



7-1-2020

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Recommended Citation

Bushman, Richard Lyman (2020) "Joseph Smith and Modernism," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 59 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol59/iss2/9>

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Joseph Smith and Modernism

Richard Lyman Bushman

One of the questions we ask about Joseph Smith's First Vision is, What did visions mean in those days? How did Smith understand his encounter with God? The most established interpretation is that questions about the churches prompted Smith to pray. He was confused by the melee of voices coming from ministers of various denominations and wanted guidance. When the heavenly personages appeared, he asked them which church to join, and they replied none of them. His prayer was answered.

That is the story of the account drafted in 1838. Initially, however, Smith may have understood the vision differently. His first account, written in 1832 and discovered in the archives in the 1960s, suggests that earlier Smith may have understood the experience as about the state of his soul. He was looking for forgiveness, as were others who flocked to the revivals in his neighborhood. In the 1838 reading of the story, the "unusual excitement on the subject of religion" and the clergy who were "active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling" led to "confusion and bad feeling."¹ Smith did not know which minister to follow. The 1832 account tells more about how the preaching brought on anxiety about his soul. At about age twelve, he reported, "My mind [had become] seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul." As he put it, "[I was] convicted of my sins," meaning he feared for his salvation. In 1832, the

1. Karen Lynn Davidson and others, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 208.

first words Joseph heard from the divine being who visited him were “Thy sins are forgiven thee”; by 1838 Smith had come to see the vision as the founding event of a new dispensation.² He wanted to explain how this great Restoration had begun and to emphasize the need for an entirely new church.

These two contexts for understanding the First Vision—denominational confusion and revival religion—are two ways of explaining how Smith understood his startling experience at different times in his life. To these two, I would like to add a third: Smith may have also been affected by an encounter with skepticism, one element in the coming of modernism, the word we use to summarize the broad reorientation of human culture over the past three or four centuries. One effect of modernism has been to drain away belief in the supernatural, leading to the famed disenchantment of the world. I believe that the touches of skepticism tinging Joseph Smith’s 1832 account suggest that faith-eroding modernist currents had reached his world by the time of the First Vision.

Religious doubt seems a long way from the passionate preaching of the Palmyra revivalists, but a passage written in Smith’s own hand in the 1832 account offers a classic deist answer to religious doubt. Deism, one form of modernist rationalism, rejected the Bible and revelation and found God instead in the regularities and beauties of the natural world. Here are Joseph Smith’s words as he approached his description of the First Vision:

For I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their magesty through the heavens and also the stars shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in magesty and in the strength of beauty whose power and intiligence in governing the things which are so exceding great and marvilous even in the likeness of him who created **him** <them> and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said **the** <it is a> fool <that> saith in his heart there is no God.³

The last phrase, “there is no God,” though taken from Psalms, implies that somewhere in his young life Joseph Smith had encountered religious doubt (Ps. 14:1). To believe, he needed a reason. The question of

2. Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 11, 13.

3. Davidson and others, *Histories*, Volume 1, 12.

God's existence had affected him enough to have learned the classic defense: God was to be found in the beauties of creation.⁴

It would not be unusual for a young man in a small New York town to have encountered skepticism. Deism in various forms was the religion of the political elite in the late eighteenth century; Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin all subscribed to a dilute form of Christianity with a deist tinge. Harvard and Yale were caught up in skepticism in the 1790s. At the same time, skeptical attitudes were filtering into the backcountry. One of the classic deist texts, *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man*, was written by Ethan Allen, a Vermont military hero and land speculator. Lyman Beecher complained that even boys "that dressed flax in the barn . . . read Tom Paine and believed him."⁵ William Miller, a country boy subsequently famous for predicting the Second Coming in 1844, lost faith in the Bible during a twelve-year period from 1804 to 1816. In Poultney, Vermont, where Miller moved in 1803, he had no trouble finding skeptical authors in the public library: Voltaire, David Hume, Thomas Paine, and Ethan Allen. Many of the leading citizens of Poultney were deists, making it more socially acceptable to doubt than to believe.⁶ When Asael Smith, Lucy Smith's universalist father-in-law, objected to her inclination to follow a Methodist revival preacher, Asael is said to have thrown a copy of Paine's *Age of Reason* into the house and demanded that she and Joseph Sr. read it as an antidote to revivalist religion.⁷

