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Of Contrasts, Apologies, and Authenticity: The First Visions of Joseph Smith and Ellen White in Comparison

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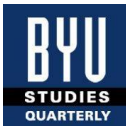
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Abstract: In the antebellum United States, a young American Christian was confused by the conflicting religious messages that swirled through the surrounding culture. The teenaged seeker sought the Lord in prayer, pleading for a message of light and love to break through the darkness. This plea was answered with a mighty vision, a revelation that brought both immediate peace and the promise of further guidance. The experience not only marked the visionary awakening of an earnest adolescent supplicant; it also eventually helped anchor the messaging of a global religious movement that would come to boast millions of members around the world. The adherents to that movement eventually began calling this epiphany the “first vision.” Various narrations of the vision were recorded by the prophet at different moments in time, critics arguing that the variations conveniently reflected doctrinal evolutions within the emerging church. Such criticisms notwithstanding, a familiar form of the experience has settled into the culture of the faith, serving as an orienting narrative in explaining the rise of a new church, a church ordained to usher in the millennial day.

The outlines of this story should sound rather familiar to Latter-day Saints. But in this case, the young prophet at the heart of the account was not Joseph Smith but Ellen White; the church that coalesced around this revelation was that of the Seventh-day Adventists rather than that of the Latter-day Saints; and the year in which the vision took place was 1844—six months after Smith’s passing. There are, then, two monumental “first visions” on the religious landscape of the United States, each one lying at the heart of a major American religious movement’s origin story, and each serving as the great inflection point in the biography of a nineteenth-century prophet. The similarities between the structure of the Adventist story of adolescent theophany and that of its Latter-day Saint counterpart seem almost to overdetermine a juxtaposition of the two experiences, and yet close scholarly comparisons have been hard to come by.



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Of Contrasts, Apologies, and Authenticity

The First Visions of Joseph Smith and Ellen White in Comparison

David F. Holland

In the antebellum United States, a young American Christian was confused by the conflicting religious messages that swirled through the surrounding culture. The teenaged seeker sought the Lord in prayer, pleading for a message of light and love to break through the darkness. This plea was answered with a mighty vision, a revelation that brought both immediate peace and the promise of further guidance. The experience not only marked the visionary awakening of an earnest adolescent supplicant; it also eventually helped anchor the messaging of a global religious movement that would come to boast millions of members around the world. The adherents to that movement eventually began calling this epiphany the “first vision.” Various narrations of the vision were recorded by the prophet at different moments in time, critics arguing that the variations conveniently reflected doctrinal evolutions within the emerging church. Such criticisms notwithstanding, a familiar form of the experience has settled into the culture of the faith, serving as an orienting narrative in explaining the rise of a new church, a church ordained to usher in the millennial day.

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each serving as the great inflection point in the biography of a nineteenth-century prophet. The similarities between the structure of the Adventist story of adolescent theophany and that of its Latter-day Saint counterpart seem almost to overdetermine a juxtaposition of the two experiences, and yet close scholarly comparisons have been hard to come by.

There are various possible reasons for the absence of such comparisons. One may be the relative historiographical invisibility of Ellen White. It is difficult to explain why more students of American history have not been attracted to a visionary woman who helped found a church in the mid-nineteenth century that now boasts some 20 million adherents worldwide—and features a highly respected global hospital system, a network of colleges and universities, and recently a prominent U.S. presidential candidate—but that neglect may well account for the fact that few scholars have thought about comparing these first visions.¹ Another contributing element to the lack of comparison undoubtedly derives from the fact that neither religious tradition is very interested in being linked to the other. We cannot know what Joseph Smith would have thought about being paired with Ellen White, but we certainly know what Ellen White thought of the pairing. She hated it, and she worked assiduously to distance her work from that of the Latter-day Saints.² So, with the scholarship looking in other directions and the churches themselves disinclined to recognize resemblances in one another, the two have rarely drawn explicit comparison.

