



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL
<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>



Religious Studies Center
<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

First Visions: The Opening Events of the Mosiac, Nephite, and Final Dispensations

Author(s): Douglas N. Marsh

Source: *Selections from the 2006 Religious Education Student Symposium*

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 2006

Page(s): 53-71



The Religious Studies Center is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Items are archived by the permission of the Religious Studies Center.

<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

First Visions: The Opening Events of the Mosaic, Nephite, and Final Dispensations

DOUGLAS N. MARSH

The visions received by prophets to open new dispensations are among the most noteworthy events of history and have rightly been the subject of intense study for centuries after they have taken place. Despite this interest, however, many details regarding these theophanies remain unknown. In some instances the accounts are obscured by imperfections in the texts, and in other cases the facts appear to have been deliberately withheld by the writer. Because of these obstacles, much information regarding these events remains undisclosed, and modern readers are left with only a basic outline.

But we are not completely without hints about the fine points of these stories. Divine revelation is often formulaic in nature, following a recognizable pattern.¹ This is particularly so with a prophetic call. One important recurring element is the “*Divine Confrontation*,” wherein “either deity or an angel appears in glory to the individual,” and another is the “*Throne-Theophany*,” in which “the individual sees the council of God and God seated upon his throne.”² A manifestation of Satan’s power, which is then overcome by the prophet, is a third element common in these experiences. These elements, as well as others, can be seen in the experiences of several different prophets throughout history, and

their recurrence shows a common pattern in their accounts. Acknowledging and studying these similarities allows for a greater understanding of the purpose and significance of the events.

This pattern is especially noticeable in the first visions of Moses, Lehi, and Joseph Smith Jr. The experiences of these three men are especially important to Latter-day Saints; not only do these men stand at the head of their dispensations, but detailed accounts of their calls to the service of the Lord are available, allowing them to be studied in depth. Some confusion may still exist because of unrevealed details in their accounts. However, several aspects of their experiences share common characteristics. A comparison of three particular phases of their visions—divine confrontation, conflict with the adversary, and vision of the heavenly council—yields a better understanding of these aspects and helps us fill in some of the blanks. Through the comparison, we gain further awareness regarding the events that transpired during these sacred occasions, increasing our understanding of the occasions when these men were designated to lead God’s people as His prophets.³

THE PILLAR OF FIRE

After they had gone to an isolated place, Moses, Lehi, and Joseph Smith had visions that opened with a magnificent display of light and the “Divine Confrontation,” or a vision of God. When Moses’s vision commenced, he saw that “the bush burned with fire,” though “the bush was not consumed” (Exodus 3:2). It was from the burning bush that God “called unto him [Moses]” (v. 4). The description of Moses’s vision is unique, different from other well-known accounts of prophetic visions of God, perhaps causing some difficulty in interpreting the account. As scholars take the available details and try to picture exactly what took place, they can gain insight by comparing it with the experience of the Prophet Joseph Smith. In a pamphlet published by Elder Orson Pratt in 1840, Elder Pratt states that during his

vision, Joseph “expected to have seen the leaves and boughs of the trees consumed, as soon as the light came in contact with them; but, perceiving that it did not produce that effect, he was encouraged with the hopes of being able to endure its presence.”⁴ In both visions, a heavenly light appeared with such radiance and glory that it was a surprise that the plants around them were not consumed. After the light appeared, the prophets were granted a vision of God, who called them to duty. The striking similarities suggest that what Moses saw could be the same thing the Prophet Joseph Smith saw—that is, a vision of God surrounded by a pillar of light.⁵

The Prophet Joseph Smith and Moses are not the only to have seen this type of divine manifestation. Nephi tells us that “as [Lehi] prayed unto the Lord, there came a *pillar of fire* and dwelt upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much” (1 Nephi 1:6; emphasis added). In an account dictated sometime between the middle of 1831 and the end of 1832, Joseph’s first choice of words to describe the phenomenon he saw in the Sacred Grove was “pillar of *fire*.” The word *fire* was crossed out, and was replaced with the word *light*.⁶ “Pillar of fire” is also the phrase Joseph used in an 1835 account.⁷ This suggests that Joseph’s vision paralleled the vision of Lehi as well as of Moses.⁸ Furthermore, the resemblance of their accounts produces at least one plausible hypothesis of what the many things Lehi “saw and heard” were: if Moses and Joseph both saw God in a “pillar of fire” in their first visions, is it possible that Lehi did as well?⁹

