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# REMEMBERING THE FIRST VISION

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*J*OSEPH SMITH REMEMBERED THAT HIS FIRST SPOKEN PRAYER, UTTERED in the woods near his parents' home in western New York State when he was about fourteen years old, evoked a vision of heavenly beings who forgave him and taught him that Christianity had gone astray. The historical record includes four accounts of this vision that were dictated or written by Joseph and several secondary accounts written by contemporaries who heard him relate the event. These records have been extensively studied, with critics highlighting their inconsistencies and believers explaining the differences in terms of the Prophet's varied audiences and intentions. But there seems to be more going on in the accounts than an effort to put into words Joseph's first encounter with deity. Closely examining both the historical record and the science of memory formation lends insight into the reasons for the discrepancies and Joseph's growing understanding of his experience.

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Joseph Smith's recorded memories of the First Vision reveal more than his encounter with deity or his theophany. They reflect his growing awareness of its meaning as he transformed sensory impressions into subjective meanings. He consciously experienced the vision as it occurred, but he also reexperienced and interpreted it over time. Reading the historical record closely in light of what is now known about forces that influence memory reveals insights into Joseph's subjective experience of the original event as well as the ongoing effects of it as manifest in subsequent memories. This approach suggests that Joseph's first telling of his experience to a Methodist minister shaped the ways in which he told the vision shortly after the event and also over time.

## PRIMARY ACCOUNTS OF THE FIRST VISION

Between 1832 and 1842, Joseph wrote or caused scribes to write four known documents describing his vision. Some of these were copied and/or revised into other documents. Besides Joseph and his scribes, five other known writers recorded versions of the event during Joseph's lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

### 1832 ACCOUNT

The first written account of Joseph's First Vision is found in Joseph's earliest autobiography: a rough, six-page statement filled with grand themes expressed by a man of limited education.<sup>2</sup> This document is not dated, but it was apparently written in response to a revelation that commanded the Saints to keep history that documented their faith, life, and deeds.<sup>3</sup> This account describes a highly personalized experience. Using the language of religious revivals, Joseph described his consciousness of his sins and of his frustrating inability to find forgiveness in a church that he thought should match the New Testament model that emphasizes the Atonement of Christ and the personal redemption it offered Joseph.<sup>4</sup>

### 1835 ACCOUNTS

In the fall of 1835, Joseph Smith told an eccentric visitor about his first vision. Joseph's scribe captured some of the dialogue in a journal entry, including Joseph's description of the events that led to the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon. In this account, Joseph described the vision as the first in a series of events that led to the translation of the Book of Mormon. He emphasized the opposition he felt in the grove and that he attempted to pray but initially couldn't. It describes one divine personage appearing in a pillar of fire, followed shortly by another, and mentions that Joseph saw many angels as well. Joseph added, perhaps as an afterthought, that he was about fourteen at the time of his vision. A week later, on November 14, Joseph told another inquirer about the vision. Unfortunately, his scribe recorded only that Joseph told an account of his "first visitation of Angels," but not a description of the vision itself.<sup>5</sup>

### 1838–39 ACCOUNT

Joseph published two accounts of the vision during his lifetime. The first and best known of these two accounts is found in Joseph's manuscript history, begun April 27, 1838, and continued in 1839. Joseph enlisted the help of George Robinson and Sidney Rigdon to help write this account, and later James Mulholland and Howard Coray also helped him record and refine it. A version of this account can be found in Joseph Smith—History 1:1–20 in the Pearl of Great Price.<sup>6</sup>

