

Guest Editor's Prologue

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Truman G. Madsen

Imagine yourself sifting through some documents on western New York and finding this typescript interview with a Presbyterian lady who grew up on a farm close to Joseph Smith's:

[she] . . . said her father loved young Joseph Smith and often hired him to work with his boys. She was about six years old, she said, when he first came to their home . . .

She remembered, she said, the excitement stirred up among some of the people over the boy's first vision, and of hearing her father contend that it was only the sweet dream of a pure-minded boy.

She stated that one of their church leaders came to her father to remonstrate against his allowing such close friendship between his family and the "Smith boy," as he called him. Her father, she said, defended his own position by saying that the boy was the best help he had ever found . . . when Joseph Smith worked with them the work went steadily forward and he got the full worth of the wages he paid.

Not until Joseph had had a second vision, she averred, and began to write a book . . . did her parents cut off their friendship for all the Smiths, for *all* the family followed Joseph. Even the father, intelligent man that he was, could not discern the evil he was helping to promote . . .

This is one of the "finds" of the researchers enlisted during recent years to pursue Mormon origins in New York. It is the only document yet discovered in which someone outside the Church has recorded hearing of Joseph Smith's First Vision at the time he had it.

The document has raised many questions and brought to the surface many differing philosophies of history when shown to professionals. In general they agree that we do not know enough about it to rely on its complete authenticity. We can summarize our knowledge of it by saying this is a late recollection of a Mrs. Palmer and that it is apparently not in her words but someone else's (unknown) who recorded it. Adepts in Mormon history will know how the portrait that emerges, squares, or fails to, with many dime-a-dozen legendary statements that we find still circulating in Palmyra.

The point here is not what the document says but what the find illustrates: the need for gathering, the absolute error of supposing that "It's all been done." Anybody on any day can walk into almost any library and find source materials that have important, even crucial, bearing on Mormon origins. Moreover, treasures lie under our very noses. This one came out of Sevier County, Utah. Our own attics may contain notes and scraps, or even

diaries, that are, we suppose, of interest only, if at all, to the family genealogist. But the hypothesis is now an axiom: there are vital tasks of gathering, researching, and interpreting which are too vast for any one mind, or any one hundred minds. They must involve us all.

The Institute of Mormon Studies, finding and funding such researchers, is a kind of cooperative network. Appropriately, we are involved in this cooperative historical project, which begins, logically and chronologically, with New York. (See Allen and Arrington below.)

The period awaits full exploration by social scientists, artists, literary historians, and as Dr. Lyon says herein, restoration archaeologists. Our task is conceived as preliminary—to deepen the fund of reliable data. Four factors encourage us:

First, the recognition that nothing has been done that cannot be improved and supplemented. B. H. Roberts, who frankly (and many would say quite justly) announced that his *Comprehensive History* was “the masterpiece of historical writing in the first century of the Church’s history,” also said, “It will all be done over again, better.” The “better,” we interpolate, whatever else it may be, will show in the precision and scope of the materials, in the insight and wholeness of interpretation, in the interlacings of happenings with the development of ideas. Compared to what has been done, and what is not yet attempted, there are “alps on alps.” (Rodman Paul believes we need to “catch up” with such social scientists as O’Dea, *et al.*) Cooperative research will be broader and deeper than the work of isolated individuals.

Second, a deepening pool of historical talent. More persons of established competence in history are active today in history of religions, intellectual history, and American history, both in and beyond the Church, than at any prior time. And leg-work researchers are legion. The papers herein, for example, have been drawn together by a half dozen individuals. But the research on which these papers are based has involved over a hundred people across the country.

Third, the removal of barriers and isolations. We have not witnessed anything quite like it before. Mormon and non-Mormon, veteran and neophyte, library and seminary, university and chance acquaintance, historical society and family friend have “joined hands” all in a calmer, kinder mood. The pattern of vitriolic blast and hasty fence repairs can still be seen here and there. But among responsible minds there is a recognition, a motivating one, that the varieties of scholarship often make friends of supposed enemies. All of us can unite as analysts before we separate as analysts; we can work long and hard together on the search for sources before we begin to choose up sides. Such a federation of methods and personalities is a present reality.

Fourth, the expanding interest in the Western world (reflected in our state universities) in the coherent study of religions. By 1980 the Church itself will have a membership of five to six million, international in character. The fresh perspectives of those who become identified with the movement, and their allies, will surely intensify concern for the Church's legacy, its authentic past. The very statistical importance of the Church will draw the attention of competent observers; and those satisfied with surface glimpses will inevitably diminish. Backgrounds, in short, will more and more come to the foreground.

In that spirit, then, we announce with unqualified approval the meticulous work being done under Earl Olson's staff at the LDS Historian's Office. Archivist Dean Jessee's paper herein is a subtopic of that project. It is the historiography of the official history; an analysis of the composition of the seven-volume *History of the Church* (DHC), the times of its accumulation and dictation in manuscript form, the secretaries involved, the decisions as to what to include and omit, patterns and sources used in correcting processes. Unknown to some, this patient reconstruction has been underway for some time at the instance of the Church authorities. It is now beginning to be made available to interested scholars.

