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Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils

Joseph F. McConkie

Among the richly colored threads woven into the fabric of apocryphal literature are many references to the premortal existence of the soul. In these sources a distinction is made between the righteous and the unrighteous souls. The righteous are those destined to become the seed of Abraham, while the unrighteous and unbelieving are foreknown as those of the gentile nations. In addition to these national foreordinations, prophets were designated and known, as were all of Abraham's seed, both small and great. This spirit or heavenly existence was governed by councils in which at least the righteous souls participated. It was in these councils that calls were made and plans laid for the creation of the earth. It is also common in apocryphal sources for the prophets, while in mortality, to be allowed to see the workings of these heavenly councils and even to return and participate in them.

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These concepts of premortal existence, foreordinations, and heavenly councils, so evident in apocryphal works, have many counterparts in the Bible. Unfortunately, their vivid colors have been hidden by the dim light of late Christian tradition and bleached by Bible translators. The fact that our apocryphal sources have been so long ignored, or lost, may have been the very thing that spared the texts much of the theological bleaching that the Bible has received, if not in the translation, most surely in transmission.

PREMORTAL EXISTENCE OF SOULS

Indeed, to say that spiritual light was dimmed by late Christian tradition may belie the point. More accurately stated, someone turned the lights out. Historically the story is simply this: belief in the premortal existence of the soul was dropped from Christianity in A.D. 553 by an edict known as the Anathemas against Origen, promulgated by the Roman emperor Justinian. The Pope consented under extreme duress.¹

A quotation from the *Secrets of Enoch* serves well to introduce our subject. "All souls," he said, "are prepared to eternity, before the formation of the world" (2 Enoch 23:5). It is not to be thought that this is just a matter of God's foreknowing things rather than their having an actual existence. Enoch was told that "men were created exactly like the angels, to the intent that they should continue pure and righteous" (1 Enoch 69:11). Concerning the soul's premortal existence, Josephus said that the Essenes held such a doctrine.² R. H. Charles describes it as a "prevailing dogma" in later Judaism.³ The concept of premortal existence was certainly common to Greek thought⁴ and is even given prominence in the Koran.⁵

From *Myths and Legends of Ancient Israel* we read the following:

In the beginning of things God the All-Father also created a great number of souls destined one day to inhabit a human body. There is a treasure or storehouse in Heaven where these souls are kept until the moment arrives for each of them to descend upon the earth and be united to "mortal coil." According to some myths these souls are hidden beneath the throne of All-Father, whilst in

other places it is maintained that the souls yet unborn walk freely in the celestial fields in company of the souls of the pious who have already passed through a body.

Some souls are spirits sent down upon earth and ordered to inhabit a human body as a punishment for faults committed. For others it is a test and an opportunity to show their strength. In the struggle of the soul, the celestial inmate, against the passions and instincts inherent in matter, the soul has an opportunity to show its worth and remain faithful to its celestial origin or to betray it.⁶

In 3 Enoch (Hebrew Enoch), Rabbi Ishmael, the recipient of the vision, is shown the spirits of the righteous who are yet to be born (3 Enoch 43:1). He is then enabled to understand a phrase in Isaiah 57:16. The text in the King James Bible states, "The spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made." But the Enoch text is significantly different: "For the spirit clothes itself before me, and the souls I have made" (3 Enoch 43:3). The interpretation given the passage is that righteous spirits need to be clothed with physical bodies in order to return to the presence of the Holy One.⁷

Baruch, the faithful secretary of Jeremiah, records in his Apocalypse the direction of the Lord to flee Jerusalem and take with him those of like spiritual temperament. He is told that evil is to come upon the city and that its inhabitants will be scattered among the Gentiles. Baruch earnestly appeals to the Lord to know what is to become of the righteous—both the living and the dead. His question grew in part out of the fact that he had been told that the world had been created specifically for Israel or for the righteous (2 Baruch 21:24–25). In response, the Lord reminds Baruch that he remembers not only those who have passed away but those appointed yet to come to earth. Baruch is then assured that all who were to be born were known to the Lord and that a place had been prepared for them. All souls, the doctrine was, are to be born before the resurrection can take place (2 Baruch 21:6; 23:4–5).⁸

The sequel to the Apocalypse of Baruch is 4 Ezra (or 2 Esdras), which purports to have been written by Ezra in the thirtieth year of the Babylonian captivity. It too seeks to reconcile the justice of God with the affliction of Israel. Like the book of Jeremiah, it is something of a book of consolation. In a dialogue

with the Lord, Ezra asks how long the present evils will exist and why his people's lives are so short and miserable. He is told not to be in a greater hurry than the Most High, for his impatience is only for himself, while the concern of the Exalted One is for the many. He is told that his question has already been asked by the righteous dead in the storehouse of souls (or, as we would know it, the spirit world). They had implored the heavens, asking: "How long must we stay here? When will the harvest begin, the time when we get our reward?" (2 Esdras 4:35–36.)⁹

In our Ezra text those asking the question were told that they would be freed from the spirit world only after all those like themselves had experienced mortality, for the times and seasons were numbered and the appointed measure of all things must be fulfilled (2 Esdras 4:36–37).¹⁰

