a soul which he beheld not; and he discerned them by the Spirit of God; and their numbers were great, even numberless as the sand upon the sea shore. And he beheld many lands; and each land was called earth, and there were inhabitants on the face thereof. (Moses 1:27–29)

The account in *2 Enoch* also posits first a spiritual, then a physical creation. God explained, "Enoch, beloved, all thou seest, all things that are standing finished I tell to thee even before the very beginning, all that I created from non-being, and visible things from invisible."<sup>30</sup> That is, "before the very beginning," God had already created everything in an "invisible" (spiritual) state, and then the "visible" (physical) was brought from out of the "invisible." God "commanded . . . that visible things should come down from invisible," so he called forth a great spiritual being named Adoil, who "had a belly of great light. And [God] said to him: 'Become undone, Adoil, and let the visible come out of thee.'"<sup>31</sup> As I mentioned above, the spiritual creation in *2 Enoch* included human souls, for "all souls are prepared to eternity, before the formation of the world,"<sup>32</sup> so that God "created man from invisible and from visible nature," with Adam's "invisible nature" specifically identified as "a second angel, honourable, great and glorious."<sup>33</sup> Likewise the *Apocalypse of*

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29. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 4.

30. *2 Enoch* 24:2, in Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, 2:444.

31. *2 Enoch* 25:1–2, in Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, 2:445.

32. *2 Enoch* 23:5, in Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, 2:444.

33. *2 Enoch* 30:10–12, in Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, 2:449.

*Abraham* depicts God telling the patriarch that “all the things and all the people you have seen stood before me before they were created.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The Obedience of Nature and the Disobedience of Humans**

One purpose for the visions of the Creation and natural phenomena in the ascent apocalypses, according to Himmelfarb, was to contrast the obedience the natural world shows to God with the disobedience of humans. “In 1 Enoch 1–5, Enoch appeals to the regularity of the luminaries in heaven and to the seasonal changes of the waters, trees, and heat on earth as examples of faithfulness to God in contrast to human unfaithfulness.” She goes on, “This theme, which is taken up in several later apocalypses, implies a certain degree of personification of natural phenomena, a development with little precedent in biblical tradition.”<sup>35</sup> For instance, another passage in *1 Enoch* describes the personified sun and moon. “One stands opposite the other before the Lord of Spirits, and they give thanks, and sing praises, and do not rest, because their thanksgiving is rest for them.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the book of Moses describes part of Enoch’s vision in which the personified earth mourned the wickedness of men. “And it came to pass that Enoch looked upon the earth; and he heard a voice from the bowels thereof, saying: Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face?” (Moses 7:48).

Moses includes another episode in which rain is equated with God’s tears, shed for the wickedness of the world. “And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?” (Moses 7:28). Compare that with Enoch’s wish in *1 Enoch* that he could weep for the world through the clouds. “Would that my eyes were a cloud of water that I might weep over you and pour out my tears like a cloud of water, so that I might have rest from the sorrow of my heart! Who permitted you to practise hatred and wickedness?”<sup>37</sup>

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34. *Apocalypse of Abraham* 22:3, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 384.

35. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 77.

36. *1 Enoch* 41:7, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 225.

37. *1 Enoch* 95:1–2, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 297.

## The Origin of Evil

Another purpose of these alternative Creation accounts was to explain "the cause of evil in the world" in a way "quite different from the dominant biblical understanding expressed in the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden," because Adam and Eve were often depicted in a more favorable light in the ascent apocalypses.<sup>38</sup> In the Enoch literature, the very brief and enigmatic account in Genesis 6:1–4 about the "sons of God" taking wives from the "daughters of men" and a mention of the presence of "giants in the earth in those days" is expanded into a detailed story of how the Watchers (a group of angels) married humans and produced giant offspring. In *1 Enoch*, the Watchers swore a terrible oath to follow through with this plan. "And they all answered him and said, Let us all swear an oath, and bind one another with curses not to alter this plan, but to carry out this plan effectively."<sup>39</sup> Their giant offspring then began to wreak havoc on the earth, and both Azazel (Satan) and the Watchers "taught all iniquity on the earth and revealed the eternal secrets which were made in heaven."<sup>40</sup> The *Apocalypse of Abraham* repeats the charge that Satan "betrayed the heavenly secrets."<sup>41</sup> Enoch was sent to preach against the Watchers, and the Flood was sent to cleanse the earth of the giants and the evils the Watchers introduced. This shift of blame for evil in the world was consistent with the early Jewish Christian belief, taught in the *Clementine Homilies*, that Adam "was ignorant of nothing,"<sup>42</sup> "neither was Adam a transgressor."<sup>43</sup> Likewise, *2 Baruch* denies that Adam passed the guilt for his actions on to his descendants. "For though Adam first sinned and brought untimely death upon all, yet of those who were born from him each one of them has prepared for his own soul torment to come, and again each one of them has chosen for himself glories to come. . . . Adam is therefore not the cause, save only of his own soul, but each of us has been the Adam of his own soul."<sup>44</sup>

