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Light Began Once More to Grow

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LIGHT BEGAN ONCE MORE TO GROW

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Readers are surely aware that the birth of the Christ child is the reason we celebrate Christmas. Members of the Church may be less aware, though, of the notable birth of a child, millennia later, of distant secondary importance.*

Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. ... [J]ust at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. (Joseph Smith — History 1:15–16)

By the time anybody out there reads this, we'll be racing from January into February 2020. However, as I write these thoughts, it's 23 December 2019. In other words, it's the eve of Christmas Eve.

It's also the 214th anniversary of the birth of the prophet Joseph Smith. Already several weeks ago, some critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were rolling out their annual claim that members of the Church celebrate “Smithmas” — the name that these critics have given to Joseph's birthday and that only these same critics use — with more enthusiasm and vigor than Church members bestow upon the mainstream Christian holiday of Christmas. Allegedly, our worship services on the Sunday closest to Christmas typically focus on the Prophet, whom we really worship. Jesus, so the charge goes, is scarcely mentioned. For some, I think, “Smithmas” is just a rather bitter and not particularly funny joke. A few, though, seem to take the claim seriously — or, at least, to want *others* to take it seriously.

I doubt, though, that many Latter-day Saints actually know that today is Joseph Smith's birthday or, if they do know it, that they are giving the subject a moment's thought. Contrary to the claims of our more extreme critics, we don't put up “Smithmas” lights, sing “Smithmas”

carols, or recite the story of Joseph's advent. Our chapels and homes aren't adorned with "Smithmas" trees. They don't feature manger scenes in which Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith gaze lovingly at their son, the infant prophet.

I won't be attending a special Joseph Smith memorial mass today. Instead, I'll be grading final exams and student term papers and otherwise engaging in ordinary, normal activities. In fact, we generally don't mark Joseph's birthday at all, let alone celebrate it — and not only because it's swallowed up in the mega-holiday that follows 48 hours later. If anything out of the ordinary happens today, it's likely to be last-minute Christmas shopping.

I recall a conversation from decades ago with Father Georges Anawati, my beloved tutor in Islamic philosophy at the Institut dominicain d'études orientales in Cairo, Egypt. Curious about my personal religious beliefs and somewhat aware of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he asked me whether we venerated the saints. No, I said. But surely, he continued, we pray to Joseph Smith. I replied that we did not. He paused for a moment, smiled, and then said, as if to himself, "These heresies are all so *bizarre!*"

However, as I've sat down to write this brief volume introduction, it occurs to me that perhaps a word or two about Joseph wouldn't be out of place today. Or, for that matter, on any day.

But first, a word about his associate, Oliver Cowdery. In April 1838, charged with serious offenses, Oliver was excommunicated from the Church. By his own choice he was not present to defend himself, though he always vigorously denied wrongdoing and eventually sought rebaptism. Before returning, however, he demanded that the accusations be retracted. Why? Because they were false. But also in order to preserve his credibility as a witness to crucial founding events of the Restoration.

In March 1846, Oliver wrote to Phineas Young that,

from your last [letter], I am fully satisfied, that no unjust imputation will be suffered to remain upon my character. And that I may not be misunderstood, let me here say, that I have only sought, and only asked, that my character might stand exonerated from those charges which imputed to me the crimes of theft, forgery, &c. Those which all my former associates knew to be false. I do not, I have never asked, to be excused, or exempted from an acknowledgement, of my actual fault or wrong — for of these there are many; which it always was my pleasure to confess. I have cherished a hope, and that one of my fondest, that I might leave such a character, as those who might

believe in my testimony, after I should be called hence, might do so, not only for the sake of the truth, but might not *blush* for the private character of the man who bore that testimony.¹

As with Oliver — who was indeed rebaptized in November 1848 — so with Joseph. Like the gospel writers and like Peter and Paul, he testified of the divine Savior of humankind with the authority of direct personal experience. But what about his character? Is his testimony reliable? He was not perfect, and his critics often portray him as a scoundrel. However, they do him a deep injustice. His goodness and his sincere dedication to the Lord are evident in reminiscences from hundreds who knew him (conveniently gathered in Mark McConkie's valuable book *Remembering Joseph*) and shine out from his personal letters and journal entries (now being gathered and published in the monumental Joseph Smith Papers project).² Like Oliver, Joseph Smith was and is a credible witness.

