



Hannah Mason
Two Personages
2018, linocut
6" x 9"

JOSEPH SMITH AND THE FACE OF CHRIST

Robert A. Rees

“He will unveil his face to you.”

—D&C 88:67–68

“Everything in the realm of nature and human existence is a sign—a manifestation of God’s divine names and attributes. . . . As it is said in the Qur’an, ‘Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.’”

—Avideh Shashaani¹

“To see your face is like seeing the face of God . . .”

—Jacob, upon meeting his long-estranged
brother, Esau (Genesis 33:10, NIV)

. . . his eyes

*Looked into the eyes of God; there was
that flash of absolute knowing.*

—Luci Shaw, “Simeon”²

What members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints refer to as the Restoration begins with Joseph Smith’s theophany of God and Christ in the Sacred Grove when he was in his early teens. Commonly known as the First Vision, it was the beginning of a series of what believers consider foundational communications from the heavens. Church president Joseph F. Smith declared what happened that

1. Avideh Shashaani, in Richard Rohr, “The Breath of God,” Center for Action and Contemplation, Sept. 27, 2018, <https://cac.org/the-breath-of-god-2018-09-27/>.

2. Luci Shaw, “Simeon,” in *Accompanied by Angels: Poems of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006), 39–40.

spring day in 1820 “the most significant historical event since the Savior’s resurrection.”³

During a recent fireside, wanting those in attendance to imagine Joseph’s visionary experience as if it had happened to them, I asked, “What did Joseph see that day that had the most profound influence on him for the rest of his life? What was the most startling realization he had upon seeing the Father and the Son?” After a moment, a woman answered, “He saw that God had a face like his.” I said, “Yes! Exactly.”

I have heard the Joseph Smith story recounted thousands of times over the past seventy-four years since I joined the Church at age ten. I have told it myself thousands of times during my six years of fulltime missionary service; in countless Sunday School, seminary, institute, and priesthood classes; and in the university classes I teach on Mormonism at the Graduate Theological Union and the University of California, Berkeley.

In all that time, I don’t remember a single person speaking of Joseph seeing God’s and Christ’s faces. Usually, our focus is on him seeing *beings* or *personages*, the latter of which is the word he uses in his accounts of that remarkable day; but, we don’t emphasize the most significant aspect of those sublime personages—their faces.

What Joseph Smith saw, therefore, was not simply an embodied God or gods (or, as his first recounting says, “the Lord”), nor simply beings with bodies similar to his own, but beings with faces he could look into as with all the mortals in his life, faces with their unique physiognomy and range of expressions. As John O’Donohue observes, “In a certain sense, the face is the icon of the body, the place where the inner world of the person becomes manifest. The human face is

3. Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 1. The words are Harper’s. His reference is: Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 495–96.

the subtle yet visual autobiography of each person.”⁴ And, one would assume, the autobiography of each divine person. What Joseph saw was the most powerful and transcendent thing possible for a human to see: the visage of God in all its distinctiveness and particularity, all its beauty, glory, and holiness.

Emma Lou Thayne writes of Joseph’s experience in her poem “Meditations on the Heavens”:

Suppose he really saw the vision, God, the angel
 My church owns the story: Joseph in the grove, fourteen
 A supernatural sight of extraordinary beauty and significance . . .
 The boy kneeling at the elevated feet of the Father and the Son . . .
 While praying for a truth that had eluded others.
 A supernatural sight of extraordinary beauty and significance . . .⁵

Is there anything that could have prepared Joseph for this experience? From all the discussions, debates, and sermons he must have heard in the various church services and camp meetings he attended, from all he would have learned at his parents’ knees, from all his reading of scripture and other publications, he would have been taught that God is a spirit, invisible to humans and further that, as John the Baptist proclaims, “no man hath seen God at any time” (John 1:18, KJV), a phrase repeated in St. John’s epistle (1 John 4:12). Joseph might also have heard references to Moses’ being allowed to look upon God’s “back parts,” but expressly forbidden from seeing his face: “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live” (Ex. 33:20, KJV).

Even though most Christians, Jews, and Muslims do not believe it is possible for a human to literally look upon the face of God, in Ezekiel

4. John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (New York: Harper Perennial), 38.

5. Emma Lou Thayne, “Meditations on the Heavens,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 143–46; also found in Emma Lou Thayne, *Things Happen: Poems of Survival* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991).

