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Honoring Joseph's Theophany Two Centuries Later

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HONORING JOSEPH'S THEOPHANY TWO CENTURIES LATER

Spencer Kraus

Review of Alexander L. Baugh, Steven C. Harper, Brent M. Rogers, and Benjamin C. Pykles, eds. *Joseph Smith and his First Vision: Context, Place, and Meaning* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021). 289 pages. \$27.99 (hardcover).

***Abstract:** In the year 2020, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints celebrated the 200th anniversary of the First Vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith. As a part of honoring that seminal moment in the Church's history, the Church History Symposium focused on the context, place, and meaning of the First Vision. Selected papers from the conference have been published in Joseph Smith and his First Vision: Context, Place, and Meaning, edited by Alexander L. Baugh, Steven C. Harper, Brent M. Rogers, and Benjamin C. Pykles, offering new insights and research into Joseph Smith's theophany in the Sacred Grove that has inspired millions worldwide to ask of God as Joseph did. The papers selected for publication are well-written and provide a great deal of new scholarship relating to the dramatic theophany that Joseph Smith experienced, and, as such, it is a great addition to any Latter-day Saint's library.*

For Latter-day Saints, the year 2020 was especially a noteworthy year, marking the 200th anniversary of what is appropriately described as the founding event of the Restoration of the Gospel in modern times:

Two hundred years ago, on a beautiful spring morning in 1820, young Joseph Smith, seeking to know which church to join, went into the woods to pray near his home in upstate New York, USA. He had questions regarding the salvation of his soul and trusted that God would direct him.

In humility, we declare that in answer to his prayer, God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph and inaugurated the “restitution of all things” (Acts 3:21) as foretold in the Bible.¹

As a part of the efforts by Latter-day Saints to follow President Nelson’s urge to remember the First Vision,² the biannual Church History Symposium hosted a range of scholars, professors, and other Latter-day Saints to delve into the beginning of our shared history, memory, and origins as Latter-day Saints. The symposium — miraculously held just before the Church made efforts to limit in-person meetings to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus — hosted multiple papers dealing with the context, place, or meaning of the First Vision for Joseph Smith and for Latter-day Saints in general. The insights shared in the published papers in this volume are a great addition to any Latter-day Saint’s library.

The fourteen papers selected are divided into four categories. The first category combines the three keynote addresses, given at the beginning and closing of the symposium. The next section deals with the historical context in which the First Vision should be understood, followed by a section relating to the Sacred Grove, the place where God the Father and God the Son appeared to the boy prophet. The fourth and final section deals with various theological or analytical lessons that can be drawn from the First Vision, and modern efforts to portray and teach the First Vision to a growing Church.

The first keynote paper is from President Dallin H. Oaks, who delivered the closing remarks of the symposium. President Oaks’ paper, “Writing about the Prophet Joseph Smith” (pp. 3–20), does not deal exclusively with the First Vision but expands to his other writing projects regarding Joseph Smith. Of the five writing projects he wrote about, it is little surprise, given President Oaks’ background, that four of them deal heavily with legal matters surrounding Joseph Smith. Because he is a lifelong scholar of Joseph Smith and an Apostle, we can gain a new appreciation for President Oaks’ works in this discussion.

President Oaks’ paper is followed by Sheri Dew’s work, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Loneliness” (pp. 21–48). Dew argues that the loneliness Joseph Smith felt throughout his life began in large part

1. “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World,” as read by President Russel M. Nelson in the April 2020 General Conference. See Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” *Ensign* (May 2020), 91.

2. See Russell M. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” *Ensign* (November 2019), 122.

with the First Vision.³ Joseph “*alone* saw the Father and the Son and then endured ridicule for declaring what he had seen” (p. 25) and was constantly “hounded for his imperfections” (p. 38) by nonbelievers then and now. For much of his prophetic career, Joseph had no forerunner to turn to for an example of how to behave. In fact, “in this dispensation, the knowledge that the heavens are open *began* when Joseph Smith had the faith to walk into a grove of trees” (p. 29). Dew’s remarks are hopeful, drawing on Joseph’s example throughout his life and offering assurance to readers, even when they too feel the burden of loneliness in their lives.

Richard Lyman Bushman’s is the final keynote paper, titled “The First Vision in 2020” (pp. 49–62). Noting that we live in a time when multiple accounts of the First Vision are widely accessible, he focused primarily on the 1832 account of the First Vision. Bushman delivers hopeful remarks in this volume, viewing the First Vision primarily as a conversion tool to Christ, just as the First Vision converted Joseph fully to Christ and caused Joseph to seek salvation.⁴ Bushman ends his paper with the simple and accurate observation: “Those who lose faith in Christ because they have lost faith in Joseph Smith have things backward. . . . We must place our faith first in Christ and believe in him apart from our faith in his messenger. Christ should be the anchor when we struggle and question” (pp. 60–61).