Why does this matter? First and foremost because Joseph pointed to Christ. And at the year-end holiday season, his testimony supplies powerful evidence that Christmas is about much more than mere commercialism laced with a dollop of Victorian sentimentality.

Through Joseph Smith came the Book of Mormon,

which contains a record of a fallen people, and the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and to the Jews also; which was given by inspiration, and is confirmed to others by the ministering of angels, and is declared unto the world by them — proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old. (D&C 29:9–11)

It was written, as its title page explains, “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.”

“And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him,” he and Sidney Rigdon wrote following their great vision of 16 February 1832,

1. See Ronald G. Watt, “‘Had You Stood in the Presence of Peter’: A Letter from Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, 1846,” *Ensign* (February 1977), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1977/02/discovery/had-you-stood-in-the-presence-of-peter?lang=eng>. See, also, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/Letters-cowdery.html>.

2. Mark L. McConkie, ed., *Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003).

this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives! For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father. (D&C 76:22–23)

As we celebrate the ancient birth and mission of Jesus Christ each December, it's fitting to reflect for a moment on the modern mission of Joseph Smith, the prophet whom the Lord chose to open the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times.

Joseph isn't the Messiah. He isn't on a par with Jesus, let alone superior. He went into the grove for guidance from the Lord, not to counsel God. He received revelation from God, not the other way around. He was subordinate. Depictions of his First Vision correctly show him kneeling, awestruck, at the feet of the Father and the Son. His importance is secondary, derivative. He is a moon, reflecting the light of the Son. His significance derives from the Lord who called him, from the Savior of whom he testified and whose birth we remember at the Christmas season. But that is no small thing.

Saturday, 21 December 2019 — two days ago, as I write — was the winter solstice in Earth's northern hemisphere. The winter solstice occurs when one of Earth's poles has its maximum tilt away from the Sun. (Accordingly, it happens twice annually, once in the northern hemisphere and once in the southern.) For those in the northern hemisphere, it is the day when the Sun is at its lowest daily maximum elevation in the sky and the day with the year's shortest period of daylight and the year's longest night. After the winter solstice, the periods of nighttime darkness become shorter and shorter, the sun rises higher in the sky, and days grow longer. There is, in short, more light.

In the northern hemisphere, the winter solstice usually occurs on 21 December or 22 December. This year, in 2019, it fell on the former. In 1805, however, the year of Joseph Smith's birth, the winter solstice fell on 22 December. The Prophet was born the very next day.

I can't say there was divine intention in this. I don't want to read more into it than there was. But it certainly seems symbolically appropriate, at the least, that the Prophet of the Restoration was born on the day in the astronomical year when darkness began to disperse and light began once more to grow. Since that time, we have "a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19).

The morning breaks, the shadows flee;
Lo, Zion's standard is unfurled!
The dawning of a brighter day
Majestic rises on the world.

The clouds of error disappear
Before the rays of truth divine;
The glory bursting from afar
Wide o'er the nations soon will shine. ...

Angels from heav'n and truth from earth
Have met, and both have record borne;
Thus Zion's light is bursting forth
To bring her ransomed children home.³

These words of Parley P. Pratt were not penned about Joseph Smith or Oliver Cowdery, but about the Restoration of which they were a part. We may also rightfully consider Parley to be a part of that Restoration. Indeed, every Saint since Joseph and Oliver — including you and me — is a part of the Restoration that continues to unfold through divine decree and providence. Zion is bursting forth, and we are all blessed to live in a time when darkness is dispersed.

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3. "The Morning Breaks," *Hymns*, no. 1.

