



Type: Journal Article

---

## “Effusions of an Enthusiastic Brain”: Joseph Smith’s First Vision and the Limits of Experiential Religion

Author(s): Jeremy Talmage

Source: *BYU Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2020)

Published by: BYU Studies

Page(s): 25–48

---

**Abstract:** Modern historians have tended to explain Smith’s cold reception as a reflection of shifting attitudes, claiming that by his day direct revelation from God was no longer acceptable. This reasoning, however, discounts the widespread visionary worldview of Smith’s contemporaries. Instead of growing up in a postrevelatory age, he lived in an evangelical environment that encouraged every convert to have his or her own experience with Christ. Signs of divine forgiveness were commonplace, and multitudes reported receiving assurance of their salvation through visions and dreams and the expression of other charismatic gifts. As one religious scholar noted, revealed religion in early nineteenth-century America was in fact “an intellectual hegemon” and the “most powerful of cultural forces.” Other historians have in turn speculated that the rebuff of Smith’s vision revolved around Jesus’s announcement that “all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight” and their “professors were all corrupt.” The preacher in whom Smith confided, however, would have agreed in principle with these sentiments; Methodists opposed creedalism and criticized other faiths for having educational requirements to participate in the ministry. It is unclear if the censure given in the First Vision applied to all religions equally or to specific church constitutions and clergy. But it is easy to imagine many Evangelicals embracing the Lord’s message that the whole “world lieth in sin,” having “turned asside from the gospel.” If the timing and the content of Smith’s experience cannot fully explain the backlash, why then, during the heat of the Second Great Awakening, did Smith’s coenthusiasts so soundly condemn his vision?



BYU Studies is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to BYU Studies and to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon and other Restoration scripture. Archived by permission of BYU Studies.

<http://byustudies.byu.edu/>

# “Effusions of an Enthusiastic Brain”

## Joseph Smith’s First Vision and the Limits of Experiential Religion

*Jeremy Talmage*

[I] wanted to get Religion too,” reminisced the Latter-day Saint prophet Joseph Smith. “[I] wanted to feel & shout like the Rest but could feel nothing.”<sup>1</sup> A wide-eyed witness of the nineteenth-century religious revivals that enveloped western New York, Smith made this lament to a close acquaintance shortly before his death in 1844. Reflecting back on the religious excitement of his youth, he detailed how he longed for a spiritual manifestation like many others enjoyed but for whatever reason seemed unable to experience the evangelical enthusiasm he so deeply desired. As a fourteen-year-old adolescent, Smith had been torn among the various religions vying for converts. While the denominations differed on finer points of doctrine, they all proclaimed a similar message: every individual needed his or her own experiential encounter with God to be assured salvation.

The heavenly response Smith yearned for eventually came in the form of a vision he received near his family’s cabin in 1820.<sup>2</sup> Heeding an

---

1. As quoted in “Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract,” The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/alexander-neibaur-journal-24-may-1844-extract/1>.

2. During his life, Joseph Smith recorded four firsthand accounts of his vision. Each telling contained unique details. For an analysis of each version, see Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012). Some scholars have claimed that differences between these accounts prove Smith radically changed his story over time. In contrast, Stephen Prothero has argued, “Any good lawyer (or historian) would expect to find contradictions in competing narratives written

admonition found in the Bible that advises, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5), Smith went to the woods and knelt in prayer, seeking divine guidance. Almost immediately some invisible evil power seized him, and his “tongue was close[d]” and “cleavet[h] to his roof [of his mouth].” Incapable of speaking and nearly overcome by the suffocating dark force, he was soon liberated from his demonic adversary by a “fire towards heaven” that gradually approached, at which point he recognized a “personage in the fire.” The heavenly being possessed a “light complexion” with piercing “blue eyes” and a “piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders[,] his right arm bear.” “A[n] other person” also appeared and “came to the side of the first.” After composing himself, Smith mustered the courage to address the pair. The first introduced the other as “my Beloved son” and commanded Smith to “harken ye him.” During the ensuing conversation, God the Father and Jesus freely forgave Smith’s sins, comforting his existential anxiety. Desirous to share this experience with others, Smith sought out a “Methodist priest” only to be hostilely censured after divulging details about the affair. “This was not a[n] age for God to Reveal himself in Vision,” the minister informed him. “Revelation has ceased.”<sup>3</sup>

In earlier articulations of his story, Smith insisted that the Methodists were not alone in rejecting him but also that he “could find none that would believe the hevny [sic] vision.”<sup>4</sup> He related that “all the sects: all united to persecute me.” The vision of a self-described “obscure boy . . . of no consequence in the world” had created such a stir that “professors of religion” and “men of high standing” united in disapprobation. Until the end of his life, Smith marveled at this prejudice, never quite able to understand how he, a barely literate farmhand, could excite the anger of all the religionists in the region.<sup>5</sup>

---

down years apart and decades after the event. And despite the contradictions, key elements abide.” Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 171; see also Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality* (Salt Lake City: Lighthouse Ministry, 1987), 143–62; and Stan Larson, “Another Look at Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 44–49.

3. “Alexander Neibaur, Journal,” 23–24.

4. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>.

5. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 4, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/>

Modern historians have tended to explain Smith’s cold reception as a reflection of shifting attitudes, claiming that by his day direct revelation from God was no longer acceptable.<sup>6</sup> This reasoning, however, discounts the widespread visionary worldview of Smith’s contemporaries. Instead of growing up in a postrevelatory age, he lived in an evangelical environment that encouraged every convert to have his or her own experience with Christ.<sup>7</sup> Signs of divine forgiveness were commonplace, and multitudes reported receiving assurance of their salvation through visions and dreams and the expression of other charismatic gifts. As one religious scholar noted, revealed religion in early nineteenth-century America was in fact “an intellectual hegemon” and the “most powerful of cultural forces.”<sup>8</sup> Other historians have in turn speculated that the rebuff

---

[history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/4](#). Those closest to Smith testified to the opposition and persecution he faced from the local religionists after he disclosed his vision. See “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” 78–79, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/85>; Wandle Mace, autobiography, 37, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; and J. W. Peterson, “Another Testimony: Statement of William Smith, Concerning Joseph, the Prophet,” *Deseret Evening News* (Salt Lake City), January 20, 1894.

6. For example, Steven Harper has claimed that by 1820 churches were “tending away from the kind of spiritual experiences Joseph described and toward presumably more respectable, reasonable religion.” Steven C. Harper, “Evaluating Three Arguments against Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 2 (2012): 19. Similarly, Stephen Fleming surmises, “The rejection of Smith’s vision by the Methodist preacher . . . suggests that those looking for the kind of supernaturalism Smith sought, and which had been accepted on the edges of Methodism decades earlier, would now have to look elsewhere.” Stephen J. Fleming, “The Religious Heritage of the British Northwest and the Rise of Mormonism,” *Church History* 77, no. 1 (March 2008): 81–82. Historian Richard Bushman likewise concludes that by 1820 “any vision was automatically suspect.” Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 59.

