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Author(s): Steven C. Harper

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Abstract: Joseph Smith's first vision is exponentially more important to Latter-day Saints now than it was when the Church was restored in 1830. Perhaps as an effect of that newfound importance, today the vision is a battleground—people negotiate their identities and relationships relative to it as they join or leave the Church, as they fight for or against the faith. How were the stakes raised?

What follows is not the whole story; this focuses on a few historical hinges in the larger story. These turning points may seem inevitable. It would be unwise, however, to assume that Joseph Smith's first vision would automatically become common knowledge to Latter-day Saints, or that they would inevitably consider it scripture, or that it would, by default, become the faith's genesis story. Many contingent choices combined and compounded to raise the stakes.



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Raising the Stakes

How Joseph Smith's First Vision Became All or Nothing

Steven C. Harper

Joseph Smith (1805–1844) inhabited a visionary world and belonged to a visionary family.¹ At about age twelve, he began to worry about his soul and started searching the Bible. As he compared the scriptures to the Christian denominations where he lived in western New York State, he found discord. For two or three years, he worried about “the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind.” He became “exceedingly distressed” and “convicted” of his sins, a problem compounded by his inability to find any “society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament.”²

Finally, he went to the woods and “cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and obtain mercy.” Joseph Smith’s earliest known account of what happened next says “a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the <Lord> opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph <my son> thy sins are forgiven thee.”³

He recorded at least four accounts of this experience between 1832 and 1842, and a few of his contemporaries wrote secondary accounts during his lifetime. Generally speaking, however, the earliest Latter-day Saints did not know much, if anything, about Joseph Smith’s first vision. It was not typically taught by missionaries or regarded as a point

1. See Richard L. Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–1998): 183–204.

2. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 2, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/2>.

3. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3.

of orthodox belief. That changed gradually after it was canonized in 1880. In 2002, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley stated, “We declare without equivocation that God the Father and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, appeared in person to the boy Joseph Smith.” He added, “Our whole strength rests on the validity of that vision. It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens.”⁴

Clearly the stakes have been raised over time. Joseph Smith’s first vision is exponentially more important to Latter-day Saints now than it was when the Church was restored in 1830. Perhaps as an effect of that newfound importance, today the vision is a battleground—people negotiate their identities and relationships relative to it as they join or leave the Church, as they fight for or against the faith. How were the stakes raised?

What follows is not the whole story; this focuses on a few historical hinges in the larger story. These turning points may seem inevitable. It would be unwise, however, to assume that Joseph Smith’s first vision would automatically become common knowledge to Latter-day Saints, or that they would inevitably consider it scripture, or that it would, by default, become the faith’s genesis story. Many contingent choices combined and compounded to raise the stakes.

1: Joseph Smith Overcame Reluctance to Tell and Record His Experience

Joseph Smith did not have to tell anyone about his vision. He did not have to record it. If he had chosen not to do either, there would have been no stakes to raise. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would have a different point of origin, probably the angel calling Joseph to the work of bringing forth the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith reported that a few days after his first vision, he “happened to be in company” with a Methodist preacher who had stirred many souls (including his). “I took occasion to give him an account of the vision,” Joseph remembered eighteen years later. “I was greatly surprised at his behaviour, he treated my communication not only lightly but with great contempt.” The minister said the story was of the devil, visions had ended with the Apostles, and there would never be another one.⁵

4. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith,” *Ensign* 32, no. 11 (November 2002): 80.

5. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 3–4, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 15, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/3>.

“Telling the story,” Joseph eventually explained, “had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion and was the cause of great persecution.”⁶ So apparently he turned inward and thought much about whether to tell, whom to tell, and how to tell his experience.

After years of what he called “serious reflection,” he embraced the identity of the persecuted visionary. He was as Paul before King Agrippa when Paul was relating “the account of the Vision he had when he saw a light and heard a voice, but still there were but few who beleived him, some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad, and he was ridiculed and reviled, But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. . . . So it was with me,” Joseph Smith declared.⁷

For much of the time between the vision and the recording of his manuscript history beginning in 1838, Joseph Smith felt torn between revealing and concealing his vision. In the early 1830s, he had no problem preaching the Book of Mormon as new scripture—he published five thousand copies, and he planned to publish ten thousand copies of the Savior’s revelations to him. His first vision was different, however. To Joseph, the Book of Mormon and the revelations were not his compositions—he was a translator and a revelator only, not an author. As such, he remained reluctant to tell his own vision story. He felt compelled by his own revelations to document his past, yet he felt incapable of doing so. But in the summer of 1832, when Sidney Rigdon claimed that God had vested Joseph’s authority in him instead, Joseph confiscated Sidney’s preaching license and declared, “I myself hold the Keys of this last dispensation and I forever will hold them in time and in eternity.”⁸ In that context, Joseph decided to tell his story, starting with his first vision.

With his counselor Frederick Williams as scribe, Joseph began “A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr. an account of his marvilous experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Ch[r]ist the son of the living God of whom he beareth record and also an account of the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time according as the Lord brought forth and established by his hand.”⁹

6. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 4.

7. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 4.

8. On Rigdon’s claim, see Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 560–64; Philo Dibble, “Early Scenes in Church History,” in *Four Faith Promoting Classics* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 74–96; and see the following at the Church History Library in Salt Lake City: Reynolds Cahoon diary, 5–17 July 1832; Charles C. Rich, “History Charles Coulson Rich,” MS, 3–4.

9. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1.

Williams listed four impressive events in Joseph's life that readers could expect to learn about in the pages that followed, beginning with his earliest experience with God. At that point, Joseph picked up the pen and finished the thought, referring to himself in the third person, as Williams had been doing, then dragged the pen across the page, making a line to separate the introduction from what came next. Below that line, Joseph started referring to himself in the first person, and all the confident language of the introduction vanished, replaced by an explanation as to why what followed was bound to be disappointing now that he was writing his own narrative. "Suffice it to say," he concedes, "I was nearly intractid in reading and writing and the ground <rules> of Arithmatic which const[it]uted my whole literary acquirements."¹⁰

Joseph Smith then wrote of his first vision in raw, vivid, and sincere terms, but he apparently did not share this 1832 autobiography. The men he had appointed to keep the Church's history seem to have known nothing about it. I interpret these facts to mean that he felt he had to record his experience, but in the wake of the minister's rejection he still found it hard to do. However, at around the same time in the early 1830s, he began telling his vision orally to friends and believers. That seems to have come easier to him than putting it in writing. Considerable evidence now shows that Joseph Smith told the vision repeatedly, perhaps often, in private settings, earlier and more frequently than has been previously thought.¹¹

In the aftermath of the Saints' 1838 war with Missouri, Joseph recorded a defensive, resolute account of his vision that would, over time, significantly shape the Saints' shared story. "Owing to the many reports which

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

11. Milo Andrus, 17 July 1853, Papers of George D. Watt, MS 4534, box 2, disk 1, May 1853–July 1853, images 231–256, partial transcript in CR 100 317, box 2, folder 15, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, October 3, 2012, corrected October 2013; Joseph Curtis, "History of Joseph Curtis," 5, MSS 1654, Church History Library; Edward Stevenson, "The Life and History of Edward Stevenson," MS 21, Church History Library; William W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, June 2, 1835, MS, Church History Library; "Journal, 1835–1836," 36–37, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/37>; Parley P. Pratt to Latter-day Saints in Canada, November 27, 1836, MS, Church History Library; M. Isabella Horne, "The Prophet Joseph Smith, Testimony of Sister M. Isabella Horne," *Relief Society Magazine* 38 (March 1951): 158–60; A. Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson, eds., *The Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, vol. 1 (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 455. For what had been previously thought, see 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): 51–52.

have been put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons in relation to the rise and progress of the Church of Latter day Saints,” he began, the words sounding as if he spat them out in defiance, “I have been induced to write this history.” He had “to disabuse the publick mind, and put all enquirers after truth into possession of the facts.”¹²

It was not inevitable that Joseph would remember or report or record his first vision in these ways. If he had chosen not to, our knowledge of it would be different at best and nonexistent at worst.

2: Orson Pratt Keeps the Memory of Joseph’s Vision Alive until the 1838 Account Is Canonized in the Pearl of Great Price

Orson Pratt was the first to publish an account of Joseph Smith’s first vision. Pratt’s *Interesting Account* (1840) marks the end of any remaining reticence on Joseph’s part; he liked how Orson told the story, and it was encouraging to Joseph to find receptive believers in the 1830s. Together, he and these believers published the vision beginning in the 1840s, and then he started telling it to journalists and historians, hoping—perhaps knowing—that they would circulate it in print.¹³

In the nineteenth century, no one worked harder or more effectively than Orson Pratt to make Latter-day Saints aware of the vision and install it as their founding event.¹⁴ Pratt apparently coined the term *first vision* in 1849. In the decades that followed, almost no one preached on the topic besides Orson Pratt, but he preached it effectively and often. By 1880, he would ensure that a mere mention of that pair of words evoked a shared meaning in the minds of many Saints. Even so, in the half century between 1830 and 1880, though Orson Pratt developed

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

13. Orson Pratt, Edinburgh, Scotland, to George A. Smith, London, England, September 24, 1840, George Albert Smith Papers, Church History Library. See Addison Pratt’s journal entry for September 17, 1844, in *The Journals of Addison Pratt*, ed. S. George Ellsworth (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), 197. See also Karen Lynn Davidson and others, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, The Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 519 nn. 7–9, 489–516; Erastus Snow, “Danish Mission summary, 1849 October 19–1854 August 28,” Erastus Snow Journals, 1835–1851, 1856–1857, Church History Catalog, https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE561751.

