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A common problem for many students of Latter-day Saint history is that they are unfamiliar with referenced sources, or they lack the ability to evaluate the reliability of historical claims.

# *A Method for Evaluating Latter-day Saint History*

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*“What histories shall we believe where Mormon history is concerned?”*

— Bruce R. McConkie<sup>1</sup>

**H**istorical claims about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are repeatedly shared in classrooms, conversations, books, manuals, videos, podcasts, and online in a variety of ways. There is no shortage of information about the history of the Restoration. When you learn about Church history from these various sources, however, how do you know which claims to accept and which to question? Are all perspectives about Church history accurate and trustworthy? And, if all historical sources are not of the same value and veracity, what guidelines can be used to differentiate them?<sup>2</sup>

Suppose, for example, you heard someone claim that in the spring of 1820 God the Father touched Joseph Smith’s eyes during the First Vision. Is that accurate? Did you realize that there actually is a historical source that would attempt to argue “yes”? In 1893 a Latter-day Saint named Charles Walker attended a testimony meeting at which one of the local elders, a man named John Alger, bore his testimony. Walker recorded in his diary that

Alger testified that as a teenager he heard Joseph Smith state that during the First Vision “God touched his eyes with his finger and said, ‘Joseph this is my beloved Son hear him.’ As soon as the Lord had touched his eyes with his finger he immediately saw the Savior.” At the close of the meeting, Walker and others questioned the speaker. Walker recorded in his journal that day, “He [Alger] told us at the bottom of the meeting house steps that he was in the House of Father Smith in Kirtland when Joseph made this declaration, and that Joseph while speaking of it put his finger to his right eye, suiting the action with the words so as to illustrate and at the same time impress the occurrence on the minds of those unto whom He was speaking.”<sup>3</sup>

After hearing that account, readers should ask themselves: Is that what really happened? Would I be willing to teach that God touched Joseph’s eyes during the First Vision in a Church class or share it in a sacrament meeting talk?

Or, how would you respond if someone criticized the veracity of the Book of Mormon by claiming, “Joseph Smith’s friend said Joseph didn’t even have real plates. All he had was a bag of sand that he put in a box for people to lift.” That claim is based on a statement made by Peter Ingersoll, a contemporary of Joseph Smith. Ingersoll first met the Smith family at Palmyra in 1822. He reportedly traveled with Joseph Smith Jr. in 1827 from Palmyra, New York, to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to help Joseph move into his father-in-law’s home. Later, Ingersoll swore the following affidavit about the gold plates in New York before Judge T. P. Baldwin of the Wayne County Court:

[Joseph said,] “As I was passing, yesterday, across the woods, after a heavy shower of rain, I found, in a hollow, some beautiful white sand, that had been washed up by the water. I took off my frock, and tied up several quarts of it, and then went home. On my entering the house, I found the family at the table eating dinner. They were all anxious to know the contents of my frock. At that moment, I happened to think of what I had heard about a history found in Canada, called the golden Bible; so I very gravely told them it was the golden Bible. To my surprise, they were credulous enough to believe what I said. Accordingly I told them that I had received a commandment to let no one see it, for, says I, no man can see it with the naked eye and live. However, I offered to take out the book and show it to them, but they refuse to see it, and left the room.” “Now,” said Jo, “I have got the damned fools fixed, and will carry out the fun.” Notwithstanding, he told me he had no such book, and believed there never was any such book, yet, he told me that he actually went to Willard Chase, to get him to make a chest, in which he might deposit his golden Bible. But, as Chase would not do it, he made a box himself, of

clap-boards, and put it into a pillow case, and allowed people only to lift it, and feel of it through the case.<sup>4</sup>

How credible is that report? Should you believe it? Or how about this one: In 1844 Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, dictated her history to Martha Coray. She recalled that a few days after bringing the plates home in 1827, Joseph called her to come down from her upstairs work on some oil cloths. Lucy reported, "I finally concluded to go down, and see what he wanted, upon which he handed me the breast-plate spoken of in his history. It was wrapped in a thin muslin handkerchief, so thin that I could see the glistening metal, and ascertain its proportions without any difficulty." Lucy then proceeded to describe the breastplate:

It was concave on one side, and convex on the other, and extended from the neck downwards, as far as the centre of the stomach of a man of extraordinary size. It had four straps of the same material, for the purpose of fastening it to the breast, two of which ran back to go over the shoulders, and the other two were designed to fasten to the hips. They were just the width of two of my fingers, (for I measured them,) and they had holes in the end of them, to be convenient in fastening. After I had examined it, Joseph placed it in the chest with the Urim and Thummim.<sup>5</sup>

If true, these three remarkable statements—from John Alger, Peter Ingersoll, and Lucy Mack Smith—could influence our understanding of Church history and doctrine. One writer claimed God physically touched the young Seer's eyes, another claimed there were no gold plates, and the third described an ancient American prophetic relic. What should we make of these claims? Can you rely on historical sources like these? Why, or why not? How can you objectively evaluate them? The purpose of this article is to address these, and related, concerns by proposing a set of five criteria to help teachers and learners assess the reliability of Latter-day Saint historical claims.