7. In 1820—the same year as the First Vision—evangelical authors in the United States and the United Kingdom published multiple treatises on the necessity of personal revelation. See Hosea Ballou, *A Series of Letters, in Defence of Divine Revelation* (Boston: Henry Brown, 1820), 5–249; Joseph Gurney Bevan, *Thoughts on Reason and Revelation, Particularly the Revelation of the Scriptures* (Dublin: Christopher Bentham, 1820); and Charles James Burton, *Revelation Vindicated, in Two Sermons* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1820).

8. David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 105.

of Smith's vision revolved around Jesus's announcement that "all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight" and their "professors were all corrupt."<sup>9</sup> The preacher in whom Smith confided, however, would have agreed in principle with these sentiments; Methodists opposed credalism and criticized other faiths for having educational requirements to participate in the ministry.<sup>10</sup> It is unclear if the censure given in the First Vision applied to all religions equally or to specific church constitutions and clergy.<sup>11</sup> But it is easy to imagine many Evangelicals embracing the Lord's message that the whole "world lieth in sin," having "turned aside from the gospel."<sup>12</sup> If the timing and the content of Smith's experience cannot fully explain the backlash, why then, during the heat of the Second Great Awakening, did Smith's coenthusiasts so soundly condemn his vision?<sup>13</sup>

---

9. "History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2]," 3. Along these lines, Robert Remini concludes it is "no wonder" the priest "called Joseph's vision a fraud." Robert Remini, *Joseph Smith* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 40.

10. See A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 43; and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11–12.

11. According to John Matzko, upon returning home from his vision, a still shaken Smith did not state "all Christian sects were equally erroneous"; instead he only told his mother that Presbyterianism was not true. John Matzko, "The Encounter of the Young Joseph Smith with Presbyterianism," *Dialogue* 40, no. 3 (2007): 68. On this occasion, Smith likely singled out this denomination because his mother had recently joined the Presbyterian Church. "History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834]," 132, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/138>; "History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2]," 2.

12. "History, circa Summer 1832," 3. Smith's earliest articulation of his vision included only a general condemnation of wickedness, without denouncing specific denominations as later accounts of the vision did.

13. Rev. Wesley Walters challenged Smith's dating of his vision after finding no evidence that suggested a "revival occurred in the Palmyra area in 1820." Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 59–81. For extensive rebuttals to Walters's claim, see Milton V. Backman Jr., "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 301–20; Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 82–93; and D. Michael Quinn, "Joseph Smith's Experience of a Methodist 'Camp-Meeting' in 1820," *Dialogue*, Dialogue Paperless: E-Paper #3, Expanded Version (Definitive), December 20, 2006, 1–110.

One reason Joseph Smith’s story of his First Vision was so off-putting seems to be the manner in which he explained it to others.<sup>14</sup> Whether consciously or not, his simple and straightforward description of the event brought together the celestial and the corporeal, ignoring the carefully constructed doctrinal demarcations of orthodoxy established by his Protestant peers.<sup>15</sup> Evangelicals, wary of the encroachment of science on their religion, had removed enthusiasm from the realm of objective experience. Visions, they contended, were only permissible as long as they preserved the strict separation between the spiritual and the sensory, mind and matter. Smith’s conviction about the reality of his vision, including his detailed physical description of Divinity, is the most likely reason for his rejection. Evangelicals certainly maintained God could communicate through revelation—just not in the way Smith reported. His vision, with its literal language, moved beyond the theologically acceptable limits of experiential religion.

### **Antebellum America’s Visionary Culture**

As the spiritual outpouring known today as the Second Great Awakening blazed across the American countryside, revivalists ventured further into the western frontier to find unconverted souls to bring to Christ. Joseph Smith’s unbaptized family was soon swept up in the religious fervor. Smith recalled the “unusual excitement on the subject of religion” in the “whole district of Country” near his home in upstate New York. The excitement commenced with the Methodists but soon became ubiquitous among “all the sects,” creating “no small stir and division among the people.”<sup>16</sup> Four groups of Methodists, two Baptist congregations,

---

14. For others who have come to a similar conclusion, see Christopher C. Jones, “The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 113–14; and John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 71–72.

15. The sacred for Protestants, as religious historian Colleen McDannell has explained, represented something separate from “the profane world of bodies.” Robert Orsi likewise notes how Protestants consciously distanced themselves from what he calls “theologies and rites of presence.” Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 5; Robert Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 32.

16. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 1–2. Methodist itinerant preachers who canvassed the country were especially adept at reaching rural regions

three Presbyterian societies, and a handful of Quakers regularly held meetings within eight miles of the Smith farm.<sup>17</sup> Part of the religious excitement mentioned by Smith undoubtedly included the July 1819 Methodist Conference held in the nearby township of Vienna, where over a hundred ministers gathered. During this large gathering, possibly thousands of interested inhabitants of the surrounding country made their way to witness the spectacle firsthand.<sup>18</sup> The Smiths almost certainly attended since the family operated a small business selling home-made refreshments at community gatherings.<sup>19</sup> One local described the 1819 revival as “a religious cyclone” that swept over the whole region.<sup>20</sup> Over the course of the next year, Presbyterians went on to hold a number of revivals in the area to counteract Methodist gains.<sup>21</sup> With the Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists all fighting for the Smiths’ loyalty, Joseph related how he became caught in the crossfire of a “strife of words and a contest about opinions.” The sectarian conflict eventually divided his own family. That, combined with the “great and incessant” cries of religionists, finally convinced him the time had arrived for him to plead with God for forgiveness of his sins and guidance about which denomination to join, unable with his own reasoning “to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.”<sup>22</sup>

---

to scout potential converts, leading one Lutheran minister to refer to these preachers as “swarming pests.” Friedrich C. D. Wyneken, “The Distress of the German Lutherans in North America (1843),” in *Antirevivalism in Antebellum America: A Collection of Religious Voices*, ed. James D. Bratt (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 111.

17. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 92.

18. A camp meeting in nearby Palmyra, New York, in 1826 attracted an estimated ten thousand participants. “Genesee Conference,” *Methodist Magazine* 9 (August 1826): 313.

19. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism: Biography of Its Founders and History of Its Church* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1867), 12.

20. M. P. Blakeslee, “Notes for a History of Methodism in Phelps, 1886,” 7–8, cited in Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 89.

