

# “Though We or an Angel from Heaven”

## Evangelicals and the First Vision

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At a small luncheon gathering of evangelical and Mormon scholars during an annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion shortly after the turn of the century, Richard Bushman issued a challenge to the Evangelicals in the form of a question posed directly to me: “Is Joseph Smith *possible* for you?” In an essay that I published in 2009, I organized my remarks on Joseph Smith as a response to Bushman’s question.<sup>1</sup>

While there is nothing that I wrote back then that I want now to retract, I have kept thinking about Bushman’s challenge. The invitation to speak at this wonderful conference gives me an opportunity to explore some further thoughts on the subject.

In that earlier essay I responded to Bushman’s challenge by focusing primarily on issues dealing with Joseph’s character. I had been intrigued by my recent reading of Rodney Stark’s treatment of the topic. While Stark did not take at face value Joseph’s account of his encounters with supernatural beings, neither did he see the need simply to choose between what he labeled the “psychopathological interpretation” and the view that Joseph was a “conscious fraud.”<sup>2</sup> Instead he argued for the need to develop “a theory of revelations” that allowed for a third category

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1. Richard J. Mouw, “The Possibility of Joseph Smith: Some Evangelical Probing,” in *Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 189–99.

2. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Mormonism*, ed. Reid L. Neilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 32.

for people like Joseph Smith—he labeled this alternative category the “revelator.” Religious leaders who deserve this label, Stark argued, offer us what they sincerely believe are “communications . . . from a divine being,” and they do so with a “creative imagination” that connects in deep ways with popular spiritual yearnings.<sup>3</sup>

While I was intrigued by Stark’s case, I was nervous about simply following him in granting “revelator” status to Joseph. We Evangelicals, like others who hold to the basic tenets of traditional Christian teaching, have obvious misgivings about some of the things that Joseph claimed to have received by direct divine revelation. We certainly are not inclined to give credibility to his report in his First Vision account that the divine Personage had said, speaking about the existing churches, that “all their creeds were an abomination in his sight.”<sup>4</sup>

Nothing in those misgivings, however, has compelled me to choose between the options that Joseph was either a deliberate deceiver or sincerely deluded. My adult efforts to make nuanced sense of Joseph’s character have been influenced by my initial encounter with his First Vision testimony, which occurred as I was just entering my own teenage years, when our family took a car trip from our home in upper New York state to California.<sup>5</sup> One of our stops along the way was in Salt Lake City, where we visited Temple Square and heard the tour-guide presentations.

Since we public-school students in New York state were required to learn some of the basics of New York history, I was already familiar with a few things about Joseph Smith’s experiences in Palmyra, but the Salt Lake City visit—which for my evangelical parents was simply a passing encounter with a non-Christian cult—stimulated my interest in Mormonism. As we headed further west, I sat in the back seat of our car reading “Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story,” a pamphlet that we had received at the visitors’ center that set forth the Pearl of Great Price version of the First Vision narrative.

For me, the most intriguing part of the story was Joseph’s description of his state of mind just before he was visited by the divine beings. His spiritual distress over “the confusion and strife among the different

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3. Stark, *Rise of Mormonism*, 56.

4. My quotations from the First Vision narrative in this essay are all from the Pearl of Great Price version of the 1838 account. Joseph Smith—History 1:19.

5. I am repeating a personal account here from Richard J. Mouw, *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 5–7.

denominations” was very similar to my own at that stage in my life. As I listened to adult Evangelicals argue over baptism, predestination, and interpretations of the book of Revelation, I also found it “impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong” (JS–H 1:8).

I found especially gripping Joseph’s poignant expression of despair: “In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?” (JS–H 1:10).

It is no exaggeration to say that I felt like I had discovered a friend in Joseph Smith. Here was someone who understood my own confusions and yearnings, ones that I had been reluctant to express to the adults in my life—and even a bit fearful of admitting to myself. Ever since then, as I have articulated in my adult career serious theological disagreements with Joseph, I have never forgotten, nor discounted, that early sense of spiritual kinship with him.