Note on Comparison as Method

The lack of such a seemingly obvious form of analysis may also reflect a postmodern skepticism about religious comparison as a legitimate academic enterprise. In our overdue moment of postcolonial awareness, the comparative study of religion has been aggressively challenged as an approach that has tended to judge one religion by the standard of

1. For membership statistics, see Office of Archives, Statistics and Research of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, *2019 Annual Statistical Report*, available at <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2019A.pdf>. A sense of White's historiographical neglect can be generated by a survey of references in *The Journal of American History*. Joseph Smith appears in the full run of that journal some 140 times. The founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, appears 24 times. Ellen White appears twice.

2. Ellen White, *Selected Messages: Book 1* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2007), 32; Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2002), 410; Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts, My Christian Experience* (Battle Creek, Mich., 1860; Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing, 1945), iv.

another—usually judging the rest of the religious world, with greater or lesser degrees of self-awareness, by the values of Protestant Christianity—doing violence to the particularities of non-Western peoples by cramming their distinctive practices and beliefs into categories constructed by the culture to which they were compared.³ The practitioners of comparative religion have scanned disparate phenomena and then placed them in seemingly universal slots labeled with words like *scripture* or *god* or even *religion*, rarely realizing that those terms came out of specific theological histories that exercised a significant and—perhaps more importantly—unrecognized refraction on the scholarly perceptions of the cultures under consideration.⁴ This tarnished history of comparative religion as an academic field suggests that in our effort to locate points of comparison across cultural forms, we have a tendency to normalize what we find familiar while marginalizing other elements, making our own culture the categorical paragon of the thing we seek in others and then necessarily finding them to fall short of that standard.

I see much truth in this critique and, subsequently, reasons to be wary in the comparative enterprise. I do not, however, see an absolute imperative to abandon it. One specific note of caution and hope comes from the unbowed comparativists Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, who have argued that comparison can escape its most dangerous pitfalls when we accept it “as an indeterminate scholarly procedure that is best undertaken as an intellectually creative enterprise, not as a science but as an art—an imaginative and critical act of mediation and redescription in the service of knowledge.” Though Patton and Ray necessarily retain a place for shared categories, I take from such a statement that we should set down the scientist’s taxonomic rigidities; to borrow Patton and Ray’s invocation of “art,” I find that comparison is

3. See, for instance, David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Michael Bergunder, “Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity: A Postcolonial Perspective on Comparative Religion,” in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Andreas Nehring (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

4. Note the burgeoning scholarship that seeks to challenge these categories as vestiges of a colonial past. For example, Thomas B. Coburn, “‘Scripture’ in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 3 (1984): 435–59; James L. Cox, *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies* (Durham, Eng.: Acumen, 2014); and Timothy Fitzgerald, “A Critique of ‘Religion’ as a Cross-Cultural Category,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9, no. 2 (1997): 91–110.

most useful when we simply set the artistry of various religious forms in revelatory relief. Patton, Ray, and others argue that when duly guarded against its abuses, comparison can still be put to profitable purposes.⁵

At its most useful, comparison reminds me a bit of my own strategies for dealing with my moderate color blindness. Sometimes I cannot quite see if an article of clothing is blue or black, green or gray until I set it against another article. Then its color becomes clearer to me. (That very act of comparison also runs the risk of imposing a distortingly flat category—of making a multishaded aquamarine shirt simply “blue” when it sits against a black jacket—but every form of analysis comes with its liabilities.) With its methodological limitations squarely in mind, we might yet make explicit comparison of religious phenomena, by which we can sharpen our necessarily dulled historical vision and better appreciate the distinguishing qualities of each rather than force false connections or let one sit in judgment of the other.

That said, two aspects of the discussion that follows might seem to flirt with the violation of the above warnings against (1) imposing artificial categories of comparison and (2) using comparison for apologetic purposes. It does something of the former at the outset and then something like the latter in conclusion. I hope in the end, however, that through careful qualification it can yet yield some of comparison’s benefits and avoid its most damaging effects.