21. “Records of the Presbytery of Geneva,” book C, 37–38, cited in Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, 83. While the meetings of the various religious groups differed slightly, “all the major denominations . . . and most of the smaller ones were strongly revivalistic.” Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), 13.

22. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 2.

Walking into the woods on a sunny spring morning in 1820, Smith likely followed the advice oft repeated at camp meetings.<sup>23</sup> Methodist circuit riders frequently encouraged those troubled about the status of their salvation to seek God in his “own temple, the leafy grove.” As one minister counseled, “If you will go with me into the grove, we will engage in prayer, and God will pardon your sins.”<sup>24</sup> “The woods worked wonders,” a historian of these conversions observed, and in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, hundreds of Evangelicals found God in the American forest.<sup>25</sup> George Brown, after hearing a sermon encouraging him to seek forgiveness in the sylvan abode, became convinced he “was a poor, miserable sinner, in great danger of losing [his] soul.” Finding “a secluded place for prayer” under an oak tree, Brown felt in his soul “a peace hitherto unknown.”<sup>26</sup> Following this familiar pattern, John Kobler “retired into a wood where [he] had deep impressions of Divine things.” The next year, he again “found the Lord” amid the “very trees of the wood” and “had sweetness in communing with [his] beloved Savior.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Charles Giles recalled seeking salvation from sin and praying for mercy in the wilderness “beneath the arms of the forest trees.” To his surprise, “the Spirit of God came down” upon him, initiating a conversation with the Divine.<sup>28</sup>

The American forest often served as a sacred space that could induce visions. Famously, only a year after Smith’s First Vision, renowned revivalist Charles Finney “penetrated into the woods” of upstate New York

---

23. The Methodist hymnal contained multiple songs guiding religious seekers to find answers in the “grove.” See Enoch Mudge, *The American Camp-Meeting Hymn Book* (Boston: Joseph Burdakin, 1818), iii, 11, 31, 121–22. For more information on how hymns sung at camp meetings might have influenced Joseph Smith, see Mark Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting for Joseph Smith’s Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 134–35.

24. S. M. Merrill, ed., *Recollections of a Superannuate: Or, Sketches of Life, Labor, and Experience in the Methodist Itinerancy by Rev. David Lewis of the Ohio Annual Conference* (Cincinnati: R. P. Thompson, 1857), 39, 82.

25. Russell E. Richey, *Methodism in the American Forest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 41.

26. George Brown, *Recollections of Itinerant Life: Including Early Reminiscences* (Cincinnati: R. W. Carroll, 1866), 61–63.

27. John Kobler, *Journal and Sermons*, quoted in Richey, *Methodism in the American Forest*, 40.

28. Charles Giles, *Pioneer: A Narrative of the Nativity, Experience, Travels, and Ministerial Labours of Rev. Charles Giles* (New York: G. Lane & P. P. Sandford, 1844), 68, 82.



to seek “relief in prayer.” Receiving a “distinct revelation,” his mind was suddenly filled with the biblical verse “then shall ye seek me and find me” (see Jer. 29:13). After he returned to his home that evening, unexpectedly his room “appeared . . . as if it were perfectly light” and he “met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face.”<sup>29</sup> Methodist Jacob Young similarly recounted that some time after he “retired to the solitary grove and sought the Lord with all [his] heart—wandering from tree to tree,” a “light appeared to shine from the south part of heaven,” revealing “the kingdom of God’s dear son.”<sup>30</sup> Elias Smith, a New England youth of only fifteen, also remembered entering “into the woods one morning” near his home in Vermont and seeing a light that “appeared to shine from heaven.” In the light, “the Lamb once slain appeared,” enwrapping him in divine love.<sup>31</sup>

Joseph Smith’s description of his vision closely mirrors the experiences of many evangelical visionaries. His account of being “seized upon” by “some power which entirely overcame” him accompanied by a “thick darkness” only to be freed by a heavenly light resembles in detail the conversion experience of Methodist Fanny Newell. Surrounded by a “cloud of darkness,” Newell reported, “[I] saw a small ray of light, and my eyes seemed fixed upon it. The light increased, until at length it appeared as large as the blaze of a candle. . . . Then I saw the appearance of a man, and then the darkness which had surrounded me withdrew. . . . The man who presented himself to my view was CHRIST.”<sup>32</sup> John Maffitt, whose memoirs were published in 1821, reported a light from heaven that “*broke in dazzling splendor thro’ the gloom,*” dispersing the black clouds that had enveloped him, allowing him to distinguish through the fog his “adorable Savior.”<sup>33</sup> In a like manner, Jacob Young,

---

29. Charles Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney* (New York: A. S. Barnes & Company, 1876), 15–19.

30. Jacob Young, *Autobiography of a Pioneer; or, the Nativity, Experience, Travels, and Ministerial Labors of Rev. Jacob Young; with Incidents, Observations, and Reflections* (Cincinnati: L. Swormstedt and A. Poe, 1859), 42.

31. Elias Smith, *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travel, and Sufferings of Elias Smith* (Boston: n.p., 1840), 53–54.

32. Fanny Newell, *Memoirs of Fanny Newell; Written by Herself* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, Little, and Co., 1832), 29–30.

33. John N. Maffitt, *Tears of Contrition: Sketches of the Life of John N. Maffitt; with Religious and Moral Reflections* (New London, Conn.: Samuel Green, 1821), 50, italics in original.

mentioned earlier, beheld a heavenly light that delivered him from "the power of darkness."<sup>34</sup>

Joseph Smith's report of a "pillar [of] light exactly over [his] head above the brightness of the sun, which descended . . . gradually untill it fell upon [him]," containing "two personages . . . standing above [him] in the air" also emulates the experience of Norris Stearns, published only five years before Smith's.<sup>35</sup> Stearns, a barely literate teenager from Massachusetts, found himself "on the brink of eternal woe, feeling nothing but death before [him]." "Suddenly," he reported, "there came a sweet flow of the love of God to my soul, which gradually increased. At the same time, there appeared a small gleam of light . . . above the brightness of the sun . . . which grew brighter and brighter." In the light, Stearns reported, "[I] saw two spirits, which I knew at the first sight. . . . One was God, my Maker," and "below him stood Jesus Christ my Redeemer."<sup>36</sup> While Joseph Smith described the beings as possessing a "brightness and glory [that] defy all description," Stearns recalled that their countenances were "of fire, being bright and shining."<sup>37</sup> Visionaries like Stearns and Smith commonly recounted God and Jesus Christ appearing as separate entities in heaven-born manifestations. Fellow visionary Billy Hibbard recalled seeing "Jesus Christ at the right hand of God looking down upon me, and God the Father looking upon him."<sup>38</sup> Smith's experience of retreating to the forest in prayer, seeing a light, and then laying eyes upon God and Jesus was far from unusual.

