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Account of Joseph's First Vision: Compared with Biblical Records of Divine Manifestations

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Compared with Biblical Records of Divine Manifestations

By J. M. Sjodahl

To a thoughtful reader of the historical account of the first vision of the Prophet Joseph, his extreme youth at the time he received that glorious manifestation suggests some such questions: Is it credible that God would choose a mere boy as his messenger? Does the Almighty ignore men who have laboriously accumulated the theological and philosophical wealth of the schools—men matured in thought and well moulded by experience—when he needs a special messenger? Would he send a child in preference to a Luther, a Knox, a Wesley, a Zinzen-dorff, a Jonathan Edwards, a Spurgeon?

If we scan the pages of sacred history for the answer to those important queries, we find that he does. We learn that at the most important epochs in human history, God has almost invariably selected young boys for his special messengers.

The life of Samuel is an illustration.

In the period between Joshua and Eli—for about 250 years—the voice of inspiration had been but feebly heard in the land, owing to the waywardness of the people. As a consequence, great political and religious changes were impending. The rule of the priesthood of God was about to be supplanted by kingly authority in accordance with the pagan pattern, and the state was to be divided and broken up. Calamities were to multiply. As the dark clouds gathered and lowered in threatening masses, the Lord decided to raise up a prophet to warn the people and interpret “the signs of the times” to them. His choice fell upon Samuel, who was a boy, twelve years of age, when he received his first vision.

In the life of the Prophet Jeremiah we have another illustration.

He, too, was called to the prophetic office at a time when great political and ecclesiastical catastrophes were approaching. He lived to witness the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the overthrow of the Jewish polity then existing. It was his special mission to warn the people. Jeremiah received his call when he was yet “a child” (Jer. 1:6), and the Lord assured him that he had been “sanctified” and “ordained” a prophet unto the nations even before his entrance into this world. (Jer. 1:5.)

The beautiful story of Daniel is another illustration of the same truth.

He was carried captive to Babylon when a boy between twelve and eighteen years of age. Three years later he received the divine revelation which enabled him to interpret the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, and which established him in his prophetic office, for which he had prepared himself by the faithful observance of the Word of Wisdom and the laws of God generally.

John the Baptist was another mighty prophet, raised up on the very eve of the Mosaic dispensation. He was dedicated to that calling from the beginning of his existence. We read of him that he was baptized in his childhood, and that, when he was eight days old, he was ordained by the angel of God unto the power with which he was especially endowed, namely, "to overthrow the kingdom of the Jews" and prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. (Doc. and Cov. 84:28.)

We might add to these illustrations of God's choice of special representatives, the accounts of Joseph in Egypt, of David, the shepherd boy, of Timothy, the beloved companion of Paul, and of our Lord himself who, at the age of twelve years, in the Temple halls, astonished the rabbis and doctors of law with his questions and answers. They all teach the same great truth—a truth which the boys especially should endeavor to have engraved upon their hearts. They show us that when great changes in the regular course of events of human history are about to take place; when the heavens are about to be shaken and the earth to tremble, and when the waves of the sea are to heave beyond their bounds; when the Lord needs a special messenger to warn men of what is coming, he invariably selects a young boy, a child, one who is pure and uncontaminated, free from prejudices, and of sterling character and virtues. Such a boy was Joseph Smith, who was called to the prophetic office on the eve of an old dispensation and the dawn of a new, as were Samuel, Jeremiah, and John the Baptist. The Prophet Joseph is in the same class as these. And thus his very youth is strong presumptive evidence of the divine origin and authenticity of the vision.

Further impregnable evidence appears when we compare the account of this vision with the records of some of the manifestations granted to other great prophets.

Isaiah saw the Lord enthroned in glory, but it is evident that the vision was accompanied by some effort of the powers of darkness to frustrate God's plans, for the prophet exclaimed: "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips." (Is. 6:5.) He was rescued from this influence by a divine messenger. Daniel's experience by the river Hiddekel was similar. When he stood in the presence of a being from the

other side, he fell to the ground (Dan. 10:1-18), and there was no strength in him until he had been freed from the evil power. Even his companions were seized with fear, and fled. Saul, on the road to Damascus, in the presence of the divine light that appeared to him, fell to the ground, trembling and blinded. John, the Revelator, fell down as dead, when he saw his glorified Master on the Isle of Patmos. (Rev. 1:17.)

Such was the experience the Prophet Joseph had on that ever memorable day of his first vision. He felt himself in the grasp of some evil power, thick darkness fell upon him, and he feared that his last hour had come. It was then that he was saved by the appearance of the divine Personages in the heavenly light. And thus, the marvelous story of the Prophet Joseph's first vision, when compared with Scripture records, bears the imprint of truth on every line.

If a modern writer of fiction had composed a story of a heavenly vision, he would, in all probability, have embellished his paragraphs with details of the features of the "angels;" with descriptions of their robes, golden crowns, harps, and especially their wings, for these things went to make up popular notions a century ago, much of it having been borrowed from Dante's and Milton's poems. But the Prophet Joseph's narrative is not burdened with any such concepts. Rather, it is contrary to what a writer of popular fiction would have presented. It reads like a chapter of the Word of God, and it, therefore, comes to us with the irresistible force of truth.

Compare this story with the accounts extant of some alleged spiritual manifestations that have become famous.

Mohammed claimed that Gabriel visited him in a cave on Mount Hira and there gave him the revelations that were collected later and published as the *Koran*. Swedenborg, the founder of a sect that bears his name, in 1743 explained that "the eyes of his inward man" had been opened to see heaven, hell, and the world of spirits, and that he had been enabled to converse with deceased acquaintances and even with many distinguished men of antiquity. The modern Spiritualists have their mediums, their ouija boards, and other contraptions, through which, as they claim, they communicate with the world beyond the veil. Mrs. Eddy, the founder of "Christian Science," also has a strange account of how she was inspired to begin her work of healing.

All accounts of these, and similar, movements, are very different from the stories we have of true revelations and visions of divine origin, including that of Joseph's first vision. That story, as we have seen, bears irrefutable evidence, both external and internal, of truth.