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## Joseph Smith in a Personal World

*Dallin H. Oaks*

**M**y subject is Joseph Smith in a personal world. My lens is primarily a personal one—his impact on me and believers I have known during my lifetime. I will also discuss Joseph Smith’s own personal world and his impact on his acquaintances and friends. A major focus will be Joseph Smith’s role as a prophet and his teachings on the reality of revelation. By *prophet* I mean one who speaks for God in revealing divine truth to others. By *revelation* I mean God’s communication to man—to prophets and to every one of us, if we seek.

As several contributors to this volume discuss, revelation is the key to the uniqueness of Joseph Smith’s message. That message began with his personal testimony that as a fourteen-year-old boy, without schooling, property, or family prominence, he saw the Father and the Son in person. He and his associates testified to later personal visits from other heavenly beings. Joseph taught that he was directed by a continuing flow of revelation throughout his life and that everyone could enjoy personal revelation or inspiration to guide them in their individual lives. “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded upon direct revelation,” he declared, “as the true Church of God has ever been.”<sup>1</sup> “Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations, and where is our religion?” he asked. “We have none,” he answered.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph Smith's teaching about the significance of modern-day revelation is clearly the most distinctive characteristic of the Latter-day Saint religion. "Whatever we may think of revelation," Joseph taught, "without it we can neither know nor understand anything of God . . . and . . . must remain in ignorance."<sup>3</sup> He also taught that "salvation cannot come without revelation; it is vain for anyone to minister without it."<sup>4</sup> Revelation is the foundation of our church doctrine and governance, and it is also fundamental to personal conversion, personal decision making, and the ways we understand and apply the inspired texts we call scriptures.

### Personal and Prophetic Revelation

When we ask in faith, Joseph Smith taught, God will give us knowledge in our mind and in our heart, by feelings (see Doctrine and Covenants 8:1–3). The New Testament describes such personal revelation. For instance, when Peter affirmed his conviction that Jesus was the divine Son of God, Jesus declared: "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). This biblical pattern is the one Joseph Smith followed as he acted upon James 1:5 and asked God for answers to his spiritual questions. Personal revelation also occurs when an inventor or artist or great leader receives flashes of enlightenment from a loving God for the benefit of his children.

To demonstrate the operation of revelation upon decision making, I will give two contrasting personal experiences—the familiar and the revelatory.

First, to illustrate the kind of decision making with which we are all familiar, I have chosen a personal experience that happened when I was serving as a law clerk to Chief Justice Earl Warren of the United States Supreme Court. In my personal journal for May 5, 1958, I wrote:

Saturday afternoon Jon, Don and I [the Chief Justice's law clerks] took up our objections to [an opinion being joined by the Chief in a particular case before the Court]. After about 3 hours of tussling, in which the Chief held his own in an admirable way, it became

clear that he was fire-hardened with the majority position but might go for some slight alterations in the opinion.

That description of three law clerks' interaction with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is typical of the process of dialogue and decision making in the legal profession.

Second, and in contrast, just over three years later, while I was employed by a large law firm in Chicago, I engaged in a different kind of dialogue and decision making. Edward H. Levi, who was later to serve as Attorney General of the United States, approached me with a proposal that I leave the law firm and become a professor at the University of Chicago Law School, where he was dean. He said, "I know you will want to pray about this." He was right. He knew this because he knew me as his student, and we had had frequent association when I was the editor-in-chief of his school's law review.

I discussed this unexpected new career path with my wife. My personal history for that August 1961 records: "We prayed about it all through the weekend and shortly felt that this was what we should do." I wrote to our parents: "None of us knows where this will lead, but we feel perfectly peaceful in our hearts that this is another valuable preparation for us." This second experience illustrates what Latter-day Saints mean by *personal revelation*, namely an inspiration or manifestation that comes in response to earnest prayer for guidance in an important personal decision.

Joseph Smith affirmed by countless teachings and personal experiences that revelation did not cease with the early apostles, but that it continued in his day and continues in ours. He also taught that revelation was a reality for everyone. "It is the privilege of the Children of God to come to God and get Revelation," he said. "God is not a respecter of persons, we all have the same privilege."<sup>5</sup> Moses declared, "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!" (Numbers 11:29). Any sincere truth seeker can receive a personal manifestation from God by the power of the Holy Ghost.