14. Milton V. Backman Jr., “Defender of the First Vision,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: New York*, ed. Larry C. Porter, Milton V. Backman Jr., and Susan Easton Black (Provo, Utah: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1992), 33–48.

and repeated a narrative of the vision based largely on Joseph's 1838–39 account, that version of the Church's origins was not universally shared, not even by Pratt's fellow Apostles.¹⁵

Early in 1850, thirty-year-old Franklin Richards, an Apostle for a little over a year, arrived in Britain to lead more than 30,000 British Saints. He brought with him an idea for a new "collection of revelations."¹⁶ Published in 1851 as the *Pearl of Great Price*, the salmon-colored booklet included revelations Joseph had published in periodicals but had not canonized or put in a book. These included his 1838–39 account of his first vision.¹⁷

Three decades later, at the Church's semiannual conference in October 1880, Joseph F. Smith, Joseph Smith's nephew and a counselor to Church President John Taylor, proposed that the *Pearl of Great Price* become canon, and the assembled Saints unanimously consented.¹⁸ Thus, Joseph Smith's 1838 account of his vision became scripture. Canonization requires a community.¹⁹ "Scripture is scripture," wrote Stephen Stein, "only insofar as it is recognized and understood as such by a given community."²⁰

15. George A. Smith, November 15, 1864, Ogden Tabernacle, Papers of George D. Watt, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, May 13, 2009. Compare to George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 11:1 (November 15, 1864), which was heavily edited and infused with extensive quotes that are not in the shorthand. See Brigham Young, March 25, 1855, Papers of George D. Watt, MS 4534, box 3, disk 1, images 142–53, Church History Library, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, July 2009, used by permission; Brigham Young, July 8, 1866, Papers of George D. Watt, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth, December 10, 2008, corrected April 13, 2012. See also John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:127 (March 1, 1863); John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:167 (March 2, 1879); and John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:65 (January 4, 1880).

16. Franklin D. Richards to Dr. Levi Richards, February 1, 1851, excerpted in Rodney Turner, "Franklin D. Richards and the Pearl of Great Price," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: British Isles*, ed. Donald Q. Cannon (Provo, Utah: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1990), 180.

17. *The Pearl of Great Price: Being a Choice Selection from the Revelations, Translations, and Narrations of Joseph Smith* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1851).

18. Journal History of the Church, October 10, 1880, 65, Church History Library (chronology of typed entries and newspaper clippings, 1830–present), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=3d758b21-a34a-4fb4-a356-d8ed113e96&crate=0&index=64>.

19. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), ix.

20. Stephen J. Stein, "America's Bibles: Canon, Commentary, and Community," *Church History* 64, no. 2 (June 1995): 171.

Sixty-nine-year-old Orson Pratt, now with snow-white hair and beard, the longest-tenured of the Apostles, watched with great satisfaction as Latter-day Saints assembled in a general conference and raised their hands in support of the proposal to add Joseph's first vision to their canon.²¹

If not for the combination of Pratt's persistence, inclusion of the vision in the Pearl of Great Price, and its eventual canonization, the vision as it is known to Saints today would not have become so commonly known. This is perhaps best observed via John Taylor, who became President of the Church in 1880, at the same time Joseph Smith's excerpted manuscript history was canonized in the Pearl of Great Price. In the 1860s and early 1870s, John Taylor spoke occasionally and briefly of the vision, as Brigham Young and others had before him, blurring events and revelations Joseph Smith remembered as distinct and speaking vaguely of the revelation coming via "an angel."²² Then, influenced by Pratt and the Pearl of Great Price, John Taylor gave increasingly specific sermons that depended on and finally aligned with Joseph's 1838 account of the vision.²³

3: Joseph F. Smith Shifts Emphasis from Joseph Smith's Last Revelation to His First Revelation

After Joseph F. Smith became the prophet and President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in autumn 1901, he routinely visited Sunday School classes and asked one of the fourteen-year-old boys to stand next to him "to give the children an object lesson of the prophet's

21. Orson Pratt had substantially revised Latter-day Saint scriptures into new editions in anticipation of the proposal. Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985), 247–86.

22. For example, in 1863 Taylor reportedly preached, "How did this state of things called Mormonism originate? We read that an angel came down and revealed himself to Joseph Smith and manifested unto him in vision the true position of the world in a religious point of view. He was surrounded with light and glory while the heavenly messenger communicated these things unto him." John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:127 (March 1, 1863). In 1872, Taylor reportedly preached, "Joseph Smith came forward telling us that an angel had administered to him, and had revealed unto him the principles of the Gospel as they existed in former days, and that God was going to set his hand to work in these last days to accomplish his purposes and build up his kingdom, to introduce correct principles, to overturn error, evil, and corruption, and to establish his Church and kingdom upon the earth. I have heard him talk about these things myself." John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:365 (March 17, 1872).

23. See John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:167 (March 2, 1879); John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:65 (September 21, 1878); John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:116–17 (November 28, 1879); and John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:161 (December 7, 1879).

age when he received the first vision.”²⁴ Joseph F. played an immense role in elevating Joseph Smith’s vision to a resilient shared origin story and transmitting it from one generation to the next.

During the first week of March 1904, Joseph F. sat in the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., before a U.S. Senate committee that took advantage of petitions against Reed Smoot, the Apostle newly elected to the Senate, to “investigate” his church and compel its members to be monogamous.²⁵ Senators interrogated Joseph F. about whether polygamy continued among his people. The primary issue, however, was whether Saints would ultimately obey their government or their God. In the words of Kathleen Flake, Joseph F. had “to find a way to rationalize convincingly the subordination of prophecy to democracy” if he wanted to keep the Protestant establishment from crushing his church.²⁶

That task may have been the easier of his two problems. The second was, in Flake’s words, “to remove his people’s faith in one revelation without undermining their confidence in all revelation, as well as the revelator, namely, Joseph Smith and himself as prophetic successor.”²⁷ Joseph F. Smith succeeded in his first task—convincing the committee that he did not consider himself above the law—but that made the second one even more precarious. He returned to Utah and to the resource best suited to the task—Joseph Smith’s canonized narrative of his first vision—and began in earnest the work Flake described as “re-placing memory.”²⁸

Just as his prophet uncle had done, Joseph F. brought a persecuted past to bear on the persecuted present. He raised the profile of Joseph Smith’s first vision and its position as the beginning of the Saints’ narrative.

24. Anthon Lund, diary, Sunday, September 21, 1902; Friday, September 26, 1902; Sunday, November 16, 1902; Sunday, September 6, 1903; Sunday, September 13, 1903; and Sunday, September 4, 1904, in MS 2737, box 62–63, Church History Library.

25. Reed Smoot to C. E. Loose, January 26, 1904, Reed Smoot Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; unsigned letter by Franklin S. Richards to First Presidency, January 18, 1904, Reed Smoot Collection; Joseph F. Smith to Reed Smoot, January 28, 1904, in *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Richard E. Turley Jr., 2 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), vol. 1, DVD 30; Charles W. Nibley, “Reminiscences of President Joseph F. Smith,” *Improvement Era* 22, no. 3 (January 1919), 195.

26. Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 77–78.

27. Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, 110, 118.

28. Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, 109–37. See also Kathleen Flake, “Re-Placing Memory: Latter-day Saint Use of Historical Monuments and Narrative in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Religion and American Culture* 13, no. 1 (2003): 69–109.

He led the effort to replace the proximate, polygamous past with an ultimate and original, persecuted past. As he toured congregations, Joseph F. continued instructing youth by calling on a fourteen-year-old boy to stand and represent youthful Joseph Smith while he told the story of his vision and “the persecution which followed immediately.”²⁹

On December 18, 1905, Joseph F. and an entourage of Church leaders (excluding those still summoned to testify before the Senate committee) boarded an eastbound train and chugged up and over “the mountains behind which they had fled as children,” headed for locations where they would memorialize their founding prophet.³⁰ For nearly a year, they had planned and prepared for the celebration of Joseph Smith’s one hundredth birthday, having approved the purchase of the property where he was born in rural Vermont and the erection of a monument there. On the anniversary date, Saturday, December 23, they packed into the cottage built for the occasion and listened to the impressive story of constructing the monument.³¹

Joseph F. stood and offered a solemn prayer, dedicating the monument and describing it as he went—a concrete foundation on bedrock, signifying apostles and prophets; a granite base “typifying the rock of revelation”; inscriptions including “Sacred to the memory of Joseph Smith, the Prophet,” “In the spring of the year of our Lord, 1820, The Father and the Son appeared to him in a glorious vision, called him by name and instructed him,” and the text of James 1:5; and thirty-nine tons and nearly that many feet of polished granite shaft.³² Cumulatively, this was a massive monument signaling the move away from Joseph Smith’s last revelation, the one on plural marriage, and toward his first vision.

After spending Christmas morning in Boston, Joseph F. and his party boarded the train again and set out to sacralize a grove. They disembarked the next day in Palmyra, New York, and hired carriages to take them a few miles to Manchester and the Smith homestead. They walked

29. Anthon Lund, diary, September 6, 1903; Sunday, September 13, 1903; and Sunday, September 4, 1904, Church History Library.

30. The quote is from Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, 111. A detailed account of the trip by one who was there is in Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith: Sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 355–56.

31. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 358–60.

