

The First Vision as a Prehistory of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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Most scholarly attention to the First Vision is dedicated to determining whether it happened or whether whatever happened is reliably described in the few primary accounts we have of it. My interests lie in a different direction. I am interested in the First Vision accounts insofar as they tell us something about religion, not about history, and not least because my wager is that this story, as a story, exceeds the limits of history, especially when it becomes understood as scripture. Which is to say, I want to better understand the work done by this story among the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

For this analysis of Smith's representation of his quest and its positive resolution, I will rely chiefly on the 1832 and 1838 manuscripts as the most intentional of the four accounts. They not only share a historiographical purpose but also are related in their production, the 1838 manuscript having used the 1832 account as a base for its narrative structure and descriptive detail of events. In contrast, the intervening 1835 account is a report of a conversation with a sole interlocutor observed by a notetaking third party. It is less useful as a primary source for Smith's understanding of the larger significance of his initial spiritual experience. The 1842 Wentworth letter is as intentional as the other church histories but relies on secondary accounts for much of its content. Finally, because of its canonical status, the 1838 manuscript is not merely authoritative but generative of the faithful reader's religious convictions. Therefore, it is uniquely relevant to this analysis of the First Vision's meaning and function among the Saints.

History and Prehistory

Joseph Smith defined his 1832 history as an account of “the rise of the church of Christ” and limited its story to four events that preceded the Church’s organization.¹ Six years later, when he returned to the unfinished 1832 manuscript and enlarged upon it, his purpose remained the same: to give an account of “the rise and progress of the Church.”² The word “progress” was a general reference to the fact that he had formally organized “according to law” the Church of Christ eight years prior.³ Nevertheless, his personal focus remained on the Church’s prehistory, not its progress.⁴ Later, others would take over the task of describing the progress of which they were a part. Smith, however, had a unique vantage point on the four events that he credits with constituting the Church’s “rise,” its coming into being. They are listed in the prologue to his first draft: “Firstly . . . receiving the testamony from on high secondly the ministering of Angels.”⁵ The words “testamony from on high” are a reference to what is today called the “First Vision.” The text later makes clear that “the ministering of Angels” is a reference to what is today understood as Moroni’s visit and tutelage. Smith’s accounts allow for other angels to have been a part of this event; hence, the plural “Angels.” Finally, Smith promises to give an account of “the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministering of—Aangels to adminster the letter of the Gospel—the Law and commandments as they were given unto him—and the ordinencs, [and] forthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of God confereed upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c—.”⁶ These third and fourth events are the appearance of John the Baptist and, subsequently, of Peter, James, and

1. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 24, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/1>.

2. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 1, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 24, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/1>.

3. “Book of Commandments, 1833,” [1], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-commandments-1833/5>.

4. Events subsequent to the Church’s organization were later included in the 1835 Book of Commandments and in what became the official history of the Church, which is still being written.

5. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

6. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

John to confer, respectively, the Old and New Testament priesthoods.⁷ Today these priesthoods are denominated Aaronic and Melchizedek but have the same scope of action: the first over temporal concerns, or the “Law and commandments,” and the second holding the keys to the spiritual blessings of the Church.⁸ Thus, “the testamony,” or First Vision, as its name suggests, is only the first part of the story and implicitly serves as the introduction to the events that followed. As with first part of any story, this one directs the reader to the end of the story, and even discloses the reason for the story as an institutional history.

While it can be said that Joseph Smith began his religious life wanting to know which church was true, it is more accurate to say he wanted to know which church could truly save him. “My mind [had] become,” he wrote in 1832, “excedingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found that . . . there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ[,] . . . and I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world.”⁹ Thus, in the 1832 account of the First Vision, the first declaration or “testamony” of the Lord was an assurance: “Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee.” This was followed by a simple exhortation to “go thy way walk in my statute” and a relatively long and universal indictment of the world: all to the effect that “none doeth good no not one.” With this, the Lord’s instruction ends, and Smith is portrayed as satisfied, even joyful: “My soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great Joy.”¹⁰ He had obtained the forgiveness he sought, and his quest for salvation was complete.

In contrast, the 1838 account is more institutionally oriented, both in its definition of Smith’s quest and in the words he heard. “My object,” he wrote, “in going to enquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects . . . to join.”¹¹ Though this version does not contradict the first account, it marks a distinctive shift in narrative focus, from personal sin to institutional authority to offer relief from sin. This shift is emphasized in the narrative when God twice forbade Smith to join any church. Moreover, in this account, not the world but religious institutions were faulted.