Joseph Smith may have encountered skepticism in the discussion group he joined in Palmyra sometime after 1816. A few local printers formed a "juvenile debating club," which gathered in the red schoolhouse on Durfee Street, to "solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics."⁸ Oliver Cowdery later hinted that before his visions Smith may have questioned the existence of God.⁹ In the debating club, he could have heard the deist answer to skepticism. The sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, and

4. The well-worn "disenchantment" impulse in modernism has recently been challenged by Jason A. Josephson-Storm in *Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

5. Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 5, 16.

6. Christopher Grasso, *Skepticism and American Faith: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 328.

7. Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 291.

8. Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 3:49–50.

9. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 56.

man “walking forth upon the face of the earth in magesty . . . all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power.”¹⁰ A few years later, the men in Zion’s Camp were surprised at how well Joseph grasped the case for skepticism. One Sunday, when the marchers were trying to disguise their Mormon identity before a crowd of curious onlookers, Joseph spoke for an hour pretending to be a “liberal free-thinker,” a category that included atheists and agnostics among its numbers. According to George A. Smith, “Those present remarked that he was one of the greatest reasoners they ever heard.”¹¹

The pull of popular skepticism in the aftermath of the Enlightenment was strong but not enough to win over large segments of the population. It was more frequently a youthful prelude to a later conversion. After being tempted by doubt, young men and women came back to belief. William Miller, after his skeptical youth, decided to put the Bible to the test and found it accurate in every detail. His faith returned to the point that he believed the Bible predicted exactly the time of the Second Coming.¹² Orestes Brownson, another Vermont-born seeker, wandered from skepticism, to universalism, to socialism, and to reform and finally converted to Catholicism.¹³

That general line of development became typical. The novelist Charles Brockden Brown followed an arc from doubt to belief dramatized in his novel *Jane Talbot*—the same arc spanning the early life of Joseph Smith.¹⁴ The New Yorker Charles G. Finney, while never totally skeptical himself, interpreted his vision of Christ as a return from a youth of irreligion and uncertainty about the Bible. Neither of his parents were professors, and “among our neighbors,” he said, “there were very few religious people.” He could not make up his mind concerning “the truth or falsehood of the Gospel and of the Christian religion.” The failure of his prayers in this anxious period “would almost drive me into skepticism,” he wrote. Desperate, in the fall of 1821, he went to the woods where he sometimes walked and crept between two fallen trees to pray. Overcome by emotion, Finney accepted the promises of the gospel. That evening, alone in his law office, he saw the Lord in person: “It seemed

10. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 12.

11. George A. Smith, “My Journal,” *Instructor* 81 (April 1946): 182.

12. Grasso, *Skepticism*, 328–29; compare 330–31 for Miller’s listeners’ conversions from freethinking.

13. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Orestes A. Brownson: A Pilgrim’s Progress* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963).

14. Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt*, 78–82.

to me that I saw him as I would see any other man.”¹⁵ Doubt was vanquished, and the very next day, he began evangelizing everyone in the street, a campaign that continued to the end of his life.

Joseph Smith’s account of his vision falls into this common pattern: the misled, skeptical seeker comes to God.¹⁶ This perspective adds another dimension to the story of the First Vision. Besides the anxious youth “convicted” of his sins and seeking forgiveness and the confused youth uncertain about which church to join, we have the skeptical youth questioning God’s existence and finding an affirmation of a divine reality.