Nephi does not say that Lehi’s initial vision was accompanied by a divine confrontation. He gives his readers only one sentence to let them know that something important has just happened. In telling his father’s story, Nephi distinguishes the pillar of fire from what Lehi “saw and heard” and states that it was “because of the things which [Lehi] saw and heard”—not because of the pillar of fire itself—that Lehi “did quake and tremble exceedingly” (1 Nephi 1:6). What Lehi saw and heard must have been substantial, for it affected him deeply.

Nephi does state, however, that he did not record all of his father's experiences.¹⁰ It is important to remember that at the time Nephi was writing on his plates, Lehi had already written his own account of his experiences. Nephi's abridgment of his father's record is intended to carry the plot along to the point where his own story begins, rather than to tell his father's entire story. What Lehi saw and prophesied was important enough to be written down, but this information had already been written by Lehi himself.¹¹ It is also probable that Nephi's primary audience, his own family and descendants,¹² had possession of Lehi's record and was familiar with it.¹³ Therefore, for the sake of brevity and in deference to his father's firsthand account, Nephi leaves the particulars out of his own record.¹⁴

The clues Nephi does give, however, show that there is more taking place than what he has stated in his record. The details of Lehi's vision that are included by Nephi follow the pattern of the visions of Moses and Joseph Smith, and it seems unlikely that his experience would have deviated from this pattern during the most important part.¹⁵ Based on the evidence available to modern readers, it is plausible that in the "pillar of fire" Lehi was visited by the Lord. In any case, Lehi did see God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, no later than upon his return to his own house (see vv. 8-9).

BATTLE WITH THE ADVERSARY

Another common element surrounding the call of a new prophet is a clash with the power of the adversary. After the presence of God withdrew from Moses, he paused to regain his composure and contemplate the enormity of the events that had just transpired. As he did so, "Satan came tempting him, saying: Moses, son of man, worship me" (Moses 1:12). Moses saw through the ruse easily, for Satan entirely lacked the glory that was characteristic of his earlier vision of God. As Moses confidently shrugged the counterfeit off, however, the power of Satan was

unleashed upon him: “Moses began to fear exceedingly; and as he began to fear, he saw the bitterness of hell” (v. 20). Satan cried, ranted, trembled, wept, wailed, and gnashed his teeth in a scene so terrible that it shook the earth. In response to the onslaught, Moses called upon God and, receiving strength, cast Satan out (vv. 21–22).

The Prophet Joseph Smith’s experience is very similar. As soon as he started to pray, Joseph “was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame [him]” (Joseph Smith—History 1:15). This was no “imaginary ruin”; he was dealing with “the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as [he] had never before felt in any being” (v. 16). The power exerted by this unseen being was so real and so alarming to the young boy that, as he recorded, he felt as if he was “doomed to sudden destruction” (v. 15). Just as Moses had experienced, the powers of the adversary were unleashed upon the unsuspecting Joseph, who was so shaken by the assault that he “was ready to sink into despair and abandon [himself] to destruction” (v. 16). Only by calling upon God, as Moses had done, was he released from Satan’s grasp.

It is remarkable that the adversary makes his greatest show of power alongside God’s greatest manifestations of glory. Lehi spoke of “opposition in all things,” explaining that without opposition, “righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad” (2 Nephi 2:11). These two encounters give a perfect demonstration of this principle. Opposition confronts the prophet with a magnitude that is the relative equivalent of the manifestation of divinity. The confrontation with and the display of the devil’s power greatly strengthened both Moses and Joseph. They learned early that when the trials are greatest they should turn to God. Because of the fortifying effect of this occasion, it makes sense that such an important learning experience would take place at the commencement of a prophet’s ministry.