God promises, “I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my spirit on the people of Israel” (Ezek. 39:29, NIV). Certainly in 1820 and thereafter, according to Latter-day Saint belief, the Lord was pouring his spirit upon the house of Israel.

While we may not be able to imagine God’s face, we also cannot imagine God not having a face any more than we can imagine him not having a heart. And even if one takes the view that God is too ineffable to either have a face or, having one, allow mortals to behold it, we know that Christ did have a face, one that artists have attempted to visualize and portray for the past two thousand years. As Richard Rohr observes, “In Jesus, God was given a face and a heart. God became someone we could love. While God can be described as a moral force, as consciousness, and as high vibrational energy, the truth is, we don’t (or can’t?) fall in love with abstractions. So God became a person ‘that we could hear, see with our eyes, look at, and touch with our hands’ (1 John 1:1).”⁶

What I want to emphasize is how absolutely profound and life-changing this experience must have been for Joseph. It was likely the most powerful experience of his truly remarkable life. Poetry and scripture can give us only an oblique glimpse into such an experience, for seeing those faces was equivalent to looking into the heart of eternity, illumined by a thousand suns.

What exactly did Joseph see on the faces of those two divine personages he witnessed standing above him in the air? The face of God must be the most beautiful thing in the universe. What Joseph beheld was the face of pure love, a face that on some deep level, in his innermost subconsciousness, must have held for him a glimmer of recognition—a face that he had seen somewhere, somehow, before time. Perhaps it was not unlike the look on the face of the father in the parable of the prodigal son. That son expected—even deserved—to see a stern face, however familiar, of disapproval and condemnation. Undoubtedly, he had imagined such a face with each fearful step homeward. Instead,

6. Richard Rohr, “Love Needs a Face,” Center for Action and Contemplation, Jan. 15, 2018, <https://cac.org/love-needs-face-2018-01-15/>.

what he saw was a face full of forgiveness, longing, and urgent love, one willing to erase all his past mistakes and transgressions. Stephen Mitchell's translation of this parable catches the exquisite drama of that moment when father and son look into one another's faces:

And when he [the prodigal] came to himself . . . he got up, and went to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him [how many days, one wonders, did the father look toward the horizon hoping to see his lost son's face?], and was moved with compassion, and ran to him, and threw his arms around him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick, bring out the best robe we have and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and make merry. For this son of mine was dead, and has come back to life; he was lost, and is found."⁷

The father running toward his son—and his command to his servants, "Quick!"—may be a response to the look of dread and foreboding on his son's face as well as his own generous impulse to forgive his wastrel's indulgent and profligate life. Judging from what we know of Christ's quickness to forgive, it may be what we can expect when we turn to him from our estrangement, from our sins and lostness.

A related story from the Torah, and one having to do with faces, is the reunion of Jacob and Esau after more than two decades of separation. As we recall, Jacob usurped Esau's birthright blessing, thereby placing himself in a superior position to his brother. Thereafter, Jacob is called "lord" and Esau "servant." Esau, angered at having his birthright stolen, sought to kill Jacob.

Fast forward to Genesis 31–32 where God commands Jacob to return to Canaan, the place of Esau's abode. After crossing into Canaan with his family and flocks, Jacob has his famous wrestle with an angel or divine messenger who, departing at dawn, tells Jacob, "You have

7. Stephen Mitchell, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 223–24, emphasis added.

striven with God and men, and won out" (Gen. 32:30).⁸ Interestingly, Jacob names the place of this encounter Peniel, which means "I have seen God face to face and I came out alive" (Gen. 32:31).

Fearful that his brother still harbors hatred toward him, Jacob hopes to placate him by sending him gifts of abundant droves of various domestic animals. When Esau sees Jacob, like the father of the prodigal son, the scripture says, "He ran to meet him and embraced him and fell upon his neck and kissed him, and they wept." Jacob responds, "For have I not seen your face as one might see God's face, and you have received me in kindness?" (Gen. 33:10). It is significant to note that since their earlier parting, Jacob has carried in his heart and mind the angry, murderous face of his brother, but Esau's face has been transformed into that of a kind, loving, and forgiving brother. When Jacob sees Esau's face, full of grace and generosity, he reverses their roles, speaking of himself as the servant and his elder brother as his lord. It is also worth noting that apparently Jacob sees something in his brother's loving visage that reminds him of what he saw on the face of the divine being with whom he wrestled.