Another example of revelation, which I will call *prophetic revelation*, occurs in the role of Joseph Smith and his successors as presidents of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Here God reveals

truths or commandments to His prophet-leader for the enlightenment of His people. This is the kind of revelation described in the Old Testament teaching that “the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7).

It is on this subject of revelation that Joseph Smith shared something important with George Washington. In *His Excellency*, Joseph J. Ellis’s recent bestseller on Washington, Ellis gives the following analysis of the man who was the founder of the American nation:

He was that rarest of men: a supremely realistic visionary, a prudent prophet whose final position on slavery served as the capstone to a career devoted to getting the big things right. His genius was his judgment. . . . But where did that come from? Clearly, it did not emanate from books or formal education, places where it is customary and often correct to look for the wellspring that filled the minds of such eminent colleagues as Adams, Jefferson, and Madison with their guiding ideas. Though it might seem sacrilegious to suggest, Washington’s powers of judgment derived in part from the fact that this mind was uncluttered with sophisticated intellectual preconceptions.<sup>6</sup>

When I read those words, I was struck with the parallel to Joseph Smith. It is surely true that Joseph’s mind “was uncluttered with sophisticated intellectual preconceptions.” It is also true—if one judges him by the criteria of the quality of his followers or the fruits of his teachings—that he got the big things right.

Joseph Smith’s almost total lack of formal education or access to the learning of his day has been a standard basis for criticizing him. “Ignorant” is the label so familiar in the popular criticisms. Perhaps it is time for educated nonbelievers to take the unlearned Joseph Smith seriously and to ask the question Ellis asked about Washington: where did his genius come from? I see revelation from God as the best answer to that question.

### **My Personal View of Joseph Smith**

I am a product of the teachings of Joseph Smith. What he taught about the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man has given me my understanding of my relationship with God, my relationship

to mankind, and the worth of men and women everywhere. He also taught that “friendship is the grand fundamental principle of Mormonism, to revolutionize [and] civilize the world.”<sup>7</sup> I believe the principles he taught have that potential.

The stated purpose of the Book of Mormon is to witness that Jesus is the Christ. That book and Joseph Smith’s other teachings about the mission of Jesus Christ have grounded me in the Christian faith. “The fundamental principles of our religion,” he proclaimed, “are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

Joseph Smith taught that each individual had identity in the world of spirits before this life. “Man was also in the beginning with God,” he revealed (Doctrine and Covenants 93:29). He also taught that we will each have identity and purpose in the life to come (Doctrine and Covenants 76:50–106; 137:5–10). These teachings have expanded my concept of my personal potential and the potential of every living person. His teachings have also disciplined and given significance and joy to my marriage relationships and to my relationships with my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Joseph Smith revealed that “the glory of God is intelligence” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:36) and that a man cannot be saved in ignorance (see Doctrine and Covenants 131:6). These inspired declarations about the eternal significance of learning—sacred and secular—have powerfully motivated my efforts to learn. The Word of Wisdom (Doctrine and Covenants 89), which he gave by revelation long before it became socially or scientifically fashionable, has kept me away from any use of tobacco or alcohol or drugs throughout my life. The health benefits of that abstinence are now evident in scientific terms. Even without such evidence, I am convinced that all of the teachings of Joseph Smith would make the world a better place for everyone.

That is my personal view of the man we call a prophet. And, of course, those teachings are the foundation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. “Everything we have is a lengthened shadow of Joseph Smith,” said Gordon B. Hinckley, our church president. “Our foundation of doctrine and practice and procedure all come down from him.”<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, I welcome the opportunity to

contribute to scholarship on Joseph Smith under the title “Joseph Smith in a Personal World.” He would have liked that, for his relationships with those around him were always personal—never institutional.<sup>10</sup>

Joseph Smith was a personal leader. His teachings always encouraged men and women to have their own personal relationship with God. For this reason, missionary work that is based on Joseph’s teachings always focuses on individuals, not groups. Thus, when Latter-day Saint missionaries encounter tribal or other leaders who are attracted to their message and offer to bring all of their followers into membership, we refuse. I recall directing that response in one example in the southern Philippines. For Joseph and for us, each individual must decide for himself or herself, without pressure from peers or higher authorities.