The Similarities of Prophetic Profile and the Problems of Apologetic Comparison

Ellen White and Joseph Smith do share an important categorical distinction. Amid a striking array of differences, the thing that Smith and White most conspicuously had in common was their remarkable ability to transition from teenaged visionaries (of which there were many in their environments) to the founders of enduring religious traditions (of which there were very few). In an influential article on the religious culture of the early American republic, Richard Bushman once wrote that Joseph distinguished himself from the visionary world around him by organizing a church, publishing revelatory texts that attracted a lasting readership, and inspiring people to alter their lives in dramatic fashion in obedience to his revealed teachings. Bushman argued that when scholars compare Smith with the scores of American visionaries who

5. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 3–4.

proclaimed an encounter with divinity but left little institutional legacy, “the differences are so great that we can scarcely even say Joseph was the most successful of the visionaries; taking his life as a whole, he was of another species.”⁶ Bushman’s observation is as compelling today as it was two decades ago. Joseph was different. But in *this* respect, it was a difference he shared with at least one other. The rarity of that distinction has drawn me to the American figure that most resembles his prophetic profile. White and Smith may not have represented the same visionary species, but in their ability to persist and build a canonizing community around their inspirations they certainly shared a genus. I do not think it distorts either story to recognize in them this particular rare and shared accomplishment.

The very similarities that justify a common analytical category can also trigger an exaggerated apologetic instinct. Sigmund Freud wrote famously of the “narcissism of small differences,” the tendency to fixate on the relatively minor variances we have with otherwise similar people and to work diligently to turn those into an amplified sense of superiority.⁷ Putting two phenomena in a comparative framework—especially when those phenomena are held in sacred reverence by two evangelizing churches—may be to set them on an apologetic collision course. Apology through a comparison of these first visions, however, would be problematic for many reasons. Consider, for instance, the example of their comparative publication histories.

One of the first things to note in a comparison of first visions is the obvious differences in the processes by which they came to wide circulation. Joseph Smith apparently made his earliest recorded account of his theophany some twelve years after his encounter with divinity, and there was no published account until a decade after that.⁸ By contrast, Ellen White penned a narrative of her vision no more than one year after she experienced it, and it was published just one month later. The rapidity of its publication helped ensure that subsequent iterations did not vary drastically from White’s first telling, though there were some revisions. A phrase that some believed was supportive of the “shut door” doctrine—which held that God would not accept any who had not

6. Richard Lyman Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997): 193.

7. Freud first put forward this idea in Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag Wien, 1930).

8. The best work on the publication history of Joseph Smith’s first vision is Steven C. Harper, *First Visions: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford, 2019).

believed in the apocalyptic predictions of Millerism—was dropped in later versions even as that position was likewise downplayed in Seventh-day Adventists theology. Similarly, a portion of White’s vision that could be seen as undermining her later-revealed doctrine of seventh-day Sabbath keeping was also cut. Across various versions, furthermore, certain words were adjusted to soften or sharpen the tone of the narrative for particular audiences.⁹

Notwithstanding those alterations, however, it is accurate to say that the variations in White’s accounts are less fundamental than some of the differences we see across Joseph Smith’s narrations of his vision. Without a comparably early publication of his story, Smith’s memory and environment offered more room to explore different elements and emphases of his theophany. For many critics of Smith’s ministry, the delay in recording his experience and the deviations in his accounts undermine the authenticity of his experience and of his claim to a prophetic call; the corollary of such an argument would afford more credence to the relative speed and stability with which White’s visionary history appeared in writing. Conversely, however, Bushman’s analysis of the early republic’s visionary culture has read Smith’s delay differently, arguing that it speaks to a prophetic ministry that focused more on establishing Zion than on presenting charismatic bona fides, a kind of early kingdom building that cannot be so easily mapped onto and—by implication—explained by Smith’s environment.¹⁰ Thus, in a comparison of publication histories, we have on one hand a rather swift and steady accounting that resembles other visionaries in White’s surroundings, and on the other we have a delayed and more uneven history of narrations that suggests a certain novelty and cultural transcendence. In a comparative debate about whether either revelatory experience was authentic, we are faced with competing standards of authenticity: consistency or originality. Comparison in this case is rather unhelpful for ranking the credibility of claims and even less so for defining the essence of a true prophetic archetype. It is useful, however, for seeing the characteristic features of these two revelatory accounts in sharper definition.

