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Acknowledgments

Samuel Alonzo Dodge

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Preface: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Steven C. Harper

Today's scholars of Joseph Smith's First Vision stand on the shoulders of giants. The saying is at least as old as Bernard of Chartres, who reportedly said that medieval professors like himself "see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature."[1] Isaac Newton later used the same metaphor to acknowledge, "If I have seen further it is by standing on ye sholders of Giants."[2] This volume reproduces some of the seminal articles that analyze Joseph Smith's First Vision written by the giants who have studied it for half a century. It is a monument to their contributions, composed of their work.

The past of First Vision scholarship is indispensable to the present. Those of us who study the First Vision today depend very much on the works of the scholars that are reprinted in this volume. Moreover, much of the source material on which their

articles are based and on which we depend, they discovered and published. We are beginning to explore further because we can see from their shoulders. This volume contains much of their mentoring.

It also serves as a mechanism for ongoing mentoring. It began with a realization that the work of the scholars republished hereafter, though well known to the students of these venerable mentors, is little known to the "rising generations" (D&C 69:8). This volume preserves and recommunicates that work, if only to the promising young historian Samuel Alonzo Dodge, who interviewed eminent First Vision scholars, gathered their seminal articles, and arranged them for publication here with a contextual introduction he composed. Brigham Young University invests its resources in mentoring the rising generations, including by funding and publishing this project. Those funds were generously supplemented by one of my mentors, Susan Easton Black, and her late husband, Harvey Black. Sam and I gratefully dedicate this volume to them. With a profound sense of indebtedness to the scholars whose work is republished on the following pages, we offer this volume as a monument to the work of my mentors and as a mechanism for continuing to communicate their important work to the rising generations.

Notes

1. John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 167.

2. H. W. Turnbull, ed., *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton, 1661–1675* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 1:416.

Joseph Smith's First Vision: Insights and Interpretations in Mormon Historiography

Samuel Alonzo Dodge

The analysis and teaching of history does not occur in a vacuum. Modern perceptions of history are shaped by new scholarly work, and that work grows out of the debate which has already taken place. In short, the scholarship that went before set the stage for the debates of the present. This is particularly evident as one studies the historiography of Joseph Smith's First Vision. For years, the historical discussion of Mormonism's early periods tended to one of two camps: critics who sought to defame Joseph Smith and discredit the religious movement he launched, or Mormon supporters whose efforts to exonerate the Prophet often resulted in excessive glossing of the blemishes found in the Church's origins.[1] The result was scholastic stagnation, the sympathizers condemning the critics as purely prejudicial and the critics dismissing the others as naive. However, towards the middle of the twentieth century, the historical discipline underwent an important development.

Historians came to understand that due to the inherent biases of all humans, it was futile for historians to try and recreate past events exactly how they transpired.[2] Therefore, rather than disregard the work done by opposing scholarship, historians began using the works from differing scholars as catalysts to propel their own work forward and strive for a more accurate depiction of the past. This disciplinary shift impacted Mormon historical studies of the First Vision.[3]

Joseph's claims of seeing God and Christ in western New York first received detailed scrutiny in Fawn Brodie's well-known biography published in 1945. In her book *No Man Knows My History*, Brodie is critical of what she calls Joseph's "pretended revelation."[4] According to Brodie, Joseph was a "mythmaker of prodigious talent" with a "boundless ambition" to rival that of "modern dictators."[5] Brodie carefully employs a disarming prose in order to present Joseph as a charlatan and dismiss his First Vision as merely a contrived effort to bolster his own claims to divine authority in the eyes of his followers.[6] Though some Mormon scholars tried to refute Brodie's work, most notably Hugh Nibley in his tract *No Ma'am, That's Not History*, for years Mrs. Brodie's book served as the "standard reference" for early Mormon studies.[7] Unable to produce any substantial work to counter Brodie, the Mormon community more or less dismissed *No Man Knows My History* as typical anti-Mormon literature.