### **Why Does Latter-day Saint History Matter?**

Latter-day Saint history matters because our doctrine is often closely tied to our history.<sup>6</sup> For many Protestant faiths, the history of their origin doesn't directly affect their church's doctrine. If you are a Lutheran or a Methodist, for example, what did or did not happen to Martin Luther or John Wesley does not fundamentally alter your doctrinal position because your beliefs are centered mainly in a *theological* position (grace, sanctification, the supremacy of scripture, etc.) and not in specific *historical* claims.

For Latter-day Saints, though, history and doctrine are often intertwined. The historical narrative affects the veracity of the doctrinal concepts. Joseph Smith had a vision (historical event) where God and Jesus appeared to him as separate beings and told him there had been an apostasy (doctrinal truth). Joseph went to a hill and removed gold plates (historical event) and brought forth new scripture called the Book of Mormon (doctrinal truth). The New Testament apostles Peter, James, and John appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and laid their hands on their heads (historical event) to give them necessary priesthood authority to organize the Church (doctrinal truth). Expressed as an analogy: Latter-day Saint history often provides the bones to which the muscles of its doctrines are attached.

Altering the supportive structure of our history can affect the doctrines associated with that history. Thus, Latter-day Saints rightfully care about learning their history. As former Church Historian Marlin K. Jensen observed, “It is important that we become familiar with our Church’s history, especially with its founding stories. These stories—Joseph Smith’s First Vision, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, angelic visitations by John the Baptist, Peter, James, John, Elijah, Elias, and others—contain the foundational truths upon which the Restoration is based.”<sup>7</sup>

Studying and understanding Church history is also important because people’s faith can be affected—positively or negatively—by what, when, and how they learn about Church history. Church history includes a wonderful repository of stories that can bolster and deepen faith. As Joseph Smith biographer and historian Richard Bushman once wrote, “After all these years of studying Joseph’s life, I believe more than ever.”<sup>8</sup> There are others, however, who hear stories related to Church history that lead them to stumble and doubt their faith.

How someone responds to Church history is largely a personal, faith-based question. Some people believe and perpetuate almost any “Church history” that confirms their views without ever knowing or questioning the original source. Others gladly pass along critical “Church history” with the same level of blind source obliviousness. Sensational devotional or controversial claims, however, can sometimes be based on singular sources, hearsay reports, second- or thirdhand accounts, misstatements, half-truths, unbalanced arguments, and quotations taken out of context. A common problem for many students of Latter-day Saint history is that they are unfamiliar with

referenced sources, or they lack the ability to evaluate the reliability of historical claims.

Because of the flood of information that surrounds us from the internet and social media, this is an increasingly common issue for Latter-day Saints who learn Church history from a variety of sources—some more credible than others. You likely know family members or friends who have bogged down intellectually or spiritually in certain historical mudholes—plowing their spiritual two-wheel drive Honda Accord into ten feet of muddy Church history, not knowing how to get out. Today, if we lack the capacity to effectively evaluate information, we may, in the prophetic words of the Apostle Paul, get stuck “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7).

### **Factors to Evaluate Latter-day Saint “History”**

Historical positions and claims can and should be evaluated for their reliability. But how can anyone properly evaluate Latter-day Saint historical sources and claims? One important approach many historians take is to consider appropriate and applicable principles from “source criticism,” which is the process of evaluating the reliability of sources associated with historical claims.<sup>9</sup> Source criticism techniques can be used by anyone, not just trained historians, and they can be as formal or informal as desired. However, it is important to recognize that while the result of applying source criticism can be an increased or reduced confidence in the reliability of an individual source, it seldom results in absolute certainty. Even after doing our best to carefully analyze the reliability of a historical claim, we can still be left seeing “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

By way of illustration, imagine you have just been told about a recent scientific study that claims drinking 64 oz. of carbonated soda every day is good for your body. Upon closer investigation (practicing source criticism), you learn that: (1) it is the only study ever to have reached that conclusion, (2) the research was sponsored solely by a major soft drink company, (3) there were only two research participants in the sample size, and (4) the study’s conclusion is based on a single survey question: “Don’t you agree that drinking carbonated drinks makes you feel better? Yes/No.” What initially appeared as an amazing and shocking new discovery could now quickly be dismissed. In social science, these are called threats to validity or reliability.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, we should not accept reported historical claims merely at face value.

