

## Comments on Doctrine & Covenants 129

This section addresses some issues concerning angels, and more specifically, how to discern between evil spirits and good messengers to avoid being deceived.

The comments in this section are aimed at Smith's contemporaries. Thus, Smith is not commenting on angelology in general, as what is presented does not necessarily apply to previous dispensations. Note v. 1-2 says angels are resurrected personages. Previous to the advent of the First Resurrection, shortly after Jesus' death, there were no angels with resurrected bodies. Thus, the first key Smith proposes would not be applicable to an Old Testament setting.

Also note Smith is referring to "beings in heaven" per v. 1. It is likely he is not referring to translated persons, as they are not "in heaven" (however in History of the Church, volume 4, page 425 Smith makes a statement wherein he equates resurrected and translated messengers with respect to this point; as a side note, this same reference tends to forward the view that resurrected and translated persons minister to mortals and that postmortal spirits minister to other postmortal spirits).

Finally, the English term "angel" is a transliteration from the Greek "angelos" and would most literally translate to the English word "messenger". In the Scriptures, the term "angel" is used in reference to unembodied spirits (i.e., premortal), disembodied spirits (i.e., postmortal), bodied spirits (i.e., mortals), and resurrected spirits. So, one cannot use v. 1-2 to say that all "angels" are necessarily resurrected personages. Smith is presenting a means of discerning between different manifestations of messengers for the purpose of distinguishing between good and evil spirits. He is not presenting a definition that is to be employed dogmatically.

1 THERE are two kinds of beings in heaven, namely: Angels, who are resurrected personages, having bodies of flesh and bones-- 2 For instance, Jesus said: Handle me and see, for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. 3 Secondly: the spirits of just men made perfect, they who are not resurrected, but inherit the same glory.

v1-3 The first two verses indicate resurrected personages (v.

1-2) do act as messengers for the Lord in carrying out His work, as do post-mortal spirits of righteous men (v. 3). It is possible these post-mortals are acting under the authority of the Lord Himself, as opposed to the authority of the Holy Spirit, cf. 2 Ne. 32:3.

The statement that "there are two kinds of beings in heaven" suggests those of Celestial quality as the other two Kingdoms in heaven (e.g., Terrestrial and Telestial, per D&C 76) are not yet populated, and won't be until the Second Resurrection. And in this kingdom are those who participated in the first phase of the First Resurrection (cp. D&C 132:29) concurrent with Jesus' resurrection and those who will participate in the second phase of the First Resurrection concurrent with the Second Advent (v. 3, cp. D&C 137:5-6).

We generally see this division in the concept of post-mortal Spirit Paradise versus Spirit Prison. Those in Spirit Paradise are those described in v. 1-3, while all other post-mortal spirits are in Spirit Prison being preached to or awaiting vicarious ordinance work so they then may move to Spirit Paradise.

4 When a messenger comes saying he has a message from God, offer him your hand and request him to shake hands with you. 5 If he be an angel he will do so, and you will feel his hand. 6 If he be the spirit of a just man made perfect he will come in his glory; for that is the only way he can appear-- 7 Ask him to shake hands with you, but he will not move, because it is contrary to the order of heaven for a just man to deceive; but he will still deliver his message. 8 If it be the devil as an angel of light, when you ask him to shake hands he will offer you his hand, and you will not feel anything; you may therefore detect him. 9 These are three grand keys whereby you may know whether any administration is from God.

v4-9 These verses present three keys, or methods of discerning who or what the messenger's intent is. The interpretation is straightforward, but there are clear implications.

The first is under certain circumstances one cannot discern the difference between the three types of messengers by visual observation. This means all three types can appear to us such that they would look like a normal person, thereby implying that spirit bodies superficially look like mortals and wear clothing and so forth, or can appear as such.

The second is dealing with the third key, why would the evil spirit extend his hand when he knows perfectly well that

you will not make contact with it in the same manner you would with the hand of a mortal or resurrected person? Perhaps the intent is to scare you to the point where it shakes you from whatever your intended course of actions was. Perhaps he hopes you would be so overwhelmed by the singularity of the experience you would be willing to rationalize it away and therefore open yourself up to self-imposed denial and deception.

The third is the supernatural is not limited to good spirits. As has been addressed previously in the D&C (cf. 28:11), there are matters of the spirit world that we simply cannot perceive and both good and evil spirits can and do take advantage of this to accomplish their respective purposes. Thus, a supernatural manifestation or seeming miracle does not necessarily imply it is from God. Take for example the situation of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh's priests, where both sides performed rival miracles. Also recall the warning in John's Revelation that the Beast will have an assistant who will work many miracles through the power of the devil and deceive many thereby (cf. Rev. 13).

v7-8 The specific act of extending the hand or not extending the hand is presented as a matter of deception. The angel of light refuses to extend the hand to deceive, where the angel of darkness will extend the hand. This is likely meant as a representative symbolic act, as opposed to being limited to solely and strictly the act of a hand clasp. Angels of light will not act deceptively where angels of darkness will act deceptively, and thus "by their fruits ye shall know them." The recipient of the messenger is to evaluate the actions of the messenger based on whether they are being deceptive or not, and therefore discern their origin accordingly. The recipient does not simply assume any messenger is of God.

## **Historical Material Pertaining to Doctrine & Covenants 129**

The text of this section was first published in the Deseret News, volume 6, number 7, page 49, dated April 23, 1856. It was published in the Millennial Star, volume 20, number 33, page 519, dated August 14, 1858. It was first published in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1876, page 419.