These stories confirm the sentiment that God's face and heart are always turned to us, which the following story from the Jewish Midrash (the rabbis' imaginative expansion of scripture) illustrates: "The son of a king was a hundred days' journey away from his father. His friends said to him, 'Return to your father.' He said, 'I can't; I'm too far away.' His father sent to him and said, 'Go as far as you can and I will come the rest of the way to you.' Thus the Holy One, blessed be he, said to Israel, 'Return to me, and I will return to you.'"⁹

How delighted God must have been that a young American farm boy was turning to him at a moment when God needed someone with

8. Genesis 32:30, in Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 180–81. Subsequent citations of Genesis are from this translation.

9. Mitchell, *Gospel According to Jesus*, 227.

faith to seek his face, someone to whom God could show *his* face—and that of his Son—and set in motion the grand restoration of all things spoken by the prophets.

The look on God's face in that American forest would have changed as he turned toward Christ and said to Joseph, "This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" (JS-H 1:17). That look of unconditional love, pride, and overwhelming gratitude the Father felt for his son we can perhaps obliquely imagine because most of us have had similar experiences of looking on or into the face of someone we love completely and unconditionally and, equally, seeing the look on the face of another person who sees us as beloved, the object of his or her unconditional love. We know that look! And Joseph, seeing the Father look toward Christ, could not have withheld his own gaze from that Son's face.

What Joseph saw in and on the faces of the Father and the Son were the mystery and majesty of their natures, their beings, their *personalities*. He saw faces filled with love, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, mercy, magnanimity, grace, and benevolence—all those virtues God reveals to us in ten thousand ways and in ten thousand places.

The moment Joseph saw the faces of God and Christ, he knew that much of what he had been taught about deity from creeds and preached from pulpits was false. This was not an invisible, distant God; it was not an angry, punitive God, and Joseph was not a despicable creature God was dangling over the fires of hell. Rather, there was the shock of recognition that God was like him and that he was like God. In his book *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints*, Catholic scholar Stephen Webb writes, "Mormonism demands a rethinking of every aspect of Christian history and tradition."¹⁰ That rethinking began when Joseph beheld the faces of God

10. Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 16. Webb asks, "Is it really bad theology to imagine that we will see God face to face one day?" (8).

and Christ in the woods near his home. As Webb asserts, “If God looks like something (rather than being completely without form), doesn’t it stand to reason that he looks like us?” He further asks, “Is it really bad theology to imagine that we will see God face to face one day?”¹¹ This truth is confirmed by modern revelation in which we are told that “when the Savior shall appear we shall see him as he is. We shall see that he is a man like ourselves” (D&C 130:1).

Joseph would have recognized that face when he saw it again in vision at the John Johnson farm in Hiram, Ohio in 1832 when he and Sidney Rigdon were contemplating “sundry revelations which had been received [which raised] many important points concerning the salvation of man.” Joseph reports:

And while we meditated upon these things, the Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened, and the glory of the Lord shone round about. And we beheld the glory of the Son, on the right hand of the Father, and received of his fulness; . . . And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives! For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father. (D&C 76:19–23)

One can assume that the “fulness” of which Joseph speaks included seeing Christ’s face, since in this same revelation he says the Lord was a personage “whom we saw and with whom we conversed in the heavenly vision” (D&C 76:14). This was followed by yet another vision in the Kirtland Temple during Holy Week in 1836 in which Joseph describes the Lord’s face in specific detail: “We saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit, before us; and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold, in color like amber. His eyes were as a flame of fire; the hair of his head was white like the pure snow; his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun; and his voice was as the sound of the rushing of great waters, even the voice of Jehovah” (D&C 110:2–3).

11. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 9, 8.

