

AN ANALYSIS OF SIX CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS
TOUCHING JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION*

By Richard P. Howard

In trying to grasp the meaning of the history of a religious institution one inevitably confronts the dual impact of both past and present on the way that meanings are shaped and transmitted by the community. By "dual impact" I mean, first, that as a community fashions its traditions, its values, and its hopes, it does so in the shadow of the totality of its past experience, much of it lying beneath the level of conscious awareness. The past permeates the present. Any one present moment is the collective body of meanings and values accruing from the historical existence of the community, and from the thought and decisions of its leaders who have articulated its most durable norms. The world view, standards of conduct, geographical locations, values, language, and customs of a community--all of which emerge out of the community's past--go a long way toward whatever the community presently sees, hears, cherishes, abhors, and performs in any specific moment of time. The other aspect of this dual impacting process is the power that the present moment has on the way a community remembers and forgets its past. Persons live in present moments, oriented toward the future mostly, and holding certain expectations, hopes, plans, and needs. These in turn have a profound influence on their choices of what to recall and how to interpret what is recalled from the past. The criteria here, of course, relate to usefulness in moving toward chosen goals.

In the light of this, the work of the historian is excitingly perplexing. The reason is that the attempt to understand the past confronts the puzzling question of the dual impact of the past on the present and the present on the past. The question has to do with the relative degree to which the direction and the essence of the impact can be determined with any sense of accuracy. Even if, by long training, experience, and skill, historians are able successfully to minimize the distorting effects of their present value systems when assessing the meaning of history, the task is just begun. For the evidence was created by human beings who brought to that creation their own values and needs and understandings, all of which combine to distort the reality of the past. And that past itself has a pervasive, distorting effect on the formulation of values, needs, and understandings--due in large part to the fact that the meanings of the past are never fully discerned.

*Richard P. Howard, "An Analysis of Six Contemporary Accounts Touching Joseph Smith's First Vision," Restoration Studies I (Independence, Missouri: Herald House, 1980), 95-117. Mr. Howard is RLDS Church Historian.

Now let us apply all of this to the process of trying to understand the First Vision of Joseph Smith. To begin, we must confront the community dimensions of that terribly powerful event. There is a sense in which the First Vision of that "clear, spring day of 1820" is as much a creation of the community that has for over 130 years believed it as it is an objective, archaeologically provable (or disprovable) event of history. This is to say that the historian deals with traces of events, not with events directly, as the scientist deals directly with chemical colorations of litmus paper under highly controlled conditions.

Seeking the reality of Joseph's First Vision we deal with traces of an event, not with the event at all. We deal with memories, reflections, and interpretations drawn out and shaped over years of time by the action and impact of subsequent events, which become part of a new past informing later attempts to discern the meanings of the earlier events.

Therefore, I have chosen not to try to deal with the First Vision in any way that tries to answer the approach taken by the Reverend Wesley Walters and the Tanners of Salt Lake City. They have burrowed through mounds of papers with the goal of persuading Mormons of every stripe that the First Vision never happened and, therefore, that the church has no genuine foundation--no reason to exist.

I know a married couple about to celebrate their silver anniversary. They have lately come to realize that the original reasons for their wedding to a great extent no longer form the basis for their present plans to continue the marriage into the next quarter-century. Joseph's First Vision could not have been the central reason for the decision of many to unite with the Latter Day Saint movement in the first decade of its existence. After all, it seems clear that that event, which from 1840 to the present has gradually become so important to so many Latter Day Saints, simply was not generally known to the membership during the first decade of the church's life. Whatever the church's reasons for being from 1830 to 1840, the First Vision was not among them as a conscious reality of vital significance to the members. By actions of the church and its leaders from 1842 on, that event has come to have a position of central importance in the literature, imagination, and theology of the various Latter Day Saint communities that have emerged from the original church.

The Walters-Tanner position is that since there appears to have been no significant revival at Palmyra in 1820, Joseph's story of the First Vision, if tied to such a revival, is a later fabrication to buttress the authority of a church and its leaders under attack. Rather than debate that position, the question I pose is this: Given six contemporary accounts touching Joseph Smith's First Vision, what will a thoughtful exploration of their relationship to each other yield in terms of comprehending and using creatively the distinction between history and metahistory? I shall try to restate the question, and I hope that it still is basically the same: If this exploration demonstrates the difficulties of a thorough historical reconstruction of the First Vision, how can RLDS historians and theologians work together

with leaders and members to supplant historical approaches to suprahistorical events with a more appropriate and useful discipline?

I do not propose to answer this question, for in my judgment the answer will be a process taking several generations, even with the most intentional and imaginative effort and the most favorable responses on the part of the church at large.