The depth of Smith’s doubt should not be exaggerated. It would be a mistake to think that the young Joseph Smith was overcome by rational skepticism. Robert Hullinger went too far in saying that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon as an answer to skepticism.¹⁷ It is more accurate to think of Smith as being exposed to freethinking rather than embracing it. His writings as a whole, his translations, revelations, and sermons, were not so much a rejoinder to skepticism as a commentary on the implications of emerging modernism. The pretended freethinking discourse on the road with Zion’s Camp best characterizes his mentality. The skeptical arguments were in his mind but were not his convictions. It was enough for him to speculate on what the world would be like if it were disenchanting, if all the supernatural effects—visions, miracles, prophecies—were drained away. Not everywhere, but here and there his writings commented on the nothingness, chaos, and disbelief that came with the modernist mentality.

In places, Smith did share the perspective of rationalist skeptics. Part of the answer to his First Vision question about the true church had a skeptical flavor. The heavenly beings who appeared to him informed him that all the religious creeds were an abomination, that those professors

15. Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney: Written by Himself* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1876), 4, 9–20.

16. The argument for God gave Smith sufficient faith to pray, and the vision banished all doubts—or seemed to. In his 1838 narrative he insisted, “I had actually seen a light and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak (un)to me.” Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 218. But in his time of early visions, passing uncertainties occasionally seized him. When he went to the hill after the vision of Moroni, he was troubled by his inability to retrieve the plates from the stone box. In that instant, he was “exceedingly frightened” and for a moment “supposed it had been a dream of Vision” but then immediately knew it was real. *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:29. From then on, he moved forward in perfect confidence that he was being led by God.

17. Robert N. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1980).

were all corrupt, and that they had a form of godliness but denied the power thereof.¹⁸ The entire ecclesiastical system, Catholic and Protestant, had to be replaced. The sweeping finality of the condemnation has been an embarrassment to present-day Latter-day Saints. It seems so harsh and comprehensive, so lacking in tact—those professors were all corrupt! But it was the way skeptics spoke of religion. Tom Paine condemned all churches wholesale: “All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.”¹⁹ The priests were all corrupt, the doctrines all incoherent and immoral. For Paine, there was nothing there to redeem. Joseph Smith stopped short of Paine’s summary judgment, but the boldness, the willingness, to condemn religion wholesale, the abandonment of the whole ecclesiastical structure at once, was very much in the skeptical vein.

For the most part, however, Smith was critical of modernism. He could never go along with rationalist reasoning about revelation, for example. All we needed to know, the deists argued, could be derived through reason from nature in its beautiful regularities. Nature was a complete and final revelation. Miracles, Emerson said, were an alien intrusion, not at one with the harmonies and beauties of everyday life. “The very word Miracle,” he exclaimed, “as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.”²⁰ Paine went further in protesting that revelations were positively dangerous. “The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries, that have afflicted the human race,” he wrote, “have had their origins in this thing called revelations, or revealed religion.”²¹

Smith could never sympathize with such a dismissal when his religious life began with an overpowering vision of God. His First Vision not only put him at odds with deists but with the Christian clergy in his own neighborhood who doubted his revelation. Smith was stung by the refusal of a Methodist clergyman to take his vision seriously. When Smith approached him for counseling, the man “treated [Joseph’s]

18. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 214. Abner Kneeland, the radical theologian, wrote in 1831 that the clergy were the most useless people in the nation. Abner Kneeland, *A Review of the Evidences of Christianity* (Boston: Office of the Investigator, 1831), 6.

19. Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason* (London: Freethought, 1880), 2.

20. Alfred Riggs Ferguson, ed., *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Volume 1; Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971), 81.