### **Excerpts from History of the Church**

Spent most of the day in conversation with Parley P. Pratt and others.

[text of D&C 129 quoted]

A man came to me in Kirtland, and told me he had seen an angel, and described his dress. I told him he had seen no angel, and that there was no such dress in heaven. He grew mad, and went into the street and commanded fire to come down out of heaven to consume me. I laughed at him, and said, You are one of Baal's prophets; your God does not hear you; jump up and cut yourself: and he commanded fire from heaven to consume my house. (Joseph Smith, History of the Church, volume 5, pages 267-268)

He explained the difference between an angel and a ministering spirit; the one a resurrected or translated body, with its spirit ministering to embodied spirits the other a disembodied spirit, visiting and ministering to disembodied spirits. Jesus Christ became a ministering spirit (while His body was lying in the sepulchre) to the spirits in prison, to fulfill an important part of His mission [1 Peter 3:18-20] , without which He could not have perfected His work, or enter into His rest. After His resurrection He appeared as an angel to His disciples.

Translated bodies cannot enter into rest until they have undergone a change equivalent to death. Translated bodies are designed for future missions. (Joseph Smith, History of the Church, volume 4, page 425)

### **Excerpt from Journal of Discourses**

I saw legions of wicked spirits that night, as plain as I now see you, and they came as near to me as you now are, and company after company of them rushed towards me; and brother [Orson] Hyde and brother [Willard] Richards also saw them. It was near the break of day, and I looked upon them as I now look

upon you. They came when I was laying hands upon brother [Isaac] Russell, the wicked spirits got him to the door of the room, I did not see them till after that took place, and soon afterwards I lay prostrate upon the floor. That was in England, pious England, in the little town of Preston, at the corner of Wilford Street, and they struggled and exerted all their power and influence. That was the first introduction of the Gospel into England, and I was shown those spirits as plainly as ever I saw anything.... I saw their hands, their eyes, and every feature of their faces, the hair on their heads, and their ears, in short they had full-formed bodies.

If evil spirits could come to me, cannot ministering spirits and angels also come from God? Of course they can, and there are thousands of them, and I wish you to understand this, and that they can rush as an army going to battle, for the evil spirits came upon me and brother Hyde in that way.... The spirits of the wicked, who have died for thousands of years past, are at war with the Saints of God upon the earth. Do I ever pray that I may see them again? No, I do not....

When I returned home I called upon brother Joseph, and we walked down the bank of the river. He there told me what contests he had had with the devil; he told me that he had contests with the devil, face to face. He also told me how he was handled and afflicted by the devil, and said, he had known circumstances where Elder [Sidney] Rigdon was pulled out of bed three times in one night. After all this some persons will say to me, that there are no evil spirits. I tell you they are thicker than the "Mormons" are in this country, but the Lord has said that there are more for us than there can be against us. "Who are they," says one? Righteous men who have been upon the earth.

But do you suppose that angels will pay friendly visits to those who do not live up to their privileges? Would you? No, you would not like to visit with persons who lie, and steal your goods, and borrow and never pay. Would you not forsake such persons? (Heber C. Kimball, Journal of Discourses, volume 3, pages 229-230)

### **Excerpt from Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith**

The substance of section 129 was revealed to Joseph Smith before 1843. Although the exact date of his receiving these principles of detecting false spirits is not known, it can safely be set before 27 June 1839. On that day members of the

First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve met in council in Nauvoo, and in this meeting the Prophet presented the following instructions for the benefit of the Twelve prior to their leaving for England:

In order to detect the deivel when he transforms himself nigh unto an angel of light. When an angel of God appears unto man face to face in personage & reaches out his hand unto the man he takes hold of the angels hand & feels a substance the same as one man would in shaking hands with another he may then know that it is an angel of God & he should place all confidence in him Such personages or angels are Saints with their resurrected Bodies, but if a personage appears unto man & offers him his hand & the man takes hold of it & feels nothing or does not sens[e] any substance he may know it is the deivel, for when a Saints whose body is not resurrected appears unto man in the flesh he will not offer him his hand for this is against the law given him. [\[Wilford Woodruff, Journal, June 28, 1839\]](#)

On the evening of 7 February 1843, Parley P. Pratt arrived in Nauvoo from his mission to England. Two days later, while he was in conversation with the Prophet Joseph Smith, the keys of detecting false spirits (section 129) were explained. The Prophet's scribe, William Clayton, was present and recorded section 129, and Clayton's account was the source for the 1876 publication of the revelation.

Compare the following entry in the Joseph Smith Diary for 9 February 1843. Although this entry, in the hand of Willard Richards, is abbreviated and unclear as a result of poor punctuation, the substance is essentially the same. The Joseph Smith Diary entry is undoubtedly based on Clayton's report.

Parley Pratt & others came in & Joseph explained the following there 3 asministerer Angels, spirits Devils one class in heaven angels the spirits of just men made perfect innumerable co of angels & spirits of just men made perfect an angel appears to you how will you prove him. ask him to shake hands If he has flesh & bones. he is an angel. "spirit hath not flesh & bones" spirit of a just man made perfect person in its tabernacle could hide its glory if David Patten or the

Devil come. how would you determine should you take  
hold of his hand you would not feel it. If it were a  
false administration. he would not do it. True spirit  
will not give his hand The devil will Three keys.

(Lyndon W. Cook, Revelations of the Prophet Joseph Smith)

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