I shall now present six contemporary accounts touching the First Vision. Each one will be preceded by a brief descriptive statement designed to enable proper scholarly citation as well as to place the source in its context. Following the sources will be a brief examination of some fourteen aspects of the First Vision as variously touched on by the six accounts, and a brief conclusion.

THE FIRST VISION: THE SOURCES

- A. 1831-1832: SMITH, JOSEPH. UNDATED MANUSCRIPT. IN "KIRTLAND LETTERBOOK, 1829-1835," pp. 1-4 (LDS Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah. Handwriting: Joseph Smith).

Dean Jessee, leading expert in the analysis of early Mormon holograph writings, in 1969 identified the handwriting of this MS as that of F. G. Williams.¹ Later he wrote that the MS was mostly in Williams' hand but that the portion dealing with the First Vision was in Smith's hand.²

At about the age of twelve years my mind become Seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul which led me to searching the Scriptures believing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God thus applying
5 myself to them and my intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly for I discovered that they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that
10 sacred depository this was a grief to my Soul thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the sittuation of the world of mankind the contentions and divions the wickedness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the ~~of the~~ minds of mankind my mind become exceedingly distressed for I become convicted of my Sins and by Searching the
15 Scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own Sins and for the Sins of the world for I learned in the
20 Scriptures that God was the same yesterday today and forever . . . when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said it is a fool that saith in his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed all all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotant and omnipresant power a being who maketh laws and
25 decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from all Eternity to Eternity and when I considered all these things and that that being seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth

30 therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else
to whom I could go and to obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry
in the wilderness and while in the attitude of calling upon the
Lord in the 16th year of my age a pillar of ~~fire~~ 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
35 opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me
saying Joseph my son thy Sins are forgiven thee. go thy way walk
in my statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of
glory I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on
my name may have Eternal life behold the world lieth in Sin at
40 this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned aside
from the gospel and keep not my commandments they draw near to me
with their lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger
is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them
acording to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath
45 been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Apstles behold and lo
I come quickly as it was written of me in the cloud clothed in the
Glory of my Father and my soul was filled with love and for many
days I could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me but
could find none that would believe the heavenly vision
50 nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart ~~about that time~~
~~my mother and~~ but after many days I fell into transgression and
sinned in many things which brought a wound upon my soul and there
were many things which transpired that cannot be written and my
Fathers family have suffered many persecutions and afflictions
....

- B. 1834-1835: COWDERY, OLIVER, AND SMITH, JOSEPH. LETTER III OF
EIGHT LETTERS TO W. W. PHELPS. IN LATTER DAY SAINTS' MESSENGER
AND ADVOCATE, KIRTLAND, OHIO, VOL. I, NO. 3, DECEMBER 1834, pp.
42-43.

Authorship is usually attributed to Cowdery but Smith collaborated at points where his firsthand knowledge made his help indispensable. This is established by two types of evidence:

1. Cowdery's own prefatory statement accompanying the publication of the first letter:

That our narrative may be correct, and particularly the introduction, it is proper to inform our patrons, that our brother J. Smith jr. has offered to assist us. Indeed, there are many items connected with the fore part of this subject that render his labor indispensable. With his labor and with authentic documents now in our possession, we hope to render this a pleasing and agreeable narrative, well worth the examination and perusal of the Saints. We assure them that it shall be founded upon facts.³

2. Circumstantial evidence. It would be unthinkable that Cowdery would have published a record of such deeply personal metaphysical experiences of his mentor without consultation.

. . . I shall therefore, pass over that, till I come to the 15th year of his life.

It is necessary to premise this account by relating the situation of the public mind relative to religion, at this time:
5 One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra, and vicinity. Elder Lane was a tallented man possessing a good share of literary endowments, and apparent humility. There was a good awakening, or excitement raised on the subject of
10 religion, and much enquiry for the word of life. Large additions were made to the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches.-- Mr. Lane's manner of communication was peculiarly calculated to awaken the intellect of the hearer, and arouse the sinner to look about him for safety--much good instruction was always drawn from his discourses on the scriptures, and in common with others, our
15 brother's mind became awakened.

For a length of time the reformation seemed to move in a harmonious manner, but, as the excitement ceased, or those who had expressed anxieties, had professed a belief in the pardoning influence and condescension of the Savior, a general struggle was
20 made by the leading characters of the different sects, for proselytes. Then strife seemed to take the place of that apparent union and harmony which had previously characterized the moves and exhortations of the old professors, and a cry--I am right--you are wrong--was introduced in their stead.