Suppose someone asks you, for example, “What’s the deal with Fanny Alger? I heard that Joseph Smith had some sort of an affair with her and that Emma saw them together. Is that true?” Instead of responding directly, your first question should likely be, “What is your source for that claim?” Considering the source of such a potentially explosive claim would be a logical beginning. After examining the source, you would learn that the assertion was made in a letter written by William McLellin. McLellin was an early convert and member of the original Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who, after being excommunicated from the Church for the third time in 1838, participated in persecuting the Saints in Missouri.<sup>11</sup> McLellin wasn’t present in Kirtland at the supposed event between Fanny Alger and Joseph Smith. He was passing on secondhand hearsay. In fact, his alleged source was Emma Smith,<sup>12</sup> who denied such accusations against her husband.<sup>13</sup> Not only was McLellin writing more than forty years after the supposed event (when even the best of memories can inadvertently be confounded), his purpose in writing the letter was to uphold his own claims of religious truth. Some basic historical source criticism reveals that there are many reasons why McLellin’s claim is questionable.

To systematize a basic approach to historical source criticism, we propose five criteria that could be profitably considered by any learner. This framework is not intended to be all-purpose or without flaw, but it has proven helpful when evaluating the reliability of claims regarding Latter-day Saint Church history. We have summarized this possible approach to source criticism in these five important questions:

1. Is it a primary account?
2. What is its relationship to other sources?
3. Is it a contemporary account?
4. Does it have an objective perspective?
5. Are its claims supported by evidence?

The following sections expand on these questions.

## 1. Primary Account

### *Was the account produced by a participant or actual observer?*

For our purposes, a primary account is a firsthand account. A secondary (or further removed) source is created by someone who did not participate in



the event but who relates what they learned from another participant.<sup>14</sup> It is self-evident why primary accounts are usually more reliable than secondary ones. Primary accounts are direct; others are filtered. Secondhand or further removed retellings can introduce miscommunication, factual errors, reinterpreting of events, and other discrepancies. For example, Willard Richards kept Joseph Smith's Nauvoo journals in 1843–44; however, as the *Joseph Smith Papers* historians note in their introduction to this journal, “Though Richards appears to have either participated in or witnessed most of the events he documented, he at times wrote retrospectively or from secondhand information. Occasionally, such practices resulted in factual error.”<sup>15</sup>

Although primary accounts are not infallible (and may even introduce additional concerns in other source criticism questions), their firsthand views are often preferable to claims made by sources experientially removed from the same event. This is one reason why Joseph Smith's four primary accounts of the First Vision—written or overseen by Joseph himself—are more notable than the secondary accounts produced by people who wrote what they remembered hearing Joseph Smith say.<sup>16</sup> Of all the First Vision accounts, Alexander Neibaur's 1844 secondhand journal account is the only one that gives certain physical descriptions of God. Neibaur claims Joseph said he “saw a personage in the fire [with] light complexion blue eyes.”<sup>17</sup> It may very well be that God has light complexion or even blue eyes and Joseph related that information on that occasion, but it also may be that Neibaur interpreted God through his own lens and unconsciously superimposed details Joseph never directly stated. Additionally, like John Alger's account about God touching Joseph's eyes in the Sacred Grove, Neibaur's statement (about God's complexion or eyes) is the lone account across multiple sources that mentions such details, which leads to our next reliability criteria: How does this source compare to other historical records?

## 2. Relationship to Other Sources

### *How does this account harmonize with others?*

The next factor to examine regarding the reliability of a historical source is to compare the historical claim with other sources dealing with the same event. Are the dates, facts, details, and claims in the account in question consistent with other available sources? What are the major similarities and differences? Why might those differences exist?



While not foolproof, this criteria—based on the idea of multiple witnesses—is crucial for reconstructing reliable history. Varying elements are emphasized in Joseph Smith’s primary First Vision accounts, for example, but each source consistently tells the same essential story: A young boy in his midteens, confused over religion, consulted the scriptures, went to a grove of trees behind his home to pray, and received a vision where heavenly beings ministered to him. Those details are consistent, while others, such as his exact age or the specific words spoken, vary.<sup>18</sup>

In recent years, there has been increased discussion regarding Joseph Smith translating the Book of Mormon using a seer stone placed in a hat.<sup>19</sup> What is the process scholars used to reach that conclusion? Unfortunately, Joseph Smith is silent about the actual process of translation, saying only that it was done by the “gift and power of God”<sup>20</sup> and sometimes adding “by means of the Urim and Thummim” (Joseph Smith—History 1:64). In an effort to understand how the Book of Mormon was translated, we are left to rely upon those who watched Joseph Smith translate or heard him tell about it. As you read their various accounts, two key questions to ask are, What is consistent across each translation account? What differs?

