



Tangible as Man's by Israel Gonzales, charcoal on paper, 8" x 10".

When Did Joseph Smith Know the Father and the Son Have “Tangible” Bodies?

John W. Welch

*The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also.
(Doctrine and Covenants 130:22)*

Joseph Smith learned many things in the First Vision—it was a burst of knowledge that poured down upon him in the spring of 1820. Particularly, he was greeted by two divine beings, “whose brightness and glory defy all description.” The first of the two, “pointing to the other,” said, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” (JS–H 1:17). Joseph then listened as Jesus spoke. That experience gave more authoritative answers to questions about the Godhead than anyone in the world had received since the vision of Stephen, who saw a heavenly vision of Jesus, “the Son of man standing on the right hand of God,” only a few years after Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection (Acts 7:55–56).

During his lifetime, Joseph spoke fairly often about his First Vision. Historians have grouped these accounts by author: four written by Joseph, five composed by others, and a dozen later reminiscences by people who heard him tell of the experience.¹ In addressing a variety of audiences, both formally and informally, these accounts consistently speak of the Father and the Son as two separate personages, who are described as having bodies and looking like each other. The Father called Joseph by name. They both spoke to him in English. He was told that his prayers

1. Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2017), 1–35.

were answered, that his sins were forgiven, that he should not join any of the existing churches, that he should keep God's commandments, and many other things. He was left wholly exhausted but completely filled with love and joy, knowing that God had a work for him to do. In many ways, this experience was both spiritual and physical.

Twenty-three years later, on Sunday, April 2, 1843, in Ramus, Illinois, Joseph spoke more clearly than ever before about the *tangible* nature of the exalted bodies of God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. He also stated how those two divine beings relate to and are different from the Holy Ghost, the third member of the Godhead. He said, "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).

To best understand these words found in Doctrine and Covenants 130, it helps to consider the context in which these statements were made. The events of that day, April 2, 1843, are reported in detail in the journal kept for Joseph by his scribes, which is now available in the Joseph Smith Papers.² It was a conference Sunday, and Apostle Orson Hyde had been asked to speak. It may have been something of a homecoming for him. He had arrived back in Nauvoo only four months earlier, on December 7, 1842, "having been away from his family for 967 days and traveling over twenty thousand miles"³ on his famous mission to dedicate the Holy Land for the return of the Jewish people. During his almost-three years away, Orson had missed a season of booming growth and soaring doctrinal developments in Nauvoo.

Beginning on page 35 of that journal, we learn that Elder Hyde opened his remarks at the 10:00 a.m. session with words about the Second Coming of Christ found in 1 John 3:2, which reads, "When he shall appear, **we shall be like him.**" Toward the end of his remarks, Elder Hyde spoke about John 14:23, which reads, "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make **our abode with him.**" He then added, "It is our privilege to have **the father & son dwelling in our hearts.**"⁴

2. See "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 2, 10 March 1843–14 July 1843," 35–45, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-2-10-march-1843-14-july-1843/43>.

3. Roy B. Huff, "Orson Hyde: A Life of Lessons Learned," *Religious Educator* 3, no. 2 (2002): 167–83, <https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-3-no-2-2002/orson-hyde-life-lessons-learned>.

4. "Journal," 35. Certain spellings adjusted; bolding, emphasis, and some punctuation added throughout this section.

During the noon hour, Joseph and others had a meal at his sister Sophronia's home. Joseph kindly said to Elder Hyde, "I am going to offer *some corrections* to you," to which Hyde *sincerely* replied, "They shall be thankfully received." Joseph then said, "When he shall appear we shall see him as he is. we shall see that **he is a man like ourselves.**— And that same sociality which exists amogt [amongst] us here will exist amo[n]g us there only it will be coupled with eternal glory which glory we do not now enjoy." And then, regarding John 14:23, Joseph added, "**The appearing of the father and of the Son in that verse is a personal appearance.**—to say that the father and the Son dwells in a mans heart is an old Sectarian notion. and is not correct. There are no angels who administer to this earth but who belong or have belonged to this earth."⁵