PREMORTAL EXISTENCE OF ALL THINGS

The idea of a premortal existence was not confined to the souls of men. Among other things, our apocryphal sources and the rabbis attributed premortal existence to the tabernacle, the temple vessels, and the city of Jerusalem.¹¹ The Lord told Baruch that he had created the city Jerusalem even before he "took counsel to make Paradise," and that he had shown it to Adam, Abraham, and Moses (2 Baruch 4:3–6). A rabbinic source adds that it was also shown to Jacob while he slept at Bethel.¹² Indeed, all things on earth were to be made after the heavenly pattern. Thus we read in Exodus that Moses was to fashion the temple and its furniture according to the pattern he saw on the mount (Exodus 25:9, 40).¹³ The idea of a heavenly temple finds confirmation in the revelations of Joseph Smith. Zion of the last days is directed to gather together, stand in holy places, "and prepare for the revelation which is to come, when the veil of the covering of my temple, in my tabernacle, which hideth the earth, shall be taken off, and all flesh shall see me together" (D&C 101:23). This is also an important New Testament motif. Paul spoke of the "Jerusalem which is above," saying it is "the mother of us all" (Galatians 4:26). Again, in Hebrews 12:22 we read of the "heavenly Jerusalem" and its "innumerable company of angels." In

Revelation we read that “John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven” (Revelation 21:2). The idea of heavenly cities and temples is certainly in harmony with the expression from the book of Moses that “all things have their likeness” (Moses 6:63), and also with the revelation of Joseph Smith which teaches that the spiritual is in the likeness of the temporal and the temporal in the likeness of the spiritual: “the spirit of man in the likeness of his person, as also the spirit of the beast, and every other creature which God has created” (D&C 77:2).

Both Jewish and Christian sources from the first centuries B.C. and A.D. insist that all the mysteries of the gospel existed before life on earth. From the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Manual of Discipline states:

All that is and ever was comes from a God of Knowledge. Before things came into existence He determined the plan of them; and when they fill their appointed roles, it is in accordance with His glorious design that they discharge their functions.¹⁴

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul said, “We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory” (1 Corinthians 2:7). Paul’s expression is common to Jewish apocalyptic literature, in which the “mysteries already exist in heaven, and have only to be unveiled.”¹⁵ Typically, as we shall see, the prophet was taken to heaven and obtained his message from the heavenly books. From the Thanksgiving Psalms of Qumran we read:

What can I say that hath not been foreknown, or what disclose that hath not been foretold? All things are inscribed before Thee in a recording script for every moment of time, for the infinite cycles of years, in their several appointed times. No single thing is hidden, naught missing from Thy presence.¹⁶

The finest expression of the idea here involved comes to us in a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith: “Will I appoint unto you, saith the Lord, except it be by law, even as I and my Father ordained unto you, before the world was?” (D&C 132:11.) This brings into focus the statement of Paul to the Colossian Saints when he said they had hope laid up in heaven, “whereof ye heard before” the “word of the truth of the gospel”

(Colossians 1:5).¹⁷ The same thing happens in the allegory of the good shepherd, in which his sheep recognize his voice and will not follow another (see John 10). This also gives a deeper and richer meaning to the Savior's promise to his disciples that the Holy Ghost would bring all things to their remembrance (John 14:26). Surely the gospel is but a distant echo of things known long before birth.

FOREORDINATIONS

The Testament of Naphtali seems to suggest that in this life we are the measure of what we prepared to be as spirits. This apocryphal text states that the Lord made "the body after the likeness of the spirit, and according to the capacity of the body doth He implant the spirit. And the one does not fall short of the other by a third part of a hair; for by weight, and measure, and rule was all the creation made" (Testament of Naphtali 2:2–4). Stating the same principle, Joseph Smith declared, "There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundation of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated" (D&C 130:20–21).

The influence of premortal righteousness on the soul in earth life is illustrated in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon: "I was a good child by nature," Solomon said, for "a good soul fell to my lot; nay rather, being good, I came into a body undefiled" (Wisdom 8:19–20).¹⁸ We are immediately reminded of the negative effect of premortal unrighteousness implied in the Lord's rebuke of Cain following his unacceptable sacrifice. Cain was commanded by the Lord to repent or he would come to be called "Perdition; for thou wast also before the world" (Moses 5:24).

Applying this principle to pre-earth spirits generally, Alma spoke of those who were foreordained to the priesthood on account of their exceeding great faith and good works, while others lost such a privilege because of the blindness of their minds and the hardness of their hearts (Alma 13:1–13). The extent of such lost blessings is attested by Jude, who spoke to the "angels which kept not their first estate," having been cast out of that

habitation for their wickedness (Jude 1:6). Jude, it appears, learned this from the writings of Enoch.¹⁹

The concept of both individual and collective foreordinations is expressly stated in the Assumption of Moses, where we read: “He [God] hath created the world on behalf of His people. But He was not pleased to manifest this purpose of creation from the foundation of the world, in order that the Gentiles might thereby be convicted, yea to their own humiliation might by [their] arguments convict one another. Accordingly He designed and devised me, and He prepared me before the foundation of the world, that I should be the mediator of His covenant.” (Assumption of Moses 1:12–15.) Commenting on this passage, R. H. Charles says, “The Gentiles are foreordained to ignorance and blind conjecture, while Moses is the chosen agent of the true revelation.”²⁰

The above passage from the Assumption of Moses has two obvious Old Testament parallels. The first is the Lord’s statement to Jeremiah regarding his foreordination: “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). The second is a statement of Moses to Israel: “When the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel” (Deuteronomy 32:8). This is an obvious reference to pre-earth assignments, though, until recently, virtually no commentators would admit it to be such. The Septuagint has a variant reading: “He established the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God,” or this could read “sons of God.”²¹ Fragments of Deuteronomy 32 discovered in cave 4 of Qumran sustain the Septuagint reading. The best fragment from cave 4 clearly contains the reading “ben elohim.”²²

