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The Visionary World of Joseph Smith

Several people around the time of Joseph Smith had visionary experiences, opening a way for some to hear and receive the Prophet's unique messages.

Richard Lyman Bushman

In the fall of 1829, when the first proofs of the Book of Mormon were coming off E. B. Grandin's press in Palmyra, Solomon Chamberlin, a restless religious spirit who lived twenty miles to the east, broke a journey to Upper Canada, stopping not far from the residence of Joseph Smith Sr. Born in Canaan, Connecticut, in 1788, Chamberlin had joined the Methodists at age nineteen, moved on to the Methodist Reformed Church about seven years later, and then tried life on a communal farm where property was held in common, following the New Testament pattern.

Dissatisfied with the religions he had tried, Chamberlin prayed for further guidance, and in 1816, according to his account, "the Lord revealed to me in a vision of the night an angel,"¹ whom Chamberlin asked about the right way. The angel told him that the churches were corrupt and that God would soon raise up an apostolic church. Chamberlin printed up an account of his visions and was still distributing them and looking for the apostolic church when he stopped in Palmyra.²

In "A Short Sketch of the Life of Solomon Chamberlain," written at Beaver, Utah, when Chamberlin was nearly seventy, he said, "When the boat came to Palmyra, I felt as if some genii or good Spirit told me to leave the boat." Guided by his inspiration, Chamberlin walked south from the town center, heard about the "gold bible" at the house where he spent the night, and the next day made his way to the place where Joseph Smith Sr. was living.

[I] found Hyrum walking the floor, As I entered the door, I said, peace be to this house. He looked at me as one astonished, and said, I hope it will be peace, I then said, Is there any one here that believes in visions or revelations he said Yes, we are a visionary house. I said, Then I will give you one of my pamphlets, which was visionary, and of my own experience. They then called the people together, which consisted of five or six men who were out at the door. Father Smith was one and some of the Whitmer's. They then sat down and read my pamphlet. Hyrum read first, but was so affected he could not read it. He then gave it to a man, which I learned was Christian Whitmer, he finished reading it. I then opened my mouth and began to preach to them, in the words that the angel had made known to me in the vision, that all Churches and Denominations on the earth had become corrupt, and no Church of God on the earth but that he would shortly rise up a Church, that would never be confounded nor brought down and be like unto the Apostolic Church. They wondered greatly who had been telling me these things, for said they we have the same things wrote down in our house, taken from the Gold record, that you are preaching to us. I said, the Lord told me these things a number of years ago, I then said, If you are a visionary house, I wish you would make known some of your discoveries, for I think I can bear them.

After hearing the Smiths' story, Solomon was convinced that this was the work he was looking for. The Smiths gave him sixty-four pages of Book of Mormon proofs, and he set off again for Canada, this time as a missionary for the gold bible. Solomon was later baptized by Joseph Smith and, in 1862, died in Washington County, Utah.³

Chamberlin's story captures the attention of anyone interested in the cultural history of Joseph Smith's time. One reason is that Solomon and Hyrum, though complete strangers when they met in 1829, recognized each other as kindred spirits. When Solomon asked Hyrum if he believed in visions or revelations, Hyrum answered, "Yes, we are a visionary house." Apparently Hyrum saw in Chamberlin's pamphlet the same message that he and the others had learned from Joseph's experiences and from the Book of Mormon. At least as Solomon told the story—and John Taylor later copied the whole account into his Nauvoo journal—Joseph Smith and Solomon Chamberlin had received similar instructions from heaven.⁴

Chamberlin's story of meeting the Smiths, although involving only himself and a half dozen others, had implications for many more. Chamberlin's and Hyrum's mutual understanding of the

word “visionary” implies a general category of people who were known to believe in visions. For the recognition to occur, visionary houses and visionary persons must have been a well-known type. Solomon and Hyrum shared membership in a class of people who believed that the heavens sometimes opened to human view.

Evidence of this early nineteenth-century visionary culture can be found in today’s computer culture with a few clicks of a mouse. The heading “visions” turns up a dozen titles in a standard research library’s catalog, and a little more searching produces more. I have found thirty-two pamphlets that relate visionary experiences published in the United States between 1783 and 1815, all but seven about visions experienced after 1776 (see pp. 198–200 below).

Still more visions are embedded in religious autobiographies of the period. The famed revivalist, Charles Grandison Finney, for example, who was living in Adams, New York, in 1821, stole into the woods to pray privately for forgiveness and afterwards in his law office had a vision of the Savior. “It seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face,” he wrote in his autobiography. Later in life, he decided the vision was “a mental state,” but at the time, he said, “It seemed to me that I saw him as I would see any other man. It seemed to me a reality, that he stood before me, and I fell down at his feet and poured out my soul to him.”⁵ Finney was not alone in thinking he had seen a heavenly being; many others, some on their way to careers as preachers and reformers like Finney, had such stories to tell.⁶ With additional effort, more visionary pamphlets of the type studied here would doubtless be uncovered.⁷

