

Part I

Restoration of the Doctrine of Divine Embodiment

One of the most distinctive insights consistently taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith is that the members of the Godhead are embodied persons.

The understanding that the Father and the Son are fully embodied persons was clearly stated by the Prophet Joseph Smith in his 1843 declaration of that doctrine. This declaration was first included in Doctrine and Covenants 130 in 1876, and it was part of the 1880 edition, which was officially accepted by Church members in the October 1880 general conference as revelation “from God, and binding upon us as a people and as a Church.”⁶ On these points, there is consensus. But what Joseph Smith and fellow Church members believed about divine embodiment in the 1830s is a matter that requires close examination. In this section, I trace the origin and development of the doctrine of divine embodiment in the revelations and reflections of Joseph Smith, showing that the doctrine was both explicit and implicit in these and other data from the beginning of his ministry. Only the doctrinal clarification that the Father’s humanlike body is composed of exalted flesh and bones cannot be clearly shown to have been understood prior to the Nauvoo period. I draw my evidence primarily from the Book of Mormon, Joseph’s inspired revision of the Bible, his several accounts of the First Vision, and the *Lectures on Faith*, with brief mention of some of the external evidence and the historical context.

My reading of the evidence leads me to reject two propositions: (1) that the doctrine of divine embodiment was articulated for the first time in 1838, and (2) that prior to 1838 Latter-day Saints understood God to be an immaterial being. I call the first conjecture the late development theory and the second the immaterialist theory.

Although LDS historians have not spoken in exactly these terms, some of their statements may be understood as espousing one or both of these theories. Three factors drive this understanding (or possible misunderstanding).

⁶Woodford, *Historical Development*, 1:91-92.

First, some writers have tended to diminish any differences between LDS teachings and other Christian doctrines in the 1830s. For example, James B. Allen asks:

What did the Mormons believe about the nature and character of God in the 1830's? . . . Perhaps the most significant observation to be made about the pre-Nauvoo concept of God held by ordinary Mormons is that it was not radically different from some other Christian perceptions.⁷

In what respects were LDS and other Christian teachings “not radically different”? Allen explains:

Many ordinary Christians . . . probably thought of God and Christ as separate entities, though they may not have thought of the Father as having corporeal existence (i.e., a tangible body of flesh). Some, at least, emphasized the idea that God was a *person*, though . . . this did not imply physical shape, form, or place.⁸

This does not mean that Allen understood early Mormon ideas to be *identical* to these Christian teachings, especially to those that denied that God had a body of any kind. He is silent on that point.

Second, authors have not been careful to define clearly what they mean by such terms as *spirit*, *absolute spirit*, *material*, *materialistic*, *corporeal*, *body*, *person*, *personage*, or *personal being*. Allen, for instance, states that the fifth *Lecture on Faith*

specifically separated the persons of the Father and the Son, though in terms that did not impute corporeality to the Father. The lecture implied quite the opposite. . . . The distinction between the Father as a “personage of spirit” and the Son as a “personage of tabernacle” certainly suggests that the Father was not thought of as having a physical, material body.⁹

But then Allen does not clarify whether the early Saints thought of God as being an immaterial person, having no body at all, or as having a nonphysical body, albeit still material. Without careful definition of the critical terms, Allen may be easily construed as espousing the immaterialist theory.

⁷James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 47.

⁸Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental,” 48; italics in the original.

⁹Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental,” 49.

Third, some writers affirm the late development theory quite explicitly, apparently overlooking contrary data. For instance, the claim that “the first printed description in Mormon sources of an anthropomorphic corporeal God”¹⁰ appeared in 1838, apparently overlooks the fact that the idea of divine embodiment was already present in many respects in the Book of Mormon.

These three factors surface particularly in Thomas G. Alexander’s article, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine,” which states:

The doctrine of God preached and believed [in the LDS Church] before 1835 was essentially trinitarian. . . . The Lectures on Faith . . . did not define a materialistic, tritheistic Godhead. . . . [Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and Latter-day Saints at that time] believed in an absolute spiritual Father. . . . Certain ideas which developed between 1832 and 1844 were internalized after 1835 and accepted by the Latter-day Saints. This was particularly true of the material anthropomorphism of God and Jesus Christ.¹¹

Such statements allow little room for an early LDS belief in an embodied God of any kind.

That the immaterialist and late development theories have enjoyed some currency is evidenced in Grant Underwood’s review of Milton Backman’s *The Heavens Resound*:

Those who have kept abreast of developments in the field of doctrinal history will wonder, for example, why Backman retains the older view that Kirtland Saints understood God the Father to have a material body, when James Allen, Thomas Alexander, and others have

¹⁰Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental,” 50, referring to Pratt who wrote, “We worship a God who has both body and parts: who has eyes, mouth and ears.” Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled: Zion’s Watchman Unmasked and Its Editor, Mr. La Roy Sunderland Exposed: Truth Vindicated: The Devil Mad, and Priestcraft in Danger* (New York: Parley P. Pratt, 1838), 29. Allen recognizes that while there was still no creedal statement on divine corporeality at that time, “it is likely that many Mormons held an anthropomorphic view.”

¹¹Thomas G. Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” *Sunstone* 10 (May 1985): 9–11. This is a reprint of the article that appeared in *Sunstone* 5 (July–August 1980): 24–33.

Others apparently asserting the late development and immaterialist theories include Dan Vogel, “The Earliest Mormon Concept of God,” in *Line upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 17–33. See also Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 4th ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1982), 169.

persuasively demonstrated that they certainly regarded God as a personage of spirit.¹²

Similarly, Underwood takes another historian, David Brion Davis, to task for not thinking “that the Saints in the 1830s held views of the Godhead much closer to those of their neighbors.”¹³

Yet what evidence is there for the late development and immaterialist theories? Surprisingly, given the weight these theories have been accorded, I find not one piece of direct evidence that the Prophet Joseph Smith ever asserted that God is nonembodied. From the literature, I have been able to extract only two arguments, which I call (a) the argument from God-as-spirit, and (b) the argument from creedal terminology. The first argument starts with the premise that Joseph and his LDS contemporaries referred to God (or, at least, to God the Father) as a spirit. If so, they must have understood him to be an immaterial or unembodied being.¹⁴ The second argument is a much broader version of argument (a). It begins with the premise that until at least 1835, Mormons often referred to God (or at least God the Father) in language reminiscent of classical Christian creeds. Therefore, they must have understood him to be an immaterial or unembodied being.¹⁵

¹²Grant Underwood, “Sounding Brass or Tinkling Cymbal?” *Sunstone* 10, no. 9 (1985): 43; Backman, p. 232, states that the *Lectures on Faith* “implied that the Father and Son are material beings in a form like created man” and that “Joseph Smith undoubtedly understood in the 1830s that spirit is matter.”

¹³Grant Underwood, “The New England Origins of Mormonism Revisited,” *Journal of Mormon History* 15 (1989): 16–17.

¹⁴Alexander cites two sources for the claim that early Mormons referred to God as an absolute personage of spirit: (1) The Book of Mormon (with Abinadi’s sermon “in Mosiah chapters 13 and 14 [being] a good example”), and (2) the *Lectures on Faith* (discussed below). Alexander, “Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine” (1985), 8–9. I find no such reference in Mosiah 13 or 14. In Mosiah 15:1–5, Abinadi gives different names to two aspects of Christ’s existence, identifying Christ’s sonship with his flesh (his incarnation) and Christ’s fatherhood with his spirit; but the contrast here is between spirit and flesh, not between spirit and body. Book of Mormon writers explicitly equate being a spirit with being embodied in humanlike form, as is discussed below.