Since religious faith and affiliation must always be a personal decision, Joseph Smith’s followers vigorously defend the freedom to choose for all people. That is an article of our faith (Article of Faith 11). Joseph Smith taught it in these words: “If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a Mormon, I am bold to declare before heaven that I am just as ready to die for a presbyterian, a baptist, or any other denomination.”<sup>11</sup> He obviously recognized that the same tyranny that would trample on the rights of believers who were unpopular and too weak to defend themselves would trample on the rights of Latter-day Saints.

### **The Personal World of Joseph Smith’s Character and Personality<sup>12</sup>**

I am a fifty-year student of the life of Joseph Smith. I was born in 1932, when the church was just over one hundred years old, so my lifetime corresponds closely to the second century of the church Joseph Smith founded. In my studies and my conclusions, I believe I am typical of the Latter-day Saints of this second century. We did not meet Joseph Smith, but we feel we know him, and we love him personally through what he taught. We are witnesses of the truth of the poetic prediction by one of his adult associates that “millions shall know ‘Brother Joseph.’”<sup>13</sup>

The Joseph Smith I met in my personal research was a man of the frontier—young, emotional, dynamic, and so loved and approachable by his people that they often called him “Brother Joseph.” His comparative youth overarched his prophetic ministry. He was fourteen at the time of the First Vision, twenty-one when he received the golden plates, and just twenty-three when he finished translating the Book of Mormon (in less than sixty working days). Over half of the revelations in our Doctrine and Covenants were given through this prophet when he was twenty-five or younger. He was twenty-six when the First Presidency was organized, and just over thirty-three when he escaped from imprisonment in Missouri and resumed leadership of the Saints gathering in Nauvoo. He was only thirty-eight and a half when he was murdered.

During his thirty-eight and a half years of life, Joseph Smith had more than his share of mortal afflictions. When he was about seven, he suffered an excruciatingly painful leg surgery. Because of the poverty of his family, he had little formal education and as a youth was compelled to work long hours to help put food on the family table. He was attacked physically on many occasions. In the midst of trying to fulfill the staggering responsibilities of his sacred calling, he had to labor as a farmer or merchant to provide a living for his family. He did this without the remarkable spiritual gifts that sustained him in his prophetic calling. The Lord had told him that “in temporal labors thou shalt not have strength, for this is not thy calling” (Doctrine and Covenants 24:9).

In spiritual matters, Joseph Smith had no role models from whom he could learn how to be a prophet and a leader. He had to rely on inexperienced associates. They struggled and learned together, and Joseph was extremely rapid in his acquisition of knowledge and maturity. He unquestionably had unique gifts. As we would say today, he was “a quick study.” He said he was taught by heavenly messengers and by other revelations from God, and I believe him.

One of his personal gifts is evidenced by the love and loyalty of the remarkable people who followed him. When Joseph challenged his followers to overcome their mortal imperfections, he did not raise himself above them and they loved him for it. In a sermon



preached a little over a month before he was murdered, he declared, “I never told you I was perfect—but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught.”<sup>14</sup> Joseph Smith had a “native cheery temperament” that endeared him to almost everyone who knew him (Joseph Smith–History 1:28). We have record of many adoring tributes like that of an acquaintance who said, “The love the saints had for him was inexpressible.”<sup>15</sup>

The companionship of his friends was a delight to Joseph Smith, who saw society- and community-building as major purposes of the gospel. According to a careful notetaker, one of Joseph Smith’s sermons used these words, which go on to reveal his attitude toward the members of his Latter-day Saint community: “I see no faults in the church—let me be resurrected with the saints, whether to heaven or hell or any other good place—good society. What do we care [where we are] if the society is good?”<sup>16</sup> The Book of Mormon teaches, “Men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25).<sup>17</sup> I believe a subsequent compiler had it right when he represented Joseph as saying that “if we go to hell, we will turn the devils out of doors and make a heaven of it.”<sup>18</sup>