Though notable religious scholars have claimed that during the 1820s Evangelicals distanced themselves from such visions, evidence

---

34. Young, *Autobiography of a Pioneer*, 42.

35. "History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1," 3. The language employed by both Smith and Stearns likely derives from Paul's description of his experience on the road to Damascus in Acts 26:13.

36. Norris Stearns, *The Religious Experience of Norris Stearns, Written by Divine Command* (Greenfield, Mass.: n.p., 1815), 12.

37. Compare Stearns, *Religious Experience of Norris Stearns*, and "History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1," 3.

38. Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel* (New York: J. C. Totten, 1825), 24. Across the Atlantic in November 1819, only a few months before Smith's vision, John Wroe likewise claimed to have seen "both the Father and the Son." John Wroe, *The Life and Journal of John Wroe, with Divine Communications Revealed to Him, Being the Visitation of the Spirit of God, to Warn Mankind That the Day of the Lord Is at Hand* (Ashton-under-Lyne, England: E. Lees and Co., 1829), 9.

indicates otherwise.<sup>39</sup> In 1826, a former resident of Palmyra and neighbor of Joseph Smith published an account of a dream in which Christ descended “in a glare of brightness, exceeding ten fold the brilliancy of the meridian Sun.”<sup>40</sup> A few years previous, in 1823, the local newspaper reported about another visionary in the immediate vicinity.<sup>41</sup> Visions like Smith’s were, in fact, common.<sup>42</sup> Joseph Smith, according to his biographer, lived in a visionary culture that cut across social divisions and “united all kinds of people.”<sup>43</sup> Men and women, rich and poor, young and old—all saw theophanies of Christ.<sup>44</sup> It comes as no surprise then that Smith’s own attempts to convey his story reflected the style of other visions that circulated in antebellum America.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, accounts

---

39. For arguments that evangelical enthusiasm waned around this time, see John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 124; and Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 241.

40. John Samuel Thompson, *The Christian Guide to a Right Understanding of the Sacred Scriptures* (Utica, N.Y.: A. G. Dauby, 1826), 71.

41. “Remarkable Vision and Revelation: As Seen and Received by Asa Wild, of Amsterdam, (N.Y.),” *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, N.Y.), October 22, 1823.

42. The prevalence of visions in early America led one historian to claim that Smith’s experience was likely “the elaboration of some half-remembered dream stimulated by the early revival excitement and reinforced by the rich folklore of visions circulating in his neighborhood.” Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), 25.

43. Richard Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997): 187.

44. For examples of women who had similar visionary experiences, see Elizabeth Elkin Grammer, *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Itinerant Female Preachers in 19th-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19–22. According to one scholar, most visions were experienced by people “during teenage years. . . . Many seem to take place in communities experiencing rapid change or an unusual degree of social dislocation; and most converts had some preexisting religious knowledge.” David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 63. This description fits Joseph Smith without qualification. For more on young people in the evangelical movement, see Trevor Jason Wright, “Your Sons and Your Daughters Shall Prophecy . . . Your Young Men Shall See Visions: The Role of Youth in the Second Great Awakening, 1800–1850” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2013), 138–45.

45. Historian John Turner notes that “much of Smith’s visionary experience resembles that of his evangelical contemporaries.” Turner, *Mormon Jesus*, 70;

of his First Vision read very “much like the conversion narratives that appear in numerous journals of other early American evangelicals.”<sup>46</sup> It is improbable that Smith would not have heard of their stories.<sup>47</sup> Countless of his contemporaries had similar experiences of beholding a heavenly light and meeting Christ.<sup>48</sup>

If anyone was likely to have accepted his tale, it should have been the Methodist minister Smith approached shortly after his vision. According to his brother, it was at a Methodist camp meeting that Joseph Smith heard Reverend George Lane’s sermon about “what church shall I join?” which focused on the scripture in James that touched the impressionable youth (see James 1:5).<sup>49</sup> By Joseph Smith’s own admission, he had grown “somewhat partial to the Methodist sect,” and the preacher to whom he first confided was quite possibly George Lane himself.<sup>50</sup> To Smith’s surprise, the reverend treated his “communication not only lightly but with great contempt.”<sup>51</sup> In Smith’s revelation, the minister sensed something particularly dangerous.

---

see also Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, “Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith’s First Vision.” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 33–37.

46. Jones, “Power and Form of Godliness,” 96–97; see also Lincoln A. Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017), 141.

47. Even if Joseph Smith had not read any written autobiographical accounts, he would have picked up the basic conversion narrative from attending camp meetings, where bearing testimony was common. Rodger M. Payne, *The Self and the Sacred: Conversion and Autobiography in Early American Protestantism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 62–63.

48. For a sampling of thirty-two visionary accounts from between 1783 and 1815, see Bushman, “Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” 201–4.

49. Peterson, “Another Testimony,” 11. For a more contemporaneous and similar account, see Oliver Cowdery, “Letter III,” December 1834, in “History, 1834–1836,” 59, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 20, 2020, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1834-1836/63>.

50. Lane passed through Smith’s neighborhood shortly after his reported vision in July 1820. Larry C. Porter, “Reverend George Lane—Good ‘Gifts,’ Much ‘Grace,’ and Marked ‘Usefulness,’” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 335. For other possible ministers to whom Smith could have reported his vision, see Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience,” 51–54.

51. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 3.

## Reason, Revelation, and the Rise of Rational Religion

Disbelief in visionary experiences has a long history in America. Early on, Puritans repeatedly denounced such revelations by Anabaptists and Quakers who had begun to settle in the colonies.<sup>52</sup> Later, during the enthusiastic outbursts of the First Great Awakening, so-called Old Light leaders singled out reports of visions as evidence that Evangelicals went too far.<sup>53</sup> Revivalists constantly struggled to counteract comparisons of themselves to visionary heretics of Christian past.<sup>54</sup> On this point, traditional religionists found unlikely allies in supernatural skeptics.<sup>55</sup> Thomas Paine, the renowned revolutionary, for instance, doubted “that the Almighty ever did communicate anything to man, by any mode of speech, in any language, or by any kind of vision.”<sup>56</sup> In the years leading up to Smith’s experience, heavenly apparitions increasingly came under attack by a new opponent—the scientific community. As part of the “medicalizing [of] religious enthusiasm,” physicians associated visions with psychiatric disorders.<sup>57</sup> Doctors at times clinically diagnosed visionaries with “religious madness,” one of several “standard medical explanations of mental illness.”<sup>58</sup> One treatise on the subject specifically included “conversations with Angelic ministers” as a symptom of

---

52. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgement: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 106–8.

53. Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 258.

54. David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 186–88.

55. Christopher Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–8.

56. Thomas Paine, “The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology,” in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 2 vols. (New York: Citadel, 1945), 1:596.

57. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 191. Unsurprisingly, the medicalization of religion corresponded with religious “disillusionment with orthodox medicine.” See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 28.

58. J. Spencer Fluhman, “A Peculiar People”: *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 61–62.

lunacy.<sup>59</sup> Hallucination, madness, and delusion were all invectives from the educated elite directed toward uncomely religious expressions. By 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville noted without any further comment that “religious insanity is very common in the United States.”<sup>60</sup>

Evangelicals, confronted with the real possibility of becoming pariahs, remade their religion, reframing their enthusiastic experiences.<sup>61</sup> As traditional piety gave way to psychopathology, they increasingly explained their faith “in scientific rather than theological” language.<sup>62</sup> Borrowing terminology from the Enlightenment, Evangelicals claimed a belief in an experimental religion that rested on empirical facts.<sup>63</sup> Through “individual experience,” they claimed to be able to “become possessed of a kind of proof.”<sup>64</sup> Part of the appeal of evangelical Christianity was specifically its evidential nature. By “appropriating an enlightened language of experience, certainty, evidence, and sensation as their own,” Evangelicalism represented, in the words of one religious historian, “a vector of modernity, a creative response to the transformations that were reshaping everyday life.”<sup>65</sup> Instead of repudiating science, Evangelicals baptized it.<sup>66</sup>

---

59. William Battie, *A Treatise on Madness* (London: Whiston and White, 1758), 58.

60. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), 2:142.

61. For a detailed description of how this happened in Britain, see Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), 1–20.

62. Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 18.

63. See Schneider, *Way of the Cross Leads Home*, 42–58.

64. Rev. Francis A. West, “Divine Providence a Moral Discipline,” in *Sermons on Important Subjects by Several Ministers of the Wesleyan-Methodist Connexion* (London: John Mason, 1832), 376.

65. Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), 8–9. Unlike Puritans and Anglicans, enthusiasts believed that one’s relationship with God was not mediated by institutions but depended entirely on the witness of the Spirit. Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 173.

66. For more information on Evangelicals’ feelings toward science, see D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism: True Religion in a Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 102–42.

Experimental religion relied upon evidence, though of a metaphysical type. Trumpeting theories of consciousness in which a disembodied mind correlated data into forms and concepts, Evangelicals marshalled popular philosophical arguments to their cause.<sup>67</sup> They were convinced that science confirmed the truths of Christianity and unabashedly embraced empiricist epistemology. Separating the sensory from the mind's understanding, perception from reality, Evangelicals constructed a space where enthusiasm was permissible outside the purview of human observation.<sup>68</sup> This demarcation between physical phenomenon and subjective spiritual truths created an untouchable realm outside the reach of objective inquiry. Thus "the mysteries of nature," in the words of one Evangelical, could never "usurp the province nor trench upon the bounds" of the "the mysteries of revelation."<sup>69</sup> Since the "Internal Witness" of the Spirit came directly "to the believer's mind," it fell safely outside "the sphere of reason."<sup>70</sup> Ingenious and inventive, they created a reality untouchable to forensic analysis, a scientific faith immune to scientific inquiry.

This retreat into an otherworldly realm to ward off modern medicine's secular explanations for religious experiences nevertheless came at a cost. The compartmentalization of the spiritual and the physical effectively erected a bulwark that kept science out of faith but at the same time hedged God in. Though Evangelicals preached of the Divine's influence in the world, in significant ways they required his absence. Revelation remained necessary for forgiveness of sins and to be born again, but they claimed this testimony could come only through certain channels—through internal witnesses of the Spirit and not through physical manifestations. This bifurcation of the celestial and corporeal

---

67. Richard E. Brantley, *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1984), 13.

68. J. Stillson Judah, *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 27. Evangelicals were especially fond of citing Isaac Newton's *Treatise on Optics*.

69. Rev. Daniel M'Allum, "Structure of the Human Eye and Ear," *Methodist Magazine* 10, no. 3 (New York: N. Bangs and J. Emory, 1827), 117; Rev. James Everett, "The Voice of Blood, as Heard from Victim on the Christian Altar," in *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 342.

70. Rev. Matthew Richey, "On the Witness of the Spirit," in *The Methodist Preacher: Or Monthly Sermons from Living Ministers. Vols. III & IV*, ed. Ebenezer Ireson (Boston: Kane and Co., 1833), 34. Enthusiasts widely accepted the fact that the Spirit's nature was "essentially different from the evidences of natural philosophy, chymistry [*sic*], &c." Ballou, *Series of Letters*, 29.

often ignored areas where the two overlapped, including the somatic nature of enthusiasm. Unwilling to abandon certain charismatic gifts that they interpreted as empirical evidence of conversion, Evangelicals struggled to explain them. Particularly troublesome were visions that described God with language that could be construed as debasing Deity. Enthusiasm, if permissible, had to maintain the “immeasurable distance that separates man from his Maker.”<sup>71</sup> According to Evangelicals, God was an eternal being without body or parts.<sup>72</sup> To suggest that the Supreme Creator in any way resembled the human with hands or feet, eyes or ears, was simply unfathomable. As one popular American theological dictionary put it, God was “invisible and impalpable,” not “to be seen and felt.”<sup>73</sup>

Visions were only permissible as long as they maintained the strict separation between the spiritual and physical. “Nothing can be more erroneous and unfounded,” cautioned one American enthusiast, than an attestation “conveyed to the recipient by means of an audible voice from heaven, or through the medium of a visionary representation.” God only testified through an “interiorly sensible operation of the Spirit,” not “to the eye—to the ear—nor even to any of the inferior faculties of the soul.”<sup>74</sup> Only communications “consistent with the character of God” and “of a spiritual” nature were permissible.<sup>75</sup> These came through an inner quickening of the Holy Spirit. This method of acquiring heavenly knowledge gave “no sanction whatever to any fanatical claims to supernatural *revelations*.”<sup>76</sup> Visionaries who claimed to have seen or talked with God, if not clinically mad, were at least “hyper-rational.” The mentally insane, as defined by Evangelicals, were specifically “those who believe themselves to be favoured perpetually with special, particular,

---

71. Isaac Taylor, *Natural History of Enthusiasm* (New York: Jonathan Leavitt, 1831), 30.

72. The First Article of Religion of the American Methodist Episcopal Church stated, “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts.” See J. Soule and T. Mason, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 19th ed. (New York: John C. Totten, 1817), 7.