¹⁵As evidence for the second premise, Alexander cites (1) an 1832 article in the *Evening and the Morning Star*: God “is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting, the same unchangeable God, the framer of heaven and earth and all things which are in them”; (2) a letter by Warren A. Cowdery published in an 1834 issue of the *Messenger and Advocate*: God “is a great first cause, prime mover, self-existent, independent and all wise being . . . immutable in his purposes

Before proceeding further, it will be worthwhile to clarify the logic of these arguments. First, construed as deductive arguments, both are nonsequiturs—their conclusions do not follow logically from their respective premises. Second, understood as inductive arguments, (a) and (b) are weak, and both depend on a third argument (c), which is only implicit. It asserts that in the first several years of the Restoration, there is no record that Joseph taught or Mormons believed that God is embodied. Therefore, no such teaching or belief existed. This argument, which is an argument from silence, is critical to the claim that before 1838 Church members believed God to be immaterial. Only if there were no (or maybe very scant) direct evidence of early belief in an embodied God would a weak inductive inference to a belief in nonembodiment have any credibility. Conversely, if there were considerable direct evidence for early Mormon belief—especially on the part of Joseph Smith—in an embodied deity, the arguments from God-as-spirit, from creedal terminology, and from silence would all be refuted.¹⁶ What, then, does the record show?

The Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon, translated by Joseph Smith in 1829 and first published in 1830, provides early revelatory data affirming divine embodiment.¹⁷ While some 283 passages in the Book of

and unchangeable in his nature”; and (3) numbers 5 and 6 of the *Lectures on Faith*: the Father is “the only supreme governor, an independent being, in whom all fulness and perfection dwells; who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient; without beginning of days or end of life.” Alexander, “Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine” (1985), 9. The analogical inference from (a) “Some early Mormons in some respects apparently held views of God similar to those of classical Christians” to (b) “Therefore, like classical Christians generally, they also believed God to be nonembodied” is weak.

¹⁶In challenging the late development and immaterialist theories, I am not questioning the general thesis that Joseph’s (and Latter-day Saint) understanding of God was enlarged over time. Indeed, in this article, I suggest that we do not know, before the Nauvoo period, how much Joseph understood concerning the Father’s humanlike body consisting of flesh and bones.

¹⁷All Book of Mormon scriptures quoted in this subsection have been checked against and found consistent with the original manuscript or (where necessary) the printer’s manuscript. Royal Skousen, ed., “Book of Mormon Critical Text Project,” Department of English, Brigham Young University.

Mormon text refer directly to either God's body or his body parts,¹⁸ three passages recording divine appearances are especially explicit. The first two confirm that God the Son (or Jesus Christ) was embodied in humanlike form in both his premortal and his postmortal (resurrected) states, and the third apparently affirms that the Holy Ghost is also embodied. The Book of Mormon is seemingly silent on whether God the Father is also embodied.¹⁹

1. The account in 3 Nephi 11 of the visit of the resurrected Christ to the Nephite and Lamanite survivors in Bountiful shows the postmortal Lord to be a humanlike, embodied being. His first appearance was announced by God the Father: "Behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name—hear ye him" (3 Ne. 11:7). In response to the Father's announcement, the survivors

cast their eyes up . . . toward heaven . . . [and] saw a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them. . . . [And] he stretched forth his hand and spoke unto the people saying: Behold, I am Jesus

¹⁸See Susan Ward Easton [Black], "Book of Mormon: Nature of God," Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

¹⁹This conclusion is based on a social trinitarian reading of the Book of the Mormon. Social trinitarianism holds that the Godhead consists of three separate and distinct persons, or centers of consciousness, who together constitute one perfectly harmonious social unit. This I understand to be LDS doctrine. However, some writers, such as Dan Vogel, deny that the Book of Mormon reflects a social trinitarian notion of God. Rather, they take the Book of Mormon writers, as well as the earliest Mormons, to have a modalistic view of God. See Vogel, "Concept of God," 24–25. Modalism is the view that God is one individual person who appears in three different modes: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But such a modalist interpretation of the Book of Mormon would also imply that God the Father is embodied in humanlike form: qua Father, God is embodied as a premortal personage of spirit; and qua Son, he is embodied as a personage of flesh and bones. A full discussion of modalism in the early Church is outside the scope of this paper, but I believe Vogel's claim is mistaken. As Vogel himself acknowledges, modalism is seemingly inconsistent with much data (24)—for example, with Joseph's 1830 revision of Genesis 1:26–27: "And I God said to mine Only Begotten, let us make man" and the Father's introduction of his "Beloved Son" to the Bountiful survivors (3 Ne. 11). I believe that the social trinitarianism model of the Godhead as set out in the 1916 First Presidency declaration on the Father and the Son more comprehensively and illuminatingly coheres with all the Book of Mormon references to God and the Godhead, satisfactorily accommodating the apparently modalistic passages. Of course, this discussion by no means implies that Joseph and his contemporaries understood the relevant passages the same way.

Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. . . . Come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet. . . . And . . . the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet. (3 Ne. 11:8-10, 14-15)²⁰

A popular (though unorthodox) Christian notion exists that Christ was resurrected with a body of flesh and bones (which is certainly the clear witness of the New Testament record)²¹ but disembodied himself when he ascended into heaven after his forty-day ministry.²² The Book of Mormon, however, affirms that the postascension Christ has a body: “And it came to pass that in the ending of the thirty and fourth year, . . . after the ascension of Christ into heaven he did truly manifest himself unto them—Showing his body unto them, and ministering unto them” (3 Ne. 10:18-19).²³ The Book of Mormon thus shows that God the Son is embodied, even after his ascension.

2. The book of Ether tells of the appearance of the Lord in his spirit body to the brother of Jared long before the Incarnation

²⁰See also 3 Nephi 10:18 and 28:12.

²¹See Luke 24:36-48; and John 20:19-28.

²²On the ascension of Christ, see Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:9-11; and Ephesians 4:8-10. The New Testament writers did not deduce from the Ascension that Christ transcended his body. See J. G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine* (New York: Association Press, 1958), 60-68. The orthodox (Catholic and mainline Protestant) teaching is that Christ is in heaven with his resurrected body today.

²³Since Christ was and is commonly understood to have lived thirty-three years, the phrase “in the ending of the thirty and fourth year” augments the post-ascension dating of the American visitation. For a discussion of the dating, see S. Kent Brown and John A. Tvedtnes, *When Did Jesus Appear to the Nephites in Bountiful?* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1989); and John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 29-33. Christ ended his first visit to the Nephites and Lamanites by ascending into heaven (3 Ne. 18:38-39). However, when he visited them again the next day, he still had a body. In each of his subsequent visits, Christ was still embodied. Mormon writes, “And after that he did show himself unto them oft, and did break bread oft, and bless it, and give it unto them” (3 Ne. 26:13). Therefore, the Book of Mormon indicates that Jesus Christ continued to have a body. Furthermore, the nature of Christ’s ascension in the Book of Mormon is different from the orthodox view of the New Testament ascension. In the Book of Mormon, Christ returned or ascended to heaven several times and, rather than transcending physical limits, visits locations in time and space.

(Ether 3:6–18). The brother of Jared presented the Lord with several stones and asked him to make them luminous (Ether 3:1–4). In response,

the Lord stretched forth his hand and touched the stones one by one with his finger. And the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord; and it was as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood. (Ether 3:6)

Indeed, so striking was the finger's resemblance to flesh and blood that the brother of Jared mistook it for the same. The Lord then revealed himself more fully to the brother of Jared, specifically identifying himself as Jesus Christ (Ether 3:14). He declared:

Seest thou that ye are created after mine own image? Yea, even all men were created in the beginning after mine own image. Behold this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after the body of my spirit; and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh. (Ether 3:15–16)

Moroni editorially commented that “Jesus showed himself unto this man in the spirit, even after the manner and in the likeness of the same body even as he showed himself unto the Nephites” (Ether 3:17).

From this text, the following points seem evident: (1) Jesus Christ is God (Ether 3:18); (2) as a spirit, prior to his incarnation, he was nonetheless embodied; (3) his body, though not yet composed of flesh and bones, was strikingly similar in both form and appearance to a human body; and (4) our bodies of flesh and bones are created in the very image of his premortal spirit body, which is thus humanlike in form. From these points, a very significant conclusion can be drawn: both Moroni anciently and presumably Joseph Smith in 1829 as the translator of Moroni's account understood a spirit to be an embodied person, humanlike in form, even if less tangible than one of flesh and bones. This understanding also finds support in Joseph's cultural context, as will be shown below. Thus, one would be mistaken to infer that, early on, Joseph (and his LDS contemporaries) must have believed that God is a nonembodied being simply because they referred to him as a spirit. Unlike classical Christians generally, Latter-day Saints did not equate *spirit* with immateriality.

