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Nephi was shown the Savior's birth in response to his admission that he "[did] not know the meaning of all things."

Scriptural Principles for Visual Media

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This is an exciting time to be an educator. Innovations in visual media technology give us instructional options completely unknown to our predecessors of even a generation ago. With little effort we can easily find professional, high-quality media addressing practically any subject we desire to teach. This is true not only for traditional media forms such as images and video but also for more immersive media, such as digital simulations or interactive exhibits. Additionally, the costs of cameras, computers, and other media development technology have dramatically decreased, while the quality those tools provide has consistently increased. This means that many teachers have started to produce visual media themselves, allowing them to better tailor learning experiences to their students' needs.

However, some religious educators have questioned how much value media actually has in the educational environment. Many are aware of President Boyd K. Packer's caution, "Visual aids in a class can be a blessing or a curse, depending on how they are used."[1] A particular worry might be that teachers cannot give their instruction a warm, personal touch if they rely too much on media supplements. And, as secular media has become more

degrading, others have genuinely wondered if any media use is even worth the effort.

But assuming the Lord inspires technological progress for *his* purposes, it seems there should be legitimate ways to use visual media during religious instruction. Further, we can have faith that the Lord is willing to teach us how. As Elder L. Tom Perry reminded us, "We should not underestimate the Lord's power and his willingness to bless our lives if we ask with a sincere heart and real intent. He has instructional designs and learning theories that the world's educational psychologists haven't even imagined yet."[2] In this spirit, then, we ask, what *would* be the Lord's designs for visual media, including media used to teach the gospel? How can we take advantage of new media techniques and technologies while still remaining in close harmony with the Lord's will?

We propose that insights can be found in the scriptures: for example, the Lord often teaches through visions, dreams, and other heavenly manifestations. Visionary encounters are sensory experiences—as is watching or interacting with visual media. While there are certainly differences between visionary phenomena and visual media, our investigation has also identified intriguing similarities. Understanding these parallels might help us apply scriptural patterns when designing or using our own media for instructional purposes. By so suggesting, we are mindful of Elder Richard G. Scott's advice, which we believe applies to using the scriptures for professional guidance as much as it does to learning gospel truths: "As you seek spiritual knowledge, search for principles. Carefully separate them from the detail used to explain them. Principles are concentrated truth, packaged for application to a wide variety of circumstances. A true principle makes decisions clear even under the most confusing and compelling circumstances."[3]

So what principles can we learn from the Lord's use of visionary manifestations? And can we apply those principles to infuse media with the same spiritual energy that visions contain? In this paper we present two purposes and four characteristics we have learned from the scriptures addressing *why* and *how* the Lord teaches through visionary experiences. We also describe practical ways educators can select, use, or create visual media that are compatible with these purposes and characteristics. Our discussion is based on our close reading of the visions, dreams, and other divine manifestations recorded in the scriptures, as well as a few selected accounts of latter-day visionary experiences. We looked for similarities and differences between various accounts that help separate the *principles* applied from the *context* and *circumstances*

of individual events. Throughout our discussion, we reference many of the examples we studied and encourage readers to decide for themselves how valuable these principles might be to their own work. We additionally hope readers will find value in the recommendations and conclusions that follow.

Purposes

The scriptures establish clear purposes for *why* the Lord teaches through visions and similar experiences. Two purposes we discovered in our study were, first, that visionary experiences prepare "the hearts of the children of men to receive [the Lord's] word" (Alma 13:24), and second, that visionary experiences make the invisible visible, both to assist recipients in personal understanding and to aid them in teaching others. Understanding these purposes can help us determine under what circumstances we might choose visual media for instructional use, as well as help us choose what media forms (such as pictorial, photographic, motion picture, or interactive) are most appropriate for those circumstances.