May I suggest that such passages constitute the theological backdrop for Paul’s statement to the Ephesians wherein he said that they were blessed “with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places” and that they had been “chosen” in Christ “before the foundation of the world” to “be both holy and without blame.” They were, he said, “predestinated”—or, more correctly, foreordained—to be the followers of Christ (Ephesians 1:3–5). We

read essentially the same thing in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, where Christ is quoted as saying, “Blessed are the solitary and elect, for you shall find the Kingdom; because you come from it, (and) you shall go there again” (Logion 49). Or, as we read in the Odes of Solomon, “Grace is of the elect! and who shall receive it except those who trust in it from the beginning?” (Ode 23:2).

The extent of the idea of foreordinations in apocryphal sources is perhaps best illustrated by the vision of Rabbi Ishmael in 3 Enoch. Ishmael was shown all generations and their doings both past and future. He saw the rulers of each generation, he saw the shepherds, oppressors, keepers, scourgers, overseers, judges, court officers, teachers, supporters, chiefs, presidents of academies, magistrates, princes, counsellors, nobles, men of might, the elders, and the guides. He saw each generation and all the doings and thoughts of men from Adam down to the last days, the time of the anointed prophet who was to be a son of Joseph, and then the coming of the Messiah, son of David, and the “fights and wars that God and Magog will fight” (3 Enoch 45).

Jewish tradition attributes this same vision to Adam (a fact sustained in D&C 107). The tradition also holds that Moses read the Book of Adam.²³

HEAVENLY COUNCILS

Another of the ancient traditions holds that God took counsel with the souls of the righteous before he created the earth.²⁴ Specifically named as being present are Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses.²⁵ Enoch said he saw the “first fathers and the righteous who from the beginning dwelt in that place” (1 Enoch 70:4). We also have an Enoch text in which Enoch is taken up into heaven and taught by the Lord all about the Creation and his works. Enoch is shown matter unorganized, a council in heaven, and Satan cast out to become the foundation of lower things and darkness.²⁶

The Book of Enoch also describes the naming of the Son of Man from among the righteous, holy, and elect. Enoch was

shown that this took place “before the sun and the signs were created, before the stars of heaven were made.” The Son of Man was to be a *staff to the righteous* and the *light of the Gentiles*, for which purpose he was *chosen and hidden*. Yet Enoch was assured that he would be revealed to *the holy and righteous* who would be saved in his name. The name given him was *His Anointed* (1 Enoch 48).

The Apocalypse of Abraham gives this description of a heavenly council:

And I said: “Primeval One, Strong One, what is this picture of the creature?” And he said to me: “This is my will in relation to that which has a being in the Council, and it became pleasing before me, and then afterwards I commanded them to be through my word. *And it came to pass that as many as I had authorized to exist, before portrayed in this picture, and had stood before me pre-created, —as many as you have seen.*”

And I said: “Ruler, Strong One, Thou Who Wast Before the World, *who are the multitude in this picture, on the right hand and on the left?*”

And He said to me: “*These upon the left side are the multitude of former generations, and those to come after you. These for judgment and order; these for vengeance and destruction at the end of the world.* But those on the right side of the picture are the people chosen for me, separate from the peoples of Azazel. These are those which I have prepared to be born through you and to be called my people.” (Abraham 22.)²⁷

From the Manual of Discipline we learn that the people of Qumran believed themselves to be the stewards of the secrets of the heavenly councils. They wrote of wisdom hidden from the wise, “a fountain of glory (hidden) from the worldly assembly— God has granted these whom he elected as an eternal possession. He has constituted them as an inheritance in the lot of the saints; and he has joined their society with the sons of heaven into a unified congregation and an assembly of saintly fabric.”²⁸

In the Ascension of Isaiah an account is given of Isaiah being taken to heaven after the manner of Enoch’s experience. There he saw the adversary and his hosts in a great fight that continues here on earth. As he was conducted through the various degrees of heaven, he saw “all the righteous from the time of Adam,” and was given a book in which he read “the deeds of the Children of Israel.”²⁹

HEAVENLY ASCENT

The ascension of prophets to heavenly councils is a prominent motif in apocryphal literature which finds expression in the traditions of the Jews and elsewhere. In a marvelously interesting article on this subject, Dr. Joseph P. Schultz writes, “In the Mesopotamian texts, the heavenly ascent is made by the king who is both a wise scribe and visionary seer and is described as ‘the Sent one.’ ”³⁰ He summarizes the various aspects of this theme as follows:

1. Ascent to heaven
2. Entering the heavenly palace
3. Reception by the high god in his assembly
4. Purification
5. Anointing
6. Robing in royal or heavenly garments
7. Handing over the heavenly book or heavenly tablets to the bearer of revelation
8. Calling with names of honor
9. Initiation into the heavenly secrets
10. Enthronement on the god-father’s throne
11. Sending forth with a commission or message to instruct the generation

For the sake of brevity, we will cite only Enoch, Moses, and Levi as examples of these themes. In the *Secrets of Enoch* we read of the Lord instructing Michael to take from Enoch his “earthly garments” to anoint him with oil and then to dress him in the “garments of My glory,” that he might enter the heavenly assembly (*Secrets of Enoch* 22:8–9).