3. In a third notable passage, the Book of Mormon tells of Nephi's encounter with "the Spirit of the Lord" and explicitly describes "the Spirit" as being embodied in humanlike form, thus further refuting argument (a)'s equation of "spirit" with non-embodiment in early Mormon doctrine. Somewhat problematic, however, is the question of referent. Whom does the phrase "the Spirit of the Lord" denote? While it might refer to the premortal Christ²⁴ or a spirit messenger from the Lord, Sidney Sperry has argued that it refers to the Holy Ghost.²⁵ In considering Sperry's arguments, let us first note the context in which the reported encounter is set. The encounter ensued when Nephi sought personal confirmation of his father's spiritual manifestations.

I . . . was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost. . . . As I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away . . . into an exceedingly high mountain. . . . And the Spirit said unto me: Believest thou that thy Father saw the tree of which he hath spoken? And I said: Yea, thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father. And when I had spoken these words, the Spirit cried with a loud voice, saying: Hosanna to the Lord, the most high God. . . . And blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God. . . . And . . . thou shalt also behold a man descending out of heaven, and him shall ye witness; and after ye have witnessed him ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God. (1 Ne. 10:17; 11:1, 4-7)

Observe that the Spirit shouts "Hosanna to . . . the most high God" and commands Nephi to witness and to bear record of "the Son of the most High God," referring in the third person to each of these members of the Godhead.

When the Spirit showed Nephi the tree of life, Nephi asked to know the interpretation thereof—for I spake unto him as a man speaketh; for I beheld that *he was in the form of a man*; yet nevertheless, I knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord; and he spake unto me as a man speaketh with another. (1 Ne. 11:11; italics added)

Nephi reports that while the Spirit of the Lord "was in the form of a man," he was a divine being and therefore not a mere man.

²⁴If "the Spirit of the Lord" who appeared to Nephi is the premortal Christ, then this text augments the Book of Mormon teaching that even as a spirit, he has a body, humanlike in form.

²⁵Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 116-18.

That he was in “the form of a man” indicates that the Spirit of the Lord was embodied. Thus it seems that Nephi saw the spirit body of the Holy Ghost just as the Brother of Jared had seen the spirit body of Christ.

To support his conclusion that “the Spirit of the Lord” who appeared to Nephi is the Holy Ghost, Sperry gives four arguments—all of which are internal to the text. First, Nephi specifically sought personal confirmation of Lehi’s manifestation “by the power of the Holy Ghost” (1 Ne 10:17); he seemed to have meditated upon the powers and functions of the Holy Ghost at considerable length before the desired manifestation was given him (1 Ne 10:17–22). Second, Nephi said he was caught away “in the Spirit of the Lord” (1 Ne 11:1). The same expression with the phrase “of the Lord” deleted is used in the chapter in relation to Mary and to the Twelve Apostles.²⁶ In both instances, the references to the Spirit seem obviously to point to the Holy Ghost, not to the premortal Christ (compare 1 Ne. 11:19 with Matt. 1:18). Third, the phrase “Spirit of the Lord” occurs some forty times in the Book of Mormon, and in no passage where it occurs does it clearly represent the premortal Christ instead of the Holy Ghost. On the other hand, many occurrences seem to refer only to the Holy Ghost.²⁷ Fourth, whenever Nephi unquestionably refers to the premortal

²⁶“And it came to pass that I [Nephi] beheld that she [Mary] was carried away in the Spirit” (1 Ne. 11:19). “And I also beheld twelve others following him. And it came to pass that they were carried away in the Spirit from before my face, and I saw them not” (1 Ne. 11:29).

²⁷For example, in no instance where the phrase was written down after the appearance of the resurrected Christ on this continent does it refer to his premortal person: “The Spirit of the Lord did not abide in us” (Morm. 2:26), “The Spirit of the Lord hath already ceased to strive with their fathers” (Morm. 5:16), and “I fear lest the Spirit of the Lord hath ceased striving with them” (Moro. 9:4). Similarly, consider Nephi’s vision of Gentiles (evidently Columbus and others) coming to America: “And I beheld the Spirit of the Lord, that it was upon the Gentiles” (1 Ne. 13:15). Certainly “the Spirit of the Lord” does not refer to the premortal Christ because in this context Nephi envisioned a time long after Christ’s resurrection. Also, the phrase is used in passages where it clearly refers to the functions of the Holy Ghost rather than the power that emanates from deity: “The Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and they were filled with joy” (Mosi-ah 4:3); and “the Spirit of the Lord did no more preserve them; yea, it had withdrawn from them because the Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples” (Hel. 4:24; compare Rom. 8:9, 11 and 1 Cor. 3:16).

Christ, he never calls him the “Spirit of the Lord.”²⁸ Sperry concludes that “inasmuch as there is no single instance in the Book of Mormon where the term, ‘Spirit of the Lord,’ can be unequivocally equated with the pre-existent Christ,” we may reasonably believe that it refers to the Holy Ghost.²⁹ If Sperry is correct, then written revelatory data from as early as 1829 suggests the embodiment of the Holy Ghost.³⁰ But, however this matter is resolved, the Book of Mormon apparently affirms that the Holy Ghost has a body and unequivocally affirms that God the Son is an embodied being in both his preincarnational and postascensional states.

Joseph Smith’s Inspired Revision of the Bible

That Joseph understood the doctrine of divine embodiment at least as early as 1830 is strongly corroborated by passages from his inspired revision of the Bible, the Joseph Smith Translation (hereafter JST).³¹ Work on the revision was underway in June 1830,

²⁸For example, when Nephi had his first visitation from the Lord, he said, “I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me” (1 Ne. 2:16). Subsequently, when referring to the prophet Isaiah, Nephi said, “He verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him” (2 Ne. 11:2). In other verses of the same chapter, he refers to the coming Redeemer as the Christ.

²⁹Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 118. Elder James E. Talmage and President Marion G. Romney also taught that “the Spirit of the Lord” who appeared to Nephi was the Holy Ghost. See Marion G. Romney, “The Holy Ghost,” *Ensign* 4 (May 1974): 90.

³⁰This data also suggests that the Holy Ghost is a person distinct from the Father and the Son. Of course, from the fact that Joseph Smith translated this text it does not follow that he immediately understood all of its theological implications. On the other hand, in June 1844, Joseph himself claimed that he had distinguished three separate persons in the Godhead from the beginnings of the Restoration:

I wish to declare I have allways—& in all congregats. when I have preached it has been the plurality of Gods it has been preached 15 years—I have always decld. God to be a distinct personage—J.C. a sep. & distinct pers from God the Far. the H.G. was a distinct personage & or Sp & these 3 constit. 3 distinct personages & 3 Gods. (Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], 378 [hereafter cited as *WJS*])

³¹See Robert J. Matthews, *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975).

when Joseph recorded the visions of Moses, which now constitute Moses chapter 1 in the Pearl of Great Price. Joseph's report of Moses' visions begins:

The words of God, which he spake unto Moses at a time when Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain, And he saw God face to face, and he talked with him, and the glory of God was upon Moses: therefore Moses could endure his presence. (Moses 1:1-2)³²

In his revision of Genesis chapter 1, completed between June and October 1830,³³ Joseph changed the King James translation (hereafter KJV) of Genesis 1:26-27 to read:

And I, God, said unto mine Only Begotten, which was with me from the beginning, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and it was so. . . . And I, God, created man in mine own image, in the image of mine Only Begotten created I him; male and female created I them. (Moses 2:26-27)³⁴

Two important points, the second dependent on the first, emerge from Joseph's revision. First, while the KJV also indicates a plurality of creators, the JST identifies who they are—God the Father and God the Son.³⁵ Second, the JST discloses that man was created in the image and likeness of God the Father as well as that of God the Son, thus implying that the Father is also an embodied being, humanlike in form.

One could object, of course, that biblical passages telling of Moses seeing God "face to face" and of man's being created in

³²Except for minor punctuation and bracketed changes, this text and the following passages from Moses read the same as "Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible," Old Testament Manuscript 2, in RLDS Library-Archives, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, p. 1, lines 2-5; italics added. Thanks to Robert J. Matthews, whose photographs and typescript of Old Testament Manuscript 2 were used to check the passages.

