The First Vision Story Revived

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The Reverend Mr. Walters's article on the First Vision raised quite a stir among Mormon scholars when an early version circulated about a year and a half ago. The essay was clearly another piece of anti-Mormon writing, a genre familiar enough to Mormon scholars. Mr. Walters's purpose, like that of many of his predecessors, was to discredit Joseph Smith's account of the First Vision and all that depended on it. But the style of his attack was both refreshing and disconcerting. In the first place, it was free of the obvious rancor characteristic of anti-Mormon writers from E. D. Howe to Fawn Brodie. However fervent their claims to objectivity and mere scholarly curiosity, sooner or later anti-Mormon authors disclose their antipathy. They cannot resist twisting the knife. Mr. Walters, by

contrast, sticks to his facts. He forgoes the attacks on Joseph's character and the credibility or veracity of his followers. He candidly presents his argument and bluntly tells Mormons to reevaluate the foundations of their church. That kind of frankness is far more disarming than the more pretentious variety.

The article also set us back because Mr. Walters took an entirely new track and followed it with admirable care. Instead of hauling out the tiresome affidavits and reviving the money-digger stories, for the most part he passed over these and concentrated on a brand-new question: Were there revivals in 1819–20 in the vicinity of Palmyra as Joseph said? Everyone up until now had assumed that of course there were. Walters said no, and the sources of his answer were impressive. They stood apart from the biased materials on which most anti-Mormon work is based. They were contemporaneous with the event, and they were right to the point. Our consternation was a genuine compliment to the quality of Mr. Walters's work.

While Mr. Walters has put us on the spot for the moment, in the long run Mormon scholarship will benefit from his attack. Not only was there an immediate effort to answer the question of an 1819 revival, but Mormon historians asked themselves how many other questions about our early history remain unasked as well as unanswered. Not long after we saw his essay, a committee on "Mormon History in New York" sent a group of scholars east for special research. The results of the first year's efforts will soon be published in *Brigham Young University Studies*, and presumably like investigations will continue. Without wholly intending it, Mr. Walters may have done as much to advance the cause of Mormon history within the Church as anyone in recent years.

Meanwhile, of course, we have to assess the damage he has done to Joseph's story of the First Vision. Is it now impossible to hold that a revival occurred near Palmyra in 1819 or 1820 as

Mr. Walters would have us believe? In attempting to answer that question, it is wise to remember the difficulties in recovering a true account of past events, especially when the witnesses tell their stories many times, over many years. Behind the simplest event are complex motives and many factual threads conjoining that will receive varying emphasis in different retellings. In all accounts of his early religious experiences, for example, Joseph mentions the search for the true church and a desire for forgiveness. In some accounts he emphasizes one, in some the other. Similarly, in the earliest record of the First Vision, he attributes his question about the churches to personal study; in the familiar story written in 1838 or 1839, he credits the revival and the consequent disputes as raising the issue for him.[1] The reasons for reshaping the story usually have to do with changes in immediate circumstances. We know that Joseph suffered from attacks on his character around 1834. As he told Oliver Cowdery when the letters on Joseph's early experiences were about to be published, enemies had blown up his honest confession of guilt into an admission of outrageous crimes.[2] Small wonder that afterward he played down his prayer for forgiveness in accounts of the vision. Such changes do not evidence an uncertainty about the events, as Mr. Walters thinks, as if Joseph were manufacturing new parts year by year. It is folly to try to

Raising the Bar

Wesley Walters performed a service to the cause of Mormon history; he questioned things that Mormons had accepted as simple fact. He raised doubts, for example, about the revival in Joseph Smith's neighborhood around 1820. By questioning that accepted belief, Walters helped Mormon historians realize that we should not assume anything; everything has to be supported. Since his time, Mormon historians have plunged deeper and deeper into the sources. The editors of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, for one, take nothing for granted—partly because Wesley Walters raised the bar. (Richard Lyman Bushman, interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, July 31, 2009, Provo, UT)

explain every change as the result of Joseph's calculated efforts to fabricate a convincing account. One would expect variations in the simplest and truest story.

The audacity of Joseph's story complicates his narrative and our recovery of the truth. As a more mature and worldly-wise person would have expected, Joseph's boyish report of his vision met skepticism and reproof. The appearance of the Father and the Son to a fourteen-year-old was beyond the bounds of credibility and blasphemous as well. In the lexicon of the revivalists, it was an egregious form of enthusiasm, the belief that the divine visited you in special vision or with extraordinary power. Enthusiasm had been the bane of revivalists and other equivalents for centuries. Every camp meeting preacher was prepared to denounce it when it raised its ugly head. Not knowing what hit him, so to speak, Joseph marveled at the anger he aroused.

