
VISIONS

A vision from God is a form of revelation whereby God discloses himself and his will. It is a visual mode of divine communication, in contrast with hearing words spoken or receiving impressions to the mind. LDS experience is consistent with biblical precedent in affirming that visions constitute a mark of divine approval. Such heavenly manifestations informed and directed Old Testament prophets (e.g., Daniel, Isaiah) and New Testament apostles (e.g., Peter, Paul). They have similarly been part of the foundation of revelation upon which Latter-day Saint prophets and apostles have asserted their testimony of the Lord. The visions of Joseph SMITH and of the Book of Mormon prophets are comparable with those of the other testamental epochs. These historic periods of testimony—the Old, the New, the Book of Mormon, and the Latter-day—show similar patterns of revelation from God. Each of these dispensations of the gospel has included visions that communicated the mind and will of the Lord for that time.

An experience of a vision in Old Testament times is “The Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh with his friend” (Ex. 33:11). Similarly, Moses “saw God face to face, and he talked with him, and the glory of God was upon Moses; therefore Moses could endure his presence” (Moses 1:2). The vision of Stephen in Acts 7:55–56 is no less vivid: “He, being full of the Holy Ghost . . . said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.” Comparable is the vision of Joseph Smith and Sidney RIGDON recorded in D&C 76:19: “The Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened. . . . And we beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father.” Each vision is unequivocal and is accompanied by the Spirit of the Lord (*see* VISIONS OF JOSEPH SMITH).

These distinctive testimonies anchor all the rest of God’s communion by a visual link with an ordinarily unseen world that directs the destiny of humankind. They provide a vivid sense of the nature of God and his design for the world that gives coherence to all other scripture and inspiration. Spiritual illumination, visual and otherwise, is contingent upon faith and trust in the Lord and obedience to him. When people reject or stray from the will of the Lord, they withdraw from his spirit (Mosiah 2:36), and visions cease. And, as declared

in Proverbs 29:18: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

In LDS doctrine visions are perceptions, aided by the Spirit, of something ordinarily invisible to human beings. The things disclosed are viewed as part of general reality. This process is according to natural law and is not “supernatural,” in the usual sense of that term. It is analogous to the fact that some physically real phenomena, such as X rays and atomic particles, are not discerned by the ordinary senses but may be detected by scientific instruments. In the case of visions, the instrument is the person, and the mechanism of observation is faith aided by the Spirit of God.

It is vital to distinguish authentically revealed visions from self-induced imaginings, wish-fulfilling dreams, errors of perception, satanic deceptions, and pathological hallucinating, all of which have been abundant in human history. Spurious visions result from seeking “signs”; authentic visions usually come unbidden. “He that seeketh signs shall see signs, but not unto salvation. . . . Faith cometh not by signs, but signs follow those that believe” (D&C 67:7, 9).

Certain criteria assist in judging the authenticity of any revelation, including a vision:

- It strengthens faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and in his divine mission and doctrine.
- It is confirmed by the witness of the Holy Ghost to the sincere seeker.
- It is usually experienced and reported by an ordained servant of the Lord, often in the name of the Lord. It is declared clearly and unequivocally, and has general application for a people or a time, or for all people and all time. Inspired visions may be experienced by others, but they have specific application to those persons or situations.
- The witness is usually supported by additional testimony, such as accompaniment of the Spirit of God, other manifestations, or the word of additional testators.
- It is consistent with scriptural principles and established doctrine.
- The one receiving and conveying the message is morally upright, honest, and humbly obedient to the commandments of God.
- The content revealed and the behavior admonished are comprehensible as good and true.

- The consequences of following the information or direction are beneficial to the individual and to others, except in cases where the vision contains a rebuke of iniquity or a prophecy of destruction.
- Feelings of enlightenment, edification, and peace, rather than of anxiety or confusion, follow the receiving or awareness of the vision.
- It is not induced by drugs, eroticism, violent or hyperemotional ritual, or worship of false spirits.

While it is often asserted that visions are merely the natural outcome of psychology, biology, culture, or drugs, this viewpoint has never been adequately supported. Such interpretations are helpful for a narrow range of explainable phenomena but do not reach the transcendent and inspirational realm of true visions. Theories from the time of Freudian psychoanalysis to the modern psychobiology of dreams and altered states of consciousness fall short of comprehending divinely given concepts.

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VISIONS OF JOSEPH SMITH

Ancient prophets were typically called through a revelatory process—visions and/or revelations: "If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream" (Num. 12:6). The prophet Joel anticipated that visions would increase in the last days, saying, "Old men shall dream dreams, [and] young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28–32).

The Prophet Joseph Smith had his first vision at the age of fourteen while praying in a grove of trees in western New York (*see* FIRST VISION). The appearance of the Lord to him, like that to Saul of Tarsus, was attended by a shining light from heaven (Acts 9:3). The Lord spoke face-to-face with Joseph and called him to service. This was the first of a series of visions Joseph SMITH received, many of which were shared with other persons. Blessed like John on the isle of Patmos and Paul who spoke

of the third heaven, the Prophet Joseph Smith affirmed, "Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject" (*TPJS*, p. 324; cf. *HC* 6:50). He also declared that "the best way to obtain truth and wisdom is not to ask it from books, but to go to God in prayer, and obtain divine teaching" (*TPJS*, p. 191).

President John TAYLOR said that Joseph Smith had contact with prophets from every dispensation:

Because he [Joseph] stood at the head of the dispensation of the fulness of times, which comprehends all the various dispensations that have existed upon the earth, and that as the Gods in the eternal worlds and the Priesthood that officiated in time and eternity had declared that it was time for the issuing forth of all these things, they all combined together to impart to him the keys of their several missions [*JD* 18:326].

A new dispensation requires the conferral of priesthood and keys, in accordance with the law of witnesses: "In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established" (2 Cor. 13:1). During the restoration sequence when priesthood and keys were conferred by angelic ministrants, the Prophet was accompanied by one or more witnesses. Oliver COWDERY was a principal figure in the fulfillment of this law of witnesses (*see* WITNESSES, LAW OF); others were David WHITMER, Martin HARRIS, and Sidney RIGDON. Distinguishing dreams from visions and associating visions and visitations, Joseph said, "An open vision will manifest that which is more important" (*TPJS*, p. 161). Crucial visions received by the Prophet Joseph Smith are the source of many cardinal doctrines and teachings of the Latter-day Saints.

THE FIRST VISION. Lucy Mack SMITH recalled that as the Joseph Smith, Sr., family worked their Manchester, New York, farm in the period of 1820, "there was a great revival in religion, which extended to all denominations of Christians in the surrounding country." Lucy and three of the children joined the Western Presbyterian Church in Palmyra, but Joseph remained "unchurched." He later wrote, "It was impossible . . . to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong" (*JS—H* 1:8). In answer to a biblical prompting that "if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God" (James 1:5), Joseph retired to the