




2008

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“A Uniformity So Complete”: Early Mormon Angelology

Benjamin E. Park

“An angel of God never has wings,” boasted Joseph Smith in 1839, just as the Saints were establishing themselves in what would come to be known as Nauvoo, Illinois. The Mormon prophet then proceeded to explain to the gathered Saints that one could “discern” between true angelic beings, disembodied spirits, and devilish minions by a simple test of a handshake. He assured them that “the gift of discerning spirits will be given to the presiding Elder, pray for him...that he may have this gift[.]”¹ His statement, sandwiched between teachings on the importance of sacred ordinances and a reformulation of speaking in tongues, offer a succinct insight into Joseph Smith’s evolving understanding of angels and their relationship to human beings. Teaching that they didn’t have wings rejected classic stereotypes and caricatures of the mysterious and mystical beings that had long held a significant part in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Among the many theological innovations Smith proposed during his prophetic tenure was taking part in a radical redefinition of the nature of angelical beings, and closing the gap between humans and angels. Long held to be a “wholly other” species, Smith reconceptualized them as members of the same human family, taking part in the same salvific work, and even dwelling mortally at some point upon the same planet; when asked whether an angel’s temporal time depended upon the “planet on which they reside,” Smith responded that “there is no angel ministers to this earth only what either does belong or has belonged to this earth,” rejecting the

¹ Joseph Smith Sermon, before 8 August 1839, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, Religious Studies Monograph Series, no. 6 (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 12-13.

notion of ontologically distinct angelic beings and collapsing the conceptual distance between “mortal” and “immortal.”²

This unorthodox angelology represents several theological beliefs for early Mormonism. First, it placed their supernatural claims on more rational foundations, adapting Romantic impulses with the growing necessity for systematic thought while at the same time invoking the literalistic readings of the Bible. Though they held on to supernatural beliefs like angelic beings, those beings could be tested through empirical means like a handshake, or even by priesthood authority. Second, resurrected angels provided Joseph Smith and his followers a tangible argument for their authority claims; early Mormonism’s solution for a fallen Christianity was to recover those who had been involved in it before the apostasy—restoring their texts, voices, and even priesthoods. Further, connected to their theology of ministering angels was the notion of evil spirits and the accompanied necessity for spiritual discernment—establishing the origin, purpose, and limits of what they recognized as the many false spirits of the day. And finally, Smith’s theological reformulation of angelic beings correlated with his larger ideological project to weld all beings—humans, Gods, and angels—into one collaborative group of intelligences diverging only in progression along an infinite spectrum.

However, it took Joseph Smith and other Mormons several years to come to these theological beliefs. Like any other religious group, early Mormon thought developed over a period of time, evolving from their beginnings as a mildly diverging form of American Protestantism to eventually a new religious tradition with numerous distinctive beliefs.³ During

² George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1995), 96.

³ For a brief outline on the evolving nature of Mormon thought, see Thomas G. Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” *Sunstone* 5:4 (July-August 1980): 24-33. For Mormonism as a “new religious

this period of change, Angels served as an important doctrinal touchstone, often appearing at important shifts during the first two decades of the movement and representing the developments that were occurring. Changing conceptualizations of angels helps chart Mormon thinking in important ways and reflect transitions into periods of elaborated ecclesiology and increasingly materialistic thinking. This paper engages Mormonism’s evolving views of angels specifically as a window to the evolving views of Mormon thought generally, arguing that angelology provides a useful vantage point from which to interpret early LDS theology.

The Contemporary Search for a “Rational” Angel

It would be beneficial to explain the context from which Mormon angelology took place. Enlightenment thought brought many challenges and innovations to eighteenth and nineteenth century religious movements. It made believers who emphasized spiritual impulses not only have to defend “what is true?” but also “what is rational?” What had been fundamental beliefs like God’s intervention in human lives, direct communication from heaven, and Angelic visitations were now contested as being unreasonable and improbable. As Leigh Eric Schmidt wrote,

The very idea of a God who speaks and listens, a proposition integral to Christian devotionalism, became a “monstrous belief” to men like [Thomas] Paine, and the voice of reason was offered as a mechanically reliable replacement for these divine attributes. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, divine absence, far more than presence, had to be constructed, and philosophical argument alone was insufficient material: the rules and practices of auditory experience had to be reshaped as a condition of heaven’s silence.⁴

However, even with the increase of enlightenment critiques, Schmidt continued that “the modern predicament actually became as much one of God’s loquacity as God’s hush.” But now

tradition,” see Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985)

⁴ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 6.

religious movements were obligated to attempt to meet new enlightenment guidelines: “a significant number of American Christians continued to absorb the mental habits and disciplines of the Scottish Common-Sense philosophy well into the nineteenth century; and evangelicals, Spiritualists, and Swedenborgians all scrambled to put themselves on respectable scientific footing.”⁵ Early Mormonism also took part within this rationalization of Christianity, as they attempted to present their supernatural claims through rational and reasonable means.

The usage of angels was one way religious leaders attempted to “put themselves on respectable footing,” and the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg provided excellent and early examples of doing just that. Swedenborg was philosopher, scientist, and Christian mystic who devoted his later life to theology, garnering numerous converts on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. He is unique in many of his religious innovations, yet influenced a large number of later thinkers in Europe and America. Among his religious writings, he audaciously claimed personal encounters with angelic beings as a central tenet to his message. Starting in the 1740s, Swedenborg developed the ability to “converse with angels and spirits in the same manner as I speak with men,” and his continual communications with angels was the main foundation for his knowledge and authority.⁶ Many of his followers came to see him as introducing “a more intimate fellowship with saints and angels,” implementing a time when “angels shall converse with men as familiarly as they did with Adam before the fall.”⁷

⁵ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 11.

⁶ *A Brief Account of the Life of Emanuel Swedenborg, a Servant of the Lord and the Messenger of the New-Jerusalem Dispensation* (Cincinnati: Looker and Reynolds, 1827), 15-19.

⁷ “Preface by the Translator,” in Swedenborg, *A Treatise Concerning Heaven and Hell, and of the Wonderful Things Therein, as Heard and Seen by the Honourable and Learned Emanuel Swedenborg* (Baltimore: Miltenberger, 1812), 5-10.

Yet Swedenborg viewed their angelic messengers as not some foreign specimen wholly distinct from humans, but rather as individuals who had once lived on Earth thoughat different phases inapost-mortal progression. This is characteristic and foretelling of the coming generations, for the enlightenment made it necessary for those who believed in angels to present them in a more reasonable framework. During this time, Schmidt argued, “the voices from the spirit-land that people desired were increasingly materialized and incarnated,” a distant cry from the “wholly other” type of ministers traditional Christianity was accustomed to.⁸ To the Swedish theologian, angelic beings were much more personal, and therefore much more *rational*, setting the stage for similar developments to take place among many contemporary Protestant traditions.

Attempts to rationalize angels were common in the eighteenth century, and speculation about their origin was highly debated. Yet many agreed that they were unique beings designed specifically for angelic work and separately created to further God’s purposes. Regarding the debate on the genesis of angels, Reverend Charles Buck noted in his highly influential religious dictionary that it “is, however, a needless speculation, and we dare not indulge a spirit of conjecture. It is our happiness to know that they are all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to them who are heirs of salvation.” As for their makeup, Buck wrote that “the more general opinion is, that they are substances entirely spiritual, though they can at any time assume bodies, and appear in human shape,” somewhat connecting angels to humans but still maintaining some physiological differences.⁹ John Reynolds, the most prolific writer on eighteenth century angelology, summed up the origin and purpose of angels within orthodox boundaries:

⁸ Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 201.