32. *Proceedings at the Dedication of the Joseph Smith Memorial Monument* (Salt Lake City, privately published, 1906), 9–27. The interpretation here closely follows Flake, “Re-Placing Memory,” 69–109. See also Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, 109–37.

into the nearby woods and sang George Manwaring's hymn "Joseph Smith's First Prayer." Anthon Lund picked up a stick as a memento and later wrote in his diary, "I felt as if walking on hallowed ground."³³ Two years later, the Church purchased the grove.³⁴

After Joseph F.'s experience in the Smoot hearings, his uncle's persecution-dominated narrative of the 1820 vision resonated with him. "The greatest crime that Joseph Smith was guilty of," Joseph F. declared in a sermon in London, "was the crime of confessing the great fact that he had heard the voice of God and the voice of His Son Jesus Christ, speaking to him in his childhood; that he saw those Heavenly Beings standing above him in the air of the woods where he went out to pray. That is the worst crime he committed, and the world has held it against him."³⁵ Joseph F. even asserted that his uncle's 1820 vision led to his 1844 murder.³⁶

In the turn-of-the-century turmoil that threatened to undermine the Latter-day Saints, Joseph F. Smith transitioned the Saints away from Joseph Smith's last revelation and focused them on his first vision. In this process, the story became "preeminently the event" of the latter days, "the most important event in the history of the world, excepting only the revelation of Godhood in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ."³⁷

33. "Tuesday December 26th [1905] We arrived at Palmyra in the morning. Here we hired carriages which took us to Manchester to a Mr. Chapman who lives in the house built by Joseph Smith. Sr. and was the farm on which Joseph (76) labored. . . . We went out into the grove where Joseph is said to have received the first vision. The company sang the hymn: 'Joseph's first prayer.' It was very interesting to see these places and I felt as if walking on hallowed ground I brought away a stick from there. Mr. Chapman and family were very pleasant and accommodating to us." Anthon Lund, diary entry, Edyth Romney transcript, Church History Library. See Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 370.

34. Donald L. Enders, "Sacred Grove," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1247. See also Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 370.

35. *Two Sermons by President Joseph F. Smith: What It Is to Be a Latter-day Saint. Divinity of the Mission of Joseph Smith* (Chattanooga: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Southern States Mission, 1906), 3.

36. "Is it true that God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son came to the earth in the spring of the year 1820 and revealed themselves to the Prophet Joseph Smith? Is that true? If it is you ought to know it, we ought to know it. Joseph declared that it was true. He suffered persecution all the days of his life on the earth because he declared it was true. He carried his life in his hands, so to speak, every moment of his life until he finally sacrificed it in Carthage jail for the testimony that he bore. . . . He knew that the Father had spoken to him, and, pointing to the personage by His side, had declared: 'This is my beloved Son, hear him.' Joseph knew this." *Two Sermons by President Joseph F. Smith*, 3–6.

37. According to a textbook written for use in Sunday Schools. John Henry Evans, *One Hundred Years of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1905), 18.

4: Accepting and Teaching the Vision as a Historical Event Becomes Fundamental for Church Educators

In April 1906, the Church's General Board of Education chose Horace Cummings to be the general superintendent of Brigham Young University. He protested that he lacked the advanced education needed for the job, but the board members knew that Cummings shared their first priority: "to teach and train the students in the principles of the gospel."³⁸ He set to work outlining a religion curriculum to be implemented in the fall.

Joseph Peterson, a psychology professor, came the following year as the first faculty member with a PhD at Brigham Young University. He was followed by a few other scholars who added academic credibility to the campus. Soon Peterson and other psychologists, philosophers, and scientists were teaching theology as well as their disciplines.³⁹ Many students appreciated how they squared the restored gospel with biblical source criticism, Darwin's theory of evolution, and Jamesian pragmatism, including the idea that visions like Joseph Smith's were better understood as subjective experience than as historical events.

Not all the students liked the new ideas. "Complaints soon began to come to me against these teachings," Cummings noted. He visited the campus, explained what he'd heard to the faculty and students, pled with them for orthodoxy, and reminded them that the "school was established to teach the gospel of Christ and not its opposite, to destroy faith."⁴⁰

Following this occasion, however, more faculty accepted the "new thought," more students embraced the teaching, more such ideas spread to other Church schools, and more complaints reached headquarters.⁴¹ In January 1911, the board sent Cummings to investigate. "I spent about nine days," he wrote, "visiting classes, talking with teachers and students, and in the evenings I visited some of the parents to see what they thought of the situation."

Cummings submitted his written report to the board "concerning the nature and effect of certain theological instructions given, mostly

38. Horace Cummings, *Autobiography*, chaps. 36 and 50, Perry Special Collections.

39. Gary James Bergera, "The 1911 Evolution Controversy at Brigham Young University," in *The Search for Harmony: Essays on Science and Mormonism*, ed. Gene A. Sessions and Craig J. Oberg (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 23–41.

40. Cummings, *Autobiography*, 41–42.

41. General Board of Education, Board Minutes, February 3, 1911, 180–86, quote on 182, Church History Library. See also Cummings, *Autobiography*, 3, 41–42.

by the College professors.” The report included ten unorthodox teachings Cummings observed, including the idea that “visions and revelations are mental suggestions. The objective reality of the presence of the Father and the Son, in Joseph Smith’s first vision, is questioned.”⁴² When Cummings pressed this point, he found that some of the faculty “strenuously denied” a historical, corporeal visit of God and Christ to Joseph Smith.⁴³

Cummings also discovered that for every student or parent who objected to the unorthodox instruction, others liked it. He spoke with many who described a painful reorientation process. He noted that the theology classes had never been so popular, and he felt caught between the demands of orthodox patrons and those of students and faculty who accused him of destroying “academic liberty” and killing their school.⁴⁴

In February 1911, the board listened to Cummings and appointed a subcommittee to hear Joseph Peterson and two other professors answer for their teaching. They “admitted teaching everything I had charged in my report,” Cummings noted. “It was decided that, since they would not promise to refrain from such objectionable teachings in the future, that their services be dispensed with.”⁴⁵ Most of the student body protested and signed a petition “endorsing the teaching of the professors, and praying for their retention by the Board.”⁴⁶ The three professors were fired, and like-minded faculty members resigned or did not receive renewed contracts.

That quieted the controversy until a summer day in Utah in 1938. The Church’s faculty who taught the faith to its youth were camped with their families for six weeks of instruction and some relaxation in a spectacular mountain setting. Then on a rainy morning, J. Reuben Clark—formerly a Washington, D.C., lawyer, then a diplomat, and at the time a counselor to Church President Heber J. Grant—addressed the teachers about a topic he and other Church leaders had worried about for several years: the need for orthodox instruction.⁴⁷

42. Board Minutes, February 3, 1911, 183.

43. Cummings, *Autobiography*, 41–45.

44. Cummings, *Autobiography*, 41–45.

45. Cummings, *Autobiography*, 41–45.

46. *Deseret News*, March 11, 1911; *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 12, 1911; Chamberlain Oral History, 8, cited in *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith*, 143 n. 23, 426.

47. Scott C. Esplin, “Charting the Course: President Clark’s Charge to Religious Educators,” *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 7, no. 1 (2006): 103–19. Just one week after the Aspen Grove address, Joseph Fielding Smith, acting as Church

The next day, the *Deseret News* carried excerpts and characterized Clark's talk as "an official pronouncement of the First Presidency of the Church," giving "direct counsel" to its religious educators.⁴⁸ Within a week, the *News* printed the entire talk, and within a month the Church's *Improvement Era* published it again, but before the sun set on the day Clark spoke, those who heard him had segregated themselves over it.⁴⁹ "There was considerable discussion about it around our campfires," one of them remembered. "We divided ourselves up pretty quickly into liberal and conservative camps." One person even rose from an impassioned discussion and announced that he was going to resign.⁵⁰

Historian, wrote to President Clark and informed him that he had "been hoping and praying for a long time for something of this kind to happen." Smith continued, furthermore, to support the First Presidency's decision to deliver the address, claiming that he had personally spoken to many teachers as well as to the Church's commissioner of education, he "realizing thoroughly the need of such counsel and wisdom." In a response to Smith dated that same day, Clark wrote that the First Presidency had "felt for some time—as you say you have felt—that something of this sort should be said." Joseph Fielding Smith to J. Reuben Clark Jr., August 15, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers, Perry Special Collections; and J. Reuben Clark Jr. to Joseph Fielding Smith, August 15, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers. In a written reply to BYU student Merrill Y. Van Wagoner, who had responded to President Clark's address with a letter voicing his perception of BYU's failure in teaching doctrine, Clark affirmed to Van Wagoner that his was "not the only statement of this sort that comes to us" and that it would be valuable to the First Presidency in its attempt to remediate the current "difficult situation" within the Church's educational system. J. Reuben Clark Jr. to Merrill Y. Van Wagoner, September 3, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers. Jesse W. Richins of the Twin Falls Idaho Stake Presidency wrote to President Clark on September 5, following Clark's address, expressing his surety that the message had been "not only very timely but very much needed." Jesse W. Richins to J. Reuben Clark Jr., September 5, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers. Writing from the Louisville office of the Central States Mission, Mission President William T. Tew responded to Clark's address (which he had obtained via the *Improvement Era*) with sentiments similar to Smith and Bischoff: "Many of us who have been in this system for years have long since recognized the need of such a barometer in our teachings." William T. Tew to J. Reuben Clark Jr., September 8, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers. Jacob P. Trayner, superintendent of the LDS Hospital at Idaho Falls, wrote to President Clark on September 14, inquiring whether the First Presidency might consider issuing the Aspen Grove address in pamphlet form. Jacob H. Trayner to J. Reuben Clark Jr., September 14, 1938, and J. Reuben Clark Jr. to Jacob H. Trayner, September 22, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers.

48. "Pres. Clark Sets Forth Church Seminary Policies," *Deseret News*, August 9, 1938, clipping included in MSS 303, box 215, folder 8, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers.