The book of Moses also expresses a more favorable view of the Fall and explicitly denies the propagation of Adam and Eve's guilt.

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38. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 4–5.

39. *1 Enoch* 6:4, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 188.

40. *1 Enoch* 9:6, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 193.

41. *Apocalypse of Abraham* 14:5 n.1, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 379.

42. *Clementine Homilies* 3:18, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:241.

43. *Clementine Homilies* 2:52, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:238.

44. *2 Baruch* 54:15, 19, in Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, 2:511–12.

Adam blessed God and was filled, and began to prophesy concerning all the families of the earth, saying: Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God. And Eve, his wife, heard all these things and was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient. (Moses 5:10–11)

Hence came the saying abroad among the people, that the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt, wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children, for they are whole from the foundation of the world. And the Lord spake unto Adam, saying: Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good. And it is given unto them to know good from evil; wherefore they are agents unto themselves, and I have given unto you another law and commandment. (Moses 6:54–56)

In the book of Moses, the introduction of evil into the world is attributed to Satan, who formed a secret society involving Cain and some of his descendants, who swore terrible oaths to one another and to Satan, who in return taught “this great secret,” how to “murder and get gain” (Moses 5:31). “Swear unto me by thy throat, and if thou tell it thou shalt die; and swear thy brethren by their heads, and by the living God, that they tell it not” (Moses 5:29). Those who revealed the secrets of the society to outsiders were killed (Moses 5:49–50). “And thus the works of darkness began to prevail among all the sons of men” (Moses 5:55). The “sons of God” in the story were Noah’s sons, whose daughters married “the sons of men”—that is, the wicked (Moses 8:13–15). When Noah preached against the wicked men, they responded with a counterclaim that “we are the sons of God” (Moses 8:20–21).

While the explanation in Moses of the identity of the “sons of god” in Genesis 6:1–4 is more consistent with later Jewish interpretation of the passage than with the story of the Watchers,<sup>45</sup> it should be noted that Moses’s expansion promotes the same theme (an alternate explanation for the origin of evil) and includes some very similar details (the oath pact and a fallen angel teaching secrets to mankind). Furthermore, it should be remembered that in Joseph Smith’s view, the “sons of god” actually were angels descended from heaven (D&C 129:1–3), since angels are simply the spirits of men.

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45. Jaap Doedens, *The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1–4: Analysis and History of Exegesis* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2019).

## The Sweep of History

The ascent apocalypses were not just concerned with the beginning of history, however. Each visionary was given a bird's-eye view of the entire sweep of cosmic history: the preexistent realities before the physical creation, the Creation, primeval history, the messianic advent, the Judgment, and the renewal of the world at the end of time. *1 Enoch* 83–90 contains a series of Enoch's "dream visions," which present a history of the world from Adam to the Maccabean period, followed by the Final Judgment and the Resurrection. *1 Enoch* 37–71 also discusses a messianic figure called "the Son of Man" (compare Daniel 7:13–14) at length. In *2 Enoch*, Enoch says, "You see how I wrote all works of every man before his creation, all that is done amongst all men for all time."<sup>46</sup> In *3 Enoch*, Metatron shows Rabbi Ishmael "the curtain of the Omnipresent One, . . . on which are printed all the generations of the world and all their deeds, whether done or to be done, till the last generation."<sup>47</sup> The *Ascension of Isaiah* describes a similar scene. "[An angel] showed me a book and opened it, and the book had writing in it. . . . The deeds of the sons of Israel were written in it, and also the deeds of others whom you do {not} know. . . . And I said, There is indeed nothing that happens in this world that is hidden in the seventh heaven."<sup>48</sup> Abraham's vision in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (chs. 20–31) included the Creation and various scenes from history through the triumph of a messianic figure, the Final Judgment, and the restoration of the temple.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, Moses reports that the Lord told Enoch, "Look, and I will show unto thee the world for the space of many generations" (Moses 7:4). In another vision, "the Lord showed unto Enoch all the inhabitants of the earth; and he beheld, and lo, Zion, in process of time, was taken up into heaven" (Moses 7:21). "And the Lord showed Enoch all things, even unto the end of the world; and he saw the day of the righteous, the hour of their redemption, and received a fulness of joy" (Moses 7:67).