⁹ Charles Buck, *A Theological Dictionary: Containing All Religious Terms; A Comprehensive View of Every Article in the System of Divinity; An Impartial Account of All the*

Since the great God design'd a Creation for his own Glory, it became him to erect a most splendid House, where he would be most seen and best served: It became him to have a vast Retinue of splendid Domesticks, surrounding his Throne, applauding his Majesty, attending his commands, ready to execute his Pleasure in any Part of his Dominions: These are usually called ANGELS in Scripture; concerning whom the Scripture-Revelation, being but concise and brief, leads us to such Inquiries as these.¹⁰

Such depictions of angels began to be challenged, however. When Swedenborg described the angels he was used to conversing with, he presented a vision of celestial beings not too dissimilar from common humanity:

The Angels converse together, as we do on earth, and in like manner on various subjects, whether of a domestic, civil, moral, or spiritual nature...The speech of angels is equally divided into words with our's, and alike sonorous and audible, for they have mouths, tongues and ears, as we have.¹¹

Similar reconstructions of heavenly beings were being done on the American continent. What began as the invisible—yet still powerful¹²—angels of the early Puritans led to claimed visitations like the one Cotton Mather recorded when he witnessed a beardless angel with traditional wings and a “splendid tiara.”¹³ However, by the beginning of the nineteenth century the growing democratized culture gave rise to an increase in angelic manifestations, and more and more people were claiming angelic visits from departed loved ones rather than other-worldly

Principal Denominations Which have Subsisted in the Religious World from the birth of Christ to the Present Day: Together with An Accurate Statement of the most Remarkable Transactions and Events Recorded in Ecclesiastical History (Philadelphia: Joseph J. Woodward, 1831), 17. On the importance of Buck's *Dictionary* in antebellum America, see Mathew Bowman and Samuel Brown, “The Reverend Buck's Theological Dictionary and the Struggle to Define American Evangelicalism,” forthcoming in *Journal of the Early Republic*.

¹⁰ John Reynolds, *Inquiries Concerning the State and æconomy of the Angelical Worlds* (London: Printed for John Clark, 1723), 1-2.

¹¹ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, 234-236.

¹² The best example for early Puritan views of angles is Increase Mather, *Meditations on the Glory of the Heavenly World* (Boston: Benjamin Eliot, 1711).

¹³ Quoted in David Levin, “When did Cotton Mather See the Angel,” *Early American Literature* 15 (1980-81): 271.

specimens.¹⁴ This idea developed even further, and by 1853 a minister by the name J. Everett could claim that every angel was merely a deceased person from this same planet.¹⁵ While early angelic claims were mostly associated with deathbed experiences and preparation for crossing the veil, these messages took on the role of confirmation and even persuasion for doctrinal and authoritative claims as many antebellum denominations battled for religious legitimacy in a growing diverse climate.¹⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century, many spiritualist movements were attempting to summon angels, hoping to gain more information and knowledge from the other side of the veil.¹⁷

The “Mormon” Angel(s)

Thus, by the time Joseph Smith and the early Mormons entered the scene, angelology was a tension-filled topic with considerable baggage, yet still a necessary issue to address. Indeed, Mormonism from the start began with a direct connection with angelic beings: Joseph Smith claimed he was visited in 1823 by an angel informing him of an ancient record to be translated; however, this message was not a faceless, extraterrestrial being created by God solely to deliver divine commands, but rather an actual human remnant of this lost civilization.¹⁸ The

¹⁴ Elizabeth Reis, “Immortal Messengers: Angels, Gender, and Power in Early America,” in *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, ed. Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 164.

¹⁵ J. Everett, *A Book for Skeptics: Being Communications from Angels, Written with their Own Hands; Also Oral Communications, spoken by Angels through a Trumpet, and Written Down as they were Delivered, in the presence of many Witnesses* (Columbus, Ohio: Osgood & Blake, 1853), 14.

¹⁶ Reis, “Immortal Messengers,” 171-172.

¹⁷ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 258, 280.

¹⁸ There is some question as to how explicit Joseph Smith was in public discourse and writing that this early angelic visitor was Moroni. Smith’s first history, written in 1832, does not name the angel. His 1839 history, which eventually became the official history of the Church,

Book of Mormon itself, in a sense, was a means of restoring lost voices with deceased persons “whisper[ing] out of the dust.”¹⁹ Within this recovered scripture, angels took an active role in narrative, including delivering messages, taking chosen prophets on enlightening paths, and even making personal redemptive appearances to wayward children in order to cause repentance.²⁰ Moroni, the same being that visited Joseph Smith in 1823, was the most explicit on the necessity of angelic ministrations in the last day, warning that if “the day of miracles ceased,” then “it is because of unbelief, and all is vain.”²¹ Similar passages can be found in the revelations that proceeded from Joseph Smith during the next few years, emphasizing the interactive role of angels in the work of mankind.²² Indeed, a key component to early Mormon scripture was the restoration of supernatural manifestations—most notably angelic ministration. Further, the Mormon claim on authority came through angelic beings, as will be discussed in the next section.

When Oliver Cowdery wrote the first public history of the Church in 1834, angels took a primary role in his narrative. Yet, after reciting Joseph Smith’s 1823 experience, he

originally named the angel as Nephi. However, several contemporary documents identify Moroni as the angel that delivered the message and the plates to the young Joseph Smith. See Joseph Smith, History [1832], in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989-92), 1:8; Joseph Smith, History, 1839, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 277; *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the latter-day Saints: From the Revelations of God* (Kirtland, Ohio: F. G. Williams and Co., 1835), 50: 2.

¹⁹ *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, Upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi*, translated by Joseph Smith (Palmyra: Printed by E. B. Grandin, for the Author, 1830), 108. (Current LDS edition: 2 Nephi 26:16.)

²⁰ *Book of Mormon*, 24-35, 248, and 323-326. (Current LDS edition: 1 Nephi 11, Alma 10:7; 36.)

²¹ *Book of Mormon*, 579-580. (Current LDS edition: Moroni 7:35-37).

²² See *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints: Carefully Selected from the Revelations of God*, Compiled by Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams (Kirtland, OH: F. G. Williams, 1835), 2:2; 4:15; 7:1; *Manuscript History of the Church*, Book A-1, 192-195, 437-441. (Current LDS edition: D&C 20:10; 77:8-9; 84:88; 88:2; 103:19-20.)

acknowledged that such an idea might be found primitive in the new enlightened age. “I am aware,” he wrote, “that a rehearsal of visions of angels at this day, is as inconsistent with a portion of mankind as it formerly was, after all the boast of this wise generation in the knowledge of the truth.” However, Cowdery’s faith in the Mormon theology of angelic beings gave him confidence that such a belief could be expected: “but there is a uniformity so complete, that on the reflection, one is led to rejoice that it is so.”²³ To Cowdery, among others, a literal reading of the Bible necessitated ministrations from angels and these angels provided the young Church an attachment to antiquity and authority.²⁴

Belief in angels became such a focal point of the Mormon message that it was a common topic in pamphlet debates between Mormons and their contemporary ministers, especially those involving Parley P. Pratt, a leading theologian and apologist. Two examples of these debates-in-print—one in America, one in Britain—represent the standard elements involved in this dialectic give-and-take. At the heart of these debates was the contested issues of biblical interpretation and spiritual gifts—in short, how was one to relate the ancient Bible to the modern world, and what spiritual manifestations were to be expected by a religious believer.