Schultz summarizes the Talmudic tradition of Moses’ ascent into heaven:

The following motifs are present: ascent to heaven, enthronement (in our legend portrayed as grasping God’s throne), robing in heavenly garments. To these motifs the sources cognate to our legend add the following: purification, anointing, calling with names of honor, initiation into heavenly secrets.³¹

The patriarch Levi is instructed on his ascension to “Arise, put on the robe of the priesthood, and the crown of righteousness, and the breastplate of understanding, and the garment of truth, and the plate of faith, and the turban of the head, and the ephod of prophecy.” Of the angels that were attending him he said:

The first anointed me with holy oil, and gave to me the staff of judgment. The second washed me with pure water, and fed me with bread and wine (even) the most holy things, and clad me with a holy and glorious robe. The third clothed me with a linen vestment like an ephod. The fourth put round me a girdle like unto purple. The fifth gave me a branch of rich olive. The sixth placed a crown on my head. The seventh placed on my head a diadem of priesthood, and filled my hands with incense, that I might serve as priest to the Lord God. (Testament of Levi 8:1–11.)

Levi’s experience included reading the celestial books written by the finger of God.³²

THE ALLEGORY OF THE PEARL

The various threads at which we have looked to this point are perhaps best woven into a single tapestry in the Syriac Hymn of the Pearl, which has been preserved for us in a work entitled the Acts of Thomas. This is an allegory of a king’s son who is required to leave his father’s kingdom, where he enjoyed great wealth, to obtain a pearl. The pearl, quite obviously, is a symbol of his own soul. His parents see that he is properly provisioned for his journey. Before leaving their presence he is required to surrender his splendid robe. This robe, or garment of light, we are told, had been woven to the measure of his stature. He also enters into a covenant with them to obtain the pearl and return that he might once again enjoy their presence and wear his splendid robe. The covenant is written upon his heart.

Though the way is hazardous and difficult, an intimate friend referred to as “an (anointed one)” warns him of the dangers that beset him. Notwithstanding all this he soon forgets his identity as a king’s son and his mission to obtain the pearl. At this point a council is held; it is attended by his father, his mother, his brother (the crown prince), and many other great and mighty ones. They

determine to send him a letter imploring him to awake and remember who he is and what king he serves. He is encouraged to remember his splendid robe and to so conduct himself that his name might be written in the book of heroes, and that with his brother he may be an heir to his father's kingdom.

Thus reminded, he commences again his efforts to obtain the pearl, which he must wrestle from a terrible serpent. This he is able to do only by naming his father's name, that of his brother, and that of his mother. Having obtained the pearl he flees Egypt, sheds his dirty and unclean garments, and is further guided by the letter. At this point he is greeted by messengers from his parents, who clothe him once more in his royal robe, and he returns as an heir to his father's kingdom.³³ As introduced in Edgar Hennecke's *New Testament Apocrypha*, this story is described as a "fabulous narrative: of a Gnostic Redeemer-myth in which to be sure nothing points to a Christian origin."³⁴

OLD TESTAMENT DOCTRINES

These same concepts of premortal existence, foreordinations, and heavenly councils are also common in the Old and New Testaments. Translators and traditional Christian commentaries have veiled them, yet in more recent years a number of very competent scholars have acknowledged them.

Our story begins, appropriately enough, with the first verse in the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Going back to the Hebrew text, Joseph Smith translated this verse, "In the beginning the head of the Gods brought forth the Gods," or he suggested it could read, "The head of the Gods called the Gods in the grand council."³⁵ Our present translations sustain the idea that the Creation was not the work of a single God, as the plural "we" keeps slipping through the otherwise tight grip of the translators. Frank Cross notes that "both in Ugaritic literature and also in Biblical literature, the use of the first person plural is characteristic of address in the heavenly council." The familiar "we" of Genesis 1:26 ("Let us make man in our image"), Genesis 3:22 ("Behold, the man is become as one

of us”), and Genesis 11:7 (“Come, let us go down and let us confound their language”) “has long been recognized as the plural address used by Yahweh in his council.”³⁶ *The Interpreter’s Bible* observes that in the creative act “God first consults with divine beings other than himself.” Hebrew religious thought, it reminds us, “was familiar with the idea of a heavenly host with whom God took counsel.” In fact, this commentary suggests that “it is fitting, if not necessary, that there should be something like cooperation on the part of the whole company of heaven.”³⁷ Dummelow also suggests that we may be dealing with a council of angelic beings.³⁸

No passage better illustrates the significance of this whole discussion than Jeremiah 23. Having rebuked the false prophets of Samaria and Jerusalem, Jeremiah establishes the test by which a true prophet is always to be known. He asks:

Who hath stood in the counsel of the Lord, and hath perceived and heard his word?

and he reports the Lord as declaring:

I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings. (Jeremiah 23:18, 21–22.)

In the margins of our old missionary Bibles we find the word *secret* suggested as a possible substitute for the word *counsel* in verses 18 and 22. Initially it does not seem to clarify what Jeremiah is saying to have the verse read, “Who hath stood in the secret of the Lord,” or to have the Lord respond, “if they had stood in my secret,” but it does alert us to the fact that there might be reason to question the King James translation in this instance.