As his protracted meditations on the incident attest, the rebuff scarred him (see Joseph Smith—History 1:21–25); his reticence to tell the details of the story for some time afterward is perfectly understandable. The revelation received just prior to the organization of the Church in 1830 merely made passing reference to a manifestation of forgiveness before the visit of Moroni (see D&C 20:5, 6). Until 1838, in accounts for non-Church members he called the beings in the First Vision personages or angels, covering the fact that he claimed to see the Father and the Son. Only in the private narrations for his history written in 1831 and 1838 did he frankly say the Lord had come to him.[3] As Mr. Walters rightly points out, some Church members in the early years may have been unaware of the actual identity of the heavenly visitors.

With that much said by way of preface, what evidence does Mr. Walters present to discredit Joseph's story? The gist of his argument, as I understand it, is that Joseph held two events in

his mind which he tried to bring together in his 1838 account. One was an actual event, the revival of 1824 when an unusual excitement occurred in Palmyra, and great multitudes, among them members of the Smith family, joined the churches. The other was a fictitious event, the First Vision, which was gradually forming in his imagination after 1830. In the process of combining his manufactured story with historical reality, Joseph found it convenient to set the vision in the time of the revival to help explain why he prayed. But it was necessary to move the story back to 1820 to leave room for the coming of Moroni and the reception of the plates. The falsity of the account shows up when we uncover the discrepancy in dates. The revival Joseph remembered occurred in 1824, not 1819 or 1820. Had the vision actually occurred in 1820, Joseph would not have put it in the wrong context. He would have told the story without contradiction. With that structure in mind, Mr. Walters sets out to prove that the revival Joseph had in mind must have been the revival of 1824, which fits his description exactly, while in 1819 and 1820 nothing came close.

The first evidence he offers is not Joseph's account but Oliver Cowdery's. In the first extended attempt to draw together the events of the early years, Oliver wrote a series of letters to the Church newspaper published in Kirtland, the *Messenger and Advocate.* The letters began in October 1834 and continued more or less regularly for a year. In December 1834, Oliver told of a revival during which Joseph had been awakened and in which Mr. Lane, a Methodist preacher, had played a part. Oliver connected this revival with the conversion of the Smith family and other events similar to the ones Joseph associated with the unusual excitement of his own, later account. Mr. Walters concludes that Joseph's revival and Oliver's were one and the same. The connection is important because the Lane who figures so prominently in Oliver's story was not assigned to the Palmyra

area until 1824 and is known to have visited the region only briefly in 1819. Therefore, Oliver was not thinking of a revival in 1819. The one revival he had in mind was the 1824 awakening, when Lane was more likely to have made an impression. And Joseph presumably had the same episode in mind when he remembered a revival.

The argument falters in two spots. The first is in Oliver's trustworthiness as a witness to these events. He did not experience them himself. All of his evidence is hearsay, and the consequent flaws are evident. Mormons can object that Oliver mixes up the First Vision and the visit of Moroni because in his narrative the revival and Joseph's question about the churches led not to the grove but to his bedroom and the visit of Moroni. The First Vision itself is skipped entirely. Oliver seems to have scrambled the two events, putting together parts of two stories to make one. Even Mr. Walters must agree that Oliver errs on the dates. In one letter he says these events occurred in Joseph's fifteenth year. In the next, claiming a typographical error, Oliver places them in the seventeenth year, which would be from December 1821 to December 1822—at least two years before the 1824 revival which Mr. Walters claims Oliver meant to describe. Neither Mormons nor Mr. Walters can accept the validity of the account uncritically. Not that Oliver's veracity is in doubt. But remember that he is the first to prepare an account of the early years. He has bits of information from various sources: stories picked up at the Smiths' while living there, tales from the neighbors in Palmyra, and, as Oliver emphasizes, the assistance of Joseph. Probably the individual details are accurate enough; the whole narrative need not be discarded because of a few obvious flaws. But he misses on the chronology, sticking together pieces that do not belong. Mr. Lane did indeed leave his mark on Palmyra, as Oliver could have learned from the residents, but he was not necessarily the revival preacher who affected Joseph.