7. For the history of so identifying the angels that conveyed this priestly authority, see Gregory Prince, *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 4–10.

8. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1; see Doctrine and Covenants 84 and 107.

9. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 2.

10. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3.

11. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3.

Specifically, Smith was told that “all their Creeds were an abomination, . . . that those professors were all corrupt.”¹² The scriptural indictment from the first account is repeated in the 1832 manuscript: “they draw near to me to with their lips but their hearts are far from me.” But what the 1832 account implied, the 1838 makes explicit. The churches did not have the power to save Smith; they did not even seek the power. “They teach for doctrines the commandments of men,” he was told, “having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof.”¹³ By 1838, with the benefit of Joseph Smith’s Kirtland experience and especially the experience of the temple, characterization of the churches as powerless had become his point, or “the testamony.”

Nevertheless, the phrase “having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof” is ambiguous. Typically, the phrase is today read as a denial of modern revelation. The text supports this interpretation by showing how Smith’s reports of this testimony were not believed specifically “because [he] continued to affirm that [he] had seen a Vision.”¹⁴ But it seems to me the content of that vision would have been even more disturbing than the fact of its occurring, especially since, as Richard Bushman has shown, Smith was not alone in being a visionary.¹⁵ Other scholars have agreed that this society and its progenitors lived in a “world of wonders” and folkways that variously informed and competed with the more formal expressions of Christianity.¹⁶ In addition, one can imagine how aggravating it would have been to hear the young man say that all the churches were sinners and, even worse, impotent. For the New Light Evangelicals especially, it would have been insulting to be

12. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3.

13. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3; see Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:8; and 2 Timothy 3:5.

14. As I mentioned, the 1832 account notes both the personal joy of the experience and the disappointment at the rejection of it by others. In the 1838 account, Smith goes into much more detail: his accounts of the vision were treated “with great contempt” and excited “great persecution which continued to increase,” and “this was common among all the sects: all united to persecute me” in “a spirit of the bitterest persecution and reviling.” “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3–4.

15. Richard Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–98): 183–204. See also Jeremy Talmage, “‘Effusions of an Enthusiastic Brain’: Joseph Smith’s First Vision and the Limits of Experiential Religion,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 25–48.

16. See David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

deemed formalists. Even so, Smith was so young and these insults so similar to what the revivalists were saying of each other that we can join Smith in thinking it unusual that they took him, “an obscure boy,” so seriously, at least with respect to his heresy.¹⁷ Alternatively, some have suggested he may have been a little paranoid here and reasonably so, given that he was writing in Missouri in the spring of 1838, during the rigors of the Missourians’ war upon the Saints.

For an alternative explanation for Smith’s harsh judgment against the churches of his day, let me return to my initial wager—namely, that the narrative structure of this account, not merely its historical context—is a source for understanding Smith’s intentions and meaning. From this perspective, the addition of the phrase “the power of Godliness” in the 1838 account goes beyond an indictment of mere religious formalism and doctrinal error.¹⁸ It expresses his primary concern: which of all the competing churches offered salvation?¹⁹ The centrality of divine power to Smith’s story is further evidenced in the next three events that compose the history and are shown to rectify the problem identified in the First Vision. They explain the “rise” and “progress” of the Church not only in revelatory experience but endowments of sacramental authority to mediate “the power of Godliness,” to not only hear God but to act for him. After the First Vision and four years of instruction by Moroni, Smith did the “mighty act” of producing the Book of Mormon as the word of God.²⁰ Next came John the Baptist, who ordained Smith to the holy priesthood pertaining to the letter of the gospel, making him a high priestly judge in the pattern of ancient Israel. As if that were not mighty enough, this ordination denominated him a lawgiver, possessed of the power of administration of “the Law and commandments *as they were given unto him*.”²¹ It is worth noting that the 1832 history was written a year after Smith received the commandment to “go to the Ohio,” with the promise that “there I will give unto you my law” (D&C 38:32). Presumably, this would have informed his retrospective understanding of the meaning of this event and contributed to the force it carries in the characterization of the lesser priesthood in his introduction to this first version of the Church’s history.

17. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 4.

18. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3.

19. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 2.

20. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

21. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1, emphasis added.

The fourth and final evidence that “the Lord brought forth and established by his hand the church of Christ in the eve of time” by giving it divine power was the restoration of a higher priesthood. This event was defined in the 1832 account as bestowing “the Kees of the Kingdom . . . the continuation of the blessings of God.”²² The same revelation that promised the Saints the law in Ohio also promised “there you shall be endowed with power from on high” (D&C 38:32). Just as the experience of administering the law in Kirtland arguably informed Smith’s description of the keys restored by John the Baptist “to administer the letter of the Gospel—the Law and commandments,” so also the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in 1836 arguably informed his 1838 account of the higher priesthood in terms of the relationship between the messengers who ordained him.²³ Though the three events that follow the First Vision in Smith’s “history of the Church” were revelatory, in the sense that they involved communication with heavenly messengers, their ecclesiastical significance is—like the First Vision—much greater than their experiential media, as revelation. In each of the three events, divine power was conveyed and made executable. Thus, the problem identified in the First Vision was solved: the “power of Godliness” was restored and institutionally available to humanity.²⁴

Still, the story of Smith’s history ends at a liminal moment between Smith’s mid-1829 restoration of the higher priesthood and the formal incorporation of the Church in spring 1830. This in-between period is described in the 1838 history but not included in its canonized version. The excluded material introduces the possibility and necessity of proselytizing now that power had been received from on high. After receiving these three dispensations of authority and “feeling it to be

22. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1. In an 1835 revelation, Smith defined this gift as “the keys of all the spiritual blessings of the church—To have the privilege of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, to have the heavens opened unto them, to commune with the general assembly and church of the Firstborn, and to enjoy the communion and presence of God the Father, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant” (D&C 107:18–19).

23. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 18. “The messenger who visited us on this occasion and conferred this priesthood upon us said that his name was John, the same that is called John the Baptist in the new Testament, and that he acted under the direction <of> Peter, James, and John, who held the keys of the priesthood of Melchisedeck, whi[c]h priesthood he said should in due time be conferred on us.”

For the dedication of the Kirtland Temple and receipt of additional power from heavenly messengers, see Doctrine and Covenants 109.

24. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3.

[their] duty,” Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery “commenced to reason out of the scriptures, with [their] acquaintances and friends, as [they] happened to meet with them.”²⁵ The 1838 narrative describes the visit of Samuel Smith and how his older brother Joseph and Oliver Cowdery “reason[ed] with him out of the Bible,” “showed him” parts of the Book of Mormon, “informed him of what the Lord was about to do for the children of men,” and “labored to persuade him” in every way possible. But not until Samuel “retired to the woods, in order that by secret and fervent prayer he might obtain of a merciful God, wisdom to enable him to judge for himself” and “obtained revelation for himself” was he convinced. This revelation, or “testimony,” like his brother’s First Vision, was merely a precedent to power. Only after baptism did Samuel “[return] to his father’s house greatly glorifying and praising God, being filled with the Holy Spirit.”²⁶ Another brother, Hyrum, appears next in the record and to the same effect. Person by person, the process was repeated until approximately twenty persons gather for the formal organization of the Church the next year.

Thus, such doctrinal intentions as this history may have had were in anticipation of and associated with the organization of a church sufficient to mediate salvation. Smith’s history is designed to tell the reader why a church was necessary and how that necessity was accomplished through the bestowal of “the power of Godliness.” Therefore, I would go so far as to say that the First Vision and the three subsequent events are less theological and more ecclesiological in their intent, less descriptive of the nature of God than about the nature of “the Church of Christ in the eve of time.”²⁷ Smith’s history is also less autobiographical than institutional. His brief 1832 prologue does indeed promise to speak of “his marvilous experience.”²⁸ But his role in the story is largely as an object, not an agent of those experiences that constitute the history. Such agency and effect belong to God and his messengers. Likewise, though the 1838 account refutes falsehoods, it does so “in relation to the rise and progress of the Church.” Ultimately, Smith’s history is not an accusatory complaint. It is, as he said when he first put pen to paper in 1832, an account of “marvilous experience” and “mighty acts.”²⁹

25. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 18.

26. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 19.

27. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

28. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

29. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

Thus, even this analysis of the First Vision and its associated events would benefit from more attention to the historical context, not so much of these four events—whether they happened or whether what happened is adequately described—but of what Smith had experienced between 1832 and 1838 that shifted this narrative so dramatically from a personal to an institutional story without changing its plot. Possibly the answer is too obvious and lies in greater appreciation for the effect of Kirtland and especially the dedication of its temple on Smith. Many years later, speaking of the encounter with another heavenly messenger during that dedication, Smith pronounced, “Now the great and grand secret of the whole matter, and the *summum bonum* of the whole subject that is lying before us, consists in obtaining the powers of the Holy Priesthood. For him to whom these keys are given there is no difficulty in obtaining a knowledge of facts in relation to the salvation of the children of men, both as well for the dead as for the living” (D&C 128:11).

Metanarrative and Mythos

Any effort to account for the function of the First Vision among the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is also well served by considering its status as a metanarrative, or a story that provides the pattern for other stories. The Bible, for example, is a metanarrative for stories of creation, fall, and redemption, restoration, and consummation. Consider the less-complicated version of Smith’s historical narrative in which he is burdened by sin and ignorance, redeemed and enlightened, and finally, empowered and able to empower others. Note the narrative’s application to Samuel Smith’s story, especially if we were to include his becoming the Church’s first missionary. In Mormonism, there are innumerable stories after the pattern of the First Vision.

Moreover, as a canonized prehistory of the Church, Smith’s account has achieved for many the power of myth. It is, or at least resembles in its effects, an origin myth, one of those culturewide narratives of primordial events, events that occurred “in the beginning” or “once upon a time,” when chaos was given order, and that therefore offer to explain the relations between time and eternity, between God and humanity. The effect on the believing reader can be the same, bringing new order to a disrupted present. “In recounting how these things began and how they will end,” writes Ricoeur, “the myth places the experience of [the reader or listener] in a whole that receives orientation and meaning from the narration. Thus, an understanding of human reality as a whole operates through the myth by means of a reminiscence and an

expectation.”³⁰ That is to say, through their myths of origin, believers are able to order or give directional purpose to the present, use the past to imagine a horizon of future possibilities, and orient present action toward that future, not only finding opportunity but also negotiating crises. Though more recent scholars have doubted that modernity can provide such believing readers, religion continues to thrive on myth and metanarrative.³¹ Smith’s account of the First Vision is a prime example, though it was not put to general use until more than a half-century after Smith’s death.

In the words of James B. Allen, author of the most extensive study, the First Vision “was not a matter of common knowledge, even among church members, in the earliest years of Mormon history.”³² Though used in a sermon as early as 1883, the First Vision did not reach a turning point in its status until the administration of Joseph F. Smith. The story was first used in Latter-day Saint Sunday School texts in 1905, in priesthood instructional manuals in 1909, as a separate missionary tract in 1910, and in histories of the Church in 1912. In 1916, the Church took ownership of the Smith family farm in Palmyra, New York. A grove of trees on the site where Joseph Smith was assumed to have had the First Vision became an increasingly popular pilgrimage site, culminating in centennial celebrations in 1920. By midcentury, Joseph Smith’s account of his theophany was denominated “The Joseph Smith Story.” Eventually, this story would be granted the status of “the beginning point, the fountainhead, of the restoration of the gospel in this dispensation.”³³

As I have argued elsewhere, Joseph Smith’s prehistory of the Church captured the attention of Progressive Era Church members because it oriented them at a time of chaos intensified by the Reed Smoot

30. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 6.

31. “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward meta-narratives.” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv. See also W. Taylor Stevenson, “Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness,” in *Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness*, ed. Lee W. Gibbs and W. Taylor Stevenson (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975), 1–17.

32. James B. Allen, “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–61.

33. Milton V. Backman Jr., “First Vision,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:515–16.

hearing.³⁴ As “*The Joseph Smith Story*,” Smith’s prehistory not only gave order to the Saints’ contemporary experience of crisis with authority but also provided hope for the future in its promise that their bond with the sacred would not be broken. Like the stories of Moses and Abraham, with which it was eventually printed, the 1838 account could be read as a prophet’s story, describing his calling, preparation, and labor of inaugurating a new aeon or dispensation of the gospel power. Probably the most extravagant and comforting of such promises was John the Baptist’s that the authority by which the Church was organized (and, implicitly, capable of being reorganized) “shall never be taken again from the earth” until it accomplished its purpose of latter-day preparation for a millennial reign of Christ (D&C 13:1). The believing reader of the Joseph Smith story is thereby assured that Smith’s restoration was permanent, that there would always remain in the Church the “power of Godliness” necessary and sufficient to administer salvation, temporal and spiritual.