21. Paine, *Age of Reason* (1880), 142.

communication not only lightly but with great contempt, saying it was all of the Devil, that there was no such thing as visions or revelations in these days.”²² Smith was dumbfounded and outraged. He did not know that in consulting a Methodist, he had inadvertently stepped into the denomination’s backlash against visions. A decade earlier converts were reporting so many visionary and other extreme experiences that the Methodist clergy lost faith in extravagant claims and began squelching such reports. Smith’s experience, being all too familiar, received the same treatment.²³ The dismissal hurt Smith, leading him to feel he was being persecuted. In his later account, he repeated over and over that “it was nevertheless a fact, that I had had a Vision.”²⁴

Smith’s history expressed only his hurt at being scolded by the minister for claiming revelation. The Book of Mormon offered a deeper analysis. It claimed that abandoning visions and miracles was the first step toward eliminating God. Moroni, the last prophet to write in the book, addressed future readers who “deny the revelations of God” and who say all heavenly gifts are done away (Morm. 9:7). Moroni insisted that the God of the Bible was always a God of miracles and he has not changed. If he changed, the results would be disastrous: in Moroni’s words, “He would cease to be God.” In a rather startling leap, Moroni argues that a god without miracles and revelations was no god at all (Morm. 9:19)! In his personal history, Smith did not say that the clergy who rebuffed him in effect obliterated God, but in the Book of Mormon, Moroni did. Another prophet, Nephi, spoke of priests in the latter days who “teach with their learning, and deny the Holy Ghost.” They “deny the power of God” and say, “Hearken unto us, and hear ye our precept; for behold there is no God today, for the Lord and the Redeemer hath done his work, and he hath given his power unto men” (2 Ne. 28:4–5). In an example of startling bravado, these Book of Mormon characters link the Christian clergy to skepticism by claiming that the denial of miracles and revelation in effect erases God.

The Book of Mormon critique parallels an argument that modern scholars have recently elaborated. Charles Taylor and Louis Dupré, among others, have said that belief did not wither because science moved in and drove out religion, as we commonly think. It was rather

22. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 216.

23. For Methodist attitudes toward visions, see John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

24. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 216.

that religion itself shed so much of its belief in divine intervention, making God so transcendent and beyond comprehension, that in time this attenuated faith offered little resistance to secularism. Protestants cast aside demons, saints, and magic, along with visions and miracles, labeling them all superstition, and by so doing emptied the world of supernatural energy. At the same time, God became more transcendent, more remote, more indiscernible, paving the way for dropping God altogether. As the author of a recent analysis of current historical literature reports, “A consensus has emerged that the expanding distance between God and creation ultimately detached temporal relations from sacred hierarchies, thus opening up conceptual space for a self-regulating universe and a self-fashioning individual subject.”²⁵ These works see, as Moroni and Nephi did, that the denial of miracles and revelations—putting distance between God and creation—allowed room for humans to claim divine power for themselves. A miracle-free clergy substituted their own words for God’s action and thus, in effect, brought to pass the death of God.

Parenthetically, let me acknowledge that my way of speaking here may puzzle some readers. Bringing Moroni and Nephi into an account of Joseph Smith and modernism may confuse the picture. Who was speaking in the Book of Mormon? Moroni and Nephi? Or Joseph Smith? Were the book’s prophets speaking against modernism from out of the dust, ancient voices engaging in a modern controversy? Or were they spokesmen for Joseph Smith? I leave each listener to decide this question and simply observe that the Book of Mormon, indubitably part of Joseph Smith’s writings, offers a surprisingly trenchant commentary on modernism. Writers in the book’s pages glimpsed the dark edges where the rationalist project played itself out and had to be resisted.

In this, Smith was, of course, not entirely alone. Friedrich Hegel contemplated the pain that comes with “the feeling that God Himself is dead,” and others through the nineteenth century reflected on a world without God.²⁶ But in Smith’s early years, American rationalists (people who relied on reason rather than scripture or tradition for finding truth) happily cast aside scripture, clergy, and tradition with no sense of loss. Thomas Paine confidently claimed, “My own mind is my own church.”²⁷ He could abandon everything else because he lived in a sunny world

25. Charly Coleman, “Resacralizing the World: The Fate of Secularization in Enlightenment Historiography,” *Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 2 (June 2010): 371.

26. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophische Abhandlungen* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1845), 153.

27. Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason* (Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publishing Group, 1974), 50.

with a God who had created a marvelous universe for humans to enjoy. Rid the world of formal religion and only happiness and hope remained. Enlightened reason promised liberation and manly boldness. Kant's famous definition of enlightenment was a person's "release from his self-incurred tutelage."²⁸ Kant's enlightened self used his or her reason "without direction from another," the Bible, the Church, or the past and was stronger as a result. The use of reason marked humanity's coming of age. The independent, reasoning man was free, bold, confident, and liberated from institutional bondage and infantilizing faith.

The question posed by the Enlightenment was this: Can reasoning humans flourish on their own without prophets, scripture, tradition, church, or God? Kant and Paine said yes; Smith's Book of Mormon warned of the dangers. The book's prophets saw in Kant's independent self the seeds of the man who would put himself in the place of God. Instead of the notion that independent reason leads to a culmination of human development, the Book of Mormon foreshadowed the emergence of a moral monster who lived without restraint and trampled on law, order, and morality.

One of the book's great creations, the overreaching Korihor, was a deep skeptic who trusted only his own senses and, in the end, overthrew law and order to live in a world free of moral shackles. "In the latter end of the seventeenth year," the Book of Mormon relates, "there came a man into the land" who was "Anti-Christ" (Alma 30:6). Korihor's initial question about Christ echoed Kant in linking skepticism to freedom: "O ye that are bound down under a foolish and a vain hope, why do ye yoke yourselves with such foolish things?" (Alma 30:13). For Korihor, beliefs were a form of subjection. They turned believers into beasts of burden, yoked with fantasies about a future their priests could not possibly foresee. Prophecies were only the "foolish traditions of your fathers" (Alma 30:14). Throwing off the prophets would liberate the mind.

Korihor envisioned a self-sufficient subject. He bluntly told his listeners to trust only their own senses: "Ye cannot know of things which ye do not see." The "traditions of your father" will only "lead you away into a belief of things which are not so." The religious teaching about remission of sins "is the effect of a frenzied mind," and this "derangement" comes "because of the traditions of your fathers" (Alma 30:15-16). False beliefs were literally driving people mad.

28. Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 4 (December 1784): 481-94.

Once rid of religious fantasies and trusting only what could be sensed, the self could carry forward a life. In Korihor's world, it was every man for himself. "Every man," he said, "fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength" (Alma 30:17). The fate of the weak and the helpless was to go down before the strong and the canny, bringing down the moral order with it. Korihor taught that "whatever a man did was no crime" (Alma 30:17). Sexual restraint was swept away along with all law and morality. Korihor led away the hearts of many, "yea, leading away many women, and also men, to commit whoredoms" (Alma 30:18). Nothing was to constrain freedom.

In stepping outside the bounds of civility and morality, Korihor evokes the tradition of massive egos descending from Milton's Lucifer and leading on to Nietzsche's "Übermensch." Nietzsche foresaw that the disappearance of God would require man to assume God's role. With God dead, nihilism, the absence of all meaning and value, loomed. The Übermensch—overman, or superman—must rise to the occasion by inventing his own morality, imposing his will, and creating meaning for lesser souls. Far from Kant's noble man of reason, these mythic superior beings transcended personal morality and lived by the law of their own wills. Korihor foreshadows a world with God absent and man alone in charge. As a modern scholar has put it, the Enlightenment prepared the way for the emergence of the human mind as the sole "source of meaning and value."²⁹ Korihor was both an Übermensch and an Ahab, driven by his passion for self-assertion against all dominating forces both in society and in the cosmos. In Milton's terms, Lucifer, Ahab, and Korihor were studies of "revenge, immortal hate, / And courage never to submit or yield."³⁰

Before his descent, Korihor is given a moment to strut about the stage. Brought before Alma, the high priest, Korihor did "rise up in great