Joseph himself never mentions Lane. Oliver was the one to insert the name in the story.[4]

The possibility remains that Lane did take part in an awakening near Palmyra and that Oliver did not confuse the story quite as much as Mr. Walters thinks. In the summer of 1819, Lane was at a Methodist Conference next door to Palmyra in Phelps (Vienna Village). It is at least conceivable that his preaching started an "unusual excitement" and did touch Joseph in some way. Oliver says only that Mr. Lane "visited Palmyra and vicinity," which might have meant the quick visit of a minister attending the conference.[5] We must not exclude Mr. Lane entirely while the evidence is still so inconclusive.

The second flaw in the argument is Mr. Walters's belief that Oliver's confusion, however serious, was no greater than Joseph's—that Oliver's account is "virtually Joseph's own personal narrative." That is a large assumption to make when the only evidence is Oliver's claim that "Joseph Smith, Jr., has offered to assist us."[6] Oliver began the letters while he was in Missouri and Joseph in Kirtland, and close cooperation was impossible. Joseph said that he first learned that the narrative was to include his life as well as the rise of the Church from the *Messenger and Advocate*.[7] After he moved to Ohio, Oliver lived in Norton, in another county from Joseph. They could not have worked together very closely. Indeed, on one point in the story they were quite at odds: Oliver said Joseph's interest in religious questions began in his seventeenth year. In his 1831–32 narrative, Joseph said his interest began when he was between twelve and fifteen. In 1835, a year after the Cowdery letters were printed, Joseph said on two occasions that his First Vision took place when he was about fourteen. Had Joseph carefully edited Oliver's account, the error would not have passed.[8] The account was Oliver's, not Joseph's, and chronological discrepancies, such as the appearance of Lane, must be credited where they are due.

Rather than rely on Oliver's dubious report as the foundation of his case, Mr. Walters stresses that Joseph's own description in the official 1838 account does not fit the events of 1819 and 1820, while they accord perfectly with the revival of 1824. Joseph said that "there was in the place where he lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country. Indeed, the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties" (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). Walters concentrates on two points: the location of the revivals and their size. He admits there were revivals in 1819 and 1820, but they were not in Palmyra or nearby. And what activity did occur close to the Smith farm did not bring "great multitudes" into the churches. Only the 1824 revival fills the bill.

Reduction of the argument to essentials reveals the difficulties of the case. In effect Mr. Walters has to say how near is near and how big is big. When Joseph spoke of "the place where we lived," did he mean his own neighborhood, the village of Palmyra just two miles away, Manchester Village about five miles from the Smith farm, the ring of surrounding villages whose news neighbors would bring to the Smith house, or the western New York region? And of what did "great multitudes" consist for a young boy? Ten or twenty converts in three or four churches, fifty or sixty in ten, or hundreds in twenty or thirty? The uncertainty should be obvious. One cannot "conclusively test" Joseph's story as easily as might be thought.

It must be recalled that when Joseph spoke of "the place where we lived" in Illinois hundreds of miles from Palmyra, he may have referred only generally to a section of western New York, just as southern Californians from scores of little towns claim Los Angeles and its happenings as their own when at a distance. All the historian can do under the circumstances is to

line up the places where revivals were reported in 1819 and 1820 and let the reader judge whether religious excitement occurred near enough to Joseph's house to meet the description.

I have not searched any of the records myself, but Mr. Walters names a number of places, and Professor Milton Backman of Brigham Young University, in an article shortly to appear in *Brigham Young University Studies*, locates others.[9] First, by way of comparison, notice the number of towns Mr. Walters mentions as having revivals in 1824 when the excitement was close enough in his judgment to fit Joseph's description. In addition to Palmyra, he lists Williamson, Ontario, Manchester, Sulphur Springs, Vienna, Lyons, and Macedon as nearby towns, a total of eight, and Mendon, Geneva, Gorham, and Clyde, another four, at a somewhat greater distance. For 1819 and 1820, Professor Backman and Mr. Walters together name Farmington, Penfield, Rochester, Lima, West Bloomfield, Junius, and Oaks Corners, a total of seven within twenty-five miles, and within forty-five miles, Cayuga, Geneva, Auburn, Aurora, Trumansburg, Ogden, East Riga, West Riga, Bergen, and Le Roy, with prospects of an awakening in Canandaigua and Waterloo, a total of twelve. That comes to eight nearby in 1824 and seven in 1819–20; and four more distant in 1824 and twelve in 1819–20. The 1819–20 season was really not so dull religiously as Mr. Walters says.