Preparing hearts. When Alma taught the people of Ammonihah the purpose of angelic visions, he stated that they "[prepare] the hearts of the children of men to receive [the Lord's] word" (Alma 13:24). It is significant that the term *heart* is used in this verse. The Lord wants us to be *converted* to his gospel, which implies such a transformation in our entire being that no other term—whether it describes gaining knowledge or improving attitudes and behavior—fully encompasses the magnitude of the change. To be converted, not only must we learn new information, but we must also be motivated, challenged, softened, comforted, persuaded, corrected, and strengthened. Visions and similar experiences, by their nature, prepare hearts in this inclusive way. Certainly the Lord is interested in using visions to explicitly teach people specific doctrines and principles. But it also appears that he uses their sensory character to show people aspects of his nature that transcend words alone, as well as to illustrate patterns of discipleship so recipients will better understand how to seek after, recognize, and rely on the more frequent inspiration received through the Holy Ghost. This is reminiscent of what Mormon taught Moroni, that angelic visits help people develop "faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts . . . ; and after this manner bringeth to pass the Father, the covenants which he hath made unto the children of men" (Moroni 7:32).

An example may illustrate. While much of our common experience teaches us that *seeing is believing*, we know the Lord's way is often that *believing leads to seeing*, or, in other words, "spiritual belief precedes spiritual knowledge."[4] One classic scriptural passage teaching this pattern is Ether 12:6, where Moroni concluded that we "receive no witness until after the trial of [our] faith." Yet Moroni did not simply assert this reality without support. In the next verse he recalled the Savior's visit to the Nephites as illustration of the truth just taught: "It was by faith that Christ showed himself unto our fathers, after he had risen from the dead; and he showed not himself unto them until after they had faith in him" (Ether 12:7). The same pattern is also illustrated early in the Book of Mormon, where after Nephi asserted his faith in what his father had seen in dream, "the Spirit cried with a loud voice, saying: . . . blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God; wherefore, thou shalt behold the things which thou hast desired" (1 Nephi 11:6). Readers pondering these examples can draw on the noticeable, clear, and tangible nature of the scriptural accounts as inspiration for applying the same pattern in the quiet, more intangible forms of spiritual knowledge gained through other, more common situations.

Visual media, as do visionary experiences, also create powerful conditions to help prepare peoples' hearts. Conversion is more than only acquiring new knowledge; consequently, we recommend that educators use visual media for more than simply communicating facts and information. Even more conventional instructional goals (such as for students to recognize or explain a gospel doctrine) can be transformed when educators see these outcomes first as tools that promote conversion and use media consistent with that broader purpose. For example, we can use media to demonstrate patterns of discipleship by featuring people who have faith in a variety of realistic circumstances or who patiently endure suffering and hardship. Similarly, the careful use of media can prepare hearts for conversion when it shows the force that gospel doctrines have in people's lives. Media can also help prepare people's hearts to trust the Lord by revealing his nature through examples of how he is involved in real people's lives. When teaching this way, educators take advantage of the full-sensory possibilities media bring to reach students beyond the intellect alone.

Additionally, educators ought not to feel they are wasting time if a media activity encourages the emotional elements of spiritual growth but is not necessarily associated with an informational objective. Preparing hearts implies

that we will spend instructional time pursuing affective outcomes that are meaningful for their own sake and not just when they support more familiar educational outcomes. It should be equally legitimate to use visual media when its primary purpose is to motivate, comfort, or persuade, since these forms of inspiration are so important to the conversion process. We also recommend that educators recognize that all characteristics of a media piece can contribute to preparing someone's heart. For example, while a strong aesthetic quality (such as high production values in a film or appealing graphic design in interactive media) may seem superfluous in educational settings, we believe it is often these intangible characteristics that lead us to feel what we need to feel so that we may be fully converted. The memorable imagery, emotional resonance, and spiritual depth often found in great media might be better than other instructional methods (such as lecture or even discussion) at encouraging students to ponder and internalize a doctrinal message. We believe this is consistent with President Henry B. Eyring direction that "the pure gospel of Jesus Christ must go down into the hearts of students by the power of the Holy Ghost. . . . Our aim must be for them to become truly converted to the restored gospel."[5]