The interest in visionary writings goes back in Anglo-American culture to a time when even the most educated segments of the population thought that supernatural wonders appeared in the heavens, and visions of angels and devils were open even to simple peasants.⁸ Then as the Enlightenment developed momentum in the early eighteenth century, writers at the upper levels of society cast doubt on all the wonders of late Renaissance culture—magic, dreams, and visions—labeling them all superstition. Belief in supernatural miracles of any kind was left for credulous and ignorant common people. A 1793 parody of the visionary accounts offered the common elitist judgment that “a great part of mankind, in every age, are pleased with the marvellous. Stories of witchcraft, fairies,

hobgoblins, revelations, visions, and trances always excite [sic] the attention of the superstitious, gain belief, and afford them unspeakable pleasure.” In the parodist’s story, a visionary is caught in many foolish mistakes by “a man of discernment and knowledge,” implying that discerning people would never believe such reports.⁹ In that rationalist atmosphere, an educated man like Finney could not believe even his own visionary experience and, to protect his credibility, had to call it “a mental state.”

But the Enlightenment could not dam all the currents of belief flowing from the seventeenth into the nineteenth century. An 1814 pamphlet published in Philadelphia went back to an earlier period for instances of divine occurrences, joining an older age to modern times. *Some Extraordinary Instances of Divine Guidance and Protection and Awful Warnings of a Just Retribution through Dreams and Visions* was a 108-page miscellany of various uncanny happenings and brushes with the supernatural collected from many times and places going back several centuries. Interspersed with a tale of Thomas Cranmer in the reign of Queen Mary Tudor was a 1798 “Account of a Trance or Vision of Sarah Alley, of Beekman Town, Dutchess County, and State of New-York.”¹⁰ In the editor’s eyes, the older world of wonders was as relevant in 1814 as the most recent vision, perhaps proving the parodist was right in thinking that the marvelous brought together people from every age.

Besides reprinting stories from centuries earlier, the visionary pamphlets mingled people of different nations and social classes. Experiences in England and Canada were on a par with those from the United States; only three of the thirty-two pamphlets in the sample directed their messages to America as a nation.¹¹ Gender and social class figured scarcely at all in the accounts. In a time when a female preacher would have been an oddity, women commonly had visions. Over a third of the accounts concerned female visionaries, and their stories gained hearers as readily as the men’s. The pamphlets were virtually oblivious to social class. The stories that were carried over from England were somewhat more likely to speak of wealth and poverty; one of the American tales spoke of the subject’s trouble in finding employment, and another told of a prostitute’s repentance.¹² Otherwise, the stories, especially the

American ones, were socially neutral. The wealth, the social position, the economic aspirations of the visionaries were nearly invisible. The classifications that mattered were religious: wickedness and righteousness, belief and disbelief, conversion or preconversion, illness and health. The stories united all kinds of people in a visionary culture.

Common religious themes, more than the visionaries' social position or national outlook, give the stories their characteristic flavor. Ten of the thirty-two pamphlets delivered apocalyptic warnings of impending judgments, usually without specifying the exact nature of the danger save that a conclusive change was near.¹³ *A Dream, or Vision, by Samuel Ingalls, of Dunham, in the Province of Lower Canada, on the Night of Sept. 2, 1809* was typical of the apocalyptic visions. Standing on the bank of the White River in Vermont in 1809, a mile upstream from the Connecticut River and so within a few miles of the farm where Joseph Smith was born, Ingalls

heard a rushing noise in the air; and instantly casting my eyes upward, there appeared to my view three carriages of polished gold, (in the form of the top of a chaise without wheels) passing through the air in a direct line abreast, and steering toward the South.

One carriage contained three women, the second three men, and the third "three Angels as I supposed by their having wings suspended from their shoulders." The angels sang a hymn from which Ingalls recalled one line: "Prepare to give me room, ye nations, I am coming!"¹⁴

Ingalls saw the angels descend over the town of Hartford on the west bank of the Connecticut River where they paused to talk. They condemned to immediate destruction a "wicked club, who are laying plots to deceive the nations" and announced that God would spare the world for 140 years. Then they disappeared, and Ingalls's vision ended.¹⁵ The author drew no moral, claimed no authority for himself, issued no explicit warning. For an apocalyptic people, the message was clear: Evil was abroad in the land, God surveyed it all, and the end was near.

Another apocalyptic visionary, Caleb Pool of Gloucester, Massachusetts, who published *News from Heaven* in 1805, opened his account by reporting that "God has been speaking by signs, by wonders and visions, to me for many years." In the first of his

visions, he saw in a dream “two fierce bulls coming very fast in pursuit of me, roaring, and their tongues lolling out of their mouths.” Provided with “the sword of the Spirit,” he thrust it into the head of one and into the side of the other, causing them to flee. Pool’s inspiration told him one bull was the devil and the other the evil spirit of the adversary “infused into men, raging wonderfully against the gospel.” The bulls raged because their time was short: “God will convince them that are striving against his Holy Spirit in a few years, perhaps in two or three,” and “they shall bow the knee to King Jesus.” After other dreams and visions, Pool asked for an audience with his local parish congregation following their meeting and told them “I come, to let you know that God is angry with you.” He reported his dreams and visions “and with a loud voice called upon them to repent and turn unto the Lord.” Meeting only disbelief, Pool predicted an imminent earthquake, which struck an hour later. The church people’s disregard did not discourage Pool. He went on receiving visions, being healed by Jesus personally in one of them, and concluded his pamphlet by expressing the hope that it would “be a mean[s] of opening the eyes of blind sinners, and shewing to many the error of their ways.”¹⁶

The attitude of warning characterizes virtually all of the pamphlets, save for a few that seem merely agog at the fabulous marvels reported.¹⁷ The apocalyptic visions were embedded in the familiar biblical story of the coming end of the world and the judgment awaiting unrepentant sinners.