## The Cosmic Journey

In addition to the similarities just discussed, it is just as enlightening to note the themes Himmelfarb identifies in the ascent apocalypses that are *not* clearly reproduced in the book of Moses. In particular, Moses

46. *2 Enoch* 53:2, in Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, 2:462.

47. *3 Enoch* 45:1, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:296.

48. *Ascension of Isaiah* 9:21–23, in Sparks, *Apocryphal Old Testament*, 804, brackets in original.

49. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 65–66.



neglects to discuss the details of the cosmic journey through the heavens—that is, the number and inhabitants of the heavens, the ascent as human deification, and the ascent as priestly investiture for service in the heavenly temple. Joseph Smith eventually included all of these elements in his later teachings, especially in the Latter-day Saint temple rites, which became the primary vehicle by which esotericism has persisted in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In most of the ascent apocalypses, the hero was transformed into an angel as he ascended through multiple heavens—usually seven or ten, although Daniélou considers these systems to have been expansions of the original three heavens (compare 2 Cor. 12:2).<sup>50</sup> Various classes of beings inhabited the heavens—sometimes even including fallen angels and the spirits of the dead. However, at least in the highest levels, “the depiction of the transformation of the visionary in the apocalypses depends on an understanding of heaven as a temple with angels as heavenly priests.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, as the hero ascended and essentially became one of the angels, he had to be anointed and clothed in priestly garments. However, “it is striking that in 2 Enoch, as in the Testament of Levi and Aramaic Levi, anointing precedes dressing in priestly garments, in opposition to the instructions for the consecration of Aaron as high priest in Exodus 29.”<sup>52</sup> The final result of the ascent and transformation is a kind of deification. Himmelfarb writes that in the ascent apocalypses, “human beings, whether all the righteous or a single inspiring example, have the potential to become like the angels, or even greater than the angels.”<sup>53</sup> For example, “in the Ascension of Isaiah the ability to endure the vision of God, to look upon his glory without blinking, demonstrates the superiority of the righteous dead to the angels.”<sup>54</sup>

The book of Moses mentions the existence of multiple “heavens” but does not explain what was meant by it. “And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come” (Moses 1:38). In 1832, however, Joseph Smith and Sydney Rigdon recorded a vision in which they were shown the three heavens (D&C 76). They described inhabitants of the highest kingdom as “priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory; and are priests of the Most High, after the order of Melchizedek, which was after the order of Enoch, which was

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50. Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 15.

51. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 4.

52. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 40.

53. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 71.

54. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 91.

after the order of the Only Begotten Son. Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God" (D&C 76:56–58).

One of Smith's later visions (D&C 131) went on to explain that the highest of the three heavens itself has three divisions. Before his death, Smith instituted temple rites that incorporate washing, anointing, and clothing in a garment;<sup>55</sup> instruction regarding the Creation and history of the world based largely on the account in the book of Moses;<sup>56</sup> making covenants with God; instruction regarding the "step-by-step ascent into the eternal presence" through the heavens; and a "symbolic entrance into the celestial world and the presence of God."<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, while the book of Moses does not directly discuss human deification, it does include a passage where Enoch says to the Son of Man, "Thou hast made me, and given unto me a right to thy throne, and not of myself, but through thine own grace" (Moses 7:59). A statement like this would have constituted quite a striking reference to deification in the Jewish and early Christian milieu of the ascent apocalypses,<sup>58</sup> even if it would not likely have been understood this way in Joseph Smith's environment.

## Implications

Joseph Smith's first esoteric document, the book of Moses, was written in exactly the style of an ascent apocalypse, missing (or merely hinting at) only a few themes that he later explicitly introduced and incorporated (along with much of the material from the book of Moses) into the esoteric temple rites. This fact strongly supports the conclusion that Smith was employing esotericism throughout his prophetic career, which is undeniably inconvenient for historians attempting to reconstruct a timeline of development for early Latter-day Saint doctrine.

