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the Heart: Joseph Smith and the
Fulness of the Earth**

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This FARMS preliminary paper was presented at the symposium "Pioneers of the Restoration" on 8 March 1997. It is being further edited for inclusion in a forthcoming collection of papers in honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson. Although it is not ready for final publication, this paper reflects substantial research and is made available to be critiqued and improved and to stimulate further research.

Pleasing the Eye and Gladdening the Heart: Joseph Smith and the Fulness of the Earth

Andrew H. Hedges

When the Spirit of revelation from God inspires a man, his mind is opened to behold the beauty, order, and glory of the creation of this earth—Brigham Young¹

On the night of 26 May 1834, Joseph Smith and the members of Zion's Camp were bedded down on the Illinois prairie just west of the Embarras River. About 11:00 P.M., the camp's guards awakened Joseph with the news that they could see the mob's campfires to the southeast. Although it was immediately clear to Joseph that they had merely seen the light of the moon rising over the flat prairie, he was so struck with how beautiful the view was that he aroused the entire camp, "wishing the brethren to enjoy the scene as well as myself," he wrote, and feeling it "well worth the trouble of any man rising from his couch to witness."²

A dozen years before the Zion's Camp experience on the prairie, Sereno Edwards Dwight had published *Memoirs of the Rev. David Brainerd; Missionary to the Indians on the Borders of New-York, New-Jersey, and Pennsylvania*. David Brainerd was a household name in early nineteenth-century America; not only had various portions of his work (most of which detailed his labors as a missionary among the Mohican and Delaware Indians between 1743 and 1747) been published and republished in both America and England over the years, but they had received glowing endorsements from such eminent divines as Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and John Styles. By 1822, they were considered as valuable for aspiring Christians as they were popular, insofar that Dwight could write confidently that the missionary's diary alone was "probably the best manual of christian experience, ever yet published," and that Brainerd himself "would

¹ *Journal of Discourses* 9:256; hereafter cited as *JD*.

² Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1948), 2:72; hereafter cited as *HC*.

probably be selected by all denominations of christians as the *holiest missionary*, if not the *holiest man*, of modern times.”³

Although seemingly worlds apart, Brainerd’s *Memoirs* and the Zion’s Camp experience with the rising moon provide important insights into how Joseph Smith’s character and thought contrasted with that of his religious-minded contemporaries, whose respect for Brainerd’s writings gives historians today—who have access to his works—some idea about the early nineteenth century’s ideal of a good Christian.⁴ Using Brainerd as our guide, it is evident that, among other things, a truly religious man in the eyes of the nineteenth-century faithful churchgoers held to the belief that the physical world was inherently burdensome, miserable, restricting, and even evil. He therefore not only had no qualms about leaving this unhappy world for a better, but actually longed for the great day of “dissolution” to arrive. Brainerd articulated and lived the ideal perfectly. “The whole *world* appears to me like a huge *vacuum*,” he wrote his brother John, “a vast empty space, whence nothing desirable, or at least satisfactory, can possibly be derived; and I long *daily* to *die* more and more to it.”⁵ The heavily wooded region in which he lived and worked was, in his eyes, “the most melancholy *desart*,” the “most lonesome wilderness,” nothing more than a source of

³ Sereno Edwards Dwight, *Memoirs of the Rev. David Brainerd; Missionary to the Indians on the Borders of New-York, New-Jersey, and Pennsylvania* (New Haven: Converse, 1822), 9, emphasis in original in all the quotations from Dwight.

⁴ I should emphasize here that this paper compares Joseph’s views of the physical world with those of his devoutly Christian contemporaries only. Its scope, then, is quite narrow, and does not attempt to compare Joseph’s ideas with those of the Deists, Rationalists, Romantics, and the emerging Naturalists and Transcendentalists who shared his world. I will simply note here that while many of these philosophies and ideologies promoted the glories and pleasures of the world, they did so at the expense of basic Christian beliefs; Thomas Jefferson, for example, a Rationalist, denied the divinity of Christ, while the Transcendentalists’ “Supreme Being” was a disembodied “Oversoul” with which one sought to “commune” through nature. Joseph, tutored by the Lord, was unique among these groups in that he was able to explain his beliefs about the physical world, and enjoy it himself, without having to abandon fundamental truths about Christ’s divinity and the nature of God.

