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THREE LEVELS OF HEAVEN? JOSEPH SMITH DEMONSTRATES HIS INABILITIES AS A PROPHET

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Sometimes the oddest quirks of church history end up being an apologist's best friends. When the King James Version of the Bible was translated between 1604 and 1611 the work was done by various committees at places like Oxford and Cambridge. Some final editing was done, but there still are places where the final translation renders the exact same words in the original Hebrew and Greek languages by completely different terms.¹ We can use one translational slip-up in the KJV, ironically, in exposing Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS or Mormon Church) as being something less than the prophet he claimed to be.

Heavens and Glories: How Many? The introduction to Section 76 of the Mormon scripture Doctrine and Covenants observes, "It appeared self-evident...that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body, the term 'Heaven,' as intended for the Saints' eternal home, must include more kingdoms than one."

In the ensuing "revelation," Smith identifies three heavens, or levels of glory: the celestial, the terrestrial, and the telestial. He is clearly seeking to parallel the discussion Paul presents in 1 Corinthians 15:39-44, for he uses the same theme of sun, moon, and stars, each with a differing glory.

In Doctrine and Covenants 76:70 we read, "These are they whose bodies are celestial, whose glory is that of the sun, even the glory of God, the highest of all, whose glory the sun of the firmament is written of as being typical." This is the highest level, the level of exaltation.

The next level, according to Doctrine and Covenants 76:71, is the terrestrial: "These are they who are of the terrestrial, whose glory differs from that of the church of the Firstborn who have received the fulness of the Father, even as that of the moon differs from the sun in the firmament."

The lowest level of "glory," the telestial level, is described in Doctrine and Covenants 76:81-84: "And again, we saw the glory of the telestial, which glory is that of the lesser, even as the glory of the stars differs from that of the glory of the moon in the firmament. These are they who received not the gospel of Christ, neither the testimony of Jesus. These are they who deny not the Holy Spirit. These are they who are thrust down to hell."

Smith quickly incorporated his new "revelation" into his theology. Later in 1832 he would write, "A man may be saved, after the judgment, in the terrestrial kingdom, or in the telestial kingdom, but he can never see the celestial kingdom of God, without being born of water and the Spirit. He may receive a glory like unto the moon...or a star...but he can never come unto Mount Zion...unless he becomes as a little child and is taught by the Spirit of God."²

LDS Apostle LeGrand Richards taught innumerable LDS missionaries this concept in his extremely influential book, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*. He cites Paul's words about the "third heaven" from 2 Corinthians 12:2 and comments, "It is obvious that there could not be a third heaven unless there is also a first and a second heaven. We therefore have three heavens, paradise, and the hell so often spoken of in the scriptures, making at least five places to which we may go after death."³

Richards then asks, “What could be plainer? There is a glory of the sun, or celestial glory; another glory like the moon, or the terrestrial glory; and another glory like the stars, or, as we will learn, the telestial glory,” and notes, quoting 1 Corinthians 15:41–42, “since ‘one star differeth from another in glory,’ so also ‘is the resurrection of the dead.’”⁴

The term “telestial” seems to have originated with Joseph Smith; it appears that he took the first two letters of “terrestrial” and slapped them on the ending of “celestial” to create the resultant new word, “telestial.” He did this apparently because he felt there should be a direct parallel between sun/moon/stars and celestial/terrestrial and needed to make up a word to fit his scheme. This stemmed from his own misunderstanding, however, of Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15. He was tripped up by a translational inconsistency in the King James Version. Let’s see how sound interpretational principles and a little knowledge of the original languages would have kept Smith from making such an error.

Bodies and Glories. In creating his doctrine of multiple heavens, Smith used the most popular English translation available to him, the King James Version, and focused on 1 Corinthians 15, particularly verse 40. It reads, “There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another.”

Here Smith found two levels of heaven, but became confused when he then read Paul speaking of three glories, that of the sun, moon, and stars. Note the entire text as it is found in the New American Standard Bible:

All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

Paul’s point is that there is a heavenly glory, and an earthly glory (just as there is a glory of the sun, and a glory of the moon, and of the stars). There is no direct connection between the *numbers* of “glories” Paul is speaking about, simply because his point is not to focus on “glories” at all! His point is to emphasize that the spiritual body, while intimately connected to the natural body, still differs from it in its glorious, incorruptible nature. He provides his own interpretation and application, “So also is the resurrection of the dead” (v. 42). In what way is the resurrection of the dead connected to the preceding examples? “It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body.” Paul’s entire thrust is to explain the nature of the relationship between the body that dies and the body that is raised again.

Smith assumed, incorrectly, that there had to be a direct correspondence between the sun/moon/stars analogy of verse 41 and the “celestial/terrestrial” terms of verse 40. This was prompted also by Smith’s interpretation of a later verse in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, even though it appeared in an entirely different context. When Paul sought to defend his apostleship against his critics in Corinth, he wrote, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—...was caught up to the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2 NASB).

Here, the third heaven is the abode of God: the “first” heaven would be the atmosphere above us, where birds fly; the “second” heaven would be where the stars are located, that which we call “space” today. Paul is saying he was taken up to the very presence of God. The context here is completely different than the discussion of resurrection bodies in 1 Corinthians 15. This has no connection to the discussion of celestial and terrestrial glories in his previous letter to the Corinthians, but the connection Smith made between the two is what provided him with his “three levels of glory.”

Would Smith have been thrown as far off track had the King James used the more common words “heavenly” and “earthly” instead of “celestial” and “terrestrial”? We cannot know, but surely, it would have been less of a temptation for Smith to come up with a never-before-seen word like “telestial” had the King James consistently translated the underlying Greek terms.⁵

We can safely assume that a true prophet of God would have had a much better grasp on the teachings of those who came before him. Smith's basic error in reading this text, combined with some unfamiliar English terminology and some translational inconsistency on the part of the KJV, has led to the entire LDS concept of levels of glory and exaltation. A sobering reminder to handle the Word of God with care and accuracy!

— *James R. White*

NOTES

1. For example, the very same Greek phrase in the very same context (that of the Ten Commandments) is rendered "thou shalt not murder" in Matthew 19:18, but as "thou shalt not kill" in Romans 13:9. Matthew was translated by a different group of scholars than was Romans, hence the inconsistency.
2. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Desert Book Company, 1976), 12.
3. LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 254.
4. *Ibid.*, 254–55.
5. In a more well-known text, that of Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus in John chapter three, the exact same Greek words are found, but there they are translated by the more familiar "heavenly" and "earthly" in the venerable KJV: "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" (John 3:12).