### 1842 ACCOUNT

The second account Joseph Smith published during his lifetime was written in response to *Chicago Democrat* editor John Wentworth's request for a "sketch of the rise, progress, persecution and faith of the Latter-day Saints" as source material for a friend, George Barstow, who was writing a history of New Hampshire. There is no known evidence that Barstow used Joseph's account, but Joseph had it printed in the March 1, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* newspaper, making it the first account published in the United States. In July 1843, a historian named Israel Daniel Rupp wrote to Joseph asking for a chapter on the history of Mormonism for inclusion in his book *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*. Joseph met Rupp's refreshing invitation to tell his own story by supplying essentially the same account as the one in the letter to Wentworth, which Rupp subsequently included in his book.<sup>7</sup> This account is concise but revealing. It says that the two divine beings Joseph saw looked exactly alike, and they told him that the existing churches believed in incorrect doctrines.<sup>8</sup>

Though each account describes Joseph's encounter with Deity, there are differences in the retellings. These differences could initially seem concerning to readers, but historians would be skeptical if they were identical, considering the passage of time and the different purposes for which they were written. But beyond those observances, there seems to be more at work here.

## THE SCIENCE OF MAKING MEMORIES

Neuroscience has shown that "memory is not fixed at the time of learning but takes time to develop its permanent form." So some leading psychologists consider it "a mistake to assume that interpretation of recalled knowledge happens only at the preloading, perceptual stage—to assume that once knowledge 'enters memory' (through the front door), it is happily stored away, to be 'retrieved' intact at later times of 'recollection.'"<sup>9</sup> Joseph Smith's earliest memories of his theophany were based on factual, sensory, and emotional elements. Those facts accumulated more and more meaning in light of subsequent experience. For example, just as World War I was the Great War until after World War II, the vision became interpreted as Joseph's first vision only after subsequent ones, as shown by his 1835 journal entry describing the vision as the first event in the process that resulted in the Book of Mormon. The part of memory that becomes possible with the passage of time and new experiences is sometimes called interpretive memory. The passage of reflective time in light of subsequent experience helps explain why Joseph recorded his most significant interpretive memory of his vision in his 1838–39 narration.

Historians often assume that an experience recorded at or shortly after the event will be accurate and that later memories are less accurate in proportion to the historical distance between them and the event. But these assumptions are usually too simplistic. While it is true that time is an enemy to memory, it is also true that memory strengthens over time, counterintuitive as that may seem.<sup>10</sup>

Both distortion and accuracy in remembered events have been proven by experiments and observations and are to be expected. One way distortion occurs is when semantic memories blend with autobiographical ones. Joseph probably unconsciously conflated semantic memories with autobiographical ones, meaning that he mixed cultural knowledge—information he simply knew from frequent exposure in his youth in an evangelical and visionary culture—with what he knew from his own experience. To put it simply, memories are both accurate and inaccurate. They are both distorted reconstructions of the past and true perceptions of the past as seen from the present. It is not safe to take for granted that Joseph's memory was perfectly accurate at the time of his experience and that it grew increasingly inaccurate in proportion to the passage of time. Suspending this assumption while analyzing the historical record in light of how memories form or consolidate can lead to new analysis and yield valuable insight.

## CONSOLIDATING MEMORIES

As Joseph processed new experiences, in part by recuperating and reforming stored information, fragments of old memories combined with current experiences to produce memories that could be vivid or vague. The degree of clarity depended mainly on how deeply he consciously processed any given detail of the experience at the time and how frequently and consciously he later recalled it. Each time he did this, he reoriented himself relative to his original experience.

This process is called memory consolidation. Some leading theorists compare it to pouring water from a leaky bucket into a much less leaky bucket. The memory that consolidates, like the water that makes it into the less leaky bucket, is remarkably stable over time.<sup>11</sup> No one knows exactly why, but repeatedly rehearsed personal narratives resist erosion over time, and some actually strengthen. It may be that frequent rehearsal of an event over time forges long-term links between related perceptions and previous knowledge, which could explain why some autobiographical memories actually become more precise and complete over time.<sup>12</sup>