When Le Roy Sunderland printed his eight-part series against Mormonism in 1838, one of his main accusations was that “[the Mormons] profess to have intercourse with the angels of God, and affirm that they frequently see them, and have messages from God through them.”²⁵ Sunderland, a Methodist, was part of a tradition that was attempting to become more “rational” and less “enthusiastic,” and thus interpreted the Mormon’s angelic claims as a remnant of a

²³ Oliver Cowdery, “Letter V,” in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:55.

²⁴ For early Mormonism’s literal interpretation of the Bible, see Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 43-73. Although he argues that they were “selective” literalists (33, 38, 65), the Saints presented themselves as the *most* literal among antebellum religionists.

²⁵ Le Roy Sunderland, “Mormonism,” *Zion’s Watchman* 3, no. 2 (13 January 1838): 6.

religious fanatical past that they were trying to move away from. In response to this accusation, Pratt countered in his *Mormonism Unveiled* that such a belief should not only be accepted, but a central part to religious claims: “this is what the Saints professed in all ages of the world, in every country, among every nation, and under every dispensation of God to man, whether Patriarchal, Mosaic, or Christian; and one who does not believe in such enjoyments, is an infidel, and not a believer of revelation in any shape.”²⁶ The rejection of these spiritual gifts, in other words, would mean the rejection of what it truly meant to be a Christian.

When Pratt’s pamphleteering took off on his mission in England, when Pratt’s pamphleteering took off, his defense of spiritual gifts in general and angelic ministrations in specific greatly increased. William Hewitt, a British minister, reacted to infiltration of Mormon missionaries into his country by attacking the claimed visions of Joseph Smith, particularly the visitations of Moroni.²⁷ Arguing that such experiences are technically “possible,” he dismisses them as not “probable” because of the different setting of the 1840s as opposed to Old Testament times. “It is true that God at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers...by the angels,” he reasoned,

for in those days such a way of communication was necessary, as the Scriptures were not then written for their instruction;--but after God had once spoken unto men by his own Son, manifested in the flesh, and fully revealed his will by him to the world, and confirmed that revelation by a long succession of unquestionable miracles, there has been no necessity for angelic appearances since the days of the Apostles.

²⁶ Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled: Zion’s Watchman Unmasked, and its Editor, Mr. L. R. Sunderland, Exposed: Truth Vindicated: the Devil Mad, and Priestcraft in Danger!* (New York: Printed for the Publisher, 1838), 5.

²⁷ Hewitt is most likely responding to Orson Pratt’s influential *A Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840).

To Hewitt, the ministration of Christ and the spread of the Bible made angelic manifestations unnecessary. While these mystical beings were still present, the government of angels is now administered in a secret and invisible manner.”²⁸ Echoing the American Cotton Mather, Hewitt not only preached the declining importance of angels, but also the widening gap between the earthly and “celestial” realms.

In Pratt’s response, the Mormon apostle claimed that the modern spiritualizing of angels does not take precedence over the divine decree for angelic ministration in the New Testament. He dismissed the notion of a “secret and mysterious way” by reasoning that nobody could witness such a manifestation and would therefore not fulfill its scriptural purpose. While Hewitt drew his reasoning of invisible angels from a respected contemporary theologian, Pratt countered that unless he heard differently from someone with prophetic authority, the biblical command for angelic ministrations was still in place.²⁹ Emblematic of the early Mormon missionary message, Pratt urged that angels not only served as heavenly messengers on divine command, but that their ministration in and of itself was a sign of the religious movement’s authority.

In Nauvoo, speculation on the nature of angels only grew. It was connected to the evolving views of the origin, nature, and possibilities of man, mankind’s relationship with God and the universe. Further, as sacred rites developed in the Nauvoo temple, angelology became more complex, classified, and, most importantly, anthropomorphized, as these new rites dealt with the discernment of good and bad angels. Several writers attempted an angel taxonomy, dividing various types of angels into differing categories. Orson Pratt argued that there were “four grand divisions,” including spirits or angels not yet embodied, spirits or angels currently

²⁸ William Hewitt, *An Exposition of the Errors and Fallacies of the Self-Named “Latter-Day-Saints”* (Lane-End: C. Watts, 1840), 5-6

²⁹ Parley P. Pratt, *An Answer to Mr. William Hewitt’s Tract Against the Latter-Day Saints* (Manchester: W. R. Thomas, 1840), 6-7.

embodied, spirits or angels disembodied yet waiting to be resurrected, and spirits or angels embodied in a mortal tabernacle.³⁰ An editorial in the Mormon newspaper, probably penned by William Phelps, divvied angels into three categories: archangels, resurrected personages, “and the angels which are ministering spirits.”³¹ This latter editorial goes into the most detail as to the nature and function of angels, making the important statement that “it is evident that the angels who minister to men in the flesh, are resurrected beings, so that flesh administers to flesh; and spirits to spirits...”³² This sets up an important distinction in the roles between embodied and disembodied spirits, leaving disembodied spirits primarily the role of ministering in the spirit world.³³ The only way a disembodied spirit could minister to someone in a mortal tabernacle, the text reasoned, was through “dreams,” so that “spirit” could remain only a minister to “spirit.”³⁴

Orson Pratt’s exposition followed the same rules concerning angelic stewardships and rules, going to far to say that the angels that administered to Adam must have been “fleshy beings of some former world” in order to minister to the fleshy mortal.³⁵ Pratt also explained the

³⁰ Orson Pratt, “Angels,” *The New York Messenger* 2, no. 13 (18 October 1845), 97.

³¹ [William Phelps?], “The Angels,” *Times and Seasons* 4 (March 1, 1845), 823. I choose Phelps because the ideas presented in this editorial match the theology present in Phelps’s fictional piece “Paracletes” (especially that of archangels) discussed later in the article. Phelps was the assistant to editor John Taylor for the *Times and Seasons*, and wrote many anonymous pieces. See Samuel Brown, “The Translator and the Ghostwriter: Joseph Smith and W.W. Phelps,” *Journal of Mormon History*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Winter 2008), 26-62. John Taylor is another possible author for this editorial.

³² [Phelps?], “The Angels,” 824.

³³ Parley Pratt had been teaching the necessity of preaching the gospel to the spirit world as a disembodied spirit for at least a year previous to this as part of his *Imitatio Christi*. Parley P. Pratt, “The Immortality and Eternal Life of the Material Body,” in Parley P. Pratt, *An Appeal to the Inhabitants of the State of New York, Letter to Queen Victoria, (Reprinted from the tenth European Edition,) the Fountain of Knowledge, Immortality of the Body, and Intelligence and Affection* (Nauvoo, Illinois: John Taylor, Printer, 1844), 35.

³⁴ [Phelps?], “The Angels,” 825.

³⁵ Orson Pratt, “Angels. No. 2,” *New York Messenger* 2, no. 16 (18 October 1845), 121.

difference in appearance between the two different types of angels, offering his view on the nature and characteristics of a spirit when not possessing a tangible body.