Twenty-two years after Brodie first published her book, a new challenge to Joseph Smith's First Vision came in a Christian tract published by Wesley Walters in 1967. In his tract *New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival*, Walters challenged Joseph's story in a particularly professional way, as he left the tired "attacks on Joseph's character and the credibility or veracity of his followers" and instead used the historical record itself as a tool to discredit Joseph's claims as a prophet.[8] Walters's

argument was simple: thorough research of western New York's historical record had uncovered "a number of difficulties" which seriously undermined the reliability of Joseph's claims.[9]

Walters argued that Joseph's description of an "unusual excitement on the subject of religion" in the spring of 1820 was anachronistic. According to Walters's research, Joseph's claims were suspect because the historical records "show that in 1820 there was no revival in any of the churches in Palmyra and its vicinity."[10] If there were no religious revivals to prompt Joseph to pray, there would have been no vision, and the whole foundation of Mormonism would need to be reconsidered.[11] Walters reasoned that Joseph's references to religious revivals had their origins in the 1823–24 revivals that are documented in Palmyra's records. Newspapers, family journals, and church records all chronicle religious awakening in 1823–24 but are silent for the years leading up to Joseph's vision. According to Walters, the discrepancy in chronology betrayed a concocted story that Joseph "altered and expanded . . . in several steps as occasion required." It was not merely an opinion that Joseph's First Vision was a fabrication. Walters believed that the historical record proved it.[12]

Walters's use of hard historical documentation clearly set it apart from Brodie's earlier indictment of the Prophet. Whereas Brodie recycled familiar criticisms of Joseph's character, albeit in a very polished fashion, Walters's research had uncovered a wealth of new primary material relating to the environment of Mormonism's early New York period and essentially opened up a subject that "Mormon historians had not really talked about before."[13] In the words of Richard Bushman, Walters had "made [Mormon historians] realize that [they] can't assume anything. . . . Walters was an ingenious researcher . . . [and because] a historian cannot disregard evidence . . . in some way or another we had to account for what he had discovered."[14] Walters's

argument was something that Mormon scholars had not confronted much before, a criticism of their religion which took the form of historical method. The very substantial nature of Walters's challenge made it impossible for Mormon historians to dismiss it as mere propaganda or anti-Mormon defamation.

Walters's article proved a catalyst which prompted several Mormon scholars to challenge his claims. Shortly after Walters published his article, Truman G. Madsen, then director of the Institute of Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, wrote to the First Presidency of the Church explaining the need to "collect basic documentary material on the New York period" in order to "dissolve" the Walters case. With the support of the First Presidency, Madsen recruited various historians "selected for their scholarly competence" and began a massive research effort to respond to the stir Walters created.[15] To lead the effort, Madsen decided to send BYU historians Milton Backman, Larry Porter, and Richard Anderson "to research original letters, church records, diaries, and memorabilia in all the country surrounding Palmyra."[16]

In addition to these historians, an entire body of researchers comprising "some forty scholars" scattered throughout the nation was also involved in the enterprise.[17] Throughout 1967–68, this body of researchers, lawyers, and administrators hunted libraries, archives, court records, journals, and church documents in order to "uncover the context, background, and original documents" pertaining to Mormonism's founding.[18] Each of the scholars was in frequent communication with Madsen, updating him on new documents uncovered and potential caches to be explored.[19] Madsen would in turn recommend which avenues should be searched and who would be the best for the job. The results were impressive.[20] As the project grew, Madsen reached out to a number of other professionals including James Allen, Leonard Arrington, Davis Bitton, Richard Bushman,

Bruce C. Hafen, Daniel H. Ludlow, and T. Edgar Lyon to aid in the project.[21] In a period of just a few months the project had grown into what Madsen considered a "revolutionary" production of scholarship which merited the printing of a special issue of *BYU Studies* in the spring of 1969.