Following the 1:00 p.m. session, the Church authorities had dinner at Benjamin Johnson's home, gathering there at 7:00 p.m. There Joseph elaborated further, giving more words of revelation that have since been included in Doctrine and Covenants 130: "Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life. it will rise with us in the revalatin [revelation], and if a person gains more knowledge and intelligenca. through his obedience & diligence. than another he will have so much the advantage in the world to come—There is a law irrevocably decreed in heaven. before the foundation of the world upon which all blessings are predicated and when we obtain a blessing it is by obedience to the law upon which that blessing is predicated."⁶

At that point, Joseph "again *revertd to Elders Hyde mistake.*" Joseph said, "**The Father has a body of flesh & bones as tangible as mans** [the manuscript here may also be read as saying "as tangible as *ours*"] **the Son also**, but the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit.— and a person cannot have the personage of the H G [Holy Ghost] in his heart he may recive the gift of the holy Ghost. **it may descend upon him but not to tarry with him.**"⁷

At the end of the dinner, Joseph "calld upon Elder Hyde to get up. & fulfil his covenant [or agreement] to preach ¼ of an hour." But "Elder Hyde arose & said Brothers & Sisters I feel as though all had been Said that can be said. I can say nothing but bless you."⁸

5. "Journal," 37–38.

6. "Journal," 42.

7. "Journal," 42–43.

8. "Journal," 44.

While the Prophet Joseph spoke politely in correcting Orson Hyde, he was firm in rejecting any idea that God is a spirit who “dwells” or “abides” in our hearts, calling this idea “an old Sectarian notion” that “is not correct.” While the Holy Ghost may “descend” upon us (as occurred at Christ’s baptism), his role is not to “tarry with,” “dwell in,” or “remain” with us.⁹ Joseph also said that when Christ appears, we shall see him “as he is”—namely, that he is “a man *like ourselves*,” and that “the Father has a body of flesh & bones *as tangible as mans*.” And regarding the coming of the Father and the Son as promised in John 14:23, Joseph said that those words refer to “a *personal appearance*.” All of these points relate to the central idea that the Father in Heaven has a tangible body, differing from a spirit body.

Over his lifetime, Joseph had come to know the essential, tangible nature of the celestial bodies of God the Father and his Son. Joseph could have learned these things in several ways:

1. Most of all, he had likely learned this from his experience with the Father and the Son during his First Vision in 1820.
2. This certitude was mutually confirmed through his inspired and reasoned work translating the Book of Mormon in 1829 and the Bible in 1832.
3. His knowledge of divine physicality was reinforced by many personal appearances to him by other embodied heavenly messengers from 1823 to 1836. Considering each of these three ways adds to our appreciation of Joseph’s learning process.

The First Vision

Joseph’s First Vision in the grove in 1820 would seem to be the primary and most likely point in time at which Joseph learned that the Father has a tangible body of flesh and bones. On no other occasion that we know of was Joseph in such close proximity with Heavenly Father.

Joseph’s reports of the First Vision repeatedly emphasize the reality and physicality of that experience. He remarked on the beautiful

9. It is possible that Joseph was sensitive to the enduring and personal sign of the Holy Ghost that was given especially to Jesus. John testified that God, who had sent him to baptize, “said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, *and remaining [menon]* on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost” (John 1:33), emphasis added. John bore record further that he indeed “saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode [*emeinen*] upon him” (John 1:32). For other people, however, the Holy Ghost does not tarry, dwell, or remain.

weather that day, where he had left his ax the night before, the trees, and other concrete details. He described the thickness of the darkness of the evil power that bound his tongue and almost killed him, and he especially noted the extreme brightness and high heat of the pillar of fiery light that at first greatly alarmed him. The realities in his account ring true. Joseph does not speak of this visitation as being a dream or an out-of-body experience. As episode 5 of the Joseph Smith Papers podcast states, Joseph was “adamant that this is something more real, that this is something more tangible” than just a vision.¹⁰

Significantly, Joseph did not say in that 1843 conference that the Father and the Son have “physical” bodies. Saying that they have physical bodies would not be the same as saying that they have tangible bodies. Many “physical” things cannot be touched. For example, something may be too hot to be touched, but it is still physical, or it may be in a gaseous state that cannot be handled. Wind is physical, and air molecules are matter, but one would not call them “tangible,” even though one can feel the wind when it blows.