³³Matthews, *Joseph Smith's Translation*, 26-27.

³⁴Old Testament Manuscript 2, p. 4, lines 26-33.

³⁵This datum, which discloses two divine individuals (God and his Only Begotten), contradicts Vogel's hypothesis that at this stage the prophet understood the Godhead to consist of only one individual or person who appears in three different modes (modalism). Other changes in the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) may suggest modalism, but when changes such as the one just quoted are taken into account, the issue is less than clear. Based on an analysis of Book of Mormon passages, Van Hale also cautions against too quickly asserting that the early Mormon concept of God was modalistic. Van Hale, "Defining the Contemporary Mormon Concept of God," in Bergera, *Line upon Line*, 13.

God's own image have long been construed so as to avoid any implication of divine embodiment. As discussed below, for example, Origen argued that it is not our body, but only our inner man or spirit that is created in God's image and that biblical references to God's body must all be understood metaphorically. Joseph Smith repudiated these de-anthropomorphizing biblical constructions, however, in his very significant emendation of Genesis 5:1–2, which was completed on November 30, 1830. In these verses, Moses says, "In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; *in the image of his own body*, male and female, created he them" (Moses 6:8–9; italics added).³⁶ Evidently, Joseph added the clarifying phrase, "of his own body," to distinguish his understanding of the text from any incorporealist construction. From Joseph's revision of these biblical texts, it appears clear that in 1830 he understood that both the Father and Son are embodied and that man's body was made in their image. Moreover, Joseph's revisions cohere tightly with the passages from the Book of Mormon already discussed. Taken together, they show that Joseph understood the doctrine of divine embodiment at least as early as 1830. He may well have learned it some ten years earlier when the Father and the Son appeared to him in the grove near Palmyra, New York—the starting point of the Restoration.

The First Vision

Joseph Smith's account of the appearance of God the Father and Jesus Christ to him in the spring of 1820 near Palmyra, New York (the First Vision) has long been understood as initially grounding his belief that both the Father and the Son are embodied.³⁷

³⁶Old Testament Manuscript 2, p. 11, lines 16–18.

³⁷For instance, after retelling Joseph's account of the First Vision, Elder David B. Haight stated, "Joseph now knew God is in the form of a man. He has a voice, he speaks, he is kind, he answers prayers. His Son is like the Father—but a separate and distinct person." David B. Haight, "Joseph Smith the Prophet," *Ensign* 19 (November 1979): 23. Similarly, in 1883, First Presidency member George Q. Cannon said, "Joseph saw that the Father had a form; that He had a head; that He had arms; that He had limbs; that He had feet; that He had a face and a tongue with which to express His thoughts." "Discourse by President George Q. Cannon," in Brigham Young and others, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 24:372 (September 2, 1883). But Allen argues



First Vision, by Gary E. Smith (1942–). Oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 1979. Courtesy Blaine T. Hudson.

Smith's depiction of the visit of God the Father and God the Son to the Prophet Joseph Smith treats the resurrected beings' corporeality matter-of-factly, neither under- nor overemphasizing it.

Indeed, Joseph's official account of the visitation, first dictated in 1838,³⁸ makes that understanding very plausible.

Just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. . . . When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—"This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" (JS-H 1:16-17)

Joseph saw two personages—the Father and the Son—standing above him in the air. For one accepting on faith both Joseph's veracity as a witness and the reliability of his memory of such an epochal event, perhaps no more is needed.

But some have challenged the historicity of this account, claiming it to be inconsistent with Joseph's earlier accounts and nothing more than a pragmatic reconstruction, deliberate or otherwise, designed to serve Joseph's ever-enlarging theological views.³⁹ Whatever credence might be given to such a conjecture, it is irrelevant here. On the issue of divine embodiment of separate deities there would be no need for reconstruction, for, as already shown, this doctrine is clearly evidenced in 1829 and 1830. Any ambiguities in documents later than 1830 should then, reasonably, be resolved in light of these earlier statements.

According to Joseph's 1838 account, he saw the Father and the Son in 1820. Though he reportedly told some of his acquaintances of the vision soon after it occurred,⁴⁰ no contemporaneous record exists of the descriptions he gave. Indeed, Allen argues that the

it was not until the 1840s that the First Vision was seen to have these implications. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental," 54-61.

³⁸The account was part of Joseph's history of the Church, which was published serially in *Times and Seasons* beginning March 1, 1842.

³⁹See Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *The Case against Mormonism*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Company, 1967), 1:128; and Vogel, "Concept of God," 27.

⁴⁰"Some few days after . . . this vision," Joseph Smith told a Methodist minister. Joseph Smith, "History of the Church," A-1, 3-4, Joseph Smith Papers, Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, quoted in Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9 (spring 1969): 290. See also Joseph Smith-History 1:21-22. Joseph may also have told his mother (he did tell her, "I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true"). Jessee, "First Vision," 290-94. See also Joseph Smith-History 1:20.

vision was not widely known until after it was reported in several publications in the 1840s.⁴¹ Nonetheless, Joseph's two known pre-1838 accounts of the vision, while not so explicit or detailed as the official version, do reflect his understanding that God is embodied.

The earliest known account was written in 1832 by Joseph Smith.⁴² The other is a journal-style entry in Joseph's history. The entry, written by Warren A. Cowdery, bears the date of Monday, November 9, 1835.⁴³ These accounts differ somewhat in the details they mention, but both are compatible as partial descriptions of the same event. The 1832 account (with original spellings but not typographical sigla) reads:

A pillar of light above the brightness of the Sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the Spirit of God and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and *I Saw the Lord and he Spake unto me* Saying Joseph my Son thy Sins are forgiven thee. go thy way walk in my Statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world.⁴⁴

While this account does not explicitly assert the Lord's spatiality or embodiment, both are reasonably implied. For Joseph "saw" the Lord, apparently within a pillar of light, and the Lord "spake" to him. Though traditional exegetes have long construed similar biblical passages figuratively,⁴⁵ there is no reason to think that Joseph meant them other than literally, for in 1832 he already understood the Father and the Son to be embodied.

Joseph's 1835 account of the First Vision reads:

A pillar of fire appeared above my head; which presently rested down upon me, and filled me with unspeakable joy. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first: he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee.⁴⁶

⁴¹Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental," 43-53.

⁴²The dating and authorship are established in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:3 (hereafter cited as *PJS*). See also Jessee, "First Vision," 277-78.

⁴³Jessee, "First Vision," 283; and *PJS*, 1:124.

⁴⁴Quoted in Milton V. Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 157; italics added.

⁴⁵See point 4 of the section on Origen as witness.

⁴⁶Joseph Smith, "History of the Church," A-1, p. 121, reproduced and quoted in Jessee, "First Vision," 284-85; and *PJS*, 1:127.

Although in this report, Joseph does not explicitly identify the two personages by name, the second personage's declaration, "thy sins are forgiven thee," apparently identifies him with the Lord of the 1832 account. The Lord (or Jesus) appears after the first personage, and both personages appear spatially "in the midst of this pillar of flame."

It is significant that Joseph refers to the Father and the Son by the term, *personage*, as opposed to the more generic terms, *being*, or even *person*, for Joseph and his contemporaries apparently understood *personage* to specifically signify an embodied person. This accepted meaning is corroborated by examining, in context, contemporaneous uses of the term and by consulting dictionaries of the period. The following instances are especially enlightening in helping us see how the term was used.

[June 24, 1834; recorded between 1842 and 1844] I left Rush Creek the same day in company with David Whitmer and two other brethren, for the western part of Clay county. While traveling, we called at the house of Mr. Moss for a drink of water. The woman of the house shouted from the door, that they had "no water for Mormons," that they were "afraid of the cholera," etc., at the same time throwing out her arms as if defending herself from the cholera *in the form of personage*. (Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:115; italics added) [By virtue of being a *personage*, something has a specific form, impliedly humanlike.]

[October 2, 1841] The angel that appeared to John on the Isle of Patmos was a translated or resurrected body [i.e., *personage*], Jesus Christ went in body after His resurrection, to minister to resurrected bodies. (Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:425; italics added; brackets and bracketed language in original text.) [By virtue of being or having a body, impliedly humanlike in form, one is a *personage*.]