There is a difference in appearance of the spirits of just men, and those immortal beings raised from the dead or translated. If the first become visible, they must appear in brightness with exceeding great splendor and glory. They have no tabernacle in which to hide the brightness of their glory, when visible to mortal eyes; the second can display their glory, or veil it from mortal gaze, by the interposition of the fleshy tabernacle. Hence the second in this respect, hold a preeminence above the first, being possessed of the superior power of administering in brightness and glory, or appearing like common mortal men according to their own will and pleasure.³⁶

Several early Mormons, most notably Orson Hyde, took a special interest in guardian angels. Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs recorded a discourse by Hyde “concerning our guardian Angels that attended each Saint, and would until the Spirit became grieved.” Jacobs took comfort from this teaching and immediately began praying for her own guardian spirit to help her in her current infirmities.³⁷ Elsewhere, Hyde discoursed that “while the angel that administers to man is still in attendance, his life is protected, for the guardian angel is stronger than death,” even arguing that Christ’s plea of being forsaken in Gethsemane was a result of the departure of “the protecting angel whom the Lord had called away, leaving Jesus in the arms of death.”³⁸ In William Phelps’s 1845 fictional piece “Paracletes,” he presented a divine plan designed so “that none of the work of the hands of the ‘Son’ might be lost or any soul which his father had given him, might be left in prison” by commissioning angels “to watch over Idumia

³⁶ Pratt, “Angels. No. 2,” 121.

³⁷ Journal Entry for 17 November 1843, “‘All Things Move in Order in the City’: The Nauvoo Diary of Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs,” ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *BYU Studies* vol. 19, no. 3 (Spring 1979), 298.

³⁸ Orson Hyde, qtd. in “Dedication of the Seventies Hall,” *Times and Seasons* vol. 6 no. 2 (February 1, 1845), 796.

[the earth], and act as spiritual guides to every soul...”³⁹Indeed, the first decade and a half of Mormonism provided many different formulations of angels and an evolving notion of their relationship to mankind and God’s Church. However, moving beyond a mere description of this developing angelology and engaging what it reveals about early Mormon thought offers an important glimpse into the mental world of the early Church.

Mormon Angels and the Appeal to Authority

Even during the translation process of the Book of Mormon, angelic ministration served a larger role in Joseph Smith’s evolving conception of ecclesiastical authority. Oliver Cowdery remembered that while they were translating the portion of the record containing the ministry of Christ, he and Smith came to the conclusion that “none had authority from God to administer the ordinances of the gospel.” As a result, they retired outdoors and an “angel of God came down clothed with glory, and delivered the anxiously looked for message, and the keys of the gospel of repentance!” Writing half a decade after the event, Cowdery attempted to recall the words of the angelic being, placing emphasis on the power they felt the ministration conferred: “upon <you> my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah I confer this priesthood, and this authority, which shall remain upon the earth, that the sons of Levi may yet offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness!”⁴⁰ Combined with the reception of the “high Priesthood after the holy order of the

³⁹ Joseph’s Speckled Bird [William Phelps], “Paracletes,” *Times and Seasons* vol. 6 no. 8 (May 1, 1845), 892. For an excellent introduction and annotated version of this text, see Samuel Brown, “William Phelps’s Paracletes, an Early Witness to Joseph Smith’s Divine Anthropology,” *International Journal of Mormon Studies* vol. 2 (Spring 2009), 62-82.

⁴⁰ Oliver Cowdery, written September 1834, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:30-31. It is important to note that the priesthood conferred by this angel held “the key of the ministering of angels,” implying that future manifestations would be expected.

son” some time later under the hands of New Testament apostles,⁴¹ angelic ministrations served as three of Joseph Smith’s four primary claims to the “Keys of the kingdom of God” in his 1832 history.⁴²

Angelic ordination was not a focus of Mormon authority in the first few years of the Church, however. From 1829, when Joseph Smith began baptizing converts, through the organizational years of 1834-35, the “Church of Christ”—the official name of the Church until 1834—was very simple in organization and quite democratic as opposed to highly hierarchical.⁴³ The early Saints based their authority on a spiritual, democratic power based on revelatory words, texts, and gifts, and did not highlight priesthood ordination.⁴⁴ Joseph Knight’s history,

⁴¹ The timing of the second angelic ordination is debated, yet is tangential and relatively unimportant to this paper’s purposes. For various interpretations of possible dates, see D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Powers* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1994), 14-26; Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 25-26; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 118, 588 n. 35; Brian Q. Cannon and *BYU Studies* staff, “Priesthood Restoration Documents,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995-96): 162-207; Larry C. Porter, “The Restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods,” *Ensign* 26 (Dec. 1996): 30-47.

⁴² When Joseph Smith began his first attempt at writing a history of the early Church in 1832, he gave four key events that he felt was crucial to “the rise of the church of Christ”:

1. “he receiving the testamony [sic] from on high”
2. “the ministering of Angels”
3. “the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring [sic] of Angels to administer the letter of the Gospel - <-the Law and commandments as they were given unto him-> and the ordinencs [sic]”
4. “a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance [sic] from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of God conferred upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c”

Joseph Smith, 1832 History, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:3.

⁴³ For a discussion on the evolving nature of Mormon authority, see Gregory A. Prince, *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), esp. 1-46; Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 1-47.

⁴⁴ See Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 104.

written in the early 1830s, does not mention any ordination by an angel.⁴⁵ Many members of early Mormonism’s early circles, especially those who left the Church during a time of temporal tumult and theological transition, recalled not hearing about angelic ordinations. David Whitmer later wrote, “neither did I ever hear of such a thing as an angel ordaining [Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery] until I got into Ohio about the year 1834—or later.”⁴⁶ William McLellin, one of the original apostle, claimed that while in 1831 he “heard Joseph tell his experience about angel visits many times, he “never heard one word of John the Baptist, or of Peter, James, and John’s visit and ordination till I was told some year or two afterward in Ohio.”⁴⁷ While we cannot determine how much this information was known during this early period, the lack of public commentary on angelic ordination is readily apparent.

⁴⁵ Dean C. Jessee, ed., “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1976): 29-39.

⁴⁶ David Whitmer interview by Zenos H. Gurley, 14 January 1885, in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 154. It should be remembered that David Whitmer in his later life was trying to distance himself from certain elements of Mormonism—most notably priesthood organization—while at the same time holding on the bare minimum of what he believed of the early Church. See H. Michael Marquardt, “David Whitmer: His Evolving Beliefs and Recollections,” in *Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2007), esp. 64-74.

⁴⁷ William McLellin, qtd in Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 19. In 1860, McLellin wrote a letter claiming “I never heard of Moroni, John, or Peter, James, and John. It was after [Joseph Smith] *fell* from God that these things were put in, in order to sustain the falsehood of these two priesthoods. I do not say but angels conversed with him, and gave him much instruction how to proceed. But that they every ordained him *I deny*.” William McLellin to Davis H. Bays, 24 May 1870, transcribed in *The William E. McLellin Papers, 1854-1880*, ed. Stan Larson and Samuel J. Passey (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007), 462. For discussions on McLellin’s “selective” memory, especially concerning his later interpretation of the priesthood, see Thomas G. Alexander, “The Past as Decline from a Golden Age: Early Mormonism’s Restorationist Tendency,” and D. Michael Quinn, “‘My Eyes were Holden in Those Days’: A Study of Selective Memory.” For an argument for the validity of McLellin’s memory, see William D. Russell, “Portrait of a ‘True Believer’ in Original Mormonism.” All these articles are found in Larson and Passey, *The William E. McLellin Papers*.