73. Charles Buck, *A Theological Dictionary*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Whitehall, 1807), 1:406.

74. Richey, “On the Witness of the Spirit,” 36–37.

75. Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes; or, a View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals and Institutions of Christianity*, vol. 1 (New York: N. Bangs and J. Emory, 1825), 95; Richey, “On the Witness of the Spirit,” 39.

76. Rev. James Douglas, “Regeneration,” in *The Methodist* 73, 5th ser., vol. 7, ed. J. W. Mendenhall (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1891), 759, emphasis in original.



and ultra-scriptural revelations from heaven.” Sensible intercourse with the Divine came exclusively “through the soul.”<sup>77</sup> Any message that did not come in this manner was to be dismissed as simply “the effusions of an enthusiastic brain.”<sup>78</sup>

### “Seeing” Visions

In 1814, just six years before Joseph Smith’s First Vision, America’s most popular evangelist, Lorenzo Dow, published his memoir, which became one of the most read books in the United States. In it, Dow described his own vision as a teenager in Connecticut. As a young boy of only thirteen, he recalled journeying “out of doors” seeking the “salvation of [his] soul.” Nearly overcome by a thick “mist of darkness,” he beheld God accompanied by “Jesus Christ at his right hand.” Dow, however, unlike Smith, was convinced that he never actually saw God or Christ. The vision had only been “strongly impressed on [his] mind” to call him to repentance.<sup>79</sup>

Dow asserted that neither he nor any other person “by these outward sensitive organs” could “hear, see, smell, taste nor feel God.” The Divine’s inexplicable and immaterial nature ruled out the possibility of literal visions. Yet, for Evangelicals, it was undeniable that God communicated to the faithful. Dow himself received such heavenly intelligence. Visions, he clarified, were experienced mentally, not through the physical sensory organs. “There are but six ways to receive ideas,” Dow explained, “which are by *inspiration*, or one of the *five senses*.”<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, revelation came only by way of inspiration—that is, directly to the perceptive faculty of the soul that functioned independent of the natural body.

Part of a larger transatlantic evangelical movement, Dow did not invent this explanation of visions but rather borrowed it from British theologians. As other European enthusiasts elucidated, godly manifestations came through “intellectual vision,” or “second sight” as it was sometimes called, a process only “somewhat analogous to the sense of seeing.”<sup>81</sup> The eye of faith created a medium to obtain certain knowledge

---

77. Taylor, *Natural History of Enthusiasm*, 35, 76, and 28.

78. Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 1:256.

79. Lorenzo Dow, *Quintessence of Lorenzo’s Works: History of Cosmopolite* (Philadelphia: Joseph Rakestraw, 1816), 12–13.

80. Dow, *History of Cosmopolite*, 347, italics in original.

81. Theophilus Insulanus, *Treatises on the Second Sight, Dreams and Apparitions* (Edinburgh: Ruddiman, Auld, and Co., 1819), 47, italics in original.

independent of sight.<sup>82</sup> Indiscernible to the natural eye, God was still perceptible. "We grant that he is *invisible* to *bodily* eyes," one English Evangelical declared, "yet assert that he can be seen by mental *eyes*."<sup>83</sup> While the belief in inner senses opened a door for communion with the Divine, it simultaneously denied the possibility of a physical appearance. As a Scottish cleric cautioned, "Jesus Christ in the body cannot be seen by any with their bodily eyes in this life"; such manifestations could only be the products of "their imagination," "disorder[s] of their head," or possibly "the humours of their bodies at that time." Either way, the minister warned, physical visions were not authentic.<sup>84</sup>

In agreement, American Evangelicals attributed most tales of visions to the human tendency to connect the spiritual and the familiar.<sup>85</sup> This did not rule out, however, the possibility that "He who is by nature invisible, makes himself as it were visible to his creatures."<sup>86</sup> At times, the influence of the Spirit could weigh upon the "faculty of the mind" whereby the "outward organs" would conceive of "forms" and "ideas of things."<sup>87</sup> In a reverse direction of how the senses usually relay information to the brain, the soul, "supernaturally invigorated and elevated," produced powerful ecstatic effects upon the body.<sup>88</sup> Enthusiasts' "imagination[s]," thus "heated and delighted" by the Holy Spirit, would fill their minds with "impressions and visionary representations."<sup>89</sup> Though the stimuli evoked physical responses that often led "a man to suppose he has some remarkable intercourse with Deity," it could only be a hallucination, "nothing more than the effects of a heated imagination, or a sanguine constitution."<sup>90</sup> Godly manifestations were as "a glass which places [a] visage before [us]," only real in the sense that they were representations.<sup>91</sup>

---

82. On spiritual senses, see Misty G. Anderson, *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief and the Borders of the Self* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 54.

83. Edward Hare, *A Letter to the Rev. Melville Horne; Occasioned by His Investigation of the Doctrines Imputed by Him to Certain Methodist Preachers* (Sheffield, Eng.: J. Montgomery, 1809), 24, italics in original.

84. James Robe, *Narratives of the Extraordinary Work of the Spirit of God at Cambuslang, Kisyth, & C.* (Glasgow: n.p., 1790), 200–201.

85. See Taylor, *Natural History of Enthusiasm*, 98.

86. Watson, *Theological Institutes*, 79.

87. Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 1:399.

88. Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 1:426.

89. Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 1:281.

90. Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 1:256.

91. Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 2:471. This analogy paradoxically required an invisible object to reflect a visible image.

Such an understanding of modern visions necessitated a reinterpretation of the Bible. While previous commentators described Divine appearances in scripture as “a reality, and not merely an illusion of the imagination,” Evangelicals increasingly read these manifestations as metaphorical.<sup>92</sup> Commenting on the section in Exodus in which God speaks to Moses “face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend,” Methodist Matthew Simpson reasoned, “If, then, we inquire what is meant by the term ‘face,’ we are at once satisfied that it can have no such application to a spirit as it has to man.” Indeed, all such language “must be used figuratively” and is “but symbol” since God “hath not body and parts.” Reading the New Testament back into the Old, Moses “must have had correct views of the Deity—he must have known that ‘God is a spirit,’ [John 4:24]—that ‘no man hath seen God at any time’ [John 1:18]—that a spiritual being cannot be materially discerned.” Granting that the Lord is often spoken of as having human characteristics, Simpson clarified, “These views arise from the imperfection of our faculties,” since “we can form no distinct conception without associating some of them” (see Ex. 33:11).<sup>93</sup> Scriptural descriptions of God’s physical nature amounted to nothing more than an allusion.