All of his life, Joseph Smith lived on the frontier, where men had to pit their brute strength against nature and sometimes against one another. He did not shrink from physical confrontation, and he had the courage of a lion. Once he was kidnapped by two men who punched cocked pistols into his ribs and repeatedly threatened to shoot him if he moved a muscle. Joseph endured these threats for a time and then snapped back, “Shoot away; I have endured so much persecution and oppression that I am sick of life; why then don’t you shoot, and have done with it instead of talking so much about it?”<sup>19</sup> His persecutors did not shoot on that occasion, but few men have been the targets of more assaults on their mission or their memory than Joseph Smith. I investigated some of these charges by personal research in original records in Illinois, where Joseph lived the last five years of his life.

One such charge arose when Joseph Smith, then mayor, and the Nauvoo City Council suppressed an opposition newspaper. This event focused anti-Mormon hostilities and led directly to Joseph’s

murder. Early Latter-day Saint historians, including B. H. Roberts, conceded that this action was illegal. However, as I researched this subject as a young law professor, I was surprised to find a legal basis for this action in the Illinois law of 1844. My law review article noted that the guarantee of freedom of the press in the United States Constitution was not declared applicable to the actions of city and state governments until 1931, and then only by a five-to-four Court's reliance on a constitutional amendment adopted in 1868.<sup>20</sup> There were many suppressions of newspapers on the frontier in the period before the Civil War. One should judge the actions of Joseph Smith on the basis of the laws and circumstances of his day, not ours.

As students at the University of Chicago, historian Marvin S. Hill and I were intrigued with the little-known fact that five men went to trial in Illinois for the murder of Joseph Smith. For over ten years we scoured libraries and archives across the nation to find every scrap of information about this trial and those involved in it. Our book reviewed the actions and words of Illinois citizens who knew Joseph Smith personally—some who hated him and plotted to kill him and others who loved him and risked their lives for him. Nothing in our discoveries in the original court records or in the testimony at the lengthy trial disclosed anything that reflected dishonor on the murdered man.<sup>21</sup>

The accessibility of Illinois court records led to another previously untouched area of research on Joseph Smith. Joseph I. Bentley, a law student at Chicago, and I discovered numerous records showing the business activities of Joseph Smith. We coauthored a law review article on this subject.<sup>22</sup> The 1840s followed a period of nationwide financial panic and depression. Economic conditions in frontier states like Illinois were ruinous. The biographers of an Illinois contemporary, Abraham Lincoln, have described his financial embarrassments during this decade, when business was precarious, many obligations were in default, and lawsuits were common.<sup>23</sup>

Joseph Smith was not spared. His enemies charged him with fraud in various property conveyances, most conducted in behalf of the church. A succession of court proceedings that extended for nearly a decade examined these claims in meticulous detail. Finally, in 1852,

long after the Saints' exodus from Illinois (so there was no conceivable political or other cause for anyone to favor the Saints or their leader), a federal judge concluded this litigation with a decree that found no fraud or other moral impropriety by Joseph.<sup>24</sup>

Poor legal advice seriously disadvantaged Joseph and his fellow church leaders and members. As one familiar with early Illinois property law and as a lawyer enjoying the benefit of over one hundred years of hindsight, I can readily see where this was the case in some of Joseph's legal controversies. This poor advice may account for Brigham Young's 1846 declaration that he "would rather have a six-shooter than all the lawyers in Illinois."<sup>25</sup>

Joseph Smith's character was perhaps best apprehended by men who knew him best and stood closest to him in church leadership. They adored him. Brigham Young declared, "I do not think that a man lives on the earth that knew [Joseph Smith] any better than I did; and I am bold to say that, Jesus Christ excepted, no better man ever lived or does live upon this earth."<sup>26</sup>

### Joseph's Impact on Personal Worlds in the Philippines

Latter-day Saints frequently mention the fulfillment of the remarkable prophecy that the name of this obscure youth on the American frontier "should be had for good and evil among all nations" (Joseph Smith–History 1:33). Today, with Latter-day Saint missionaries in over one hundred twenty nations and with more than half of the twelve million church members living outside the United States, that statement is much easier to understand than when it was first uttered to a seventeen-year-old boy in 1823. With that background in mind, I will now describe how Joseph Smith has changed lives—personal worlds—in one such nation, the Philippines.