A second category of visionary stories, the heavenly journey visions, comprising another nine of the thirty-two pamphlets, send a warning to readers based on the promise of heaven and the threat of hell.¹⁸ In their journeys into the afterlife, these visionaries saw actual acquaintances either in bliss or suffering and brought the news back to their earthly acquaintances. Often an angel or guide accompanied the visionaries as they were lifted from the earth and entered heaven. Commonly, Satan raged at them as they proceeded on their heavenly journey, but the traveler passed by unharmed just beyond the devil’s reach. The obvious message to readers is to stay out of Satan’s grasp.

One author of a heavenly journey pamphlet, Sarah Alley of Beekman Town, New York, a twenty-year-old single woman, fell

into a swoon for four or five hours while sitting by the fire in her father's house and was transported to the world beyond. Accompanied by an angel, she came first to a burning lake where an "abundance of people who appeared to be in the utmost anxiety, distress, and unutterable misery" sat one above the other, "the flames of fire passing up between them." A great devil tried to lay hold on her but was tethered by a chain. A man she knew well urged her "to go and warn his family and friends to do better than he had done" before it was too late. Her guide then conducted her to a place of happiness "where I saw Christ and the holy angels around him, and abundance of people clothed in white robes," though she could not recognize any of them.

Returning to consciousness and finding several people around her, Alley "pressingly advised them to take warning by her." Then she fainted again, and her guide took her directly to heaven, where this time she did recognize many of the inhabitants:

They appeared to be sitting, and in a situation of perfect peace and happiness, God sitting above them, and my guide telling me which he was, though he did not converse with me. I also saw Christ, who seemed a little before the rest, of whom I begged entrance into that peaceful situation.

Christ said no; she must return and warn people, a charge repeated by a person she knew well who "pressingly desired me to warn his friends and relations to change their way of walking." After more such admonitions, "they seemingly all joyfully bid me farewell, and my guide conducted me back to my body."¹⁹

Sarah Alley's experience, like that of all the apocalyptic and heavenly journey visionaries, changed her into a witness. While intensely personal, often involving the visionary's own conversion, a revelation of heaven carried a responsibility to tell everyone. Sarah Alley was admonished over and over to warn her friends; Caleb Pool called a meeting of church people to hear his story. All of the accounts in the sample were published, just as Solomon Chamberlin had his account of his vision printed for distribution. While private and personal, the vision was for the public. The experience set up an obligation to tell and warn the world, forcing the visionaries to make connections outside of their personal spheres.

The impulse to speak ultimately created or, perhaps more accurately, perpetuated visionary culture. To make the voice of warning heard, visionaries, or sometimes their friends, called printers to their aid. The published narratives linked the visionaries to many others—the circle of friends who helped with the printing, a band of small-town printers who knew the market, and a wider audience who read the accounts with varying degrees of belief and skepticism. This conglomerate of visionaries, friends, printers, and readers made up the visionary culture that enabled Solomon Chamberlin and Hyrum Smith to recognize their spiritual kinship.²⁰

Solomon Chamberlin's attraction to the Smiths is easy to understand. Not only was Joseph Jr. a visionary, but his father was also. Furthermore, Joseph Sr.'s dreams were similar to some of the visions in the pamphlets. Recorded by Lucy Smith in her *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet*, Joseph Smith Sr.'s dreams sound like the visions of Caleb Pool. Joseph Sr. saw wild beasts, desolate landscapes, ominous buildings, and antagonistic crowds, all symbolizing the spiritual condition of the world.²¹ These scenes would not have surprised readers of visionary pamphlets. Running through Joseph Sr.'s dreams was the familiar sense of moral decay and danger and the implied warning to turn to God now.

We are most interested, however, in Joseph Smith Jr.'s place in the visionary culture. How did his revelations compare to the stories in the pamphlets? Of all the pamphlets, the one most like any of Joseph's revelations was *The Religious Experience of Norris Stearns, Written by Divine Command, Shewing the Marvellous Dealings of God to His Soul, and the Miraculous Manner in which He Was Delivered from the Jaws of Death and Hell; and His Soul Set at Liberty,—Likewise His Appointment to the Ministry; and Commision from on High, to Preach the Gospel to Every Creature*, published in 1815. In its entirety, Stearns's narrative is a shapeless, picaresque story of a marginal young man's wanderings about New England and New York, punctuated by occasional visions and premonitions. Though Stearns's life was quite different from Joseph's, here and there Stearns's account strikes a familiar note, as in a few sentences in the preface.