The pattern thus established suggests that the clash ought to be a recurring element in the events preceding the ministry of other prophets.¹⁶ In Lehi's first vision, which parallels those of Moses and the Prophet Joseph in other ways, no confrontation is recorded. Perhaps in his attempt to record only the indispensable, Nephi skipped over the clash.¹⁷ It is also possible that no such battle ever occurred. Because no known record of such an experience exists, modern readers are left to speculate whether, or when, such an event may have taken place. It is possible that the struggle took place as Lehi retired to his bed after seeing the pillar of fire, bewildered as was Moses just after his first experience. Not only is the timing just right, corresponding as it does with Moses's battle, but having a supernatural experience during a deep sleep is a motif throughout the Book of Mormon.¹⁸ Undeniably, there is little evidence for this assumption, but the possibility of a battle against the adversary remains because of the pattern established by the experiences of others, especially in light of Lehi's teachings on "opposition in all things."¹⁹

THE HEAVENLY COUNCIL

One of the most remarkable types of visions afforded to man also plays an important part in the call of a prophet. Though Nephi omits many details in abridging his father's account, he gives much attention to what takes place during this phase of his father's first vision. Nephi says that "being thus overcome with the Spirit, [Lehi] was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (1 Nephi 1:8). During the vision, Lehi was granted the privilege not only of seeing God in council with His angels but also of learning of His plan for His children and of His tender mercies toward them. The grandeur of the vision was so great that at its close, Lehi was overcome with awe and seemed to completely forget about the prophecies of doom included in this vision (see vv. 13-14).

The splendor and majesty naturally associated with seeing God upon His throne make the occurrence an extraordinary one. As outstanding as such experiences are, however, written accounts of a vision of the heavenly council are among the oldest and most common of all apocryphal writings. Hugh Nibley explained, “The Great Council held in heaven ‘at the foundation of the world’ is a theme that runs like a thread through the scriptures: the first book of the Old Testament opens with it, and the last book of the New Testament closes with it, and all the major prophets had the privilege of viewing the heavenly scene of God upon his throne surrounded by numberless concourses of angels.”²⁰ Recognizing now the importance and the ubiquity of the heavenly council in the scriptures, researchers are finding it in places they never before thought to look.²¹

Nibley further taught that the purpose of the vision of the council shown to the ancient prophets “was to explain to them what happens here and to console them in their distress by showing them that there is a divine plan behind everything.”²² The purpose of a prophet’s vision of the council is to receive instruction from God pertaining to his role in the plan of salvation.²³ As directions are given to participants, however, God does not dictate His will directly but rather passes the information through a hierarchy of messengers. In Lehi’s vision of the council, God, who is seated upon His throne, delegates the assignment of giving Lehi his instructions to Christ, described as “One descending out of the midst of heaven” (v. 9). Following Him are “twelve others,” representing the Apostles (v. 10). It is these twelve, and specifically “the first” of them, who come upon the face of the earth and give Lehi his message (v. 11). The recipient of the vision then follows the example given to him by these messengers and relays the instructions to his listeners (see v. 18).

The connection the vision of the council had with the calling of a new prophet was not lost upon the people of Lehi’s day. In fact, as Jack Welch notes, it was expected—if not required—for a prophet to have seen

and heard the events of the council, “and then to carry out his assignment meticulously by delivering the precise words of the council’s decree. . . . To so report and do, it has been concluded, was certification in that day that the prophet was a true messenger of God.”²⁴ It is little wonder, then, that the Lord would begin the Nephite dispensation by showing Lehi this vision. Thus empowered and authorized, Lehi carried out his assignment by reporting to the people of Jerusalem God’s will for them. His assignment eventually required him to leave behind his riches and his home; guide his family through a grueling, eight-year expedition through the desert; and establish a new nation in the promised land.