Making the invisible visible. The second purpose of visionary experiences is to make the invisible visible. In this way, visionary experiences function much the same as do other approaches to teaching gospel principles. As President Packer advised, "In teaching the gospel, we do not recreate the material world around us; we deal with the intangible world within us, and there is a big difference. None of the ordinary tools are available."[6] President Packer then reviewed time-honored techniques of teaching this "intangible world," including stories, comparisons, and parables, concluding that "[such] illustrations . . . make the meaning of the lessons clear to people of all ages" because they act as "a stepping-stone to relate and interrelate [our] past experience . . . into larger, more meaningful, more inclusive learning patterns."[7]

All three of these techniques have analogues in visionary experiences. We see stories in examples such as the Spirit showing Nephi events from the Savior's life to teach him about God's love, reinforcing its reality as more than only abstract doctrine (see 1 Nephi 11:26–33). Comparisons can be seen in many symbolic visions, such as the Lord teaching Jeremiah about Judah's coming destruction through the symbol of a seething pot (see Jeremiah 1:13–14) or teaching Amos about the judgment of Israel through the symbol of a plumb line (see Amos 7:7–9). We can imagine people encountering

objects seen in a vision during their everyday lives and remembering the truths underneath the symbols, both reinforcing the former instruction as well as encouraging further reflection. Even parables seem to have a visionary equivalent through more extended, symbolic manifestations such as Lehi's vision of the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 8) or John's visions throughout the book of Revelation. These encounters, combining features of both stories and comparisons, seem in part to help recipients interpret real-life events from the perspective of invisible gospel patterns. For example, while Lehi was certainly aware of Laman's and Lemuel's wayward natures before his vision, he began to fear more for their eternal destiny after seeing them fail to partake of the tree of life's fruit (see 1 Nephi 8:35–37). And Nephi's vision of the same symbolic imagery helped him make sense of the eventual destruction of his descendants (see 1 Nephi 12).

In similar fashion, visual media can also be used to make the invisible visible. This is perhaps one of the greatest strengths media brings to instruction, and we can find media-based examples of all three of the visualization approaches cited earlier (stories, comparisons, and parables). Stories told through visual media can illustrate the gospel in action, making real for students the applications of potentially abstract spiritual teachings. Media-based comparisons could include pictorial graphics or photographs that serve as observable analogies of divine principles. Even diagrams and simple drawings can be used to create visible representations of otherwise intangible gospel patterns. Finally, visual parables could combine features of both stories and comparisons, helping students interpret their own lives in context of gospel doctrines. For example, a film telling a parable-like story could illustrate a choice and its consequences in a figurative way, giving students strong visual imagery to reflect on, understand, and remember in time of need if they ever face a similar choice in their own lives.

Additionally, scriptural visions are often given for the express purpose of calling recipients to teach the gospel, in which cases the very forms of their visionary encounters become an important foundation for their visualizing intangible doctrines for others. As two examples, Ezekiel was told to "declare all that thou seest to the house of Israel" (Ezekiel 40:4), and the Lord said to Abraham, "I show these things unto thee before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words" (Abraham 3:15). Perhaps after their visions, these prophets held before an audience the same objects they saw, teaching doctrine through a tangible representation. Or they might have brought the

gospel to life for their listeners by retelling an event or story they witnessed in a dream. Or it could even be that the prophets used their visionary encounters as a memory aid while preaching, to help them recall doctrinal details the Lord would have them teach. While these illustrations are conjecture, they are easy to imagine when considering accounts such as Nephi's using knowledge gained through his visions to teach Laman and Lemuel (see 1 Nephi 15), Peter's teaching the universality of the gospel message after being taught the same symbolically through vision (see Acts 10), or Joseph's relying on the details of Pharaoh's dream to warn Pharaoh about the upcoming seven years of famine (see Genesis 41).

