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“Joseph Smith’s accounts of his vision are remarkably consistent. His descriptions are, in fact, portraits of the time and place in which he lived.” —Steven C. Harper

Reconciling Joseph Smith— History 1:10 and 1:18–19

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It makes sense that because Joseph Smith’s story so often starts with the First Vision, his critics start there too. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that every word of his (and others’) multiple accounts of that vision has been scrutinized over and over.¹ This brief paper proposes something very modest in looking anew at a handful of those words that have been considered troublesome.

Here is the essence of that trouble, as some have seen it. In Joseph’s 1838–39² dictated account (the account that would eventually find its way into the LDS Church’s canon as the official Joseph Smith—History), he described his youthful confusion about the competing religious sects that he encountered in these words: “In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together?” (Joseph Smith—History 1:10). According to this narrative, it seems that fourteen-year-old Joseph had already considered the possibility that all churches could be “wrong together.” Yet only eight verses later (by the account’s current scriptural format), Joseph reported what seems like surprise in response to the divine injunction that he must join no

church, “for they were all wrong”—and “it had never entered into [his] heart that all were wrong” (JS—H 1:18–19). But didn’t we just read that the “all were wrong” possibility had entered his heart in verse 10? Why such an apparently careless and contradictory oversight in the narrative?

Some critics have held up this sequence of verses as yet another example of the inconsistencies that reveal Joseph’s story to be what they believe it really is: a convoluted fabrication that he composed, piecemeal, over time.³ However, these critics seem to be making a mountain out of a molehill—especially in light of the recently published transcriptions of several manuscript versions of Joseph Smith’s history as part of the larger Joseph Smith Papers Project.⁴ In this case specifically, and in the case of so many other Joseph Smith documents generally, closer attention to textual clues and to the composition process of scribing and editing and publishing complicates these types of superficial dismissals of Joseph Smith’s personal narrative. A fresh take on these First Vision passages is just one such possibility that the Joseph Smith Papers manuscripts can offer.

Even without recourse to those manuscripts, though, many readers are not really troubled by the apparent contradiction since it can be (and has been) handled satisfactorily in a number of ways. First of all, it would seem only fair-minded to agree that we tell our stories similarly, in that it is natural to project what we have learned from an experience onto our narration of that experience. We see things differently when we know the end from the beginning, and we highlight those important awakenings, especially as we are better equipped, with hindsight, to sift out the crucial moments. In that sense, Joseph Smith’s 1838 retelling feels like an authentic and matter-of-fact recollection; we can relate to that kind of story.⁵

Historian Richard L. Bushman puts it well: “Behind the simplest event are complex motives and many factual threads conjoining that will receive varying emphasis in different retellings. . . . The reasons for reshaping the story usually have to do with changes in immediate circumstances. . . . Such changes do not evidence an uncertainty about the events, as Mr. [Wesley P.] Walters thinks, as if Joseph were manufacturing new parts year by year. It is folly to try to 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.”⁶

Second, some readers have appropriately highlighted the importance of the word *heart* in verse 18 of Joseph Smith—History. The pivotal distinction

in this way of thinking is that while Joseph may have *theoretically* considered the idea that all religions were false (v. 10), such a reality had never entered into his *heart*—into that symbolic center of being that represents surety and conviction, such that he had never really given serious credence to that theoretical possibility before (vv. 18–19). That explanation also seems to fall within the believability and commonality of the human experience. Many of us can probably think of analogous “I never *really* thought that was possible” experiences in our personal histories.⁷

What this paper offers in addition to the foregoing explanations are two other possibilities in reconciling this minor contradiction in Joseph Smith—History. These two explanations are based on textual discoveries in the Joseph Smith Papers Project—and the first bears directly on this question of “[entering] into [his] heart.”

Parallel Phrasing in the Coray Draft

In a draft of Joseph Smith’s history that was written sometime in 1840–41 by scribe Howard Coray (but only essentially rediscovered in the Church’s archival holdings in 2005), the corresponding passage reads differently:

Joseph Smith—History 1:18–19

I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong . . .

Howard Coray’s 1839–41 history (labeled Draft 3 in Histories, Volume 1 of The Joseph Smith Papers)

I asked the Personages who stood in the light; Which of the sects were right. (for I supposed that one of them were so.) and which I should join. I was answered “join none of them; they are all are wrong . . .”⁸

Coray’s version suggests that Joseph still “supposed”—still believed, still considered it most likely—that one of the sects was right, even if he had considered the *possibility* that such was not the case. Thanks to the careful editorial scrutiny of *The Joseph Smith Papers* scholars, it is apparent that Coray’s draft was written after the draft of Joseph Smith’s history (labeled Draft 2 in the handwriting of James Mulholland) that was eventually published in the

Times and Seasons and then the Pearl of Great Price. *The Joseph Smith Papers* volume editors note that, “for whatever reason,” Joseph Smith chose that Draft 2 (Mulholland) version for eventual publication, even though there is evidence to suggest that Coray transcribed as Joseph “read aloud from Draft 2 in the large manuscript volume, directing editorial changes as he read.” With that background in mind, the parallel phrases above suggest an affinity of sentiment, such that the phrase “it had never entered into my heart” meant, essentially, “I [still] supposed one of them were [right]”—which reinforces the reading that Joseph held out hope *in his heart* that he would be pointed to the true denomination.⁹

A Question of Antecedents

One minor drawback in reading Joseph Smith’s history in its current scriptural format is that the verse divisions might inadvertently separate his thoughts too starkly. Because of that potential challenge, the second possibility proposed here is that the contradiction between verses 10 and 18 might simply be a question of antecedents in verse 10. Thus one final alternate reading (and reconciliation) of those verses becomes clearer in the paragraph format of the Draft 2 (Mulholland) manuscript version of Joseph Smith’s history. In what is now verse 9 in the Pearl of Great Price version, Joseph describes the furious activity of three named denominations: the Presbyterians, the Baptists, and the Methodists. Those were the major players in the religious competition that was all around him in that region of New York.¹⁰ And those three groups preached, importantly, distinct soteriological visions of Christianity. If, however, verse 10 is not seen as completely separate from verse 9, then we might understand Joseph’s questions as being much more specific.

Here is how the passage appears in Draft 2 (Mulholland) of Joseph Smith’s history:

My mind at different times was greatly excited for the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all their powers of either reason or sophistry to prove their errors, or at least to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally Zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others.

In the midst of this war of words, and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself, what is to be done? Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together? and if any one of them be right which is it? And how shall I know it?¹¹

Read in that way, new attention to the determiners and pronouns might be in order. Which of all of *these* parties—that is, the Presbyterians, Baptists, or Methodists—is right? Or are *they*—Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists—all wrong together? If any of *them*—Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists—be right, which is it? It seems reasonable to conclude that Joseph wondered *not* about the possibility that there was no true religion on the earth, but only that the principal religions represented *in his area* might all be wrong. Hence, his crucial question—his “object in going to enquire of the Lord”—was “to know which of *all* the sects was right,” and perhaps it was the subsequent instruction to join no sect *anywhere* (“for they were *all* wrong”) that would have been surprising; in that case, this latter possibility was the one that had never entered into his heart.¹²

Again, this is only suggested as one way to read the text—but it is one that also seems to fit with a telling line in the earliest known written account of the First Vision, one from 1832 that Joseph Smith partly dictated and partly wrote. The key is something he stated about personal familiarity:

In that 1832 history, Joseph wrote in his own hand:

At about the age of twelve years my mind become seriously [impressed] with regard to the all important concerns of for the welfare of my immortal Soul which led me to searching the scriptures believeing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God thus applying myself to them and *my intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations* led me to marvel exceedingly for I discovered that <they did not adorn> instead of adorning their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository this was a grief to my Soul . . .¹³

The fact that his conclusions were based on an “intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations” should not be overlooked. His subsequent recollections do seem to reflect an expanded understanding of a broader apostasy: “by searching the scriptures I found that ~~man~~ <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament.” Yet his choice of words (“no society or denomination”) and his declaration that “I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and to obtain mercy” seem to reflect his discouragement with his *local* options and his growing assurance that only divine intervention could help him transcend that confusion.¹⁴

It may, then, have been the sheer universality of the apostasy (“join *none* of them”) that had not entered into his heart. It may have been Joseph Smith’s

original hope and assumption, as expressed in the Howard Coray draft, that “one of them were” right, even if he had considered the theoretical possibility that the three denominations with which he had “intimate acquaintance” were all “wrong together” and that he would have to seek a religious home among another, less familiar one of “all the sects.”