49. "First Presidency Sets Standards for Church Educators," *Deseret News*, August 13, 1938.

50. Sterling M. McMurrin and L. Jackson Newell, *Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion* (Salt Lake City:

Clark had drawn a polarizing line around orthodoxy, around “two prime things that may not be overlooked, forgotten, shaded, or discarded.” First, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the crucified and risen Christ. “The second of the two things to which we must all give full faith is that the Father and the Son actually and in truth and very deed appeared to the Prophet Joseph in a vision in the woods,” Clark said.⁵¹

Clark consciously described the vision as a *fundamental* of the faith.⁵² For Latter-day Saints, Clark declared, the line was drawn at Joseph Smith’s first vision, and that significantly raised the stakes.

5. Dale Morgan’s Source Criticism of the First Vision Is Circulated in Fawn Brodie’s Biography of Joseph Smith

Two days after J. Reuben Clark made belief in the canonized version of Joseph Smith’s first vision a test of orthodoxy, Dale L. Morgan, just graduated from the University of Utah, began work as a historian as part of the New Deal.⁵³ Raised as a Latter-day Saint and already a gifted writer, Morgan was haunted by meningitis-induced deafness that struck just as he was coming of age. In college he traded faith-based explanations for psychological ones and began to view his society through a sociological lens. He was “undergoing a wholesale revision of all [his] beliefs,” he said, just as he went to work surveying records and compiling county histories.⁵⁴

In his spare time, Morgan began research for a history *magnum opus*. He dug into the canonized part of Joseph’s manuscript history and

Signature, 1996), 115. See also N. L. Nelson to J. Reuben Clark, September 2, 1938, J. Reuben Clark Jr. Papers.

51. J. Reuben Clark Jr., “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” address to seminary and institute of religion leaders at the Brigham Young University summer school in Aspen Grove, Utah, on August 8, 1938 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992), 1–2, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/ldsorg/manual/seminary/32709_000.pdf.

52. Clark framed his talk in terms that situated it relative to debates about Protestant fundamentalism. A good survey of the controversy is George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), especially see pp. 56–61.

53. Richard Saunders, “‘The Strange Mixture of Emotion and Intellect’: A Social History of Dale L. Morgan, 1933–42,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 48.

54. Saunders, “Strange Mixture,” 49, cites Morgan to Jerry Bleak, May 22, 1938, Bleak Letters, in n. 30, but on the page says it was May 1939. Morgan to Jerry Bleak, November [December] 31, 1938, Bleak Letters, quoted in Saunders, 50 n. 34.

compared it closely with Oliver Cowdery's historical letters, becoming an early, serious source critic of the Saints' genesis story, the first to ask when and why the sources were created and how they compared to each other, among the first to ask questions about the historical memory of Joseph Smith and his followers.

Almost no one knew at the time that there were a couple of primary but unpublished accounts of the vision in the Church's archive: a brief 1832 autobiography and an 1835 journal entry. Morgan thus felt sure "that no man in his church, not even Joseph himself, suspected in 1835 that he had been visited in his youth by the Father and the Son."⁵⁵ The later discovery of those sources and others would prove Morgan wrong on that point and raise the stakes even higher.

Morgan knew that the laity accepted the canonized story at face value, while outsiders simply dismissed Joseph's story as either ridiculous or evidence of psychosis. Morgan thought metaphorically of the source texts as a mural whose visible layer obscured "underpaint."⁵⁶ He was first to painstakingly peel back the layers insofar as the available sources allowed and was behind only Orson Pratt and B. H. Roberts in seeing dissonance between and in these sources.⁵⁷

He concluded "that the idea of a visitation from the Father and the Son was a late improvisation" by Joseph Smith, "no part at all of his original design."⁵⁸ Morgan's source criticism led to his conclusion that Joseph Smith enlarged his story over time, that there was no 1820 vision and only Joseph's later "conception investing him with an ineffable dignity, for in all recorded history, to what other men have the Father and the Son appeared?"⁵⁹

Morgan's claims had potential to wreak havoc on Latter-day Saint understanding of the first vision, but only potential. They made little difference so long as they remained in Morgan's mind, unarticulated by a man who had much to say but who could not hear, rarely spoke, and had thus far not written his arguments except possibly in early drafts.

55. John Philip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 249.

56. Morgan uses this metaphor throughout his draft chapter. See Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 245–61.

57. For more on Pratt and Roberts as source critics, see Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 98–99, 151–54.

58. Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 247. See p. 255 for Morgan's awareness that he was first to make such observations.

59. Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 253.

Then Fawn McKay Brodie, a friend and protégé of Morgan's and a niece of Apostle David O. McKay, unleashed the potential.

In 1945, the publishing house Knopf published Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*. Brodie had persuaded Knopf of her "attitude of complete objectivity," but she had confided to Morgan about her psychological need to understand Joseph Smith's life and escape his influence. She reflected later that writing the biography enabled her to assert her independence, providing the resolution to what she called her "compulsion to liberate myself wholly from Mormonism."⁶⁰

Brodie followed but simplified Morgan's interpretation, completely rejecting the orthodox position Clark stated in 1938 "that the Father and the Son actually and in truth and very deed appeared to the Prophet Joseph in a vision in the woods."⁶¹ Instead, Brodie argued in lucid prose that Joseph had no theophany in 1820 but simply combined his past—a "half-remembered dream" induced by the anxieties of revival culture—with his late 1830s present—the need for the credibility inherent in divine authority.⁶²

She set forth the ideas so boldly that Morgan was "struck," as he told her, "with the assumption your MS [manuscript] makes that Joseph was a self-conscious imposter." She was not a careful historian, and he worried about what he called her "bold judgments on the basis of assumptions," a critique shared by later reviewers.⁶³ Brodie wrote for the public, however, not for source critics. In abridging the argument, she made it accessible and interesting, giving a wider audience than ever a plausible alternative to orthodox belief. In the wake of Brodie's biography, rumors spread through the laity that Joseph Smith "evolved his doctrine from what might have been a vision, in which he is supposed to have said that he saw an angel, instead of the Father and the Son. According to this theory, by the time he was inspired to write the occurrence in 1838, he had come to the conclusion that there were two Beings."⁶⁴ Brodie's book began a war of words. It had to be refuted. The sacred narrative of a people was at stake.

60. Newell G. Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie: A Biographer's Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 80, 95, 105, 115.

61. Clark, "Charted Course," 2.

62. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 25.

63. Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie*, 87, 95, 105.

64. S. Dilworth Young, "The First Vision," *Improvement Era* 60, no. 6 (June 1957): 436.

6. Apologetics, Polemics, and Growing Awareness of Source Suppression

Hugh Nibley, a professor of ancient history at Brigham Young University, published a polarizing, satirical review of Brodie's biography in 1946.⁶⁵ In 1961, Nibley weighed in again with a four-part essay titled "Censoring the Joseph Smith Story."⁶⁶ Meanwhile, a young newlywed named Sandra Tanner was distancing herself from her childhood faith. Her mother had been traumatized by reading Brodie's biography, and Tanner had tried to help her keep the faith but had then lost her own in the process. When Tanner read Nibley's essay, what she noticed was an aside from his argument. He said his great-grandfather wrote a journal entry about hearing Joseph Smith tell his vision. "Because it was a sacred and privileged communication," Nibley said, his ancestor's journal entry "was never published to the world and never should be."⁶⁷

Tanner wrote to Nibley, asking for access to the entry. "The day my great-grandfather heard that remarkable account of the First Vision from Joseph Smith," Nibley replied, "he wrote it down in his journal: and for 40 years after he never mentioned it to a soul. Therefore, when I came across the story unexpectedly I handed the book over to Joseph Fielding Smith and it is now where it belongs—in a safe. The prophet did not like to talk about the First Vision," Nibley reasoned, "and those to whom he told the story kept it to themselves. It was only when inevitable leaks led to all sorts of irresponsible reports that he was 'induced' to publish an official version."⁶⁸

Sandra Tanner wrote to Apostle and Church Historian Joseph Fielding Smith, asking for access. He replied, "Private journals are filed in this office with the understanding that they will be available to members of the family, but not to the general public."⁶⁹ Nibley wrote to Sandra again,

65. Hugh Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History: A Brief Review of Mrs. Brodie's Reluctant Vindication of a Prophet She Seeks to Expose* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946). On Nibley being enlisted to write a rebuttal, see David J. Whittaker's foreword to his anthology of Nibley essays, *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass: The Art of Telling Tales about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), ix–xxi, where he claims twice that Nibley was asked by leaders.

66. Hugh Nibley, "Censoring Joseph Smith's Story: Part I," *Improvement Era* 64, no. 7 (July 1961): 490–92, 522–26.

67. Nibley, "Censoring Joseph Smith's Story: Part I," 522.

68. Hugh Nibley to Sandra Tanner, March 8, 1961, in Pauline Hancock, *The Godhead: Is There More Than One God* (Independence, Mo.: Church of Christ, n.d.), 12–13.

69. Joseph Fielding Smith to Sandra Tanner, March 13, 1961, in Hancock, *Godhead*, 13.

revealing the name of his ancestor, saying, “The reason that Alexander Neibaur told no one of his experience for forty years is that it was strictly confidential and should remain so. I think we should respect his confidence. Actually, the last time I asked permission to see the Journal, I was refused. Any attempt to reproduce it at this time is out of the question.”⁷⁰

7. Dramatic Growth and New History

The stakes of Joseph Smith’s first vision were raised substantially in the 1960s. When Church President David O. McKay told the world’s 1.3 million Saints in 1954 “to proclaim . . . that the Church is divinely established by the appearance of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ to the Prophet Joseph Smith,” they shared a single, scriptural memory of their origin story.⁷¹ By 1970, there were 1.6 million more Saints, two newly discovered primary accounts of Joseph Smith’s vision, and a contested new historiography.