⁵ Dwight, *Memoirs*, 122.

“great hardships” and “tedious travel.”⁶ Convinced that the physical world had nothing to offer, Brainerd could not even visit a house “where one was dead and laid out” without “look[ing] on the corpse,” he wrote, “and long[ing] that my time might come to *depart*,” or suffer some small inconvenience without being “comforted, to think, that death would ere long set me free from these distresses.”⁷ “O death, death, my kind friend,” he called out at one point, “hasten, and deliver me from dull mortality, and make me spiritual and vigorous to eternity!”⁸

While Brainerd’s negative sentiments about the physical world and his attending paeans to death may appear somewhat morbid to us today, they were nevertheless the hallmark of a faithful Christian in the eyes of early America’s mainstream religious confessors.⁹ Very few, no doubt, lived up to the ideal, but given the popularity of Brainerd’s works, it appears that most “good Christians” of Joseph Smith’s time would have agreed at least intellectually that a truly religious man appreciated the things of the spirit enough to know that the things of the earth—physical things—were quite beneath his notice. It is important to note, however, that this idea did not originate with Brainerd; indeed, the notion that the material or physical was far inferior to the spiritual had been part and parcel of Christianity ever since the first and second centuries when Greek converts, unable to relinquish their ancient philosophers’ teachings in this regard, had introduced it into the church, which itself lacked such a doctrine.¹⁰ The popularity of Brainerd’s

⁶ Ibid., 99, 101, 121, 176.

⁷ Ibid., 180, 145.

⁸ Ibid., 167.

⁹ Early American ministers routinely defended a deceased church member’s sincerity and spiritual preparedness by noting how calmly, or even eagerly, he or she faced death; for example, see Experience Mayhew, *Indian Converts: or, Some Account of the Lives and Dying Speeches of a Considerable Number of the Christianized Indians of Martha’s Vineyard, in New-England* (London: 1727).

¹⁰ Stephen E. Robinson, “Warring against the Saints of God,” *Ensign* (January 1988): 39.

writings in the early nineteenth century merely indicates that these centuries-old “doctrines” were alive and well during the time of the Prophet Joseph.¹¹

For all the health this philosophy was enjoying in early America, however, it is important to note that in Joseph Smith we find precisely the opposite idea. For Joseph, the things of this earth—such as the view afforded by the rising moon—were very much deserving of his attention, and he had no qualms about enjoying the pleasures to be derived from the physical world. This was not because Joseph was a hedonist, but rather because he understood, as few of his Christian contemporaries did, that the time-honored Christian teaching about the inferiority of the physical world was one of the “vain philosophies of men” that had crept into the early church, and one that had no basis in the doctrines of the Gospel.

As a youth, Joseph was cognizant of the earth’s pleasures and the beauty of its order, and apparently appreciated, at least to a degree, its significance in the grand order of things. In his 1832 account of the first vision, Joseph recounts how, as a boy, he

looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their magesty [*sic*] through the heavens and also the stars shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth . . . and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said <it is a> fool <that> saith in his heart there is no God.¹²

¹¹ Other authors have noted the harsh “otherworldliness” that prevailed in early nineteenth-century Christianity and the effects it had on many church members. Leonard J. Arrington, for example, has observed that “the goal set up by the ministers of the time was that each church member should become a spiritual athlete, that is, work unceasingly at being a religious person,” and that many who were raised under the “artificially severe, ascetic, fun-aborring” conditions “that contemporary religion seemed to insist upon . . . felt guilty if they enjoyed the ordinary things of life”; see Leonard J. Arrington, “Joseph Smith and the Lighter View,” *New Era* (August 1976): 8, 10. For a further discussion of this topic, see Rex A. Skidmore, “Joseph Smith: A Leader and Lover of Recreation,” *Improvement Era* (December 1940): 716.

¹² Dean C. Jessee, ed. *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:6.