Let’s consider several accounts of the translation process. The first is an early contemporary account (1829) by an antagonistic source. Jonathan Hadley was a local printer who declined to print the Book of Mormon when he was approached with an offer by Joseph Smith. In the 11 August 1829 issue of *The Palmyra Freeman*, Hadley stated: “It was said that the leaves of the [Gold] Bible were plates, of gold about eight inches long, six wide, and one eighth of an inch thick, on which were engraved characters or hieroglyphics. By placing the spectacles in a hat, and looking into it, Smith could (he said so, at least,) interpret these characters.”<sup>21</sup> This is a secondhand account, as Hadley would have been told the details of the translation by someone else (assumedly Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, Martin Harris, or Oliver Cowdery). However, it is a strong contemporary account from 1829, the earliest on record and before the Book of Mormon was published.

Here is another secondhand, contemporary account from 1831—by a less-antagonistic Shaker who heard Oliver Cowdery preach—saying that the Book of Mormon was translated by “two transparent stones in the form of spectacles” through which the translator “looked on the engraving & afterwards put his face into a hat & the interpretation then flowed into his mind.”<sup>22</sup>

Now here are two statements from individuals who believed in the Book of Mormon, but who eventually distanced themselves from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Near the end of her life, in an 1879 interview with her son Joseph III, Emma Smith recalled serving as a scribe for her husband while he translated. She reported Joseph “sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.”<sup>23</sup> An 1887 reminiscence by David Whitmer similarly explained that “Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face. . . . A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English.”<sup>24</sup>

And finally, here are statements from two people who witnessed the translation and remained faithful in the Church. Joseph Knight Sr. wrote (sometime between 1833 and 1847): “Now the way he translated was he put the urim and thummim into his hat and Darkned his Eyes than he would take a sentance and it would apper in Brite Roman Letters. Then he would tell the writer and he would write it. Then that would go away the next sentence would Come and so on. But if it was not Spelt rite it would not go away till it was rite, so we see it was marvelous. Thus was the hol [whole] translated.”<sup>25</sup> In an 1881 *Deseret Evening News* letter to the editor, Edward Stevenson, an acquaintance of Martin Harris, reported an 1870 Sunday meeting in which Martin Harris discussed how the Book of Mormon was translated during the time he served as Joseph Smith’s scribe. According to Stevenson, Martin Harris reported that

the Prophet possessed a seer stone, by which he was enabled to translate as well as from the Urim and Thummim, and for convenience he then used the seer stone. Martin explained the translation process as follows: By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were r[e]ad by the Prophet and written by Martin, and when finished he would say, ‘Written,’ and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected.<sup>26</sup>

These six sources provide various details about the Book of Mormon translation process. Although each source may suffer in some areas of reliability based on the criteria discussed in this paper, there is a consistency across each of these accounts—of Joseph using stones and often a hat to assist in the translation process. When analyzing historical accounts, we should not carelessly dismiss unique or lone claims regarding various historical narratives, but

we should carefully compare those details with other accounts. Consistency can be the companion of surety.

John Alger's statement, claiming that God touched Joseph's eyes in the Sacred Grove, is a lone claim that lacks validation from any other source dealing with the same subject. It was also recorded many decades after the event supposedly took place. It is not consistent nor contemporaneous, which brings us to our third criteria.

### 3. Contemporary Account

#### *How soon after the event was the account recorded?*

A third factor that can influence the validity of a historical source claim is *when* the event was recorded. A contemporary account is recorded at, or relatively near to, the event's occurrence. It is well-established that memories can inadvertently change over time.<sup>27</sup> Details can become lost and events confounded as time passes.<sup>28</sup>

Not only can event details alter over time, so can our *interpretation* of those details. The more the years go by, the more likely we are to see our memories through new lenses. This is not always negative—as sometimes time and space allow for clearer personal views to understand past events—but reinterpretation over time can introduce inaccuracy.

In a scientific experiment testing the ability to remember the location of items on a computer screen, if a participant incorrectly identified the placement of an item and put it where it didn't belong, the next day they tended to place the object in the same wrong location again. Why? "Our findings show that incorrect recollection of the object's location on day two influenced how people remembered the object's location on day three," wrote the lead author of that study published in the *Journal of Neuroscience*. "Retrieving the memory didn't simply reinforce the original association. Rather, it altered memory storage to reinforce the location that was recalled at session two. . . . When you think back to an event that happened to you long ago—say your first day at school—you actually may be recalling information you retrieved about that event at some later time, not the original event."<sup>29</sup>

Latter-day Saint historian Steven C. Harper has written about memory in relation to Joseph Smith's accounts of the First Vision. Why do some of the accounts differ from others in certain details, like Joseph's age or the exact wording of God speaking to Joseph? Remember, Joseph didn't first record the

event until more than a decade after it happened (1832), with his final written account (1842) being recorded twenty-two years after the First Vision. Harper writes:

