Courtesy Brian Kershisnik

Brian Kershisnik (1962–), *Flight Practice with Instruction,* oil on paper, 1997, 15" x 11". The apparently whimsical images in the Brian Kershisnik paintings featured in this issue are infused with profound meanings. Much of Kershisnik's work focuses on people's relationships with each other and with the divine. The works chosen for this issue address themes of community and mutual dependence discussed in Terryl L. Givens's article. In *Pruners* (front cover), Kershisnik's figures are literally standing on one another's shoulders to achieve the group's goal. The *Flight Practice with Instruction* pieces (back cover and above) show people who, having learned to overcome worldly constraints, are tutoring those just beginning to cast off these burdens.

"Lightning Out of Heaven"

Joseph Smith and the Forging of Community

Terryl L. Givens

Several weeks ago I received an email from someone who identified himself as a BYU student doing a research paper on the Prophet Joseph Smith. He asked, "Would you be kind enough to share with me what you feel the impact of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon on the world has been?" This was an important question, so I took time framing my reply. I wrote, "It was big." However, upon reflection, I decided against sending that email. I did not want to do most of his work for him. I thought perhaps I would now revisit that question in a little more depth.

A few months back I was visiting with a foreign scholar of religion who had a related question for me: "To what do you attribute the remarkable growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?" Many people have been asking this question for a few years now. The bicentennial of the Prophet's birth has given many scholars an opportunity to ask these and similar questions in formal settings: at symposia hosted by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.; by the New South Wales Parliament in Sydney, Australia; and by the National University of Taiwan in Taipei. When Joseph Smith was just a boy of seventeen, he said an angel appeared to him and declared "that [his] name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people."[1] This year in particular has seen that prediction borne out. Secular scholars and Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and presumed atheists—in many nations and in many tongues—speak good of Joseph's name. In Sydney, Dr. Kazi Islam, a Muslim and chair of the Department of World Religions, Dhaka University, Bangladesh, explained that he introduced Mormonism as a compulsory part of the master's degree in his department "because of [his] profound love and

Terryl L. Givens

Terryl L. Givens, Professor of Literature and Religion at the University of Richmond, is at the forefront of scholarship in Mormon Studies. He says, "I came to Mormon Studies through my work in nineteenth-century literature, when I realized how little fiction had been examined as a window into the Mormon conflicts of that century. It was a natural progression to turn my attention next to the most important religious text produced by an American during that century—the Book of Mormon itself—and its translator, Joseph Smith. As a student of Romanticism, I am continually impressed by the ways in which Joseph Smith embodied and fulfilled the highest and noblest aspirations of that movement, but without capitulating to the forces of secularism that were so manifest in the thought of many of his contemporaries. In my forum address, I try to take stock of how history and inspiration combined in him to produce what I really believe was one of the great intellectual syntheses of his age.

"At the same time, and on a related note, I wanted to continue my own search to understand how faith fits into the life of the mind, and why what is largely a spiritual gift can at the same time be endowed with such tremendous moral significance. Responses to my talk have confirmed for me that many Latter-day Saints are grappling with these same issues themselves."

Dr. Givens's publications include *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* and *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (both published by Oxford University Press), and *The Latter-day Saint Experience in America* (published by Greenwood Press). He is currently working on a cultural history of Mormonism, to be published by Oxford in 2007.

respect for the ideals" of that tradition Joseph Smith founded.[2] Dr. Jason Lase, a director general in the Indonesian Department of Religious Affairs, affirmed his belief that Joseph Smith was "a modern religious genius" who created what he called "one of the most stable and well-organized religious organizations" he has ever known.[3] A few months later, Arun Joshi, a Hindu journalist from India, gave a remarkable talk at the Taipei conference in which he related the experience of the First Vision to the conflicts in Kashmir and the Middle East, concluding, "The message of Joseph Smith is more relevant . . . today than ever before."[4]

These are surely exciting developments, and it can be heady stuff for members of a previously marginalized religion of modest size to find their faith and founder the subject of symposia, celebration, and scholarly interest. Some have even predicted a new world religion will emerge out of these accelerating developments. As that researcher had asked me at a conference, "How do you account for this growth?"