25 In this general strife for followers, his mother, one sister, and two of his natural brothers, were persuaded to unite with the Presbyterians. This gave opportunity for further reflection: and as will be seen in the sequel, laid a foundation, or was one means of laying a foundation for the attestation of the truths, or
30 professions of truth, contained in that record called the word of God. After strong solicitations to unite with one of those different societies, and seeing the apparent proselying disposition manifested with equal warmth from each, his mind was led to more seriously contemplate the importance of a move of this
35 kind. To profess godliness without its benign influence upon the heart, was a thing so foreign from his feelings, that his spirit was not at rest day nor night. To unite with a society professing to be built upon the only sure foundation, and that profession be a vain one, was calculated, in its very nature, the more it was
40 contemplated, the more to arouse the mind to the serious consequences of moving hastily, in a course fraught with eternal realities. To say he was right, and still be wrong, could not profit; and amid so many, some must be built upon the sand.

45 In this situation where could he go? If he went to one he was told they were right, and all others were wrong--If to another, the same was heard from those: All professed to be the true church; and if not they were certainly hypocritical, because, if I am presented with a system of religion, and enquire of my teacher whether it is correct, and he informs me that he is not
50 certain, he acknowledges at once that he is teaching without authority, and acting without a commission! . . . [This account makes no further reference to the First Vision in the grove near Manchester, New York.]

- C. 9 NOVEMBER 1835: SMITH, JOSEPH, TO "JOSHUA THE JEWISH MINISTER," IN SMITH, JOSEPH, "HISTORY," BOOK A-1, pp. 120-122. (LDS Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah. Handwriting: Warren Cowdery; pagination is from the back of the book).

In the LDS Archives repose the handwritten MSS comprising the official "History of Joseph Smith" as dictated to various scribes. Predating these MSS is the MS book known as the private journal of Joseph Smith, begun on 27 Nov. 1832.⁴ This journal provided much of the data later written into the official history MSS, referred to above. The eight Cowdery letters, copied from the Messenger and Advocate, appear here also, mostly in the hand of Warren Parrish. At the end of the eighth letter the style changes from Cowdery's rhetoric to a chronicle-type, daily entry form, and this in the hand of Warren A. Cowdery. This 142-page journal began on 22 September 1835, and continued to January 18, 1836. Under the date of 9 November 1835 appears the interview between Joseph Smith and "Joshua the Jewish Minister," in which the former narrates his early visionary experience.⁵

The conversation soon turned upon the subject of Religion, and after the subject of this narrative had made some remarks concerning the bible, he commenced giving him a relation of the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the Book of
5 Mormon, which were nearly as follows. Being wrought up in my mind respecting the subject of religion, and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong, but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be right, in matters of so much moment, matter
10 involving eternal consequences. Being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove and there bowed down before the Lord, under a realizing sense (if the bible be true) ask and you shall receive, knock and it shall be opened, seek and you shall find, and again, if any man lack wisdom, let [him ask] of God who giveth
15 to all men liberally & upbraideth not. Information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called on the Lord for the first time in the place above stated, or in other words, I made a fruitless attempt to pray My tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could
20 not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some one walking towards me. I strove again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprang upon my feet and looked around, but saw no person, or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking. I kneeled again, my mouth was opened and my
25 tongue loosed; I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head; which presently rested down upon me, and filled me with unspeakable joy. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the
30 first: he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee. He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. I saw many angels in this vision. I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication.

- D. 1840: PRATT, ORSON. INTERESTING ACCOUNT OF SEVERAL REMARKABLE VISIONS, AND OF THE LATE DISCOVERY OF ANCIENT AMERICAN RECORDS (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), pp. 3-6.

Orson Pratt was serving a mission in England as a member of the Council of Twelve in 1840 when he published this 31-page tract. Pratt's account of the First Vision, partially based on Source "B" and presumably based on his access to other early documents and to conversations with Joseph Smith, provided the foundation for much of the account later found in the "Wentworth Letter".

When somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old, he began seriously to reflect upon the necessity of being prepared for a future state of existence: but how, or in what way, to prepare himself, was a question, as yet, undetermined in his own mind: he perceived that it was a question of infinite importance, and that the salvation of his soul depended upon a correct understanding of the same. He saw, that if he understood not the way, it would be impossible to walk in it, except by chance; and the thought of resting his hopes of eternal life upon chance, or uncertainties, was more than he could endure. If he went to the religious denominations to seek information, each one pointed to its particular tenets, saying--"This is the way, walk ye in it;" while, at the same time, the doctrines of each were, in many respects, in direct opposition to one another. It, also, occurred to his mind, that God was not the author of but one doctrine, and therefore could not acknowledge but one denomination as his church; and that such denomination must be a people, who believe, and teach, that one doctrine, (whatever it may be,) and build upon the same. He then reflected upon the immense number of doctrines, now, in the world, which had given rise to many hundreds of different denominations. The great question to be decided in his mind, was--if anyone of these denominations be the Church of Christ, which one is it? Until he could become satisfied, in relation to this question, he could not rest contented. To trust to the decisions of fallible man, and build his hopes upon the same, without any certainty, and knowledge, of his own, would not satisfy the anxious desires that pervaded his breast. To decide, without any positive and definite evidence, on which he could rely, upon a subject involving the future welfare of his soul, was revolting to his feelings. The only alternative, that seemed to be left him, was to read the Scriptures, and endeavour to follow their directions. He, accordingly, commenced perusing the sacred pages of the Bible, with sincerity, believing the things that he read. His mind soon caught hold of the following passage:--"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."--James 1:5. From this promise he learned, that it was the privilege of all men to ask God for wisdom, with the sure and certain expectation of receiving, liberally; without being upbraided for so doing. This was cheering information to him: tidings that gave him great joy. It was like a light shining forth in a dark place, to guide him to the path in which he should walk. He, now, saw that if he inquired of God, there was, not only, a

possibility, but a probability; yea, more, a certainty, that he
45 should obtain a knowledge, which, of all the doctrines, was the
doctrine of Christ; and, which, of all the churches, was the
church of Christ. He, therefore, retired to a secret place, in a
grove, but a short distance from his father's house, and knelt
down, and began to call upon the Lord. At first, he was severely
50 tempted by the powers of darkness, which endeavoured to overcome
him; but he continued to seek for deliverance, until darkness gave
way from his mind; and he was enabled to pray, in fervency of the
spirit, and in faith. And, while thus pouring out his soul,
anxiously desiring an answer from God, he, at length, saw a very
55 bright and glorious light in the heavens above; which, at first,
seemed to be at a considerable distance. He continued praying,
while the light appeared to be gradually descending towards him;
and, as it drew nearer, it increased in brightness, and magnitude,
so that, by the time that it reached the tops of the trees, the
60 whole wilderness, for some distance around, was illuminated in a
most glorious and brilliant manner. He expected to have seen the
leaves and boughs of the trees consumed, as soon as the light came
in contact with them; but, perceiving that it did not produce that
effect, he was encouraged with the hopes of being able to endure
65 its presence. It continued descending, slowly, until it rested
upon the earth, and he was enveloped in the midst of it. When it
first came upon him, it produced a peculiar sensation throughout
his whole system; and, immediately, his mind was caught away, from
the natural objects with which he was surrounded; and he was
70 enwrapped in a heavenly vision, and saw two glorious personages,
who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness.
He was informed, that his sins were forgiven. He was also
informed upon the subjects, which had for some time previously
agitated his mind, viz.--that all the religious denominations were
75 believing in incorrect doctrines; and, consequently, that none of
them was acknowledged of God, as his church and kingdom. And he
was expressly commanded, to go not after them; and he received a
promise that the true doctrine--the fulness of the gospel, should,
at some future time, be made known to him; after which, the vision
80 withdrew, leaving his mind in a state of calmness and peace,
indescribable. Some time after having received this glorious
manifestation, being young, he was again entangled in the vanities
of the world, of which he afterwards sincerely and truly repented.

E. 1842: SMITH, JOSEPH, "WENTWORTH LETTER," TIMES AND SEASONS, VOL.
III, NO. 9, MARCH 1, 1842, pp. 706-707.

When Joseph Smith was editor of Times and Seasons (Feb.-
Nov. 1842), John Wentworth, proprietor of the Chicago Democrat
newspaper, asked him for an article on the history of the Latter
Day Saint Church, to be sent to a Mr. Bastow, who was writing a
history of New Hampshire. Since this article is but a brief
sketch, the account of the First Vision is very condensed, and
relies at many points on Source "D".

When about fourteen years of age I began to reflect upon the
importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon
enquiring the plan of salvation I found that there was a great

5 clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society they
referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing
to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection:
considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be
the author of so much confusion I determined to investigate the
10 subject more fully, believing that if God had a church it would
not be split up into factions, and that if he taught one society
to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, he
would not teach another principles which were diametrically
opposed. Believing the word of God I had confidence in the
15 declaration of James; "If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God
who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not and it shall be
given him," I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to
call upon the Lord, while fervently engaged in supplication my
mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded,
20 and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious
personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and
likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun
at noon-day. They told me that all religious denominations were
believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was
acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was
25 expressly commanded to "go not after them," at the same time
receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some
future time be made known unto me.