Mr. Walters's main argument is that no revival occurred in Palmyra itself. But even that fact cannot be established absolutely. It is a negative claim and depends on negative evidence, which is always tenuous. Mr. Walters relies on the absence of revival reports, but just because someone failed to write a report of an event does not mean it did not occur. In this case we even lack some of the records that would contain important traces. The Palmyra Presbyterian Church records are missing, and Methodist figures take in an entire circuit and fail to note changes in smaller locales. Furthermore, lots of things happen

that are never recorded. "An unusual excitement on the subject of religion," all that Joseph claims for the place where he lived (the "great multitudes" were joining the churches in "the whole district of country"), might have been passed over in the national religious press covering as it did countless small towns. The news included in the Palmyra paper depended on the taste and inclinations of the editor. We know that he failed to report a Methodist camp meeting in June 1820 because a report of the death of a local citizen incidentally mentioned his attendance at a camp meeting the day before his death.[10] The point is that although we think a revival should have been recorded, there are many reasons why it could have been missed. We cannot know for sure that an event did not occur unless reliable witnesses on the scene say no, and thus far Mr. Walters has found none such to testify.

But apart from the possibility that some awakenings occurred right next door, as it were, the major question is whether or not seven revivals within twenty-five miles is enough to justify a statement eighteen years later and hundreds of miles away that there was an unusual excitement in the place where Joseph Smith lived. Perhaps the heart of the matter is the effective horizon of the Smith household. Was everything beyond Palmyra Village alien territory, news of which they did not associate with their own place? Or did their psychological environs extend farther? Remember that they sold cakes and beer at gatherings of various sorts and that the boys had to range about for work to supplement their scanty farm income. Joseph went to Pennsylvania for employment when he was in his early twenties. If the older sons followed a similar pattern, the Smith family would keep up with events over a rather broad territory. Fifteen or twenty miles would not take them into foreign parts. All this must be taken into account when judging dimensions of the district they called their own.

In assessing Mr. Walters's second line of reasoning, the inferior size of the 1819–20 revivals, two considerations must be kept in mind. The first is that the revivals of 1824 were not the standard for people in 1819. In his article, Mr. Walters tells us first of the hundreds converted in the later years and then goes back to 1819 to show how insipid it was by comparison. After reading about the carnage of the Civil War, we may think the War of 1812 no war at all. The important question, of course, is how it looked to the participants and, in this case, to a boy of fourteen. Without knowing anything greater, did the excitement of 1819 strike him as unusual? Did the reports of conversions in the surrounding area sound like great multitudes joining the churches? Remember that he was just developing personal religious concerns and, judging by the 1831–32 narrative of the First Vision, was sensitive to religious sincerity and hypocrisy. Would reports of awakenings and conversions, however modest by comparison to later revivals, have registered with this sensitized young man as unusual and great?

The second consideration is that admissions to membership do not necessarily measure the intensity of a revival. The first stage in the conversion process was awakening or conviction, when the preacher aroused fears in the prospective convert. At this point, he began to realize his danger and to worry about pleasing God. This was the most violent period. An awakened person was filled with anguish and might faint under moving preaching. The intense concern could continue for a few days or a few years. Sometimes it simply faded away and never reached a climax in conversion. In Calvinist churches, which would include the Presbyterians and most Baptists, the person remained outside the church until he received grace and with it assurance of salvation. Some converts would pass through periods of awakening two or three times before they knew grace and joined a church. There might be an unusual excitement about

a religion and only a few people actually qualify for admission. High admissions are a good sign of a revival; absence of admissions does not necessarily mean no religious excitement. Without being at the scene, one cannot accurately measure the intensity of religious excitement.

The point is important in the interpretation of Joseph's narrative, for all that he says went on in "the place where we lived" as "an unusual excitement on the subject of religion." The "great multitudes" joining churches occurred in "the whole district of country." The excitement may have been an awakening or a prospect of a revival, not a shower of grace itself with the resulting increase in memberships and reports in the national religious press.