Students can also be encouraged to use visual media as tools for making the invisible visible when sharing the gospel with others. Just like prophets can use imagery from their visions and dreams as a form of instructional aid when preaching, students can draw on media representations when discussing doctrines and principles in both formal and informal settings. Not only might students accurately remember important points to share by using media but they are likely to be more confident when they have powerful illustrations to augment their own explanations and testimonies. (Parenthetically, this could also help students better learn themselves what was originally taught.) When using media in their instruction, teachers can expressly discuss the possibility of students' sharing the same piece with others. Individual media items can also encourage viewers to go forth and share what they have learned. For example, a film could conclude with a trusted character summarizing major themes and inviting further action. Or less formally, invitations to share could be built into the media more naturally, such as through enthusiastic stories of people sharing spiritual truths with others or examples of wise mentors who pass along what they have learned about the gospel to those they love.

Characteristics

The scriptures also contain characteristics that demonstrate *how* the Lord teaches through visions and similar experiences. We discovered four characteristics in our study: first, these visionary experiences are intimate, not distant; second, they are participatory, not passive; third, they create a sense of sacred awe; and fourth, they are spiritually demanding. Understanding these characteristics can help us determine how to design our own visual media, select already-created media suitable for our circumstances, or decide

whether a specific media form (such as pictorial, photographic, motion picture, or interactive) will be appropriate for an anticipated use.

Intimate, not distant. The first characteristic of visionary experiences is that they are intimate, not distant. By this we mean that heavenly messages seem to radiate warmth, concern, and compassion, not leading to informality but rather lifting recipients up to the divine position from which the vision originates. Unnecessary psychological or spiritual barriers, which could create a sense of detachment or separation, do not seem to be placed between heavenly manifestations and their recipients. Instead, even when a vision includes more than one participant, every element seems designed to emphasize that the Lord is personally aware of each person involved, that he reaches out to them with heartfelt care, and that he equally wants them to draw nearer to him. In this sense, visions seem to be a remarkable example of President Howard W. Hunter's observation: "I have always been impressed that the Lord deals with us personally, individually. We do many things in groups in the Church, . . . but so many of the important things—the *most* important things—are done individually . . . as one person developing a relationship with our Father in Heaven."[8]

We can observe this in many reports of heavenly visitations. Notice the intimacy in the brother of Jared's vision, in which, after asking the Lord to "prepare [the sixteen stones] that they may shine forth in darkness," he saw "the Lord [stretch] forth his hand and [touch] the stones one by one with his finger" (Ether 3:4, 6). Or, while not the canonical version, another account of the First Vision increases our sense of that event's intimacy by recording, "God touched [Joseph's] eyes with his finger and said, 'Joseph this is my beloved Son hear him.' As soon as the Lord had touched his eyes with his finger he immediately saw the Savior."[9] Additionally, when the Savior visited the Nephites he invited them "one by one" to "feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet" (3 Nephi 11:15). And finally, in one of the most remarkable visions reported in scripture, we find an emotional tenderness and spiritual intimacy in Enoch's account of the Lord's grief and even tears over the sins of his children (see Moses 7:28).

We can similarly create this kind of intimacy in visual media, helping to replicate the one-on-one character that visionary experiences seem to have so even people in large groups feel that a message is meant "just for them." We can remove elements that act as visual barriers or that create remote and distant points of view. For example, while speaking behind podiums and wearing

formal clothing may be appropriate in some circumstances, such as in filmed presentations of General Authorities, we should carefully consider this style before using it in other media since it can unintentionally lead people to disengage with the message. Additionally, our choice of language can make a difference. Specialized jargon, institutional terminology, and passive expressions typically increase emotional distance, while a friendly, conversational style enhances feelings of intimacy. Music can help by creating feelings of warmth and tenderness. And finally, when educators create their own visual media, or even when students create media, the local character of such pieces often has a personal, sincere, and authentic quality even if the production values are lower than what could be obtained through professional means.