Moses was called upon to perform a task comparable to Lehi’s but on an even greater scale. Faced with a similar duty, he was afforded a similar experience.²⁵ After passing the test presented to him by the adversary, he was caught up into heaven. From there, God promised Moses that He would speak to him “concerning this earth” and instructed him to write what he was told (see Moses 1:40). At this point, the modern book of Genesis begins with Moses’s account of the Council in Heaven and the Creation. The translation of Genesis 1:1 suggested by Joseph Smith in his King Follett discourse makes the reference in Genesis to the Council in Heaven even more clear: “In the beginning, the head of the Gods called a council of the Gods; and they came together and concocted [prepared] a plan to create the world and people it.”²⁶ Moses’s record of the Council in Heaven thus prefaces not only his own ministry but also the written record of all Judeo-Christian religion.

Because of its importance, it comes as little surprise that the vision of the council would be such a fundamental, and even common, aspect of the events surrounding the calling of a new prophet.²⁷ But in the record of the First Vision of Joseph Smith, this element does not appear to be part of his vision. It is apparent, however, that much of what took place during the First Vision of Joseph Smith remains unrecorded. In the 1838 account found in the Pearl of Great Price, Joseph declared that there were “many

other things” that the Savior said to Joseph, “which I cannot write at this time” (Joseph Smith—History 1:20). In another account, Joseph also stated that “I saw many angels in this vision.”²⁸ Despite the fact that they are not mentioned in the Joseph Smith—History version, the angels seem to have performed an important role during this vision. Their presence is significant enough that during the earlier years of this dispensation, the best known aspect of Joseph’s vision was the angels, and early members of the Church referred to the vision as “the first *visitation of Angels*.”²⁹ Clearly many significant details regarding the First Vision have gone unmentioned, unnoticed, or both.

For whatever reason, Joseph chose not to disclose these details, but the presence of the angels may provide an important clue. In the “council visions” of other prophets, the role of the angels is well documented: they are messengers that act as intermediaries between God and man. There are several important differences between Joseph’s experience and the council visions of others; nevertheless, the significance and prevalence of these visions suggests that the “many angels” Joseph Smith spoke of may have performed a similar function during his First Vision.³⁰ In fact, notwithstanding the variations, his vision has several aspects in common with the council visions of others.³¹

It was previously noted that an important characteristic of Lehi’s vision was the adherence to a celestial line of authority—the orders came first from the Father, then to the Son, then to the Twelve, and then to Lehi. That same line of authority is apparently established in Joseph’s First Vision. The Father did not directly answer Joseph’s questions about which church was true but instead deferred to His Son: “This is My Beloved Son. Hear *Him*” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17; emphasis added). We can see that this general pattern, established in the First Vision, was followed throughout Joseph Smith’s ministry; God’s *modus operandi* in dealings with the Prophet was usually to send a messenger to Joseph rather than visit him Himself.³²

We naturally infer that the vision of the heavenly council would take place *in heaven*. Nothing Joseph recorded or recounted to others supports the idea that he was caught up into heaven, though too many details remain unrecorded to make a definitive statement.³³ The fact that a vision does not require its recipient to be in any particular place in order to receive the intended information may render Joseph's physical location during the vision irrelevant anyway. But this instance may be a special case when the council normally held in heaven was held on earth, this time with the Father Himself in attendance. This is especially significant in light of Zenos's allegory of the olive tree, found in Jacob 5. In caring for the vineyard, the Lord of the vineyard brings about His will by pronouncing it to His servant, who "brought other servants" to work with Him (Jacob 5:70). Here, the same line of authority seen during the vision of the heavenly council is used. During the final phase of the labor, however, Zenos states that "the Lord of the vineyard labored also with them" (v. 72). This may refer to the Father's direct participation with the Savior in ushering in this dispensation. The occasion of the First Vision was so important, it seems, that the Father disrupted the normal mode of command and came to earth personally to instruct the Prophet. This deviation is significant enough that it was foretold by the prophet Zenos over twenty-four hundred years before it took place as a sign of the commencement of the dispensation of the fulness of times.