Joseph may have purposely or unconsciously conflated events. Such compression or blurring is common when people remember and tell their histories. Joseph may have had a hard time remembering exactly when the vision occurred and, thus, how old he was at the time. Some of his accounts use the word “about” to describe his age or when his father moved to Palmyra or later the Manchester farm or other details of the story. As we all do, Joseph may have mixed information from his explicit episodic memory (the kind of memory that consciously recalls events from the past) with semantic memory (the kind of memory that knows what it knows without remembering how it knows, as in remembering one’s name or phone number).<sup>30</sup>

For these reasons, contemporary historical accounts are generally viewed as being more trustworthy than other accounts written long after the event. When historical accounts become late reminiscences, there is an increasing likelihood some details may have been forgotten, confounded, or reinterpreted. A contemporary account does not have to be recorded on the same day as the event, though. The general rule is *the closer to the event, the better*.

Journal entries, letters, business and administrative documents, newspaper reports, shorthand recording of sermons, photographs, and the like are typical types of credible contemporary sources. Although being a contemporary source is desirable for trustworthiness, it is often not enough. For example, after being excommunicated from the Church for adultery, Nauvoo’s disgraced former mayor John C. Bennett made several outlandish claims about Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints’ practice of plural marriage. Bennett wrote about a supposed systemic “order” of Latter-day Saint wives who publicly wore white, green, or black veils according to their virtue (or lack thereof), spirituality, and intimate availability.<sup>31</sup> These claims were made in the summer of 1842, very near to the time of the purported events. While other accounts support Bennett’s premise that Joseph Smith was privately practicing plural marriage, his contemporary claims (in his 1842 book *History of the Saints: An Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*) about this colored-veil marriage-order scheme are not consistent with other sources. His language is so colored by his personal agenda and bias as to be difficult to believe. His writings lack a balanced, more objective view found in many other sources.

#### 4. Objective Perspective

##### *How free is the author from bias?*

Bias can consciously and unconsciously influence how someone views and reports a historical event. A disinterested bystander who witnesses a car accident will likely give a less biased report to police, for example, than the drivers who were involved in the crash. Generally, when something important is at stake, bias naturally rears its protective head. Discussions about religion, politics, finances, family, gender, power, and so forth can become contentious and are often full of partiality. Participants can view the same facts and reach completely different conclusions, depending on their agendas and perspectives. The latest political tax reform initiative? “A celebration!” says one political party. “A travesty to justice!” says another.

We must recognize there is no such thing as truly objective history.<sup>32</sup> Written history isn’t made by events; it is made by those who record and interpret those events. “Historians do not discover a past as much as they create it,” wrote the authors of *An Introduction to Historical Methods*.<sup>33</sup> “They choose the events and people that they think constitute the past, and they decide what about them is important to know.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, we must “always consider the conditions under which a source was produced—the intentions that motivated it”<sup>35</sup> and the context in which it was created. Latter-day Saint historian Dean C. Jessee wrote, “The sources are not the past but only the raw materials whence we form our conception of the past, and in using them we inherit the limitations that produced them.”<sup>36</sup>

To be clear, a complete lack of bias does not exist for any historical claim. Instead, we should look for the motivations and the degree to which an author may introduce bias. We should try to determine: What is at stake? Is there a hidden agenda? What might the author hope to gain or accomplish? Why did they tell the story *this* way and not *that* way? For example, when a historical event is simplified for easier understanding—such as a brief historical summary in a Church-produced curriculum manual intended for lay members—the reader receives a condensed version that may be accurate, yet it necessarily omits additional details and important nuance for the sake of accessibility and brevity. Simple narratives, of necessity, leave out complexity and can reflect a kind of bias as well. The same holds true for meme-worthy, bumper sticker platitudes critical of events in Church history (e.g., “Brigham

Young ordered the Mountain Meadows Massacre!”). Most historical narratives contain additional layers of unexplored complexity.

Bias can often be detected through the selective omissions of facts and details or a lack of balance that favors only one perspective. Judgmental or emotion-laden trigger words can also indicate bias. The same event can be reported as being “deranged” and “ridiculous” or “phenomenal” and “wondrous.” When the Church published the Gospel Topics Essay “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo” in 2014,<sup>37</sup> for example, media outlets reported on the essay with varying degrees of bias. One prominent newspaper headline read: “Mormon Church Finally Admits Founder Joseph Smith Was Polygamist with 40 Wives.”<sup>38</sup> The word “finally” was included to excite the reader and suggest a biased claim that the Church had been covering up Joseph Smith’s practice of plural marriage. The existing historical record, however, simply does not support accusations that the Church did not acknowledge Joseph Smith’s practice of plural marriage prior to 2014, as various prior Church-published materials dealt with that subject.<sup>39</sup> Such a claim is not only biased, but it lacks supporting evidence—which is our last criteria.