But to get down to the facts, what indications are there of the size of the revivals in 1819 and 1820? Methodist figures are most elusive because, as mentioned before, they summed up membership for an entire circuit, and activity in one area could be lost. What we do know is that perhaps a hundred Methodist ministers met in the village of Vienna, next door to Palmyra, during the first week in July in 1819. It is likely that either during the conference or as it broke up, these ministers preached in nearby towns. A historian of Methodism in Phelps, where the village of Vienna was located, says that in the following year a "flaming spiritual advance" occurred in the area. A convert during this revival series spoke late in life of "a religious cyclone which swept over the whole region round about" at this time, when "the kingdom of darkness was terribly shaken."[11] As Mr. Walters says, the Ontario Methodist circuit shows no growth in these years, but there is evidence that the next circuit, which came very close to the Smith house, did. The figures may be a little uncertain, but the Lyons circuit minutes nonetheless show a jump from 374 to 654 in 1820, fully as many as Mr. Walters mentions in 1824 for Ontario Methodists.[12] Mr. Walters also

cites a local Methodist who wrote about the years before 1823 that "for two or three years we saw no great awakenings." That certainly implies that two or three years earlier, right around 1820, there was an awakening. The significance of the comment is heightened when it is noted that the Methodists first advanced from a class meeting to a church the next year and the following year began chapel construction.[13] Orsamus Turner, a newspaperman in Palmyra who knew the Smiths personally, recalls that Joseph caught "a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting" somewhere along the road to Vienna, the place where the big Methodist conference was held. Since Turner left Palmyra in 1822, we can presume that the camp meeting and Joseph's awakening occurred before that date.[14] All told, there can be little doubt that the Methodists were up to something in 1819 and 1820.

The absence of the minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association for 1820, the association that included the area around Joseph's home, handicaps work on the Baptists. Mr. Walters gives loss and gain figures, which are deceptive because in a transient community the numbers moving out might outweigh a considerable number of converts. He does tell us in a footnote that six people were baptized in the Palmyra church between September 18, 1819, and September 23, 1820.[15] The Baptist church in Farmington (Manchester), just five miles away, baptized twenty-two in 1819, a sizable number in a congregation consisting of eighty-seven members in 1818.[16] Walters himself admits that must have been a revival. The Freewill Baptists in Junius, a town just east of Vienna, also reported a revival and added fifteen members in 1820.[17] Whether or not that counts as unusual depends, of course, on the standard one sets. But for these people, the additions were not commonplace. Palmyra's six converts in the year following September 1819 compared to one in 1821; Farmington's twenty-two in 1819, to none in 1821.[18]

Presbyterian figures for the Palmyra congregation itself are also missing for 1819 and 1820. The local church's own records are lost, and the congregation failed to report at the February 1820 meeting of the presbytery. Mr. Walters relies on the absence of reports in newspapers and general histories to reach his conclusion of no revivals. We do know that there was a substantial awakening at Geneva, within the same presbytery as Palmyra. From 1812 to 1819 the average increase in membership was nine; from July 1819 to July 1820, eighty joined, most of them in the fall of 1819.[19] Next door to Palmyra in Oaks Corners (located in the town of Phelps), the place where the Methodist Conference had met, the average admissions between 1806 and 1819 was five, with nine as the previous high. Thirty were admitted in 1820, the bulk of them in the winter and spring. The Presbyterians also reported "in gatherings" at five other churches within twenty-five miles of Palmyra.[20] When the Presbytery of Geneva, which included Palmyra, met in February 1820, sixteen churches reported two hundred new members. However we may judge the magnitude of the revival, the representatives felt that "during the past year more have been received into the communion of the Churches than perhaps in any former year."[21]

The question for us is whether or not the Smiths would have agreed with the judgment of the Geneva Presbytery. Did 1819 and 1820 seem like big years with "great multitudes" joining the churches in the "whole district of country"? Doubtless this was an important year for religion in New York as a whole and upstate particularly. All of the major denominations reported large increases. Methodist membership for 1820 in western New York increased by 2,256 members, the largest annual increase ever reported for the region to that time.[22] Presbyterian and Baptist growth was comparable. The Presbyterian annual report for 1819 said "the past has been a year of signal and

almost unprecedented mercy" as far as "genuine religious revivals" went, and six of the eight areas of special grace were in New York.[23] Baptist numbers in western New York grew by more than 1,500 in 1819.[24] Some of this news filtered through to the Smiths via the *Palmyra Register*, which was publishing accounts with such extravagant statements as "the face of the country has been wonderfully changed of late" with reckonings of church admissions to back up the excitement.[25] Believing for a moment that four members of the Smith family had joined a church themselves that year as Joseph said, we can understand how reports like these would have registered and very possibly left the impression that great multitudes were uniting with various religious parties.