I am, perhaps belatedly, coming to the recognition that the sustained growth of the Church, while impressive, is not itself the greatest legacy of Joseph—or the most significant issue we can investigate. Amway had a phenomenal growth rate. There is something else Joseph accomplished—something that is obliquely suggested by the very difficulty of knowing whether to define the people who now revere him as a church, a religion, a culture, an ethnicity, a global tribe, or something else. Joseph succeeded in creating a community with no real parallel—and few precedents—in the history of the world. The Prophet's brother Hyrum tried to capture the unique quality of this society when, a few months before Joseph's death, he said: "Men's souls conform to the society in which they live, with very few exceptions, and when men come to live with the Mormons, their souls swell as if they were going to stride the planets."[5]

It is the quality of this community, not its rate of increase, that is the more vital fact—and the more enduring mystery—of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. So I wish to explore some of the factors that I believe have contributed to the effect that Joseph's message has wrought on the world and on his followers in particular. My remarks are in essence an extended commentary on the truth pronounced by Thomas Carlyle before Joseph's own death. "The Great Man," Carlyle wrote, "was always as lightning out of Heaven; the rest of men waited for him like fuel, and then they too would flame."[6] What I want to understand, then, is what did Joseph teach, and what did he embody, that did not simply attract a faithful core of followers but that galvanized and welded them into a powerfully cohesive group and that continues to endow a multimillion-member movement with those same bonds and cohesion and vitality today? As Carlyle's quote

intimates, there is a dimension to "the Great Man" and his influence that is to be understood historically. And there is a dimension that transcends history in its evocation of that which is universal. Both elements are present in Joseph Smith's case.

First, it is useful to see Joseph within a particular historical context. A scant dozen years before Joseph's birth, Louis XVI was guillotined by radicals. That may seem an odd counterpoint to a talk about the Mormon Prophet, but Albert Camus called that execution "the crux of our contemporary history."[7] Why? Because it represented a banishment of God from the subsequent history of that people and because it precipitated a steep decline in the fortunes of religion in the West generally. Louis was, after all, supposed to be God's representative by divine right. His premeditated execution represented a deliberate, willful repudiation of God and His role in civic society. The revolutions that would occupy America and Europe from 1776 and throughout the next century were occasioned by many factors. But central elements were an irrepressible optimism about human potential, a growing embrace of human dignity and freedom as the birthright of every man, and, in many cases, doubts that such values and aspirations could be compatible with the institutions of the organized church. Lafayette called his violent passion for liberty a "holy madness."[8] Jefferson swore on the altar of God eternal enmity against every form of tyranny over the mind of man. William Wordsworth spoke for millions when he wrote, "Bliss was it in that dawn [of revolution] to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!"[9] But as the *philosophes,* French revolutionaries, English radicals, and growing numbers of intellectuals and reflective individuals concluded, dignity and freedom alike were threatened by institutionalized systems of religion that almost universally emphasized human depravity, inherent guilt, and arbitrary omnipotence.

The result, when it wasn't outright atheism or revolution, was often despair about the irredeemably tragic nature of the human condition. One cannot peruse the poetry of the Romantics without being struck by the soul-agony of an entire generation—drawn more than any other to the possibilities of the sublime, of transcendence, of the beautiful in nature and in humankind, but thwarted and oppressed at every turn by stultifying systems, rigid hierarchies, and inflexible orthodoxies. Thus the common lament of the poets of the age: "Man is of dust," mused the great Wordsworth, but "ethereal hopes are his." "Too, too contracted are these walls of flesh," he mourned, "For any passion of the soul that leads / To ecstasy."[10] Lord Byron's Lucifer taunted the man Cain because Cain was a creature of "high thought [but he was] / Linked to a servile mass of matter."[11] The poet Robert Browning described the quintessentially

tragic human plight more simply as the intersection of "infinite passion, and the pain / Of finite hearts that yearn."[12] So they all concluded, with Wordsworth, that "unless above himself he can / Erect himself, how poor a thing is Man!"[13]

Alexis de Tocqueville, in these same years, recorded how he "had seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom almost always move in contrary directions."[14] In Joseph Smith, religion and freedom found their first perfect, seamless synthesis. For it was into this environment that Joseph introduced a reinvented story of human origins, nature, and potential. And in the greatest intellectual fusion of his age, Joseph argued that the majesty of God does not exist at the expense of the dignity of man. He made religion the advocate, rather than the enemy, of all that is best in human yearning. But most important, Joseph promulgated a set of teachings that centered the restored gospel on a correct understanding of the divine nature, of human nature, and of their relationships to each other. That is the knowledge that imbued his followers with an uncommon degree of self-knowledge and shared purpose.