The public are here presented with a book written by an illiterate youth, who has been highly favoured of God, and shown many things,

which he is now commanded to write. He earnestly solicits the candid attention of every reader, that it may not stand (as the useless Parenthesis) among the other books of the world; for it is written in obedience to the Divine Command, *as a Testimony* to show his Calling. Care has been taken, that nothing should be written, but by the immediate command of the Lord; whose *Servant* and *Prophet* I am.²²

The religious predicament of the Smith family is also echoed in Stearns's description of his father's faith:

My Father was once a praying man, and belonged to the Baptist Church in Leyden; but not having faith in ceremonial ordinances, and dead forms of religion, he withdrew from their meetings, and was soon given up to the buffetings of Satan, that his soul might be saved in the day of our Lord Jesus.²³

Most of the story sounds nothing like Joseph Smith's, but one striking passage resonates with the 1839 account of the First Vision. Stearns had a vision early in his life, when he was still laboring through heavy doubts about religion:

At length, as I lay apparently upon the brink of eternal woe, seeing nothing but death before me, suddenly there came a sweet flow of the love of God to my soul, which gradually increased. At the same time, there appeared a small gleam of light in the room, above the brightness of the sun, then at his meridian, which grew brighter and brighter: As this light and love increased, my sins began to separate, and the Mountain removed towards the east. At length, being in an ecstasy of joy, I turned to the other side of the bed, (whether in the body or out I cannot tell, God knoweth) there I saw two spirits, which I knew at the first sight. But if I had the tongue of an Angel I could not describe their glory, for they brought the joys of heaven with them. One was God, my Maker, almost in bodily shape like a man. His face was, as it were a flame of Fire, and his body, as it had been a Pillar and a Cloud. In looking steadfastly to discern features, I could see none, but a small glimpse would appear in some other place. Below him stood Jesus Christ my Redeemer, in perfect shape like a man—His face was not ablaze, but had the countenance of fire, being bright and shining. His Father's will appeared to be his! All was condescension, peace, and love!!²⁴

Nothing after these passages parallels Joseph Smith's experience. Stearns was actually beset by skepticism and was driven to believe in the divine by visions whose reality he initially doubted. After the vision related here, he wandered aimlessly from one job to another, dabbling in preaching, seeking a vocation, and forever

stumbling up against the supernatural. He broke off the pamphlet in the middle, before his life's work was resolved and even before his own beliefs were crystallized.

What are we to make of Stearns's account? Although his life never came into focus and his visions went nowhere, we still are interested in his relationship to the Restoration and Joseph Smith. Were Stearns's visions a premonition of what was to come or in some way a preparation for a later revelation of God? Chamberlin's visions readied him to believe visions and to accept the Book of Mormon without the doubts that impeded most Americans. Did the visionary culture open the minds of others? Can we imagine little gleams of light breaking through the clouds everywhere, as a preliminary to the fullness of the Restoration? Or were the visions mere delusions, manufactured by the visionaries' own feverish imaginations or by Satan?

Unfortunately, we have no way to judge the authenticity of these visionary accounts: Some present fabulous, cumbersome stories that sound like the fantasies of troubled souls, straining one's credulity. Others, like the heavenly journey of Sarah Alley, may have sobered readers and turned them to God. Why not concede to Sarah a measure of divine inspiration?

Inspired or not, Stearns's pamphlet and the writings of the other vernacular visionaries dispel the idea that revelations were unknown until the First Vision opened the heavens in 1820. In the experience of the visionary writers, the heavens were anything but sealed, for the writers saw angels, bizarre beasts, and sacred mountains or looked into heaven and hell and saw and heard Christ and the devil. We can imagine this flow of religious stories trickling through rural villages and possibly washing over the Smiths. It is unlikely that we will ever know if any single pamphlet save Chamberlin's reached them, and we cannot conclude that the similarities of tone and style mean that Joseph imitated Norris Stearns or anyone else. What the resemblances between the 1839 account of the First Vision and a few passages in Stearns's narrative do demonstrate, in my opinion, is that Joseph did not have to invent a literary voice for himself anymore than he had to invent the English language. When searching for the right tone for his story, one was readily available. Precedents existed for a young boy

offering a simple account of his experience. The visionaries did not argue for the reality of their visions, apparently not troubling themselves with the questions of skeptics. The writers simply stated the facts of their visions, as if awed and impressed themselves by what transpired. That voice suited Joseph perfectly, and he adopted it as his own with immense success in his simple narrative of innocence overtaken by divinity.

The stylistic similarities only highlight, however, the differences between Joseph and the host of now forgotten visionaries. Putting him alongside Norris Stearns forces on us the question of why their lives took such divergent paths. Stearns proclaimed himself a prophet, but he did not go on to organize a church. His writings did not become scripture or attract believers. Nor did the writings of any of the other thirty-one pamphleteers. People did not flock to hear the visionaries' teachings or pull up roots to gather with fellow believers. Followers of Joseph Smith did all of these things and more. They reoriented their entire lives to comply with his revelations. The differences are so great that we can scarcely even say Joseph was the most successful of the visionaries; taking his life as a whole, he was of another species.