Perhaps the greatest additions to scholarship on the First Vision this volume offers come from three papers that explore the Second Great Awakening in the world leading up to Joseph’s fateful spring of 1820. Together, the presented papers offer a wide panorama of the religious revivals occurring in Joseph Smith’s present world. A picture can be drawn of a young boy who, in the midst of conflict between

3. This loneliness is perhaps best described by Joseph Smith himself. After the Three Witnesses viewed the golden plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, Smith is reported as saying, “I was relieved of a dreadful burden which was almost too much for me to endure . . . and it does rejoice my soul that I am not any longer to be entirely alone in the world.” *Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845*, p. [11], bk. 8, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/103>. Joseph Smith would feel that same loneliness at the very end of his life when accused of cowardice for leaving Nauvoo: “If my life is of no value to my friends it is of none to myself.” *Joseph Smith Jr., History, 1838–1856, volume F-1*, 148, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/154>.

4. Joseph’s drive to pray in the Sacred Grove came primarily over a sorrow for his sins and desire to be forgiven, according to his 1832 journal, and little is said regarding his desire to know which church he should join. See *Joseph Smith Jr., History, circa Summer 1832*, 2–3, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/2>.

Presbyterianism and Methodism, draws upon the inspiration of multiple revivalist traditions in his own quest for knowledge, a fitting beginning for the time of a “restitution of all things” (Acts 3:21).

Rachel Cope’s paper “The First Vision Within the Context of Revivalism” (pp. 65–88) presents a concise portrait of contemporary experiences similar to Joseph Smith’s own quest for forgiveness and salvation. Cope demonstrates that the revivals occurring in Joseph’s vicinity show an increased desire of many for forgiveness and deeper conversion to the Lord, much like Joseph Smith experienced. While revival meetings may have initially sparked an interest in religion, “the vast majority of converts encountered divine forgiveness in quiet, peaceful moments that occurred within private spaces in nature or at home” (p. 76). Joseph’s experience in the Sacred Grove can be understood better in the context of revivalist converts who similarly sought peace and forgiveness.

Richard E. Bennett presents a new argument in his paper “Quiet Revivalism: New Light on the Burned-Over District” (pp. 89–108) that is especially noteworthy for future studies regarding the religious revivals of Joseph Smith’s day.⁵ When Latter-day Saints read of the “war of words and tumult of opinions” that Joseph Smith records in his 1838 history (see Joseph Smith—History 1:10), it can be easy to assume that the spirit of revivalism was so domineering that conflict was commonplace among the various sects fighting for converts. However, at the same time, while some Presbyterian ministers may have been especially loud in their struggles for new converts, others were in a spirit of “quiet revivalism,” as Bennett describes (p. 90). This form of revivalism did not gain new converts through loud shouts and camp meetings, but rather personal home visits, somber and reverent meetings, and instructions for the youth to pray privately for salvation after meditating upon the scriptures. Many details of Bennett’s proposed quiet revivalism are strikingly consistent with details of the First Vision provided by Joseph Smith throughout his life (pp. 103–104).

5. Bennett expands upon this paper in his book *1820: Dawning of the Restoration* published shortly after the symposium. In this book, Bennett explores more of the religious revivalism that occurred in the American landscape beginning with the Puritans at Plymouth Rock, while his present paper focuses on the more personal approach of Presbyterian revivalism. See Richard E. Bennett, “From Plymouth Rock to Palmyra: Joseph Smith Jr., the Second Great Awakening, and the Quest for Divine Truth” in *1820: Dawning of the Restoration* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020), 317–42.

Mark L. Staker and Donald L. Enders' paper "Excitement on the Subject of Religion: Controversy within Palmyra's 1819 and 1820 Preaching District" (pp. 109–28) also provides new light on the revivalism occurring in the Palmyra preaching district. Staker and Enders point to specific debates that occurred between Methodist and Baptist ministers during these years that likely had an impact on the "war of words" Joseph described. Baptism and its role in salvation was often the central issue of these debates, and Staker and Enders provide compelling evidence that during these formative debates, would-be converts were affected by still-developing doctrines of these Protestant sects which likely influenced many people in their quest for salvation, Joseph Smith included.⁶ A compelling reason to believe that Joseph was influenced by these debates is that Joseph himself records that his interest in the religious revivals was a multi-year effort beginning "about the age of twelve years."⁷ Being "somewhat partial to the Methodist sect," Joseph likely would have been aware of debates regarding Methodist doctrines surrounding baptism and its significance for the seeker of salvation (Joseph Smith—History 1:8).

Another valuable contribution that appears in this volume is a paper by Quinten Zehn Barney discussing the context of Joseph Smith's 1844 recital of the First Vision to Alexander Neibaur (pp. 129–46). Barney is the first to attempt a contextual reconstruction of this event. His analysis includes a potential cause for Joseph Smith to share his experience in Neibaur's presence and a possible date that Neibaur would have returned to in his journaling efforts to capture his memories of the Prophet Joseph.