### Evangelical Hostility

I did not say anything to my parents about what was for me the positive experience of reading Joseph’s First Vision testimony. In the evangelical world in which I was raised, Mormonism was seen as a sinister cult that had its origins in Joseph Smith’s deceptions. The antagonism toward The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was being reinforced at the time by the emergence of an energetic “counter-cult” movement, in which Walter Martin was to become the best-known crusader. Martin began speaking to evangelical audiences in the mid-1950s about Mormonism as the most threatening of the non-Christian cults. He soon expanded his influence with his first book, *The Rise of the Cults*,<sup>6</sup> published in 1957, to be followed in 1965 by his bestseller, *The Kingdom of the Cults*.<sup>7</sup>

On a theological level, Martin basically employed a doctrinal check-list approach in assessing a movement’s theology. Do they believe in the Bible’s supreme authority? The Trinity? Classic understandings of the person and work of Christ? And so on. But he also

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6. Walter R. Martin, *The Rise of the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955).

7. Walter R. Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965).

often encouraged conspiracy elements, and this was especially the case with Mormonism. Other evangelical critics of Mormonism expanded on Martin's efforts with speculations about how Joseph Smith might have plagiarized the Book of Mormon from fictional texts that were available at the time but have long since been lost. In their 1982 film, *The God Makers*—and in a book by the same name appearing two years later—Dave Hunt and Ed Decker wove a narrative about Joseph Smith dabbling in the occult.<sup>8</sup>

While this kind of portrayal of Mormonism has not stood up in the light of serious historical scholarship, the basic elements of the counter-cult approach are still widely disseminated in the evangelical world. Those of us who have attempted to correct the record with our fellow Evangelicals are frequently accused of being taken in by the deceptions that gave rise to Mormonism from its very beginnings.

Why the relentless evangelical hostility toward Mormonism? Other branches of traditional Christianity—mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy—have not, for the most part, engaged in the same level of what Joseph reported as the “great contempt” shown by the Methodist pastor to whom he originally reported his First Vision experience (JS-H 1:21). One obvious factor for Evangelicalism's often passionate denunciations of Mormonism is that we, like the LDS folks, actively compete for souls—both movements are deeply committed to evangelism. And for Evangelicals, Mormonism's proselytizing efforts pose a threat, and this has been so from the beginning. Furthermore, Mormonism's growth—its transition from a local New York state phenomenon to a global religious presence—requires an explanation. And as has often been the case, Evangelicals have mined the explanatory resources of demonizing portrayals of those with whom we disagree.

While this commitment to viewing Mormonism in sinister terms is obviously regrettable, it does have the benefit of being an answer to an important question: what *is* the power of Mormonism as a global movement that had its origins in the spiritual struggles of a teenage boy in nineteenth-century rural New York state? This bicentennial commemoration of Joseph's First Vision provides an excellent opportunity for us, Mormon and non-Mormon alike, to explore further this important question.

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8. *The God Makers*, directed by Ed Decker and Dave Hunt (Irvine: Harvest House, 1984).

## Social Embodiments

I take my point of departure in pursuing this question from an important observation made by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his now-classic 1981 book, *After Virtue*. There MacIntyre makes the intriguing suggestion that every “moral philosophy . . . characteristically presupposes a sociology,” such that “we have not yet fully understood the claims of any moral philosophy until we have spelled out what its social embodiment would be like.”<sup>9</sup> This means, says MacIntyre, that in addition to engaging in the typical logical analyses of the basic principles of, say, utilitarianism or a deontological ethic, we must also ask ourselves what it would look like if a society patterned its complex life in consistent conformity to John Stuart Mill’s principle of utility, or to Kant’s Categorical Imperative.

I am convinced that MacIntyre’s “social embodiment” test also applies to systems of religious teaching. What would it look like, for example, if a community patterned its complex life in a manner consistent with the theology of Paul Tillich or Karl Barth? Fortunately, in the case of Joseph Smith’s teachings, we have a visible social embodiment that we can point to in answering our question. Such a community would look like The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I will put my point bluntly: the way a community lives out a founder’s teachings can tell us something significant about that founder’s character. I draw encouragement for taking this test seriously in the case of Joseph Smith from a similar treatment of Mohammed by one of my theological heroes, the influential nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper, who was well known in the Netherlands for his advocacy of Calvinist orthodoxy. Kuyper was also an important political figure who served in the Dutch Parliament as the leader of a Christian party, and in the early years of the twentieth century, he served a term as the Dutch prime minister.