Focusing on the differences rather than the similarities, we see the limited force of the visionary writings. The narratives of dreams and miraculous appearances did not imply the construction of any institutional forms; they did not propose doctrine; they did not proclaim commandments. They were apocalyptic warnings, visions of worldly wickedness and onrushing doom. In a sense, they were titillations of the religious sensibilities that imposed no obligations beyond a general revulsion against sin and responsiveness to divine purpose. The visionary writings were a later version of the Puritan preoccupation with wonders. They inspired awe at the presence of invisible powers made visible but were an occasion to marvel rather than to act.

Joseph Smith's revelations by contrast radically redirected people's lives. His writings became authoritative statements of doctrine and the divine will. They implied an ecclesiastical polity and a reorganization of society. Out of a few verses in the Doctrine and Covenants, a new economic order emerged. Moved by the revelations, people went on missions to distant places, migrated to

Missouri, paid tithing, underwent life-threatening persecutions, built cities. The revelations formed a new society created in the name of God. Joseph's words were read as divine commandments with immediate implications for the conduct of life.

The contrast with other visionary writings compels us to ask how Joseph Smith turned into a prophet who led a movement. What path led him away from the visionaries who wrote a pamphlet or two, issued warnings to their neighbors, and then disappeared into obscurity? If the similarities gave Solomon and Hyrum instant recognition of one another, how did Joseph Smith separate himself from the visionary culture and become the prophet to a people?²⁵

Perhaps the most important difference between Joseph and the visionaries was the way Joseph first presented himself to the world. In the early years, the key formal statements, the ones recorded as revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, played down visionary experiences. One might expect Joseph Smith to preface the Doctrine and Covenants with the story of the First Vision, as Mormon missionaries later handed out the pamphlet *Joseph Smith's Own Story* to prospective converts. But judging from the written record, the First Vision story was little known in the early years.

For twenty years after the vision occurred, Joseph Smith published nothing about the vision of the Father and the Son to link him to the other visionaries. By his own account, after he returned from the grove he did not tell his own mother about the vision. He related the experience to a local clergyman, whose negative response must have discouraged further retellings.

The vision gets an oblique reference in section 20 (1830) as a time when "it was truly manifested unto this first elder that he had received a remission of his sins," without so much as mentioning the appearance of the Father and the Son (D&C 20:5).²⁶ The account of the vision at the beginning of Joseph Smith's 1832 history again emphasized forgiveness of sins and played down the details of what he saw, saying only that "I saw the Lord and he spake unto me."²⁷ Even that spare account was not published, and the whole story made so little impact that for years some scholars believed no narration of the First Vision existed until his 1839 history.²⁸ Rather

than cultivating the kinship with Solomon Chamberlin's culture, Joseph seems to have made little of the revelation that connected him most strongly to the visionaries of his time.

He was less reticent about the visit of Moroni—a visionary story, albeit one without parallel among the visionary accounts. Still he held back information about Moroni, too. Although Joseph told family and friends about the angel's appearance, the preface to the first edition of the Book of Mormon says nothing about the angel, only that “the plates of which hath been spoken, were found in the township of Manchester, Ontario county, New-York.”²⁹ If he had been playing to the visionary culture, the visit of an angel would have received top billing. When questioned about the discovery of the plates, Joseph Smith at first was reluctant to elaborate, saying it was not expedient for people to know more.³⁰ Only later did he choose to include it as a standard part of the story he told about the Church's origins.

By the same token, descriptions of the angelic visitations of John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John were not included in the 1833 Book of Commandments. The 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants made references to the angelic visitations that were only slightly more descriptive than the mention of the First Vision in section 20.³¹ The current section 13, which records John the Baptist's words, did not appear in either of the early compilations; Joseph apparently had said little about John the Baptist's bestowal of the Aaronic Priesthood³² until Oliver Cowdery gave an account of it in an 1834 letter published in the *Messenger and Advocate*. Oliver went into raptures about the experience: “What Joy! what wonder! what amazement!”³³ When Joseph finally wrote about the event in 1839, he was much more low key, avoiding the sensational: “A Messenger from heaven, descended in a cloud of light, and having laid his hands upon us, he ordained us.”³⁴ Joseph never gave a detailed written description of the visit of Peter, James, and John; he simply mentioned that it happened (D&C 27:12; 128:20). He was closemouthed enough that we have trouble now knowing exactly when it occurred.³⁵

Joseph himself never made reference to other visionaries, and we cannot tell for sure if he consciously distanced himself; but when compiling revelations for publication in these early years, he did omit almost every account that might connect him to the

visionaries of his time. The revelations he published struck another note entirely. The opening line of Doctrine and Covenants 20, a primary defining document in the 1835 compilation of revelations, sounds a theme unheard in any of the visionary reports: "The rise of the Church of Christ in these last days . . . it being regularly organized and established agreeable to the laws of our country, by the will and commandments of God." None of the visionaries spoke of the rise of a church. Mostly these people stood along the margins of conventional church life, skirting it, sometimes resisting it, usually disregarding it altogether.³⁶ By publishing a pamphlet rather than seeking a place in the pulpit or space in the denominational newspapers, the visionaries circumvented the institutional. Caleb Pool knew he could not speak to the congregation during services and asked to be heard after the meeting. The visionaries turned to the printers to get the warning message out, rather than to the clergy. Sarah Alley fulfilled her obligation by speaking to her immediate friends and then writing up her account for publication. The visionaries related to the whole world through the press rather than to a congregation through a church.