My wife and I recently returned from two years in the Philippines. There we lived among a people who endured over four hundred years of colonial rule. After the Spanish yoke was lifted, they had a forty-year administration by the United States and a brief, harsh occupation by Japan. Today they have been independent for almost sixty years, but it seemed to us that their colonial heritage still haunts

them. Economically, their culture is one of dependency. A landed and wealthy aristocracy of their own people has replaced the foreign masters, but the wonderful Filipino people still lack many of the political freedoms and economic opportunities they desire. They are like an eagle shown the joy of flight but still kept on a tether.

In the Philippines, my wife and I experienced the impact of the teachings of Joseph Smith and the practices of our faith in what we call the developing world. It is now just a little over forty years since the first Latter-day Saint missionaries commenced their work in that nation. When they began, they had just one local church member. Today, there are over 500,000 in that country, and we must modulate our missionary activities in order to ensure that our growth does not exceed our capacity to train local leaders.

I am often asked why our church has grown so rapidly in the Philippines and in other parts of the developing world. The label “rice Christians” memorializes the reality that some of the converts of Christian preaching in underdeveloped lands were persons in search of economic rather than religious gain. Our growth includes some of this. Some of our new members in the Philippines undoubtedly expected personal advantages from their friendship with American missionaries or their membership in a financially strong American church. But this cannot be a major factor, since for many years the greater part of Latter-day Saint missionaries in the Philippines have been native Filipinos or other Pacific islanders.

The most important ingredient at work in the remarkable growth and staying power of the Latter-day Saint church in the Philippines is the investigators’ personal conversion to the doctrines of the church. To cite one objective test of that staying power, attendance records indicate that about 100,000 Filipino members attend the three-hour Sunday meetings at least once each month in 1,100 congregations presided over and taught entirely by local Filipinos. Tens of thousands regularly serve in voluntary leadership and teaching positions. In a nation with the cultural traditions, transportation difficulties, and economic challenges of the Philippines, this level of attendance and leadership activity is impressive by any measure.

Why do the teachings and example of the prophet Joseph Smith have such power in the Philippines and in other nations in the developing world?

The first reason, which applies in every nation, is revelation. The Book of Mormon tells of a people who “had many revelations” (Jacob 1:6). When those investigating our church hear what we call the message of the Restoration, including the account of Joseph Smith’s first vision and the key doctrines he taught, they are invited to pray to God in the name of Christ and ask if these things are true. They are promised that if they ask with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth to them by the power of the Holy Ghost (see Moroni 10:4). They are told that they should not be baptized until they know by personal revelation that the message is true and that this church is still led by a prophet.

“The best way to obtain truth and wisdom,” Joseph Smith taught, “is not to ask it from books, but to go to God in prayer, and obtain divine teaching.”<sup>27</sup> This teaching and challenge is especially meaningful in a culture where many feel insignificant and isolated, politically and economically. Persons in that circumstance can identify with a prophet who was unschooled and poor. They welcome the message that even the poor and downtrodden are children of a Heavenly Father who loves them and has a plan for them. And they feel ennobled as well as challenged by the teaching that persons can know the truth for themselves by personal revelation from God rather than by depending on others of greater education or standing.

Sometimes that revelation comes after baptism, as it did with Arsenio Pagaduan. He was baptized in the Philippines in 1973, but continued to wonder about the truth of the Book of Mormon. Two years later, when he was sent to England to do post-graduate work in Agricultural Engineering, he determined to study the Book of Mormon carefully along with his graduate studies. While doing so he received clear, strong impressions of its truthfulness. According to his written account, as he read the promise in Moroni 10:4:

My eyes were [so] saturated with tears that I had to stop reading. The impressions of the Holy Ghost in my being [were] so strong that I knelt down in prayer of gratitude to our Heavenly Father. . . .