[January 29, 1843]. . . The sign of the dove was instituted before the creation of the world, a witness for the Holy Ghost, and the devil cannot come in the sign of a dove. The Holy Ghost is a personage, *and is in the form of a personage*. It does not confine itself to the *form* of the dove, but in *sign* of the dove. (Smith, *History of the Church*, 5: 261; first italics added) [By virtue of being a personage, one has a specific bodily form, not dovelike but impliedly humanlike.]

[Recorded in 1839]. . . A personage appeared at my bedside, standing in the air, for his feet did not touch the floor. He had on a loose robe of most exquisite whiteness. . . . His hands were naked, and his arms also, a little above the wrist; so, also, were his feet naked, as were his legs, a little above the ankles. His head and neck were also bare. (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:11; italics added) [A human-like embodied being is a *personage*.]

In an Infobases™ search of Church historical documents for the period 1830 to 1844,⁴⁷ I found 103 distinct occurrences of the term *personage*. In every instance, the term was used to denote what was explicitly, or in context impliedly, an embodied being. *Personage* was used to describe a distinguished man or woman 28 times, a member of the Godhead 28 times, a resurrected being or angel 21 times, a body 17 times, and an embodied being but not one having flesh 9 times.

Joseph's and his fellows' employment of the term apparently reflected contemporary usage. For example, Noah Webster's 1828 edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language* provides the following as the first two entries under *personage*: "1. A man or woman of distinction; as an illustrious *personage*"; and "2. Exterior appearance; stature; air; as a tall *personage*; a stately *personage*."⁴⁸

By way of contrast, in his 1838 account of the First Vision Joseph did not describe Satan as a personage. Rather, he referred to him as "some actual being from the unseen world," "some power," and the "enemy" (JS-H 1:15-16). None of these expressions connote a visible, bodily being, though Joseph's descriptions of Satan's actions, such as, "seized upon" and "influence over me as to bind my tongue" sound very tactile (JS-H 1:16). Immediately after his description of his encounter with this unseen actual being, Joseph told of seeing "two personages." It does not appear that Joseph called them personages for lack of a better word. Rather, the contrast in descriptions indicates that *in this vision* Joseph *experienced* the beings differently—the Father and the Son as visible, fully embodied beings (and, hence, as personages) and Satan as an unseen but actual being.⁴⁹

⁴⁷LDS Collectors Library version 2.0 DOS, Infobases, Provo, Utah, 1995.

⁴⁸Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. "personage"; italics in original.

⁴⁹From this it should not be inferred that at this time Joseph did not understand that Satan is embodied. Rather, on this occasion, Joseph Smith did not experience him as such. It is easily deduced from Joseph's later theological statements that Satan has a spirit body.

Other recorded accounts of the First Vision in the 1840s clearly show, of course, that in those years Joseph understood God to be embodied. For example, in his Wentworth Letter, written for non-Mormons, Joseph attests: “I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day.”⁵⁰ Compare Orson Pratt’s 1840 version, the first known published account of the First Vision, “[Joseph] saw two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness.”⁵¹ The words *features* and *likeness* are unintelligible as references to formless beings. These must be taken as direct indications that the Father and the Son are embodied.

This conclusion no longer need rest on inference when we examine other accounts of the First Vision. Consider, for example, the description of the vision given by Alexander Neibaur, a teacher who instructed Joseph Smith in German and Hebrew. He recorded in his personal journal, dated May 24, 1844, the following account as related to him by Joseph:

[Joseph Smith] went into the Wood to pray knelt himself down . . . saw a fire towards heaven come near and nearer saw a personage in the fire light complexion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over

⁵⁰Joseph Smith composed this letter “at the request of Mr. John Wentworth, Editor and proprietor of the *Chicago Democrat*.” It was published in Nauvoo, Illinois, in *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 1, 1842): 706. Reproduced in Jessee, “First Vision,” 296; and *PJS*, 1:430.

⁵¹Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1840), 5, in *PJS*, 1:391. This account is almost identical to Orson Hyde’s 1842 account: “Two glorious heavenly personages stood before him, resembling each other exactly in features and stature.” *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste, eine Stimme aus dem Schoose der Erde* (A Cry from the Wilderness, A Voice from the Dust of the Earth), trans. Marvin H. Folsom (Frankfurt, Germany: n.p., 1842), quoted in *PJS*, 1:408–9. In an interview with Joseph in 1843, the *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette* (September 23, 1843) reports him as stating, “I kneeled down, and prayed, saying, ‘O Lord, what Church shall I join?’ Directly I saw a light, and then a glorious personage in the light, and then another personage, and the first personage said to the second, ‘Behold my beloved Son, hear him.’” “The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, &c.,” *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette* 58 (September 15, 1843): 3, quoted in *PJS*, 1:444.

his shoulders his right arm bear after a wile a other person came to the side of the first.⁵²

While the later first- and second-hand accounts of Joseph's first vision differ in the details they provide, all of them are plausibly read as consistent with Joseph's very early understanding that the Father and the Son are embodied persons.

The Lectures on Faith

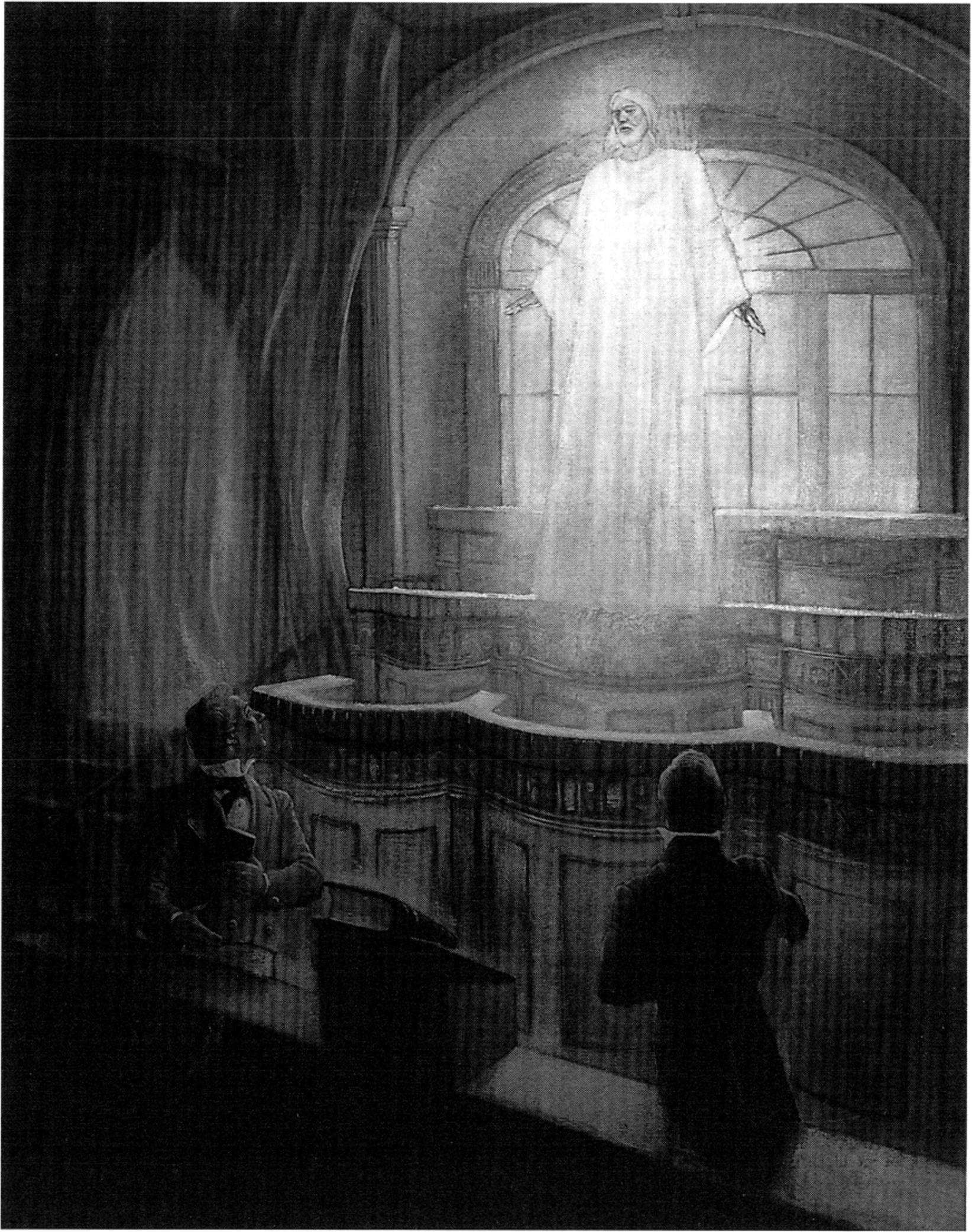
The *Lectures on Faith* were prepared in the fall of 1834; presented to the School of the Elders in Kirtland, Ohio, in November and December 1834; edited in 1835; and published in the fall of that year.⁵³ The published lectures, especially Lecture 5, show that the idea of an embodied God, introduced at least as early as 1829–30, continued to be affirmed in the mid-1830s.