Thus, Progressive Era changes to the Church were ordered within Smith’s cosmology of divine promise and fulfillment. This lent stability to efforts to revoke the theocracy, economic communalism, and plural marriage of the previous generation. Member confidence in that cosmology may have been shaken by the defensive and casuistic testimony of Church witnesses at the Smoot hearing, by the confusion and disarray in Church policy, and by the judgment and removal of Apostles John W. Taylor and Matthias F. Cowley.³⁵ Yet the constructive capacity of Smith’s mythos of pre-Church origins and its unbreakable bond with the sacred helped restore confidence in most members. By inscribing their present experience onto Joseph Smith’s, believing readers could appropriate a future in which failure was impossible. In these first years of the twenty-first century, with its own tensions and fissures within the Church, the celebratory bicentennial year of the First Vision could not have been better timed.

Let me make one final point about the First Vision in relation to my hypothesis that the Church is for Smith primarily a locus of power, not merely a deposit of right doctrine. This point has to do with empowerment of others.³⁶ Like Lehi, the initial protagonist in the Book of

34. For a discussion of the use of the First Vision during the Smoot hearing, see Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 109–35.

35. See Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, 91–94, 104–7, 144.

36. No wonder, then, that the idea of a “first vision” has achieved primacy in the imagination of all would-be Saints.

Mormon, Smith was a “visionary man.” The fact that he had so many visions reminds us to moderate our emphasis on his First Vision by remembering it was *only* the first. Nevertheless, the First Vision attains among contemporary Saints insofar as it is paradigmatic. It is rightly honored as providing the pattern for obtaining faith and, therefore, a chief duty for the faithful. Here I ask you to consider the ways in which Smith’s First Vision has become enacted, even ritualized, within the Saints’ formal worship services, as well in their ordinary conversations.

Ritualization

The First Vision story fits into not only the history of seekerism and evangelism but also early American Bible-reading and religion-making efforts to participate in salvation history. Like the Puritans and especially radical Puritans, Latter-day Saints have always wanted to live within a society bound by biblical covenants and ordinances.³⁷ They seek not only to know which church is true but to experience holiness. Though culturally more characteristic of Smith’s time and place, the desire to be holy is no less central to the religious life generally. Regardless, it is certainly the central wager of Mormonism, then and now, what Smith sought to realize through a restoration of the “power of Godliness.” Seen from this vantage point, his organizational efforts to found a church were nothing less than an effort to create a tool by which others, notwithstanding their ordinariness, could experience the divine. Though awash in word and text, Mormonism is a fully embodied religion. Its core convictions are to be experienced in everyday life and are guided by ritual expression.

All four of the Smith’s accounts of his first vision convey sense impression, not merely words or mental impressions. They emphasize his having seen a great light, as great as and even brighter than the sun at “noon day” and as a “pillar of flame which was spread all around.”³⁸ The light “rested upon” him and bathed the world in a fire that did not burn, but “filled [him] with the spirit of god.”³⁹ The 1838 account adds that darkness engulfed him immediately after he voiced “the desires

37. See Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

38. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3; “Journal, 1835–1836,” 24, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed April 16, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25>.

39. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3.

of my heart to God.” The darkness was “thick” and “overcame” and “gathered around” and bound him by some great power of “astonishing influence.”⁴⁰ When the pillar of light or flame appeared, it expelled the darkness. Then, the aural dimension—or what Smith heard—becomes the focus of his narrative, and the testimony begins. Such originating moments of the Church’s history, or of any religion’s history for that matter, are maintained and made present not only by such writing but also by embodiment in rituals. Think, for example, of the New Testament’s description and nearly two thousand years’ observance of the Last Supper.

There are other, more ordinary rituals, too, which order the life of believers and believing communities and signify the possibility of spiritual transformation. The amount and centrality of ritual to the Latter-day Saints in their ordinary lives and religious activities, from family prayer and family home evening to temple endowments and sealings, evidence this fact. Hence, not surprisingly, Smith’s narrativizing of the vision that began it all has become ritually performed and provides a source of personal and collective renewal from generation to generation, a pattern to be repeated and internalized.