- F. 1842: SMITH, JOSEPH, "HISTORY OF JOSEPH SMITH," TIMES AND SEASONS, VOL. III, NOS. 10 and 11, MARCH 15 and APRIL 1, 1842, pp. 726-728, 748-749.

Introducing his history in its first of many installments in Times and Seasons, Joseph Smith notes that it is based on his journal (Smith, Joseph, "History," book A-1, pp. 1-4, LDS Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah is the citation for the First Vision account. This in turn was based on an earlier MS written in 1838.). He also observes that this account will be much more comprehensive than that which he had published in the previous number in the "Wentworth Letters."⁶

Some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of the country,
5 indeed the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people, some crying, "lo, here," and some "lo, there;" some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and
10 some for the Baptists. For, notwithstanding the great love which the converts for these different faiths expressed at the time of their conversion, and the great zeal manifested by the respective clergy, who were active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling, in order to have every
15 body converted, as they were pleased to call it, let them join what sect they pleased; yet, when the converts began to file off, some to one party, and some to another, it was seen that the

seemingly good feelings of both the priests and the converts were more pretended than real, for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued; priest contending against priest, and convert against convert, so that all the good feelings, one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words, and a contest about opinions.

I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My father's family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith, and four of them joined that church, namely, my mother Lucy, my brothers Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and my sister Sophronia.

During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often pungent, still I kept myself aloof from all those parties, though I attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit: but in process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them, but so great was the confusion and strife among the different denominations that it was impossible for a person young as I was and so unacquainted with men and things to come to any certain conclusion who was right, and who was wrong. My mind at different times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult was so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists, and Methodists, and used all their powers of either reason, or sophistry to prove their errors, or at least to make the people think they were in error: on the other hand the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally zealous to establish their own tenets, and disprove all others.

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

While I was laboring under the extremes difficulties, caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth unto all men liberally and upbraideth not and it shall be given him." Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God I did, for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passage so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the bible. At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. I at length came to the determination to "ask of God," concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture. So in accordance with this my determination, to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life that I had made such an attempt, for amidst all my anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally.

After I had retired into the place where I had previously
75 designed to go, having looked around me and finding myself alone,
I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to
God. I had scarcely done so when immediately I was seized upon by
some power which entirely overcome me, and had such astonishing
influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak.
Thick darkness gathered around me and it seemed to me for a time
80 as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. But exerting all my
powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this
enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was
ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction, not
to an imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from
85 the unseen world who had such a marvelous power as I had never
before felt in any being. Just at this moment of great alarm, I
saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness
of the sun; which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It
no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy
90 which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two
personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description)
standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling
me by name, and said, (pointing to the other.) "This is my
beloved Son, hear him."
95 My object in going to enquire of the Lord was to know which
of all the sects was right? that I might know which to join. No
sooner therefore did I get possession of myself, so as to be able
to speak, - than I asked the personages who stood above me in the
light, which of all the sects was right; (for at this time it had
100 never entered into my heart that all were wrong.) and which I
should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for
they were all wrong, and the personage who addressed me said that
all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those
professors were all corrupt, they draw near to me with their lips,
105 but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrine the
commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the
power thereof." He again forbade me to join with any of them:
and many other things did he say unto me which I cannot write at
this time. When I came to myself again I found myself laying on
110 my back, looking up into heaven. Some few days after I had this
vision, I happened to be in company with one of the methodist
preachers who was very active in the before mentioned religious
excitement, and conversing with him on the subject of religion I
took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had
115 had. I was greatly surprised at his behavior, he treated my
communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it
was all of the devil, that there was no such thing as visions or
revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with
the apostles, and that there never would be any more of them. I
120 soon found however that my telling the story had excited a great
deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion and was
the cause of great persecution which continued to increase, and
though I was an obscure boy only between fourteen and fifteen
years of age and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of
125 no consequence in the world; yet men of high standing would take
notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create
a hot persecution, and this was common among all the sects: all