Indeed, the word “tangible,” which Joseph did use in 1843, comes from the Latin *tango*, meaning “I touch.” At that time, it clearly meant, as it still does today, to be “perceptible by the touch; tactile.”¹¹ The word normally implies some human contact through touch, but because none of Joseph’s accounts give any information in this regard, readers are left to ponder what might have calmed the anxious young Joseph as his First Vision unfolded. We can imagine that the voice and nearness of God were gentle and intimate. Because Joseph was called by name, it became clear that this Being knew him personally. The Father may have gestured with open arms; perhaps there was some kind of physical contact. While we don’t know, of course, some physical interaction could have happened as they met.

When the Father and Son appeared, the finger of God was extended, pointing toward his Beloved Son. One thinks of the premortal Jehovah extending his finger to touch the sixteen stones of the brother of Jared (Ether 3:6) and of the finger of the great I Am writing the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone for Moses (Ex. 8:19; 31:18). Could the Father have also extended his finger toward Joseph? On February 2, 1893, in St. George,

10. Christopher Jones, guest, “It Caused Me Serious Reflection,” transcript, January 5, 2020, *The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast*, Spencer W. McBride, host, 44:07, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/the-first-vision-podcast-episode-5-transcript?highlight=tangible>.

11. Webster’s 1828 Dictionary, s.v. “Tangible,” accessed April 6, 2020, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/tangible>.

Utah, John Alger¹² related a little-known account regarding Joseph's experience, which was written down that day in the detailed diary of Charles Lowell Walker.¹³ According to Walker, Alger claimed that "God touched his [Joseph's] 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." This allowed Joseph to turn his attention more particularly to the Son, who then instructed him. According to Walker, Alger had heard Joseph give this account when "he, John, was a small boy" in Kirtland, Ohio, in "the house of Father Smith," which would have been around 1833 when John was about thirteen years old. To make the point that Joseph had felt the touch, Alger went on to say "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."¹⁴ While this account is a late and singular recollection, Walker mentions details of Alger's experience clearly and specifically. It is not inconsistent to think that the finger of God first touched Joseph's eyes and then, as the 1838 account mentions, also gestured toward the Son.

Is it also possible that other tangible contacts occurred? Would it have been out of character for Jesus to have lovingly encircled Joseph in his arms? Or, since the Apostle Thomas in Jerusalem and 2,500 people in the Nephite city of Bountiful had been allowed to touch the wounds in the resurrected Jesus's hands, feet, and side, might not Jesus have offered the same to Joseph Smith? This would have been especially poignant, for in Joseph's earliest account Jesus said, "Joseph <my son> thy sins are forgiven thee. . . . I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life."¹⁵

As early as August 1836, it was reported by Reverend Truman Coe, a Presbyterian minister in Kirtland, that the Latter-day Saints "believe that

12. John Alger (1820–1897), no known relation to Fanny Alger, joined the Church in March 1832 at the age of eleven. John married Sarah Pulsipher on January 6, 1842, with Joseph performing their wedding in Nauvoo. They arrived in Utah in 1848 and settled in St. George in 1864. See <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/missionary/individual/john-alger-1820?lang=eng> and <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/KWJZ-5JN>.

13. Charles Lowell Walker, *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, ed. A. Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1980), February 2, 1893, 2:755–56.

14. Walker, *Charles Lowell Walker*, 2:756.

15. "History, circa Summer 1832," 3, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>.

the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts.” Other statements by Latter-day Saints around that time confirm Coe’s assertion.¹⁶ In Philadelphia in 1840, Orson Pratt and others discussed how God has revealed his corporeality, and how, as Samuel Bennett maintained, “in these last days hath his bodily presence been manifested.”¹⁷ As Steven C. Harper concluded based on several sources, Joseph Smith and others “were telling of the vision in the 1830s, and its implications for the trinity and materiality of God were asserted that early”¹⁸—earlier than people have previously thought—and these implications Joseph made explicitly and unambiguously clear in Ramus, Illinois, in 1843.