29. This idea is depicted in Louis Dupré's analysis of the Enlightenment. Coleman, "Resacralizing the World," 388.

30. Henry F. Pommer, *Milton and Melville* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1970), 32. Melville, one writer has argued, "helped establish the conception of the Luciferian antihero as an American type who invents his own rules" but eventually learns that "extreme self-invention inevitably leads to the ultimate form of alienation: a radical distance from God and from fellow humans." John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Franklin Edgar Farley (Chicago: Scott Foresman, 1898), 81. In the Book of Mormon, Korihor is eventually "cast out, and went about from house to house begging for his food" (Alma 30:56).

swelling words” against the priests and judges, “accusing them of leading away the people after the silly traditions of their fathers.” He accuses the rulers of a desire to keep the people down that they “may glut [themselves] with the labors of [the people’s] hands, that they durst not look up with boldness” (Alma 30:27, 31). The Book of Mormon gives Korihor great lines. He is one of the book’s most strongly etched figures, just as Lucifer is Milton’s greatest creation and Ahab dominates *Moby Dick*. All these authors betray their fascination with dark, luminous heroes who glow with satanic fire before their fall.

Flashes of extreme thinking flare up throughout the Book of Mormon. At points, the text says boldly that the alternative to faith is a world without meaning, assurance, and governance. In one of the strangest and most perplexing passages, nihilism, the conviction that the world has no meaning at all, comes to the surface. Father Lehi, who ripped his family from the comforts of life in civilized Jerusalem and carried them into the wilderness, was one who seems to have ruminated on a godless world. His blessing on his son Jacob begins with a conventional explanation of the Atonement: People are subject to law and consistently fail to conform; by the law they are cut off. Their only hope is in Christ, who answers the ends of the law. Abruptly in the middle of this standard discourse, Lehi breaks off into a lengthy and somewhat mystifying argument about the necessity of opposition. Lehi asks what would the world be like with no law and no punishment, that is, with no morality. Law, he says, defines an elemental opposition: disobedience to law and the consequent punishment versus obedience to law and the resulting happiness. At first the passage reads like a commonplace observation that the world is filled with good and evil; those who obey will prosper, and those who transgress will suffer. But Lehi goes a step further to assert that the opposition of happiness and misery constitutes the foundation of existence. Without obedience and disobedience or reward and punishment, there would be nothing, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. There might be physicality but no life.

Without law and punishment, existence collapses. “All things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility. . . . Wherefore, it must needs have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the end of its creation. Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes.” And, of course, if these are not, “there is no God,”

and we and the earth are not, “wherefore, all things must have vanished away” (2 Ne. 2:11–13). That is nihilism. Lehi goes beyond mere deism to imagine a world without structure, a world without law and order, and, of course, a world without God. The universe would be an eternal, featureless nullity, as good as vanished away. In a rebuke to modernist doubt, Lehi lays out the terrifying consequences of removing God and his laws from the universe.

In place of this emptiness, Lehi offers a world of conflict: happiness versus misery, good versus evil, choice versus emptiness, agency versus paralysis, existence versus nonexistence. The fall that in Christian lore brought good and evil into the world, he ends up arguing, also bestowed life and happiness. Rather than a flat, compound world without opposition, there was a world of conflict and vivacity. Opposition was so vital to human well-being that God himself introduced conflict into the garden. Otherwise there could be no real existence: “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” (2 Ne. 2:25). And all of it began with the introduction of a law.

This view is ultimately profoundly optimistic. It turns all the sorrows of good and evil into positive potential. Through law, opposition, punishment, and sin come joy and life. It is not the happy world of the deists with their smiling harmonies and their rage against religion. Lehi arrived at joy only after considering a world without law, without God, without structure. He celebrates a world based on struggle, on opposition in all things. I cannot imagine where these thoughts came from or in whom they originated. But I see in them a mind willing to break through the surface, to contemplate extremes, to imagine an existence without order of any kind, to face up to one of the nightmares of modernism—the absence of all meaning.