This personal knowledge borne by the Holy Ghost of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon led me to other important truths: that Joseph Smith was indeed a prophet of God and that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is really true.<sup>28</sup>

Whenever this knowledge comes with surety—whether before or after baptism—it ties the convert closely to Joseph Smith. A convert serving as a missionary recorded this experience with someone who attacked Joseph Smith:

I allowed him to finish his tirade and calmly testified about the prophet Joseph. As I was sharing my testimony, a warm feeling started to fill my whole being until it completely enveloped me. It was a special kind of warm, sweet, tender glowing feeling that tells me what I was saying is true. I know it was the Holy Ghost telling me that Joseph Smith is truly a prophet of God.<sup>29</sup>

A similar expression came from an isolated island where an elderly rice farmer was taught by the missionaries and baptized. One of my associates heard him speak. Trembling with emotion, with big tears running down his cheeks, he said: “I am so grateful to the Prophet Joseph Smith. I am thankful at last to know about the Lord’s true church—His church is now restored to the earth. I am thankful to understand His plan of salvation. Oh, how happy I am to finally have the truth.”<sup>30</sup> This old rice farmer was also grateful to be taught about a God he can understand as “an exalted man.”<sup>31</sup> Joseph Smith revealed God to be a personal being with “a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s” (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22).

The teachings of Joseph Smith require individual responsibility, and they promise rewards for efforts at self-improvement.<sup>32</sup> That assurance and promise is very meaningful to those who are poor and desirous to improve. It is especially powerful when combined with continuing revelation, which promises that we are not locked into or limited by the conditions or rules of the past. “We are differently situated from any other people that ever existed upon this earth,” Joseph Smith taught, “consequently those former revelations cannot be suited to our conditions; they were given to other people, who were before us.”<sup>33</sup>

Another attraction to the theology Joseph Smith taught is that it presents mortal life in a context preceded by a premortal existence and followed by assurances of continued progress in the world to come. In this view of life all stand equal before God, without regard to the conditions of their mortal birth or citizenship or their current attainments of property or prominence. That message attracts the poor and the disadvantaged in every land, just as it did my ancestors in England and Scandinavia in the earliest days of Latter-day Saint missionary work there.

The Book of Mormon, brought forth by Joseph Smith, contains many of these teachings that I have cited as reasons for the rapid growth of our church in the developing world and among the poor and oppressed in all nations. Its first chapter states that God's "power, and goodness and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth" (1 Nephi 1:14). It later declares that God has not only spoken to the Jews who wrote his teachings in the Bible and to the people who wrote them in the Book of Mormon, but that he "shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it" (2 Nephi 29:12). The book also affirms that the Savior appeared to people in more lands than just in Judea (3 Nephi 16:1-3; 17:4). It also teaches that the gospel of Jesus Christ, for which it is a second witness, will "be declared to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people" (Mosiah 15:28). "Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another," a Book of Mormon prophet declared, "or one man shall not think himself above another" (Mosiah 23:7). In sum, the Book of Mormon contains a universal message and it affirms the value of all people everywhere. In a circumstance where the rich and the proud persecuted the poor, a Book of Mormon prophet declared this to be "abominable unto him who created all flesh," for "the one being is as precious in his sight as the other" (Jacob 2:21; see also verses 12-20). Persons who had "set their hearts upon riches" were told that they were "cursed because of your riches, and also are your riches cursed because ye have set your hearts upon them" (Helaman 13:20-21).

The faithful in the Philippines look to a prophet for guidance in their personal lives, just as the people of Kirtland and Nauvoo looked to Joseph Smith. A prophet has taught them to shun the

culture of dependency and take the responsibility for their personal support and that of their families. He has taught them to be honest. He has taught them to be good law-abiding citizens, and to help one another in their towns and villages and in their communities of faith. And he has promised them that if they are faithful in paying their tithes and offerings, as increasing numbers are, the Lord will bless them and their entire nation.<sup>34</sup> All these teachings are twenty-first-century applications of principles taught in the nineteenth century by Joseph Smith.