Modern neuroscience is unfolding our understanding of many hitherto hidden mysteries of our brains. For example, scientists have identified a part of the brain whose sole function is face recognition.¹² According to Linda Graham, a psychotherapist specializing in neuroscience and human relations, “We all rely on the fusiform gyrus in the right hemisphere of the brain to read the facial expressions of another person. The direct eye contact of emphatic, responsive parenting stimulates the development of this structure in the baby’s brain; we can strengthen the functioning of this structure through eye contact with other people lifelong. Research has shown that when our right hemisphere reads safety and trust in the facial expressions of another person, the amygdala calms down, and the stress response is reduced.”¹³

God knew of the dark terror that had enveloped Joseph just prior to his vision, a terror so threatening that Joseph experienced being on the edge of annihilation. As he describes it, he was captive to “the power of this enemy which had seized upon me . . . the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being.” It was in this moment when he was about to succumb to total despairing darkness that he cried out for deliverance, “exerting all [his] powers to call upon God to deliver” him (JS-H 1:16).

At this dramatic moment when, one assumes, God has allowed Joseph to experience the full force of demonic power in order that he might truly be open to the light that was about to envelop him—at the point when he was on the verge of being sucked into the vortex of the very heart of darkness—a pillar of light “above the brightness of the sun” descended, and Joseph looked into that light and, seeing the face

12. Elizabeth Norton, “Facial Recognition: Fusiform Gyrus Brain Region ‘Solely Devoted’ To Faces, Study Suggests,” *HuffPost*, Oct. 24, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/24/facial-recognition-brain-fusiform-gyrus_n_2010192.html.

13. Linda Graham, *Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience and Well-being* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2013), 262–63.

of God, immediately found himself “delivered from the enemy which held [him] bound” (JS–H 1:16–17). Again, returning to Linda Graham’s observation: “Studies have shown that when one person sees calm in the facial expression of another person, activity in the amygdala—the fear center [of the brain]—in the first person calms down. The functioning of [this structure] is developed through eye contact and mirror neurons, as in relationships of secure attachment and between a true other and a true self.”¹⁴

Consider what Joseph experienced in the Sacred Grove. “The direct eye contact of emphatic, responsive parenting” would have stimulated the development of this structure in his brain. Also, it would have immediately dispelled the darkness surrounding him, which he described as “some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction” (JS–H 1:15). Imagine, then, how Joseph must have felt at that moment looking into the faces of the Father and the Son. It would have been like standing on the earth when “darkness was upon the face of the deep . . . And God said, Let there be light” (Gen. 1:2–3, KJV), except in this instance it was light combined with abundant, palpable love. I think of the mother who, upon gazing into the eyes of her newborn infant, said she felt as if she were beholding the universe. Or, as Elizabeth Bowen says, “To turn from everything to one face is to find oneself face to face with everything.”¹⁵ Richard Rohr adds, “Jesus is the one face, we are the interface, and Christ is the Everything.”¹⁶

14. Graham, *Bouncing Back*, 200.

15. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (New York: Anchor Books, 1948), 218.

16. Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2014), 228.

It is interesting to speculate that as pre-existent creatures, however we came into being, the first faces we would have beheld were those of our Heavenly Mother and Father. That first imprinting on our pre-mortal brains—and souls (our *intelligent* refined-material bodies)—would have locked us into love from the very beginning. Our first experience of seeing the eyes and faces of these divine beings is likely embedded somewhere in our subconsciousness.

One of the things that marked Joseph's trying, at times terrifying, and even tragic life was an amazing confidence that he was on the Lord's errand. Derided, persecuted, brutalized, deserted, and betrayed, he was never defeated. On one occasion, he gave this counsel to George A. Smith: "Never be discouraged. If I were sunk in the lowest pits of Nova Scotia, with the Rocky Mountains piled on me, I would hang on, exercise faith, and keep up good courage, and I would come out on top."¹⁷ Even when he knew he was headed for certain death, turning back to Carthage, he said, "I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer's morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men" (D&C 135:4).