A Weeping God

He did this, first and foremost, by his radical reconceptualization of the nature of God. One of my favorite stories concerns a woman named Sarah Edwards, wife of the famous Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards. He was best known perhaps for his sermon that every early American schoolchild had read: "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." He told his audience: "The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present. . . . The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you." And, for the unregenerate, he continued: "When God beholds the ineffable extremity of your case, and sees your torment to be so vastly disproportioned to your strength, and sees how your poor soul is crushed, and sinks down, as it were, into an infinite gloom; he will have no compassion upon you . . . ; there shall be no moderation or mercy."[15]

I cannot help but wonder how such excesses struck the hearts and minds of tender people everywhere and of Edwards' own devout and loving wife in particular. It so happened that on one occasion when Edwards was out of town, another local preacher came to visit Sarah and her children. He offered to have a prayer with the family, and she agreed. Afterward, she recorded in her journal that while the Reverend Peter Reynolds was offering his prayer, she found herself feeling "an earnest desire that, in calling on God, he should say, *Father.*" She asked herself, "Can I now at this time,

with the confidence of a child, and without the least misgiving of heart, call God my Father?"

In consequence of this reflection, she recorded, "I felt a strong desire to be alone with God," and withdrew to her chamber. In the moments that followed, she continued:

> The presence of God was so near, and so real, that I seemed scarcely conscious of any thing else. God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, seemed as distinct persons, both manifesting their inconceivable loveliness, and mildness, and gentleness, and their great and immutable love to me. . . .
>
> The peace and happiness, which I hereupon felt, was altogether inexpressible.[16]

Long before Joseph Smith offered his first prayer, thousands and millions of people must have yearned, as Sarah did, for the assurance that God is not the severe, distant, impersonal deity of Jonathan Edwards but the kind, loving, and very personal God that Joseph found in the Sacred Grove. That Joseph experienced this God, that the Book of Mormon testifies of and exemplifies His tender mercies, and that all and sundry are invited and given the means to experience God's presence in the world and in their own lives made belief in a living, personal God a potent and irresistible principle.

That God has a body of flesh and bones is not the revolutionary teaching. God's physical form is not the point. That God has a heart that beats in sympathy with ours is the truth that catalyzes millions—that He feels real sorrow, rejoices with real gladness, and weeps real tears. This, as Enoch learned, is an awful, terrible, yet infinitely comforting truth.

Growing organically out of this conception is a new human relationship to the divine that requires a new vocabulary. In 1844, Parley P. Pratt published a little story in the *New York Herald* entitled "Joe Smith and the Devil." In this story the devil happens upon Joseph, and they have a pleasant conversation. The devil is insisting to the Prophet that he, the devil, is happy to support "all creeds, systems, and forms of Christianity, of whatever name or nature; so long as they leave out that abominable doctrine, which caused me so much trouble in former times, and which, after slumbering for ages, you have again revived; I mean the doctrine of . . . " And guess what that doctrine was. What do you think Parley P. Pratt and (I think we can safely assume) Joseph Smith himself believed was the single most important doctrine he restored—one to make the devil himself quake in the knowledge that his kingdom was in jeopardy of total collapse? That principle, Pratt wrote, was this: "You have again revived

[and this is the devil speaking here] the doctrine of direct communion with God, by new revelation."[17]

Latter-day Saints frequently refer to this principle as personal revelation, but I think that term fails to sufficiently delineate the distinct contours—historically and theologically speaking—of the model Joseph reinstituted. A prominent historian recently wrote in a history of the century before Joseph Smith that the extremes of deists and dissenters alike were happy to accept "religion without its substance, faith without revelation."[18] Another prominent historian of religion wrote that by the modern age, "Revelation in the fully personal sense characteristic of personal agents has been abandoned."[19]

Two characteristics distinguish the revelation Joseph modeled:

First, from his initial inquiry in those New York woods to his last revelations, Joseph's prayers anticipated a personal response, a discernible moment of dialogue or communicated content. This model, which I call dialogic revelation, situates Joseph and the religion he founded well outside Christian understandings of revelation. Even the Christian model that seems closest in spirit to this one, called by Avery Dulles "revelation as inner experience,"[20] differs sharply. Within this model, theologian George Tyrrell wrote that there can be no revealed statements or doctrines.[21] Auguste Sabatier insisted that "the object of the revelation of God can only be God Himself,"[22] and John Baillie insisted that, "according to the Bible, what is revealed to us is not a body of information concerning various things of which we might otherwise be ignorant."[23] Against this backdrop Joseph insisted that prayer frequently and dramatically evokes an answer that is impossible to mistake as anything other than an individualized, dialogic response to a highly particularized question.