On the first Sunday of every month, the Saints leave their pews and stand before their congregations to articulate a “spiritual experience,” an experience that is a testimony to them of some religious reality from which a religious conviction has been distilled. To my knowledge, anthropologist David Knowlton has provided the most complete analysis of this practice as a ritual. Noting the presumed spontaneity of the moment, he observes, “It may surprise some Saints, but our bearing of testimonies is as much a structured ritual as the high Catholic mass. . . . [or] the Andeans who ceremoniously [present objects] . . . as an offering to the mountains and the earth.” The difference between these and the Saints’ formal testimony bearing is only, he writes, the “kinds of signs and symbols we privilege. . . . Words become our stones, our llama hair, our sugar. . . . When we combine these emblem-words in meaningful ways within ritual settings, they not only create referential meaning (an understanding of the intended message), they also invoke spiritual significance. . . . It is the ritual of testimony—the structured, public speaking of a shared rhetoric—which makes the metaphor of testimony tangible and immediate.”⁴¹ Such testifying does not merely

40. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 3.

41. David Knowlton, “Belief, Metaphor, and Rhetoric: The Mormon Practice of Testimony Bearing,” *Sunstone* 15, no. 1 (1991): 20–27.

describe. It performs and marks the modern seeker's progress along the path modeled by Smith himself, from naïve questioning to manifestation of power. Also, like Smith, they find in this experience the legitimacy of the Church as a locus of divine power.

I would add to Knowlton's analysis more recent theoretical insight that rituals, for all their structure and repetition, are also relatively flexible and constructive. They create in the performer a kind of "mastery that experiences itself as relatively empowered, not as conditioned or molded."⁴² As such, ritualization facilitates and even enables both participation in and resistance to the larger socio-cultural dynamics within which it operates. In other words, rituals make not robots but players within a field of social power. Thus, the Saints' formal testifying, as a ritual, both reiterates the First Vision and pushes it in new directions. This, too, is consistent with the ways in which Smith's testimony enacted and contested the conversion narratives of his day.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that Smith's testimony has become memorialized and is ritualized in a manner that reinforces the Saints' conviction that the power of godliness is at work in the world, their world, and by them, as well for their benefit. Thus, the 1832 manuscript's witness to personal salvation through divine act and the 1838 manuscript's measure of institutional legitimacy through endowments of divine power are joined and renewed by successive generations who witness to a divine power at work in the Church. These accounts, whether or not on the first Sunday of every month or by ordinary believers or prophets, are more than a history of events, though that may be the only way we can perceive them scientifically. Understanding them, however, requires acknowledging that this is religious activity. It is an attempt to explain the "marvilous," the sense of something not material but no less real.⁴³ It is the work of all religions, and this is one of the ways Mormonism does that work, from generation to generation. Hence, the canonization of Smith history, which made it formally the rule or measure and *regula* or order of faith.

42. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 221. Bell further describes this "relative empowerment" as a "practical knowledge [which] is not an inflexible set of assumptions, beliefs, or body postures; rather, it is the ability to deploy, play, and manipulate basic schemes in ways that appropriate and condition experience effectively." See also Catherine Bell, "The Ritual Body and the Dynamics of Ritual Power," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4, no. 2 (1990): 299–313.

43. "History, circa Summer 1832," 1.

Conclusion

No doubt, when seeking to distinguish themselves from other branches of Christianity, the Saints will continue to find it convenient to use the First Vision to argue that God is not trinitarian. Smith's accounts of the event show, however, that this was not a pressing issue for him. Rather, he was anxious to find the church that could enable him to obtain forgiveness of his sins. When he did receive forgiveness, however, it was by divine intervention. As for finding a church, he left the grove empty-handed. Smith's story then turns to showing how, because it could not be found, such a church had to be founded—through Smith becoming a prophet and being ordained a high priest. In these events, we find the answer to Smith's naïve first prayer and the story of his own maturation, in addition to “the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time.”⁴⁴ Thus, to the extent that it can be reduced to a doctrinal proposition, the First Vision stands largely for an ecclesiological one. In telling the reader how The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came into being, Smith's history tells the reader something essential, even definitive, about the Church. Or, in other words, he gave the reasons for the Church's existence: its having “the power of Godliness” to save souls.

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44. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.