Many years ago, I published a poem on this subject called "Somewhere Near Palmyra" in which, reflecting on a time when I stood in the Sacred Grove, I tried to imagine Joseph's experience:

He saw something that morning
deep among the delicate leaves
burning against the Eastern sky:
The sun and suns,
radiance enfolded
in oak and elm,
visages of light
luminous as seer stones

17. George A. Smith, "History of George Albert Smith by Himself," p. 49, George Albert Smith, Papers, 1834–75, Church Archives. This quotation also appears in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 227.

rinsing the still grasses;
 personages of fire,
 jasper and carnelian,
 dispersing the morning dew:
 images that bore him
 through dark of night,
 terror of loneliness,
 blood of betrayal,
 the ache of small graves,
 to death from the prison window
 where collapsing
 through the summer air,
 he fell—¹⁸

It was the image of those holy, glorious visages that I believe sustained Joseph throughout his life. It is interesting to speculate that as he crossed the Mississippi on his way to safety in the West, those searing images of God's and Christ's faces that he had seen so many years earlier were brought into his consciousness and caused him to turn back. My speculation is spurred by what I consider the most significant phrase in Joseph's holograph record of his first vision. After his encounter with deity, he reports, "My soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy and the Lord was with me but [I] could find none that would believe the hevnlly [*sic*] vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart."¹⁹ This seems to me the kind of genuine expression of someone who has had a transcendent experience. It is interesting that Joseph uses the same phrase Mary used in describing her experience when Gabriel heralded the impending birth of the

18. Robert A. Rees, "Somewhere Near Palmyra," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1980): 105–06. Reprinted in Eugene England and Dennis Clark, eds., *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 100–01.

19. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 6.

Savior—to ponder in the heart. *Ponder* (from the Latin *ponderare*, “to weigh”) means “To wonder, to think of deeply . . . to consider something carefully and thoroughly.” That is what Joseph did following his theophany and, one would imagine, many times thereafter.

At the same fireside previously mentioned, another person, a new convert, said, “I also think that when God looked into Joseph’s eyes, he saw a reflection of his own face.” Of course he would have, just as we who look into our spouse’s, children’s, or grandchildren’s eyes see a reflection of our own.

It occurred to me not long ago that if we each carry the physical DNA of our earthly parents and other ancestors, why wouldn’t our spirits, which are refined matter, carry the DNA of the parents of our spirits? And if this is the case, which is the logical conclusion of Mormon cosmology, then we carry in our refined material souls the indelible imprint of the faces of our heavenly parents, Mother and Father. Their intention from the beginning was that we would be of their lineage and in their images; and their further intention was to reveal this to us. As the Midrash states, “It is with love that God made human beings in His image, but it was with a special love that *He let them know that He had made them in His image.*”²⁰ Why? So that we would understand that on both the material and refined material levels we are deeply, deliberately, literally related and connected eternally to these our divine sires. As Rabbi David J. Wolpe observes, “There is only one bond among human beings that cannot be broken, the bond of being a child of God. It can be betrayed, but never erased.”²¹

Further, Heavenly Father and Mother intended that their first begotten in the spirit world would be the means of bringing us back to them by making it possible for us to have his light—the light of Christ with which we are all born—to be attracted to and harmonize with their

20. Rabbi Akiba, as quoted in David J. Wolpe, *The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God* (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), 71; emphasis in the original.

21. Wolpe, *Healer of Shattered Hearts*, 67.

light. Gerard Manley Hopkins shows this beautifully in his sonnet “As Kingfishers Catch Fire.” Hopkins argues that everything expresses its nature by what it does: the wings of kingfishers and dragonflies catch sunlight, stones ring when dropped down wells, strings of instruments sing when plucked, and bells ring when pealed—all sounding their inner essence by outwardly manifesting it. As with creatures and inanimate things, he adds, so with us:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 . . . Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying *What I dó is me: for that I came.*

He then argues that it is through Christ that we are capable of doing more than this, more than what we can do by ourselves:

I say móre: the just man [Christ] justices . . .

That is, Christ, as our advocate, justifies us to God, pleading our individual cases, despite our sins and failings, as worthy of redemption.

The last three lines of the poem tie all this marvelously rich imagery together and bring us back to Joseph’s powerful experience. Hopkins writes,

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men’s [and women’s] faces.²²

Christ plays our part before the Father as if he were an actor, making us lovely—lovelier and more lovable than we deserve—by showing our faces, lightened by his light, to the Father (and, presumably, hopefully, certainly, our Mother).