When Kuyper retired from his political career, he embarked upon a two-year (1905–1907) tour of the Mediterranean countries, during which he wrote extensively about his firsthand impressions of Islam. These reflections have recently been published in an English translation, a four-hundred-page volume entitled *On Islam*.

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9. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 22.

Kuyper's firsthand encounter with Islam during his Mediterranean tour leads him to express admiration for the social impact of Muslim life and thought. Prominent in Kuyper's case is his observation about the character of Islam's founder. "By what magic," Kuyper asks, "did Mohammed radiate such an unparalleled charisma" that his "imprint is still very evident," even in the "remotest areas" of the Middle East? Kuyper cannot believe that the Muslim prophet was simply engaged in "a deliberate act of deception." Religious perspectives that are set forth by leaders who want to deceive their followers have no sustainability, he says. "Charlatans live a lie," observes Kuyper, and typically "the sudden flaring . . . of the visionary's brilliance does not provide the power that rules the ages."<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, Kuyper argues, Mohammed seems to have possessed "a spiritual power of the first order," and even if there were "factors of a lower order" also at work in extending his influence, Kuyper saw something in Mohammed's message that spoke to even deeper places in the human spirit. An effective spiritual vision, Kuyper argues, "stirs the deepest longings within our very being, more powerfully than any other single factor through the passage of one's personal life and throughout the history of humanity."<sup>11</sup> And in Kuyper's estimation, Mohammed clearly had that kind of power.

I believe that the same kind of assessment can apply to Joseph and his impact on the community that embodies his vision. By setting aside the conspiratorial aspects that have long characterized the evangelical assessment of Mormonism, not only can we Evangelicals get a better grasp of the power of Joseph's impact, but we can even learn more about our own spiritual quests.

### Angelic Visits

The title that I have given to this essay contains a direct allusion to a biblical text that has been frequently quoted by counter-cult opponents of Mormonism: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8 KJV). This Pauline warning has often been cited against Mormonism, as if the very appeal to angelic visitations is

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10. Abraham Kuyper, *On Islam*, ed. James D. Bratt with Douglas A. Howard, trans. Jan van Vliet (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham Press, 2017), 167.

11. Kuyper, *On Islam*, 168.

out of bounds as an authentic faith claim made after the closing of the biblical canon. But such a stricture rules out too much.

While I was preparing my earlier essay on the Joseph Smith phenomenon, I also happened to be reading Kenneth Silverman's 1984 biography of Cotton Mather, where Silverman reports on Mather's testimony regarding an angelical visitation. In 1693, thirty-year-old Mather was struggling to grasp the will of God for his life. Then one night, in his bedroom, he had what he described as this "strange and memorable thing": "After outpourings of prayer, with the utmost fervor and fasting . . . there appeared an Angel, whose face shone like the noonday sun . . . ; He was completely beardless, but in other respects human, his head encircled by a splendid tiara; . . . On his shoulders were wings: . . . His garments were white and shining; his robe reached to his ankles; and about his loins was a belt not unlike the girdles of the peoples of the East."<sup>12</sup>

Mather did not record the details of the message that the angel delivered to him, but he did testify that the angel prophesied that he, Cotton Mather, would accomplish great things and that his intellectual influence would reach to the European continent.<sup>13</sup>

Nothing in that account is incompatible with evangelical thought. Nor should Joseph's encounter with divine and angelical beings simply be dismissed out of hand. Indeed, there are good reasons to pay theological attention to reports of angelic visitations, even if we can question some elements in those reports.

In her 2008 study of encounters with angels, the Presbyterian theologian Susan R. Garrett puts it well. "At the heart of any discussion of angels," she says, is a deep concern about "the extent and modes of God's presence in the world."<sup>14</sup> In contemporary life, she argues, "much of the talk about angels is a reaction against the alleged distance of God from the world, and against the related tendency in Western culture toward separation of creator from creature." Popular reports of visitations, then, typically come from people who have been liberated from living "under

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12. Mather recounted this experience, not in his diary, but in a separate document, and he described the visitation in Latin. The translation here is found alongside the original Latin in Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 127–28.