The root from which *counsel* or *secret* comes is the Hebrew *sod* (also rendered *sodh*, or *sode*), which should have been translated “council,” which is the way it reads, for instance, in the New English and Jerusalem Bibles.³⁹ Hebrew dictionaries indicate to us that what we are dealing with is a circle of people

assembled in a sacred or secret council. After pursuing the etymology of *sod*, Raymond Brown concludes that its basic meaning is “council or assembly.” He further concludes that in our Jeremiah text we are clearly dealing with a heavenly assembly.⁴⁰

What Jeremiah is telling us, then, is that all true prophets will profess to have stood in a heavenly council or assembly where they received their message and the commission to declare it. Any not so professing are, according to Jeremiah’s standard, to be rejected as false prophets. We have seen that the prophets of our apocryphal records comply well with this standard. We have already noted that Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and Levi are purported to have had such experiences. We now turn our attention to those manuscripts that became a part of the scriptural canon. Here, too, we are going to find that this is a well-established pattern, notwithstanding the fragmentary nature of our records. H. Wheeler Robinson, in his article on “the Council of Yahweh,” warns us at the outset that we would seriously err if we were to suppose that these references to heavenly councils were figurative rather than literal expressions on the part of the prophets.⁴¹ Another scholar observes that the allusions to these heavenly councils were clearly understood by those to whom the prophets originally wrote, and that it has taken a later generation to misunderstand and remove them.⁴²

A natural companion to the above-quoted Jeremiah passage is one of our most often quoted missionary scriptures, Amos 3:7:

Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.

The word *secret* in this text is the same as that found in the marginal reading in Jeremiah. As in Jeremiah, its root is *sod*, and again the context is that of heavenly councils. What Amos is telling us is that the Lord does not act independently of the heavenly council where all prophets are instructed and ordained.

THE DOCTRINE OF COUNCILS

The concept that the Lord does not act independently of heavenly councils provides the pattern or model by which we are

to identify his kingdom on earth. We have already seen that things on earth, so far as they are not perverted by wickedness, will be patterned after heavenly things. The kingdom of God is governed in the heavens by councils, and it must also, then, in the proper order of things, be governed here by councils. It naturally follows that all who properly represent the Lord must have received both message and commission from the proper council. Certainly such must always be true of those professing to be Apostles, for the word *apostle* comes from a Greek word meaning "one who is sent."

ANCIENT PROPHETS AND THE HEAVENLY COUNCIL

The three clearest illustrations of prophetic experience with the council of the Lord are Micaiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. Let us briefly review each. When King Jehoshaphat of Judah was asked by King Ahab of Israel to march with him against the Syrians, Jehoshaphat asked what the word of the Lord was. Ahab brought in his four hundred supposed "prophets," all of whom promptly assured that the venture would be successful. Apparently suspicious of these sycophants, Jehoshaphat pressed for another prophet. Ahab reluctantly brought in Micaiah. At first Micaiah sarcastically imitated the four hundred false prophets, also assuring victory to his hosts; then he dropped his facade of mockery, boldly denounced the campaign, and graphically foretold the disaster that would attend it. He did this in the form of a parable: "I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd: and the Lord said, These have no master: let them return every man to his house in peace" (1 Kings 22:17). In doing so Micaiah stated the authority for his message: "I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left." The Lord inquired for one who would falsely lead Ahab into battle. A spirit volunteered, saying, "I will persuade him." In response to the Lord's question as to how he would do so, the spirit indicated that he would influence Ahab's prophets to lead him astray. The interview ends with Zedekiah, the leader of the false prophets, hitting Micaiah in the face and King Ahab ordering Micaiah

imprisoned. Micaiah's counsel is disregarded, the kings go to battle, Ahab is killed, and his soldiers, as sheep without a shepherd, return to their homes. (See 1 Kings 22:18–36.) Of importance to us in this story is the fact that the revelation to the king is merely the relaying of what the prophet had seen and heard in the heavenly council.

The second clear prophetic experience with the Lord and his council is found in Isaiah 6. This is the account of Isaiah's call to the ministry. As the account opens, Isaiah sees the Lord sitting upon his throne, surrounded by seraphim who are rendering expressions of praise to the Lord. Overwhelmed by a consciousness of his personal sins and those of his people, Isaiah anticipates destruction, for he knows that no unclean thing can enter the presence of the Lord. He is then involved in a cleansing ritual, and his sins are forgiven. All of this is preparatory to his being able to hear the voice of the Lord of hosts as He asks of the celestial council: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah, whose purged lips now enable him to speak even in this most august circle, volunteers: "Here am I; send me." In so speaking he is obviously echoing, in spirit and words, the response of the Son of Man to a similar invitation in the heavenly councils of the premortal world (see Abraham 3:27). His offer to serve and represent the Lord and his council is accepted. He is then instructed in that which he is to say.

Before proceeding with the experience of Ezekiel, there are four other passages in Isaiah that should be considered in the context of our discussion. The first is Isaiah 14:12–17. These verses are something of a taunt song directed at the king of Babylon, and are equally descriptive of Satan's rebellion in the Grand Council in Heaven.

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north:

I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.

Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee, and consider thee, saying, Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms;

That made the world as a wilderness, and destroyed the cities thereof; that opened not the house of his prisoners?