The lectures were initially prepared by a committee of presiding Church officers, which included Joseph Smith. While authorship

⁵²Alexander Neibaur Journal, May 24, 1844, photographically reproduced and edited in *PJS*, 1:461–62. Interestingly, an account that the Father actually touched Joseph's eye appears in an independent recollection of a separate report of the experience given by Joseph. Charles L. Walker (1855–1902) made the following entry in his diary:

2nd February, Thursday, 1893, Attended Fast Meeting. . . . Br. John Alger said while speaking of the Prophet Joseph, that when he, John, was a small boy he heard the Prophet Joseph relate his vision of seeing The Father and the Son, *That God touched his eyes with his finger and said, 'Joseph this is my beloved Son, hear him.'* As soon as the Lord had touched his eyes with his finger he immediately saw the Savior. After meeting, a few of us questioned him about the matter and he told us at the bottom of the meeting house steps that he was in the House of Father Smith *in Kirtland* when Joseph made this declaration, and that Joseph while speaking of it put his finger to his right eye, suiting the action with the words so as to illustrate and at the same time impress the occurrence on the minds of those unto whom he was speaking. (A. Karl Larson and Katherine Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker* [Logan, Utah: Utah State University, 1980], 755–56; italics added)

⁵³For historical background on the *Lectures on Faith*, see Larry E. Dahl, "Authorship and History of the Lectures on Faith," in *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, eds. Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 1–21.



Jesus Christ Appearing to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple, by Gary E. Smith (1942–). Oil on canvas, 36" x 42", 1980. Courtesy Blaine T. Hudson. The Latter-day Saint knowledge concerning the embodiment of the resurrected Savior was reinforced by the appearance of Christ to Joseph and Oliver in the first LDS temple. Joseph Smith described Christ's appearance in this way: "His eyes were as a flame of fire; the hair of his head was white like the pure snow; his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun" (D&C 110:3).

issues are not fully resolvable now, research to date indicates that Joseph Smith, William W. Phelps, Sidney Rigdon, or Parley P. Pratt may have contributed as authors to lecture 5.⁵⁴ Regardless of actual authorship, Joseph prepared the lectures for publication, and they were published in 1835 with his sanction and approval in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Joseph, along with the other committee members, signed his name to a preface published with that edition, which states:

We have, therefore, endeavored to present, though in few words, *our* belief and when we say this, humbly trust, the faith and principles of this society as a body.

We do not present this little volume with any other expectation than that we are to be called to answer to every principle advanced. [Italics in original]

That said, for present purposes I will refer to the ideas in the lectures as if they were advanced by Joseph. The *Lectures on Faith* were retained in subsequent editions of the Doctrine and Covenants until 1921, when they were removed by the First Presidency.⁵⁵

As evidence of Joseph's 1834-35 understanding of divine embodiment, lecture 5, paragraph 2, asserts:

There are two⁵⁶ personages who constitute the great, matchless, governing, and supreme power over all things, by whom all things were created and made, that are created and made. . . . They are the Father

⁵⁴See Alan J. Phipps, "The Lectures on Faith: An Authorship Study" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1977), 66-67; Wayne A. Larsen and Alvin C. Rencher, "Who Wrote the Book of Mormon? An Analysis of Wordprints," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982), 184; and Noel B. Reynolds, review of Dahl and Tate, *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, in *BYU Studies* 32 (winter and spring 1991): 288-90.

⁵⁵For an analysis of the reasons why the *Lectures* were removed, see Richard S. Van Wagoner, Steven C. Walker, and Allen D. Roberts, "The 'Lectures on Faith': A Case Study in Decanonization," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (fall 1987): 71-77. See also Dahl, "Authorship and History of the Lectures on Faith," 16-19.

⁵⁶Since Joseph Smith here explicitly affirms that two personages exist in the Godhead (the Father and the Son), some commentators have suggested that at this time, Joseph's understanding of God was binitarian (see Vogel, Alexander, and Kirkland in Bergera, *Line upon Line*). I am not persuaded, since the same lecture repeatedly refers to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit separately and as three. Headway toward resolving this puzzle can be made by remembering that

and the Son—the Father being a personage of spirit, glory, and power, possessing all perfection and fullness, the Son, . . . a personage of tabernacle, made or fashioned like unto man, or being in the form and likeness of man, or rather man was formed after His likeness and in His image; He is also the express image and likeness of the personage of the Father.

The meaning seems clear: both the Father and the Son have human-like bodies,⁵⁷ for both are referred to as *personages*. And just as man “was formed after [the Son’s] likeness and in His image,” so also is the Son “the express image and likeness of the personage of the Father.” As already shown, the JST and book of Moses indicate Joseph understood *image* to signify bodily image.

This conclusion is further reinforced by a still closer analysis of the text, for Joseph not only refers to the Father and the Son as personages, but he also asserts that the Son is in the express image of “the personage of the Father.” How should the phrase, “personage of the Father” be understood where *personage* does not refer to the Father but apparently to something that can be predicated of the Father? Here, I believe, the term refers directly to the Father’s body. Compare the second entry under *personage* in *The Oxford English Dictionary*:

Joseph used the term *personage* to refer to a visible, humanlike, embodied being. While Joseph Smith at this time understood the Holy Ghost to be an actual being, he apparently did not yet understand him to be embodied in humanlike form (despite Nephi’s description of the “Spirit of the Lord” as embodied). Thus, Joseph describes the Godhead as consisting of three beings but only two personages. These formulations in lecture 5, which sound like Campbellite theology (Vogel, “Concept of God,” 27), may have originated with the former Campbellites Sidney Rigdon or Parley P. Pratt. Parley P. Pratt Jr., ed., *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 13–14. Even in his canonized 1843 description of the Godhead where Joseph explicitly extended the category *personage* to include the Holy Ghost, he still distinguished the Holy Ghost’s mode of embodiment from that of the Father and the Son. He says, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit” (D&C 130:22). For a helpful discussion of the status of the Holy Ghost as presented by the *Lectures on Faith*, see Robert L. Millet, “The Supreme Power over All Things: The Doctrine of the Godhead in the Lectures on Faith,” in Dahl and Tate, *Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, 231–34.

⁵⁷Lecture 5’s static description of Christ as a personage of tabernacle resolves the mostly answered objection that Christ disembodies when he goes to heaven.

2. The body of a person; chiefly with reference to appearance, stature, etc; bodily frame, figure; personal appearance. . . .

1559 R. Hall *Life Fisher* in *Fisher's Wks.* (E.E.T.S.) II. p. lxiiij, Doctor Ridley (who was a man of verie little and small personage).

1606 Bryskett *Civ. Life* 32 Well borne, vertuous, chaste, of tall and comely personage, and well spoken. . . .

1785. Cowper *Let. to Lady Hesketh* 20-24 Dec., Half a dozen flannel waistcoats . . . to be worn . . . next to my personage.⁵⁸

Consistent with Joseph's 1830 revisions of Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 5:1-2, the *Lectures on Faith* reaffirmed in 1834 that man is created in the image of the body of both the Father and the Son.⁵⁹

What, then, shall be made of the lecture's referring contrastingly to the Father as "a personage of spirit" and to the Son as "a personage of tabernacle"? Again, Webster's 1828 dictionary is helpful. It lists "our natural body" as one use of the term *tabernacle*.⁶⁰ Our natural body, I take it, is a body of flesh and bones. If so, the lectures affirm that God the Son has a flesh-and-bones body, humanlike in form, while God the Father has a spirit body, also humanlike in form.⁶¹ As mentioned, Joseph later knew that the Father, as well as the Son, has a glorious, incorruptible body of flesh and bone.⁶² No doubt, his understanding of the mode of the Father's embodiment was enlarged and refined as he continued to receive and reflect on revelation.