### **Joseph Smith on Revelation and Scripture<sup>35</sup>**

The principle of independent verification by revelation introduces my last subject, which is Joseph Smith's teachings on the relationship of revelation to the interpretation of the Bible or any other inspired text. The Latter-day Saint approach to scriptural interpretation follows from our belief in continuing revelation. We encourage everyone to study the scriptures and to prayerfully seek personal revelation to know their meanings for themselves.

Most Christians believe that the scriptural canon—the authoritative collection of sacred books used as scriptures by true believers in Christ—is closed because God closed it some centuries following the death of Christ and he has not given any comparable revelations since that time. Joseph Smith taught that the scriptural canon is open.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the canon of scripture is open in several ways, and the idea of continuing revelation is crucial to all of these.

First, Joseph taught that God will guide his children by giving new additions to the body of scriptures. The Book of Mormon is such an addition. So are the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. Often, those new revelations explain the meaning of scriptures previously canonized—meanings that may not have been evident in earlier times. As Joseph taught, “We never can comprehend the things of God and of heaven, but by revelation.”<sup>37</sup> Sometimes these new meanings are the ones most valuable and useful to us as we seek to obtain answers to our personal questions and to understand what the Lord would have us do in our own time and circumstances.



These new revelations on the meaning of existing scriptures are of two types. They may be *public* revelations, such as the numerous additions and clarifications in the Joseph Smith translation of the Bible and the revelations published in the Doctrine and Covenants on the meaning of Bible passages. They may also be *private* revelations on the meaning of existing scriptures, to help us with our personal studies and decisions.

Joseph Smith and an associate, Oliver Cowdery, set the example. After their baptism, they were filled with the Holy Ghost. Then, as Joseph Smith explained in his personal history, “Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of” (Joseph Smith–History 1:74). Joseph Smith applied that principle to the Apocrypha. He was reported to have taught that much of the Apocrypha was true, but one had to be guided by the Spirit of God to select the truth out of those writings.<sup>38</sup>

The ordinary person obviously needs help in understanding the meaning of obscure ancient texts with diverse meanings. The traditional approach has been to rely on scholarship and historical methods, such as authoritative commentaries. Latter-day Saints, of course, know that learned commentaries can help with interpretation, but we maintain that they must be used with caution. Commentaries are not a substitute for the scriptures any more than a good cookbook is a substitute for food. The apostle Paul wrote that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16; also see 2 Peter 1:21) and that “the things of God knoweth no man, except he has the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11, Joseph Smith Translation). Consequently, while Latter-day Saints rely on scholars and scholarship, that reliance is preliminary in method and secondary in authority.

Similarly, Latter-day Saints believe that as a source of sacred knowledge, the scriptures are not the ultimate but the penultimate. The ultimate knowledge comes by personal revelation through the Holy Ghost. We read the scriptures not only for knowledge, but also for direction. We seek inspiration in interpretation, but we also seek

revelation in applying God's commandments to the circumstances of our day.

Because of our reliance on revelation, Joseph Smith's lack of formal education in languages and scholarship is seen in a different light by Latter-day Saints than by our scholarly colleagues of other faiths. Joseph Smith declared, "Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject."<sup>39</sup> Joseph Smith's teaching on this subject is clearly stated in this passage from the Book of Mormon: "For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round" (1 Nephi 10:19). So it is that the Lord said to a Book of Mormon leader named Nephi: "For unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have" (2 Nephi 28:30; see also Matthew 13:12).

### **Personal Conclusion**

Some may wonder how members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, both in Joseph Smith's time as well as today, accept the direction of a prophet in their personal lives, something that is unusual in most religious traditions. The answer is revelation—and in this case it is personal revelation.

The principle of personal revelation—difficult to describe in analytic terms—is explainable by an analogy from the law. As a former lawyer and judge, I am familiar with the use of certified copies of official documents, like a death certificate or an honorable discharge from military duty. Such copies are accepted as if they were originals, because of their official certificate. This acceptance is based on the fact that anyone who doubts the authenticity of the content can verify its accuracy by going to the original. So it is with the prophetic revelation of a prophet of God. He is the certifying authority that his teaching or direction is from God. Anyone who doubts this—and

none are discouraged from personal doubts—can verify the authenticity and content of the message by checking it with the official source, by personal revelation.