9. The best work on the publication histories of Ellen White’s visions is Ronald D. Graybill, *Visions and Revisions: A Textual History of Ellen G. White’s Writings* (Westlake Village, Calif.: Oak and Acorn, 2019).

10. Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” 195–97.

The Distortions of Category and the Details of Ellen's Experience

As noted above, the very categories that facilitate comparison can also cause distortion. One place where the comparative impulse has the potential to distort rather than clarify is in the fact that both these phenomena have been slotted into the shared category of *vision*. Joseph and Ellen both used the word to describe their experiences, so this is not an example of the imposition of subsequent scholarly terms. However, despite this common title, Smith's and White's experiences actually represented two very different kinds of spiritual phenomena. Whereas Joseph's amounted to a personal appearance and dialogical exchange with divine beings, figures whom he apparently understood to be really present in the grove where he knelt, Ellen's vision showed her scenes far removed in time, space, and even conceptual structure from the little domestic altar at which she was kneeling when the vision struck.

To appreciate the specifics of Ellen's epiphany, one must first understand something of the historical context in which she experienced it. A sickly sixteen-year-old Ellen Gould Harmon (she would not become Ellen White until she married James White about twenty months after her first vision) had just endured the religious trauma that came to be known as the Great Disappointment. Like tens of thousands of others who believed in William Miller's millennial message, the Harmon family was shocked and disoriented on October 22, 1844, when Christ's failure to appear on earth proved that something about Miller's biblical calculations had been faulty. The Millerite disappointment was so profound as to splinter the movement into a number of "Adventist" groups—a term retained by people who still believed in the reality of an imminent return of Jesus but had to recalibrate Miller's original timing and conception of that second advent.¹¹

In early December, a few weeks after the Great Disappointment, Ellen and a group of unsettled Adventists gathered in a home in southern Maine and together offered up their morning prayers. In the middle of her devotions, Ellen began to fall into an entranced vision. She found

11. For more on the Great Disappointment, see Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993). Before the Disappointment, the titles *Adventist* and *Millerite* were used quite interchangeably. After the Disappointment, the term *Millerite* fell into disuse for obvious reasons, leaving *Adventist* as the designation of choice for a variety of groups that retained some revised version of the original millennial message.

herself surrounded by light before she felt herself to be “rising higher and higher from the earth.” She spiritually ascended up and out of her immediate circumstances until she gained some critical distance on the world below her and could see many things that were not immediately present in the place where she physically knelt. She had a panoramic view of a great global metaphor of the world’s progress toward the millennium; she seemed to understand intuitively that she was looking at an abstract representation of sacred history.¹²

Her initial impulse when reviewing the images in front of her was to locate what she called the “Advent people,” those faithful souls who had endured such antagonism from their surrounding culture because of their fervent belief in Christ’s imminent appearing. When Ellen searched the scenes for her post-Disappointment people, she could not see them until she heard a voice that said, “Look again, and look a little higher.” She recorded, “At this I raised my eyes and saw a straight and narrow path, cast up high above the world. On this path the Advent people were traveling to the city, which was at the further end of the path. They had a bright light set up behind them at the first end of the path, which an angel told me was the Midnight Cry.¹³ This shone all along the path, and gave light for their feet that they might not stumble.”

In other words, she saw God’s people on the move. This motion served as an allegorical representation of movement into end times, a shared experience of inexorable advancement toward the Millennium. She saw that these pilgrims on the path of time remained steady in their progress “if they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus, who was just before them, leading them to the city.” But as she watched this story unfold, she noted that not every traveler stayed on the path. Some soon “grew weary, and they said the city was a great way off, and they expected to have entered it before. Then Jesus would encourage them by raising His glorious right arm, and from His arm came a light which waved over the advent

12. All quotations related to Ellen White’s first vision will be taken from Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts: My Experience, Views and Labors in Connection with the Rise and Progress of the Third Angel’s Message* (Battle Creek, Mich.: James White, 1860), 30–35. For a helpful, concise biography of Ellen White, see Jerry Moon and Denis Kaiser, “For Jesus and Scripture: The Life of Ellen White,” in *The Ellen White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2013), 18–95.