Second, the Book of Mormon expands the notion of revelation far beyond the Old Testament model, according to which, as the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* puts it, "[Prophecy] was pre-eminently the privilege of the prophets."[24] This rupture with Judaeo-Christian precedent occurs most forcefully in 1 Nephi, chapters 10 through 11. Lehi is the patriarch and prophet of his people. In the Old Testament we find that it is to the prophets and patriarchs that revelation comes. So it is only to be expected that when a vision of the tree of life is given, Lehi would be the recipient. But Nephi was "desirous also that [he] might see, and hear, and know of these things" for himself (1 Nephi 10:17). When Nephi made his wish known to the Spirit of the Lord, he was asked if he believed the words of his father (see 1 Nephi 11:1–5). I don't know this, but I can imagine that at this moment Nephi paused. Perhaps if he said no, the Spirit would rebuke him for disloyalty and faithlessness. But if he said yes, the Spirit

might well ask, "Then why not be content to take the word of your prophet and patriarch?"

When Nephi indicated that he did indeed believe the words of his father, the Spirit broke forth into a virtual psalm of rejoicing, shouting, "Hosanna!" Then Nephi was rewarded, not rebuked, for seeking his own personal revelatory experience (see 1 Nephi 11:5–6). Here we find a dramatic and momentous break with the Old Testament pattern. Revelation, we here learn, is the province of Everyman.

The subject of that dialogue between the human and the divine finds substantial definition as well. The revelations that come from God to prophets, the great Abraham Heschel wrote, "may be described as *exegesis of existence from a divine perspective.*"[25] Well, that may be. But not many individuals are concerned, when they kneel in prayer, with "exegesis of existence from a divine perspective." In the Book of Mormon, worried parents, earnest missionaries, befuddled Church leaders, hungry hunters, and inquiring sons all learned the great truth that their concerns—their immediate, quotidian, personal concerns—were God's concerns. And solutions to those proximate concerns are the appropriate subject of divine communication from the heavens. That knowledge binds a people to their God more powerfully than the "exegesis of existence."

Four Truths About Human Nature

Joseph's conception of humankind was as radical—and as well timed—as his views on deity and revelation. I am not sure which answered the greater hunger of the seeking soul. Here are the four truths about human nature that Joseph taught that would reinvent man. We are, he declared, *eternally* existent, inherently *innocent,* boundlessly *free,* and infinitely *perfectible.* These notions simply had to have resonated with special force in a time, as I mentioned earlier, when—even more forcefully than in the Renaissance—traditional strictures on man's self-understanding were bursting.

1. Man Is Eternally Existent. Joseph quoted the Savior as saying: "I was in the beginning with the Father. . . . Ye were also in the beginning with the Father. . . . Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be" (D&C 93:21, 23, 29).[26] Philosophers since Plato had sensed this, poets like Wordsworth had believed this, but Joseph Smith was the first prophet to clearly teach this. But have you considered some of the logical implications of a premortal existence? First, that man lived forever through ages that recede back to an infinite past leads to a second powerful principle.

2. Man Is Inherently Innocent. If we lived as spirit children before the Fall of Adam, then we do not descend from corrupt or fallen parents. As Joseph taught, "Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again, in their infant state, innocent before God" (D&C 93:38).

A second implication of premortality is equally profound. A British philosopher only pointed out the obvious when he argued that if God created our souls, He "could have prevented all sin by creating us with better natures and in more favourable surroundings. . . . Hence we should not be responsible for our sins to God."[27] Thomas Aquinas was one of the first theologians to recognize this problem when he admitted the logical difficulty of finding freedom in a universe where God is the first cause of everything—because, as Aristotle had reasoned, only that which is not created can be free.[28] But if the soul is coeternal with God, as Joseph proposed, then the Gordian knot is severed.

3. Man Is Inherently Free. If man is coeternal with God, agency—or moral freedom—can logically inhere in every human being. And so we find Joseph affirming that "all truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence" (D&C 93:30).