Additionally, visions can show us how to increase intimacy in large-scale media presentations. For example, even manifestations of immense scenes and comprehensive detail still have an intimate quality, closing the spiritual distance between the encounter and its recipient. We note epic accounts such as Lehi's vision of the tree of life, and we often imagine such visions unfolded as if the recipient were watching a film. Yet close readings of many visionary experiences indicate that they are less like watching a movie and more like being immersed in a virtual reality. We see this in telling details from Lehi's record, such as that he "did go forth and partake of the fruit" (1 Nephi 8:11) directly from the tree, indicating that he was not watching the scene from a distance but was actually part of the action. Other visions include similar details, such as Moses' vision of "the earth, yea, even all of it; and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold" (Moses 1:27). This verse suggests that Moses was not observing environments from an objective distance but was scrutinizing individual elements up close. And Ezekiel reported that he not only conversed with an angel measuring the dimensions of a visionary temple but also was close enough to what he was observing to document even small measures the angel made (see Ezekiel 40).

Visual media has analogous means of closing physical, emotional, and spiritual distance. The warmth of a video can be increased by showing frequent close-ups, especially shots of peoples' eyes or smiles. Filmed demonstrations can similarly be given a more personal character by showing objects and events from a close perspective. As another example, interactive media can give students a more immersive, and therefore potentially more intimate, perspective on many gospel-related events, such as what it was like to cross the plains with the pioneers or to work with Christ's Apostles in ancient

Israel. Yet even when interactive media is not applicable, the underlying principle of creating intimacy by showing an insider's perspective is still valuable. Intimacy in visual media is less about explaining ideas objectively and unemotionally and more about illustrating gospel doctrines as lived experiences that meaningfully improve our relationships with each other and with the Lord.

Participatory, not passive. The second characteristic of visionary experiences is they are participatory, not passive. Heavenly manifestations seem to exemplify the principle expressed by Elder David A. Bednar: "We primarily are to act and not only to be acted upon—especially as we seek to obtain and apply spiritual knowledge. . . . Learning by faith requires spiritual, mental, and physical exertion and not just passive reception."[10] In the case of visions, this means we often observe recipients meaningfully engaging with the events in which they are immersed. Or, to use an analogy, the visions recorded in the scriptures do not seem to unfold according to strict lesson plans. A classic example is Nephi's vision of the tree of life, in which both the Spirit of the Lord and an angel frequently asked Nephi questions, such as, "What beholdest thou?" or, "Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?" (1 Nephi 11:14, 21). Significantly, Nephi's answers seemed in part to influence what additional events were revealed to him. For instance, Nephi was shown the Savior's birth in response to his admission that he "[did] not know the meaning of all things" (1 Nephi 11:17). Similarly, Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 1), Amos (see Amos 8), Zechariah (see Zechariah 4), and the brother of Jared (see Ether 3) were also questioned about what they saw in visions, with additional revelation being given to them after their replies.

Just as interesting is how often vision recipients are asked to meaningfully contribute to visionary events and not only watch, question, or comment on their experiences. In other words, rather than being idle spectators, vision recipients are often more like actors in a drama, intensely involved and sometimes even necessary to the action their visions portray. Enoch's visions unfolded only after he obeyed the Lord's command to "anoint thine eyes with clay, and wash them, and thou shalt see" (Moses 6:35). John the Revelator was given a book in a vision with the command to "eat it up" (Revelation 10:9), symbolically teaching him his mission to gather Israel (see D&C 77:14). Lehi's vision similarly taught him about Jerusalem's destruction through his active reading of a book the Savior gave him (see 1 Nephi 1:11–13). The Lord instructed Ezekiel to command the "dry bones [to] hear the word of the Lord . . . [and] live" (Ezekiel 37:4–5), which action on Ezekiel's part brought about

the manifestation the Lord wanted Ezekiel to receive. And in another vision, Ezekiel was led by an angelic guide to wade in a river flowing out from under Jerusalem's temple, where Ezekiel learned by his own actions that the water became deeper and stronger as it approached the Dead Sea (see Ezekiel 47).