united to persecute me. It has often caused me serious reflection both then and since, how very strange it was that an obscure boy
130 of a little over fourteen years of age, and one too who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintainance by his daily labor, should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, so as to create in them a spirit of the hottest
135 persecution and reviling. But strange or not, so it was, and was often cause of great sorrow to myself. However it was nevertheless a fact that I had had a vision. I have thought since that I felt much like Paul when he made his defence before King Agrippa and related the account of the vision he had when he "saw
140 a light and heard a voice," but still there were but few who believed 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. He had seen a vision, he knew he had, and all the persecution under heaven could not make it otherwise,
145 and though they should persecute him unto death, yet he knew and would know unto his latest breath that he had both seen a light and heard a voice speaking to him, and all the world could not make him think or believe otherwise.--So it was with me, I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two
150 personages, and they did in reality speak unto me, or one of them did; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision yet it was true, and while they were persecuting me, reviling me and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart, why persecute for telling
155 the truth? I have actually seen a vision, and "who am I that I can withstand God," or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen, 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; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God and
160 come under condemnation. I had now got my mind satisfied so far as the sectarian world was concerned, that it was not my duty to join with any of them, but continue as I was until further directed; I had found the testimony of James to be true, that a man who lacked wisdom might ask of God, and obtain and not be
165 upbraided. I continued to pursue my common avocations in life until the twenty first of September, one thousand eight hundred and twenty three, all the time suffering severe persecution at the hands of all classes of men, both religious and irreligious because I continued to affirm that I had seen a vision. During
170 the space of time which intervened between the time I had the vision, and the year eighteen hundred twenty three, (having been forbidden to join any of the religious sects of the day, and being of very tender years, and persecuted by those who ought to have been my friends, and to have treated me kindly and if they
175 supposed me to be deluded to have endeavored in a proper and affectionate manner to have reclaimed me, I was left to all kinds of temptations and mingling with all kinds of society, I frequently fell into many foolish errors and displayed the weakness of youth and the corruption of human nature, which I am
180 sorry to say led me into divers temptations, to the gratification of many appetites offensive in the sight of God. In consequence of these things I often felt condemned for my weakness, and imperfections;

AN EXAMINATION OF FOURTEEN ASPECTS
OF THE FIRST VISION AS VARIOUSLY
TREATED IN SIX CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS

An explanation of three matters should facilitate the reader's use of the sources in conjunction with this part of the essay. First, since Account (B) figures only in the first two to the fourteen categories (for reasons that soon will become apparent), it will be completely absent from the final twelve aspects covered. Second, the parenthetical numbers following each of the following citations refer to the line numbers of the respective sources and enable the reader to find the excerpt in its context. Finally a letter designating each of the sources--excluding (B), of course--is entered under each of the final twelve categories, although at some points a letter will be followed only by the phrase, "no mention of this." This will remove any doubt as to whether the source in question was thoroughly examined.

I. Joseph Smith's age at the time of the vision; his preparation

- A. "...in the 16th year of my age..." (33)
- B. See comment below.
- C. "...I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication..." (31)
- D. "...When somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old,..." (1)
- E. "...When about fourteen years of age I began to reflect..." (1)
- F. "...It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty..." (67)

Comment

Only one account (A:9-13) mentions a prolonged period of reflection and meditation commencing at age twelve; all other accounts convey the impression of a brief, intensive contemplative period followed very soon by the vision.

One account (B) begins to introduce the reader to what coincides well with some of the introductory statements of accounts A,C,D,E, and F, but then later (beyond this source) changes the time to Joseph's seventeenth year, erroneously connecting this with 1823 or, rather, erroneously calling 1823 his seventeenth year when it should have been referred to as this eighteenth year. He became eighteen on December 23, 1823. In any case, Account (B) prepares the reader for the First Vision and then inexplicably moves directly to the 1823 experience. Therefore, we must leave Account (B) out of nearly all the calculations since it appears that Cowdery and Joseph originally intended to publish an account of the First Vision and then decided for some reason not to; instead, they went directly to the 1823 vision, after having introduced the First Vision. Since (B) does introduce the First Vision by sketching in the background of denominational strife, it will be considered in terms of Joseph's motivations to pray, a topic to which we shall now turn.