In the 1950s and especially the 1960s, Latter-day Saint missionaries baptized more than a million converts worldwide, many of whom were inspired by the story of Joseph Smith’s first vision. In Baltimore, however, the missionaries narrowly missed a couple of converts, thanks in part to a teen named Wesley Walters,⁷² who had only recently been “captivated by the marvelous love of God who would provide such a great salvation, and the love of the Lord Jesus, who would die for such a miserable sinner.”⁷³

Unbeknownst to him at the time, Wesley Walters’s conversion to evangelical Christianity and his “rescue” of friends from Latter-day Saint missionaries started a cascade of events that would profoundly raise the stakes on Joseph Smith’s first vision. Walters pursued a secondary education and ordination. By 1960, Walters and his wife, Helen, were parents of four children, and he was pastor of a United Presbyterian congregation in Marissa, Illinois. Then out of the blue came an invitation for him to publish an essay in the popular new periodical

70. Hugh Nibley to Sandra Tanner, March 21, 1961, in Hancock, *Godhead*, 13–14.

71. David O. McKay, in *The One Hundred Twenty-Fourth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1954), 25.

72. Helen Walters, “Wesley Walters, Sleuth for the Truth,” 2, unpublished manuscript in Presbyterian Church of America Historical Archives, St. Louis, Missouri.

73. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 2. On Barnhouse’s appearance and voice, see Margaret N. Barnhouse, *That Man Barnhouse* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1983).

Christianity Today.⁷⁴ Editor Carl Henry had recruited heavyweights to write about the standard constellation of cults—Jehovah’s Witnesses, Adventists, Christian Scientists—but could think of no one to write the essay on Latter-day Saints until an old professor recommended Walters based on a paper Walters had written for class.

That essay launched Walters into a career-long combat with Joseph Smith’s first vision. When he began his quest, widely known sources were limited to the canonized account and Oliver Cowdery’s 1834–35 letters to William W. Phelps. Joseph Smith had confidently placed the vision in the spring of 1820. Cowdery, however, claimed that the religious excitement “in Palmyra and vicinity” occurred in Joseph’s seventeenth year, not fifteenth.⁷⁵

Which date was right? Walters wondered, strategizing that he could not disprove a vision, but that he could verify the facts Joseph Smith had set forth as context for it.⁷⁶ He searched back issues of *Methodist Magazine*. He worked his way through the 1819 issues, finding plenty on revivals but nothing in Palmyra. He found nothing for 1820, nor 1821, and so on. Finally, in the March 1825 issue, he discovered Reverend George Lane’s account of a Palmyra revival that started the preceding summer.⁷⁷ The discovery elated Walters.⁷⁸ It stimulated and focused further research on the discovery of evidence of the 1824 Palmyra revival to the point that Helen wondered whether it was overkill.⁷⁹

While Wesley Walters was scouring archives in the American Midwest and East, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints hired Dean Jessee to help catalog manuscripts piled in boxes behind a screen of wire mesh in the basement of the Church Administration Building in Salt Lake City. Jessee loved it in “the cage,” as he called it, screened off from the world, surrounded by Joseph Smith’s papers. He traced Joseph Smith’s Manuscript History to the sources behind it,⁸⁰ and

74. For the history of the periodical *Christianity Today*, see Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian: An Autobiography* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1986).

75. “History, 1834–1836,” 61, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed August 26, 2018, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1834-1836/65>.

76. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 4–5.

77. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 5.

78. Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1967): 231.

79. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 6.

80. See source note for “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” at <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/1#source-note>.

there discovered Joseph's 1835 journal entry, in which a scribe recorded Joseph's telling of his vision to a visitor.⁸¹

Meanwhile, James Allen earned a PhD in history from University of Southern California in 1963 and joined the history department faculty at BYU in 1964. Soon thereafter a graduate student named Paul Cheesman approached him excitedly and said he wanted to write his thesis on the First Vision. "I think I can prove that it really happened," he said.⁸²

"What makes you think that?" Allen asked, believing in the vision but not that it could be proved by the historical method.⁸³

"I have found another version of Joseph Smith's first vision," Cheesman answered.⁸⁴ It was an undated manuscript in the voice of Joseph Smith, written apparently by a scribe in the early 1830s on the first six pages of a ledger book before being cut out. Cheesman had been shown the document in the Church Historian's office; Allen went there promptly.⁸⁵ As he read, Allen began formulating a new research agenda.⁸⁶ When did Joseph Smith begin to tell this story? he wondered. When did he stop telling it, or did he stop telling it? He wanted to know when Saints began to know the story of Joseph Smith's first vision.⁸⁷

Cheesman finished his master's thesis in 1965. It included Joseph Smith's 1832 vision account in an appendix, the first time the document had ever been printed. "This thesis is not an effort to prove beyond all doubt that Joseph Smith was telling the truth," a wiser Cheesman began, "for this cannot be done by empirical methods." He wrote candidly about "the various sources" that had emerged. He argued that Joseph Smith told a generally consistent story over time and offered plausible reasons why Joseph apparently did not write or tell about the vision for years after it occurred.⁸⁸

81. Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 275–94. Dean C. Jessee, interview by Samuel A. Dodge, copy in author's possession.

82. James B. Allen, interview by Samuel A. Dodge and Steven C. Harper, 2009.

83. Allen, interview, 2009.

84. Allen, interview, 2009.

85. Paul R. Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965), 126; Jessee, "Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," 275–94; Davidson and others, *Joseph Smith Histories, Volume 1*, 2–23; Allen, interview, 2009.

86. Allen, interview, 2009.

87. Allen, interview, 2009.

88. Cheesman, "Analysis of Accounts," 1–2, 126.

Very soon afterward, Sandra Tanner and her husband printed their pamphlet, *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision*. They copied Cheesman's transcription of the new source document—claiming it had been “suppressed for 130 years”—but otherwise disagreed with Cheesman's every argument. He had sought to minimize dissonance in the historical record. They tried to maximize it and to prove that Joseph Smith “did not see the father and the son in 1820.”⁸⁹

James Allen, meanwhile, tried to understand the historical record. He presented his research in Logan, Utah, to a group of scholars who were thinking of forming a Mormon history association. Allen showed them that the first vision was not a factor in the conversions of early Saints, nor was it common knowledge among them or their critics. Joseph was telling it, however, earlier than Fawn Brodie had claimed, some late reminiscences suggested, and as the new document seemed to confirm.⁹⁰

Meanwhile, by 1967 the Evangelical Theological Society had been defending the idea of an inerrant Bible for nearly two decades. That fall, the society's periodical published an unheralded essay but, in retrospect, a highly significant one. Titled “New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival,” it was the fruit of several years of determined research, a paper delivered the previous December at a society meeting, authored by Rev. Wesley P. Walters.⁹¹

The essay made a cool, historical argument. Granting that he could not prove whether Joseph Smith envisioned divine beings in the woods of western New York, Walters asserted that he could use historical records to check Joseph's claim that unusual religious excitement in his region led him to seek answers and ultimately led to the spring 1820 vision. Having scoured the records, Walters made the case that historical evidence disproved any sizeable revival in Joseph's vicinity in 1820 and therefore that he made up his story later, situating it in the context of a well-documented 1824 revival. “The statement of Joseph Smith, Jr. *can not be true* when he claims that he was stirred up by an 1820 revival

89. Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision* (n.p., n.d. [1965]).

90. Allen, interview, 2009. Also see James B. Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith's ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought,” *Dialogue* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 29–45.

91. *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10, no. 4 (1967). See Wesley P. Walters to James B. Allen, November 3, 1967, Wesley Walters Papers, Presbyterian Church of America Historical Archives, St. Louis, Missouri.

to make his inquiry in the grove near his home,” Walters concluded.⁹² His thesis and his method were altogether novel. He rightly concluded that as a result of his work, “all students of Mormon history will be forced to reconsider the reliability of Joseph’s first vision story.”⁹³

To that end, Walters had also submitted his essay to *Dialogue*, a brand-new periodical published by Latter-day Saint academics. It had recently featured James Allen’s research on the first vision, including a discussion of the accounts recently discovered by Cheesman and Jesse.⁹⁴ *Dialogue*’s editors postponed publication of Walters’s research until they could muster a response.⁹⁵ By submitting his essay to *Dialogue* in 1967, Walters awakened a faithful intelligentsia, among whom it caused “consternation.”⁹⁶

Truman Madsen wrote to Church President David O. McKay in April 1968, “The first vision has come under severe historical attack.”⁹⁷ Like Walters, Madsen was in his early forties. He was a Harvard-educated philosophy professor and director of the Institute of Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University. Madsen gathered a “steering committee or advisory council.” He recruited forty-year-old James Allen.⁹⁸ Another member of the committee was thirty-six-year-old Richard Bushman, whose newly published dissertation, *From Puritan to Yankee*, was about to win the Bancroft Prize.⁹⁹

92. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins,” 227–44, quote on 228.

93. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins,” 241.

94. Allen, “Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision,’” 29–45.

95. “The Question of the Palmyra Revival,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 59–100.

96. Richard L. Bushman, “The First Vision Story Revived,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 83–93, reports “consternation” on p. 83. James B. Allen had been aware of Walters and his research since at least 1966. See James B. Allen to Rev. Wesley P. Walters, December 6, 1966; Rev. Wesley P. Walters to Dr. James B. Allen, October 23, 1967; Allen to Walters, October 30, 1967; and Walters to Allen, November 3, 1967, in Walters Papers.

