

LDS Perspectives Podcast

Episode 20: The Vision with Matthew McBride

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*This is not a verbatim transcript
Some grammar and wording has been modified for clarity.*

Nick Galieti: Hello and welcome to the LDS Perspectives Podcast. I'm Nick Galieti, host of this episode. On this episode, we are pleased to have for our guest, Matthew McBride, who is the web content strategist and manager for the Church History Department. He is a graduate student in American History at the University of Utah and author of various articles on Mormon history, as well as a book on the original Nauvoo Temple. He joins us today to talk about his Revelations in Context essay as part of our ongoing series for those essays. His is on Section 76 and is entitled "The Vision." Welcome Matthew McBride. Thank you for coming in.

Matthew McBride: It's great to be here, Nick. Thanks.

Nick Galieti: We're going to just jump right into this essay because there is just so much that we can talk about. It's not only just a very big section, but the section of revelation itself had a huge impact on the Saints. You called this essay "The Vision." Why is it called "The Vision"?

Matthew McBride: Well, I call it "The Vision" because Joseph Smith and his contemporaries called it "The Vision." It was an important revelation and different and distinctive in some ways from a lot of the other revelations that were compiled and put into the Doctrine and Covenants.

Nick Galieti: This one was originally received on February 16, 1832, inside the John Johnson home in Hiram, Ohio, while Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon were working on a revision of the New Testament. Let's get into kind of the circumstances, the immediate circumstances, and what happened for that revelation. It says in the section heading that they were reading the scripture John 5:29, and that kind of prompted this revelation. What else can you tell us about the setting of this revelation?

Matthew McBride: Well, that gets pretty well at the immediate setting. One thing that's important to understand about the larger setting is just this world that

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Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon live in, which is a world that is steeped in biblical language. It's a highly religious culture that they inhabit. Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon are very astute Bible readers. One of the things that makes Joseph Smith atypical though for his time is his view of the Bible. Most people believed in the all-sufficient, infallible word of the Bible, and Joseph Smith is coming along and saying, "No, the Bible needs revision." This is what he and Sidney Rigdon are doing. They sit down, and they are working on a revision of the Bible, and their work on John chapter 5 is what spurs this vision.

Nick Galieti: That's where they were at in the process. Perhaps, maybe as a refresher, we should remind the listeners of the main doctrinal points of Section 76. What are some of the things that it talks about?

Matthew McBride: Joseph Smith characterizes this vision as the vision of the resurrection. That, indeed, is the subject of this passage in John chapter 5 that they're revising when the vision occurs. It's this expansive vision of what is going to happen in the resurrection. It really is interesting to think about it in the context of American religious culture at that time. What Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon do here is they weigh in with this vision on maybe the most contentious, theological debate in American religion at that time, which is the debate over the nature of salvation. What is it? Who gets it?

What this vision does is it departs in some ways that end up being hard for some church members to swallow as they encounter it for the first time. Whether you come from a Calvinist background; or a Presbyterian, and you feel that God has predestined some people to salvation and others to damnation or whether you come from an Armenian background; or maybe you're a Methodist, and you emphasize and feel like a human will and free choice has an important role to play in salvation, chances are you feel or believe that there are some people that are going to be saved, and there are some people that are going to be damned. Chances are, you believe there are a lot more people that will be damned than the choice elect few that will be saved.

Now there is at the time another small and pretty unpopular school of thought called Universalism. Universalists believe, "*No, God's powerful, he's going to save everybody.*" Here comes Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, first of all working on a Bible translation or a revision, which would have been disconcerting to people to begin with — to people that live in this culture and come from this background. Then, in the course of

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this revision they weigh in on this theological debate, and they adopt, at least in appearance, the least popular of these positions — the Universalist position.

It says in that section that there is such thing as a “perdition.” It’s either hypothetical or there aren’t very many that are going to end up there. The bottom line is that pretty much everybody is going to be saved. Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess. God is powerful enough to save everybody, or as we would say today, everyone will inherit a kingdom of glory.

Nick Galieti: Is this the first time we’re hearing the words “telestial,” “terrestrial,” and “celestial,” the three kingdoms that we talk about in our plan of salvation lessons and all that?

Matthew McBride: It’s the first time that Joseph Smith introduces the idea of three kingdoms of glory. I believe it’s the first time that we get this word “telestial,” which is something new with Joseph Smith. There were others, Alexander Campbell, and then there’s this Swedish mystic named Emanuel Swedenborg that had conceptions of a three-tiered heaven, but this really is kind of the first time that it becomes a part of Mormon theology and Mormon soteriology.