4. Man Is Infinitely Perfectible. And, finally, Joseph taught that this perfect moral freedom that God grants to us opens up possibilities that exceed anything the Christians of his day could imagine. He said:

> You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods . . . by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection *of the dead,* from exaltation to exaltation—till you are able to sit in everlasting burnings and everlasting power and glory.[29]

In so literally embracing the divine potential in man, Joseph ennobled human nature to such a degree that even the most exuberant Renaissance humanists would have blanched. Parley P. Pratt suggested the profound implications of all this for our relationships to deity and to each other: "Gods, angels, and men are all of one species, one race, one great family, widely diffused among the planetary systems."[30]

The audacity of such a view is the more striking when it is juxtaposed with the teaching of one of the most influential founders of the Christian tradition. Writing 1,500 years ago, Augustine asked, "What could be worse pride than the incredible folly in which I asserted that I was by nature what [God is]?"[31] How significant that Joseph's most potent teaching—the one with the greatest power to found true community by rooting it in a knowledge of relations among men and women and gods as they really are and

really can be—should be condemned in the early Christian centuries as the greatest and most dangerous of blasphemies.

Eternal existence, inherent innocence, perfect freedom, and infinite potential—in the world before Joseph Smith, man was seen as created out of nothing, crippled from his birth with a depraved nature, often enjoying little or no freedom of the will, and limited in his potential by a jealous god. No wonder that by the nineteenth century some societies were rebelling against kings and church alike, believing that both were an enemy to man and his eternal soul. No wonder that when Joseph taught again these doctrines of human nature, his ideas were like fire on dry kindling.

The Primacy and Durability of Personal Relationships

Joseph emphasized the primacy and durability of personal relationships. On the eve of his martyrdom, the Prophet turned to Dr. Willard Richards and said:

> "If we go into the cell, will you go in with us?" The doctor answered, "Brother Joseph you did not ask me to cross the river with you—you did not ask me to come to Carthage—you did not ask me to come to jail with you—and do you think I would forsake you now? But I will tell you what I will do; if you are condemned to be hung for treason, I will be hung in your stead, and you shall go free." Joseph said, "You cannot." The doctor replied, "I will."[32]

How does one explain the depths of this love and loyalty? Joseph's friends loved him because they knew the extent of his love for them. Nothing in Joseph's life was more important than friendship. When he revealed that the "same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there [in the eternal world],"[33] Joseph was affirming the fact that heaven is constructed out of a web of human relationships that extend in every direction. By the time his work was done, he had laid the groundwork for men to be sealed to their wives across the eternities; for parents to be sealed to their children and their children's children and to their parents and their parents' parents across infinite generations; and for friends to be bound to friends in a great assembly and Church of the Firstborn. Parley Pratt singled out this dimension to Joseph's teachings as a supreme contribution:

> It was Joseph Smith who taught me how to prize the endearing relationships of father and mother, husband and wife; of brother and sister, son and daughter.
>
> It was from him that I learned that the wife of my bosom might be secured to me for time and all eternity; and that the refined sympathies

> and affections which endeared us to each other emanated from the fountain of divine eternal love. . . .
>
> I had loved before, but I knew not why. But now I loved—with a pureness—an intensity of elevated, exalted feeling, which would lift my soul from the transitory things of this grovelling sphere and expand it as the ocean.[34]

The privileged status of personal relationships was not just incidental to the Restoration; it was a primary focus. As Joseph wrote, "It was my endeavor to so organize the Church, that the brethren might eventually be independent of every incumbrance beneath the celestial kingdom, by bonds and covenants of mutual friendship, and mutual love."[35] When he later stated, with striking brevity, "Friendship is one of the grand fundamental principles of 'Mormonism,'"[36] he was saying something about the deepest underpinnings of Mormon theology. Joseph rejoiced in his relationships to God, family, and friends, and he articulated a system that both revealed their eternal dimension and—this is key—provided the principles, ordinances, and knowledge to render them eternal.

He wrote in his journal: "How good and glorious it has seemed unto me, to find pure and holy friends, who are faithful, just, and true. . . . In the name of the Lord, I feel in my heart to bless them. . . . These love the God that I serve; they love the truths that I promulgate. . . . I . . . prayed for them with anxious and fervent desire. . . . They shall not want a friend while I live."[37] No wonder he could say truthfully, "Let me be resurrected with the Saints, whether I ascend to heaven or descend to hell."[38]

To others he insisted: "When you & I meet face to face, I anticipate, without the least doubt, that all matters between us will be fairly understood, and perfect love prevail; and [the] sacred covenant by which we are bound together, have the uppermost seat in our hearts."[39] Again, how significant it is that he actually made the affirmation of such bonds into a sacred ritual. Those who attended his School of the Prophets were greeted in this manner:

> Art thou a brother or brethren? I salute you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, in token or remembrance of the everlasting covenant, in which covenant I receive you to fellowship, in a determination that is fixed, immovable, and unchangeable, to be your friend and brother through the grace of God in the bonds of love. [D&C 88:133]

Seeing this project of a timeless and borderless web of human relationships as his objective, one can understand what sociologists and students of religion cannot: how to explain the great secret of how Mormonism became not just another church, not just a thriving institution, but a people for whom the words *brother* and *sister* carry more than metaphoric

significance. The great appeal of first-generation Christianity, Elaine Pagels has recently written, was the feeling of entering into an extended family community.[40] It was no small feat and not without the highest significance that Joseph successfully replicated the most essential, the most authentically Christian aspect of the primitive Church. That is the true greatness of his legacy: he forged a genuine community.