## 5. Supporting Evidence

### *Is there additional information that tends to confirm this account?*

Although everyone is entitled to their own view of events, sometimes our perceptions skew our objectivity. When a historical claim is made, we should ask ourselves: Is the account grounded in supporting evidence, or does it appear to be only hearsay, conjecture, subjective opinion, or blatantly false information? It is not uncommon for people to make various claims about Joseph Smith’s practice of plural marriage, for example. But we should exercise caution before we accept those claims. Because of its secretive nature, careful historians acknowledge that we know less about Nauvoo polygamy than Utah polygamy. As the editors of *The Joseph Smith Papers* point out: “Most of the information on the practice [of polygamy] during this [Nauvoo] period comes either from later affidavits and reminiscences or from reports of disaffected members of the church at the time—none of which, for a variety reason, can be considered entirely reliable historical sources for delineating how plural marriage was understood and practiced by those involved at the time.”<sup>40</sup>

Reliable information on Joseph Smith's practice of plural marriage is sparse, and those who make bold claims—such as, “Joseph Smith invented polygamy to justify his sexual promiscuity” or “Joseph Smith never had any conjugal relationships with his polyandrous wives”—often lack solid supporting evidence and are stepping onto the shaky ledge of conjecture, supposition, and personal opinion. It may be plausible. It could be possible. It might even be logically deduced or inferred. But that is not enough to declare something as a historical fact. The key question that must be asked is *Is it supported by reliable, factual sources or evidence?* Anyone can make a historical claim. It is more difficult to substantiate that claim.

Ideally, supporting evidence for historical claims should be found in other corroborating sources. Historical artifacts, audio or video recordings, photographs, eyewitness testimony, scientific measurement, physical evidence, medical records, government documents, financial ledgers, or other documentary data can indicate that a claim is more than conjecture, hearsay, or opinion. In our search for truth, we might well ask ourselves, “If this claim were on trial in a court of law, would there be sufficient evidence available to support or reject it?”

## Conclusion

No historical source is perfectly reliable. All sources are affected to some degree by participation, time, bias, consistency, and facts. The issue isn't whether something is perfectly reliable, but the degree to which we can assess or judge the reliability of any given historical claim. This holds equally true for favorable, neutral, and hostile sources. To uncritically quote a source simply because it supports a specific point of view is not good scholarship. Doing so will not lead to truth. This is equally true for both critics of the Church and apologists. In short, while “the historian's basic task is to choose reliable sources, to read them reliably, and to put them together in ways that provide reliable narratives about the past,”<sup>41</sup> doing so is easier said than done.

We have suggested five criteria that can be used to evaluate historical sources—in an effort to answer if the source in question is a primary and contemporary account related to other sources and whether it has an objective perspective supported by additional evidence. Our criteria list is not meant to be exhaustive. It is intended to be a formative tool, not a definitive one. What we propose is one possible way to evaluate historical sources.



It is logical, and even expected, that two people can examine the same sources and reach very different conclusions regarding their reliability. Our goal is to help learners become more conscious about the reliability of historical sources. We recognize that evaluating historical sources is more art than science. We offer this method as a starting point to assist learners to think more deeply about the reliability of historical sources.

To see how these five criteria may be used as an assessment tool in an effort to determine historical reliability, please see the template included in appendix A. We then use that template in appendix B to provide sample evaluations for the reliability of John Alger's First Vision claim and Lucy Mack Smith's account of the breastplate. Additional Church history statements that you and your students may use to practice evaluating sources include Philo Dibble's account of Doctrine and Covenants 76 and Willard Richards's account of the Martyrdom.<sup>42</sup>

We should seek to understand Church history in order to better understand the Restoration. Ultimately, we can learn and profit from Church history only to the extent that we can adequately evaluate the sources and stories of those who created and shaped that history. **RE**

## Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 254.
2. This article is adapted from Anthony R. Sweat, "Studying Church History," in *Seekers Wanted* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 7–23.
3. Charles Walker diary, 2 February 1893, in *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, ed. A. Karl Larsen and Katharine Miles Larsen (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 755–56.
4. Testimony of Peter Ingersoll, 9 December 1833, in E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: Telegraph Press, 1834), 235–36.
5. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 107. Digital Collections, BYU Library, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/17401>.
6. Throughout this article, we use the word *doctrine* to mean an "authorized Church teaching." For a discussion of this definition, see Anthony Sweat, Michael Hubbard MacKay, and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Evaluating Latter-day Saint Doctrine," in *Foundations of the Restoration: Fulfillment of the Covenant Purposes*, ed. Craig James Ostler, Michael Hubbard MacKay, and Barbara Morgan Gardner (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 23–44.
7. Marlin K. Jensen, "Stand in the Sacred Grove," *Ensign*, December 2014, 71.
8. Richard Bushman, *On the Road with Joseph: An Author's Diary* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 111.