In the articles published in that issue, Mormon scholars contended that Walters's use of church records to indicate a lack of religious activity in 1819–20 was erroneous. According to Walters, membership records indicate that "the Presbyterian church in Palmyra certainly experienced no awakening that year" and neither did the Baptists. In the case of the Methodists, "the Mormon Prophet could hardly have picked a poorer year" to place the revivals, for all their congregations throughout Palmyra's circuit show an actual loss of members for 1819–20.[22] However, in his article "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District," Milton Backman showed that despite Walters's assertions, western New York "was in an almost constant state of revivalism" in the early nineteenth century.[23]

Backman discovered evidence that these revivals continued in their regularity up through the years immediately preceding the First Vision. "On June 19, 1818, for example, a [Methodist] camp meeting was held near Palmyra which, according to one report, resulted in twenty baptisms and forty conversions to the Methodist society."[24] Furthermore, Backman demonstrated that in the years 1819–20, the nearby towns of Geneva and Oaks Corners saw conversions numbering eighty and thirty, respectively. In the case of Oaks Corners, this was an increase from the annual conversion rate of five that had been the norm from 1806 to 1819.[25] In essence, Backman was saying that the Palmyra region was not as religiously dead in 1819–20 as Walters thought. Palmyra fit right in with the "tremendous age of revivalism" that characterized much of the nation during the early nineteenth century.[26]

Walters had anticipated this response while writing his original essay and asserted that the towns in which there was religious excitement in 1819–20 were too far away for the adult Joseph to designate as "the place where we lived" while writing his account.[27] However, when comparing Walters's analysis with that of Backman, Richard Bushman pointed out that both historians used Bloomfield, Junius, Palmyra, Geneva, Oaks Corners, and a number of other towns when dating the revivals, Walters in 1824 and Backman in 1819–20. In total, there were "eight [towns] nearby in 1824 and seven in 1819–20" that experienced revivals "and four more distant in 1824 and twelve in 1819–20."[28] Bushman used Backman's evidence to argue that for Walters, the very towns which he considered close enough for Joseph's revivals in 1824 were too far away when revivals happened there in 1819–20.

Demonstrating that revivals occurred when and where Joseph claimed was only one aspect of the Mormon scholars' response to Walters and Brodie. There was also the matter of the publicity of Joseph's vision. Fawn Brodie was unable to find any references to Joseph's vision in local newspapers. According to Brodie, newspapers "which in later years gave him plenty of publicity" would almost certainly have mentioned Joseph's vision. Because the event "passed totally unnoticed in Joseph's hometown," she reasoned that it was an elaboration of a "half remembered dream" catalyzed by revival excitement later on.[29] However, in December of 1967, Richard Anderson wrote to Truman Madsen claiming that although individual religious experiences may not have caught the attention of local papers, he had found several allusions to the First Vision in regional papers.[30] Though most of these allusions were from people who were "more interested in proving [Joseph's] religious views ridiculous than factually describing" events, Anderson argued that they did indicate that several people knew of Joseph's vision

early on.[31] These finds encouraged Anderson to look for more "reminiscences of individuals" to corroborate Joseph's claims. In the same letter, Anderson expressed his desire to search for "some kind of transcript . . . [or] allusion to the First Vision" in the New York region.[32]

The result was Anderson's article "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision Through Reminiscences," published in the special spring 1969 issue of *BYU Studies*. In his article, Anderson strove to pick up "traces of the First Vision" either through "what Joseph had told, or what [people] had observed" about him.[33] Two of these sources, Orsamus Turner and Pomeroy Tucker, both tried to slander Joseph by accusing him of "announcing to the community that Methodism wasn't true" after his initial conversion at a camp meeting. Though these two sources sought to expose Smith as a fraud, Anderson argues that Turner and Tucker ironically helped confirm the prominence of Methodist revivalism in the area prior to 1820.[34] Furthermore, Anderson believes that these circumstantial confirmations further discredit Brodie's thesis that Joseph "was a seeker of buried treasure, [and] not the sincere religious investigator that he [described] himself to be."[35] Anderson asserted that Turner and Tucker moved in the same social circles as Joseph and that their recollections of the Prophet being involved in religious seeking should be given more credit than the "community gossip" of his money digging.[36] According to Anderson, Tucker's statement that Joseph could relate a "marvelous absurdity with the utmost apparent gravity" could be "the community response to Joseph's limited narration of his vision."[37] Anderson's article indicates that perhaps Joseph told his story on a number of occasions.