Already aware, then, of the implications inherent in the very order of the earth as a young man, Joseph learned even more about its beauty and purposes during the summer of 1831, shortly after he and several other elders had dedicated the land of Zion and its temple lot. Known today as section 59 in the Doctrine and Covenants, this revelation from the Lord contains one of the great truths about the physical world that the Prophet restored during his ministry:

Verily I [the Lord] say, that inasmuch as ye [keep the Sabbath holy], the fulness of the earth is yours, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, and that which climbeth upon the trees and walketh upon the earth; Yea, and the herb, and the good things which come of the earth, whether for food or for raiment, or for houses, or for barns, or for orchards, or for gardens, or for vineyards; Yea, all things which come of the earth, in the season thereof, are made for the benefit and the use of man, both to please the eye and to gladden the heart; Yea, for food and for raiment, for taste and for smell, to strengthen the body and to enliven the soul. And it pleaseth God that he hath given all these things unto man; for unto this end were they made to be used. (D&C 59:16–20)

It is clear from his own writings, as well as those of his contemporaries who took the time to record their observations of the Prophet, that Joseph took this doctrine to heart and made it a point to enjoy life's little pleasures. This included, as the exhausted men of Zion's Camp learned, an appreciation for beautiful scenery. Further evidence suggests that not all such scenery had to be as spectacular as a moonrise to win the Prophet's admiration. From his own record, he read of the "truly delightful" view that could be obtained from the top of an ancient mound in Illinois, or the "beautiful location" of Adam-ondi-Ahman.¹³ The Prophet found the area around Nauvoo particularly noteworthy in this regard. In a letter to John C. Bennett, written shortly after the Saints began settling there, Joseph noted how the growing town was "beautifully situated on the banks of the Mississippi. . . . [at] probably the best and most beautiful site for a city on the river."¹⁴ In a

¹³ HC 2:79; 3:39.

¹⁴ HC 4:177.

proclamation to the Saints issued a few months later, Joseph went on to explain the new city's name—a Hebrew word for a beautiful and restful place—by noting its “most delightful location” on the east bank of the great river, and at the western edge of “an extensive prairie of surpassing beauty.”¹⁵

Closely related to this appreciation for natural beauty was the Prophet's love for the outdoors and outdoor activities. It is no coincidence that several people remember having first laid eyes on the Prophet, not in the confines of his office or in a meeting, but *outside*, and frequently at work. Brigham Young, for example, first saw Joseph as he was “chopping and hauling wood” near his home in Kirtland.¹⁶ Wilford Woodruff first saw him “out in the field,” where “he had on a very old hat, and was engaged shooting at a mark.”¹⁷ The Prophet's own record indicates that when he wasn't chopping wood or target practicing, he enjoyed walking in the woods, working in his garden, riding his horse, and taking pleasure rides on the steamship *Maid of Iowa*, of which he was a half owner.¹⁸

Along with his appreciation for the outdoors and beautiful scenery, Joseph thoroughly enjoyed the pleasures to be derived from his physical body. As Leonard Arrington makes clear, this is not to suggest that Joseph crossed the line “between living the fuller life to which we are called by the gospel and indulging in licentious behavior,” but rather simply to note that the

¹⁵ HC 4:268. I am indebted to Larry Porter for leading me to these references about Nauvoo. Similar statements are peppered liberally throughout the Prophet's record. A sampling of descriptive phrases used by the Prophet to convey his appreciation for the earth's beauties would include “spring . . . with all its charms,” “the beautiful, clear water of the lake,” and “beautiful country”; see HC 2:405, 503, and 3:34 respectively. While Joseph may not have penned several similar statements contained in his *History*, evidence suggests that he probably read and endorsed them. These would include a description of Jackson County, where the author recorded that “as far as the eye can glance the beautiful rolling prairies lay spread around like a sea of meadows. . . . The shrubbery was beautiful. . . . The prairies were decorated with a growth of flowers that seemed as gorgeous grand as the brilliance of stars in the heavens, and exceed description”; see Jessee, *Papers*, 1:359.

¹⁶ HC 1:297.

¹⁷ JD 7:101.

¹⁸ Skidmore, “Joseph Smith,” 717, 762.