A Culture of Certainty

There is, I think, another aspect of his legacy that shapes the special character of the people who call Joseph "Prophet" and that connects them in a particularly powerful way. That is the possibility of religious certainty that Joseph held out. A man inducted into his religious vocation with a literal visit by an embodied God and Christ is not likely to view his religious convictions in the same terms as a typical Christian believer. Translating scripture out of tangible metal plates weighing forty or fifty pounds is not of the same order of prophetic utterance as expressing mere spiritual intimations. Feeling the weight of angelic hands belonging to resurrected Apostles on his head—conferring upon him the priesthood of God—produced a crystalline certainty about his authority (the lack of which would drive Roger Williams to abandon his own church). Joseph Smith, in other words, did not simply believe he was a prophet inspired to act in God's name; in his mind he was as certain as any man could be on any subject sacred or secular. "I knew it, and I knew that God knew it,"[41] he said of his initial encounter with deity. Joseph's formative experiences—as a fourteen-year-old seeker, as a prophet, and as a religion maker—were saturated in the physical, the tangible, the material, and the visible.

Certainty is a term that frequently appears in the ministry of Joseph Smith—often in a doctrinally prominent position. In his *Lectures on Faith,* which he delivered to the elders in Kirtland, he claimed that from earliest times, faith has been a prelude to sure knowledge:

> The inquiry and diligent search of the ancient saints to seek after and obtain a knowledge of the glory of God [was rooted in] the credence they gave to the testimony of their fathers. . . . The inquiry frequently terminated, indeed always terminated when rightly pursued, in the most glorious discoveries and eternal certainty.[42]

Of his own case he wrote to his wife, "For as much as I know for a certainty of Eternal things if the heveans linger it is nothing to me."[43] It is easy to see why his personal encounter with a conversing deity would ground his own sense of epistemological certainty. But he clearly saw his own experience as a prototype others could—and should—aspire to.

An 1833 revelation had the Lord declaring, "Every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am" (D&C 93:1). This possibility Joseph related to the doctrine of the Second Comforter, spoken of by Christ when He addressed His disciples before His crucifixion. On that occasion He promised that the Father would send them "another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever" (John 14:16). Joseph wrote: "When any man obtains this last Comforter, . . . the visions of the heavens will be opened unto him, and the Lord will teach him face to face, and he may have a perfect knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God."[44]

Joseph apparently believed that the personal epiphany he experienced in his visitation by the Father and the Son—heralding full immersion in the divine light, with all its epistemological fullness and certainty—betokened an order of knowledge that was the right and destiny of all faithful Saints. That very real possibility informs Mormon life, worship, personal aspirations, and shared purpose. To attend any LDS testimony meeting, for example, is to enter into a rhetorical universe in which a language of calm assurance and confident conviction and even professions of certain knowledge overwhelm the more traditional Christian expressions of common belief. It may well be that this sense of shared knowledge—its possession or pursuit—is an even more potent community builder than shared faith. At the same time, of course, such rhetoric can have its drawbacks. It can convey a sense of smugness or superiority; it can create the tragic impression that with certainty there is no room or need for searching; and it can create discomfort and alienation on the part of those who do not or cannot share in expressions of serene, unconflicted conviction.

So it is at this point that I want to conclude with a few observations about what happens in the absence of such certainty. Whether faith is a way station on the way to certainty, as it seems to be in Alma's sermon, or the place one's spiritual journey takes one to, it is important that one understand the incalculable significance of faith—of this deliberate gesture of belief—as a defining moral gesture.

It is true that some people seem born with faith. And many people die with a full complement. My own grandmother spent her last months pining for death because she was the last of her generation; she "missed her people" to an excruciating degree; and she grew more and more disconnected from a world she saw as simply irrelevant, without the power to interest or lay hold upon her. It was striking to watch the world and persons beyond the grave assume, in her mind and in her conversation, a fully fleshed-out texture and presence that utterly displaced the inhabitants of

the here and now. Faith did not seem a choice for her. It descended upon her as naturally, irresistibly, and encompassingly as the heavy snowfalls on her upstate New York farm.