However, 1834-5 brought many changes for the young Church. Based on what he believed to be the “order of heaven in ancient councils,” Joseph Smith began implementing multiple layers of hierarchical organization.⁴⁸ He organized High Councils in both Kirtland, Ohio, and Clay County, Missouri in 1834; in 1835, he expanded it even further by establishing a Quorum of Twelve Apostles and a Council of Seventy.⁴⁹ Smith received a revelation that established the different roles and authorities of the higher and lower priesthoods as well as the many new priesthood offices.⁵⁰ But with this new emphasis on ordination came a need to validate their ordaining authority, and angelic connections to antiquity took center stage.

When preparing to organize the Kirtland High Council, he instructed those in attendance that “I shall now endeavour to set forth before the council, the dignity of the office which has been conferred upon me by the ministering of the Angel of God, by his own voice and by the voice of this Church.”⁵¹ Indeed, Smith’s idea of recovering the “ancient councils” was by hearkening to the ancient patriarchs who took part in those councils. Around the same time, Joseph Smith gave Oliver Cowdery a blessing in which he explained it was a fulfillment “of prophecy of Joseph, in ancient days,” that Smith and Cowdery should “be ordained...by the hand of the angel in the bush, unto the lesser priesthood, and after receive the holy priesthood under the hands of those who had been held in reserve fore a long season even those who received it under the hands of the Messiah” in order to establish the governing councils of the

⁴⁸ Kirtland Council Minute Book, 17 February 1834.

⁴⁹ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 251-69; Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 39-77; Prince, *Power from On High*, 24-35. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832-1839*, vol. 1 of the journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 252-260.

⁵⁰ *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835), section 3 (Current LDS edition: D&C 107).

⁵¹ Kirtland Council Minute Book, 12 February 1834.

Church in the latter days.⁵² Smith again emphasized the angelic authority when instructing the newly-formed Quorum of the Twelve, explaining, “You have been ordained to the Holy Priesthood. You have received it from those who had their power and Authority from an Angel.”⁵³ In this period of increasing attention of authority and ordination, the Mormon Prophet began to emphasize authority through angelic ordinations—a theme that would only be expanded in years to come.

Once the Kirtland Temple was completed and dedicated—an event that involved a spiritual “Pentecost” including many angelic manifestations⁵⁴—Smith claimed further angelic visitations and ordinations, which in turn signaled deeper theological developments. On April 3, 1836, a week after the dedication, Joseph Smith recorded in his journal a visitation from Moses, Elias, and Elijah, all conferring keys and priesthoods upon the Mormon prophet.⁵⁵ These keys, and the principles Smith would associate with them, would come to dominate Nauvoo theology and discourse, as he hearkened repeatedly to “the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood,” the

⁵² Blessing by Joseph Smith, Jr., on Oliver Cowdery, dated 18 December 1833, revised and recorded 2 October, 1835, Patriarchal Blessing Book 1:12, transcribed in H. Michael Marquardt, comp., *Early Patriarchal Blessings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2007), 8-9. There is some debate about if this blessing was delivered in December 1833 or December 1834. See Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 46-51. Either date, however works within this framework, since the former date takes place two month previous to the organization of Kirtland High Council, and the latter is two months previous to the organization of the Quorum of the Twelve.

⁵³ Kirtland Council Minute Book, 21 February 1835.

⁵⁴ See Steven C. Harper, “‘A Pentecost and Endowment Indeed’: Six Eyewitness Accounts of the Kirtland Temple Experience,” in John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820-1844* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2005): 327-372.

⁵⁵ Joseph Smith, Journal, 1835-1836, in Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journals*, 222 (3 April 1836).

“sealing” ceremonies, ordinances for the dead, and temple rituals—all of which he would associate with Elijah.⁵⁶

That Smith relied on angels for his authority claims reveals an important glimpse into early Mormon thought. Ecclesiastical authority was an important issue in antebellum Protestant religious culture, with many competing claims on how an authoritative bridge could be built between modern present and the ancient, New Testament past. Martin Luther’s “priesthood of all believers” was a popular position for many evangelical-minded denominations, especially among those who emphasized a popular clergy. Among restorationist movements, which Mormonism has often been associated with,⁵⁷ authority was gained through close examination of the Bible and the legitimate interpretation of scripture. Joseph Smith’s appeal to restore the true Christianity, however, was to receive it from those who were a part of it before it was lost. By resurrecting ancient prophets and patriarchs as ministering angels designed to bestow authoritative keys, knowledge, and priesthood, Smith provided a connecting link between Saints of the latter days and Saints of a former day.

This was crucial, for in his mind salvific rituals had passed unchanged from the time of Adam through to the second coming of Christ, establishing an authoritative continuum that necessitated both constant ritual performances and authority to administer them: “Ordinances were instituted in heaven before the foundation of the world in the priesthood for the salvation of men,” he taught in Nauvoo, and were “not [to] be altered, not to be changed. All must be saved

⁵⁶ Prince, *Power from On High*, 35-44.

⁵⁷ For an overview, see Jan Shippis, “The Reality of the Restoration and the Restoration Ideal in the Mormon Tradition,” in *The American Quest for the Primitive Church*, ed. Richard T. Hughes (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 181-195.

upon the same principle.”⁵⁸ Thus, his design was not only designed to recover past figures, but to recover the authority of these past figures. In 1839, when the idea of priesthood authority was further solidified, he delivered a discourse that outlined his views of keys and authority exercised by a long network of priesthood officiators:

The Priesthood was. first given to Adam: he obtained the first Presidency & held the Keys of it, from generation to Generation...These men held keys, first on earth, & then in Heaven.—The Priesthood is an everlasting principle & Existed with God from Eternity & will to Eternity, without beginning of days or end of years. the Keys have to be brought from heaven whenever the Gospel is sent...He, (Adam) is the Father of the human family & presides over the Spirits of all men, & all that have had the keys must stand before him in this great council...The Keys were given to [Adam], and by him to others he will have to give an account of his Stewardship, & they to him...The Savior, Moses, & Elias—gave the Keys to Peter, James & John on the Mount when they were transfigured before him...How have we come at the priesthood in the last days?...it came down, down in regular succession. Peter James & John had it given to them & they gave it up.”⁵⁹

Indeed, Smith exulted in his angelic tutelage and ordination. In a letter written to the Church in 1842, Smith jubilantly proclaimed the many angelic visitors who had taught and ordained him in his prophetic experience, making possible what he believed was the restoration of the ancient gospel:

Now, what do we hear in the gospel which we have received?...Moroni, an angel from heaven, declaring the fulfilment of the prophets—the book to be reveal’d...The voice of peter, James & John, in the wilderness, between Harmony, Susquehanna County, and Colesvill, Broom County...And the voice of Michael the archangel—the voice of Gabriel, and of Raphael, and of divers angels, from Michael or Adam, down to the present time; all declaring each one their dispensation, their rights, their keys, their honors, their majesty & glory.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Joseph Smith, 11 June 1843, *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, ed. Scott H. Faulring (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1989), 383-384.

⁵⁹ Joseph Smith Sermon, 8 August 1839, Willard Richards Pocket Book, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 8-9.

⁶⁰ Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:473-474.