This assertion was further corroborated when Madsen's researchers brought several little-known or unknown contemporary accounts of Joseph's vision to light. As the multiple accounts were closely examined, some naturally raised the

question of Joseph's consistency.[38] Both Brodie and Walters alleged previously that the inconsistencies found in the various accounts indicated a "remarkable evolution in detail" that stemmed from Joseph's need to distance himself from rumors of his "money digging" and later to mollify the dissent he faced within the Church.[39] Understanding the import of this accusation, Truman Madsen wrote to Dean Jessee asking for his particular help in researching the different accounts. Because of Jessee's position in the Church historian's office, Madsen felt that Jessee would have more familiarity with and easier access to the documents than other scholars.[40] Jessee published his landmark article "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision" in the spring 1969 issue of *BYU Studies*.

In his article, Jessee asserts that Joseph's "youth . . . , frontier conditions . . . , [and] a lack of academic training" all contributed to the relatively late compilation of the First Vision story.[41] He and other scholars reconciled the variations in Joseph's accounts. James Allen, for example, has observed that the first record of Joseph's First Vision, written in 1832, is riddled with poor grammar and punctuation. Allen asserts that when it is compared with the much more polished 1838 account, it becomes clear that the six intervening years were a time of impressive intellectual and experiential growth.[42] With this in mind, the variations in the account do not necessarily indicate deception, but rather the simple maturing of Joseph throughout his prophetic career. Or as Dean Jessee and Richard Bushman have both pointed out, experience shapes the way in which all people relate events and Joseph's own perceptions of what the First Vision actually meant and what his role would be as God's prophet unfolded only as the years passed.[43] Thus with each recording of the First Vision experience, different facets of the experience are emphasized. In fact, the accounts would be "more peculiar if [Joseph] had related it the same."[44]

The influence of the publications of these Mormon scholars in response to Fawn Brodie and Wesley Walters can be debated. On the one hand, neither Brodie nor Walters ever modified their previous conclusions in light of the research other scholars produced.[45] *No Man Knows My History* is still lauded by some as the foremost biography of Joseph Smith. Wesley Walters is still regarded by some as the final word on the historical accuracy of Joseph Smith's First Vision. Needless to say, the important contributions made by Truman Madsen and the scholars he organized did not settle the debate, and perhaps they were never meant to. Richard Bushman seemingly put it best when he wrote, "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 how big is big. I doubt very much that historical inquiry will ever settle that question to the satisfaction of all."[46]

What is certain is that Mormon historical studies were profoundly affected by Brodie and Walters. Brodie sought to make Mormons stop and "question" the "moving power of Mormonism."[47] Walters sought nothing less than to "force upon Mormon writers a drastic reevaluation" of the origins of their faith.[48] Both were successful, though not in the ways they imagined. Because of the challenges made by Brodie and Walters, Mormon historians have been driven with indefatigable energy "to search for . . . early sources" and dig "deeper and deeper into [those] sources."[49] The quality of work produced by Mormon scholars has only continued to improve since Brodie and Walters. In the long run, Mormon scholarship has benefitted from their work.[50]

Scholarly debate and criticism are important elements of the historical discipline because the contest of ideas leads to deeper research and more thorough analysis. This brief introduction illustrates how the historical debate surrounding Joseph Smith's

First Vision took shape. Fawn Brodie and Wesley Walters were central to the formation of subsequent First Vision scholarship because their work proposed the questions that later formed the historical debate. Subsequently, Latter-day Saint scholars responded to the challenges with an increased energy that greatly benefited the study of early Mormonism. This book is intended to introduce a new generation of readers to those responding Latter-day Saint scholars and their contributions to the historical debate. By coupling historical study with faith, readers will be better prepared to face the challenges that an increasingly competitive world presents (see D&C 88:118). As a practicing member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, my personal views of Joseph Smith and early Mormonism resonate with the interpretations presented in this book. However, as an aspiring historian, I have also benefited from learning about these scholars' professionalism. They are exemplary historians as well as men of faith. They showed me that it is possible for a historian to excel in the craft and still "hearken unto the counsels of God" (2 Nephi 9:29).

