

Matthew O. Richardson, “The Road through Palmyra,” in *Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to the Restored Church* (Provo, UT and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2004), 198–211.

The Road through Palmyra

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With enthusiastic anticipation, Isaiah prophesied of “a marvellous work and a wonder” (Isaiah 29:14) that would come forth following certain apostasy. Interestingly enough, this restorative work, marvelous in scope and significance, was not conceived in notable circles of theologians, scholars, or philosophers. It would have been utterly impossible for this movement to take place at any recognizable location, as did other notable events in human history. In fact, this prophesied restorative work could begin only at one place in the world, a region that relatively few knew—Palmyra, New York. In this light, the marvelous work of the Restoration was truly a wonder.

The Restoration was inseparably linked to Palmyra because within a relatively unobtrusive and common-looking hill nearby a sacred record was buried. This record, written and deposited in the hill by ancient prophets, would become known as the keystone to the doctrine of the Church and was directly associated with the miraculous restorative events

during 1820–30. [1] Another fixed facet of the Restoration to consider was the foretold participation of a “seer” who would be raised up with the power to bring forth the word of God (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 50:30). Joseph of Egypt prophesied that this seer would be a deliverer “like unto Moses” (2 Nephi 3:9) and that “his name shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father” (2 Nephi 3:15). President Brigham Young later clarified that it was Joseph Smith Jr. who would be the seer, for “it was decreed in the counsels of eternity, long before the foundations of the earth were laid, that he should be the man, in the last dispensation of this world, to bring forth the word of God to

the people, and receive the fulness of the keys and power of the Priesthood of the Son of God.” [2] Thus, a specific man and a specific hill had to meet.

As incredible as these foretold events were, there is still more to consider. There were those who would provide invaluable assistance in bringing forth the Restoration. They were the “means” to further the work (D&C 5:34), those whom Nephi described as “three witnesses” who would see Cumorah’s record and “testify to the truth of the book and the things therein” (2 Nephi 27:12). Thus, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer also had to converge within reasonable proximity to the fixed geographical region of Palmyra, where they would be connected to the foretold seer. Their connection was necessary for the Restoration to be set in motion. The story of how the seer and three witnesses of the marvelous Restoration would meet in the proper place at the proper time is a fascinating one.

Joseph Smith

The Prophet Joseph Smith’s road to Palmyra was a lengthy journey of delays, detours, disappointments, and, at times, heart-wrenching trials. It was a journey that began long before his birth. While some may consider the Smiths’ eventual move to Palmyra as coincidence or fate, it is wise to consider President Thomas S. Monson’s feeling that “there is a guiding hand above all things.

Often when things happen, its not by accident. One day, when we look back at the seeming coincidences of our lives, we will realize that perhaps they weren’t so coincidental after all.” [3] In this light, the hardships, trials, and mishaps experienced by the Smith family members not only molded their characters but served to move them in certain directions. Perhaps even the Smiths were surprised to find themselves in Palmyra, for there is no record of a divine manifestation directing them there. Unlike Moses or Lehi, who were foretold of a promised destination, it seems that the Smiths were able to make sense of the long journey to Palmyra only after they had arrived. And then it was difficult to ignore the “guiding hand above all things.”

The Smiths’ road to Palmyra was a generational journey. Perhaps a good starting point would be Ebenezer Mack (Joseph Smith Jr.’s maternal great-grandfather). He was “a man of considerable property, and lived in good style.” [4] He was in a position to leave his family in security with both property and style. Yet through a series of “misfortunes,” he was reduced to poverty, and his son, Solomon, was “boundout” (apprenticed) as a youth. Apparently, this influenced

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Solomon to spend his lifetime consumed with obtaining riches. His quest to find comfort and prosperity was never realized, and Solomon finally concluded that “the Lord would not suffer me to prosper.”^[6] Rather than sinking deep roots on a spacious family farm, Solomon’s attempts to secure reasonable means to make a living eventually led him and his family to Gilsum, New Hampshire. It was while Solomon was living in Gilsum that his son Stephen, a successful businessman, sought to have his sister, Lucy, live with him and help care for his growing family.^[7] Lucy Mack returned with her brother Stephen to Tunbridge, Vermont, in 1795 while her parents, Solomon and Lydia Gates Mack, remained in Gilsum.^[8]

Joseph Smith’s father’s family was of Puritan stock with deep generational roots in Topsfield, Massachusetts. Samuel Smith (Joseph Jr.’s paternal great-grandfather) was well respected and even served in community positions. Samuel’s second son, Asael (Joseph Jr.’s grandfather), left the family farm only to return to Topsfield in hopes of saving the family farm from the burden of debt.^[9] Asael’s attempts to save the farm were in vain, and after spending time in Ipswich, Massachusetts, Asael sought inexpensive land in Vermont. He took his sons, Jesse and Joseph, with him to clear land, and in 1791 the Smith family moved to Tunbridge, Vermont. It was in Tunbridge that Joseph Smith and Lucy Mack met and eventually married in 1796.

Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith began their married life under reasonably favorable circumstances. With modest business success, Joseph Sr. became interested in investing in ginseng.^[10] Unfortunately, he was cheated in the venture and was left financially ruined. For the next fourteen years, the Smiths worked day labor and resorted to tenancy rather than land ownership. It was under such conditions that Joseph Smith Jr. was born on December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont. After enduring the typhoid outbreak in 1812, the Smiths began farming in Norwich, Vermont, on Esquire Murdock’s property. Lucy Mack Smith wrote, “The first year our crops failed; yet, by selling fruit which grew on the place, we succeeded in obtaining bread for the family.”^[11] Unfortunately, the second year of crops also failed, and the last straw came in 1816. Often called the “year without a summer,” 1816 saw unusual wintry conditions throughout the spring and summer making it impossible to raise crops.^[12] When the crops failed for a third time, Joseph Smith Sr., discouraged and broken, determined to leave Vermont. His brothers had already moved to New York by 1815, and Joseph thought it might be well to follow in their footsteps. Joseph Sr.’s desire to leave Vermont was not singular. In fact, in 1816 Vermont experienced a mass exodus of those hoping to find more favorable conditions elsewhere.^[13]

The Smiths found their way to the village of Palmyra, New York, in 1816. Through sheer determination and a united effort by parents and children, the Smiths worked to secure a tract of land in Manchester (on the borders of the township of Palmyra) sometime in 1818.^[14] After building a “snug” cabin, the Smiths continued to work the land and secure odd jobs to make ends meet. At this point they were located less than three miles from a drumlin that would later be called the “Hill Cumorah.”^[15]

Now that the Smiths were living just off Stafford Road bordering Palmyra and Manchester, conditions were set for unfolding the Restoration. Granted, the road to Palmyra had been arduous and long, but now the chosen seer was present. In 1820 Joseph would enter the grove of trees that surrounded the Smith log home, and this experience would set in motion a series of marvelous events. In 1827, after yearly visits to the Hill Cumorah, Joseph would obtain the sacred record and begin translating the contents. Three years later, the Church of Jesus Christ would be restored again in Fayette, New York, less than thirty miles from Cumorah. It is interesting that the Lord’s hand in moving Joseph into the position to receive the plates was wrought not only upon him but upon previous generations of his family. While circumstances of the moment, poor personal decisions, and even decisions made by others seemed unfortunate and surely unbearable at the time, the Smiths and the Macks were influenced by such experiences that comfort might have otherwise eclipsed. Likewise, some may conclude that the desperate ice summer of 1816 was bereft of godliness, and they may be surprised to find God in the event upon further inspection. This was the culminating event, after all, that persuaded the Smiths to leave Vermont and seemed to direct them further along the road to the area of Palmyra. Upon later reflection, Brigham Young said, “The Lord had his eye upon him [Joseph Smith], and upon his father, and upon his father’s father, and upon their progenitors. . . . He has watched that family and that blood as it has circulated from its

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fountain to the birth of that man.”

Martin Harris

The road to Palmyra was much shorter for Martin Harris than for the Smiths. This does not discount the influences on or reasons for earlier members of the Harris family to immigrate to a new country and settle in Palmyra.

But much of Martin Harris’s pre-Palmyra history is only slightly known.^[17] Martin Harris was born May 18, 1783, in Easttown, New York. He was described by one of his early contemporaries as an “industrious, hard-working farmer, shrewd in his business calculations, frugal in his habits, and, what was termed a prosperous man in the world.”^[18] He married his cousin Lucy Harris in 1808 and, over the next several decades, managed over 240 acres of productive land. In addition to his farming skills, Martin was a man of varied talent. He won prizes in local fairs, produced textiles, and raised animals. He was also active in civic affairs, participating in local defensive campaigns during the War of 1812 and serving as a town manager and the overseer of highways. It is clear by almost every account that Martin Harris maintained a respectable reputation.