In an age where many Protestants and spiritualists were attempting to recover angelic *voices* as a way to gain comfort or information, Joseph Smith sought to recover physical angelic *personages* with their accompanying *priesthoods* as a more solidified claim to ancient authority.⁶¹

Discerning False Spirits from True Spirits

In early Mormonism, priesthood-carrying angels were not the only type of spirits to be reckoned with. As early as 1831, Joseph Smith was required to dictate two revelations that were explicitly designed to direct the Saints in discernment between good and evil spirits. Having arrived on a scene of charismatic excess among the recent Kirtland converts, Smith was required to correct what he understood to be “some strange notions and false spirits” that had “crept in among [the Church].”⁶² One of the revelations the Mormon Prophet received in response, recorded in May 1831, warned his followers that “there are many spirits which are false spirits, which have gone forth in the earth, deceiving the world.”⁶³ The topic of discernment was still on Smith’s mind a few months later in October, when he counseled the Church to beware of “false

⁶¹ For an analysis of the antebellum quest to restore supernatural voices, see Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, esp. 199-211.

⁶² Smith, 1839 History, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:347. For other contemporary accounts of this outbreak of enthusiasm, see Parley P. Pratt, ed., *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 61; Bruce N. Westergren, ed., *From Historian to Dissident: The Book of John Whitmer* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 57; and John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints (Commonly Called Mormons)* (St. Louis: printed for the author, 1839), 16; Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, A Faithful Account of that Singular Imposition and Delusion* (Painesville, Ohio: By the Author, 1834), 116. For an analysis of this spiritual crisis, see J. Spencer Fluhman, “The Joseph Smith Revelations and the Crisis of Early American Spirituality,” in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 68.

⁶³ *Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ, Organized According to the Law, on the 6th of April, 1830* (Zion: W.W. Phelps & Co., 1833), 2. (Current LDS edition: D&C 50:2).

Christs”—a New Testament allusion, yet one that points to the this tension in early Mormon thought.⁶⁴

The idea of false spirits—or more specifically, fallen angels—was an important issue in antebellum America. Indeed, many contemporary religionists were left to determine “distinction[s] between the efficacy of demonic and divine intervention,” especially as it related to their own assemblies.⁶⁵ Beyond just labeling these evil influences as just mystical forces of a vague satanic power, however, more and more began describing them as fallen angels—human like personages who lacked a body yet possessed human-like characteristics. Most explained them as angelic beings that, often because of pride, fell from their divine positions. Buck’s *Theological Dictionary*, the widely used theological reference for antebellum America, wrote, “although the angels were originally created perfect, yet they were mutable: some of them sinned, and kept not their first estate; and so, of the most blessed and glorious, became the most vile and miserable of all God’s creatures.” Kicked out of heaven and organized under a quasi-demonic rule, these angels, Buck explained, were set out to tempt, try, and even destroy humanity.⁶⁶ John Reynolds, another period theologian who spoke on angels, also noted that there were numerous heavenly creatures who had fallen because of “pride” and were left to disturb the children of God.⁶⁷

Early Mormon teachings and revelations echoed these sentiments. An 1832 revelation labeled the devil as “an angel of God who was in authority in the presence of God, who rebelled against the Only Begotten Son” and was then “thrust down from the presence of God and the

⁶⁴ Cook, *Far West Record*, 23 (25 October 1831).

⁶⁵ Juster, *Doomsayers*, 35.

⁶⁶ Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 17.

⁶⁷ Reynolds, *Inquiries*, 14.

Son...”⁶⁸ As mentioned above, the early Church suffered from many “false spirits” even before that which divided those within and without the movement on what the boundaries and limits were concerning spiritual enthusiasm. Smith would later explain these manifestations as inexperience on the part of the Saints at discerning true and false spirits.⁶⁹ As the Church developed, these false spirits continued to evolve to signify disembodied personages that sought after the tabernacles of mankind. Phelps’s “Paracletes” depicted the guardian angels determined to “preserve [mankind] from the secret of unfor[e]seen snares of those angels who kept not their first estates, but were left in their sins, to roam from region to region, and in chains of darkness, until the great day of judgment.”⁷⁰

By Nauvoo, discerning spirits was a common topic in Joseph Smith’s discourse. The detection of false angels was a focus for the Mormon Prophet during this period. George A. Smith, cousin of Joseph and member of the Quorum of the Twelve, remembered that “there was no point upon which the Prophet Joseph dwelt more than the discerning of Spirits.”⁷¹ In 1842, Joseph Smith echoed and built upon the 1831 episode by writing that “‘it is evident from the apostle’s writings that many false spirits existed in their day, and had ‘gone forth into the world,’ and that it needed intelligence which God alone could impart to detect false spirits, and to prove what spirits were of God.” Only now, Smith added a new element: the discerners must be in

⁶⁸ *Doctrine and Covenants* (1835), 91:3. (Current LDS edition: D&C 76:25.)

⁶⁹ Joseph Smith, “Try the Spirits,” *Times and Seasons* 1 April 1842, pg. 743-747; Joseph Smith, 1839 History, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:347.

⁷⁰ [Phelps], “Paracletes,” 892.

⁷¹ “Minutes of Meetings Held in Provo City,” 28 November 1869, Microfilm of holograph, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. It should be noted that at the time of this statement of George A. Smith, the Mormons were in a debate with a growing number of Spiritualists in Utah, and hence had a reason to emphasize the importance of discernment.

possession of priesthood keys and have “a knowledge of the laws by which spirits are governed.”⁷²

Smith further explained a test by which this knowledge could be obtained. “If an Angel or spirit appears offer him your hand,” he explained some time around 1840, “if he is a spirit from God he will stand still and not offer you his hand. If from the Devil he will either shrink back from you or offer his hand, which if he does you will feel nothing, but be deceived.”⁷³ Such a test implied a personage-like appearance of false spirits, and that the only way to detect them was a physical touch that would help differentiate them from resurrected angels. Indeed, just like Joseph Smith’s rationalized resurrected beings, false spirits also took on the form of man and should be dealt with accordingly.

Mormonism’s teaching that angels could be discerned by virtue of the priesthood also reveals a growing awareness on his part of eternal laws and authority that govern the entire universe—even disembodied spirits who did not keep their first estate. In 1845, Orson Pratt addressed the question, “how the saints can distinguish between angels of authority, and such as have no authority, seeing there are so many different classes,” by reasoning “that no one can distinguish correctly, without the keys of the priesthood, obtained through the ordinances of endowment.”⁷⁴ The priesthood in early LDS thought was not merely a means to perform salvific

⁷² Joseph Smith, “Try the Spirits,” *Times and Seasons* 1 April 1842, pg. 743-747. This editorial, though signed by Joseph Smith, was most likely written by William Phelps or John Taylor. Many of Smith’s documents, especially in Nauvoo, were penned under the supervision of Smith but were authored by his scribes. As one recent scholar noted, “[Smith’s] name on any document from his last years is not an answer but a question.” Michael Hicks, “Joseph Smith, W. W. Phelps, and the Poetic Paraphrase of ‘The Vision,’” *Journal of Mormon History* 20:2 (Fall 1994): 68.

⁷³ Joseph Smith, December 1840, recorded in William Clayton’s Private Book, in *Words of Joseph Smith*, 44. There is some question as to when this account was written. See Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 514.

⁷⁴ Pratt, “Angels. No. 2,” 121.

ordinances or sacraments; it was an eternal power present outside of the human race that governed the entire cosmos and everything therein.