Conclusion

With all that said, it is in the end wise to remember historian Steven C. Harper’s observation about the believability of Joseph Smith’s history: “Joseph Smith’s accounts of his first vision are remarkably consistent. His descriptions are, in fact, portraits of the time and place in which he lived. Indeed, *if Joseph had repeated well-rehearsed statements verbatim from year to year rather than the thoughtful accounts he gave in specific contexts, historians would rightly find him more calculating and less credible.*”¹⁵ Professor and poet Arthur Henry King found him credible:

When I was first brought to read Joseph Smith’s story, I was deeply impressed. I wasn’t inclined to be impressed. As a stylistician, I have spent my life being disinclined to be impressed. So when I read his story, I thought to myself, this is an extraordinary thing. This is an astonishingly matter-of-fact and cool account. This man is not trying to persuade me of anything. He doesn’t feel the need to. He is stating what happened to him, and he is stating it, not enthusiastically, but in quite a matter-of-fact way. He is not trying to make me cry or feel ecstatic. That struck me, and that began to build my testimony, for I could see that this man was telling the truth.¹⁶

The conclusion here is that the seeming contradiction in Joseph Smith—History 1:10 and 1:18–19 should give readers no reason to believe otherwise. Instead, these verses offer us yet one more reminder that careful attention to historical documents repeatedly shows that Joseph Smith’s story is always worthy of a closer look. **RE**

Notes

1. For those various accounts, see Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012); hereafter H1. See also John W. Welch, ed., with Erick B. Carlson, *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 1–75. Some of the best scholarship—landmark studies as well as recent work—on the First Vision can be accessed in two important new books:

Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Exploring the First Vision* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2012), and Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012).

2. While Joseph Smith apparently began dictating a history in the spring of 1838 after John Whitmer’s disaffection from the Church, no version of that original dictation/history is extant. The earliest extant version was written by scribe James Mulholland in 1839, yet several clues in that 1839 history indicate that Mulholland copied (at least in part) from that 1838 history. The 1839 version (which Robert Thompson finished after James Mulholland’s death in November 1839) is called Draft 2 by *The Joseph Smith Papers* editors. This draft was apparently the principal source for the published history that would first appear in the *Times and Seasons* newspaper in 1842. See the detailed explanation in *HI*, 192–203.

3. See one such example in Sharon Lindbloom, “Inconsistency in Joseph Smith’s Canonized History?,” blog post at *Mormon Coffee*, October 10, 2007, <http://blog.mrm.org/2007/10/inconsistency-in-joseph-smiths-canonized-history>. It is worth noting that James E. Talmage, under assignment to prepare the 1902 edition of the Pearl of Great Price, deleted the parenthetical phrase—“for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong”—from verse 18. The phrase was reinserted in the Church’s 1981 edition of the Pearl of Great Price. I am indebted to Professor Alexander L. Baugh for pointing out this sequence of changes. Walter Whipple noted the deletion in his 1959 master’s thesis but did not comment on this specific change, although he provided explanation for other textual changes in the various Pearl of Great Price editions. See Walter Whipple, “An Analysis of Textual Changes in the ‘The Book of Abraham’ and in the ‘Writings of Joseph Smith, the Prophet’ in the Pearl of Great Price” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1959), 86, 86b; compare pages 119–25. It seems possible that James E. Talmage reasoned that the phrase, which appears almost as a parenthetical afterthought in the manuscript in any case, should be removed to resolve the contradiction considered here—a contradiction that might unnecessarily draw attention from the principal message of Joseph Smith’s account and that in the end seems to be a superficial concern.

4. It is worth noting that because most of what we have of Joseph Smith’s history was written by scribes, the question of what Joseph said and what his scribes may have added or emended or interpreted is never unimportant in cases like this.

5. Professor Kerry M. Muhlestein at BYU proposed such an explanation in email correspondence with the author, August 20, 2012: “In my experience interviewing people for historical content, they tell their stories in broad terms, retrojecting things that they now know. It is difficult to remember what you knew before or after a particular part of the story when you are just telling the story in general. Then, when they move into specifics, such as a specific dialogue or a specific action, they remember that part well, and it forces them to think carefully through the chronology of events and what they knew or thought at various points of the chronology. Joseph’s story follows that pattern. When talking about the story [in] general he says that they may all be wrong together. But when he has to recall the specific thing he asked the Lord, he remembers that he asked which church he should join. That question causes him to remember that at that point he had not yet thought of them all being wrong. The specific dialogue prompts the specific chronology. In my opinion, if he were making this up, he would have checked through the document for inconsistencies. Since he is remembering something that actually happened to him, it reflects a typical recall pattern.”