I think of Joseph that fateful day at Carthage, his premonition of death about to become a reality. He had to be thinking of Christ because

22. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), available at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173654>.

he and his brother Hyrum requested their friend and future prophet, John Taylor, sing “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief,” an English hymn that Taylor had recently included in both the Manchester and general Church hymnals. That hymn, based on the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, epitomizes Christ’s gospel and is particularly poignant in relation to the theme of this paper since it invites all of us to look into the face of anyone who is poor, hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, or destitute in any way—all those Mother Theresa describes as “Jesus in disguise”—to look into their faces and see the face of Christ himself. As the words of the hymn state:

Then in a moment to my view
The stranger started from disguise.
The tokens in his hands I knew;
The Savior stood before mine eyes.
He spake, and my poor name he named,
“Of me thou hast not been ashamed.
These deeds shall thy memorial be;
Fear not, thou didst them unto me.”²³

Standing on the other side of the Mississippi, imagining the Western refuge he had seen in vision then turning back to Carthage was the ultimate moment for the prophet. David Whyte’s beautiful poem “Santiago,” though not about the Prophet, catches some of what I imagine he must have felt turning east, the direction in myth and scripture associated with Eden, the birth of Christ, the Resurrection, paradise, and the triumphal return of the Savior.²⁴

the way that you followed, the way that carried you
into your future, that brought you to this place,
no matter that it sometimes took your promise from you,

23. “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief,” *Hymns*, no. 29.

24. Philip Kosloski, “The Ancient Symbolism of North, South, East and West,” *Aleteia*, Aug. 4, 2017, <https://aleteia.org/2017/08/04/the-ancient-symbolism-of-north-south-east-and-west/>.

no matter that it had to break your heart along the way:
 the sense of having walked from far inside yourself
 out into the revelation, to have risked yourself
 for something that seemed to stand both inside you
 and far beyond you, that called you back
 to the only road in the end you could follow . . .²⁵

It is not difficult to imagine that during these last fateful moments at Carthage as Joseph fell to his death from the prison window, he saw once more the face of Christ as he had seen it in that light-blessed woods when he was fourteen and later in the Kirtland Temple and at other times during his brief life, including in the vision described in section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

It is also possible that that was the first face he saw when he passed through the veil to the eternal worlds.

However we think of God, to whatever extent we can visualize the face of divinity with our limited minds and imaginations, we can all conceive of the possibility of seeing such a face. Most sacred books suggest that possibility. Even though Muslims do not believe it is possible for mortals to see God's face, they do believe that the righteous will have such an experience in the hereafter. As the Qur'an states, "On that day some faces will be bright, looking at their Lord" (Qur'an 75:22–23).

Asked if we will see God on the day of resurrection, the Prophet Muhammed replied, "Surely, each of you will see God on the day when you shall meet Him, and there will be no veil or translator between Him and you." As one Islamic commentator says, "The joy of seeing God for a believer will be greater than all the joys of Paradise combined."²⁶

I imagine all of us having that experience, looking into the face of divinity, rejoicing as we see ourselves reflected in his or her or their faces. As President Ezra Taft Benson observed, "Nothing is going to

25. David White, "Santiago," in *Pilgrim* (Langley, Wash.: Many Rivers, 2012), available at <https://www.davidwhyte.com/english-poetry#Santiago>.

26. "Can We See God?," *The Religion of Islam*, May 1, 2006, last modified Nov. 3, 2019, <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/331/can-we-see-god/>.

startle us more when we pass through the veil to the other side than to realize how well we know our Father and how familiar His face is to us.”²⁷ Martin Schalling’s lovely hymn text “Herzlich lieb hab ich dich, o Herr” (“Lord, Thee I love with all my heart”), which Bach used as the final chorale for his magnificent oratorio, *The Passion According to St. John*, expresses that ultimate promise for Christians:

Lord, let at last Thine angels come,
To Abram’s bosom bear me home,
That I may die unfearing;
And in its narrow chamber keep
My body safe in peaceful sleep
Until Thy reappearing.

Schalling then imagines our being awakened by Christ, perhaps in the way a loving parent awakens a sleeping child:

And then from death awaken me
In bliss untold my eyes shall see,
O Son of God, Thy glorious face,
My Savior and my fount of grace.²⁸

In the name of him who is the face of all that is lovely, loving, and holy,
Amen.

27. Ezra Taft Benson, “Jesus Christ—Gifts and Expectations,” *Ensign*, Dec. 1988, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1988/12/jesus-christ-gifts-and-expectations?lang=eng>.

28. J. S. Bach, *The Passion According to St. John* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1951), 230–31.

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