But such a gift I have not found to be common. It would seem that among those who vigorously pursue the life of the mind in particular, who are committed to the scholarly pursuit of knowledge and rational inquiry, faith is as often a casualty as it is a product. The call to faith is a summons to engage the heart, to attune it to resonate in sympathy with principles and values and ideals that we devoutly hope are true, and to have reasonable but not certain grounds for believing them to be true. I am convinced that there must be grounds for doubt as well as belief in order to render the choice more truly a choice—and, therefore, the more deliberate and laden with personal vulnerability and investment. The option to believe must appear on our personal horizon like the fruit of paradise, perched precariously between sets of demands held in dynamic tension. One is, it would seem, always provided with sufficient materials out of which to fashion a life of credible conviction or dismissive denial. We are acted upon, in other words, by appeals to our personal values, our yearnings, our fears, our appetites, and our egos. What we choose to embrace, to be responsive to, is the purest reflection of who we are and what we love. That is why faith, the choice to believe, is, in the final analysis, an action that is positively laden with moral significance.

I believe that we are—as reflective, thinking, pondering seekers—much like the proverbial ass of Buridan. If you remember, the beast starved to death because he was faced with two equally desirable and equally accessible piles of hay. Having no determinative reason to choose one over the other, he perished in indecision. In the case of us mortals, men and women are confronted with a world in which there are appealing arguments for God as a childish projection, for modern prophets as scheming or deluded imposters, and for modern scriptures as so much fabulous fiction. But there is also compelling evidence that a glorious divinity presides over the cosmos, that God calls and anoints prophets, and that His word and will are made manifest through a sacred canon that is never definitively closed. There is, as with the ass of Buridan, nothing to compel an individual's preference for one over the other. But in the case of us mortals, there *is* something to tip the scale. There is something to predispose us to a life of faith or a life of unbelief. There is a heart that in these conditions of equilibrium and balance—and only in these conditions of equilibrium and balance, equally "enticed by the one or the other" (2 Nephi 2:16)—is truly free to choose belief or cynicism, faith or faithlessness.

Why, then, is there more merit—given this perfect balance—in believing in the Christ (and His gospel and prophets) than believing in a false deity or in nothing at all? Perhaps because there is nothing in the universe—or in any possible universe—more perfectly good, absolutely beautiful, and worthy of adoration and emulation than this Christ. A gesture of belief in *that* direction, a will manifesting itself as a desire to acknowledge *His* virtues as the paramount qualities of a divided universe, is a response to the best in us, the best and noblest of which the human soul is capable. For we do indeed create gods after our own image—or potential image. And that is an activity endowed with incalculable moral significance.

As Carlyle said, "The Great Man was always as lightning out of Heaven; the rest of men waited for him like fuel, and then they too would flame." Joseph Smith ignited something in thousands of men and women that connects them to God and to each other in powerful ways. In part, this was because he was, like Esther, born to his hour in human history—an hour when the passion for human liberty never burned brighter. His message resonated because it was a stirring, compelling, and exciting synthesis that presented a spiritually hungry humankind with a god, like the god of Plato, who "was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be."[45] The god of Joseph Smith was not a threat to human potential but a being who gloried in that potential and whose work was to bring it to fruition. That was why Joseph's message resonated and caught hold like a burning fire.

But his message also flamed forth because millions of men and women have freely chosen to believe. They assayed the opinions of doubters, and they gave a hearing to the critics. Like Brigham Young, they knew Joseph was human and subject to err, but they sampled his words and agreed they tasted like honey. They weighed the beauty of a god and of human origins and a human future unlike anything before imagined. They found reason to doubt, and they found reason to believe. They chose to believe.

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1. Joseph Smith–History 1:33; also Joseph Smith Jr., *The 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), 1:11–12 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

2. Kazi Islam, "The Economic World of Joseph Smith—A Response," remarks delivered May 21, 2005, at *The Worlds of Joseph Smith,* bicentennial symposium held May 20–21, 2005, New South Wales Parliament, Sydney, Australia.

3. Jason Lase, "Fruits and Roots of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," delivered May 21, 2005, at *The Worlds of Joseph Smith,* bicentennial symposium held May 20–21, 2005, New South Wales Parliament, Sydney, Australia.

4. Arun Joshi, "Mormon Ways of Family Life Can Resolve Conflicts in World," paper delivered at *Ideas for the 21st Century: The Worlds of Joseph Smith,* National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan, August 27, 2005.