13. This is a reference to the Millerite message, which drew heavily from the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25. Christ was coming soon, just as the bridegroom had showed up at midnight. The vision’s suggestion that the “midnight cry” continued to illuminate the millennial path of Adventists was to say that Miller’s message was not to be entirely abandoned.

people, and they shouted Hallelujah!”¹⁴ She continued, “Others rashly denied the light behind them, and said that it was not God that had led them out so far. The light behind them went out, leaving their feet in perfect darkness, and they stumbled and got their eyes off the mark, and lost sight of Jesus, and fell off the path down into the dark and wicked world below.”

As Ellen described a scene in which some faithfully persevered and others fell off the path, her pronouns shifted from third-person plural to first-person plural: “Soon we heard the voice of God like many waters, which gave us the day and hour of Jesus’ coming. The living saints knew and understood the voice, while the wicked thought it was thunder and an earthquake. When God spake the time, he poured upon us the Holy Spirit, and our faces began to light up and shine with the glory of God as Moses’ did when he came down from mount Sinai.”

The striking imagery of conflict, the vivid clash of light and dark, and ultimate vindication increased in intensity as the vision proceeded: “At our happy, holy state the wicked were enraged, and would rush violently up to lay hands on us to thrust us into prison, when we would stretch forth the hand in the name of the Lord, and the wicked would fall helpless to the ground. Then it was that the synagogue of Satan knew that God had loved us, and they worshiped at our feet.”

From this account of the saints overcoming the forces of evil on earth, the vision turned to the arrival of Jesus Christ himself. In an image drawn from scripture, the second advent began with the appearing of a small cloud in the distance: “We all in solemn silence gazed on the cloud as it drew nearer, and became lighter, glorious, and still more glorious, till it was a great white cloud. The bottom appeared like fire; a rainbow was over it, and around the cloud were ten thousand angels singing a most lovely song. And on it sat the Son of man.”

Ellen’s vision then rose to its revelatory apogee, a description of the glorified Christ:

His hair was white and curly and lay on his shoulders. And upon his head were many crowns. His feet had the appearance of fire, in his right hand was a sharp sickle, in his left a silver trumpet. His eyes were as a flame of fire, which searched his children through and through. Then all faces gathered paleness, and those that God had rejected gathered

14. The word used in earlier versions of the vision was *hallelujah*; later versions used *alleluia*. This is one of the examples Graybill cites in arguing that later iterations of the vision adopted more respectable phrasing. See Graybill, *Visions and Revisions*, 30.

blackness. Then we all cried out: “Who shall be able to stand? Is my robe spotless?” Then the angels ceased to sing, and there was some time of awful silence, when Jesus spoke: “Those who have clean hands and pure hearts shall be able to stand; My grace is sufficient for you.” At this our faces lighted up, and joy filled every heart. And the angels struck a note higher and sung again, while the cloud drew still nearer the earth.

As the cloud lowered Jesus to earth, he called upon the sleeping Saints to arise from their graves with a shout of “Awake, Awake, Awake.” The redeemed replied with another “Hallelujah!” as they “recogniz[ed] their friends who had been torn from them by death, and in the same moment we were changed and caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air.” After this rapture of the great reunion, Jesus placed crowns of glory on each redeemed head as the vision moved across a sea of glass and toward the gates of heaven. Entering the gates, Ellen saw a river of pure water flowing out from the throne of God and running through the golden Tree of Life. The vision drew to a close with another Hallelujah shout, with the echoes of angelic harps, and with a reminder that no earthly tribulation could overshadow the glory of the heavenly city. The journey was worth it.

A Study in Visionary Contrasts

Joseph Smith and Ellen White each had what they and their respective communities call first visions, but the contrasts between their two revelatory experiences could hardly be starker. Take, for instance, the locational specifics of their events: Ellen was pulled up and out of that down-east farmhouse in order to encounter the divine, whereas for Joseph divinity came down into the grove, where he remained rooted to the earth. The location of Ellen White’s first vision has not become the pilgrimage site for Seventh-day Adventists the way the Sacred Grove has become for Latter-day Saints; there are a variety of reasons for that difference, to be sure, but some of the explanation undoubtedly has to do with the fact that the particular venue for Ellen White’s vision immediately passed into insignificance and even nonexistence during her vision, while Joseph Smith—at least in some tellings—reported seeing his heavenly visitors in among the very trees that surrounded him.¹⁵ Where Ellen was transported, Joseph was visited.