Our search has shaken several idols of some historical critics about the New York era. For example:

(1) the dogma that the unedited manuscript history is most reliable. In case after case we find corrections in the published version based on hard evidence. The negative connotation of "edit" cannot be generalized.

(2) the "burned-over district" stereotype derived, perhaps unfairly, from Whitney Cross. All was not feverish and frenzied. Instead, in 1819 religious evangelism had phases which were "solemn, still, and reflective," commending withdrawal into silence.

(3) several word-shifts. We have found ourselves misreading Joseph. He speaks, for example, of "parties" (meaning more than denominations or churches), of "religious excitement" (meaning dispute as well as conversion), of "revival" (meaning spiritual awakenings as well as meetings), of "Lord," "angel," "persecution" with meanings slightly, but importantly, different from present usage.

(4) either-or. Our inquiry has at times been crippled by questions whose form guaranteed distortion. Was Joseph stimulated by his Bible or by some preachers? Did Joseph Smith want a knowledge of which church to join or forgiveness of his sins? Did he behold the Father and the Son or angels? The answer is often "both/and" instead of "either/or."

A caution or corrective emerges from these as a working principle. Let us not claim more or less for Joseph Smith than he claimed for himself. That is primary. It forces us back to original materials. We must be concerned

at the outset with what is what, avoiding what Feigl called the twin temptations: reductive tendencies (“nothing but”) and seductive tendencies (“something more than”).

Out of these studies, which we intend to continue and expand, will come published monographs or source-bibliographies for each period of the Church. Out of these, in turn, may come a carefully annotated *DHC*, footnoted on each name, place, and date and explaining alteration, a chronicle in which future scholars may place confidence. And out of these, in turn, will emerge a comprehensive history which will be for its time a new masterpiece.

This means an official invitation to all: Match the desire to publish, to “break into print” with a concern to contribute your “raw data” to the development of a monumental monograph on sources. (Even a three-by-five card with the name of a New York convert will be credited to you.)

The committee has encouraged me to add a word on the limits of perspective, historical perspective in particular. No mistake is more inept among critics of Mormonism than the supposition, often derived from their own traditional outlook, that past events, beginning events, are “what we go on” religiously, and that the present completely hinges on the past. It was exactly that assumption which Joseph Smith uprooted. That there were unique and unrepeatable aspects in his experience is obvious. But he insisted that in authentic religion there are public, shareable, and in a less precise sense, repeatable experiences. In a Church totally committed to the “yet to come” of divine revelation and one equally committed to rescue the past from obscurity, the point is not to swallow and accept, but to duplicate and reenact. Religiously we are condemned if we cling vicariously to the highest experiences of the past in the absence of our own. And it is no paradox that our interest in present experience intensifies interest in the past.

A similar distortion arises in historical approaches to Joseph himself. A tremendous loss occurs when one must turn from the occurrence, the personal observation, to the written word, to the preserved, to the presently available, to the presently understood. Some have written as if Joseph Smith’s First Vision were his final or at least foremost. Yet in the very year he was dictating the earliest known account of the First Vision to Frederick G. Williams (1831–32), he received “The Vision” (February 16, 1832) with Sidney Rigdon. Some of its differences from the First Vision are that it was (1) shared, witnessed, and written jointly with Sidney Rigdon; (2) recorded in the spirit of the event on the very day and place of its occurrence; and (3) immediately copied and circulated far beyond Ohio. And the Prophet later said that he could reveal “a hundred fold more” of what he learned in this vision, which included their both seeing the Father and the Son, but

for two reasons: he was not permitted, and the saints were not prepared.

Now that we have copies of the three early manuscript accounts of the First Vision bound in this single volume, we are impressed with their harmony considering the very different circumstances of their writing: (1) the 1831–32 manuscript is apparently an attempt to get it on record; (2) the 1835 account relates a spontaneous interview between the Prophet and a Jewish minister, recorded by his scribe “as nearly as follows;” and (3) the 1838 record was written to answer “the many reports” circulating as far west as Missouri which the Prophet said were designed to militate against the character of the Church. Several members of the Institute of Mormon Studies are presently preparing studies of these accounts, recorded interviews, and journal reports of gatherings where the Prophet presented or mentioned his experiences in New York. These will be published in future issues of *BYU Studies* as they are completed.

Thus, if the focus of this issue is “What is the evidence for these events?” that is only the foreword to the implicit focus and question: “What are these events evidence for?”

All the contributors have written in a tentative tone and commend the same tone in the reader. They invite further scholarly analysis, fully expecting that these formulations may very well be burst by the growing content of research. For in the study of history as in history itself, the final word is that there is no final word.

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