5. Address of Hyrum Smith, April 7, 1844, *History of the Church,* 6:300.

6. Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Prophet," *Heroes and Hero Worship* (1840).

7. Albert Camus, "The Execution of the King," in part 3 of *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt,* trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 120; see also Adam Zamoyski, *Holy Madness: Romantics, Patriots, and Revolutionaries, 1776–1871* (New York: Viking, 2000), 1.

8. Marquis de Lafayette, *Lettres de Prison,* ed. Jules Thomas (Paris: Delagrave, 1907), 203–5, quoted in Zamoyski, *Holy Madness,* 88.

9. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1799–1805), book 11, lines 108–9.

10. William Wordsworth, *The Excursion* (1814), book 4, lines 140, 179, 182–83.

11. Lord Byron, *Cain* (1821), act 2, scene 1, lines 50–51.

12. Robert Browning, *Two in the Campagna* (1855), stanza 12.

13. William Wordsworth, *The Excursion* (1814), book 4, lines 330–31.

14. Alexis de Tocqueville, "On the Principal Causes That Make Religion Powerful in America," *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 282 (vol. 1, part 2, chapter 9), quoted in Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 205.

15. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," *The Works of President Edwards: With a Memoir of His Life,* ed. Sereno Edwards Dwight, 10 vols. (New York: Carvill, 1830), 7:169, 170, 172.

16. Sarah Edwards, in *Works of President Edwards,* 1:172–73; italics in original; see also George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 243–44.

17. Parley P. Pratt, "Joe Smith and the Devil: A Dialogue," *New York Herald,* August 25, 1844, 1.

18. Himmelfarb, *Roads,* 48.

19. William J. Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 24.

20. Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 68.

21. See George Tyrrell, *Through Scylla and Charybdis* (London: Longmans, Green, 1907), 326–27.

22. Auguste Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion Based on Psychology and History* (New York: Harper, 1957), 33.

23. John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 28.

24. In F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* 3rd ed., rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. "prophecy," 1345.

25. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets,* 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1969–71), 2:xvi; emphasis in original.

26. The nature of eternal intelligence has not been specified. Joseph Smith addressed "the immortality of the spirit of man. . . . The intelligence of spirits had no beginning, neither will it have an end." Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 353.

"Some LDS leaders have interpreted this [the coeternal nature of intelligence] to mean that intelligent beings—called intelligences—existed before and after they were given spirit bodies in the premortal existence. Others have interpreted it to mean that intelligent beings were organized as spirits out of eternal intelligent matter, that they did not exist as individuals before they were organized as spirit beings in the premortal existence (Abr. 3:22; *JD* 7:57; 2:124). The Church has taken no official position on this issue." Dennis J. Packard, "Intelligence," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:692.

27. John McTaggart and Ellis McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion* (1906; reprint, New York: Kraus Reprints, 1969), 165.

28. See Thomas Aquinas, Objection 3 and Reply to Objection 3 in Part 1, Question 83, First Article: "Whether Man Has Free-Will?" *Summa Theologica,* 3 vols. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947–48), 1:418. Aquinas is quoting Aristotle's *Metaphysics,* book 1, chapter 2.

29. Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 201; emphasis a demarcation in original; see also *History of the Church,* 6:306.

30. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology: A Voice of Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 21.

31. Augustine, *Confessions* (397–401), trans. F. J. Sheed, book 4, section 15.

32. *History of the Church,* 6:616.

33. D&C 130:2; see also *History of the Church,* 5:323.

34. Parley P. Pratt Jr., ed., *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt,* 4th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 259–60.

35. *History of the Church,* 1:269.

36. *History of the Church,* 5:517; text as in original.

37. *History of the Church,* 5:107, 108, 109.

38. *History of the Church,* 5:517.

39. Letter to Edward Partridge and others, December 10, 1833, in Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith,* rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: BYU Press, 2002), 337–38; brackets in Jessee.

40. See Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 6–10.

41. Joseph Smith–History 1:25; *History of the Church,* 1:8.

42. N. B. Lundwall, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.), 23 (2:56). Joseph's actual authorship of the Lectures on Faith has become increasingly doubtful; it seems that they were, at the least, authorized by him and a reflection of his theological views.

43. Letter to Emma, March 21, 1839, in Jessee, *Personal Writings,* 449; text as in original.

44. *History of the Church,* 3:381.

45. Plato, *Dialogues,* "Timaeus," trans. Benjamin Jowett, section 1, 29.