Visual media can be equally participatory. Again, we cite the example of interactive media, which can both ask people questions as well as engage them in meaningful activities. However, the participation implied by visionary phenomena is more sophisticated than some interactive media that do little more than require people to advance a presentation to the next screen or to answer a multiple-choice question. Rather, the type of interactivity more analogous to visions would invite people to participate in an activity or scenario to the extent that they perform meaningful actions and observe the consequences of their choices. Frequently, this might immerse people in an interactive story, perhaps in the role of one of the main characters. For example, could one develop interactive media that let people take part in Lehi's escape from Jerusalem, the building of the Nauvoo Temple, or the story of David and Goliath? Would examples such as these help people better learn important spiritual truths because they have invested their own efforts in extracting lessons from the events?

But visual media need not be interactive to be participatory. For example, while watching a film or a video sometimes has the reputation of being a passive experience, it only becomes so when what is being watched is simplistic and trivial. Although we admit this reputation is somewhat deserved, especially when one considers how much mindless programming can be found on television, watching a media production can still lead to great mental and spiritual participation even if it does not require physical participation. Great stories spark the imagination, encouraging viewers to vicariously explore the world through another's eyes and ponder what they would do if they were faced with the same choices they see being made on the screen. Authentic stories can also prompt discussion among groups both small and large, often more meaningfully than when people are asked more objective, intellectual questions about doctrinal subjects. Finally, when people experience media that encourages this level of reflection and discussion, they often will also want to apply what they observe, patterning their lives after what they see not because the blessings have been explained to them theoretically but because they have felt the desirability of those blessings for themselves.

Sacred awe. The third characteristic of visionary experiences is that they create a sense of sacred awe, meaning visions cause people to feel astonishment, joy, humility, concern, wonder, and in some cases even shock or fear. Far from being dispassionate events, scriptural visions are meant to uplift, strengthen, and inspire people's whole souls, not just their intellect. Accordingly, the Lord seems to use strong emotion to fully impress a spiritual message into the hearts and minds of vision recipients. For example, after Lehi's initial visions, "his soul did rejoice, and his whole heart was filled, because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shown unto him" (1 Nephi 1:15). Ezekiel's vision of glorious beings and other marvelous phenomena caused him to "[fall] upon [his] face" (Ezekiel 1:28) in amazement. Both Moses' (see Moses 1:9–10) and Joseph Smith's (see Joseph Smith—History 1:20) visions were so overwhelming that they lost all strength for a time. The angel who appeared to Alma and the sons of Mosiah spoke "as it were with a voice of thunder, which caused the earth to shake upon which they stood; and so great was their astonishment, that they fell to the earth, and understood not the words which he spake unto them" (Mosiah 27:11–12). And even Peter, James, and John, overshadowed by the Father's presence at the Mount of Transfiguration, "fell on their face, and were sore afraid" (Matthew 17:6), as were the shepherds visited by an angel announcing the birth of the Savior (see Luke 2:9).

Visual media can help inspire this kind of sacred awe. In preface to this discussion we recognize that prophets have rightly warned against using sentimentality and emotionalism if they become substitutes for, instead of supplements to, legitimate spiritual experiences. Many have heard President Howard W. Hunter's caution, "I get concerned when it appears that strong emotion or free-flowing tears are equated with the presence of the Spirit. Certainly the Spirit of the Lord can bring strong emotional feelings, including tears, but that outward manifestation ought not to be confused with the presence of the Spirit itself."[11] Often cited in connection is when the Lord spoke to Elijah not in the impressive wind, earthquake, or fire but in the quiet of "a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12). Consequently, we have sometimes noticed suspicion of any appeal to emotion as it relates to religious instruction. But we believe President Hunter was only warning against emotion *replacing* spirituality, not the Spirit *using* emotion as a tool to edify and inspire. And while the Lord did not depend on physical demonstrations to speak to Elijah, for some reason, the wind, earthquake, and fire were still important enough for

him to cause them. Similarly, while the Spirit does not depend on our expressions of emotion, for his own reasons, the Lord may still prompt emotion as a manifestation of his power and grace.