97. Truman G. Madsen to First Presidency, April 17, 1968, Truman G. Madsen Papers, Wheatley Institution, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as TGM Papers). Truman G. Madsen to John Wilde, January 4, 1967, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Craig A. Hanson, October 22, 1968, TGM Papers.

98. Allen, “Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision,’” 29–45.

99. James B. Allen and Leonard J. Arrington, “Mormon Origins in New York: An Introductory Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 241–42; Truman G. Madsen to Dallin H. Oaks, January 25, 1968, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Stanley B. Kimball, January 25, 1968, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Frederick G. Williams, February 22, 1968, TGM Papers; Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Exploring the First Vision* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2012), xii; Bushman, “First Vision Story Revived,” 83; Truman G. Madsen to

This team planned a variety of publications. Along with the dialogue to be published in the aptly named *Dialogue*, they wrote monologues for the spring 1969 issue of *BYU Studies*, including the two newly discovered accounts of the vision, and an accessible summary of all the known vision accounts for the *Improvement Era*, trying to coordinate a nearly simultaneous release of the two publications.¹⁰⁰

At a symposium at Southern Illinois University in 1968, Madsen and Walters coincidentally crossed paths. “Wesley Walters!” Madsen said, eyeing the Reverend’s nametag. “So *you’re* the one who dropped the bomb on BYU!” The two struck up a conversation, and Madsen thanked Walters: “They’re giving us all the money we want to try to find answers to you.”¹⁰¹

The next spring, *Dialogue* lived up to its name when it featured a three-part exchange between Walters and Richard Bushman.¹⁰² An editor’s preface explained why the journal had postponed publication of the Walters essay, and why it was taking the unusual step of republishing it now.¹⁰³ After the Walters essay in the publication came Bushman’s, “The First Vision Story Revived,” and then Walters’s “A Reply to Dr. Bushman.”

Bushman had been chosen to respond because he seemed to Madsen and others the least likely to be too defensive.¹⁰⁴ Bushman’s cool, reasoned response matched Walters’s paper in tone and acknowledged the Reverend’s success at avoiding tired issues and genuinely puzzling the Saints’ historians. Even so, Bushman casually predicted a positive result for his

Ruth Shinsel, October 30, 1967, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Robert B. Flanders, January 24, 1968, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Ruth Shinsel, October 20, 1967, TGM Papers.

100. Truman G. Madsen to Richard L. Bushman, October 18, 1968; and Truman G. Madsen to Ruth Shinsel, November 25, 1968, TGM Papers.

101. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 1, emphasis in original.

102. This exchange included a brief introduction, “The Question of the Palmyra Revival,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 59–60; and the following articles: Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 60–81; Richard L. Bushman, “The First Vision Story Revived,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 82–93; and Wesley P. Walters, “A Reply to Dr. Bushman,” *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 94–100.

103. Joe Jeppson of *Dialogue* sent Walters word in February 1969 that the journal planned to publish his essay in the next issue, followed by Bushman’s reply (which Jeppson included), and invited Walters to reply to Bushman. He informed Walters, “Bushman is a Harvard PhD who taught at B.Y.U. until he won the ‘Bancroft Prize’ . . . & moved to a full professorship at Boston Univ. He’s LDS & pretty orthodox.” Joe Jeppson to Wesley Walters, February 17, 1969, Walters Papers.

104. Truman G. Madsen to Richard L. Bushman, October 18, 1968, TGM Papers; Truman G. Madsen to Eugene England, October 16, 1968, TGM Papers.

side since the essay had galvanized research. “Without wholly intending it,” Bushman understated, “Mr. Walters may have done as much to advance the cause of Mormon history within the Church as anyone in recent years.”¹⁰⁵

As Bushman noted, Walters arrived at his conclusion largely by trusting Oliver Cowdery’s memory while impugning Joseph’s—or, rather, asserting that Joseph did not misremember the experience and instead manufactured it later using elements of an 1824 revival (that Cowdery remembered accurately) but projecting them back to 1820. Bushman responded that it was more Oliver than Joseph who “scrambled the two events, putting together parts of two stories to make one,” and faulted Walters for trusting Cowdery’s memory as “virtually Joseph’s own personal narrative.”¹⁰⁶

As Walters argued that the evidence for revivalism was too little and too far from Joseph Smith in 1820 to meet “the standard,” Bushman repeatedly reminded him that there was no objective standard; there was only Joseph Smith’s subjective description.¹⁰⁷ Walters had oversimplified objectivity, Bushman contended, making himself the subjective judge of “how near is near and how big is big” when it came to Joseph’s subjective experience of unusual religious excitement in his region.¹⁰⁸

Bushman’s article emphasized inescapable subjectivity inherent in historical subjects, including Joseph Smith. But in the late 1960s, and perhaps even now, many more Latter-day Saints shared Walters’s view of static memory and objective history. Walters had begun his essay by citing the Saints’ own authorities affirming the vision’s significance as second only to Christ’s resurrection and ministry.¹⁰⁹

“Wes,” Helen once complained, “you are beating a dead horse. . . . Why do you keep on looking for more evidence?” He paused, then soberly explained his rationale. “When liberals come up with what they claim are contradictions in the Bible we don’t give up on our faith right away. We look for any possible explanation or way out. And even if we can’t explain one contradiction, or two, we don’t give up on our faith in God’s word. . . . Mormons are the same way.”¹¹⁰

105. Bushman, “First Vision Story Revived,” 83.

106. Bushman, “First Vision Story Revived,” 85.

107. Bushman, “First Vision Story Revived,” 83–85.

108. Bushman, “First Vision Story Revived,” 86.

109. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins,” 227.

110. Walters, “Wesley Walters,” 6.

Wesley Walters understood what was at stake. So did James Allen and the editors of the *Improvement Era*, who published in the April 1970 issue “Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision: What Do We Learn from Them?”¹¹¹ It was a sophisticated yet accessible synthesis of the historical record and recent scholarship. Milton Backman followed with a monograph in 1971, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*, including evidence for religious excitement in western New York State through 1820 and the texts of the vision accounts—Joseph Smith’s four and five others from contemporaries, including the Alexander Neibaur journal entry.¹¹² Neither Walters’s landmark efforts to undermine Joseph Smith’s first vision nor the responses of believing historians raised the stakes much at the time, however. Too few members of the laity knew about them to make much difference. The potential of the newly discovered records and of ways of interpreting them was waiting for an information age to unleash it.

8. Joseph Smith’s First Vision in the Information Age

Grant Palmer’s 2002 book, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*, worked like Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*.¹¹³ They are both poor examples of the historical method, but some readers gained from them an identity-stabilizing relationship to the past. Jan Shipps described this phenomenon. “In some (perhaps many) instances,” she wrote, “study of the community’s history appears to be a surrogate for lost faith. In other instances, however, it becomes an effort to find hard evidence that can serve as justification for abandoning the community’s credal base. If it is the latter and if the interest in history becomes a preoccupation that leads to writing about the community, very often the outcome is history that is tendentious in the extreme—history the community dismisses as ‘apostate.’”¹¹⁴

In *An Insider’s View*, Palmer reassured readers that he had no agenda but truth. With disarming potency, he cast considerable doubt on the Saints’ simple narrative. He didn’t just question Joseph Smith’s vision;

111. James B. Allen, “Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision: What Do We Learn from Them?” *Improvement Era* 73, no. 4 (April 1970): 4–13.

112. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971).

113. See Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2002), vii–x.

114. Jan Shipps, *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 179–80.

Palmer confessed that his own heartfelt youthful feelings of the Holy Spirit had been a delusion, or at least a misguided way to discern truth.¹¹⁵

Around the same time, President Gordon B. Hinckley delivered his 2002 sermon on the all-or-nothing historicity of Joseph Smith's first vision. He called out "a so-called intellectual who said the Church was trapped by its history."¹¹⁶ Palmer—the type of person President Hinckley had in mind—advocated that the Church should follow the example of the Independence, Missouri-based Community of Christ (the second-largest church under the restoration umbrella), which was distancing itself from Joseph Smith's first vision, in contrast to President Hinckley's stand.¹¹⁷

Critiques like Palmer's multiplied online, where more and more Saints encountered claims that disrupted their shared memory. Why are there no accounts of the vision at the time it occurred? Why does the 1832 account only mention the Lord? Why are there so many accounts, and why do they make conflicting claims about Joseph Smith's age, what he was worried and praying about, and what he learned from God?

Of the Saints who learned of the newly selected and related knowledge, many dismissed or disregarded it. Many others, however, experienced dissonance that led to deeper investigation. Some successfully incorporated new knowledge and consolidated a more complex but still orthodox memory. For others, however, a high degree of unresolved dissonance eroded their faith. They could no longer believe that Joseph Smith experienced a vision, but because it had become the seminal event underpinning their faith, they could agree with President Hinckley: "It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud."¹¹⁸

Apologetic websites situated new knowledge in support of the collective memory, adding complexity and resolving dissonance with little disruption. Critical sites selected and related information in ways that undermined the standard story. Bloggers and vloggers and tweeters and trolls weighed in, some posing as objective analysts, others blatantly partisan.

115. Palmer, *Insider's View*, 131–32, 235–54.

116. Hinckley, "Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith," 80.

117. Palmer, *Insider's View*, 263. On the RLDS/Community of Christ historical shift, compare Joseph Smith III and Heman C. Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 4 vols. (Lamoni, Ia.: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1908), 1:6–12, with Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820–1844* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 51–67.