13. Silverman, *Cotton Mather*, 128.

14. Susan R. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 39.

the pall of a deity portrayed to them as removed, detached, and coldly indifferent to the suffering his judgments imposed.”<sup>15</sup>

This sense of liberation obviously had something to do with the reception of Joseph’s reports of his visitations. This enthusiasm was captured in a delightful way by the Latter-day Saint poet W. W. Phelps in the hymn he composed for the 1836 dedication of the temple in Kirtland:

The Spirit of God like a fire is burning!  
The latter-day glory begins to come forth;  
The visions and blessings of old are returning,  
And angels are coming to visit the earth.<sup>16</sup>

This way of viewing the early years of Mormonism is confirmed in the biography of Parley P. Pratt by Terryl Givens and Matthew Grow. They point out that Pratt was unusual among early Mormon converts in that his conversion was occasioned by his reading of the Book of Mormon. “Up to this point,” Givens and Grow report, “the vast majority of converts to Mormonism had been drawn from the Smiths’ immediate circles,” folks who had “first encountered Joseph Smith and his revelatory claims and then read the Book of Mormon,” with the book functioning in their minds primarily “as a sign of a divinely sanctioned restoration.”<sup>17</sup>

What all of this clearly seems to indicate is that a key factor in the emergence of Mormonism was a widespread popular religious desire to connect the supernatural to present realities in rather concrete ways. Richard Bushman puts this point well in discussing what he describes as the “unbounded enthusiasm” of Joseph’s 1842 account of his various revelations, during what was in fact an especially difficult time in his career. This account—recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 128:20–21—gets at the heart of the restoration, says Bushman, in its “mingling [of] the names of ‘divers angels’—Michael, Gabriel, Raphael—with special, mundane places that one could locate on a map—Fayette, Seneca County, Colesville, Broome County, and the banks of the Susquehanna River.”<sup>18</sup>

15. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel*, 239.

16. William W. Phelps, “The Spirit of God,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1985), no. 2.

17. Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33, 90.

18. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 478.



This desire to encounter the divine in concrete ways in venues that have local zip codes is a continuing spiritual preoccupation in American popular culture. *Guideposts* magazine, established by Norman Vincent Peale in 1945, is currently one of the most widely circulating popular spirituality periodicals in the United States, with a present circulation of close to a million subscribers. When after the first couple of decades the Peale ministry people realized that their readers were especially responsive to accounts of angelical encounters, they established a spin-off magazine, *Angels on Earth*, which currently has a circulation of over a half-million subscribers.

To dismiss on theological grounds continuing stories of angelic appearances on “the banks of the Susquehanna” is to fail to probe important and enduring spiritual realities. Evangelicalism has given much attention in recent decades to ways that it can appeal to “seeker sensitive” realities in its worship patterns and evangelistic outreaches. To ignore the appeal of Mormonism—inspired by Joseph’s original “restoration” message that was grounded in turn in his own personal testimonies of supernatural encounters—is not only to fail to understand the global impact of the Mormon message, but also to miss out on lessons that need to be learned about spiritual currents that run deep in the human quest. It is not insignificant, I think, that Steven C. Harper makes significant use of the “seeker” theme in his fine study of the various accounts of the origins and impact of Joseph’s First Vision.<sup>19</sup>

### Reducing the Distance

So, back to Richard Bushman’s question to me: “Is Joseph Smith *possible* for you?” It should be clear from what I have said here already that the Joseph Smith of the First Vision is very possible for me personally. He took seriously the apostolic charge to seek wisdom from God. He prayed for deliverance from the evil that afflicts our personal lives. He asked legitimate questions about how to discern the truth about matters of faith in the midst of highly vocal controversies about doctrinal differences.

To acknowledge the legitimacy of Joseph’s spiritual quest from an evangelical perspective is not, of course, to endorse the answers that he claimed to have received in his First Vision. But it does point to new ways for more productive engagement between the two communities.

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19. Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012).