Joseph Smith remembered or forgot elements of his experience based on what he knew at the time and how often and how deeply he rehearsed them. In 1835 he vividly described the parts of the experience that he processed deeply and then added as an afterthought his approximate age as best his vague memory of it could recover. Likewise, in 1839 he remembered that

an unusual religious excitement occurred in his region only “sometime in the second year after our removal to Manchester,” but he felt sure that it began with the Methodists. He remembered that the vision occurred in the “morning of a beautiful clear day early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty,” but apparently he could not recall precisely which day. He noted that after the vision he was “between fourteen and fifteen years of age,” which his scribe later qualified further by inserting “or thereabouts.”<sup>13</sup>

The ideas that Joseph Smith consolidated best, and thus remembered most vividly, were the ones he associated most meaningfully with the resolution to his terrible problem of finding the right way to be saved. These were points at which emotion and cognition combined, as in his 1832 autobiography’s description, “my mind became exceedingly distressed,” or his 1839 history’s marriage of “serious reflection and great uneasiness” and “laboring under the extreme difficulties caused” by competing preachers and doctrines. The 1835 account in Joseph’s journal says that he was “wrought up in [his] mind” and “perplexed in mind” and describes his increasing consciousness of the possibility of a divine answer and his “fixed determination to obtain” one.<sup>14</sup> His 1832 account says that his mind became “seriously impressed with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of [his] immortal soul,” that denominational strife made him grieve and “marvel exceedingly,” that as he “pondered” he became “exceedingly distressed,” “felt to mourn,” and finally “cried unto the Lord for mercy” and experienced a theophany that filled his soul with love for days and led him to “rejoice with great Joy.”<sup>15</sup> Intense emotion and repeated reflection combined to create the Prophet’s most vivid and enduring memories. By remembering these parts of his experience and allowing for the natural process of forgetting others, he became aware of what was meaningful about it.

## REJECTION OF THE 1832 ACCOUNT

Since Joseph Smith’s ability to form memories depended largely on what he already knew, his culture conditioned the ways he remembered his original experience, and subsequent experiences expanded his ability to rehearse meaningful reflections of what he had experienced.<sup>16</sup> His 1832 autobiography is “a traditional form of spiritual autobiography familiar to him and those around him.”<sup>17</sup> Joseph remembered his vision in terms of acceptable spiritual discourse, mimicking a generic style and tone that emphasized personal sinfulness and redemption by Christ.

There are reasons to question whether Joseph’s 1832 autobiography was satisfying to him and to surmise that he felt conflicted about its contents. He probably intended this document to serve as source material for the Church’s historians, Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer, who began their histories where this one ends.<sup>18</sup> Neither of them, however, seemed to know it existed. Joseph Smith never published it and probably did not

circulate it. He appears to have regarded it as an unusable draft. Perhaps he thought it too marred by his being “deprived of the bennift of an education,” but it seems most likely that the perspective that came with the passage of time and subsequent experiences made this memory sound increasingly unsatisfying to his ears.

It is the memory of a teen aspiring to convince an evangelical clergyman of his legitimate conversion experience. Yet, even as he dictated this memory in 1832, Joseph’s revelations had tended away from evangelical Protestantism toward nearly universal salvation in degrees of heavenly glory and temple ordinances mediated by priesthoods, moving the gospel Joseph was in the process of restoring well beyond what is reflected in the autobiography he wrote that year.<sup>19</sup> Then why would he record a memory that was not fully satisfying to him?

One answer is that Joseph Smith’s 1832 autobiography can be read as a conflicted consolidation of his memory. Some literary scholars theorized why. The puzzle, they noted, is not that Joseph’s story squared with acceptable ways of writing evangelical autobiography, but that the story was so poorly received.<sup>20</sup> They hypothesize, presumably based on Joseph’s later report that his first oral telling of his experience was flatly rejected by a Methodist preacher, that he originally told a story so unorthodox that he was rejected, so he recast the story safely in 1832 “as if it were primarily a vision granted to assure him of his personal redemption and the need for men to repent, and not to assure him of the apostasy of all churches and the need for a Restoration,” as his 1839 account would emphasize.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1838–39 process of reforming his story for allies and against enemies, Joseph described his first telling of the vision, in which he unexpectedly received reproach rather than validation:

Some few days after I had this vision I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist Preachers who was very active in the before mentioned religious excitement and conversing with him on the subject of religion I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had had. I was greatly surprised at his behaviour, he treated my communication not only lightly but with great contempt, saying it was all of the Devil, that there was no such thing as visions or revelations in these days, that all such things had ceased with the [p. 3] apostles and that there never would be any more of them. I soon found however that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion and was the cause of great persecution which continued to increase.<sup>22</sup>

It was a jarring experience for Joseph to have his crisis resolved one day and then have that resolution rejected by an authority days later. That experience upset his memory of it and, as one can see by the emphasis he placed

on it in 1839, he continued to form and reform the ways he remembered it over time.

In telling his experience to the preacher, Joseph sought assurance that the resolution to his crisis was real. Instead, the preacher's flat rejection likely created cognitive dissonance in the young man, resulting in an internal conflict Joseph sought to reduce by remembering differently. In such circumstances, people regularly recast their past so that it conforms to their culture. But making a memory public, Joseph learned, also makes the memory contestable.<sup>23</sup> This interpretation of Joseph's memories suggests that the minister's rejection retarded, to a degree and for a time, Joseph's willingness and perhaps even his ability to tell his story.

Joseph's original, unrecorded telling led to rejection by the minister and the world he represented. When Joseph worked up the will to tell it again in his 1832 autobiography, he recast the story as an evangelical script, conforming to his culture and seeking validation. There is no evidence that he did so conspiratorially or even consciously, but rather as part of the ongoing process of consolidation. Joseph was apparently reticent to tell his story at all after it was initially rejected, which explains both why the 1832 story says what it does and why Joseph seems not to have favored or shared it. The past Joseph Smith recorded in 1832 may have been more pleasing to the minister than Smith's original telling, but it did not resonate with Joseph's present. Whatever the reasons, the 1832 consolidation of Joseph Smith's memory was not the memory that would develop. But by the time he collaborated on his earliest autobiography, Joseph Smith's memory had become fixed on one point: his ministry began with the vision in the woods.<sup>24</sup>

### ASSOCIATIVE RETRIEVAL AND THE 1835 ACCOUNT

Joseph's autobiographical act of composing the 1832 narrative required a different type of memory retrieval than the November 1835 journal entry that captures his unplanned telling of the story. He composed the 1832 document in an act of intentional, explicit remembering, which required a systematic search of memory known as strategic retrieval. But when telling the story of his vision to a visitor in the autumn of 1835, Joseph relied on associative retrieval, resulting in a memory formed automatically by an unsolicited cue rather than by a systematic search. The 1832 and 1835 records are thus two unique memories of the same event, each formed when different kinds of cues activated different pieces of the past stored in different parts of Joseph's brain. Because the memories are of the same event, they are quite similar, but because their retrieval cues enabled Joseph to recover varied pieces of the past, they are also quite distinct. The 1835 record of spontaneous memory shows that, given the right cues and context, Joseph could produce a memory of the event that did not depend on or respond



to the Methodist minister, either attempting to please him, as in 1832, or lashing back at him, as in 1838–39.

### RETRIEVAL AND THE 1835 AND 1838–39 ACCOUNTS

Like the 1832 and unlike the 1835 story, the 1838–39 consolidation of Joseph Smith's memory was strategic, cued by the intentional, explicit act of composing history. Indeed, the awful year, much of it spent in jail in Liberty, Missouri, bookended by Joseph's 1838 and 1839 history drafts, provided the present that cued this memory of the past. Defensive from the outset, the extant 1839 draft of this document declared that it was written to "disabuse the publick mind" by counteracting "the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons" who were militating against Joseph's character and his church, and it continues at times as a protest against the Protestant clergy.