After the publication of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith immediately organized a church. Rather than dissipating his religious energies in messages published to the world at large, he focused on the formation of an institution. The early revelations to his father and his brother, to Joseph Knight Sr., and to the Whitmers stressed the theme of "a great and marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men." He told them to preach repentance, to "establish the cause of Zion," and to ready themselves to reap the harvest of souls (D&C 11:1, 6; compare sections 4, 12, 14-16). Instead of impressing his followers with the miraculous visions he had seen, he recruited them to carry the gospel to the world. "Say nothing but repentance unto this generation," Hyrum was told (D&C 11:9).

Speaking in that voice, Joseph Smith set himself apart from the visionary culture of Solomon Chamberlin and Norris Stearns. He did not repudiate that culture, but he took another path. To be sure, the similarities that did exist likely worked in Joseph's favor. One can imagine a warm reception for the Mormon message among people who believed that the heavens were not sealed. After asking the Smiths to tell their visions, Solomon Chamberlin assured them

“I can bear them,”³⁷ implying that some Christians might balk at renewed revelation, while he was sympathetic. A population ready to bear such news would be of great help to the infant church.³⁸

Also embedded in Joseph’s works are the two narratives that ran through the visionary reports—the coming judgments on the earth and the punishment and rewards of the life to come. The first narrative foresaw the return of Christ; the second told of the soul’s journey from earth life through death to the hereafter. Both stories had as much meaning for the Saints as for the visionaries. The preface to the Doctrine and Covenants was a “voice of warning” to all people prior to the Second Coming, and the vision of the three degrees of glory held out promises of glory in the afterlife.

But in Joseph’s teachings, another narrative stood out above either of these—the building of Zion in the last days. Unlike the pamphlet visionaries, Joseph harnessed the energy of his visions to the cause of the Church.³⁹ His followers loved the stories of visions and made more of supernatural occurrences in their tales of Joseph than he did himself. Not wanting to suppress the visionary entirely, Joseph did relate the details of the First Vision and the coming of Moroni—after the Church was firmly established.⁴⁰ Having put Zion first, Joseph’s visions inspired his followers to preach the gospel in all the world, to gather from the four quarters of the earth, and to build cities and temples. Going beyond the simple warnings of the visionary pamphlets, Joseph’s revelations became the founding stories of a new religious movement.⁴¹

Joseph Smith’s experiences can be compared to reports from the visionaries of his time, just as he can be linked to other nineteenth-century cultures—universalism, rational skepticism, republicanism, progress, revivalism, magic, communitarianism, health reform, restorationism, Zionism, and a host of others. But no one of these cultures, or even all of them added together, encompasses the whole of his thought. Joseph went beyond them all and produced a culture and society that the visionaries around him could not even imagine. Visions and revelations lay at the core of the Restoration, but the doctrinal and institutional outworks extended well beyond the limits of Solomon Chamberlin’s visionary culture.

Richard Lyman Bushman is Gouverneur Morris Professor of History at Columbia University. He expresses appreciation to NiCole Barzee of the BYU Studies staff for help in studying and organizing the accounts.

LIST OF PAMPHLETS

- Adams, Ebenezer. *A True and Wonderful Relation, of the Appearance of Three Angels, (Cloathed in White Raiment) to a Young Man in Medford, near Boston, in New-England, on the 4th of February 1761, at Night.* Boston: Green and Russell, [1761?].
- Alley, Sarah. "Account of a Trance or Vision of Sarah Alley, of Beekman Town, Dutchess County, State of New-York." In *Some Extraordinary Instances of Divine Guidance and Protection and Awful Warnings of a Just Retribution through Dreams and Visions.* Philadelphia: Joseph Rakestraw, 1814.
- Anonimus's *Travels throu' Europe and America, and Some Visions of Many Heavenly Mansions in the House of God, John XIV, 13.* Ephrata, 1793.
- Ashburn, Rebecca. *Three Remarkable Dreams in Succession, on Thursday Night, April 15th, Friday Night, April 16th, and Saturday Night, April 17th, 1802.* [Philadelphia?]: n.p., 1802.
- De Benneville, George. *A True and Remarkable Account of the Life and Trances of Dr. George De Benneville.* Norristown: David Sower, 1800.
- Chamberlain, Thomas. *America's Timely Remembrancer; or, the Minister Preaching His Own Funeral Sermon; Being a Warning from Heaven to All Vile Sinners on Earth.* Frederick-Town: M. Bartgis, 1794.
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- [Clarke, Samuel.] *The Strange and Wonderful Swansey Vision*. Boston: n.p., [178-?].
- Culver, Nathan. *A Very Remarkable Account of the Vision of Nathan Culver . . . to Which is Added, an Extraordinary Vision, Seen by a Gentleman of Philadelphia*. 5th ed. Portsmouth: Oracle Office, 1796.
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- Havens, Nicodemus. *Wonderful Vision of Nicodemus Havens, of the City of New York, Cordwainer, Wherein He Was Presented with a View of the Situation of the World, after the Dreadful Fourth of June, 1812 and Shewing What Part of New York Is to Be Destroyed*. Boston: Coverly Jr., 1812.
- Ingalls, Samuel. *A Dream, or Vision, by Samuel Ingalls, of Dunham, in the Province of Lower Canada, on the Night of Sept. 2, 1809*. [Windsor, Vt.?]: n.p., [1810?].
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- Lee, Richard. *The Melancholy End of Ungrateful Children*. Rutland, Vt.: By the author, 1795.
- M'Gowan, John. *Death, a Vision: or, the Solemn Departure of Saints and Sinners, Represented under the Similitude of a Dream*. From the 6th London edition. Harrisburgh, Pa.: John Wyeth, 1796.
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- Pool, Caleb. *News from Heaven, by Visions, Communicated Miraculously to, and Explained by, Caleb Pool, of Gloucester*. Salem: By the author, 1805.
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- Stearns, Norris. *The Religious Experience of Norris Stearns, Written by Divine Command, Shewing the Marvellous Dealings of God to His Soul, and the Miraculous Manner in Which He Was Delivered from the Jaws of Death and Hell; and His Soul Set at Liberty,—Likewise His Appointment to the Ministry; and Commision from on High, to Preach the Gospel to Every Creature*. Greenfield, [Mass.]: By the author, 1815.
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- A Wonderful Account of a Little Girl of Nine Years Old, Who Lives in the Town of Jericho, in the State of Vermont; by the Name of Hannah Coy*. [Windsor, Vt.]: n.p., 1800. Published with *An Account of the Vision or Trance of a Young Woman, Who Lives on the West Side of Lake Champlain, in the State of New-York, in the Town Called Pleasant Valley*. [Windsor, Vt.]: n.p., 1800.