Developing Mormon conceptualizations of embodiment also played a role in theorizing evil spirits. Equating having a body with power, mortal saints now had an advantage over fallen angels who were disembodied. “All men have power to resist the devil,” he explained in 1841, because “they who have tabernacles have power over those who have not.”⁷⁵ The fact that mankind kept their first estate gave them authority over those who rebelled and followed the devil. “The greatness of [the devil’s] punishment,” he taught two years later, “is that he shall not have a tabernacle[,] this is his punishment.”⁷⁶ Franklin D. Richards remembered Smith calling it the “mortification of satan,” and that he and his demons often make it a goal to take possession of bodies, but are forced to leave “when the proven authorities turn him out of Doors.”⁷⁷ Thus, while Smith confirmed that evil spirits sought to take control of human bodies, he assured the Saints that they had the innate power to resist them by virtue of their tabernacles as well as their priesthood.

This humanization of fallen angels added new elements to spiritual discernment. Beyond empirical handshakes, other tests very common in human experience were also employed. Joseph Smith gave an off-hand remark that one way to detect an evil messenger by the color of their hair.⁷⁸ Parley Pratt wrote that someone possessed of a “bad spirit” has several tangible

⁷⁵ Joseph Smith Sermon, 16 May 1841, recorded in William Clayton’s Private Book, in *Words of Joseph Smith*, 74.

⁷⁶ Joseph Smith Sermon, 14 May 1843, recorded in Wilford Woodruff Journal, in *Words of Joseph Smith*, 201.

⁷⁷ Joseph Smith Sermon, 21 May 1843, recorded in Franklin D. Richards’ “Scriptural Items,” in *Words of Joseph Smith*, 208.

⁷⁸ Smith, “Try the Spirits,” 747.

signs, including “a disagreeable smell,” the use of obscene words, and even the causation of deafness and dumbness.⁷⁹

While the Prophet was hesitant in giving physicality to angels, several of the early Saints wrote about experiences in which they physically battled demonic forces. Wilford Woodruff, for example, recorded in his journal in 1840 an instance where the devil “made war” with him, and this literal battle was anything but mythical: “[the devil] caught me by the throat & choked me nearly to death. He wounded me in my forehead. I also wounded him in a number of places in the head.”⁸⁰ These details were later struck out by a pencil, however, possibly as a result of learning from Smith that angels could not physically harm you. Woodruff’s literal view of demonic “war” did not fully mesh with the Prophet’s understanding of unembodied spirits; while they rejected the idea of “immaterial spirit,” and thus believed demons were composed of some sort of matter, Smith taught that an evil spirit could never gain possession of a human body unless granted access.

This did not mean that Smith did not believe in literal battles with opposing spirits. On the contrary, his assertion that the evil spirits’ desire was to take control of human bodies implied some sort of struggle. However, these struggles were more internal than external, “spirit” to “spirit,” most notably displayed in his later First Vision accounts.⁸¹ Smith’s exorcism was based on priesthood authority—implying more of an internal, supernatural struggle—rather than a physical brawl with a dark figure. Representative of the Mormon Prophet’s experiences with

⁷⁹ Parley P. Pratt, *The Key to the Science of Theology: Designed as an Introduction to the First Principles of Spiritual Philosophy; Religion; Law and Government; As Delivered by the Ancients, and as Restored in This Age, For the Final Development of Universal Peace, Truth and Knowledge* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855), 116.

⁸⁰ Wilford Woodruff Journal, 18 October 1840, in Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal: 1833 Typescript*, 9 volumes (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 1:532.

⁸¹ Joseph Smith, 1839 History, in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:272.

demonic possession was a June 1831 meeting where one follower, Harvey Whitlock, was possessed by the devil—“bound by the power of Satan,” as observer Philo Dibble put it⁸²—as if being internally attacked. To counter, Joseph Smith laid his hands on the afflicted Whitlock, invoking his priesthood power to dispel the demon.⁸³

In sum, discerning false spirits was as important to the early saints as ministrations from true angels. They believed in a world where numerous spirits abounded, while only some could be trusted. While early manifestations vacillated between mystical forces and embodied beings, the face of these evil spirits became more and more human-like—mirroring their similar developing belief in anthropomorphic angels. Belief in the mythical destroying angel of Zion’s Camp eventually evolved into the corporality-starved fallen dominions of Nauvoo. This particular aspect of their developing angelology not only reveals elements of early Mormon thought, but they also shed extra light on Smith’s growing conception of supernatural sociality.

The Familial Order of Heaven

Nowhere is this growing idea of sociality more readily apparent than in Joseph Smith’s humanization of angelic beings. That Smith depicted the empirical test of shaking hands as a way to discern angels reveals more than just a perceived way to identify spirits, or even a rational attempt to give credence to a supernatural experience, but it also hints to a deeper underlying theme beneath his reconceptualization of the order of heaven. In nineteenth century America, the practice of shaking hands tangibly symbolized the rural fraternity that the young nation embraced. This practiced irked British observer Frances Trollope, who bemoaned the “eternal

⁸² Philo Dibble, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” in *Juvenile Instructor*, May 15, 1892, 303.

⁸³ Levi Hancock, *Autobiography*, 33-34, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

shaking hands” among the vulgar American men who saw themselves as “gentlemen”—one of the many aspects of “republican equality” that Trollope found so repulsive.⁸⁴ By suggesting that angels—traditionally understood to be celestial beings from another sphere of glory—were willing to shake hands with humanity, suggests the close relationship Smith envisioned for the two beings.⁸⁵

In a sermon given sometime during the summer of 1839, Joseph Smith presented an interconnected, working relationship between mortals and angels. “Those men whom these Keys have been given” will all work together in reporting stewardship, he taught regarding every dispensation head, “and they without us cannot be made perfect.” Smith explained to his audience that these angelic beings were not other-worldly creatures or completely different specimens, but rather “men [who] are in heaven” and still have “their children...on Earth.” This familial connection, enough that the angels’ “bowels yearn over us,” was the climax of antebellum America’s yearning for a consanguineous cosmology.⁸⁶ But this familiarization of angels was as sacerdotal as it was totemic; “both mortal and immortal servants,” Smith claimed, “were working together “& join hand in hand in bringing about” the Kingdom of God.⁸⁷ That these insights on angels comes in the middle of one of his most important discourses on priesthood authority lends

⁸⁴ Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1901), 141. I appreciate Samuel Brown for pointing out this reference to me.

⁸⁵ Joseph Smith’s teachings concerning “handshakes” should also be seen in the context of his involvement with masonry during this period. See Michael W. Homer, “Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry’: The Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism,” *Dialogue* 27, no. 3 (1994): 1-116.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Reis noted that this “transformation of deceased family members into angels allowed believers to reconstruct families beyond the grave.” Reis, “Immortal Messengers,” 164.

⁸⁷ The Mormon Prophet then expounded on the parable of the mustard seed, claiming that the fruition of the lesson was that the full-grown mustard tree would eventually be big enough to host fowls (representing angels). Joseph Smith Sermon, before 8 August 1839, recorded in Willard Richards Pocket Companion, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 10.

to the importance that these angelic beings hold in Smith’s long chain of priesthood holders all working together to provide salvation for the entire earth.