Prophet, who realized the eternal significance of the body and of the information to be learned through it, took every opportunity that presented itself to exercise and experience its wonders.¹⁹ Best known in this regard is his love for wrestling and other sports, such as pulling sticks, jumping at a mark, and playing ball.²⁰ Not so well-known, perhaps, but entirely in keeping with his zest for life, was his love for good food. While evidence for this side of Joseph's character is rare in the historical record, his noting the "excellent wild turkey [he had] for supper" on his way from Independence to Kirtland in 1831, or the "sumptuous feast" he attended at Newel K. Whitney's home early in 1836, certainly suggests that he appreciated a well-prepared meal.²¹ So too does a recollection of the Prophet by John L. Smith, who lived with Joseph for several months as a youth. After having been called to a dinner of corn bread, John reported, Joseph "looked over the table [and] said, 'Lord, we thank Thee for this Johnny cake, and ask Thee to send us something better.'" His request was not long in being granted; before they had finished the corn bread, according to John, "a man came to the door and asked if the Prophet Joseph was at home. Joseph replied he was, whereupon the visitor said, 'I have brought you some flour and a ham.'" ²²

Of all that Joseph found to enjoy in this world, evidence suggests that he derived his greatest pleasure from the association he had with other people. A close reading of the historical record shows that he was rarely to be found alone and that this was largely a result of his own desire to be with others. Whenever possible, these were first and foremost members of his own family. As LaMar C. Berrett has shown, Joseph was a devoted son, brother, husband, and father, a man who "took time to be with his wife"—as well as other members of his family—"whether he had it or

¹⁹ Arrington, "Joseph Smith," 13.

²⁰ Alexander L. Baugh, "Joseph Smith's Athletic Nature," in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), 137–50.

²¹ HC 1:202; 2:362.

²² John Lyman Smith, "Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith," *Juvenile Instructor* 27 (1892): 172.

not.”²³ He also enjoyed spending time with children, finding “in the greatest perfection,” according to one contemporary observer, the “innocence and purity” he so loved in “the prattling child.”²⁴ And finally, Joseph clearly welcomed opportunities to associate with other adults, to the point where his son Joseph III recalled that his “father’s home in Nauvoo was generally overrun with visitors.”²⁵

Joseph frequently combined his love for exercise and the outdoors with his love for associating with his family and friends. When Brigham Young first saw the Prophet, for example, “two or three of his brothers” were helping him chop the wood, while Wilford Woodruff noted that he was attended by his brother Hyrum when he met him out in the field target practicing.²⁶ For this very reason, Zion’s Camp, in spite of its hardships, provided Joseph with no small amount of pleasure, as evidenced by a letter he wrote to Emma after having reached the Mississippi River in June 1834:

The whole of our journey, in the midst of so large a company of social honest and sincere men, . . . and gazing upon a country the fertility, the splendor and the goodness so indescribable, all serves to pass away time unnoticed, and in short were it not [th]at every now and then our thoughts linger with inexpressible anxiety for our wives and our children . . . our whole journey would be as a dream, and this would be the happiest period of all our lives.²⁷

²³ LaMar C. Berrett, “Joseph, a Family Man,” in *The Prophet Joseph: Essays on the Life and Mission of Joseph Smith*, ed. Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 36–48; quotation on p. 43.

²⁴ Louisa Y. Littlefield, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27 (1892): 24.

²⁵ Joseph Smith III, *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration*, ed. Mary Audentia Smith Anderson (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1952), 73.

²⁶ *HC* 1:297; *JD* 7:101.

²⁷ Dean C. Jessee, comp. and ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 324–25. I am indebted to Richard L. Anderson for directing me to this account.

Similarly, Joseph went on walks, horseback rides, and at least one sleigh ride with Emma and did everything from “playing in the yard” to hunting ducks and sliding on the ice with his sons.²⁸ His whole family attended him on his pleasure trips aboard the *Maid of Iowa*.²⁹ Much of the time he spent with neighbor children was also outdoors, where he could be found playing ball with a group of boys at one moment and picking flowers for a fatherless little girl the next.³⁰

Overtly manifesting his love for the beauties and pleasures of the earth, Joseph offended several of his religious-minded contemporaries who had been raised to believe that a truly religious individual should wear, like David Brainerd did, his “otherworldliness” on his sleeve.³¹ Many of these people, although taken aback at some point in their association with Joseph by his down-to-earth qualities, were able to overcome their prejudices and learn from the Prophet’s manner. Rachel R. Grant, for example, who admitted that the “great deal of sectarianism” she had imbibed made her think initially that the more serious Hyrum seemed more like a prophet than the “cheerful and happy” Joseph, faithfully went on to raise the seventh president of the church.³² Similarly, Sidney Rigdon learned a valuable lesson when he censored the Prophet in 1838 for encouraging a company of Mormon militiamen, wet and cold from an October rainstorm, to warm and cheer themselves by wrestling. “‘Brother Sidney,’” Joseph said, “‘you had better go out of here and let the boys alone; they are amusing themselves according to my orders.’” To Sidney’s chagrin—

²⁸ Berrett, “Family Man,” 43–44; John Lyman Smith, “Recollections,” 172; Joseph Taylor Sen., “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27 (1892): 202; HC 5:265.