A key to inspiring sacred awe through media is for each media component to be designed in support of a substantial message structure. Just like a vision's impressive events and stirring emotion are always built on a strong foundation of doctrine and principle, media that has a similarly solid structure can better support affective, emotional elements. In other words, a strong message structure is like a skyscraper that can rise hundreds of feet above the ground due to its strong internal framework. For example, media structure can be built on strong stories that avoid a didactic, "preachy" tone while still demonstrating meaningful choices and consequences. In stories of this quality, the layers of good music, inspiring imagery, or impressive visual effects all reinforce the intended outcome of sacred awe. But if a story is overly simplistic, such as when scenarios and characters are only superficial illustrations meant to prove a point, viewers are more likely to interpret the emotional components as stereotypical and clichéd. The same is true for all of the individual media elements; if they are insubstantial in themselves, such a musical score that is excessively sentimental, they are more likely to result in the emotional manipulation that President Hunter and others have warned about.

Another way heavenly visitors inspire sacred awe is by declaring spiritual messages through expressive, vivid language that stirs the emotion. Even today many of these accounts remain some of the most memorable, loved, and inspiring passages found in the scriptures. Consider the Lord's assertion to Moses: "The heavens, they are many, and they cannot be numbered unto man; but they are numbered unto me, for they are mine. . . . And there is no end to my works, neither to my words. For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:37–39). We also note how the Savior introduced himself to the Nephites: "Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning" (3 Nephi 11:10–11). And all of Christendom takes comfort in the words of the angel to the shepherds: "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour,

which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10–11). The communicative strength of these passages is based only in part on the words that were spoken. Just as important are the style, tone, and other modes of expression that give them elegance and beauty. They, along with many similar passages, are cherished just as much for how they make people feel as they are for the information they contain.

Just as these visionary messages were delivered in stirring and inspiring language, visual media, including filmed versions of lectures or speeches, can encourage sacred awe by taking advantage of equally eloquent styles. A warm, personal tone can be more helpful than institutional jargon or passive terminology. But the underlying media structure remains important—if a presentation is not built on a strong foundation of an authentic and insightful message, expressive language can frequently come across as shallow or manipulative. Educators interested in models of how to accomplish this can study addresses delivered by the Brethren, who often use elegant expressions to communicate a doctrinal point. Their examples demonstrate that when the underlying message is sound, clear statements of principle are not watered down or lost when combined with persuasive language but can help inspire sacred awe of which the Spirit would approve.

Spiritually demanding. The fourth characteristic of visionary experiences is that they are spiritually demanding, meaning they can be very challenging to understand. Rather than simplifying doctrinal subjects, visions frequently communicate rich symbolism, intricate detail, or other elements that often make them more difficult to interpret than a straightforward explanation. And even when a vision includes direct answers, those answers are frequently accompanied by figurative imagery, adding a spiritual depth that gives additional meaning to the verbal message. For example, before Isaiah was told his sins were forgiven, he saw in vision a divine being flying towards him, "having a live coal in his hand . . . and he laid it upon [Isaiah's] mouth" (Isaiah 6:6–7). Or, instead of simply telling Abraham that he would have countless descendants, the Lord's message was, "Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be" (Genesis 15:5). We also note the vision to Peter, who was not directly commanded to take the gospel to the Gentiles but was given a symbolic vision of myriad beasts that he was to eat, with the message, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common" (Acts 10:15).

We believe visions are spiritually demanding so that people will reflect again and again on what they experienced, with both the symbolism and underlying message growing in meaning because of the effort required to understand. In this sense, visions are consistent with Elder Bednar's conviction, "I have observed a common characteristic among the instructors who have had the greatest influence in my life. They have helped me to seek learning by faith. They refused to give me easy answers to hard questions. In fact, they did not give me any answers at all. Rather, they pointed the way and helped me take the steps to find my own answers. I certainly did not always appreciate this approach, but experience has enabled me to understand that an answer given by another person usually is not remembered for very long, if remembered at all. But an answer we discover or obtain through the exercise of faith, typically, is retained for a lifetime."[12]

So while an easy-to-understand statement may be filed away in the mind, rarely thought of again, the demanding nature of a vision can provide people with enough spiritual substance for them to question and learn long after the experience itself ends. Or, in other words, spiritually demanding visions plant marvelous doctrines in recipients' hearts that they may not fully grasp at first but that lead them to seek greater comprehension through reflection, prayer, and further study. This was exemplified in the scriptures by both Joseph Smith and Joseph F. Smith, who saw visions they did not initially understand but who were able to receive even greater manifestations through their efforts to make sense of what the Lord was showing to them (see D&C 137:5–9; 138:25–30).