In his translation of Isaiah, Avraham Gileadi renders the phrase “I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation” as follows: “I will seat myself in the mount of assembly of the gods.”⁴³ In a footnote to his translation of Isaiah, H. L. Ginzberg identifies this as “the assembly of the gods in the council.”⁴⁴

The next verse deserving consideration is Isaiah 25:1, in which Isaiah praises the Lord for his “counsels of old.” Gileadi suggests that this should be “things planned of old.” Some scholars have suggested that this refers to the plan of salvation as presented by the Lord in the heavenly council.⁴⁵

The third and fourth references are found in Isaiah 40. Let us turn first to the introductory verses of that chapter. What we find here is a series of active imperatives in the plural form, “comfort ye,” “speak ye,” and “proclaim ye.” The audience being addressed is not identified. Traditionally it has been supposed to be prophets in general, Israel’s priests, or the remnant of the faithful who will proclaim this message of consolation. Cross and other scholars agree that these interpretations are forced and suggest that “the setting is the heavenly council in which Yahweh addresses his heralds.” The conclusion, he reasons, is confirmed by the verses that follow in which herald voices

are heard proclaiming the divine message quite as directed in verses 1 and 2. Their proclamation announces the imminence of Yahweh’s appearance in acts of redemption and, more specifically, directs preparations for the construction of the “superhighway” on which Yahweh will march through a transformed desert at the head of his people. This herald proclamation in verses 3 and 4, to level hills and raise valleys, is directed to supernatural beings, to the council of Yahweh. This is indicated in the cosmic scale of the preparations for the divine theophany and is substantiated by Malachi’s comment (3:1): “Behold I send my messenger and he shall prepare the way before me.”⁴⁶

The fourth reference is Isaiah 40:13–14. Here the prophet reasons with his audience, asking them what was supposed to be

an obvious question. Historically, however, it has not been so obvious to commentators. The passage reads as follows:

Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counsellor hath taught him?

With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge and shewed to him the way of understanding?

R. N. Whybray, after a sophisticated discussion of these verses occupying more than eighty pages, concludes that this is indeed an allusion to the idea of Yahweh presiding over a council and taking advice from a counsellor. “It is,” he said, “extremely probable that the council referred to is an assembly of heavenly beings.”⁴⁷

The third prophet who experienced and recorded a vision of the type experienced by Micaiah and Isaiah was Ezekiel. If we combine the descriptions given in chapters 1 and 10, Ezekiel saw the Lord sitting upon a throne surrounded by heavenly beings. He also heard a voice, from which he obtained the words he was to teach, and thus he prefaced his message with the words, “Thus saith the Lord God” (Ezekiel 1:26; 10:14; 1:1, 28; 2:4).

Another Old Testament story that demands our attention is that of the heavenly assembly wherein Satan is granted permission to try the man Job. Our text gives the setting: “Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them” (Job 1:6). The LXX rendering of this verse reads that it was the “angels of God” who came to present themselves to the Lord, while Joseph Smith changed it in his translation to read “children of God.” Any of these expressions, or the combination of them, convey to the mind of a Latter-day Saint the idea of an assembly made up of the offspring of the Divine Father prior to their birth into mortality. The perplexing thing about the account is the presence of Satan in the assembly. That he has no right or power to be present is without question. Although the story is generally recognized as another of the many Old Testament references to heavenly councils, I know of no completely satisfying explanation of it. We have a similar story in Zechariah 3. Here Joshua the high priest, clothed in filthy garments, stands accused by Satan in the

heavenly court. He is acquitted, as a symbol of which his filthy garments are replaced with clean ones. He is then given jurisdiction over the temple and its precincts, and is promised continued access to God conditioned on his walking in the ways of the Lord (Zechariah 3:1–7).

Two references in the book of Job may be of even greater interest to our study. In Job 15:8 one of Job's friends taunts him, asking if he had sat in the council of God. Effectually he may have been asking, "Do you think yourself so wonderful that you sat at the council where plans were made to create the earth?" "Were you present when God said, 'Let us make man in our own image and in our likeness?'"⁴⁸ And, of course, the best known of the Job references is one which is given in the form of a question: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? . . . when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4–7).

Among all the Old Testament books, the idea of a heavenly council is probably found most prominently in the Psalms. Consider first Psalm 82, which states: "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods." The King James translators have here, as elsewhere, at least partially obscured the verse. The word *mighty* more properly would have been translated "gods" or "heavenly beings." For instance, the New English Bible reads: "God takes his stand in the court of heaven to deliver judgement among the gods themselves" (Psalm 82:1). One scholar, introducing a book-length discussion on this psalm, observes that "scarcely any psalm seems to have troubled interpreters more or to have experienced a wider range of interpretation and a more disturbing uncertainty and lack of finality therein than Psalm 82."⁴⁹ In contrast, for a Latter-day Saint it is simply a companion passage to Abraham 3, wherein the Lord shows Abraham the premortal assembly of spirits who were to come to earth. Some of them were identified as "noble and great," obviously implying that a judgment had been made and that others were neither noble nor great. Referring to the great ones he said, "These I will make my rulers," and he further told Abraham, "Thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born." The account then continues to tell how some of

those spirits rebelled at the selection of the Son of Man as the chief messenger of God on the earth, and “kept not [their] first estate” (Abraham 3:28).

After nearly one hundred pages of analysis, Julian Morgenstern concludes that the psalm is indeed speaking of the offspring of Deity who have sinned and thus have come under judgment. The sixth verse, which reads “Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High,” Morgenstern interprets as the Father saying to his rebellious children, “I thought that ye were gods, but since you have proven yourself unworthy you will now be divested of your divine natures and forfeit the privilege of living in heaven.”⁵⁰

We cannot leave our brief consideration of this passage without linking it to Isaiah 24:21a, which reads: “It shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall punish the host of the high ones that are on high.”