With Harris already established in Palmyra, it is how his path intersected that of Joseph Smith that is of particular interest and importance. Harris became acquainted with the Smith family sometime after their arrival in Palmyra in 1816. It seems that he first became associated with the Smiths when he employed some of the members of

their family.^[19] This makes sense since the Smiths were eager to find means to support themselves and better their circumstances. Beyond this scope, the depth and frequency of their association is uncertain. According to Harris, it was well after Joseph’s vision in 1820 that he began to personally investigate the religious claims of the young prophet. Although it is certain that Harris knew the Smiths by this time, at least through their business association, he was initially cautious in his involvement with the Restoration. In fact, he first waited for his wife and daughter to make

inquiries about Joseph’s experiences before he began his own investigation.^[20] But by 1828 Martin was confident enough in his opinion of the Restoration that he found himself helping Joseph by acting as his scribe in the translation.

The path to the Restoration for Martin Harris was not predictable, nor was it easy. By 1829 it was well known in Palmyra that Martin Harris was directly connected with the Restoration and even though he was a Palmyra local with an essentially impeccable character, he was publicly criticized and scorned for this connection. In spite of the scorn, Harris

was unafraid to show public support of Joseph and the Restoration.^[21] In addition to giving personal assistance, Harris was also a financier of both Prophet and the work of the Restoration. Little did he realize that the very land he

successfully cultivated would one day become the ransom for publishing Cumorah’s record.^[22]

Oliver Cowdery

Like Joseph Smith’s path, Oliver Cowdery’s road to Palmyra can be traced to generations before his birth. Unlike the Smith family, where financial ruin, unfortunate mishap, and even natural disaster uprooted and moved the family, Oliver’s heritage was moved by different means. Oliver Cowdery’s fourth-great-grandfather William Cowdery

was “staunch in his belief of personal religious freedom and the right of free worship.”^[23] Inspired by personal beliefs, William pursued a quest of religious worship by coming to America with the Pilgrim movement in 1630. For several generations, the Cowdery’s made their home in Massachusetts, and then Nathaniel Cowdery moved to Reading, Vermont, in 1786. Nathaniel’s grandson William Cowdery Jr. married Rebecca Fuller and became the father of Oliver Cowdery on October 3, 1806. It is interesting to note that Oliver’s mother, Rebecca Fuller, was the great-granddaughter of John Fuller and Mehitbel Rowley, who were the second-great-grandparents of Lucy Mack Smith (mother of Joseph

Smith Jr.). This made Oliver Cowdery and Lucy Mack Smith third cousins.^[24] There is no evidence, however, that

Oliver knew of his family relationship with the Smiths.^[25]

Oliver Cowdery was raised in Vermont, and although some of his brothers left the family home in search of better situations in New York, Oliver stayed until 1825. In 1828 Oliver’s brother Lyman was hired to teach at a rural school in Manchester, New York. Unfortunately, Lyman could not fulfill the assignment and suggested to the trustees that his younger brother, Oliver, might be given the post. The trustees of the school (which included Hyrum Smith)

approved Oliver as a replacement, and he began his employ in 1828.^[26] At this point, Oliver not only had found the

road to Palmyra but was himself the master of a schoolhouse located on Stafford Road, only a mile east of the Smith home. With such close proximity, it was only a matter of time before his path intersected the Prophet's.

It was the general custom of the day that the master of the rural school would board with families of his students in lieu of charging tuition.^[27] Thus, Oliver met the Smiths under this circumstance. Remember that Joseph was in Harmony, Pennsylvania, at this time and not at the Smith homestead. According to Lucy Mack Smith, it was while Oliver was staying with them that “he began to hear from all quarters concerning the plates.”^[28] Rumors of the miraculous events had been circulating in Palmyra since the First Vision in 1820. To think that Oliver would not hear of the rumors, especially when he was actually boarding with the Smiths, would be odd indeed. With piqued curiosity, Oliver began to petition Father Smith for more information about the incredible experiences. Naturally, the Smiths were cautious in sharing tales of visions, angels, and golden plates—especially with strangers. Lucy Smith admits that after a “considerable length of time,” Oliver gained the confidence of Joseph Sr. and was given “a sketch of the facts relative to the plates.”^[29]

The accounts of the Restoration that Father Smith shared with Oliver made a deep impression on him. He couldn't seem to escape thinking about the events and finally determined that he must meet Joseph. After making it “a subject of prayer,” Oliver firmly believed that it was “the will the Lord” that he should go to Harmony, Pennsylvania. With that sense of a “guiding hand above all things,” Cowdery was resolute in his desire to leave for Harmony, and he related to Lucy Mack Smith, “If there is a work for me to do in this thing, I am determined to do it.”^[30] Thus, in late March 1829, Oliver Cowdery and Samuel Smith left Manchester to meet the Prophet Joseph in Harmony, Pennsylvania. Granted, to some, Oliver's generational journey to Palmyra may have been surprising, but in truth his arrival and intersection with the promised seer were foreseen.