II. Joseph's motivations to seek and pray

- A. "...all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul...(2)
"...the situation of the world of mankind, the contentions and divisions the wickedness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind..." (11-13)
"...my mind become exceedingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins..."(14)
"...and I felt to mourn for my own sins..." (18)
"...I cried unto the Lord for mercy..." (29)
Study of the scriptures revealed to Joseph an unchanging God, omnipotent, seeking after human beings "to worship him in spirit and in truth..." (19-28)
Study of the scriptures also revealed how much the existing denominations had fallen short of "a holy walk and Godly conversation..." (7)
- B. Rev. Lane's ministry aroused the sinner to look about him for safety. (12)
There was a general strife among the contending sects for followers, and his mother, sister, and two of his brothers joined the Presbyterians. (20-26)
He was perplexed in his mind over which sect to join, as to join one without proper authority would be folly, thus his spirit was in turmoil both day and night over which to join. (30-50)
- C. "...I knew not who was right or who was wrong, but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be right, in ...matters involving eternal consequences..." (7-9)
"...Information was what I most desired at this time..." (15)
"...Being thus perplexed in mind..." (10)
- D. Joseph was reflecting on the necessity to be prepared for a future state of existence, and how to prepare for that. After all, his soul's salvation was the issue. (2-7)
Contending religious systems taught conflicting doctrines, and God could not be the author of such confusion. With such a diversity of doctrines, and God being the author of but one true doctrine, the task became to identify which of all the hundreds of denominations was the one true church. The only alternative seemed to be to read the scriptures. (10-30)
Joseph read James 1:5 and was greatly cheered by the promise that if he sought God in prayer he would be told which of all the doctrines was right, and which of all the churches was right. (33-45)
- E. "...I began to reflect on the importance of being prepared for a future state..." (1-2)
"...there was a great clash in religious sentiment;... considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of such confusion,...Believing the word of God I had confidence in the declaration of James (chapter 1:5)..." (3-14)
- F. "I felt some desire to be united with them [Methodists], but so great was the confusion and strife among the different denominations that it was impossible for a person young as I was and so unacquainted with men and things to come to any

certain conclusion who was right, and who was wrong. My mind at different times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult was so great and incessant." (31-38)

"...Who of all the parties are right? Or are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right which is it, and how shall I know it?" (44-47)

"...I was one day reading the epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse....Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine....I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God." (49-62)

Comment

Throughout all six accounts of conditions prefatory to the First Vision mention is made of divisions and contentions in the religious scene remembered by Joseph Smith and the quandary he felt himself in over which to join, although in Account (A) this aspect is only very briefly hinted at. But of all the accounts, only (A) stresses Joseph's sense of his own sin and need for divine mercy to overcome that condition.

Accounts (D) and (E) come only close enough to such a confession by representing Joseph as having sensed the necessity or importance of being prepared for a future state.

Use of scripture: Accounts (D) and (F) state that Joseph read James 1:5 as the direct stimulus for his overt attempt to pray, while (E) simply affirms his belief in the scriptures and his confidence in the declaration of James 1:5. Account (B) hints at no specific use of scripture in his decision to pray. In (C) we find Joseph bowing in prayer with a conscious awareness of the truth of two scriptures--Matt. 7:7 and James 1:5--but not actually reading any scriptures in preparation. Account (A) portrays Joseph studying the scriptures at length although not mentioning James 1:5.

III. The place

- A. "...the Lord hear my cry in the wilderness...." (30)
- C. "...I retired to the silent grove...." (10)
- D. "...He, therefore, retired to a secret place, in a grove, but a short distance from his father's house..." (45)
- E. "...I retired to a secret place in a grove...." (14)
- F. "...I retired to the woods to make the attempt...." (66)

Comment

Accounts (C), (D), and (E) refer to the place as a secret place, a grove, a silent grove. (F) refers to the woods, and (A) to the wilderness, a word also employed in (D) later then referring to the light descending on Joseph in prayer. Only one account (D) fixes the location with any exactness; even so we are at a loss to know precisely where the place was.

IV. Envelope, seized, overcome by an alien force, darkness, power

- A. No mention is made of this.
- C. No mention is made of any external, destructive power or of darkness, but Joseph could not speak his prayer until two unsuccessful attempts, marked by the sound of walking toward him, had passed. (18-23)
- D. Joseph was severely tempted by the powers of darkness, which endeavored to overcome him. (47)
- E. There is no mention of this.
- F. "...seized upon by some power which entirely overcome me, [so great] as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak." (74)
"Thick darkness gathered around me, and I felt doomed to destruction...." (76)
"...I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction, not to an imaginary ruin, but the power of some actual being from the unseen world who had such a marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being...." (80)

Comment

This is one of the most varied and problematic aspects of the First Vision, for we have extremes from the sheer terror of Joseph on the brink of total destruction as he struggles to pray (F) to the total lack of a reference to such an experience (A). In account (C) there appears the unique noise of walking toward Joseph as he sought to pray. Only (F) and (D) mention darkness, with the former describing it literally and the latter symbolically as the "power of darkness."

V. Joseph's struggle with and victory over demonic powers

- A. No mention is made.
- C. "...I kneeled down again (third time) and my mouth was opened and my tongue loosed; I called on the Lord in mighty prayer...." (23)
- D. "...but he continued to seek for deliverance, until darkness gave way from his mind; and he was enabled to pray, in fervency of the spirit, and in faith...." (49)
- E. No mention is made.
- F. "...But exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized me..." (78)

Comment

We see a steady progression from (C) to (F) (except E) in terms of the degree of detail characterizing Joseph's recollection of this intense struggle with alien powers and darkness. Finally (F) he is delivered from the awful powers of destruction and darkness, not to a further season of prayer (as in C and D) but directly to the theophany.