COMMON ELEMENTS AMONG FIRST VISIONS			
	Divine confrontation	Conflict with the adversary	Vision of the Heavenly Council
Moses	Exodus 3:2	Moses 1:12-20	Moses 1, 2; Genesis 1
Lehi	Sees pillar of fire and "sees and hears much"	Not supported by the text	1 Nephi 1:8-15
Joseph Smith	JS-H 1:17	JS-H 1:15-16	"Many angels"

CONCLUSION

The importance of the first visions of Moses, Lehi, and Joseph Smith has been recognized by those who have studied the events that transpired during those sacred events. The comparison of the events, by noting the established patterns and evaluating the unknown in context with what is known, brings to light much of interest. By examining the patterns, we can get a better understanding of the purpose God had when he revealed Himself to His prophets. One also receives a greater appreciation of the character of the men called to be prophets. Though they faced extreme tests, they held true to the faith in spite of the adversary's attacks. Having proven themselves worthy, they were granted the privilege of seeing God and of receiving His divine instruction. As a result, the blessings of the gospel were made available to the people in their time and to others for generations to come. Though we do not have all the details, clearly much of significance took place when the silence between heaven and earth was broken.

NOTES

1. Nephi, for example, was shown the same vision his father Lehi saw (see 1 Nephi 11:3), which ended with the same vision the brother of Jared saw (see Ether 3:25). We do not have writings from either prophet describing all of that revelation, but we do have the writings of yet another prophet who saw the same vision: the Apostle John (see 1 Nephi 14:24).
2. Blake T. Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis," *BYU Studies* 26 (1986): 69-70. In his study of the prophetic call form, Ostler lists eight different elements. First, "there is a brief introductory remark providing circumstantial details such as time, place, and historical setting." Second, "either deity or an angel appears in glory to the individual." Third, "the individual reacts to the presence of the deity or his angel by way of an action expressive of fear, unworthiness, or having been overpowered." The fourth phase is the "Throne-Theophany," in which "the individual sees the council of God and God seated upon his throne." After that, "the individual recipient is commanded to perform a given task and assume the

role of prophet to the people.” Sixth, “the prophet responds to the commission by claiming that he is unable or unworthy to accomplish the task.” This protest is often absent when the reaction phase is present. In a gesture of support, “the deity reassures the prophet that he will be protected and able to carry out the *commission*,” and sometimes uses signs and miracles to convince him. Finally, “the commission form usually concludes in a formal way, most often with a statement that the prophet has begun to carry out his commission” (“The Throne-Theophany,” 69–70; emphasis in original).

3. This study does not encompass the calls of all prophets, though the calls of several men are comparable to the three studied here. One of the more notable of these is that of Abraham, who, like Moses, Lehi, and Joseph Smith, stands at the head of a dispensation, and whose call also shares many of the similar aspects studied herein. It is also important to note that not all prophetic calls or visions fit into the patterns described in this study. Some accounts are incomplete, whereas others show clear distinctions from the patterns discussed here. Because He works with different men in different situations, it should come as no surprise that God operates in different ways. God is certainly not bound to act as man would expect Him to.
4. Orson Pratt, quoted in Milton V. Backman Jr., “Confirming Witnesses of the First Vision,” *Ensign*, January 1986, 35.
5. One may wonder why the men use such different language to explain similar experiences. First, prophetic visions are unusual events, with which the men would have had few things to compare—the experience would “defy all description” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17). Moses was not an eloquent speaker, which complicated matters further. He protested in his visit with the Lord that he was “slow of speech, and of a slow tongue” (Exodus 4:10), and even after the Lord promised to teach him what to say, Moses was so self-conscious of his inadequacies that he pleaded with the Lord to send a spokesman to speak for him (see Exodus 4:10–16). This may or may not have affected his writing style, since eloquence in speaking does not equal eloquence in writing (see Ether 12:23–24). At any rate, the experience was unique enough that readers need not expect the accounts to be exactly similar.
6. Dean C. Jessee, “The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *BYU Studies* 9 (Spring 1969): 280.
7. Jessee, “The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 284.