15. Consider, for instance, the line from Joseph’s 1835 journal entry, which draws attention to the fact that the flames filled the surrounding area “yet nothing consumed.” The phrasing indicates some surprise that the woods were not affected by the fire that he

Not only did Ellen White's vision detach her from the particularities of place, moving her to a universalized vantage point from which the stylized earthly drama could be viewed, but it also broke her out of her time. Her vision was historical in the sense that there was temporal movement to the events she witnessed, but she experienced prospective events in precisely the same way she experienced those that had recently transpired. Past, present, and future played out before her. She witnessed things yet to be as though they had already been. Strikingly, her visionary account addresses the coming second advent in the past tense because she had already seen it. Jesus "descended on the cloud, wrapped in flames of fire."

Joseph, by contrast, never left his moment in time. Indeed, in some renditions, he was quite conspicuously stuck there. When his visitors spoke of things to come, they did so in the future tense. And whereas White's vision carried a sense of synchronic totality, Smith's experience seemed very much to emphasize his lack of foreknowledge. In the Wentworth letter, he recalled receiving a "promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me."¹⁶ Future time loomed beyond his adolescent reach. His vision was explicitly in the now. Where Ellen saw the great culmination of the millennial message, Joseph was temporally rooted at the beginning of a restorative process.

In keeping with its effect of raising Ellen White to a place beyond her embodied time and space, her experience also freed her from the literal and opened her to scenes of symbolic meaning. In saying this, it would be misleading to suggest that hers was an entirely allegorical vision. For people who believed in the actual return of Jesus Christ to earth, a vision depicting his arrival—especially one describing the curl of his hair and the sound of the angelic voices around him—always had an element of literalness to it. Nonetheless, symbols abounded across this panorama. The trail was temporal progression rather than an actual footpath. The light behind was the millennial messages of the past. The world below was spiritually under the Adventists, not bodily beneath

perceived to be present in the grove. "Journal, 1835–1836," 24, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed February 15, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>. The version in the Wentworth letter states that Joseph's "mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded," suggesting both a mental refocusing and a persisting sense of presence. "Church History," 1 March 1842, 706, *Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed February 17, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/1>.

16. "Church History," 1 March 1842, 707.

them. The synagogue of Satan represented all those who fought against the Adventist message rather than an actual building or congregation. Some images that came before Ellen are difficult to place exclusively in either the literal or the symbolic category; for instance, she saw Jesus with a sharp sickle in one hand and a silver trumpet in the other. Those may have been material realities as well as representative of judgment and warning. Either way, however, they mark the kind of imagery that is strikingly absent from Joseph's description of his encounter with the Father and the Son.

This is one of the contrasts of the visionary accounts that sticks out most dramatically from the comparison. When set against Ellen White's first vision, Smith's appears notably devoid of any symbolic presence. For a figure obviously capable of elaborate symbolic thought—a man who developed intricately representational temple rituals and spoke regularly of crowns and thrones as the markers of godhood—his encounter in the grove is remarkably austere. His accounts carry none of the symbolic accoutrements of sign, token, or emblem. No metaphoric images, no allegorical presences, no swords of justice or books of life. Other than the angels that appear in some of the accounts, his narrations describe just personages, bathed in light, engaged in conversation.

This element of Smith's theophany is particularly notable in light of the visionary accounts he had recently published in the Book of Mormon. Indeed, Ellen White's first vision looks more like the revelatory events that occupy the opening book of Nephi, such as the symbols of Lehi's dream or the imagery of Nephi's angelic flight into the future. As with Ellen's vision, Lehi's dream is full of symbols: trees and rivers and people along a path. As with Ellen, an angel tells Nephi where to look amid the scenes playing out before him. As with Ellen, time collapses for Nephi into a shared temporal frame. As with Ellen, Nephi sees both literal history (such as the birth of Jesus) and symbolic images (such as the whore of Babylon).¹⁷ Some elements of Lehi's, Nephi's, and Ellen's experiences, in fact, are so similar as to have drawn charges of plagiarism from anti-Adventist polemicists.¹⁸ Such antagonizing claims of copying are not very convincing, but the similarities they point to are undeniably remarkable.