Doubtless the accounting will vary in succeeding years as some reports prove unfounded and evidence of additional revivals is discovered. The details of the picture are bound to change. As it now stands, however, I am satisfied myself that enough was going on in 1819 and 1820 to have impressed a religiously oriented young boy. Putting aside the possibility of revivals in Palmyra itself for the moment, there is hard evidence to prove activity in nearby Farmington and Phelps (Oaks Corners), both close to the Smith farm, and substantial revivals in the next circle of villages. Beyond that, western New York was very lively indeed. At best, critics of Joseph's story can claim that there was not enough excitement close enough to Palmyra to satisfy them. But again, that all depends on how near is near and big is big. I doubt very much that historical inquiry will ever settle that question to the satisfaction of all.

The weakest portion of Mr. Walters's essay is the attempt in the last pages to explain the various narratives of the First Vision and speculate if Joseph was making up the story as he went. As I suggested at the first, there are bound to be variations in the reports of any event, simply because the narrator

emphasizes one portion or another of the story. Simple slips may account for other differences. In the 1831 story, for example, Joseph places the First Vision in his sixteenth year instead of his fifteenth, a mistake I for one can easily excuse, considering how I always have to stop to calculate just how old one is in his fifteenth year. Perhaps the only fundamental conflict in the facts is between the money-digging Joseph of the years before 1827 and the religious Joseph afterward who must have pious motives for everything he does. That conflict, of course, also coincides with the anti-Mormon accounts of Joseph's early life and the Prophet's own story. Mr. Walters assumes an impossible task when he tries to reconcile the stories of those who hated Joseph and wished to discredit him and the more sympathetic accounts. I think the evidence from the enemies of the Church and the evidence from Joseph's own mouth will always be contradictory. Bringing the two together as Walters does results in hopeless difficulties. He has Joseph concerned only with buried treasure and bearded spirits until 1827, when suddenly the need to mulct Martin Harris leads Joseph to introduce a religious note. From there on the money-digging precipitously disappears, and all we have is religion. The Book of Mormon, finished just two years later in 1829, is over five hundred pages of substantial religious narrative with only a few references that could be connected by any stretch of the imagination to the money-digging enterprises that presumably obsessed Joseph in 1827. That assumes a more drastic change in character than anything the revivals produced. It seems much easier to believe that Joseph had always been religious, as everything he and his mother say leads us to think. The money-digging side of his character was almost wholly the invidious creation of the neighbors, based on his employment for an individual or two who were seeking treasure. If we exclude this embittered gossip from the picture, the First

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Academics use the phrase "the hermeneutics of suspicion." Hermeneutics means interpretation, and the hermeneutics of suspicion means that you take nothing at face value. Beneath the surface of any writing or any action there's something else, probably something more base than appears on the surface.

I believe in the hermeneutics of trust. That is, you begin by trusting what people say. You may throw doubt on any assertion when the evidence requires it, but you begin by taking the subject seriously on his or her own terms.

Those who practice the hermeneutics of suspicion feel that to ferret out *the truth* you cannot trust appearances. Only by removing the masks that all of us present to the world do we arrive at reality. Moreover—and this is important—the critic can determine what that reality is. I, the critic, can judge what's really there.

The hermeneutics of trust begins with the position that we never can find out *the truth*, what really happened. Everything we know in this life is seen through someone's eyes. All a historian has to work with is the way this person saw it or that person saw it. There is no reality out there that isn't seen through human eyes. The purpose of history is not to find out what really happened but to collect the ways human observers have described what they think happened. We look at the world through others' eyes.

That viewpoint may disappoint us. We don't like to think we will never know the complete and final truth. But in another way it's lovely. It means we are introduced to the inner lives and the way of looking at the world of all these different people. My aim has been, when writing about Jonathan Edwards or Joseph Smith or Thomas Jefferson, to see the world as they saw it. That is the way I write history, and, frankly, I prefer to read that kind of history. I don't want the historian to reduce whatever happens to the modern, commonsense view of what the possibilities are. I want to know what Muhammad thought and what Buddha thought, not the beliefs of some modern writer. My aim as a historian is to explain what Joseph Smith understood was happening to him. (Richard Lyman Bushman, interview by Samuel Alonzo Dodge, July 31, 2009, Provo, UT)

Vision story, rather than being a late concoction, fits perfectly with the deep religious interests which Joseph says preoccupied him from age twelve and which show through in virtually everything we have from his own mouth from 1829 on.