The principle also applies to the message in sacred music. For Joseph Smith, the experience of divine disclosure was beautifully distilled in the words of one of his favorite hymns, “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief.”<sup>40</sup> When he and his associates were confined in the Carthage Jail on that hot afternoon of June 27, 1844, he requested that it be sung for him. Less than an hour later he was dead. The words of the first and the last two verses are these:

A poor wayfaring Man of grief  
 Hath often crossed me on my way,  
 Who sued so humbly for relief  
 That I could never answer nay.  
 I had not power to ask his name,  
 Whereto he went, or whence he came;  
 Yet there was something in his eye  
 That won my love; I knew not why.

In pris'n I saw him next, condemned  
 To meet a traitor's doom at morn.  
 The tide of lying tongues I stemmed,  
 And honored him 'mid shame and scorn.  
 My friendship's utmost zeal to try,  
 He asked if I for him would die.  
 The flesh was weak; my blood ran chill,  
 But my free spirit cried, “I will!”

Then in a moment to my view  
 The stranger started from disguise.  
 The tokens in His hands I knew;  
 The Savior stood before mine eyes.  
 He spake, and my poor name He named,  
 “Of Me thou hast not been ashamed.  
 These deeds shall thy memorial be;  
 Fear not, thou didst them unto Me.”

## Notes

1. 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), 6:9 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).
2. *History of the Church*, 2:52.
3. *History of the Church*, 4:574.
4. *History of the Church*, 3:389.
5. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, Religious Studies Monograph Series, no. 6 (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 13, 15.
6. Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 271.
7. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 234.
8. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1949), 121.
9. Quoted in Gerry Avant, "Moving Church Forward with Faith," *LDS Church News*, published by *Deseret Morning News*, March 19, 2005, 3.
10. See Mark L. McConkie, *Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003).
11. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 229.
12. This section is an edited version of a talk given in 1996, with some omissions and other slight editing. See Dallin H. Oaks, "Joseph, the Man and the Prophet," *Ensign* 26 (May 1996): 71–72.
13. "Praise to the Man," in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 27, verse 4.
14. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 369.
15. Mary Alice Cannon Lambert, *Young Women's Journal*, 16 (December 1905): 554.
16. Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 234.
17. In this paper, when I refer to Joseph Smith's teachings and personal views, I include statements from his sermons and letters, as well as revelations and translations brought forth by Joseph Smith.
18. *History of the Church*, 5:517.
19. Joseph Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 2:167, June 30, 1843; see also *History of the Church* 5:440.
20. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Suppression of the *Nauvoo Expositor*," *Utah Law Review* 9 (1965): 862–903.
21. Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy: The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1975).

22. See Dallin H. Oaks and Joseph I. Bentley, "Joseph Smith and Legal Process: In the Wake of the Steamboat *Nauvoo*," *BYU Law Review* (1976): 735–82.
23. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 94–118.
24. Oaks and Bentley, "Legal Process," 767–82.
25. *History of the Church*, 7:386.
26. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:332, August 3, 1862.
27. *History of the Church*, 4:425.
28. Arsenio Pagaduan, "The Power of the Book of Mormon," manuscript in author's possession.
29. M. J. Balledos Perez, "I Didn't Know I Know," manuscript in author's possession.
30. Words of Berlie M. Patricio, quoted in memorandum of D. Rex Gerratt, in author's possession.
31. *History of the Church*, 6:305.
32. He taught, for instance, "God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect." Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 51, see also 12–13.
33. *History of the Church*, 2:52.
34. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Manila Philippines Temple Dedicatory Prayer," in *Selected Manifestations*, comp. David M. Reay and Vonda S. Reay (Oakland: n.p., 1985), 340–42.
35. This section uses some material from a talk given to the BYU Studies Academy in 1993; see Dallin H. Oaks, "Scripture Reading and Revelation," *Ensign* 25 (January 1995): 7–9.
36. See Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (1984; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 321–24.
37. *History of the Church*, 5:344.
38. Recollection of Edward Stevenson, quoted in *They Knew the Prophet*, comp. Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 96.
39. *History of the Church*, 6:50.
40. "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief," in *Hymns*, no. 29.