17. See 1 Nephi 8–14.

18. See Dale Ratzlaff, "The Mormon Connection: Did Ellen White Copy from Joseph Smith?" *Proclamation Magazine* (Summer 2015), <http://www.lifeassuranceministries.org/proclamation/2015/2/themormonconnect.html>.

In fairness, one could argue that Joseph's first vision is somewhat more like Lehi's first vision described in 1 Nephi 1—where the heavens opened to reveal the Father and the Son, the latter coming to stand before Lehi in his room—but from there Lehi's vision expands into something much more comprehensive, a revelation of secret abominations and of impending judgments. Lehi's visuals are also quite different from Joseph's: God sits on a throne and Jesus proffers a book of prophecies. Neither first vision in the Book of Mormon—Lehi's nor, especially, Nephi's—matches all that well with Joseph's. This point becomes especially clear in light of the fact that in many respects they match much better with Ellen's. When Nephi describes his first visionary experience as being “carried away” by the Spirit, he certainly sounds more like Ellen than Joseph.¹⁹

This is hardly the only such sharpening contrast borne out by comparison. Whereas Joseph Smith's impulse in the run-up to his vision was to query about the state of his own soul or get information on his search for a true church, Ellen White's concern was for the status of a people. That is, in comparison, Joseph's vision was a rather individualistic experience, while Ellen's—like Lehi's and Nephi's—was about a collective. Research into the conversion experiences recorded in the early American republic suggests that there may be sociological explanations for this difference. Men and women were conditioned to think differently about the relative prominence of the individual and the community at the beginning of their quests for conversion.²⁰

There may also be more specific biographical explanations for this difference, given that by the time Ellen White had her vision, she had years of experience as a member of a marginalized and belittled group. She had lived through massive expectation and deep disappointment with the Advent people, and her vision of hope spoke to that community as a community. Joseph Smith, by contrast, had neither a peculiar

19. 1 Nephi 14:30; 2 Nephi 4:25.

20. See Susan Juster, “‘In a Different Voice’: Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America,” *American Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1989): 34–62. Juster's research only fits partially with the difference between these two visions. She holds that the completion of the conversion process tended to bring women out of a beginning point of deep community embeddedness into a state of relative individualization. The point here is not that Juster fully explains the difference we see in these visions but that her emphasis on the ways that gendered conditioning shapes the communitarian-individualized element of spiritual experience should alert us to the fact that Ellen and Joseph were coming at their visions with differently gendered identities and contrasting socializations.

people to whom he belonged nor a sense of shared global significance in his search for divine guidance. These things would come later. Indeed, in 1820 he was at an age when one's egocentrism factors more prominently than in later stages of life; Ellen essentially shared that age but with countervailing social concerns.²¹ Particular moments in their own life stories seem strikingly reflected in the kinds of visions they experienced. The biographical contexts of the two experiences certainly help account for their differences in form and structure. Even the very setting of their prayers speaks to their contrasting circumstances: Joseph knelt in a seeker's isolation, while Ellen gathered in shared sorrow with other disappointed Adventists.

Surely, too, the sorts of theological crises that were on their minds informed their sense of what God showed them. Ellen White was thinking intently about the Millennium, and there is considerable evidence to suggest that the visionary experiences of nineteenth-century millenarians tended to come in something like the form that Ellen's first vision took: panoramic views of significant scope with literal and symbolic images mixed, drawing on the models of apocalyptic imagery provided in the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation.²² By way of contrast, we have no evidence that Joseph Smith had given great thought to millennialism at the time of his vision. He had much more personal kinds of concerns, and the experience he received in return spoke to that set of preoccupations. His focus was on the state of his own soul and his early exercise of religious agency, the resulting vision reflecting the relatively muted place of millennialism in his set of theological concerns. In the 1832 account, Christ tells Joseph that he is coming quickly, but the young visionary got no more information on the