Joseph's crisis in this account is caused by clergymen who created a contest for souls and turned the Bible into a battleground. Richard L. Bushman observed how Joseph Smith's earliest recorded memory of the vision and this one share the story "of a lonely adolescent, occupied with spiritual agonies, trying to account for his fabulous experiences." He notes how the later document "has a more confident public tone" and asserts that "Joseph, still the perplexed youth, is also the prophet about to usher in the last dispensation."<sup>25</sup> The perspective is enlarged and institutional. The revelation is not simply another manifestation of Christ to a born-again soul, but an indictment of Christian churches and creeds. It is not simply the marvelous experiences of Joseph Smith but the story of "the rise and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."<sup>26</sup>

The 1839 narrative begins with the facts of Joseph's life in the same straightforward style that characterizes earlier accounts, but then it begins to muse about the events, identifying and assigning meaning in the process. In other words, Joseph Smith's factual memory of the preacher's rejection catalyzed an important interpretive memory that is manifest in his shift from narrated facts to a description of how it felt to remember the rejection in the context of Missouri.

Recalling fears about the status of his teenage soul and concerns that the Calvinist Presbyterians could be right about God saving or damning according to his will, and anxious to find evidence of a Methodist alternative, Joseph Smith remembered that he favored Methodism and wanted to join but felt paralyzed by the denominational competition. The epiphany that resulted from his reading of the invitation in James 1:5 to ask God for wisdom emerges often in Joseph's accounts but is especially pronounced in 1839, since it enabled him to transcend the clergy and sent him to the woods where he learned for himself.



In the 1839 document, Joseph Smith remembered not only sights, sounds, and the most intense thoughts and emotions of his experience, but he also made sense of his present position as the embattled president of a new church by noting how Protestant clergymen fought to redeem his soul, only to have their pretense exposed as sectarian strife.<sup>27</sup> He remembered in this context that when his vulnerable teenage self had asked the Son of God which of the churches he should join, the divine reply was “none of them, for they were all wrong, and the Personage who addressed me said that all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight, that those professors were all corrupt, that ‘they draw near to me to with their lips but their hearts are far from me, They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof.’”<sup>28</sup> He then describes his effort to share this heavenly message with a Methodist preacher, who “treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil.”

Remembering his youthful rejection in the wake of war with Missouri made it seem to Joseph Smith that he had always been severely persecuted. In a present rife with concerted opposition often led by Protestant ministers, his mind was cued to search the past for the origins of persecution. He found it in the form of Protestants from whom he had unsuccessfully sought solace in his youth. He recounted his “serious reflection” on what he describes as a recurring thought that he had attracted so much unsolicited attention, though “an obscure boy.” He described his “great sorrow” vividly.

An observer of the outward scene may not have interpreted these events nearly as intensely as Joseph did subjectively. Aside from the stinging rejection of the Methodist minister to whom he reported his vision, his memory of persecution in childhood was vague and notably impersonal. There is very little factual memory in this part of his 1839 narrative aside from the preacher’s rebuff. In Joseph’s interpretive memory, the preacher spoke for everyone else. It *seemed* like everyone had always been allied against him. In the middle of assigning this meaning to his memory, Joseph declared, as if responding to the preacher, that “it was nevertheless a fact, that I had seen a vision.” He then returned to his interpretive mode, telling candidly how, subsequent to the vision itself, he found meaning in it by comparing his experience to St. Paul’s before Herod Agrippa.<sup>29</sup> This portion of the autobiographical narrative especially shows how Joseph Smith’s long-term consolidation of memory enabled him to find enlarged or at least varied meanings in his experience by 1839, meanings that made sense of his present as well as his past.