Nick Galieti: This isn’t just new to the world at large and unique to Mormonism; it’s even new to Mormonism because the Book of Mormon doesn’t talk about it. Here’s something that’s kind of being, not really thrust onto the members. In fact, that’s one of the questions that I have. In your essay, you talk about how Samuel Smith, Joseph’s brother who was on a mission at the time, mentioned that there were handwritten copies of this vision that circulated among the members of the church and also that there were other people present. Who were some of the people that were present and how was this revelation recorded?

Matthew McBride: As we understand it, there were several people present in the room as Joseph and Sidney experienced this vision. I don’t know that we know who all of them are or even exactly how many there were. One person who repeatedly over the course of his life left accounts of being a witness of that experience was Philo Dibble. His early accounts are modest. They say, “I was there,” or, “I came in toward the end.” Later on, he elaborates on this a little bit more and talks a little bit more about what the experience was like. This is where we get the story from Philo Dibble’s

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later accounts of Sidney Rigdon being exhausted after the visionary experience, and Joseph Smith saying something about how he's not as used to it as I am. One of the details that Dibble gives, though, is that the other people in the room could not see the vision. This is an experience that Joseph and Sidney had alone.

Your question about these copies that circulated I think is interesting. This speaks to the scribal culture and maybe speaks to just the way that members of the church hung on the words that Joseph Smith produced through revelation, even later on in his public sermons. This is not exclusive to the vision, to Section 76, this is something that occurred regularly. As people leave on missions or as they travel, they ask if they can take copies of the revelations because they prized them in this way. This was especially true before the revelations were compiled and published in the Book of Commandments and the Doctrine and Covenants.

Nick Galieti: Did the people see this as Joseph Smith's words, as a revelation that Joseph Smith is interpreting, or did they take this as a, "Thus saith the Lord" — that this is the Lord speaking through Joseph and he's just the mouthpiece"?

Matthew McBride: Unlike some of the earlier revelations that we have in the Doctrine and Covenants, this one's kind of a hybrid. It's an amalgam. It's Joseph and Sidney sitting down and writing, and there are several different genres that are baked into this one document. There are instances where we have the voice of God speaking directly through Joseph Smith. You have other instances where the famous testimony that Sidney Rigdon and Joseph Smith give.

Nick Galieti: The "last of all" one?

Matthew McBride: Right. That testimony. One way to think about that in a different way is to realize that this is a fairly unique experience in American religious history. Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon have a shared visionary experience. Now there are all kinds of accounts during this time period, especially in the 18th and early 19th century when people are living in this culture of people having visions and seeing Jesus on the right hand of God or the various ways that they describe their visions, but it's very rare to find an account of two people having a vision of, in this case, God the Father at once and to both record this. I think that, for me, gives me a bit of a

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different perspective of that testimony that they give. This is the testimony last of all that we give that he lives. This is a unique moment and a unique experience in American religious history.

Nick Galieti: We talk about this vision, and it being a pretty important thing in American history and certainly with an LDS culture still very significant. But how was it received among the membership of the church?

Matthew McBride: Well, not as well as you might think. This is surprising to people when they encounter it for the first time because today, when we think about Section 76, we think about the three degrees of glory and our response is, “Three degrees of glory, #ILoveJosephSmith,” because it’s so cool. We love it, and we embrace it, and it’s beautiful.

For members of the church at that time, and this is going back to what I said before about religious culture and about this really contentious debate, in particular about salvation and in the unpopularity among most people of Universalism. That’s where this all comes in. When word about the vision gets out, there are members that receive it well. W. W. Phelps says, “This is the greatest news that’s every come from heaven” (paraphrasing). Then you have others that are just deeply disturbed by it because it feels like Universalism. They’ve spent their entire life in this debate where they’re criticizing Universalism, and they are defending their position, whether it be a Calvinist kind of position or an Armenian position about salvation. Here, Joseph Smith is coming along and saying, “No, here’s a revelation, and God is going to say ... Salvation is the baseline.” There’s more than salvation, too, which is one of the interesting and unique things about Section 76. But salvation is something that God is able to provide to everybody. They’re upset by it.

Nick Galieti: Was there a prevailing thought or soteriology the Saints had prior to this?

Matthew McBride: Everybody’s kind of coming at it from their own peculiar background.

Nick Galieti: So there wasn’t anything that concrete?

Matthew McBride: Joseph Smith saw this in his family growing up. He had a father who, along with his brother and his father, belonged to a Universalist society early in their lives and appears to have embraced Universalist ideas in the way he thought about the world and about God. Then, on the other hand, Lucy, Joseph Smith’s mother, has this more of a Calvinist background,

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and she leans toward Presbyterianism. Even within the microcosm of the Smith family, there are these different opinions. It's hard to know exactly what influence this had on the way people received the vision, but I suspect, and I think the sources do tell that this debate over salvation and over Universalism really was at the heart of some of the reactions that people had. I think it depended on the background that they brought, and the assumptions that they were bringing to the table.