8. Both Moses and Joseph were surprised that the plant life around them was not incinerated.
9. See John W. Welch, "The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo: FARMS, 2004), 427. It is important to recognize that Lehi's "first" vision may merely be his first vision of which there is surviving record. David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely reason that because there is no definite statement to the contrary "we cannot be certain that this is the first time he received divine instruction." Lehi's mannerism, they continue, is "behavior already suggesting prophetic stature." This statement is in harmony with John W. Welch's observation that in praying in behalf of his people, Lehi "was in harmony with the spirit of classic Hebrew prophecy that flourished in his day." The Seelys do concede, however, that Lehi's vision "is reminiscent of the vision in Isaiah chapter six, where that prophet saw the Lord upon his throne at the time he received his prophetic call (see Isaiah 6:1-13)," which implies that this was also Lehi's first vision ("Lehi and Jeremiah: Prophets, Priests, and Patriarchs," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 [1999], 30). Further supporting this position is the dramatic lifestyle change induced by Lehi's prophetic call. Hugh Nibley points out that Lehi was a rich merchant, with an enviable lifestyle. However, "in openly siding with Jeremiah . . . he had made himself a traitor to his class and his tradition." The danger to his life was serious enough that he was forced to leave Jerusalem to save his life (*Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1952], 12-13). The nature of the vision, as well as the drama caused by it, seems to indicate that the experience was a new one to Lehi. Welch ultimately concurs with this belief (see Welch, "The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem," 427).
10. "And it mattereth not to me that I am particular to give a full account of all the things of my father, for they cannot be written upon these plates, for I desire the room that I may write of the things of God" (1 Nephi 6:3).
11. "For he hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams; and he also hath written many things which he prophesied" (1 Nephi 1:16).
12. "For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ" (2 Nephi 25:23).
13. The 116 stolen pages, according to Joseph Smith, were "from the Book of Lehi, which was an account abridged from the plates of Lehi" (preface, Book

of Mormon, 1830 edition), and so it would seem that Lehi's record was available to Mormon. Nephi also refers his readers to his father's record for important information he leaves out of his own account, as in 1 Nephi 6:1: "For it is given in the record which has been kept by my father; wherefore, I do not write it in this work."

14. It is also possible that ancient readers would have known to associate a vision of God with a pillar of fire. John W. Welch taught that "the appearance of fire, especially a pillar of fire, was a frequent mode of heavenly manifestation," a fact demonstrated by the repetition pointed out in this study ("The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem," 426).
15. Welch does point out that the manifestation in the pillar of fire was "sometimes of God and other times of his messengers or of the holy beings who surrounded him." He further states, "We cannot be certain who or what Lehi saw in the pillar of fire that appeared to him. . . . But since Lehi's vision of God himself is reported as the next stage of the vision, it seems more likely to me that what he beheld at this time was a messenger of God." He does concede, however, that Lehi "could have seen God" ("The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem," 426-27). Others state that the many things which he heard and saw "undoubtedly refer to the history of the people" (George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, "Commentary on the Book of Mormon" [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1955], 8). However, this statement does not define the method by which the information was conveyed or reveal the identity of his messenger. Based on the evidence presented in this study, this writer feels it most likely that Lehi was visited by God at this time.
16. One needs to look no further than to the example of the Savior Himself. All three synoptic Gospels describe the temptations that Jesus endured before He began His public ministry (see Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:1-13). They also suggest that the experience greatly strengthened the Savior, for He returned "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14). Hugh B. Brown also faced an experience similar to that of Joseph Smith's, just prior to his calling as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve (see Hugh B. Brown, "I Cannot Buy That with Money," in *Outstanding Stories by General Authorities*, ed. Leon R. Hartshorn [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970], 17).
17. In *The Restoration*, a video published by the Church in 2003 telling the story of Joseph Smith's First Vision, the conflict with Satan is likewise skipped—not in an attempt to cut out the less important parts or cover up embarrassing

details but in order to clearly tell the most critical aspects of the occasion. Nephi may have done the same in his account of Lehi's story.