My central argument is that the 1832 account of Joseph Smith’s First Vision points toward a third dimension in the vision’s cultural context. We have long understood that Smith’s question about which church to join arose out of the denominational confusion of his time, and more recently we have added concern for the state of his soul coming out of the revivals. I have drawn attention to a third context for understanding Smith’s vision: a brush with modernism. The brief reference to a deist argument for God in the 1832 account of Smith’s First Visions suggests an exposure to the questions of early modern skepticism. In that passage, Smith recognizes that doubt had to be answered with reason.

Touches of rationalist thinking turn up here and there throughout Joseph Smith’s writings. The total dismissal of the religious establishment

of churches, clergy, and creeds, for example, was a deist way of thinking. “That all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt” is something Thomas Paine would have enthusiastically endorsed (JS–H 1:19).

If we turn to the Book of Mormon, Smith’s writings comment still more extensively on modernist thought. Deists believed revelation to be unnecessary and positively dangerous, the source of much evil in the world. The Methodist clergyman whom Smith told about his First Vision likewise denied that revelation was possible today. In response to both, Moroni and Nephi in the Book of Mormon warn that the denial of revelation endangers belief in God. By reducing the power of God to reveal himself today, humans assume the right to speak for God, in effect acting as if God were dead.

Here and there, Smith’s writings go even further in commenting on the perplexities and pains of modernism. Rationalism’s foundational assertion was that the rational mind, freely choosing for itself, will find happiness and freedom. Kant wrote of a heroic rationalist, capable of discovering truth on his or her own without guidance from tradition and scripture. To this, the Book of Mormon’s Korihor offers a sobering rejoinder. Korihor starts with an Enlightenment call for independent judgment, freed from the shackles of prophets, priests, and scripture, but he ends as a heedless egoist who brooks no constraints on will and passion and without regard for law other than his own desires. His will takes the place of God’s will; his mind, the divine mind. He becomes God. Korihor, the book seems to be saying, is where total dependence on rationality ends.

Korihor is not the end of these plunges into modernist extremes. Lehi in the Book of Mormon imagined a world without law where there was no good and evil and thus no God and no happiness. Existence becomes a compound in one, as Lehi said, with no punishment and thus no mercy and no joy. Like other modernists, he saw nihilism—pure meaninglessness—as the inescapable outcome of a universe without law. Lehi believed that God had to inject sin and punishment into the world in order for man to be and have joy.

Latter-day Saint thinkers have struggled with the darker implications of these passages in Smith’s writings. They seem beyond comprehension, too extreme to be engaged. Perhaps the most compelling response is found in Smith’s own writings. In the Book of Abraham, God encounters a material universe waiting to be organized by force of divine will and intelligence. He offers his children a glorious world as

Moses was allowed to view it in Moses 1. But the universe is also hard earned and incomplete, always in need of further creations. Beyond the bounds of creation, there remain, it would seem, realms of unorganized matter awaiting organization. The implication of Smith's creation stories is that there are expanses of disorder where God does not reign, where all things are still a compound in one, and human joy is not found. Lehi, Moses, and Abraham offer hope that a creator can bring order and joy wherever he chooses to act.

Korihor's egoism and Lehi's reflections on nihilism, which I have elaborated on today, are not the end of Joseph Smith's encounters with modernism. Rationalist themes were actually woven deep into his own theology. He foresaw a future for humans that was akin to the modernist belief that ultimately men take the place of God. At the end of his life, Smith spoke of a God who is an exalted man and a model for what humans can become. This God is not supplanted by humans, but his very purpose is to share his godhood with his children. By binding themselves to him, they can receive of his fulness (D&C 93:20). If they covenant properly, says one of Smith's revelations, "all that my father hath shall be given unto them" (D&C 84:38). In fulfillment of the Enlightenment dream, humans can become gods. With this stroke, Smith presented himself as both a critic of the Enlightenment and its fulfillment. While his writings denounced Enlightenment hubris, his theology embodied the high hope that humanity can rise out of its stupor and become as God. They do not ascend in Korihor's way, by an assertion of will and ego, but by making agreements and commitments, which put them, as Latter-day Saints say these days, on the covenant path to exaltation.

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