Nick Galieti: There were some instances in your essay that essentially said there were branches of the church that outright said, "This isn't good," and started preaching against it. There was some effort that actually had to be made on the part of the leadership of the church to go out and perhaps even calm the storms, if you will. What were maybe one or two of those instances from your essay that you talked about?

Matthew McBride: Well, John Murdock, a great early missionary is one of these people that end up going out and doing some of this work — evangelizing, helping people understand the vision, and helping them see how it can fit into their notions of salvation and religion. Sometimes that's what it took — kind of a pastoral hand — whether it's a missionary or it's somebody that's able to come along and just talk them through it. Murdock is one of these.

Nick Galieti: There were some people that we might not consider having a difficult time with this — one of those being Brigham Young. You have some quotes in the article. In fact, I wanted to give one of the quotes. Brigham Young said that he had to think and pray to read and think until he knew and fully understood himself those different things. In some respects, we have what you're talking about here: this idea that even people like Brigham Young were coming with their different backgrounds. I wouldn't use the term "baggage," but just different backgrounds that they came to and their understanding of this.

Matthew McBride: Brigham Young's case is really, really interesting. I think he says that it was just completely contrary to his former education. I like his response, and he says that he didn't reject offhand or reject it immediately, but he decided to wait and take some time with it. This is just how cognition works, right? It's how learning works. Our minds are like this house, and we spend our lives filling the house with furniture; we furnish it. When new ideas come in or a new piece of furniture gets delivered, we have to rearrange the furniture sometimes to make room for it. Sometimes we'll get a piece of furniture and just send it right back to the store. Sometimes

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we're really excited about something, and we can find a place for it immediately. This, for Brigham Young, maybe felt like someone had delivered like a 35-foot-long, triangle-shaped orange couch or something. He's like, "How am I going to fit this?" He says, "I'm not going to send this back to the store. I'm going to give this some time. I'm going to work on it." I think that's admirable. It's something that I like about Brigham Young's response. I think it was a facet of his discipleship — his willingness to look at this new thing and say, "I'm going to work on it, and I'm going to try to figure out a way to make this fit."

Sometimes it is just a hard process, and we might leave a piece of furniture sitting in the front room wrapped in plastic, and we might stub our toe on it every time we walk by and might cause us some pain. Ultimately, this is kind of a process that we see as Brigham Young encounters this new idea. I think that kind of work is relevant, and it's an increasingly important part of discipleship in the information age or a discipleship in a church that believes in ongoing and continuing revelation where we know that change is going to happen, we know that we're going to encounter new things. We don't cram stuff in and duct tape it into place because that makes it difficult to accommodate the novel and the change. I like Brigham Young's approach because he's thinking carefully about this, and he's going to figure out how to fit it in.

Nick Galieti: That's how Brigham Young was when he was being converted to this church, if I remember the stories correctly. He wasn't an overnight convert.

Matthew McBride: Yeah.

Nick Galieti: He took a bit of time and was very methodical. In some respects, you see the same thing here. One of the things that strikes me about Brigham Young's example is that he didn't park his membership until he got this figured out. He didn't say, "All right, I'm going to stop being a member for a little bit until ..." He went forward with faith and that example can be relevant to today as you pointed out.

Matthew McBride: Well, sure. Brigham Young didn't throw all the furniture out the window. He's like, "No, I'm going to figure this out." I think that is a process that we see all the time, and I experience it myself regularly. It's probably something that people experienced in 1978 when here comes President Kimball. Here's a revelation on the priesthood, and it's different. It's

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different than what we had come to know and had come to expect. I think to the credit of the majority of Latter-day Saints, they receive this revelation, they rearranged their mental furniture, they made a place for it. There were others that evidently struggled to find a place to make that fit. There was probably some older furniture that maybe needed to be sent to Goodwill, and maybe people are still hanging onto some of that furniture. That would be an example.

Another example might be just the way that we respond when we learn something new about church history. Oh, Joseph Smith had four accounts of his First Vision or he translated the Book of Mormon with a seer stone? What happened to the Urim and Thummim? These are new, and they are ideas that come in, and they challenge us. There's work to be done to say, "Okay, how can I rearrange the furniture? How can I make this fit?" That's the path that Brigham Young takes with the vision. It's the path that I think is part of consecration and discipleship in the day that we live in.