⁵⁸*The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "personage."

⁵⁹Alexander relies on the *Lectures on Faith* as his principal evidence for the late development and immaterialism theories. In my view, careful textual and contextual analyses of the lectures disconfirm these theories.

⁶⁰Webster, *American Dictionary*, s.v. "tabernacle."

⁶¹As further evidence for my position, note that Joseph in 1841 used the same phrase, "personage of spirit," to describe the Holy Ghost in contrast to the Father and the Son, both of whom he then described as personages of "tabernacle." *WJS*, 64. The month previous, Joseph asserted that the Holy Ghost had a spirit body. *WJS*, 62-63. Clearly, Joseph understood a "personage of spirit" to be embodied. Compare, above, the brother of Jared's description of the humanlike body of the premortal Christ as set out in Ether 3 and Tertullian's description of the soul.

⁶²Based on a semantic study of the word *spirit* in lecture 5 and other Joseph Smith writings and scriptures, Millet has considered the possibility that even at this time, Joseph Smith may have understood that the Father had a body of flesh and bones. Millet, "The Supreme Power," 225-28. See also Millet, "Joseph Smith and Modern Mormonism: Orthodoxy, Neoorthodoxy, Tension, and Tradition," *BYU Studies* 29 (summer 1989): 55-56.

External Corroborative Evidence

That the members of the Godhead are embodied persons and that Joseph Smith understood this fact are clearly indicated in the earliest recorded evidence of Mormon discourse. Yet for the pre-1838 period, questions still remain. Was this understanding merely confined to Joseph and other Church leaders or merely embedded in the revelatory discourse awaiting later extraction and explicit articulation? How widely and fully did the membership at large understand the doctrine? The answers to these questions are not so clearly indicated in available documents. However, there is some significant evidence that the doctrine was communicated and accepted within Church circles generally.⁶³ I summarize that evidence here.

1. Lucy Mack Smith, the mother of the Prophet, in an 1830 conversation with a group of three delegates from a council that was determined to stop the further publication of the Book of Mormon, acknowledged that Mormon belief in an embodied God had already provoked Methodist attack. In her history, she recounted, “the different denominations are very much opposed to us. . . . The Methodists also come, and they rage, for they worship a God without body or parts, and they know that our faith comes in contact with this principle.”⁶⁴

2. Truman Coe, a Presbyterian minister who had lived among the Saints in Kirtland for four years (1832–1836), confirms Lucy’s statement. In a letter that was published in the *Ohio Observer* on August 11, 1836, he wrote:

[The Mormons] contend that the God worshipped by the Presbyterians and all other sectarians is no better than a wooden god.

⁶³Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences,” *BYU Studies* 9 (spring 1969): 373–404.

⁶⁴Lucy Mack Smith, *The History of Joseph Smith*, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 161. Lucy apparently dictated this account of the conversation in 1845. Dan Vogel asserts that such a statement “does not mean that in 1830 Mormons were teaching that the Father has a body like the Son’s,” since this doctrine was introduced much later. Rather Vogel claims that Lucy Smith was “more likely” saying that the Methodists objected because Book of Mormon modalism implied to them that it was God the Father who became incarnate in the flesh. Vogel, “Concept of God,” 24. Since, as has been shown, there is no credible basis for the claim that the doctrine was not introduced until much later, Vogel’s assertion begs the question.

They believe that the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts; and that when the Creator formed Adam in his own image, he made him about the size and shape of God himself.⁶⁵

Both Truman Coe and Lucy Mack Smith refer to what they take to be the beliefs of the community (“they believe”; “our faith”) as contrasted with views held by individual Mormons only.

3. John Murdock and Zebedee Coltrin, two members closely associated with Joseph in Kirtland, both claim to have witnessed appearances of deity in the winter of 1832–33, and their descriptions are decidedly anthropomorphic. Coltrin related a divine manifestation, which occurred in Kirtland in February or March 1833.⁶⁶ He reported:

Joseph having given instructions, and while engaged in silent prayer, kneeling . . . a personage walked through the room from East to west, and Joseph asked if we saw him. I saw him and suppose the others did, and Joseph answered that this was Jesus, the Son of God, our elder brother. Afterward Joseph told us to resume our former position in prayer, which we did. Another person came through; He was surrounded as with a flame of fire. [I] experienced a sensation that it might destroy the tabernacle as it was of consuming fire of great brightness. The Prophet Joseph said this was the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I saw him. . . .

He was surrounded as with a flame of fire, which was so brilliant that I could not discover anything else but his person. I saw his hands, his legs, his feet, his eyes, nose, mouth, head and *body in the shape and form of a perfect man*. He sat in a chair as a man would sit in a chair, but This appearance was so grand and overwhelming that it seemed that I should melt down in His presence, and the sensation was so powerful that it thrilled through my whole system and

⁶⁵Milton V. Backman Jr., “Truman Coe’s 1836 Description of Mormonism,” *BYU Studies* 17 (spring 1977): 347, 350, 354.

⁶⁶Coltrin said that this visitation occurred “about two or three weeks after the opening of the school [of the prophets].” This would place the experience in February of 1833, since the school commenced on January 23, 1833. October 3, 1883, *Salt Lake School of the Prophets: Minute Book 1883* (Palm Desert, Calif.: ULC Press, 1981), 39. On the other hand, it is possible that after half a century, Coltrin’s recollection may have been thrown off by a month. Such a theophany occurred in the School of the Prophets on March 18 according to First Presidency member Frederick G. Williams’s minutes of that meeting. Williams wrote, “Many of the brethren saw a heavenly vision of the Savior, and concourses of angels, and many other things, of which each one has a record of what he saw.” Milton V. Backman Jr., *The Heavens Resound: A History of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio, 1830–1838* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 267.

I felt it in the marrow of my bones. The Prophet Joseph said: "Brethren, now you are prepared to be the apostles of Jesus Christ, for you have seen both the Father and the Son and know that They exist and that They are two separate personages."⁶⁷

Murdock was in the first group to be ordained high priests by Joseph Smith in 1831.⁶⁸ While in Kirtland, Murdock's wife died shortly after giving birth to twin boys. These were the twins that Joseph and Emma took into their home to raise. Murdock claimed to see the Lord sometime during the winter of 1832-33 while living in Joseph's home. In his abridged history taken from his journal, he wrote:

During the winter that I boarded with Bro[ther] Joseph . . . we had a number of prayer meetings, in the Prophet's chamber. . . . In one of those meetings the Prophet told us if we could humble ourselves before God, and exercise [*sic*] strong faith, we should see the face of the Lord. And about midday the visions of my mind were opened, and the eyes of my understanding were enlightened, and *I saw the form of a man*, most lovely, the visage of his face was sound and fair as the sun. His hair a bright silver grey, curled in a most majestic form, His eyes a keen penetrating blue, and the skin of his neck a most beautiful white and he was covered from the neck to the feet with a loose garment, pure white, whiter than any garment I had ever before seen. His countenance was the most penetrating, and yet most lovely. And while I was endeavoring to comprehend the whole personage from head to feet it slipped from me, and the vision was closed up. But it left on my mind the impression of love, for months, that I never felt before to that degree.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Statement of Zebedee Coltrin, *School of the Prophets*, 38-39; italics added. Since this witness is apparently based on personal reminiscence, it does not provide, by itself, compelling evidence that the Saints in 1832-33 believed God to be embodied. Possibly, he read a later-acquired understanding into his account of his earlier experience. However, given the 1829-30 evidence already presented supporting divine embodiment, Coltrin's testimony properly becomes part of a cumulative case.

⁶⁸Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1925), 220-21.