My own approach to promoting better understanding between Evangelicals and Mormons has been to reduce the distance between the two faith communities. As I have already observed, one reason why Mormon-Evangelical relations have been characterized by so much hostility over the past two centuries is that the two communities compete with each other in evangelistic efforts—a factor that does not play a significant role in, say, Mormon relations with Presbyterians or Episcopalians. This explains why Evangelicals have often resorted to magnifying the differences between their own perspective and that of Mormonism.

The opportunity to focus on the First Vision account provides a good occasion for reducing the areas of disagreement. Given the fact that most Evangelicals would not simply rule out the Cotton Mather story on theological grounds, it is difficult to understand why Joseph Smith's reports of encounters with divine and angelic beings should be automatically suspect from an evangelical perspective. I found it significant that while I was working on this paper, I attended an evangelical gathering where an expert on Middle East ministries told of angels visiting Muslim women in Iran, encouraging them to worship Jesus as the true source of salvation.

And what about Joseph's insistence that the creeds of the churches of his day were an "abomination" in the sight of the divine visitors? Similar assessments—with various degrees of harshness—are often expressed by evangelical pietists who point to what they see as the spiritual hypocrisy of those who subscribe to "cold orthodoxy." This antipathy toward precise doctrinal formulations often takes evangelical shape in "No creed but Christ" manifestos. And even when credal affirmations are prominent in communions within the broad Christian tradition, it has not been uncommon for one group to condemn another group's creeds as heretical. An obvious case in point here is the actual warfare that has occurred in the past between churches of the East and West regarding the introduction of the *filioque* ("and from the Son") clause in the Nicene Creed.

What is legitimately of theological concern for Evangelicals about the First Vision is the way it set in motion a religious perspective that featured extrabiblical teachings associated with claims about the restoration of the ancient office of prophet. For Evangelicals, the fundamental issue at stake here is the rejection of the Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

Even here, though, we have to acknowledge that we Evangelicals have argued persistently with others *within* the broader Christian community

about this topic. Our differences with Catholicism are an obvious case in point. Catholics believe that they must accept as authoritative certain truths—truths they believe come from God—whose explicit content goes beyond anything we can find in the Bible. Where Catholicism differs from Mormonism, of course, is on how the community is given access to these extra-biblical teachings. In Catholic thought, authoritative pronouncements are arrived at by means of the office of the *magisterium*. Ecclesiastical authorities arrive at new teachings by a process of explicating data found in the Bible.<sup>20</sup> The Immaculate Conception of Mary is a case in point. This dogma has developed by means of reflection on the biblical account of Jesus being born of a virgin. Historically, Catholicism came to insist that God, knowing that Mary would someday give birth to the Incarnate Son of God, prepared her for it by seeing to it that she herself was born without being affected by original sin, so that she could carry the sinless Babe in her womb.

The prophetic office in Mormonism differs significantly from this teaching office in Catholicism. When Latter-day Saint leaders declared that it had been revealed to them that, for example, plural marriage was no longer permissible and that the priesthood would now be open to males of black African descent, these teachings did not “grow out of” earlier prophetic deliverances—it reversed them. God directly conveyed something different, not contained in previous revelations—through the Church’s prophet.

Here, too, however, it is helpful to ask the Bushman question. Is even *this* way of advocating for postbiblical revealed “truths” in any way possible for Evangelicals? Terryl Givens offers a necessary word of caution for those of us who might want to issue a clear no on this subject. He observes that even in Christian communities where the formal theologies insist upon “historically delimited inspiration, rather than continuing utterance,” there persist “certain forms of personal, unmediated knowledge of God and his truths.” Givens finds this occurring in the strain of “Primitive Christian or affirmative mysticism” that places a strong emphasis on “the open revelation of God to man,”<sup>21</sup> and it is

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20. For the classic case for this understanding of doctrinal development, see John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845; 2d ed., London: Longmans, Green, 1878).

21. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 229.

not difficult to see it at work in various manifestations of popular Evangelicalism. It is certainly to be found in contemporary Pentecostal and charismatic communities.