Nick Galieti:

You mentioned in the essay, and we've talked about it. There are examples of people that maybe weren't predisposed to accepting the revelation because of their previous beliefs that they brought into it. You also talk about people that did accept it, embraced it, and loved it. Those people were predisposed to the idea of continuing revelation. How can we become more predisposed ourselves to accepting continuing revelation?

Matthew McBride:

That's a great question. My first observation as I've talked to people is just to notice how vastly different the response is to new information can be. Different religious backgrounds led, I think, to really drastically different responses to Section 76, to the vision. The assumptions and the baggage, I think it's a fair word, that we bring to the table do change the way that we respond. It's interesting to see how two people can respond so differently to the same new idea. I see this in my family, I see it in my ward, and among my friends. The thing that I've learned working on this essay and from Brigham Young's response, in particular, is just the idea of patience and of not reacting in a knee jerk way. Just to recognize that this is how learning works. This is what we do as human beings when we encounter the *new*. If we can take this reasoned approach to say, "All right, here's a new idea," and take the time to do the hard work that's necessary to rearrange things and figure out how that's going to fit. That's really valuable.

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Maybe the other kind of metaphor that you could bring in is Joseph Smith's metaphor. Maybe I'm misappropriating it a little bit, but he talks about how he's the rough stone that's rolling down a hill, and he's bumping up against things all the time. They have the effect of not shattering him or breaking him, but of knocking off the rough edges and smoothing him and polishing him. I like that image, too. This idea that if we can hold to what we know, what we felt, just like Brigham Young did. He said, "Okay, this idea is really weird and strange to me. Here's what I know. Here's what I've felt. I'm going to take this new idea, and I'm going to give it some time."

Nick Galieti: To plant that seed.

Matthew McBride: Yeah, and to have that kind of flexibility. It reminds me of something that Elder Marlin K. Jensen used to say, I don't know that it originated from him, but I think he on occasion would say, "Blessed are the flexible because they don't get bent out of shape." Having a little bit of that kind of spiritual flexibility, I think is important. It will prevent us from breaking and allow those experiences and new pieces of information that come at us to shape us and polish us instead.

Nick Galieti: I had an experience that I wanted to get your take on. To me, I think this one thing that I think is amazing about the scriptures, and particularly Section 76, is that as we revisit it at different times in our lives that our previous experience informs our new reading in a different way. In this case, I decided to try and listen to Section 76 on the audio scriptures and just see how maybe something might stand out different to me to have someone reading it to me. It actually happened that in Section 76, there was language about the people in the telestial kingdom about being numbered as the stars of the sky, essentially, and the sands of the earth. It made me think, "Hmm, that's Abrahamic covenant kind of speech." It made me think, "I wonder if there's a connection between Section 76 and the Abrahamic covenant?" From that point, I started trying to answer my own questions. As the author of this essay, I'm curious what questions you've had that perhaps were addressed as you wrote the essay about Section 76?

Matthew McBride: Reading Section 76, for me, as a regular reader of the scriptures that historical, historicized kind of approach in reading is always something that brings a lot of value for me. Those are the kinds of questions that arise for me as I read it. To open up Section 76 and to read it is to kind of open

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up this debate again that is happening in Joseph Smith's day about salvation, about what it means. Reading Section 76 is an interesting experience. It's so big. There's so much in there. I don't pretend to understand all of it. There are aspects of it that I still look at, and I'm like, "I don't quite see how this fits. I don't quite understand how this works or how it relates to other later revelations that Joseph Smith has or other practices that he implements. Like baptism for the dead," or whatever it might be.

Both that experience of reading and having those questions arise in my mind and then just this work that I did to look at the way that people responded to Section 76 in the first place is a reminder to me that I don't always understand everything; it's okay to live with some ambiguity sometimes. That's the nature of life. It's not something that I just set aside. To go back to my previous analogy, I probably don't take the new piece of furniture and stick it in the basement and ignore it. For me, spirituality is this really active process. Scripture reading is an ongoing and never ending process. I might get to the end of aspects of it, and I might come to some insight and understand sometimes. Other times it's just an exciting process that I want to embrace and maybe someday we can get to the bottom of it all.

Nick Galieti: I appreciate you coming in and talking about your essay. Again, it's the one entitled "The Vision" on Section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants. It's part of the Revelations in Context series found on LDS.org. We will have a link to that essay at the posting for this episode at ldsperspectives.com, and I want to thank you again, Matthew McBride, for coming in and talking about this and giving us some really good analogies and ways to approach continuing revelation. I appreciate that.

Matthew McBride: It's been good to talk to you. Thanks.

Nick Galieti: Thank you.

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