21. This is not the place to dive into the complex and often contradictory research on adolescent egocentrism, except to note that some studies have seen it to peak around age 14–15. Others see it continuing or even rising into one's mid-twenties. See Angelica P. Galanaki, "Adolescent Egocentrism," *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Abnormal and Clinical Psychology*, ed. Amy Wenzel (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2017), 49–52; and Kristina D. Frankenberger, "Adolescent Egocentrism: A Comparison among Adolescents and Adults," *Journal of Adolescence* 23, no. 3 (June 2000): 343–54.

22. See, for instance, Nimrod Hughes, *A Solemn Warning to All the Dwellers upon the Earth* (New York: Largin and Thompson, 1812); Samuel Ingalls, *A Dream or Vision by Samuel Ingalls of Dunham in the Province of Lower Canada on the Night of Sept 2 1809* (Windsor, Vt.: n.p., 1810); and William E. Foy, *The Christian Experience of William E. Foy, Together with the Two Visions He Received in the Months of Jan. and Feb. 1842* (Portland: J. and C. H. Pearson, 1845).

coming culmination.²³ Two very different visions seem reflective of two very different circumstances and two contrasting sets of questions.

Conclusion: A Modest Apology

As I noted at the outset, despite the apologetic impulses that have often flowed—frequently unacknowledged—into comparative religion, I consider the comparison of Ellen White and Joseph Smith to give the lie to the usefulness of such. The comparison does not confirm the superior authenticity of one over the other. Furthermore, from a personal standpoint, I cannot even say that one clearly surpasses the other for its visionary artistry, in part because—though they are both called *visions*—they are in fact such categorically divergent experiences. Different questions, different answers, different cultures of vision. I can see certain features of each more clearly when I position them against one another, but they defy any sort of facile assessment of one’s superiority over the other. This comparison will not be put to apologetic purpose—with one possible, modest exception.

The comparison, in ways I did not fully expect at the outset, did eventually come to speak to a question of authenticity—not in the sense of one appearing more authentic than the other but in the sense that the results of the comparison speak to a set of specific questions that have circulated around Joseph Smith’s account. Specifically, they touch on this persisting question of whether the narrating of this vision in the 1830s and early 1840s—many years after its purported occurrence—was an effort to bolster Joseph’s prophetic authority rather than an honest recounting of an actual experience.

I did not appreciate until I laid these visions side by side how much Joseph’s accounts did not include. When he began recounting this experience, he had published the Book of Mormon, but *his* first vision looked little like Lehi’s and nothing like Nephi’s. When he began recording his vision, he was enmeshed among a people who had shared the experience of persecution and were then struggling mightily for collective survival and a cohering story, and yet the vision had little to offer by way of common purpose or identity. By the time he was recording this experience, he had reason to seek to consolidate his prophetic authority, and yet rather than claim a kind of panoramic comprehensiveness, his vision amplified the piecemeal and personal nature of revelation. By the

23. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 17, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>.

time he began recording these experiences, he had spent a lot of time thinking and writing about the specifics of the Millennium—and had published epic and sometimes symbolic scriptural depictions of grand, global sweep—but in this first vision, there is no scene of global conflict, no guide to world events, no apocalyptic emblems to unravel. Again and again, the vision that Joseph began recording in the 1830s seems to disregard the pressing issues of that period in his prophetic career and focus instead on the preoccupations of a young soul seeking personal comfort and direction. This point becomes especially clear in contrast to Ellen White's very different first vision.

While the comparison of Joseph Smith's vision to Ellen White's does not elevate one over the other in their competition for credibility, it has drawn my attention to certain absences in Joseph's accounts of which I had previously been only dully aware. This awareness, sharpened in comparative context, has accordingly nudged me toward the conclusion that the first vision as it is recorded in the 1830s and 1840s looks more like the sort of experience the adolescent Joseph would have sought than the sort of vision the adult Joseph might have conjured. This is, to be sure, comparison-as-art rather than comparison-as-science, but its results seem nonetheless vivid.

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