Joseph Smith continued to consciously interpret the experience over the years. In 1842 he added amendments to the 1839 document, including this interpretive memory: “It seems as though the adversary was aware at a very early period of my life that I was destined to prove a disturber & annoy of

his kingdom, or else why should the powers of Darkness combine against me, why the oppression & persecution that arose against me, almost in my infancy?"<sup>30</sup> The idea that Joseph Smith was persecuted as a toddler is not a factual memory for which one might find objectively verifiable evidence. It is an interpretive memory, for which the only archive is the mind of the rememberer. To the thirty-six-year-old Joseph Smith, embroiled at the time of the 1842 composition in efforts to extradite him from Illinois to Missouri, oppression and persecution *seemed* to have begun in infancy and to have lasted for a lifetime.

### THE REARRANGEMENT OF MEMORY

Joseph Smith's accounts of his experience are rich descriptions of his world, saturated with cognitive words and deeply emotional clauses. They are narrative descriptions of his experience, journeys inside of his *mind*, a word he used frequently when recounting the vision. As a result, Smith's accounts of his theophany are representative of a dynamic memory. His stories exhibit cognitive sophistication as well as a rich mixture of emotions. They reveal forgetting, as well as enduring, vivid memories of elements of the experience that deeply impressed him—anxious uncertainty prior to the vision, the epiphany that resulted from reading and reflecting on James 1:5, the feeling of love and redemption that followed being forgiven by God, and the reality of the vision itself. The accounts reveal that he consciously interpreted the experience and discovered meanings in it later that were not available to him when it occurred. The accounts are not, by Joseph's acknowledgment, a flawless recreation of the event, nor are they likely "a complete fabrication of life events."<sup>31</sup> Rather, they are products of Joseph Smith's subjective, constructive process of remembering.

There is no way to show, nor is there necessarily reason to assume, that Joseph's memories decrease in accuracy or increase in distortion in proportion to their historical distance from the vision itself. It seems best to regard each of them as a new memory, each a creation formed by an original connection of present cues and stored pieces of past experience. Each reveals some of the ways Joseph Smith integrated his past and ever-changing present in a continuous effort to make sense of both. Given what the study of memory has revealed, it seems unwise to read Joseph Smith's accounts as static pictures of a verifiable past or as complete fabrications of an experience that did not happen. Rather, they are evidence of what Richard Bushman called "the rearrangement of memory," or of what might be quite accurately called, simply, *remembering*.<sup>32</sup>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. “First Vision Accounts.” <https://www.lds.org/topics/first-vision-accounts>.

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*Smith's First Vision.* Among other projects, he is currently at work analyzing how Joseph Smith's First Vision has been remembered over time. He is married to Jennifer Sebring, and they have five children.

## NOTES

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2. "History, circa 1832," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832?p=1>.
3. Doctrine and Covenants 85.
4. "History, circa 1832," *Joseph Smith Papers*.
5. "Journal, 1835–1836," *Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-1835-1836?p=24>.
6. "History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2]," *Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2?p=2>.
7. Joseph Smith, "Latter Day Saints," in *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*, comp. I. Daniel Rupp (Philadelphia: J. Y. Humphreys, 1844), 404–10.
8. "Church History, 1 March 1842," *Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/church-history-1-march-1842?p=1>.
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14. *JSP*, J1:87–88.
15. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1: 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 10–16 (hereafter *JSP*, H1).
16. Maurice Halbwachs and others have argued that all individual memory is in some sense collective, since it is socially mediated. See Anastasio et al., *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation: Analogous Processes on Different Levels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 45–48.

17. Neal A. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, "Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith's First Vision," in *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 33.
18. JSP, H1:5, n. 11.
19. See D&C 76 and 84, "Doctrine and Covenants, 1844," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/doctrine-and-covenants-1844>.
20. Anastasio et al., *Individual and Collective Memory Consolidation*, 9.
21. Lambert and Cracroft, "Literary Form," 36–37.
22. JSP, H1:214–17.
23. Susan Engel, *Context Is Everything: The Nature of Memory* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1999), 9, 18–33, 48.
24. JSP, H1:10–16; Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 69.
25. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 389; see also Lambert and Cracroft, "Literary Form," 69.
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27. JSP, H1:204–20.
28. JSP, H1:214.
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