6. Richard L. Bushman “The First Vision Story Revived,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 83; cited in Steven C. Harper, “Trustworthy

History? A Review of *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 297.

7. Professor Steven C. Harper emphasizes this distinction in *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, 92–93: "When we listen to Joseph carefully we also hear his subtle but significant distinction between his mind and his heart. Introspective Joseph reflected carefully and wrote quite precisely about his thought processes as well as his emotional responses, but not all of his readers listen carefully enough to discern the difference. It was, according to Joseph, his mind that was worked up as he rationally looked for evidence of 'who was right and who was wrong.' In 1832 Joseph said that he was about twelve when his 'mind became seriously impressed' regarding the welfare of his soul. Each of his accounts narrates a struggle between his head and his heart. He felt deep emotional desires for God's love and forgiveness and attention. But his accounts narrate his simultaneous efforts to discern authentic answers through rational processes. Not picking up on Joseph's distinction nor understanding the tension between head and heart that is the key conflict in his accounts, some readers have wondered or have even been critical of what they regard as inconsistency in Joseph, especially in his 1838 account. There he said that he had often thought about which church was right and that they may all be wrong and wondered how he could know. Later in the same account Joseph acknowledged that he asked the divine beings which church was right because, as he put it, 'at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong.' When we listen carefully to Joseph we hear him describing the tension between what he had often thought in his head and what he would allow himself to conclude in his heart. His rational processes had suggested repeatedly that all the churches might be wrong, but that was a thought too terrible for Joseph to let it sink into his hopeful heart. Emotionally it was such an awful conclusion to the pre-vision teenager that he refused to let the recurring idea become a foregone conclusion without more wisdom from God. What seems to some like inconsistency in Joseph's story can be interpreted as the very point he intended to communicate, namely that his head and his heart were at odds and he desperately needed wisdom from God in order to discern which if either he should favor." For Harper's important insights about interpretive approaches to the First Vision accounts generally and the "hermeneutics of suspicion," see Steven C. Harper, "Suspicion or Trust: Reading the Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 63–75.

8. *HI*, 215.

9. See *HI*, 195–202.

10. It should be noted (and I am indebted to Alexander L. Baugh for bringing this to my attention) that Milton Backman's extensive study of the religious activity in Joseph Smith's New York revealed that the Society of Friends (Quakers) perhaps claimed more adherents than any of the other denominations in the area (and Martin Harris had ties to the Quakers), even though in Joseph Smith's recollections he did not include the Quakers in his list of sectarian competitors. That might be a commentary both on Joseph Smith's proclivities and on the Friends' proselytizing practices. See Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 64, 68, 83–84. For contemporaries' accounts of Martin Harris's affiliation with the Quakers, as well as his own comments about his early religious leanings, see Ronald W. Walker, "Martin Harris: Mormonism's Early Convert," *Dialogue* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 33, where Walker notes, "As a youth he may have worshipped with the Friends (the extended Harris family had Quaker ties), but since his midlife religious awakening, though 'anxiously

sought' by the 'sectarians,' he had felt 'inspired of the Lord & taught of the Spirit' to refuse a formal commitment."

11. *HI*, 210. Interestingly, the editors of this volume included an explanatory footnote (note 45) after this paragraph that seems to at least acknowledge the contradiction: "In his circa summer 1832 history, JS recounted that by the time of his vision he had already concluded that the world lay in apostasy and that 'there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament.'" While the editors' reading of that passage is certainly straightforward, the suggestion here is that an alternate reading is also possible.

12. *HI*, 214; emphasis added.

13. *HI*, 11; emphasis added.

14. *HI*, 11–12. This local-versus-global framing of the question also seems to be at the heart of a later retelling of the vision. See the so-called "Wentworth letter," which was published in the March 1, 1842 edition of the *Times and Seasons* as "Church History," and is reprinted in *HI*, 494: "if I went to one society they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection: considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that *if God had a church* it would not be split up into factions, and that if he taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, he would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed. . . . They ('two glorious personages') told me that *all religious denominations* were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom" (emphasis added).

15. Harper, "Trustworthy History?," 298; emphasis added.

16. Arthur Henry King, *Arm the Children: Faith's Response to a Violent World* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1998), 288, cited in Harper, "Trustworthy History?," 298.