In the Psalms we come across this picture of the Lord in the midst of the assembly of the gods again and again. For example, in Psalm 89:5–7 we read:

The heavens praise Thy wondrousness, O Yahweh, Likewise Thy trustworthiness in the assembly of the gods.

For who in the skies can be compared with Yahweh; Who among the gods is like unto Yahweh?

A god who inspires awe in the council of the gods, Who is great and fearful beyond all those who surround Him.⁵¹

Psalm 29:1–2 summons these same gods to do homage before the Lord, to bow down before him and praise his name, while Psalm 97:7b likewise bids all the gods to bow down before God. Psalm 103:20–21 is an invocation directed to the celestial assembly, and Psalm 148:2 commands the angels of the Lord, all those who constitute his host, to praise him. Psalm 97:9b records that God is supreme over all the gods; Psalm 96:4 states that God is to be feared over all the gods; and Psalm 95:3 attests that God is a great king over all the gods.

OTHER SCRIPTURES

As we turn hurriedly to the New Testament, where we can pause for but a moment, one cannot help but be struck with how

perfectly Christ complies with the standard for a true prophet as established by Jeremiah. “I came down from heaven,” he said, “not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me” (John 6:38). “The Son can do nothing of himself,” he declared, “but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise” (John 5:19). “My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. . . . He that speaketh of himself,” he continued, “seeketh his own glory: but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him.” (John 7:16, 18.)

F. F. Bruce assures us that Paul’s statement that he had been separated from his mother’s womb and called by the grace of God (Galatians 1:15–16) should be translated “he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me.”⁵² In Acts 3:21 Peter makes reference to a “restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” Bruce also notes that the phrase *since the world began* could just as well have been translated “from eternity.”⁵³ Should we understand the text to mean that holy prophets should speak only those things that they learned “from eternity,” or in heavenly councils?

It cannot be without significance that the scriptural records restored by the Prophet Joseph Smith comply perfectly with this “from eternity” doctrine. The Book of Mormon opens with a vision of Lehi in which he sees the heavens opened and God sitting upon “his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.” He saw the premortal Christ and the Twelve that were to follow him, and he received a book from which he read those things that he was to declare upon the earth. (1 Nephi 1:8–14.) Joseph Smith also restored to us an account of the vision of Enoch in which he saw the history of man from his day until that time when his city would return to the earth. “I beheld the heavens open,” Enoch said, “and I was clothed upon with glory; I saw the Lord; and he stood before my face, and he talked with me” (Moses 7:3–4). Very similar to this account is one in the Secrets of Enoch, where Enoch is taken into the presence of the Lord (this same Enoch who claimed to be “destined”—Enoch 39:9), but is first required

to remove his earthly garments, and then to be anointed and dressed in the garments of the glory of the Lord (Secrets of Enoch 22:8–9). Abraham’s vision we have mentioned above in a different setting. Let us add to it the visions of Moses as revealed to Joseph Smith. In these visions Moses is taken into the presence of the Lord, has the glory of the Lord placed upon him, and is also invited to see the visions of eternity and the events of the Grand Council (Moses 1; 4:1–4).

And finally, what of the Prophet Joseph Smith? How does he measure against Jeremiah’s test and the pattern of the prophets? We cite but one illustration, Doctrine and Covenants 76. Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, being in the Spirit on the sixteenth day of February 1832, declared that by the power of the Spirit their eyes were opened to see the things of God—“Even those things which were from the beginning before the world was, which were ordained of the Father.” The glory of the Lord shone upon them and they saw “the Son, on the right hand of the Father, . . . and saw the holy angels, and them who are sanctified before his throne, worshiping God, and the Lamb.” They also saw, in the story of eternities past, “an angel of God who was in authority in the presence of God, who rebelled against the Only Begotten Son . . . [and] was thrust down from the presence of God and the Son.” (D&C 76:11–27.) And they saw future eternities. As Joseph declared, that which they recorded was truly a “transcript from the records of the eternal world.”⁵⁴

It was the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith that there is a time to come in which all things which were “ordained in the midst of the Council of the Eternal God of all other gods before this world was” shall be revealed (D&C 121:32).

CONCLUSION

The doctrines of premortal existence, heavenly councils, and foreordinations were all a part of the theology of the ancient Saints and as such are a necessary part of the promised restoration of all things. Not found in the theology of the rest of the so-called Bible-believing world, these doctrines stand as an evidence that Joseph Smith was a prophet and that ours is an ancient

church restored, which, of course, is our testimony to all the world.

In harmony with the test for a true prophet as given by Jeremiah, Joseph Smith declared that: "Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was." Using himself as an illustration he added: "I suppose I was ordained to this very office in that Grand Council."⁵⁵ Similarly, Joseph F. Smith, in his great vision of the redemption of the dead, named Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, and Wilford Woodruff as representative of those who were "among the noble and great ones who were chosen in the beginning to be rulers in the Church of God" (D&C 138:53–55). These doctrines, of such importance to the ancient Saints, have been restored once again to a place of prominence among the Saints of the latter days.

Notes

1. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. XIV (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), p. 320; cf. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 17 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967), 8:96–101; 10:771–73; 14:145.

2. *Josephus: Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1970), Wars of the Jews II:8–11.

3. R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University, Clarendon Press, 1976), 2:444. Hereafter cited as Charles.

4. David Winston, "Preexistence in Hellenic, Judaic and Mormon Sources," in Truman G. Madsen, ed., *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center, 1978), pp. 13–33.