For Joseph, Oliver's arrival was none too soon. In March 1829 the Lord assured Joseph, “I will provide means whereby thou mayest accomplish the thing which I have commanded thee” (D&C 5:34). Only weeks later, Joseph met Oliver, the promised “means” to the restorative end. Almost immediately after his arrival, Oliver Cowdery began working as Joseph's scribe in the translation of the Book of Mormon and was also witness to the marvelous work of the Restoration. With Oliver at Joseph's side, the restorative events began to unfold at a wondrous pace.

David Whitmer

David Whitmer was born January 7, 1805, near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. His journey to Palmyra began when his parents, Peter and Mary Musselman Whitmer, left Pennsylvania for New York in 1809. The Whitmers settled with other Pennsylvanian Germans in Fayette, New York, which happened to be only thirty miles from Palmyra. The eventual parents of eight children, the Whitmers were respected citizens in the area.^[31]

According to David Whitmer, he arrived in Palmyra because of business dealings. His initial connection to the Restoration, however, was through Oliver Cowdery. In 1828 David Whitmer was on business in Palmyra when he heard townfolk discussing golden plates found by local resident Joseph Smith. Initially, Whitmer dismissed the claims as gossip, but then he talked further with Oliver Cowdery, who was living in Palmyra at the time. Oliver Cowdery said that he knew the Smith family and believed that there was some truth to the story and that he planned to investigate further.^[32]

David, who was twenty-three years old at the time, returned to Fayette with a promise that Oliver Cowdery would advise him of his investigation. David was informed months later that Oliver intended to visit Joseph in Harmony, Pennsylvania, where the Prophet was living near his in-laws.^[33] In the spring of 1829, Oliver Cowdery and Samuel Smith made their way to Harmony. Both Oliver and Samuel visited the Whitmers in Fayette on their way to visit Joseph in Pennsylvania. Little did anyone realize at this point that within a years time, the Church of Jesus Christ would be organized at that very spot in Fayette.

Oliver and Samuel departed to visit Joseph, and shortly afterward, David received another letter from Oliver giving a positive testimony to his inquiries regarding Joseph and the plates. In a later communication, Oliver told David that he was acting as a scribe for Joseph as they translated the plates from Cumorah. Oliver even included several lines from the translated work, which David shared with his family in Fayette. A later communication from Oliver requested David to come to Harmony and bring Oliver and Joseph back to Fayette to board with the Whitmers while they finished^[34]

the translation of the record. After consulting with Father Whitmer, David was set to bring both Oliver and Joseph to Fayette, pending completion of the spring planting.

The request for David to leave Fayette for Harmony could not have come at a more inconvenient time. Fall harvest was dependent on a successful spring planting, and the Whitmers were depending on a successful fall harvest. With David's responsibility to prepare the soil for the spring planting, it would appear that his road to meet the Prophet Joseph would be delayed or canceled. But when David returned to his fields to resume plowing, he found that five to seven acres had been plowed during the night.^[35] He was therefore able to complete the plowing in short order. What might have appeared as coincidence to some bore the mark of a "guiding hand above all things" the next day. When David went to spread the plaster of paris, a common soil preparation of the day, he found the work was already done. His sister said that her children had called her the day before to watch three strangers spread the plaster with remarkable skill. She assumed they had been hired by David or by Father Whitmer.^[36] It seemed clear that the "guiding hand" of divine intervention would clear necessary roadblocks that would have impeded David Whitmer from completing his journey and connecting with the Prophet Joseph Smith. David drove the three-day journey of about one hundred miles to Harmony to bring Oliver and Joseph back to the Whitmer farm. They returned to Fayette around the first of June 1829.

The Whitmers received their new guests warmly. According to Joseph, Father Whitmer extended an invitation to stay with them, free of expense, for as long as was needed to complete the work.^[37] In addition to the temporal support provided by the Whitmers, "David, John and Peter Whitmer, jun., became the Prophet's zealous friends and assistants in the work."^[38] With David's road through the Palmyra region and his connection with the Prophet Joseph complete, he assisted in the restorative works that included his name on the charter of the newly established Church, which was organized in Peter Whitmers home in 1830.