Notes

1. Davis Bitton and Leonard J. Arrington, *Mormons and Their Historians* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), xii; D. Michael Quinn, "Joseph Smith's Experience of a Methodist 'Camp Meeting' in 1820," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Dialogue Paperless: E-paper, no. 3 (December 2006): 1.

2. Charles A. Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *The American Historical Review* 39, no. 2. (January 1934): 219–31, accessed July 9, 2010, http://www.historians.org/info/aha_history/cabeard.htm.

3. See Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Revived," *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 90; W. P. Walters, *New Light on*

Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival (La Mesa, CA: Utah Christian Tract Society, 1967), 4, 18.

4. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 23.

5. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History,* viii, ix.

6. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 25.

7. James Allen and Leonard Arrington, "Mormon Origins in New York: An Introductory Analysis," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 262.

8. Bushman, "First Vision Revived," 82.

9. Walters, *New Light on Mormon Origins*, 4.

10. Walters, *New Light on Mormon Origins*, 5.

11. Walters, *New Light on Mormon Origins*, 18.

12. Walters, *New Light on Mormon Origins*, 15.

13. Richard L. Anderson, interview by author, Provo, UT, July 29, 2009.

14. Richard L. Bushman, interview by author, Provo, UT, July 31, 2009.

15. Truman G. Madsen to First Presidency, April 17, 1968, Truman G. Madsen Papers, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

16. Truman G. Madsen to First Presidency, April 17, 1968, Truman G. Madsen Papers; see Allen and Arrington, "Mormon Origins in New York," 242.

17. Truman G. Madsen to First Presidency, April 17, 1968, Truman G. Madsen Papers.

18. Truman G. Madsen to Fred Williams, February 22, 1968, Truman G. Madsen Papers.

19. Truman G. Madsen to Milton V. Backman Jr., August 26, 1968, Truman G. Madsen Papers.

20. Conversation between Truman G. Madsen and Charles D. Tate Jr., 1967–68, Truman G. Madsen Papers.

21. Truman G. Madsen to Daniel H. Ludlow, November 10, 1967, Truman G. Madsen Papers; Bruce C. Hafen to Truman G. Madsen, March 6, 1968, Truman G. Madsen Papers.

22. Walters, *New Light on Mormon Origins*, 12.

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

24. Backman, "Awakenings," 307.

25. Backman, "Awakenings," 311.

26. Milton V. Backman Jr., interview by author, American Fork, UT, August 12, 2009.

27. Walters, *New Light on Mormon Origins*, 12.

28. Bushman, "First Vision Revived," 87.

29. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 23, 25.

30. Richard L. Anderson, interview by author, Provo, UT, July 29, 2009; Richard L. Anderson to Truman G. Madsen, December 12, 1967, Truman G. Madsen Papers.

31. Richard L. Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 376, 383–85.

32. Richard L. Anderson to Truman G. Madsen, December 12, 1967, Truman G. Madsen Papers.

33. Richard L. Anderson, interview by author, Provo, UT, July 29, 2009.

34. Richard L. Anderson, interview by author, Provo, UT, July 29, 2009.

35. Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation," 385.

36. Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation," 376, 385.

37. Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation," 385.

38. Richard L. Anderson, interview by author, Provo, UT, July 29, 2009.

39. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 24, 25; Walters, *New Light on Mormon Origins*, 15, 18.

40. Truman G. Madsen to Dean C. Jessee, March 4, 1968, November 4, 1968, Truman G. Madsen Papers.

41. Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 294.

42. James Allen, interview by author, Orem, UT, July 27, 2009.

43. Dean C. Jessee, interview by author, Orem, UT, July 27, 2009; Richard L. Bushman, interview by author, Provo, UT, July 31, 2009.

44. Dean C. Jessee, interview by author, Orem, UT, July 27, 2009.

45. Richard L. Anderson, interview by author, Provo, UT, July 29, 2009.

46. Bushman, "First Vision Revived," 90–91.

47. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, ix.

48. Walters, *New Light on Mormon Origins*, 73.

49. Richard L. Bushman, interview by author, Provo, UT, July 31, 2009.

50. See Bushman, "First Vision Revived," 91–92.