In addition, Joseph affirmed on April 2, 1843, that “the *appearing* of the father and of the Son,” as mentioned in John 14:23, “is a *personal appearance*.”¹⁹ It would seem that Joseph had in mind here a specific “personal appearance” of the Father and of the Son, and what appearance

16. Truman Coe, “Truman Coe’s 1836 Description of Mormonism,” ed. Milton V. Backman Jr., *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 8. “Composed of body and parts” stands in direct opposition to the language in the Westminster Confession. Another early assertion of God being embodied is found in Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled: Zion’s Watchman Unmasked, and Its Editor, Mr. L.R. Sunderland, Exposed: Truth Vindicated: The Devil and Priestcraft in Danger!* (New York: Parley P. Pratt, 1838), 29.

17. Samuel Bennett, *A Few Remarks by Way of Reply to an Anonymous Scribbler, Calling Himself a Philanthropist: Disabusing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of the Slanders and Falsehoods Which He Has Attempted to Fasten Upon It* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking and Guilpert, 1840), 11.

18. Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 53–57. In addition to the recollection of John Alger (see note 14 above), others reported that Joseph spoke at least briefly about the First Vision on other occasions, including:

(a) in a testimony in 1833, as remembered by Milo Andrus on July 17, 1853. Papers of George D. Watt. MS 4534, box 2, disk 1. May 1853–July 1853 images 231–56, partial transcript in CR 100 317, box 2, folder 15, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, October 3, 2012, corrected October 2013;

(b) to believers in the spring of 1835 in Michigan, as written by Joseph Curtis in 1839. “History of Joseph Curtis,” 5, MSS 1654, Church History Library;

(c) in a sermon in June of 1835 in Kirtland, as recalled by William Phelps. William W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, June 2, 1835, MS, Church History Library;

(d) in a personal conversation on November 9, 1835 in Kirtland, as recorded in Joseph’s journal. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 87–88; and

(e) to a congregation in the summer of 1837 in Toronto, as reported by Mary Horne. M. Isabella Horne, “The Prophet Joseph Smith: Testimony of Sister M. Isabella Horne,” *Relief Society Magazine* 38, no. 3 (March 1951): 158–60.

19. “Journal,” 37, italics added.

of the Father and the Son could have been more “personal,” “tangible,” and real to Joseph than his own First Vision?

Joseph’s Translations

Joseph also learned and consistently taught several things about the tangible nature of the Godhead from the scriptures. From the New Testament, Joseph knew that Jesus had appeared with a tangible resurrected body to many on several occasions before he ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. And from the Book of Mormon, Joseph knew that Jesus had retained his physical resurrected body even *after his ascension* to the Father when Jesus appeared to the Nephites (see 3 Ne. 15:1).

From his work on the Bible, Joseph learned much about the embodiment of God. One such instance comes from his work on John 4:24. Shortly before February 16, 1832, as Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were working through the Gospel of John, they encountered the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well. After Jesus told her that the time was coming when righteous people would no longer worship the Father either on Mount Gerizim in Samaria or on the temple mount in Jerusalem, he revealed that, indeed, the hour had then come “when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him” (John 4:23). Continuing, Jesus elaborated, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (v. 24), or so reads the King James Version and most translations of this verse. In his rendition of these verses, however, Joseph excised the words “*is a*” and revised the statement to read, “For unto such [true worshippers] *hath* God *promised his* Spirit. And they who worship him, must worship in spirit and in truth.”²⁰ Joseph had learned by his own experiences in communing with God that the Father is not a spirit. And actually, the Greek in this verse, while being ordinary enough, is open to interpretation and elaboration. The Greek simply contains two nouns and tersely reads: *pneuma ho theós* (*pneuma* meaning “spirit,” *ho theós* meaning “God”).²¹