18. Take, for example, the account of Alma the Younger: "I was racked with eternal torment. . . . I was tormented with the pains of hell" (Alma 36:12-13; cf. Moses 1:20—"he saw the bitterness of hell"). The torment does not end until Alma calls upon God, as Moses and Joseph do: "I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me" (Alma 36:18). Furthermore, once Alma is released, he sees, "even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (Alma 36:22). Alma already shares one thing in common with Lehi; why not another?
19. At least one piece of evidence supports the idea that a clash with Satan did *not* occur when Lehi was called. Later, as Lehi's family was traveling through the desert, they were faced with the threat of starvation when Nephi's bow broke and the bows of the other sons "lost their springs" (1 Nephi 16:21). In this situation, even Lehi buckled under the pressure, and Nephi reported that "my father began to murmur against the Lord his God" (v. 20). The grumblings had been serious, for when he turned back to the Lord, he was severely disciplined before receiving instruction (see v. 25). "In the midst of affliction, Lehi fails to meet the test as does his son" (Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1947], 47).

Moses and Joseph Smith certainly made mistakes, even to the end of their lives, but were never so shaken by severe trials that they lost faith. While languishing in Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith asked, "How long?" (D&C 121:2, 3), showing that even in the toughest circumstances, he still had faith in the eventual fulfillment of God's promises. When times were tough for Moses, he actually served as the intercessor for his people, pleading their cause before God and offering to "make an atonement for [their] sin" (Exodus 32:30). When he did complain, the Lord responded by granting the petition. For example, to the complaint that "the burden of all this people" (Numbers 11:11) was too much to handle, the Lord responded by allowing Moses to appoint seventy men to be officers over the people, "that thou bear it not thyself alone" (v. 17). The fact that God reacted to Moses's complaint indicates that Moses had not stepped outside his bounds and murmured against the Lord. Both Moses and Joseph Smith, who had both been victorious over the adversary in their early confrontations, had strength enough to pass

through further trials without losing faith. If Moses and Joseph Smith both learned to resist the adversary through their early confrontations, perhaps Lehi's fortitude does not compare as favorably because he had not gone through such an experience himself.

One would do well to consider what Lehi went through in following the commandments of the Lord. He abandoned a well-established lifestyle and great wealth to serve in the capacity which he was assigned. Lehi received the charge, similar to the charge Christ gave the rich young man in Matthew 19:24, to leave his wealth behind in order to follow God's commandments. In this case, such was the faith and dedication of Lehi that he accomplished the Herculean task of placing God before riches. Perhaps this was Lehi's true test. It is also possible that Lehi went through a different sort of test before his call as a prophet. Of Lehi's character, Nibley wrote, "Of all the righteous men in Jerusalem, Lehi alone was singled out for a task requiring a combination of qualifications and a measure of faith which few men have ever had. . . . Lehi was no ordinary man" (*Lehi in the Desert*, 83).

20. Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 184-85.
21. Take, for example, the visit of the angels to the shepherds in Luke 2, where once again the familiar motif of "a multitude of the heavenly host praising God" (Luke 2:13) is found. The fact that "a multitude" of angels were sent to announce the birth of Christ when one angel would certainly have been sufficient to act as a messenger suggests that there is more going on than just an announcement. The celebration of the heavenly hosts during the commencement of the Savior's life on earth seems reminiscent of the earlier council, when "all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7); perhaps the mode of celebration was a reenactment of that council.
22. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 187.
23. It is easy to think of the council as a meeting that has concluded and to speak of the council is to speak of an event that has passed, due to its ties to the creation of the world. As important as the preliminary knowledge of the creation is, it is only part of the story. The glimpses of the council afforded to man show a living, ongoing process of transmitting God's will to His children, stressing the fact that not only was the plan first established by the council but that all things are still being done by the council, under the direction of God.