The manner in which enthusiasts interpreted biblical manifestations carried over into the way they reported their own visions. As one religious historian explains, “Evangelicals were very careful in the language they used to describe” such manifestations, employing words like “seemingly” and “by faith” in order “to signal their awareness of the enormous potential of unorthodox spiritual experience.” Visions “should be *seen*—not felt or heard in any physical way—and seen by the ‘eye of faith’ alone.”<sup>94</sup> Evangelical authorities often enforced this rule through the emendation or redaction of visionary reports. When Connecticut minister Eleazar Wheelock received an anonymous account of someone who had been transported to heaven and conversed with “God the father and God the son,” he corrected the simple story by inserting commentary

---

92. Thomas Scott, *Vol. 5: The Holy Bible [. . .] according to the Authorized Version* (London: James Nisbet, 1866), 4R6.

93. Rev. Matthew Simpson, “The Influence on the Human Mind of the Manifestation of God’s Glory,” in *The Methodist Episcopal Pulpit: A Collection of Original Sermons from Living Ministers of the M. E. Church*, ed. D. W. Clark (New York: Lane and Scott, 1848), 15–23.

94. Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 115–16, italics in original.

that clarified that the convert had only “suppos’d” to have witnessed such things. As everything had taken place in “the invisible World,” Wheelock added that he or she had only “seamd” to have seen the “Glorious attributes of the incomprehensible God.” In no way had the author experienced the event with the “bodily sences [*sic*].”<sup>95</sup> In a comparable manner, Pastor Samuel Hopkins, the editor of an early evangelical woman’s memoirs, sanitized her story of a vision of Jesus; deeming the content potentially harmful to proper theology, he omitted it in its entirety from the publication of her life history.<sup>96</sup>

For the most part, however, Evangelicals successfully self-censored. Norris Stearns’s vision, described earlier, paralleled Smith’s but differed in one essential: unlike Smith, he cautiously qualified that he could not be certain if what he witnessed happened “in the body or out.” God appeared “almost in bodily shape like a man,” but “in looking steadfastly to discern features, [he] could see none.” Disguising the Divine in metaphorical language, Stearns reported, “His face was, as it were a flame of Fire, and his body, as it had been a Pillar and a Cloud.”<sup>97</sup> Revivalist Charles Finney in a similar fashion mollified the language of his vision. The entirety of his experience with the Savior occurred within a “remarkable state of mind,” and it only “seemed as if [he] met the Lord.” Finney, though he referred to his vision as an “interview,” made certain to clarify that “[Jesus] said nothing” and that it only “seemed to me a reality, that he stood before me.” Pouring his soul out, Finney described falling at Christ’s feet and bathing them in tears as he “wept aloud like a child,” and yet he was careful to note he “had no distinct impression that [he] touched him.” Deeply conditioned by his subsequent ministerial education and theological instruction, Finney wrote, “It did not occur to me then, nor did it for some time afterward,” that the vision transpired “wholly [in] a mental state.”<sup>98</sup>

Like the aforementioned visionaries, Elias Smith, who witnessed the Lamb of God in a heavenly light, made it clear that the vision only “appeared to my understanding” in an out-of-body experience. His mind transported to the eternal realm. He “seemed to rise in that

---

95. Eleazar Wheelock, quoted in Douglas L. Winiarski, “Souls Filled with Ravishing Transport: Heavenly Visions and the Radical Awakening in New England,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (January 2004): 30–31, 44 n. 83.

96. See Brekus, *Sarah Osborn’s World*, 111–12.

97. Stearns, *Religious Experience*, 12.

98. Finney, *Memoirs*, 19–20.

light” while “everything earthly was gone from [him].”<sup>99</sup> Finally, Billy Hibbard, another young New Englander who claimed he “saw” Jesus Christ and God the Father in secluded prayer, employed the language of observation loosely. Though he described the “rapturous sight” of “beholding the glory of God,” Hibbard’s vision occurred with his eyes closed. Realizing the impossibility of seeing the Divine through physical perception, Hibbard explained to his readers that “if I had kept my eyes open, I should not have seen God in glory, and Jesus Christ.”<sup>100</sup> Mental and metaphorical, visions were inexact representations of supernatural realities.

Unlike his contemporaries, Joseph Smith maintained that what he beheld in vision accurately reflected what had in fact transpired. Equating his own experience to that of Paul’s on the road to Damascus, Smith divulged that Paul truly had seen “in the way a light from heaven” and heard a “voice speaking” unto him (see Acts 26:13–14). This self-comparison to Paul seems far from unintentional; Evangelicals frequently described Paul’s conversion as prescriptive.<sup>101</sup> Knowing this, Smith forthrightly asserted Paul “saw a light and heard a voice.” Though scoffers “ridiculed and reviled,” calling him both “dishonest” and “mad,” this did not “destroy the reality of his vision.” “So it was with me,” Smith related. “Though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true. . . . I ha[d] actually seen a vision.”<sup>102</sup>

Over the course of Smith’s lifetime, he wrote or dictated multiple accounts of his First Vision, each one containing an unsophisticated, plain presentation of the nature of the event. In his first attempt to write

99. Smith, *Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travel, and Sufferings*, 59.

100. Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life*, 23–25.

101. See Rev. George Coles, “The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus,” in *Methodist Preacher*, 51–62; Rev. Jotham Horton, “The Efficacy of Faith, as Illustrated in the Character and Life of the Apostle Paul,” in *Methodist Preacher*, 63–82; and Rev. Robert Alder, “The Power of the Gospel,” in *Sermons on Important Subjects*, 403–27.

102. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 4. Counter to Joseph Smith’s claim, Ezra Booth, an early Latter-day Saint convert who later apostatized from the faith, claimed that Smith did “not pretend that he sees them with his natural, but with his spiritual eyes; and he says he can see them as well with his eyes shut, as with them open.” E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: By the author, 1834), 186. Historian Dan Vogel makes a similar argument, believing “Smith used visual language to describe an experience that was non-sensory.” Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 31.

down his experience, he simply reported, “I saw the Lord” and “he spake unto me.”<sup>103</sup> If anything, Smith became more direct in his later comments in what has been called the “*thatness*” of his vision.<sup>104</sup> “I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak to me,” he affirmed in 1838. “Why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen?”<sup>105</sup> As one historian has noted, Smith, in contrast to other visionaries, “became more insistent on the reality and materiality of his experience” over time. “Instead of backing down in the face of skeptics, Smith doubled down on the physical nature of his vision.”<sup>106</sup> Moreover, he described in detail the characteristics of the “personages” he had seen.<sup>107</sup> While many of Smith’s contemporaries claimed to have peeked beyond the veil and beheld beatific visions of the Divine, he audaciously proclaimed to have had real, personal communication with an anthropomorphic God the Father and Jesus Christ.