If Mr. Walters has not undercut the First Vision story as he meant to, Mormons might profit nevertheless by inquiring what would happen to our faith if he had succeeded or what we would do if six eminent anthropologists presented "conclusive proof" that the Book of Mormon was fraudulent. The question I have in mind is, how much does our faith depend on supporting historical evidence? On the one hand, we make a great deal of it. Mormons delight in Hugh Nibley's arguments in behalf of the Book of Mormon. We all hope he will be equally successful in proving the authenticity of the Book of Abraham. On the other hand, we are prone to dismiss all this as irrelevant. I have heard Professor Nibley himself summarize a long argument for the Book of Mormon, to which his Mormon audience had listened raptly, by saying that, of course, none of this really matters. The important point for him was that God had revealed the truth to Joseph by the Holy Spirit; the historical case was mere trimmings, the game played for the sheer fun of it.

Looking on from the outside, an observer might think Mormons are hopelessly mixed up. If testimony is all that really matters, why worry about the historical evidence? Since an airtight case would fail to convince believing Mormons, they should forget about proofs for the Book of Mormon and replying to the Reverend Mr. Walters and concentrate on their religious experiences and the satisfactions of their group life.

For those blessed with it, spiritual experience is the most compelling data. Honesty requires that one remain true to it even in the face of other evidence to the contrary. Were a case made against the Book of Mormon, our sense of balance and personal integrity would compel Mormons to hold on to their beliefs. But I wager that we would search heaven and earth to break the case and prove the book true historically. Mormons are determined to have both material and spiritual evidence for

their faith. The spiritual is the more important, but the material must have its place.

There is good reason for this combination. Mormons are committed to a God who acts in history. He led ancient Israel; he came to earth to redeem the world; he guides prophets in our time; and he helps individuals day by day with mundane problems. Our most basic commitment is to the power of God acting concretely in the lives of men. He comes and leaves footprints. To give up on historical proofs would be to relinquish in part our faith that God enters the here and now to lead and help and illuminate. Mormons feel divine power mainly in their spiritual experiences, but they believe traces of it can also be detected in the history of his people and his prophets. So long as we embrace that faith, we will, I think, search for proofs and evidences and reply to the likes of Mr. Walters when they try to confute us.

Notes

1. One of the articles in the special issue of *Brigham Young University Studies*, Dean C. Jessee's "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," reprints three narrations by Joseph. *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 275–94.

2. See his letter to Oliver Cowdery in the *Messenger and Advocate*, November 6, 1834, reprinted in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Independence, MO: Press of Zion's Printing and Publishing, 1951), i, 78–79.

3. See the accounts in the Jessee article cited in note 1.

4. William Smith's account is as suspect as Oliver's. William was only nine when Joseph had the First Vision and would have had to rely on others to supplement his own memory. Furthermore, the interview with William took place in 1893 when he was eighty-two. As Mr. Walters notes, William, like Oliver, was foggy about the date of the revival.

5. Kirkham, *A New Witness*, i, 84.

6. Kirkham, *A New Witness*, i, 78.

7. Kirkham, *A New Witness*, i, 78.

8. It may be that Joseph corrected Oliver only after the letters appeared. One reading of the letters, a conjectural one like Mr. Walters's reconstruction at the end of his essay, would hold that Joseph stopped Oliver after he read in print the December letter telling of the revival in Joseph's fifteenth year. It sounded like Oliver was going on to relate the story of the vision which Joseph still held back for fear of misunderstandings. Joseph may also have seen other flaws in the account. At any rate, in the next letter Oliver changed the time of the story from Joseph's fifteenth to his seventeenth year and hurried on to the visit of Moroni.

9. "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 301–20.

10. *Palmyra Register*, June 28, July 5, 1820. Cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 319n19.

11. M. P. Blakeslee, "Notes for a History of Methodism in Phelps, 1886," 7–8, copy located in the Brigham Young University Library. Cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 308n16.

12. Minutes of the Several Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, New York, 1820, 27 (hereafter cited as Methodist Minutes); Methodist Minutes, 1821, 27, cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 314n26.

13. Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 77n43.

14. For the full story on Turner, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences," in the special issue of *Brigham Young University Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 373–404.

15. Walters, "New Light," 77n40.

16. *Minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association* (Canandaigua, NY, 1818), 3; *Minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association* (New York, 1819), 2; cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 314n27.

17. Marilla Marks, ed., *Memoirs of the Life of David Marks* (Dover, NH, 1846), 26, cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 314n28.

18. Walters, "New Light," 77n40.

19. "Records of the Church of Christ in Geneva, State of New York," 146–56, 158–59, 136–38, First Presbyterian Church, Geneva, New York; "Minutes of the Session, 1819–1826," 260–86, located in the First Presbyterian Church, Geneva, New York, cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 310n22.