24. See Welch, "The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem," 429. In Lehi's day, the prophet Jeremiah gave scathing criticism to false prophets by asking them, "Who hath stood in the counsel of the Lord, and hath perceived and heard his word? who hath marked his word, and heard it?" (Jeremiah 23:18). In this passage, the vision of the council was a means of separating a true prophet from false ones.
25. Moses and Lehi are similar in many respects (see Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi as Moses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 [2000]: 26–35).
26. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 6:302–7.
27. Lehi and Moses were not the only ones whose ministry commenced with a vision of the Council in Heaven; the scriptures contain numerous examples. Especially worthy of mention in this study are the previously noted examples of Isaiah, found in the sixth chapter of his book, and of Alma the Younger, described in Alma 36. More examples are found in Ostler's previously cited work. Showing the vision of the council to a newly called prophet is a demonstrably standard practice.
28. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," 284.
29. See Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," 286; emphasis added. This may have been what caused the common theory that Joseph's First Vision story has evolved from being a mere angelic visitation to a vision of God. A study of the various accounts of the First Vision, as early as the 1832 account, shows that Joseph was reluctant to disclose more information than necessary and that he had seen the Lord.
30. This idea is further supported by the reasons for showing such a vision. As was previously shown, the vision of the Council in Heaven is intended to reassure the viewer that God's divine plan remains in force, and to give them their instructions pertaining to their role in fulfilling that plan. Joseph came to God specifically seeking that instruction. Thus God had motive and opportunity to show the vision of the council, as well as an established historical pattern of doing so with prophets before Joseph.
31. Welch identifies three main elements of what he terms "council visions": "first, that God was described as surrounded by his numerous host; second, that the discussion of the council was brought to a conclusion by a council leader; and third, that the word of God was then stated to determine the fate of a person or group" ("The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of

Jerusalem," 428). One of Joseph's accounts speaks of "many angels," possibly paralleling the motif of "numberless hosts" referred to by Welch. Likewise, Joseph records that God called the meeting to order and gave instruction to the Prophet, meeting the other two points. Joseph's accounts also satisfy many of the elements of Ostler's previously mentioned prophetic call form:

Introduction: Joseph prefaces his vision with an explanation of the circumstances that lead him to the grove (see Joseph Smith—History 1:1–14). The length of the introduction, it should be recognized, is uncharacteristic of Hebrew literature. The historical introduction is to be brief, as in Isaiah 6:1: "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne."

Divine Confrontation: The Father and the Son appear to Joseph in glory (see Joseph Smith—History 1:16–17).

Reaction: Joseph needed time to "get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak" (v. 18).

Throne-Theophany: Joseph sees "many angels" in connection with this vision, as noted above.

Commission: Joseph is commanded not to join with the other churches and instructed him further (see vv. 19–20).

Protest: Absent, as allowed when the "reaction" element is present.

Reassurance: In the 1832 account, Joseph is told that he is forgiven of his sins (see Backman, "Confirming Witnesses of the First Vision," 35). It is possible that there is also undisclosed information among the "many things" that Joseph could not write at that time (see v. 20).

Conclusion: The light departs, and Joseph finds himself staring into heaven (see v. 20).

32. For example, in matters relating to the Book of Mormon, Joseph was instructed by Moroni. He received the authority to baptize from John the Baptist, who himself was operating under direction of Peter, James, and John. Those three later gave Joseph the authority to lead and direct the Church of Jesus Christ on earth. These representatives who were sent were specially and specifically capacitated to perform in the necessary function. The identity of the messenger is important as it relates to the role they were to perform during their visits. There were times Christ personally came to speak to the Prophet, of course, but such exceptions generally arose because no messenger could perform in the required function, such as when Christ personally appeared to accept the Kirtland Temple as His house (see D&C 110).

33. Ostler discusses the differences between Joseph's vision and other visions of the council, noting that "the visions of God in nineteenth-century literature do not mention the Council in Heaven, nor do they employ any uniquely Hebrew symbolism in relation to the council" ("The Throne-Theophany," 85). In speaking of the ascension motif, he notices "an ascension to the throne of God of some element in the vision, but not an ascension of the prophet himself" ("The Throne-Theophany," 86). Ostler feels that Joseph's account does not "conform to the throne-theophany and commission pattern found in the ancient works and 1 Nephi 1" ("The Throne-Theophany," 86). These deviations from the "throne-theophany and commission pattern" Ostler describes, however, deal mostly with the *method* in which the account is told. When they depart from the established pattern, it is by means and for reasons treated above. This writer feels that Ostler may have exaggerated the importance of the differences in order to establish the independence of Lehi's account from Joseph's. In studying the occasion, it seems that the vision conforms in every way to these criteria, even if Joseph's record does not. This is strong evidence of the authenticity of Joseph's record—his First Vision resembles the visions of the ancient prophets, yet he seems entirely unaware of the fact.