²⁹ Skidmore, “Joseph Smith,” 762.

³⁰ For stories of Joseph playing with neighborhood children, see accounts by Edwin Holden, John Lyman Smith, Calvin W. Moore, John W. Hess, Batsheba W. Smith, Lucy M. Smith, and William M. Allred in “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27 (1892): 153, 172, 255, 302, 344, 471, and 472, respectively. For an account of his picking flowers for a fatherless girl, see Mercy R. Thompson, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27 (1892): 399.

³¹ Both Alexander L. Baugh and Truman G. Madsen have noted this phenomenon; see Baugh, “Athletic Nature,” 145–47, and Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 25–26. I am indebted to these two authors for pointing me to the sources I use in developing this argument further.

³² Rachel R. Grant, “Joseph Smith, the Prophet,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 16 (December 1905): 551.

especially since it resulted in his coat being torn—the Prophet then commenced wrestling with him, after which the first counselor reportedly “never countermanded the orders of the Prophet” again.³³

Joseph, fully realizing that his unique approach to life could be misconstrued, did what he could both to allay others’ fears and educate them in this regard. “The Saints need not think because I am familiar with them and am playful and cheerful, that I am ignorant of what is going on,” he told the Twelve thirteen months before his death. “Iniquity of any kind cannot be sustained in the Church, and it will not fare well where I am; for I am determined while I do lead the Church, to lead it right.”³⁴ Similarly, William M. Allred recalled that Joseph once reported that he knew “it tried some of the pious folks to see him play ball with the boys.” Joseph explained his actions by relating the story of a prophet “who was sitting under the shade of a tree amusing himself in some way, when a hunter came along with his bow and arrow, and reproved him. The prophet,” said Joseph, “asked him if he kept his bow strung up all the time. The hunter answered that he did not. The prophet asked why, and he said it would lose its elasticity if he did. The prophet said it was just so with his mind, he did not want it strung up all the time.”³⁵

In spite of his efforts, however, a number of people were not able to relinquish their hold on their prejudices. This included several ministers who visited Joseph at various times and who were reportedly “shocked”—“awfully shocked,” in one case—when Joseph challenged them to a wrestling match or jumping contest.³⁶ At times, Joseph’s manner elicited even more extreme reactions. George A. Smith, for example, knew of an entire family that left the church because they

³³ John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled: or The Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop, John D. Lee* (St. Louis: Bryan, Brand, 1878), 76–78; quotations on pp. 77, 78.

³⁴ HC 5:411.

³⁵ William M. Allred, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27 (1892): 472.

³⁶ Edwin F. Parry, comp., *Stories about Joseph Smith the Prophet: A Collection of Incidents Related by Friends Who Knew Him* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1934), 17–18; JD 3:67.

saw Joseph “[come] down out of the translating room, where he had been translating by the gift and power of God, and commenc[e] playing with his little children.”³⁷

Conclusion

The contrast between Joseph Smith and the nineteenth-century ideal of a religious man could not have been greater. At a time when many people felt that piety was a function of one’s ability to ignore the pleasures this world has to offer, Joseph was making no secret of the fact that he loved his life on this physical earth, and wanted to experience it to the fullest possible extent. This was not, again, because the Prophet was a hedonist, but rather because he understood, like very few of his Christian contemporaries did, that this earth had been created for the express purpose of making mankind happy and that there was nothing inherently wicked about enjoying its pleasures. This truth, like so many others, had been lost during the Great Apostasy, and people had been suffering the effects of its absence for some 1,800 years by the time Joseph arrived on the scene. The restoration of this truth to the earth in the early nineteenth century, and the Prophet’s willingness to live and teach it as a truly Christian principle in the face of no small opposition, count as great events in the history of the restoration of the gospel.

³⁷ JD 2:214.