20. Joseph Smith Translation, John 4:26 (in John 4:24, note a).

21. While the Greek is and can be normally translated as “God is *a* spirit” (emphasis added), it can also be read as saying “God is spirit,” “God is spiritual,” or “God [promises] spirit.” Joseph is not the only one to have noticed the incompleteness of this intentionally cryptic saying of Jesus. See, for example, Marcus Dods, “The Gospel of

Joseph also modified 1 John 4:12. Here the King James Version reads, “No man hath seen God at any time.” Again Joseph added an important proviso: “No man hath seen God at any time, *except them who believe.*”²² Indeed, God the Father had been seen, and would be seen, by Joseph Smith and other believers with him on at least four occasions between 1831 and 1836: namely, on June 4, 1831, at the Morley farmhouse outside of Kirtland, Ohio; on February 16, 1832, in the John Johnson home in Hiram, Ohio (see D&C 76:19–23); on March 18, 1833, in the School of the Prophets, upstairs in the Newell K. Whitney Store; and on January 21, 1836, in the not-yet-completed Kirtland Temple (partially canonized in Doctrine and Covenants 137).²³ However, while God the Father was *seen* on those occasions, nothing indicates that Joseph learned on those occasions that God the Father has a *tangible* body.

Simple points of logic also reinforced Joseph’s conclusive understanding of God’s tangibility. Since Jesus still has a tangible resurrected body, and since he is “the express image of [God the Father’s] person” (Heb. 1:3), then it would follow that the Father has a body every bit as tangible as the Son’s. To the same effect, Jesus said, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). And on April 2, 1843, when Joseph cited 1 John 3:2, which reads, “When he shall appear, . . . we shall see him as he is,” he explained that statement by affirming, “We shall see that he is a man *like ourselves.*”

Heavenly Messengers

Finally, numerous angelic visitations repeatedly confirmed to Joseph that resurrected beings have tangible bodies. While being ordained in May 1829 to the Aaronic Priesthood by John the Baptist and sometime thereafter to the Melchizedek Priesthood by Peter, James, and John, Joseph and Oliver Cowdery felt *hands* placed upon their heads. They spoke often of the physical sensation of those hands upon their heads

St. John,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 5 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1:728 note to verse 24, who translates this as “God is Spirit,” pointing out the comparison with “for God is light,” not “a” light (1 John 1:5, *hoti ho theós phōs estin*), and “God is love,” not “a” love (1 Jn. 4:8, *hoti ho theós agapē estin*). And after all, Jesus spoke in veiled terms on several encounters, notably as he spoke to the Samaritan woman throughout their encounter at the well in John 4.

22. Joseph Smith Translation, 1 John 4:12 (in 1 John 4:12, note a).

23. See Alexander L. Baugh, “Seventy-six Accounts of Joseph Smith’s Visionary Experiences,” in Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 280–83.

and the impression upon their souls as priesthood powers were conferred upon them. Seventy such statements are readily compiled at the end of a chapter in *Opening the Heavens* by Brian Q. Cannon.²⁴ These statements were made between 1829 and 1848, mainly by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery but also by twenty-five other people who could have heard Joseph or Oliver personally describing these supernal events. These documents speak generally and often mention Joseph and Oliver as being “authorized,” given “authority,” “commissioned,” or “ordained,” or as having the priesthood “conferred,” “confirmed,” or “bestowed” upon them as part of their “reception” of the high priesthood. While such words may well imply the transfer of authority by the laying on of hands, many of these accounts specifically mention the “hand” or “hands” that were placed on their heads to bestow upon them the power to administer the ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For example, Oliver’s 1833 patriarchal blessing speaks of him having been ordained to the lesser priesthood “by the *hand* of the angel in the bush,” a reference to the angel John the Baptist; the blessing also makes reference to the holy priesthood being bestowed “under the *hands* of those [Peter, James, and John] . . . who received it under the hand of the Messiah.”²⁵ In 1836, Joseph spoke directly of “being ordained under the *hands* of the Angel,”²⁶ and in 1836 he spoke of the messenger from heaven “having laid his *hands* upon us.”²⁷ In 1844 he said that the angel “laid his *hands* upon my head.”²⁸ Oliver Cowdery similarly testified in 1834 that they received “under [the angel’s] *hand* the holy priesthood”²⁹ and in 1836 that it was bestowed on them “by the laying on of the *hands* of those who were clothed with authority.”³⁰ Others such as Orson Pratt³¹

24. Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff, “Documents of the Priesthood Restoration,” in Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 247–79. See also several passages in the Book of Mormon; for example, the report that Jesus “touched” all of the twelve Nephite disciples (3 Ne. 18:38) and “laid his hands upon them” and gave them “power that to him upon whom ye shall lay your hands, ye shall give the Holy Ghost” (Moro. 2:1–2).

25. Document 8, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 251.

26. Document 11, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 253.

27. Document 12, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 253.

28. Document 19, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 258.

29. Document 20, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 259.

30. Document 25, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 262.

31. Document 39, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 267; Document 40, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 268.

(1840; 1848), John Taylor³² (1840), Orson Hyde³³ (1841; 1842), George J. Adams³⁴ (1849), Warren Foote³⁵ (1842), William I. Appleby³⁶ (1848), and Brigham Young³⁷ (1847) mentioned particularly the *hands* under which the powers and keys of the priesthood were restored. As these hands were felt by Joseph and Oliver on those occasions, they certainly experienced and never forgot the physical weight of those tangible hands upon their heads.

Even earlier, when Joseph first saw Moroni in 1823, he was immediately struck by this angel’s body: “He had on a loose robe. . . . His hands were naked, . . . as were his legs, a little above the ankles. His head and neck were also bare. I could discover that he had no other clothing on but this robe, as it was open, so that I could see into his bosom. . . . His whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning” (JS–H 1:31–32). The materiality of Moroni’s personhood was stunning to Joseph. In vivid details, he remembered this angel’s hands, legs, ankles, head, neck, chest, and face. While Moroni and Joseph apparently did not touch each other on that first occasion, the two of them met on many other occasions. Moroni handed to Joseph (and Joseph returned to Moroni) several tangible physical objects. In these interactions, Joseph could well have touched or encountered Moroni’s physical robe, fingers, and hands, although he never says so. But in order to tell whether or not a purported messenger was truly of God, Joseph counseled his followers on February 9, 1843, to extend a hand. Resurrected messengers from God, he said, will not shy away from such a request for a tangible confirmation, “and you will feel his hand” (D&C 129:4–5). The spirits of just men made perfect, however, will simply stand still, for they cannot deceive (129:7), while the devil will offer his hand, but “you will not feel anything” (129:8). From this it may well be implied that Joseph himself had used that test, with positive results, to separate good messengers from evil ones.

At the conclusion of his remarks on April 2, 1843, it is possible that Joseph was thinking of Moroni, John, and others who had visited him

32. Document 43, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 270.

33. Document 50, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 272; Document 51, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 272.

34. Document 55, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 274.

35. Document 58, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 275.

36. Document 63, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 276.

37. Document 70, in Cannon, “Priesthood Restoration,” 279.

when he said, “Angels who administer to this earth . . . belong to or have belonged to this earth.”³⁸ As Joseph had learned by his experiences, these heavenly beings were once mortal. They were of this human family—physically, tangibly, and literally. The same declaration would equally apply to our incarnate Savior and Elder Brother, Jesus Christ.

Thus, for over twenty years, Joseph had many experiences in which he saw, heard, or even felt the embodied realities of God and his angelic messengers. Few theologians would imagine that God is embodied in any way, let alone with an exalted body of flesh and bones. Long before 1843, Joseph Smith had come to reject the idea that God is simply spirit or a spirit. Instead, he had come to know otherwise—prophetically, dramatically, tangibly, and of a surety.

John W. Welch is the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at the J. Reuben Clark Law School at Brigham Young University, as well as the chairman of Book of Mormon Central. He has served as the general editor of the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (1985–2010), as one of the editors of Macmillan’s *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (1988–1992), and as editor in chief of *BYU Studies* (1992–2018).

38. “Journal,” 38.