9. See, for example, Birger Hjørland, "Methods for Evaluating Information Sources: An Annotated Catalogue," *Journal of Information Science* 38, no. 3 (April 2012): 258–68.
10. See, for example, Charles Secolsky and D. Brian Denison, *Handbook on Measurement, Assessment, and Evaluation in Higher Education* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2017).
11. See Jan Shipp and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1994), 325–27. See also Matthew C. Godfrey, "William McLellin's Five Questions," in *Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/doctrine-and-covenants-william-mccllin>.
12. In an 1872 letter to Joseph Smith III, McLellin explained his source of that information as follows: "I visited your Mother and family in 1847, and held a lengthy conversation with her, retired in the Mansion House in Nauvoo. I did not ask her to tell, but I told her some stories I had heard. And she told me whether I was properly informed. . . . I told her I heard that one night she missed Joseph and Fanny Alger. She went to the barn and saw him and Fanny in the barn together alone. She looked through a crack and saw the transaction!!! She told me this story too was verily true!" Letter from William McLellin to Joseph Smith III, July 1872, Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri. See *The William E. McLellin Papers, 1854–1880* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007), 488–89.
13. See "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saint's Herald*, 1 October 1879, 289.
14. In a scholarly sense, secondary historical sources are generally books or articles, often written by scholars, based on primary account materials. In this article, we are differentiating between a primary and secondary *account* and a primary and secondary scholarly *source*.
15. Introduction to Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844*, vol. 3 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2015), xii–xiv.
16. See "Primary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Deity," <http://josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-first-vision>.
17. "Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract," p. [23], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/alexander-neibaur-journal-24-may-1844-extract/1>.
18. See James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of the First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?" *Improvement Era*, April (1970), 4–13.
19. See "Book of Mormon Translation," Gospel Topics Essays; Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph the Seer," *Ensign*, October 2015, 48–55; Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., "Volume 1 Introduction: Joseph Smith Documents Dating through June 1831," in *Documents Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Document series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2013), xxv–xl; and Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light* (Provo UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015).
20. See the preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon.
21. Jonathan Hadley, "Golden Bible," *Palmyra Freeman*, 11 August 1829, 2.
22. Christian Goodwillie, "Shaker Richard McNemar: The Earliest Book of Mormon Reviewer," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (2011): 143.
23. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald*, 1 October 1879, 289–90.

24. David Whitmer, "An Address to All Believers in Christ, By a witness to the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon" (Richmond, MO: n.p., 1887), 36.

25. Dean C. Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1976): 35. The exact date when this reminiscence was given is unknown.

26. Edward Stevenson, letter to the editor, "One of the Three Witnesses. Incidents in the Life of Martin Harris," *Deseret Evening News*, 13 December 1881, 4. Stevenson was relying on an eleven-year-old memory of a forty-two-year-old reminiscence he heard Martin Harris share in September 1870. Martin Harris had died six years earlier in July 1875. See <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=23174102>.

27. See Steven C. Harper and Samuel A. Dodge, *Exploring the First Vision* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012).

28. See Malcolm Gladwell, "Free Brian Williams," *Revisionist History*, season 3, episode 4, <http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/24-free-brian-williams>, for an interesting case on confounding memory over time. Years after the event, news anchor Brian Williams said he was involved in a helicopter that took enemy fire in Iraq during the war on terrorism, which turned out not to be true. It appears Williams wasn't intentionally deceptive but likely had confounded and coopted others' memories as his own.

29. Marla Paul, "Your Memory Is Like the Telephone Game," *Northwestern Now*, 19 September 2012, <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2012/09/your-memory-is-like-the-telephone-game>.

30. Steven C. Harper, "A Seeker's Guide to the Historical Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Religious Educator* 12, no. 1 (2011): 165–76.

31. John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 220–25. For an annotated discussion of the issues surrounding Bennett's claims, see Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–1843*, vol. 2 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), xxvi and xxx.

32. The problem of trying to create a purely objective history is what one author called "history's epistemological crisis." Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1988), 573.

33. This idea is summarized in two statements attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte: "History is written by winners" and "History is a set of lies agreed upon"; [https://goodreads.com/author/quotes/210910.Napol\\_on\\_Bonaparte](https://goodreads.com/author/quotes/210910.Napol_on_Bonaparte).

34. Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 1.

35. Howell, and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 19.

36. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), xiv; emphasis in original.

37. "Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/plural-marriage-in-kirtland-and-nauvoo>.

38. Philip Sherwell, "Mormon Church Finally Admits Founder Joseph Smith Was Polygamist with 40 Wives," *The (London) Telegraph*, 11 November 2014, <http://telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/11223347/Mormon-church-finally-admits-founder-Joseph-Smith-was-polygamist-with-40-wives.html>.

39. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 132, a canonized revelation available to all Saints since 1876, tells Emma Smith to “receive all those that have been given unto my servant Joseph, and who are virtuous and pure before me” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:52). For other Church articles prior to the churchofjesuschrist.org topics essay that discuss Joseph Smith’s practice of plural marriage, see Dean C. Jessee, “Steadfast and Patient Endurance,” *Ensign*, June 1979; D. Michael Quinn, “The Newel K. Whitney Family,” *Ensign*, December 1978; Gracia N. Jones, “My Great-Great-Grandmother Emma Hale Smith,” *Ensign*, August 1992; and “Chapter Twenty: Doctrinal Developments in Nauvoo,” *Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2003), 251–62.

40. Introduction to *JSP*, J2:xxv.

41. Howell, and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 2.

42. Philo Dibble, *Juvenile Instructor*, 15 May 1892, 303–4; and “Two Minutes in Jail: As Told by Willard Richards,” *Times and Seasons*, 1 August 1844, 589–99; reprinted from the *Nauvoo Neighbor*.

Appendix A

Evaluating Historical Documents Form

To evaluate a historical source, answer each of the five questions below:

- Green

Yellow

Red
- Very minor or no concerns

Moderate concerns

Serious or significant concernss

Place an “x” in the appropriate column for each question. List your reasons for your decision.

Questions	Evaluation Choices			Reasons
	Green	Yellow	Red	
Primary account?				
Relationship with other sources?				
Contemporary account?				
Objective perspective?				
Supporting evidence?				
Summary evaluation:				

Appendix B

Evaluating the John Alger and Luck Mack Smith Accounts

Using the form provided, here is one way to evaluate the reliability of John Alger’s account in which he claimed God touched Joseph Smith’s eyes in the Sacred Grove and Lucy Mack Smith’s account of handling the breastplate.

John Alger Account

Source: Charles Walker diary, 2 February 1893 (note 3 above)

Questions	Evaluation Choices			Reasons
	Green	Yellow	Red	
Primary account?			x	This is a thirdhand account. Charles Walker is reporting what he heard John Alger say he heard Joseph Smith say.
Relationship with other sources?		x		Alger’s claim that the Father and Son appeared to Joseph Smith and that God appeared first, saying, “This is my beloved Son” are consistent with other First Vision sources. But his unique claim that God touched Joseph’s eyes is not reported in any other of the nine contemporary accounts of the First Vision—a detail that seems likely to be mentioned.
Contemporary account?			x	John Alger reported this in 1893, about 60 years after the event supposedly was related to him when he was a young boy in Kirtland, Ohio, in the 1830s.
Objective perspective?		x		There is some potential for bias here, given that John Alger may be playing to a Utah crowd who didn’t know Joseph Smith personally, as he claimed he did. But his language is not polemical, and his relation of the event is straightforward.
Supporting evidence?		x		Evidence suggests Alger lived in Kirtland at the same time Joseph Smith did. But other than his own claim or scriptural precedent (such as God touching Enoch’s eyes), there is no other documentary evidence to support this assertion.
Summary Evaluation: Overall, while it seems likely that Alger could have heard Joseph Smith relate the First Vision, we would not consider Alger’s assertion that God touched Joseph’s eyes as being highly reliable, placing most of our marks in the yellow and red categories of moderate or significant concerns.				

Lucy Mack Smith Account

Source: Lucy Mack Smith, Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet (note 5 above)

Questions	Evaluation Choices			Reasons
	Green	Yellow	Red	
Primary Account?	x			Lucy Mack Smith is reporting her own, personal experience here. She handled, touched, and felt the breastplate.
Relationship with Other Sources?	x			Lucy's description of a breastplate is consistent with the testimony of Joseph Smith, Doctrine and Covenants 17, and David Whitmer.
Contemporary Account?		x		Joseph Smith brought the breastplate home in September 1827. Lucy recorded this in 1844, about 17 years later. Earlier documentation of the event would be preferable, but it is not available.
Objective Perspective?		x		Lucy's report is candid and straightforward. However, there is certainly some bias involved. After all, she is Joseph's mother. The family's reputation and her son's prophetic ministry were closely tied to the claims regarding angels, gold plates, seer stones, and the breastplate.
Supporting Evidence?	x			Lucy's description is straightforward and detailed. She includes dimensions, details, and material descriptions. Her account appears devoid of opinion, conjecture, or hearsay. Others reported having seen or handled the same object.
Summary Evaluation: Overall, while having the physical breastplate available for all to see via a photograph or in a museum would quell any skepticism, Lucy's account here is mostly evaluated as green with some yellow. It is a strong firsthand account, is consistent with other accounts and available evidence, but contains some bias and is not contemporary. We consider this a highly reliable account of an interaction with the breastplate.				