## Epilogue

“What kind of a being is God?” Joseph Smith asked a gathered audience of ten thousand a month before the last recorded presentation of his First Vision. “Does any man or woman know?” Fighting the wind, he bellowed, “Have any of you seen him, heard him, communed with him?” “The great secret,” Smith revealed, is that “God himself, who sits enthroned in yonder heavens, is a man like unto one of yourselves. . . . If the vail was rent to-day, and the great God, who holds this world in its

---

103. For theories about what might have prompted Smith to write down his vision in 1832, see Ann Taves and Steven C. Harper, “Joseph Smith’s First Vision: New Methods for the Analysis of Experience-Related Texts,” *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 60–63; and Matthew C. Godfrey, “The Second Sacred Grove: The Influence of Greenville, Indiana, on Joseph Smith’s 1832 First Vision Account,” *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 4 (October 2018): 15–17.

104. Adele Brannon McCollum, “The First Vision: Re-visioning Historical Experience,” in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert, Religious Studies Monograph Series, vol. 5 (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1981), 185, emphasis in original.

105. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 4.

106. Turner, *Mormon Jesus*, 71–72.

107. “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 707, available at Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/2>.

orbit, and upholds all things by his power; if you were to see him to-day, you would see him in all the person, image and very form as a man.”<sup>108</sup> Smith was convinced that he had actually seen God and conversed with him.<sup>109</sup> From his first telling of his vision to the last, he maintained the unambiguous nature of this event.<sup>110</sup>

Reared in an environment awash with visionaries, Smith’s vision stood out. “Instead of bringing him into the mainstream as conversions ordinarily did,” as Smith’s biographer noted, his vision “set him on a course of his own.”<sup>111</sup> Ignored by the very people who encouraged him to seek God, he would go on to found his own religious tradition. His literal interpretation of his experience set him apart so entirely that no other denomination would accept him.<sup>112</sup> Smith’s description of his vision transgressed the theological barriers that had been erected by Evangelicals to protect the Eternal from obtrusion, and Smith’s claim to have seen God cut to the core of their theology, threatening to destabilize the very foundation of creedal Christianity. Divinity’s omnipotence, omniscience, and ontological uniqueness all rested on a presupposition

---

108. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by *Times and Seasons*,” 613, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/2>.

109. Smith preferred to use the Bible to explicate God’s nature, though his own visionary experiences doubtlessly contributed to his conception of the Divine. See James B. Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” *Dialogue* 1, no. 3 (1966): 38.

110. Smith’s First Vision is rarely included in discussions of early Latter-day Saint theology. Since accounts of the vision were committed to paper over a decade after the event, scholars commonly assume they must reflect later ideas. I, however, argue that Smith’s vision was rejected precisely for theological reasons, and he appears to never have equivocated on the idea that he beheld an embodied God. For opposing views that downplay or ignore the First Vision, see Thomas G. Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” *Sunstone* 5, no. 4 (July–August 1980): 24–33; Benjamin E. Park, “Salvation through a Tabernacle: Joseph Smith, Parley P. Pratt, and Early Mormon Theologies of Embodiment,” *Dialogue* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 5–10; and Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 17–20.

111. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism’s Founder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 41.

112. As one scholar has put it, Joseph Smith “was off script.” Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 99–100.

of incorporeality, not to mention the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Whereas Evangelicals maintained that Deity was wholly immaterial and invisible, Smith turned the entire system on its head by simply proclaiming that the Almighty could, if he so pleased, reveal himself through physical means.<sup>113</sup> To those around him, it was impossible to conceive anything more blasphemous than the God Smith described, who stood, pointed with his finger, and carried on a conversation.<sup>114</sup>

Evangelicals countered Smith’s claim to have “actually seen a vision” with a robust theological framework that categorically denied such manifestations.<sup>115</sup> For them, the story’s antimodern undertones ruled out the possibility of it being a genuine revelation. Since Smith described his vision in material terms, its ultimate source had to be physical. Evangelicals, therefore, suggested Smith suffered from insanity. As one contemporary detailed, his communication with God the Father and Jesus Christ derived from “a distempered brain.” The diagnosis was certain: Smith’s insistence on beholding God made him a “lunatic.” As a “weak minded” youth, he had become “maddened with religious frenzies” to the point that he “fancied and believed” that he had actually been visited by heavenly beings.<sup>116</sup> To Evangelicals, his vision constituted nothing more than a sensory illusion triggered by his own imagination—an unfortunate side effect of unchecked enthusiasm.

For Joseph Smith, visions were nothing but straightforward. While Evangelicals maintained that the transcendent had to be translated to be understood, he suggested it needed no interpretation. God, who at sundry times had shown himself to ancient prophets, again manifested his bodily presence as he had done formerly. Attempts to say that such visions, past and present, were a “*similitude—figurative, metaphorical, & C.*,” for Latter-day Saints, amounted to little more than Protestant philosophizing.<sup>117</sup> If they could only “gaze into heaven [for] five minutes,”

---

113. Joseph Smith would go on to claim, “There is no such thing as immaterial matter.” “History, 1838–1856, Volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843],” 1552 (May 17, 1843), Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 20, 2020, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/195>.

114. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 4.

115. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 4.

116. Charles Mackay, *The Mormons: Or Latter-day Saints* (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1851), 26, 165.

117. Samuel Bennett, *A Few Remarks by Way of Reply to an Anonymous Scribbler, Calling Himself a Philanthropist: Disabusing the Church of Jesus Christ*



Smith declared, they would “know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject” about “the relation of man to God.”<sup>118</sup> The distance between the human and the holy was not as great as supposed. Recalling Jesus’s words from the Sermon on the Mount that “the pure in heart . . . shall see God” (see Matt. 5:8), Smith promised his followers that like him they too “should see a heavenly vision.”<sup>119</sup> In the decades following Joseph Smith’s First Vision, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints successfully siphoned thousands of converts from mainline denominations by promising believers a more intimate relationship with the Divine. In the end, his vision opened the door for an even more experiential religion than Evangelicalism, one in which the faithful could encounter God without qualification.

---

Jeremy Talmage is an employee of the Church History Department and a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Utah. He holds graduate degrees from the University of Utah and Yale University and has previously authored articles that have appeared in the *Journal of Mormon History*, *Mormon Historical Studies*, and the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*.

---

*of Latter-day Saints of the Slanders and Falsehoods Which He Has Attempted to Fasten Upon It* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking and Guilpert, 1840), 11, italics in original.

118. “History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” 1750 (October 9, 1843), Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 20, 2020, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/122>.

119. “Minutes, 18 March 1833,” 17, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 20, 2020, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-18-march-1833/2>.