NOTES

¹Dean C. Jessee, ed., "The John Taylor Nauvoo Journal, January 1845–September 1845," *BYU Studies* 23, no. 3 (1983): 45.

²For Chamberlin's life, see David F. Boone, "Prepared for the Restoration: Spiritual Manifestations Foreshadowed the Return of the Gospel to the Earth," *Ensign* 14 (December 1984): 17–21. Chamberlin's 1829 pamphlet partially supports his later account of his vision. He describes his discovery of apostasy in 1816 and his search for God's "true church and people," but another vision that year led him to the Reformed Methodists, among whom he found "Gods dear children." The pamphlet does not mention a search for an apostolic church. A recently discovered copy of Chamberlin's tract, *A Sketch of the Experience of Solomon Chamberlin, to Which Is Added a Remarkable Revelation, or Trance of His Father-in-Law Philip Haskins* (Lyons, N.Y.: n.p., 1829), is now on deposit in Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, and will be published with an introduction by Larry C. Porter in a forthcoming issue of *BYU Studies*. Solomon wrote his name "Chamberlin"; family members later changed the name to "Chamberlain." See also "Remarkable Vision and Revelation: as Seen and Received by Asa Wild, of Amsterdam, N.Y.," reprinted from the *Amsterdam, N.Y., Mohawk Herald*, October 1, 1823, in the *Palmyra, N.Y., Wayne Sentinel*, October 22, 1823, also submitted for publication to *BYU Studies*, together with commentary by Elden J. Watson.

³Larry C. Porter, "Solomon Chamberlain—Early Missionary," *BYU Studies* 12, no. 3 (1972): 314–18.

⁴Jessee, "John Taylor Nauvoo Journal," 44–46.

⁵Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney. Written by Himself* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1876), 19–20. Finney later appealed to what he called the "affirmation of reason." See Noel B. Reynolds, review, *BYU Studies* 32, no. 1–2 (1992): 292.

⁶For citations to visionary experiences, see John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 41–42, 63, 126–27; and Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 72–75.

⁷For two visionaries closer to Joseph Smith's time and place, see Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 58. See the additional references in Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, "Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 34–35. Professor Herbert Sloan of Barnard College has drawn my attention to a pamphlet beyond the time boundaries of the sample: *Remarkable Visionary Dreams, of a Mulatto Boy, in Northfield, Mass. by the Name of Frederic W. Swan, Aged Thirteen Years: Together with a Sketch of His Life, Sickness, Conversion, and Triumphant Death* ([Chesterfield, N.H.]: Joseph Merriam, 1822). Swan's dreams fell into conventional patterns, including a heavenly journey, as analyzed in this paper.

⁸David D. Hall, "A World of Wonders," in *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 71–116.

⁹*A True Narrative of a Most Stupendous Trance and Vision, Which Happened at Sharon, in Connecticut. in January, 1789* (n.p., 1793), 3, 11.

¹⁰*Some Extraordinary Instances of Divine Guidance and Protection: And Awful Warnings of a Just Retribution through Dreams and Visions* (Philadelphia: Joseph Rakestraw, 1814), 13, 50–55.

¹¹Nicodemus Havens and Abraham Wood pamphlets are cited in full in the list of pamphlets at the end of this article; see pp. 198–200. Hereafter, author's names without citation refer to this list.

¹²Norris Stearns and Mehetable Churchill.

¹³The ten apocalyptic pamphlets include those by Ebenezer Adams, Isaac Child, Samuel Clarke, Nicodemus Havens, Samuel Ingalls, Ann Phillips, Caleb Pool, Norris Stearns, Timothy Walker, and Abraham Wood.