Visual media can be just as spiritually demanding as these visions, encouraging people to ask their own questions so they can better learn by faith. This frequently happens as we select media that is somehow challenging for people to analyze or interpret. Of course, in some cases media might be an appropriate choice when it simplifies written or verbal explanations. Yet we equally believe that more difficult media often helps people better internalize important gospel doctrines, preparing them to apply and live those doctrines outside of a classroom environment. In this case we recommend *against* selecting media that presents idealized story lines, that smooths out the uncertainty and unpredictability accompanying many real-life choices, or that minimizes how difficult it can be to live the gospel in our fallen world.

In contrast, narratively dense scenarios often support multiple points of view and differing interpretations that can lead to vigorous discussion among

viewers about questions such as "What if . . . ?" "How do we know . . . ?" or "But what about . . . ?" They can also lead to reflective contemplation about the same questions within the privacy of one's own heart. Similar results can be seen when a message is communicated through rich symbolism, visual metaphor, or figurative analogy—people who experience such media can frequently draw their own conclusions about the gospel's meaning in their lives, which is a valuable educational outcome even when their conclusions cannot be predicted in advance. Of course, educators are rightly interested in making sure students "get the point" of what is being taught. We believe this does not have to be an either/or decision. There is an important place in religious education for clear, unambiguous explanation of gospel principles, as well as a place for spiritually demanding media that invites people to ask their own questions and seek their own answers about gospel subjects.

Conclusion

By applying scriptural purposes and characteristics of visionary experiences, religious educators will be better able to use visual media to strengthen people's faith and teach them the gospel in a personally valuable way. What we have presented here is only the briefest introduction to how visual media can prepare hearts, make the invisible visible, and increase media's use of intimacy, viewer participation, generated sacred awe, and spiritually demanding material. Those who do not have the time, interest, or experience to create their own media can still effectively select existing products that conform to scriptural recommendations. And those who are a little more adventurous can use the same guidance to produce visual media that are customized to their individual circumstances and needs.

We conclude with Elder Perry's encouragement, which we cited earlier: "We should not underestimate the Lord's power and his willingness to bless our lives if we ask with a sincere heart and real intent. He has instructional designs and learning theories that the world's educational psychologists haven't even imagined yet."[13] We invite readers to take Elder Perry at his word. We *can* take advantage of new media technique and technology while still remaining in close harmony with the Lord's will. We *can* apply scriptural principles to infuse media with the same spiritual energy that visionary manifestations contain. And we are confident that by so doing we will embark on an exciting and rewarding journey, perhaps one in which we will learn as much or more than our students do. ⬛

Notes

1. Boyd K. Packer, *Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer*, comp. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 331.

2. L. Tom Perry, "Learning to Serve," *Ensign*, August 1996, 15.

3. Richard G. Scott, "Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge," *Ensign*, November 1993, 86.

4. Packer, *Mine Errand from the Lord*, 62.

5. Henry B. Eyring, "We Must Raise Our Sights," in *The Voice of My Servants: Apostolic Messages on Teaching, Learning, and Scripture*, ed. Scott C. Esplin and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2010), 14.

6. Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently,* rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 31.

7. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently*, 48.

8. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 208.

9. Charles Walker, Diary, February 2, 1893, published as A. Karl Larsen and Katharine Miles Larsen, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 755–56, quoted in Dean C. Jessee, "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 28.

10. David A. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," in *The Voice of My Servants: Apostolic Messages on Teaching, Learning, and Scripture*, ed. Scott C. Esplin and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2010), 168–69.

11. Hunter, *Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, 184.

12. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," 174.

13. Perry, "Learning to Serve," 15.