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55. Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 154–55.

56. James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 99–100.

57. Allen Claire Rozsa, "Temple Ordinances," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1444; Todd Compton, "Symbolism," in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1430.

58. For instance, 3 *Enoch* (a fifth- or sixth-century Jewish ascent apocalypse) has the exalted Enoch being given the divine name (YHWH) and a throne in the highest heaven. When a visitor mistakenly thought the throne meant Enoch was another power in heaven equivalent to God, Enoch was given sixty fiery lashes and made to stand up from his throne. 3 *Enoch* 10:3; 16, in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:264, 268. In contrast, John saw Jesus sitting on God's throne (Rev. 7:17) and promised Christians they would be given the divine name (Rev. 3:12) and sit with Jesus on God's throne (Rev. 3:21).

The fact that the sort of apocalyptic documents discussed here were among the typical literary vehicles for early Jewish and Jewish Christian esoteric traditions poses no less of a challenge for historians trying to reconstruct the sources of Joseph Smith's esoteric doctrines. If he constructed his body of esoteric teachings piecemeal from various Christian nonconformists, as Charles Harrell proposes, or from a hodgepodge of folk-magical, Masonic, and Kabbalistic texts, as D. Michael Quinn argues,<sup>59</sup> it seems very unlikely that Smith could have plucked from such a sea of distractions a significant number of elements attested in early Jewish Christian writings that he could fashion into a coherent theology *and could then present in a standard format of early Jewish Christian esoteric literature*. He must somehow have had relatively direct access to the early Jewish Christian esoteric tradition.

Of the ascent apocalypses, only *1 Enoch* and the *Ascension of Isaiah* were available in English translation by 1830.<sup>60</sup> D. Michael Quinn and Salvatore Cirillo argue that Smith clearly did have access at least to *1 Enoch*,<sup>61</sup> but their arguments have significant flaws. For instance, the rest of the ancient Enoch literature (for example, *2 Enoch*, *3 Enoch*, and the *Book of Giants*), which was either undiscovered or not translated into English in Joseph Smith's lifetime, contains more striking and less diluted parallels with the book of Moses.<sup>62</sup> And in any case, *1 Enoch* and the *Ascension of Isaiah* could not have given Smith a complete picture of the essential elements of the ascent apocalypse genre and are missing

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59. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998). For the Masonic parallels, see also Cheryl L. Bruno, "Congruence and Concatenation in Jewish Mystical Literature, American Freemasonry, and Mormon Enoch Writings," *Journal of Religion and Society* 16 (2014): 1–19, [https://www.academia.edu/8368033/Congruence\\_and\\_Concatenation\\_in\\_Jewish\\_Mystical\\_Literature\\_American\\_Freemasonry\\_and\\_Mormon\\_Enoch\\_Writings](https://www.academia.edu/8368033/Congruence_and_Concatenation_in_Jewish_Mystical_Literature_American_Freemasonry_and_Mormon_Enoch_Writings).

60. Richard Laurence published English translations of the *Ascension of Isaiah* and *1 Enoch* in 1819 and 1821 respectively. See <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t64470b25&view=1up&seq=7> and <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175001827503&view=1up&seq=7>. Compare Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 191.

61. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 191–92; Salvatore Cirillo, "Joseph Smith, Mormonism, and Enochic Tradition" (master's thesis, Durham University, 2010), <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/236/>.

62. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Ryan Dahle, "Could Joseph Smith Have Drawn on Ancient Manuscripts When He Translated the Story of Enoch? Recent Updates on a Persistent Question," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019): 305–74.

important elements of Smith's theology (for example, the premortal existence of souls) present in some other ascent apocalypses.

Given these facts, I believe the historian's task of tracking possible sources of Joseph Smith's ideas just became both easier and more difficult. It is easier because, whatever folk-magical, hermetic, Masonic, or Kabbalistic texts Joseph Smith may have encountered, he still must have had relatively direct access to early Judeo-Christian esoteric traditions to discern which aspects of those traditions had roots in the primitive Christianity he was explicitly attempting to restore. Therefore, the most important possible sources to locate must be the sort that would have given Smith insight into *that*. It is more difficult because that sort of source was in woefully short supply in Smith's lifetime.

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