⁶⁹"An Abridged Record of the Life of John Murdock: Taken from His Journal by Himself," typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 13; italics added. The experience recounted here, unlike most of the other events described in Murdock's record, is not specifically dated. This lacuna raises the possibility that the account is a personal reminiscence that Murdock has added to his abridged journal entries and not an abridged journal entry itself. Even if this is the case, in the context of the evidence already presented, such a personal reminiscence is also part of the cumulative case.

The direct evidence supporting the claim that from Restoration beginnings Mormons generally understood God to be embodied is corroborated by an examination of the historical context in which the Restoration unfolded. This examination controverts any claim that Joseph's cultural contemporaries, both in and out of the Church, were largely immaterialists. As Phillip L. Barlow has persuasively argued, Joseph read the Bible literally, even before the organization of the Church.⁷⁰ And so did many other Christians. In his sociological study of Mormonism, Thomas F. O'Dea found that "i[n] the *Book of Mormon* itself there is already a concrete conception of God somewhat anthropomorphic in implication. Yet this was little more than the literalness of evangelical Protestantism."⁷¹ Even Joseph's later explicit teaching that all spirit is material (D&C 131:7-8) was evidently widely believed in the early nineteenth century. Ronald W. Walker writes that "Mormonism was . . . born within an upstate New York matrix that combined New England folk culture with traditional religion."⁷² The "traditional religion" component of Joseph Smith's environmental "matrix" was far from the idealism and immaterialism of classical Platonism. In fact, O'Dea informs us:

The culture of New York may have imparted an extreme literalness and materiality to Joseph's reports of his visions. Yet anthropomorphism in the conception of God and especially in imagining what God might be like was certainly widespread and hardly seems to have been restricted to one sect or group. The same may be said with regard to a literal understanding of the Bible, which tended to support such human representations of God.⁷³

Many participants in this folk culture "longed for tangible experience with the supernatural" and "yearned for a religion that they

⁷⁰Phillip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11-42.

⁷¹Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 122.

⁷²Ronald W. Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," *BYU Studies* 24 (fall 1984): 450.

⁷³O'Dea, *The Mormons*, 125.

could experience physically.”⁷⁴ In this context, the distinction between spirit and matter was only one of degree, not of kind.

Thus it seems the cultural matrix of upstate New York in the 1820s reinforces the direct evidence cited that many of Joseph Smith’s earliest Mormon contemporaries generally also understood that God is embodied. This is not to say that the doctrine of divine embodiment was derived from Joseph Smith’s environment. As Richard Bushman reminds us, “Joseph learned early to trust his own experiences above the influence of established authorities and institutions. His vision, instead of bringing him into the evangelical mainstream like most conversions, set him on a course of his own.”⁷⁵

While the evidence is quite compelling that the doctrine of divine embodiment was articulated in the earliest revelatory discourse and was understood by Joseph and his fellow Latter-day Saints, the doctrine was apparently not strongly emphasized at that time.⁷⁶ On the other hand, by 1838, members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles had privately and publicly taught divine embodiment as a doctrine of the Church.⁷⁷ From the early forties onward, the idea was vigorously publicized and promoted not only by Joseph

⁷⁴Alan Taylor, “The Early Republic’s Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780–1830,” *American Quarterly* 38 (spring 1986): 22–23. See also Alan Taylor, “Rediscovering the Context of Joseph Smith’s Treasure Seeking,” *Dialogue* 19 (winter 1986): 25–26. See Ronald W. Walker, “Joseph Smith: The Palmyra Seer,” *BYU Studies* 24 (fall 1984): 461–72; and Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 69–76.

⁷⁵Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 59.

⁷⁶I draw this conclusion from the relative paucity of mention of the doctrine in the popular Mormon publications of that day.

⁷⁷In a personal letter, Wilford Woodruff wrote, “Their [*sic*] is a whole generation worshipping they know not what, whether a God without mouth, eyes, ears, body parts or passions as he does not reveal himself unto them, but their is not deception with the Saints in any age of the world who worships the living and true God of revelation.” Wilford Woodruff to Asahel H[art], Scarborough, Maine, August 25, 1838, quoted in Robert H. Slover, “A Newly Discovered 1838 Wilford Woodruff Letter,” *BYU Studies* 15 (spring 1975): 357. Note that Woodruff attributes the belief to “the Saints” and asserts that it is grounded in revelation.

In a missionary effort, Parley P. Pratt wrote and published that “*we* worship a God who has both body and parts: who has eyes, mouth and ears, and who speaks when he pleases.” Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 29; italics added. Grant Underwood has argued that Pratt was merely parroting other sects of the time who believed that the Father had a body. Grant Underwood, “The New England

but by Mormon missionaries, including Orson and Parley Pratt, as a most distinctive and attractive doctrine of the Restoration.⁷⁸

To the staunch immaterialist, it may seem strange that the doctrine of divine embodiment would be an attractive one. However, in January of 1841, Joseph Smith not only taught that God is embodied but that his body, far from demeaning him, is a crucial aspect of his glory: “That which is without body, parts and passions is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones. . . . All beings who have bodies have power over those who have not.”⁷⁹ Hence, God’s having a body of flesh and bones is crucial to his having power over all beings. Likewise, Joseph denies that spirit is immaterial:

The body is supposed to be organized matter, and the spirit, by many, is thought to be immaterial, without substance. With this latter statement we should beg leave to differ, and state the spirit is a substance; that it is material, but that it is more pure, elastic and refined matter than the body; that it existed before the body, can exist in the body; and will exist separate from the body, when the body will be mouldering in the dust; and will in the resurrection, be again united with it.⁸⁰

Origins of Mormonism Revisited,” *Journal of Mormon History* 15 (1989): 16–17. I believe that I have shown, however, that that doctrine is embedded in the earliest LDS datum discourse.

⁷⁸See, for example, Parley P. Pratt, “Immortality and Eternal Life of the Material Body,” in *An Appeal to the Inhabitants of the State of New York, Letter to Queen Victoria, (Reprinted from the Tenth European Edition,) The Fountain of Knowledge, Immortality of the Body, and Intelligence and Affection* [Nauvoo: John Taylor, 1840], reprinted in *The Essential Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 104–30. Parley P. Pratt’s main thesis is that “all persons except materialists must be infidels, so far at least as a belief in the scriptures is concerned . . . man’s body is as eternal as his soul” and “the idea of a ‘God without body or parts’ . . . [is among] errors of the grosest [*sic*] kind” (104). See also Orson Pratt, *Absurdities of Immaterialism; or, A Reply to T. W. P. Taylder’s Pamphlet, Entitled, “The Materialism of the Mormons or Latter-day Saints, Examined and Exposed”* (Liverpool, England: R. James, 1849), quoted in David J. Whittaker, ed., *The Essential Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 61–108.

⁷⁹*TPJS*, 181. This is the first extant, explicit statement made directly by Joseph himself that the Father has a body of flesh and bones.

⁸⁰*TPJS*, 207.

Having a body is also crucial to our happiness: “Spirit and element, inseparably connected receive a fulness of joy” (D&C 93:33).

We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the celestial kingdom. The great principle of happiness consists in having a body. The devil has no body and herein is his punishment. He is pleased when he can obtain the tabernacle of man, and when cast out by the Savior he asked to go into the herd of swine, showing that he would prefer a swine’s body to having none.⁸¹

So critical is a body to the happiness of a person that Satan, an unembodied spirit, envies even the bodies of swine. This concept of the body as a glorious and empowering prize, not a wretched prison, is essential to understanding the teaching that God is embodied.

⁸¹*TPJS*, 207. Joseph Smith taught the doctrine of divine embodiment on several occasions during the Nauvoo period. For example, he is reported to have said the following: “Concerning the Godhead it was Not as many imagined—three Heads & but one body, he said the three were separate bodys [*sic*]” (*WJS*, 63) and “The holy ghost is yet a Spiritual body and waiting to take to himself a body.” *WJS*, 382. In his King Follett discourse, Joseph taught, “If you were to see him [Elohim] today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man.” Discourse, April 7, 1844, Nauvoo, Illinois, in *TPJS*, 345; see also Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl, *The Prophet Joseph Smith’s King Follett Discourse: A Six Column Comparison of Original Notes and Amalgamation* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1983).