118. Hinckley, "Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith," 80.

An anonymous person who later posed as an objective analyst wrote, “I was very distraught when I started learning these things. At first I felt as if my entire world had collapsed.” This person began studying for a few hours a day, trying to figure out whom to trust. Deciding that “both sides are guilty of making errors and misrepresenting the facts,” they started mormonthink.com as a place to post pro and con arguments along with a personal point of view.¹¹⁹ In this environment, the Church could not wisely quarantine information about the vision.

The Joseph Smith Papers put it all online. Building on Dean Jessee’s pioneering work, by 2005 the project had institutional support from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and generous funding from Larry H. and Gail Miller. The resulting volumes have been critically acclaimed for meeting the highest standards of documentary editing. What they lacked, however, was accessibility. The books were large and expensive. Some volumes sold extremely well but were not generally or widely digested.

Then, in October 2013, all of the first vision accounts in the known historical record were published together in a new open-access website, josephsmithpapers.org. These documents were already online elsewhere and in print volumes of the Joseph Smith Papers, but pulling them together made them easier to access and signaled to Latter-day Saints and others that the Church was forthright. Relatively few Latter-day Saints or anyone else knew of the documents, however, or paid attention to efforts to publicize them.

Then, without fanfare, on November 20, 2013, the Church published “First Vision Accounts” on lds.org. It was an unattributed essay including candid statements of all the issues raised over the years, counterarguments to Brodie and Walters, links to images of all the known accounts, and the epistemology Grant Palmer disputed: “Neither the truth of the First Vision nor the arguments against it can be proven by historical research alone. Knowing the truth of Joseph Smith’s testimony requires each earnest seeker of truth to study the record and then exercise sufficient faith in Christ to ask God in sincere, humble prayer whether the record is true. If the seeker asks with the real intent to act upon the

119. D. Jeff Burton, “Anonymous Confessions of an LDS Webmaster,” *Sunstone*, no. 150 (July 2008): 67–69.

answer revealed by the Holy Ghost, the truthfulness of Joseph Smith's vision will be manifest."¹²⁰

The essay had been in the works for a few years. By the time it was published, more people than ever before were firm in the faith of Joseph Smith's first vision. At the same time, probably more people than ever before were experiencing increasing doubt that the vision had happened as Joseph described, along with distrust of the Church as a reliable source of truth on the matter. The stakes were higher than ever.

As had always been the case, many options existed for how the Church could proceed. All kinds of contingent choices could be made. The Church could maintain its line in the sand. Or it could adopt the "evolutionary development" interpretation of Mark A. Scherer, the Community of Christ World Church Historian, who argued in 2013 that spiritual truths, not historicity, are the more important product of Joseph Smith's vision accounts.¹²¹

In the end, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints did not choose only to tell the old story in new ways, nor only to maintain unequivocally that Joseph Smith saw God and Christ in the grove in 1820, nor only to emphasize the spiritual message in the historical record. It chose, instead, to do all these and more.

In February 2016, Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles gave the annual address by a senior Church leader to Church educators. He declared that they should stop handling complex issues in an old-fashioned way:

As Church education moves forward in the 21st century, each of you needs to consider any changes you should make in the way you prepare to teach, how you teach, and what you teach if you are to build unwavering faith in the lives of our precious youth.

Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, "Don't worry about it!" Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church. . . .

It was only a generation ago that our young people's access to information about our history, doctrine, and practices was basically

120. "First Vision Accounts," part of the Gospel Topics Essays series, originally published November 2013, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.lds.org/topics/first-vision-accounts?lang=eng>.

121. Scherer, *Journey of a People*, 65–67.

limited to materials printed by the Church. Few students came in contact with alternative interpretations. Mostly, our young people lived a sheltered life.

Our curriculum at that time, though well-meaning, did not prepare students for today—a day when students have instant access to virtually everything about the Church from every possible point of view.¹²²

Elder Ballard explicitly directed the educators to seek, and help their students seek, accurate history from experts and acknowledged that he did so as well. “Please,” he said, “before you send them into the world, inoculate your students by providing faithful, thoughtful, and accurate interpretation of gospel doctrine, the scriptures, our history, and those topics that are sometimes misunderstood,” including “different accounts of the First Vision.”¹²³

Elder Ballard said that the Church had made “extraordinary efforts to provide accurate context and understanding” and pointed to the Gospel Topics essays as “a prime example of this effort.” Then he told the teachers, “It is important that you know the content of these essays like you know the back of your hand.”¹²⁴

In a May 2016 worldwide broadcast to young adults, Nancy and Richard Maynes modeled the new approach. Nancy Maynes spoke from the packed Tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City. She told them about when she was their age and lacked purpose and direction. She was a believer in Jesus Christ. She attended different churches, “hoping to find some answers,” and finally knelt at her bedside and asked God for help. Then she met Richard Maynes, who introduced her to the Church.¹²⁵

“The First Vision was an important part of my conversion,” she said. “I felt a connection with Joseph Smith because he had the same question that I had: Where do I find the truth? Heavenly Father answered his

122. M. Russell Ballard, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century,” address to CES Religious Educators, February 26, 2016, Salt Lake Tabernacle, accessed online August 25, 2018, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century?lang=eng>.

123. Ballard, “Opportunities and Responsibilities.”

124. Ballard, “Opportunities and Responsibilities.”

125. Nancy J. Maynes, “Finding My Purpose,” Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults, May 1, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2016/01/finding-my-purpose?lang=eng>.

sincere prayer, and He answered my prayer.”¹²⁶ Nancy Maynes’s autobiographical testimony showed a rising generation anew how Joseph Smith’s first vision contributed to conversion and modeled a gospel-based epistemology.

Her husband, Elder Richard J. Maynes, a General Authority Seventy, then did something no General Authority had ever done before in that space: he cited and quoted extensively from “First Vision Accounts,” reviewing the four primary accounts in detail, noting variation and differences but emphasizing their “consistent, harmonious story.”¹²⁷

Elder Maynes ended his address by testifying of Joseph Smith’s first vision and inviting audience members to share their thoughts and feelings about it on social media, noting that missionaries all around the world were sharing the same “sacred information” that converted Nancy years earlier.

Richard Bushman spoke to students at BYU–Hawaii in November 2016. He chose as a topic “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?” He began by guiding the students on a virtual tour of a brand-new exhibit at the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City. It tells “the story of the Restoration,” he said, a story of people who “yearned for revelation and direction from heaven and could not find it. Then the exhibition displays a picture of Joseph Smith searching the scripture and invites you into a theater where the First Vision is reenacted in film. The film is projected in a round room to show a wooded grove surrounding you about 240 degrees. A tall young man walks into this grove, prays, and the light appears. The revelation that was looked for by so many seekers has at last come.”¹²⁸

Bushman described other exciting new aspects of the old story. “As the film begins, words appear on the screen explaining that there are nine versions of the First Vision and this presentation draws on all of them.” That represented a major departure from earlier films, which drew on multiple accounts without revealing the fact to viewers. Moreover, as Bushman described to the students, “on a stand as you exit the theater is a notebook containing all of these accounts in full, with the parts that are

126. Maynes, “Finding My Purpose.”

127. Richard J. Maynes, “The Truth Restored,” *Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults*, May 1, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2016/01/the-truth-restored?lang=eng>.

128. Richard L. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?” devotional address given at Brigham Young University–Hawaii, November 15, 2016, accessed August 25, 2018, <https://devotional.byuh.edu/node/1514>.

incorporated into the film script printed in bold. That is a new addition to the story—nine accounts of the First Vision when previously we had known only one, the one that appears in *Pearl of Great Price*.¹²⁹

Bushman then told a detective story. “I thought you might be interested in hearing how it came about that we have these other accounts when for so long there was just one. Even more important, how does this new knowledge affect our understanding of Joseph Smith and the Gospel?”¹³⁰ This was Richard Bushman at his best as selector and relator of “new knowledge.”

The problem, Bushman said, was Fawn Brodie’s thesis that Joseph made up the vision story later. “Church historians of course could not leave that challenge unanswered. They thought Brodie made a weak argument but without evidence of an earlier account, her conjecture might persuade some. And so the hunt was on.”¹³¹

In Bushman’s telling, newly discovered accounts solved the problem. The 1832 and 1835 accounts “effectively dispelled” Brodie’s argument, he said, “but the acquisition of other records of the First Vision had an added value.” In Bushman’s telling, differences in the accounts were interesting, expected, and revealing. He noted that the 1832 account was incomplete, but he liked it for what it had, not what it lacked. It had forgiveness. “The first thing the Savior did was forgive Joseph and urge him to repent,” Bushman noted. “The first act of the restoration was to put the soul of the Lord’s prophet in order. After granting forgiveness, Christ went on to remind Joseph of the atonement.”¹³²

“This account throws new light on the Restoration,” Bushman declared. “The 1838 account, the traditional one, emphasized the problem of churches; which church is true? The 1832 story brings redemption to the fore—forgiveness and atonement. Even the prophet of the Lord stands before God in need of forgiveness.” Bushman was offering a new memory of the seminal story. In the twenty-first century, it could be less about feeling embattled and persecuted and debating the nature of the one true church. Attention could shift instead to the universal message of redemption through Christ. Bushman emphasized the second point very much. “Likely no more than a handful of Latter-day Saints had even heard of the First Vision before 1839,” he said. The message of the

129. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

130. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

131. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

132. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

restored gospel, Bushman declared, was Christ, as the Book of Mormon proclaimed on its title page. “That is what Joseph would want to come out of his work: for us to believe in Christ.”¹³³

The problem, Bushman noted, is that “some people’s faith is based more on Joseph Smith than on Jesus Christ. When they begin to question the Prophet, they lose faith in the Savior. We all know of Latter-day Saints whose faith is shaken by new facts, such as the existence of the alternate accounts of the First Vision which I have talked about today. When this new information builds up, they grow concerned. Could it all be wrong? Their consternation goes so far that they consider leaving the church, painful as that would be.”¹³⁴ He said he had tried for a long time to answer the specific questions of those who worried about having different accounts of the vision, but he had changed his approach. “I have taken to asking the doubters a question. How do you feel about Jesus Christ?” He told the students the following:

Those who lose faith in Christ because they have lost faith in Joseph Smith have things backward. Joseph’s mission was to increase faith in Christ, not in himself. He thought of himself as one of the weak things of the world who came forth that faith might increase in the earth and that Christ’s everlasting covenant might be established. He would want us to develop faith in his teachings, in Christ and the atonement, in prayer and adhesion to high moral standards, not in him as a man. He would want us to believe in the principles independent of the man, as the Saints in the first decade did. We honor him as a prophet, to be sure, but as one who testified of the Savior. His revelations pointed beyond himself to Christ and the Father. I believe in Joseph Smith as a prophet of God, and most of you here today do too. But we must place our faith first in Christ, and believe in him apart from our faith in his messenger. Christ should be the anchor when we struggle and question.