Conclusion

Fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of a marvelous work and wonder to come forth may have seemed implausible when he spoke it. Aligning all the factors necessary for a restorative effort is nearly incomprehensible to the logistical mind. But in June 1829, Joseph Smith, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer retired to the woods together and became forever known as witnesses of the foretold Restoration. In their testimony of the work to "all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people," Harris, Cowdery, and Whitmer testified that they "beheld and bear record that these things are true." They then stated, "And it is marvelous in our eyes" (Book of Mormon, "The Testimony of Three Witnesses").

When President Howard W. Hunter recalled the restorative efforts, he reminded the Saints that this marvelous work was the fruit of "the most humble beginnings."^[39] Such beginnings began to take shape long before the First Vision in 1820. The prelude to such restorative events required individuals to be uprooted, endure the follies of their peers, be moved upon in unseen ways, and make connections with others that would yield a harvest beyond their mortal understanding and grasp. This prelude was not coincidence, nor was it mere fate. The divine arranging to bring the restorative work to pass was a wondrous work indeed. Elder Neal A. Maxwell reminds us that "His [God's] overseeing precision pertains not only to astro-physical orbits but to human orbits as well."^[40] In such manner were the human orbits of Joseph Smith, Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer aligned. Such alignment was a wondrous prelude to the marvelous Restoration.

^[1] See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932–51), 4:461.

^[2] Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 7:289.

^[3] Thomas S. Monson, quoted in Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Lessons Learned in the Journey of Life," *Ensign*, December 2000, 9.

^[4] Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations*

(1853; reprint, Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1995), 15.

[5] Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 5–7.

[6] Solomon Mack, *A Narrative [sic] of the life of Solomon Mack Containing an Account of the Many Severe Accidents He Met with During a Long Series of Years, Together with the Extraordinary Manner in Which He Was Converted to the Christian Faith* (Windsor, Vt.: Solomon Mack, 1810), 10, in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

[7] See Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 36.

[8] See Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage*, 80.

[9] See Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage*, 117.

[10] Ginseng, a root thought to prolong life and restore virility, grew wild in Vermont and was greatly valued in China.

[11] Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 66.

[12] It was later proposed that the unusual weather pattern in 1816 was caused by the effects of a violent volcanic eruption in Indonesia (Henry Stommel and Elizabeth Stommel, *Volcano Weather* [Newport, R.I.: Henry and Elizabeth Stommel, 1983], 3, 11–12; cited in *Church History in the Fulness of Times* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000], 24).

[13] See Larry C. Porter, “A Study of the Origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the States of New York and Pennsylvania, 1816–1831” (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1971), 10.

[14] Larry Porter reports the move as “approximately 1818” because of contemporary accounts placing the Smiths in the area in 1818–19. Discussion as to the actual location of the Smith’s log home (whether in the Township of Palmyra or in Manchester) can also be found in Porter, “A Study of the Origins of The Church,” 16–17.

[15] What is now known as “Hill Cumorah” was also called “Mormon Hill,” “Golden Bible Hill,” and “Bible Hill” (Porter, “Study of the Origins of The Church,” 25).

[16] Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:289–90.

[17] See Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 95.

[18] James Reeves, *Palmyra Courier*, May 24, 1872; James Reeves had known Martin Harris in Palmyra, New York.

[19] See *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 45.

[20] See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 107.

[21] See Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 112–13.

[22] Martin Harris sold one hundred and fifty-one acres at a public auction in April 1831 to pay Mr. E. B. Grandin (Wayne Cutler Gunnell, “Martin Harris—Witness and Benefactor to the Book of Mormon” [master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1955], 38).

[23] Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery: Second Elder and Scribe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 13.

[24] Lucy Mack’s mother was also a cousin of Mary Gates, who was married to Nathaniel Cowdery Jr. (Oliver Cowdery’s second-great-granduncle); see Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 14–15.

[25] See Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 14.

[26] See Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 128; see also *Church History in the Fulness of Times*, 53.

[27] See Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery*, 29.

[28] Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 128.

- [29] Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 128.
- [30] Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 129.
- [31] See Porter, “A Study of the Origins of The Church,” 93.
- [32] See Lyndon W. Cook, ed. *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1993), 60.
- [33] See Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 61.
- [34] See Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Western Epics, 1971), 1:265.
- [35] See David Whitmer interview, September 7–8, 1878, interviewed by Orson Pratt, cited in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 51.
- [36] See Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 136–37.
- [37] See Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:49.
- [38] Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 1:265.
- [39] Howard W. Hunter, “The Sixth Day of April, 1830,” *Ensign*, May 1991, 63.
- [40] Neal A. Maxwell, “In Him All Things Hold Together,” in *1990–91 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1991), 108.