Actually, Pentecostalism provides an interesting reference point for comparative analysis on the subject of the role of prophetic activity. The Pentecostal scholar John Christopher Thomas observes that while both communities stress “the continuing presence and function of the gift of prophecy in the contemporary world,” Pentecostalism differs from Mormonism in encouraging “a somewhat democratized view of the prophetic” with an insistence on “the role of the community in assessing and discerning prophetic words and proclamations.” Mormonism, in contrast, “appears for the most part to focus on individual prophets and their roles around which the faithful gather and against which the unfaithful rebel.” Thus, Thomas argues, Mormonism “views the community as being subject to the prophet’s own sense of calling and directives.”<sup>22</sup>

Thomas’s point is a good one. There are, however, strands in Pentecostalism that come closer to the Mormon understanding of the prophetic role, particularly where the apostolic and prophetic functions are closely aligned. In many smaller Pentecostal groups, for example, the decidedly non-“democratic” authority of the church leader is frequently associated with what are seen as the leader’s “five ministry offices”: apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher.<sup>23</sup>

### Doubling the Doubters

I conclude now with a final reflection on Richard Bushman’s challenge.

David Guterson’s 2003 novel, *Our Lady of the Forest*, tells a story about a sixteen-year-old runaway girl, Ann, living in the woods in Washington state, who claims to be experiencing encounters with the Virgin Mary.<sup>24</sup> When I read that narrative, I found it fascinating, so much so that I wondered whether I might be engaging in a bit of spiritual voyeurism. And that certainly may have been a factor in my fascination. The more I thought about it, though, I sensed that I was also voyeuristically

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22. John Christopher Thomas, *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Cleveland, Tenn.: CPT Press, 2016), 384–85.

23. Randall Grier, “Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors, Teachers,” Randall Grier Ministries, <https://rgm.me/apostles-prophets-evangelists-pastors-teachers/>.

24. David Guterson, *Our Lady of the Forest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

observing the voyeurs who were also characters in Guterson's telling of the story. While Guterson treats his young visionary with much respect, he also gives sympathetic portrayals of some other characters—one of them a Catholic priest—who have serious doubts about the legitimacy of Ann's reports of her encounters with the Blessed Mother. But their doubts were different from my own, since Guterson's fictional doubters tend to be either unbelievers or liberal Catholics. In my reading of the novel, then, I had to struggle with my distance from *their* doubtings, even as I wrestled with my own questions.

I struggle with similar tensions in my wrestling with Joseph's First Vision. Earlier I described my fascination—indeed, my empathy—with the teenage Joseph's testimony as I read it for the first time in the backseat of our family car. Nothing in that experience inclined me to consider becoming a Mormon—my empathy has always been mixed with some significant doubts. But those doubts have typically been accompanied by my doubts about other doubters.

Truth be told, in reading David Guterson's story of the teenage Ann, I actually lean heavily toward seeing her in terms of what Rodney Stark labels in his discussion of Joseph Smith the “psychopathological interpretation.” But in Joseph's case, I have consistently refused to be forced by other doubters into choosing between the simple binary of “a liar or a lunatic.”<sup>25</sup>

In an important sense, the way in which Joseph Smith is possible for me as an Evangelical is closely linked to what Richard Bushman insists is at the heart of the restoration that Joseph claimed to embody in his spiritual leadership: the “mingling [of] the names of ‘divers angels’—Michael, Gabriel, Raphael—with special, mundane places that one could locate on a map—Fayette, Seneca County, Colesville, Broome County, and the banks of the Susquehanna River.”<sup>26</sup>

This portrayal of angelic visitations to very mundane settlements along a river in Pennsylvania points me to yet another link between an angel and a river. In the opening verses of Revelation 22, the apostolic Seer testifies that an “angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. . . . On each side of the river stood the tree of life. . . . And the leaves of the

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25. Mouw, “Evangelical Probing,” 198.

26. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 478.

tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse” (Rev. 22:3 NIV).

That angelic witness to the healing powers of the heavenly river is good news these days for folks who live, for example, along “the banks of the Susquehanna River” and for me also, which is why in my own evangelical way I can take hope in that poetic declaration by W. W. Phelps:

The Spirit of God like a fire is burning!  
The latter-day glory begins to come forth;  
The visions and blessings of old are returning,  
And angels are coming to visit the earth.

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