We now benefit from having not just one but many accounts of the First Vision, each one offering a different perspective. The Vision is a powerful source of faith. It helps my faith to know that someone in our own era saw God. But we should keep in mind the Vision’s purpose: it was to testify of the Lord. That Christ will come first in our faith, that he will be the foundation, that we will enjoy forgiveness and renewal through His atonement, I pray in Christ’s name, amen.¹³⁵

133. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

134. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

135. Bushman, “What Can We Learn from the First Vision?”

On May 31, 2018, the Church-owned *Deseret News* published “Defending the Faith: The Supposed Scandal of Multiple First Vision Accounts,” an essay by Daniel Peterson. He dismissed the widespread criticisms that the multiple accounts show that Joseph Smith “simply couldn’t get his story straight” and that “the LDS Church has sought to hide these differing accounts.”¹³⁶

Comments on the article began to accumulate. Most attacked Peterson’s premises. One found Joseph Smith’s accounts “very inconsistent.” Some said Peterson should have faulted Joseph Fielding Smith for suppressing evidence and credited Gerald and Sandra Tanner with finding it. Soon the commenters were waging a war of words about Joseph Smith’s memory and about whether Joseph Fielding Smith really suppressed evidence and about whether God has a body and whether anyone had ever seen God.

Then a commenter identified as apm22 from Sparks, Nevada, interrupted to post a lament and to ask a question. “I was never aware of differing 1st vision accounts,” he said, though he had been a missionary and later served in two bishoprics and had read all seven volumes of *History of the Church*. Peterson’s article emphasized how early and often the accounts had been published and publicized by the Church, yet this mainstream member repeated, “I never knew about the differing accounts.” He expressed sadness and wondered, “Why don’t the leaders write articles in the *Ensign* or speak about the details of these things in General Conference?”¹³⁷

Commenter IronChild9 from Boise, Idaho, had also responded to Daniel Peterson’s *Deseret News* article, saying that by emphasizing how scholars had known of the vision accounts for half a century he had obscured the fact that the laity did not know. “When was the last time this was discussed from the pulpit, Sunday school lesson, or visiting teaching visit? Why is it only mentioned in an essay that is essentially buried deep on the church website? Sure, this info can be found by those that go looking, but why should they have to go looking? Why isn’t this part of the standard narrative that is taught from primary onwards?”¹³⁸

136. Daniel Peterson, “Defending the Faith: The Supposed Scandal of Multiple First Vision Accounts,” *Deseret News*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/900020151/the-supposed-scandal-of-multiple-first-vision-accounts.html>.

137. Peterson, “Defending the Faith,” see comments at <https://www.deseretnews.com/user/comments/900020151/the-supposed-scandal-of-multiple-first-vision-accounts.html>.

138. Peterson, “Defending the Faith.”

In a devotional address days later, Apostle Quentin L. Cook announced a new standard narrative. In his June 12, 2018, address to BYU–Idaho students, Cook declared, “For the first time in nearly a hundred years, a new multi-volume history of the Church is being issued under the direction of the First Presidency.” Titled *Saints*, it had been in the works for a decade, he told them, and the first few chapters had already been serialized online and in the Church’s magazines. Cook described it as a narrative history—“the true story of ordinary people who became saints.” He said the first volume was being translated into fourteen languages for worldwide distribution beginning in September 2018.¹³⁹

The new history would now begin with the spring 1815 cataclysmic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia, signaling “to God’s children everywhere” by its opening scene and worldwide distribution “that it is the story of their covenant with God, who knows their hardships” and who would, despite cataclysmic or private tragedies, “endow our lives with transcendent meaning, promise healing through the Savior’s Atonement, and assure us that relationships we cherish here on earth can endure in eternity, coupled with eternal joy.”¹⁴⁰

Elder Cook told the students that *Saints* was not old-fashioned but a story for them and about them, one that located them relative to the epic story of God renewing his covenant to redeem mankind because of love. “As you read, you will discover new insight and meaning even in stories you have heard before.” He then illustrated this point by selecting and relating Joseph Smith’s first vision in a new way, drawing on the way Bushman related the 1832 and 1838 accounts and adding an interpretation that resolved the problem B. H. Roberts had once tried to address by simply deleting a troublesome line—before the world could access high-resolution images of all the original accounts with a search engine and a few mouse clicks.¹⁴¹ Elder Cook explained,

139. Quentin L. Cook, “Out of Obscurity: How Merciful the Lord Has Been,” devotional address, Brigham Young University–Idaho, June 12, 2018, Rexburg, Idaho, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.byui.edu/devotionals/elder-quentin-l-cook-spring-2018>.

140. Cook, “Out of Obscurity.”

141. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 1–4. Compare to “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 11 (April 1, 1842): 748; Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 706. On p. 3 of his “History of Joseph Smith from the Millennial Star,” Roberts wrote the following in pencil: “contradiction with statement in Wentworth letter [one illegible word] see preceding.” *History of Joseph Smith*, 3 vols., in B. H. Roberts collection, MS 1278, Church History Library.

No scene in Church history is better known than Joseph Smith's First Vision, but *Saints* helps us better understand how Joseph struggled to reconcile what he felt in his heart with what he thought in his mind. Joseph's heartfelt desire to feel the Savior's forgiveness had gone unfulfilled because he observed that none of the existing churches taught "the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament."¹⁴² In his mind Joseph pondered which church was right, or if they were all wrong. In his heart he desperately hoped that one of them was right so he could find the peace he sought. With his head and his heart at odds, Joseph discovered that he could ask of God. He went to the woods to pray. There he saw the Father and the Son, who forgave him and resolved his dilemma in a way he had never imagined.¹⁴³

Indeed, as Elder Cook indicated, Joseph Smith's first vision is the inciting incident in this new narrative. The first chapter sets it up. Joseph Smith is an appealing protagonist. Like many others in his world, he is afflicted by disease and disruption. Like many others, he wonders if his sins have displeased God, and he seeks to be reconciled to God lest he be damned at death. He is frustrated until he discovers a new way to read an old verse. Chapter 2 shows the young hero going to the woods to pray for wisdom. He is opposed by an unseen power but prevails at the last moment, when "a pillar of light appear[s] over his head" and descends, "filling him with peace and unspeakable joy."¹⁴⁴

Joseph sees God in the light, who calls him by name and introduces his Beloved Son, who says, "Joseph, thy sins are forgiven." Joseph asks, "What church shall I join?"

"Join none of them," Christ answers. "They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof." They converse further; Joseph sees a host of angels and is finally left looking into heaven. The narrative is captivating and blends the accounts harmoniously, drawing on the most descriptive and dramatic elements of each. The next passage tells how Joseph's story was rejected by the minister.¹⁴⁵

142. "History, circa Summer 1832," 2.

143. Cook, "Out of Obscurity."

144. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 15, also available at <https://www.lds.org/languages/eng/content/history/saints-v1/02-hear-him>.

145. *Saints*, 16–17.

Then comes some exposition, explaining that Joseph kept the vision to himself after being rejected and later tried to record it. “He wrote the words out himself, in halting language, trying earnestly to capture the majesty of the moment.” He recorded it again later, with help from scribes, saying “less about his own search for forgiveness and more about the Savior’s universal message of truth and the need for a restoration of the gospel. With each effort to record his experience, Joseph testified that the Lord had heard and answered his prayer.”¹⁴⁶ In the new narrative, the answer to Joseph Smith’s prayer launches a quest that transforms him from an obscure boy into a prophet with power from God to seal relationships so that they transcend even death.

Joseph Smith inhabited a visionary world and belonged to a visionary family. It was still bold of him, and unpopular, to declare that he had seen a vision. He stuck with that story. “Why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen,” he said, “for I had seen a vision, I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dare I do it.”¹⁴⁷ Thankfully, if not inevitably, he recorded the experience repeatedly and resolutely. Over two centuries, the stakes of his claim have been raised. Joseph Smith’s first vision is now all or nothing. The Latter-day Saints’ April 2020 bicentennial celebration of the vision indicates it will remain so, not inevitably, but because of many contingent choices to believe “that the Father and the Son actually and in truth and very deed appeared to the Prophet Joseph in a vision in the woods.”¹⁴⁸

Steven C. Harper is Professor of Church History at Brigham Young University and Editor in Chief of BYU Studies. From 2012 to 2018, he was the managing historian and a general editor of *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter-days*. He is the author of books and articles, most recently *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (Oxford, 2019).

146. *Saints*, 18–19.

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

148. Clark, “Charted Course,” 2.