Two articles appear regarding the sacred place where Joseph saw God. Matthew C. Godfrey's paper (pp. 149–66) discusses the influence Joseph's natural environment had on the revelations that Joseph received, and Gary L. Boatright Jr. discusses a brief history of the Sacred Grove from Joseph Smith's life to modern times (pp. 167–84). Godfrey emphasizes the impact that traditional Puritan understandings of the land may have had on Joseph Smith and how his revelations in sacred, natural environments reflect those worldviews, a previously unexplored topic when studying the First Vision.

6. Milton V. Backman Jr. has previously shown that Baptists — a small minority during the years 1818 to 1820 — had seen significant growth in their membership records during 1819. See Milton V. Backman Jr., "Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 314, http://byustudies.byu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/09_3Final.pdf.

7. *Joseph Smith Jr., History, circa Summer 1832*, 1, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/1>.

Steven Hepworth's paper (pp. 187–204) is also an excellent addition found in this volume. During the Second Great Awakening, Hepworth demonstrates that many contemporaries of Joseph Smith had what they believed to be communications with the divine and confrontations with the devil in their own quest for salvation. The visionary world Joseph Smith lived in has previously been addressed by Richard Lyman Bushman, and in many ways Hepworth's paper builds on Bushman's work.⁸ Hepworth, however, focuses on diabolic visions that were experienced, wherein deliverance from the devil is offered, resulting in accounts of miraculous salvation. In Joseph Smith's day, "many mainline Protestants believed the age of miracles and visions had ended. For them, all supernatural effects necessarily sprang from either fraudulent illusions or the workings of the devil. . . . Satan both impeded revelation and explained it away" (p. 199). Hepworth's scholarship provides additional details in understanding the public's bitter rejection of Joseph Smith's theophany and future revelations.

Kent P. Jackson offers additional insights into Joseph's quest for the true church as well (pp. 205–18), focusing his paper on the Apostasy and promised restoration. Jackson discusses the Apostasy in terms of the Greek word *apostasia*, meaning "rebellion" (pp. 211–12), which should be understood by Latter-day Saints as the rebellion against the early Apostles. "Later developments in Christian belief, some of which are very troubling, did not constitute the Apostasy but were consequences of the Apostasy" (p. 212). John W. Welch's work is especially useful in further understanding the creeds of Christianity and doctrinal developments that God likely was referring to as "an abomination" (Joseph Smith—History 1:19).⁹ While Jackson provides only a brief introduction, Welch discusses all of the developments of early Christianity and Protestantism as well as what Joseph would have likely been familiar with at the time of the First Vision.

Another paper presented by Steven L. Olsen offers insights regarding the literary craftsmanship of Joseph Smith—History as a scriptural narrative (pp. 219–36). Olsen describes the three main narrative plots found in the

8. See Richard Lyman Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997): 183–204, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3203&context=byusq>.

9. See John W. Welch, "All Their Creeds Were an Abomination: A Brief Look at Creeds as Part of the Apostasy," in *Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to the Restored Church* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 228–49, <https://rsc-legacy.byu.edu/archived/prelude-restoration-apostasy-restored-church/all-their-creeds-were-abomination-brief-look>.

brief canonized history, including how their conflicts and resolutions each tie into the other. While the decision to canonize Joseph Smith—History did not deal with the literary qualifications of any surviving writing from Joseph Smith or other leaders of the Church, Olsen provides an interesting analysis of this scriptural history for Latter-day Saints.

The last two papers offer remarks regarding the later retellings of the First Vision. Lisa Olsen Tait discusses Susa Young Gates and her article “Vision Beautiful” celebrating the centennial anniversary of the First Vision (pp. 237–56). The article originally discussed what the First Vision meant to women, especially in their fight for suffrage, and provides fascinating insights. Casey Paul Griffiths’ paper discusses a brief history of theatrical attempts to portray the First Vision (pp. 257–77). Griffiths shows that the insights provided by people attempting to capture the theophanic beauty of the First Vision highlight some of the challenges that Joseph Smith likely faced when trying to capture the details of this event in words. Around the same time Griffiths presented this paper, Anthony Sweat published an article in *BYU Studies Quarterly* discussing artistic representations of the First Vision. Similar themes are discussed in the two papers that will interest readers, such as how different Church leaders wanted to depict this event, the effect these depictions have on Latter-day Saints, and how various representations incorporated different accounts of the First Vision.¹⁰

This volume is a wonderful addition to any Latter-day Saint’s library. The research behind the various papers ranges in topic, depth, and scope, offering new insights to many aspects of the First Vision. The editors and researchers who have together provided access to these papers in this volume have done a great service to the Latter-day Saints, and the insights offered in this volume may prove instrumental in Church history and the early life of Joseph Smith studies moving forward.

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10. See Anthony Sweat, “Visualizing the Vision: The History and Future of First Vision Art,” *BYU Studies* 59, no. 2 (2020): 223–86, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/59-2Final.pdf>. My thanks to Neal Rappleye for informing me of this article.

associate and also as a research assistant for Lincoln Blumell studying early Christianity and the New Testament.