20. "Session Book of the First Presbyterian Church in Phelps," Book II, 11–19, Presbyterian Church, Oaks Corners, New York. *Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1821), 22; "Records of the Synod of Geneva (1812–1835)," 220–21, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT; "Records of the Presbytery of Geneva," Book C, 37, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University; J. Jermain Porter, *History of the Presbytery of Geneva, 1805–1889* (Geneva, 1889), 25, cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 311n23–24.

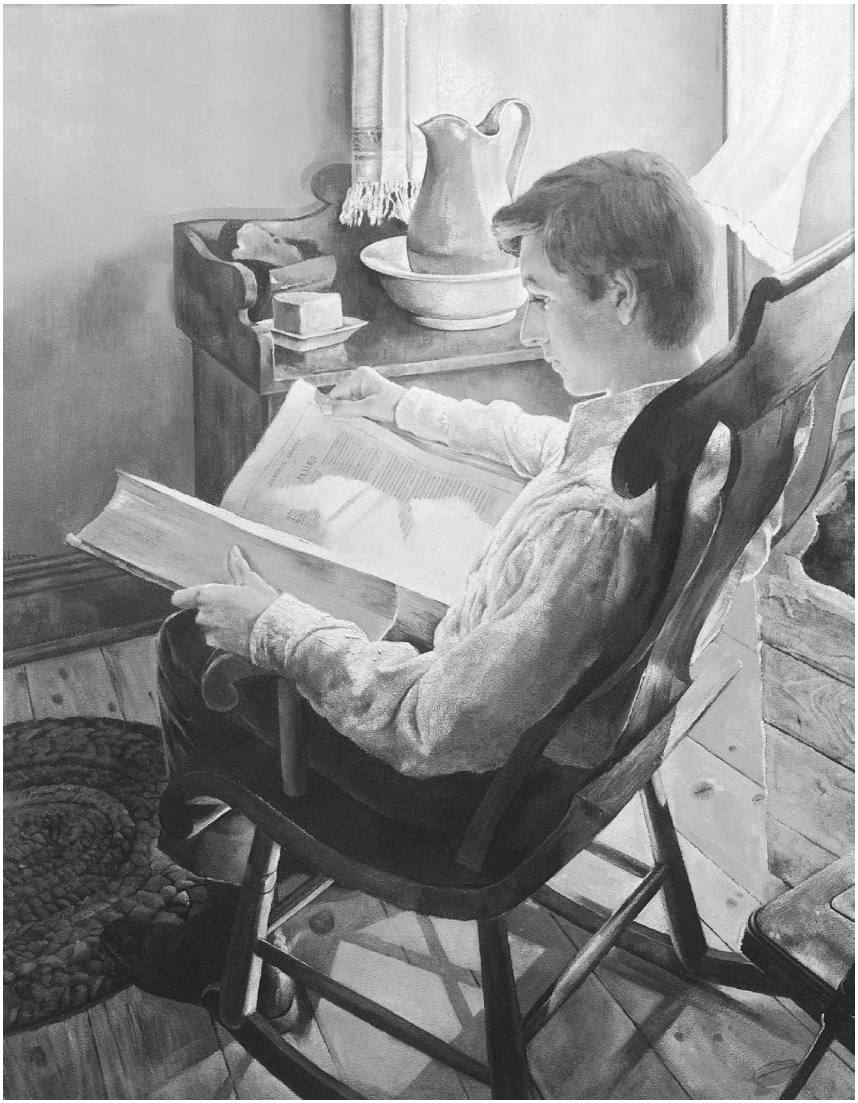
21. "Records of the Presbytery of Geneva," Book C, 37–38, cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 311n25.

22. *Methodist Minutes* (1821), 27–28, cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 317n38.

23. *Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly* (1820), 321–22, cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 316n35.

24. Proceedings of the Baptist General Convention in the United States, at their Second Triennial Meeting, and the Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Managers (Philadelphia, 1820), 308–9. The figure of 1,500 was the total from only five associations. There were others which failed to report.

25. *Palmyra Register*, June 7, September 3, 1820, cited in Backman, "Awakenings," 316n33.



The First Vision, according to the Mormon prophet, came as a result of his prayerful inquiry concerning which church to join. He was forbidden to join any of them, for all were wrong. (Harold T. Kilbourn, Joseph Smith Seeks Wisdom From the Bible, *© 1975 Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)*