A year later, Smith expanded on his teachings concerning the continued priesthood work after death. Using the biblical figure Abel as an example, Smith explained that the world’s first martyr could still “speak” in modern times because he “magnified the Priesthood which was confired[sic] upon him and died a righteous man,” and afterward “became...an angel of God by receiving his body from the dead” and conferring his keys upon the next dispensation. While the dead may “rest from their labors” for a period, “yet their work is held in reserve for them, that they are permitted to do the same works after they receive a ressurection for their bodies...”⁸⁸ During the same period, Parley Pratt taught similar sentiments, arguing that even after death, “we are more fully than ever qualified to teach, to judge, to rule and govern; and to go and come on foreign missions” in their new angelic status, continuing to fulfill our divine purposes.⁸⁹

However, the angels of Mormonism are not only taking part of the same *work*, but they are also the same type of *being*, only at varying points along an eternal spectrum. As early as the end of 1833, Joseph Smith began placing familiar names on mythical and supernatural beings. “Since I came down I have been informed from a proper source,” wrote Oliver Cowdery to John Whitmer on New Years Day, 1834, “that the angel Michael is no less than our father Adam and Gabriel is Noah.”⁹⁰ Identifying two Old Testament figures (Adam and Noah) as the two archangels mentioned in the Protestant Bible (Michael and Gabriel) collapsed the traditionally

⁸⁸ Joseph Smith Sermon, recorded by Robert B. Thompson, 5 October 1840, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 41-42.

⁸⁹ Parley P. Pratt, “Intelligence and Affection, in *An Appeal*, 39.

⁹⁰ Oliver Cowdery to John Whitmer, 1 January 1834, Huntington Library, transcribed on the *Book of Abraham Project*, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/Letters-cowdery.html> (accessed 9 June 2009).

sacred distance between human and the supernatural.⁹¹ In Commerce, Smith taught that “the innumerable company of Angels” are merely “those that have been resurrected from the dead.”⁹² Orson Pratt explained that angels are labeled differently than men “merely to designate and distinguish between different classes of the same order of beings, according to their advancement in the different stages of their existence.”⁹³ Orson’s brother, Parley, echoed the same theme a decade later when he famously quipped, “Gods, angels, and men are all of one species, one race, one great family, widely diffused among the planetary systems, as colonies; kingdoms, nations, etc.”⁹⁴ In 1843, Joseph Smith elaborated on his eternal familial chain and the differences between this hierarchical structure, noting that “Gods have an ascendancy over angels” because of their fuller progression along the spectrum.⁹⁵ In his dictated revelation on polygamy written down that same year, he claimed that those who rejected this principle of marriage would be relegated to

⁹¹ While Michael and Gabriel are the only two mentioned in the Bible, traditional Christianity recognizes five more: Raphael, Uriel, Raguel, Zerachiel, and Remiel. Raphael is listed as one of the voices of the restoration in the letter excerpt above. Barachiel, an archangel in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, resembles the sometimes code name for Joseph Smith, Baurach Ale. Further, in Kirtland, one “young man” even “foretold” that Joseph Smith would be “the Sixth Angel.” Charles Ora Card, *The Diaries of Charles Ora Card: The Utah Years, 1871-1886*, ed. Donald G. Godfrey and Kenneth W. Godfrey (Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 2006), 386 (8 October 1882).

⁹² Joseph Smith Sermon, before 8 August 1839, recorded in Willard Richards Pocket Companion, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 14.

⁹³ Pratt, “Angels,” 98.

⁹⁴ Parley P. Pratt, *The Key to the Science of Theology*, 33. Pratt wrote an editorial a decade earlier where he also wrote that Gods, angels, and men “are one great family, all of the same species, all related to each other, all bound together by kindred ties, interests sympathies, and affections.” Parley P. Pratt, “Materiality,” *The Prophet* 1, no. 52 (24 May 1845).

⁹⁵ Joseph Smith Sermon, 11 June 1843, recorded in Joseph Smith Journal, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 212.

the station of ministering angels in the next life, while those who embraced it would be exalted as Gods.⁹⁶

Indeed, this familializing of angels and Gods is part of Mormonism’s unique *scala naturae*, connecting a chain of hierarchical links along a graduated ladder that covered every conceivable point of human growth and potential.⁹⁷ Speaking at the dedication of the Seventy’s Hall in Nauvoo, apostle Heber C. Kimball “used a chain as a figure to illustrate the principle of graduation, while in pursuit of celestial enjoyment in worlds to come.”⁹⁸ Mormon ontology presented a unification of species with numerous grades and advancements, similar to—and possibly influenced by—the spiritual chain depicted in Joseph Smith’s Abrahamic scripture. “These two facts exist,” counseled Smith’s revealed text of Abraham, “that there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they; I am the Lord thy God, I am more intelligent than they all.”⁹⁹ This eternal chain in early LDS thought entailed vast possibilities including a pre-existence, mortal probation, angelic servitude, and eventual godhood.

Perhaps the best collapse of these differing races into one divine species is best expressed through William Phelps’s speculative work of theological fiction, “Paracletes.” In this 1845 text, Phelps presented a universe full of “paracletes”—what Samuel Brown describes as “humanized angels or divinized humans”¹⁰⁰—widely situated along an eternal Chain of Being; some already

⁹⁶ Joseph Smith Revelation, 12 July 1843, reprinted in “Revelation Given to Joseph Smith, Nauvoo, July 12th, 1843,” *Deseret News Extra*, 14 September 1852, 26. (Current LDS edition: D&C 132:16.) This is the earliest published version of the revelation.

⁹⁷ The best work on this topic in western thought is still Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936).

⁹⁸ Heber C. Kimball, qtd. in “Dedication of the Seventies Hall,” 795.

⁹⁹ “The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (15 March 1842): 720. (Current LDS edition: Abraham 3:10.)

¹⁰⁰ Brown, “William Phelps’s Paracletes,” 65.

Gods ruling over their own planets, some beings not yet embodied and waiting to be called down to their own earth, some beings assigned to serve as ministering angels to varying planets, and one individual chosen to serve as a spiritual “Adam” for his own world (and also to serve as an “arch angel” after his death¹⁰¹). All these “paracletes,” though at different stages along this marvelously graduated path, are all of the same race and represent each other at different points.¹⁰² Such is the fulfillment of the disintegration of terrestrial and celestial spheres, making the difference one of progress and status rather than of species.

Conclusion

Mormon angelology, more than just the result of early LDS literalistic reading of the bible and emphasis on spiritual gifts, reminds the reader of the developing ontological formulation of early Mormon thought. Serving as a touchstone from which to gauge the evolving nature of LDS theology, Mormon perceptions of angels presented in microcosm the larger ideological shifts taking place. It played a role in their balancing of the supernatural and the rational; it took center stage when it came to authoritative claims; it helped resolve and explain competing spiritual claims, demonic possessions, and evil spirits. But most of all, it helped orient Mormon ontology: man’s relationship with spirits, the universe, and even God. Early Mormon theology was as boundless as it was bold, offering mankind potential to become prophetic, angelic, or literally God-like, expressed beautifully in Parley Pratt’s conclusion to his essay, “Intelligence and Affection”:

From all these and a thousand other promises made to prophets and apostles, we feel safe in the conclusion, that a field wide as eternity and boundless as the ocean

¹⁰¹ [Phelps], “Paracletes,” 892.

¹⁰² There is still, however, a reference to a “head-god” who appears to be from a different race than all others, but whether this difference is from development or is inherent is unclear.

of God’s benevolence, extends before the servants of God. A field where, ambition knows no check, and zeal no limits; and where the most ardent aspirations may be more than realized. A field where crowns of glory, thrones of power and dominions of immortality are the rewards of diligence. And where man—once a weak and helpless worm of dust may sit enthroned in majesty on high, and occupy an exalted station among the councils of the sons of God.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Pratt, “Intelligence and Affection,” 40.