¹⁴Samuel Ingalls.

¹⁵Samuel Ingalls.

¹⁶Caleb Pool, 3–4, 9–10, 31.

¹⁷Rebecca Ashburn, Norris Stearns, and Benjamin Say.

¹⁸The heavenly journey pamphlets, cited in full in the list of pamphlets, include Sarah Alley; *Anonimus's Travels*; Nathan Culver; *The Glory of the Heavenly City*; John Mills; *A True Narrative*; *A Warning to Disobedient Youth*; Chloe Willey; and *A Wonderful Account*.

¹⁹Sarah Alley, 50–55.

²⁰The visionaries who published their dreams and visions in pamphlets are only part of the larger visionary world of that era. A computer catalog brings up a half dozen books on visionary poetry, much of which was written in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These books are a reminder that within the span of Joseph's life, the idea of divine revelation fascinated all segments of the cultural spectrum. The interest was nearly as common among the educated classes as among the uneducated. William Blake—learned, sophisticated, and acclaimed—reported daily visions and wrote poems that were close to automatic writing. Poets from Shelley to the American John Trumbull used visions as frames for their poems. Emerson admonished the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School in 1837 to dream dreams and see visions. Where Joseph fit in this broader picture is a question that also deserves attention. See, for example, Judith Weissman, *Of Two Minds: Poets Who Hear Voices* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993); and Andrew J. Welburn, *The Truth of Imagination: An Introduction to Visionary Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

²¹Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (1853; reprint, Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1995), 57–59, 70–72.

²²Norris Stearns, preface; italics in original.

²³Stearns, 5.

²⁴Stearns, 12. God or Christ or both appear in visions in ten of the pamphlets: Sarah Alley, George De Benneville, Nathan Culver, *Glory of the Heavenly City*, John M'Gowan, Caleb Pool, Dorothy Ripley, Norris Stearns, *A Warning to Disobedient Youth*; and *A Wonderful Account*. Many of the appearances occur in the heavenly journey stories where the visionary sees God or Christ in a celestial setting.

²⁵The question is addressed from a literary perspective in Lambert and Cracroft, "Literary Form and Historical Understanding," 31-42.

²⁶In the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, what appears as section 20 in the present edition was prominently located immediately after the revealed preface, appearing as section 2. *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland: F. G. Williams, 1835).

²⁷Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 280.

²⁸Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet*, 2d ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 21-25; James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (autumn 1966): 28-45; James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43-61; and Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2d ed., rev. and enl. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980). Joseph's 1839 history was published beginning in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842.

²⁹The Book of Mormon (Palmyra: E. B. Grandin, 1830), preface, reprinted in Wilford C. Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His Work* (n.p.: Deseret News Press, 1958), unpagged.

³⁰The Conference Minutes, and Record Book, of Christ's Church of Latter Day Saints, October 25, 1831, cited in Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 23.

³¹*Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints*, 180 (now Doctrine and Covenants 27:7-8, 12).

³²See Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff, "Priesthood Restoration Documents," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995-96): 175-77.

³³Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, September 7, 1834, Norton, Ohio, in *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 14-16, quoted in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:31.

³⁴Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith* 1:290; see also 1:238.

³⁵Stories of priesthood restoration may have circulated unofficially, judging from Ohio newspaper reports on Mormon claims to authority. *Painesville Telegraph*, November 16 and December 7, 1830. The "Visions of Moses" given in June 1830 carried the instruction to "show them not unto any except them that believe," (Moses 1:42) and had little circulation for many years. See also Cannon and BYU Studies, "Priesthood Restoration Documents," 162-207, especially 177, no. 7; and Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:238-39.

³⁶Only three of the visionaries in the sample are explicitly favorable to or at ease with a church or minister: Rebecca Ashburn, Thomas Chamberlain, and *A Wonderful Account*.

³⁷Porter, "Solomon Chamberlain—Early Missionary," 317.

³⁸Visionaries were probably bound to one another by their willingness to suspend disbelief, for they had in common the opposition of a doubting world. On the one hand, visionaries suffered from the attacks of skeptics spawned by the

Enlightenment who were questioning all the Christian revelations, and, on the other, by preachers in most of the mainstream denominations who were embarrassed by any manifestation of enthusiasm. A writer in the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine* in 1805 wrote that no person should “publish to the world the discoveries of heaven or hell which he supposes he has had in a dream, or trance, or vision.” Cited in Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 59.

³⁹After Joseph’s time, Ellen G. White similarly combined visions with church building, as did the Methodists earlier. See Jonathan M. Butler, “The Making of a New Order: Millerism and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventism,” in Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 202–5; and John H. Wigger, “Taking Heaven by Storm: Enthusiasm and Early American Methodism, 1770–1820,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 14 (summer 1994): 167–94.

⁴⁰Doctrine and Covenants 128:21 refers to visitations that were never reported to the church. In May 1843, Joseph said, “I could explain a hundred fold more than I ever have of the glories of the kingdoms manifested to me in the vision, were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive them.” Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 5:402.

⁴¹This last point is the argument of Lambert and Cracroft, “Literary Form and Historical Understanding,” 39–42.