5. According to the Koran, the heavenly books revealed to Muhammad contain an account of the deeds and destiny of man (Sura. 6:59; 10:62; 22:69). Muslim tradition holds that Muhammad ascended to heaven to receive instruction.

6. Angelo S. Rappoport, *Myth and Legend of Ancient Israel* (London: Gresham Publishing Company, 1982), 1:20–21.

7. Hugo Odeberg, *3 Enoch or The Hebrew Book of Enoch* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1973), p. 134. Avraham Gileadi, in *The Apocalyptic Book of Isaiah* (Provo, Utah: Hebraeus Press, 1982), p. 145, translates this verse "I will not contend forever, nor always be angry; the spirit and souls I have made would faint before me."

8. Charles 2:495.

9. Cf. the New English Bible with Apocrypha, and Charles 2:567. It is of interest to the Latter-day Saint that while this passage has no parallel in the Bible it has two companion passages in the Doctrine and Covenants. One in section 45 restores a dialogue between the Savior and the Apostles in which they manifest the same concern. In response Christ said: "For as ye have looked upon the long absence of your spirits from your bodies to be a bondage, I will show unto you how the day of redemption shall come, and also the restoration of the scattered Israel" (D&C 45:17). The other passage is in the Vision of the Redemption of the Dead (see D&C 138:50).

10. Charles 2:567.

11. Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan from 3rd German ed., vol. 1 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1958), pp. 102–3, 320–21.

12. Charles 2:482.

13. Cf. Exodus 26:30; 27:8; Numbers 8:4.

14. Manual of Discipline iii:13–iv:26, found in Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, English trans., 3d ed., rev. and en. (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), p. 48.

15. As quoted in Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 62.

16. Psalms of Thanksgiving 1:20–25; see Gaster, p. 146. The Shepherd of Hermas expressly declared that the world was created for the sake of the Church, the Church having been created before the foundation of the world. (*Hermas* 4:33; see also Harnack, p. 103). In the legends of the Jews we read that two thousand years before the creation of the heaven and earth seven things were created: the Torah, the Divine throne, Paradise, Hell, the Celestial Sanctuary, a jeweled altar graven with the name of the Messiah, and a voice that cries aloud, "Return ye children of men."

17. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1979), p. 141.

18. The same concept is implied in 4 Maccabees 18:23. See Charles 2:685n.

19. Jude quoted from Enoch in vss. 14–15. Enoch wrote of the angels who kept not their first estate (1 Enoch 10:15–16; 12:4–5).

20. Charles 2:415.

21. Adam Clark, *Clark's Commentary*, 3 vols. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press), 1:825. See also *Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press), 2:519; H. Wheeler Robinson, "The Council of Yahweh," *Journal of Theological Studies* (1944) 45:155.

22. E. Theodore Mullens, Jr., *The Assembly of the Gods*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, number 24 (Scholars Press, 1980), p. 202 (Gepeser Rabbah 72:7).

23. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold, 7 vols. (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912), 1:61; 3:154.

24. Charles 2:444; cf. Genesis Rabbah, 72:7.

25. Rabbi Nissim Wernick, "A Critical Analysis of the Book of Abraham in the Light of Extra-Canonical Jewish Writings" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1968), p. 22.

26. This Enoch text is quoted in High Nibley's series of articles on Enoch in the *Ensign* (April 1977, pp. 87–88).

27. Found in "The Book of the Revelation of Abraham," *Improvement Era* 1 (August 1898): 799.

28. Brown, "Mystery," p. 24; cf. Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 388.

29. L. Lamar Adams has combined three Isaiah fragments into one text in *The Living Message of Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), pp. 105–28.

30. Joseph P. Schultz, "Angelic Opposition to the Ascension of Moses and the Revelation of the Law," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 61 (April 1971): 294.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 295.

32. Ginzberg 2:175.

33. Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 2:498–504.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

35. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1927), 6:307, 475. Hereafter cited as *HC*.

36. Frank M. Cross, Jr., "The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 11.275 n.4. Cf. Robinson,

“The Council of Yahweh,” pp. 154–55; also Brown, “*Mystery*,” p. 3, n.9.

37. *The Interpreter’s Bible* 1:482–83.

38. J. R. Dummelow, *The One Volume Bible Commentary* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1975), p. 5.

39. James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance, with Greek and Hebrew Dictionary* (Nashville, Tenn.: Regal Publishers); see *Hebrew Dictionary*, p. 82.

40. Raymond Brown, “*Mystery*,” p. 2; cf. *Interpreters Bible*, 5:992; Cross, p. 274; Mullens, p. 119.

41. Robinson, p. 151. Robinson deals more extensively with this whole subject in his work *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), pp. 166–72.

42. Edwin C. Kingsbury, “The Prophets and the Council of Yahweh,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1964) 83:279–86.

43. Gileadi, *The Apocalyptic Book of Isaiah*, p. 45.

44. H. L. Ginzberg, *The Book of Isaiah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), p. 44.

45. Victor L. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), p. 247.

46. Cross, pp. 275–76.

47. R. N. Whybray, *The Heavenly Counsellor in Isaiah 40:13–14* (Cambridge: University Press, 1971), p. 78.

48. *Clarke’s Commentary* 2:76; cf. *Interpreters Bible* 3:1018; Brown, “*Mystery*,” p. 5.

49. Julian Morgenstern, “The Mythological Background of Psalm 82,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1939) 14:29–30.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 115–17.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.

52. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 75.

53. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), p. 112.

54. *HC* 1:252.

55. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938), p. 365.