VI. His mind taken (caught) away from surrounding objects

- A. No mention is made.
- C. No mention is made.

- D. As a consequence of the light's enveloping him, Joseph felt "a peculiar sensation throughout his whole system; and immediately, his mind was caught away, from the natural objects with which he was surrounded." (66); he then saw two personages. (67)
- E. As a consequence of being fervently engaged in prayer, Joseph's "mind was taken away from the objects with which he was surrounded"; (16) and then he saw two personages in the midst of a brilliant light. (19)
- F. No mention is made.

Comment

While it is the light which takes Joseph's mind away from all his surroundings (D), it is the fervency of his prayer that effects this, according to the Wentworth Letter (E), readying him for the apprehension of light encircling the two personages.

VII. The pillar of light

- A. "...a pillar of fire 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...." (32)
- C. "...A pillar of fire appeared above my head; which presently rested down upon me, and filled me with unspeakable joy...." (25)
- D. "...he, at length, saw a very bright and glorious light in the heavens above; which, at first, seemed to be at a considerable distance. He continued praying, while the light appeared to be gradually descending towards him; and, as it drew nearer, it increased in brightness, and magnitude, so that, by the time that it reached the tops of the trees, the whole wilderness, for some distance around, was illuminated in a most glorious and brilliant manner. He expected to have seen the leaves and boughs of the trees consumed, as soon as the light came in contact with them; but, perceiving that it did not produce that effect, he was encouraged with the hopes of being able to endure its presence. It continued descending, slowly, until it rested upon the earth, and he was enveloped in the midst of it." (52-60)
- E. "...and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day..." (18)
- F. "Just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun; which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound." (84)

Comment

Accounts (A), (C), and (F) refer to a pillar, either of fire or light. (D) describes the light in terms suggestive of fire (with the reference to Joseph's expectation that the foliage on the trees should have been consumed as the light drew near).

By contrast (E) suggests that the light and the personages appeared to Joseph at the same moment; of course the brevity of (E) minimizes the seriousness of this as a determinant for discontinuity from the combined consistency of the other four sources. It should be noted that, in describing the immediate effects of the light on Joseph, each of the four accounts (except E) differs from the other three significantly.

VIII. The personages

- A. "...and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying...behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world..." (35, 37)
- C. "...A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame,...another personage soon appeared like unto the first: he...testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. I saw many angels in this vision..." (26, 28, 30-31)
- D. "...he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision, and saw two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness..." (67-69)
- E. "...I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day..." (17-20)
- F. "...I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said, (pointing to the other.) 'This is my beloved Son, hear him.'" (88)
"...I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak unto me, or one of them did..." (143-145)

Comment

(A) identifies the one personage confronting Joseph as Jesus. The only other account to identify personages encountered is (F): the Father and the Son. (D) and (E) consistently indicate two identical personages, presumably angelic, but they are not identified. In both accounts they appear to have become visible to Joseph simultaneously. (C) is the only account to suggest that the two unidentified personages appeared to Joseph in succession. In addition, "...many angels appeared..." to Joseph during this vision. Neither Joseph Smith nor any other Latter Day Saint analyst has satisfactorily accounted for the discrepancies among the five accounts on the point of the number and identity of the personage(s) appearing to him in the First Vision.

IX. Joseph's sins are forgiven

- A. "...Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee..." (36)
- C. "...thy sins are forgiven thee..." (29)
- D. "He was informed that his sins were forgiven..." (69)
- E. No mention is made of this.
- F. No mention is made of this.

Comment

Only in (A) is Joseph represented as having been moved to prayer by an awareness of his own sinfulness. His major motive was to gain insight on his future religious affiliation and purpose. Why a reference to forgiveness of sin does not appear in the two later accounts is not clear. Perhaps space limitations were a factor in (E), and perhaps in (F) Joseph's eye is understandably "on history." This, combined with his heady position (ecclesiastical, political, and military) at Nauvoo by 1842 could well have influenced the later style. Such a conclusion is tempered, however, by Joseph's admission of personal sinfulness and folly in the years between 1820 and 1823, which deeply troubled him prior to his encounter with Moroni in September of the latter year. (169-174)

X. Instruction on the popular religious denominations of the day

- A. "...none doeth good no not one they have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me...." (39-42)
- C. No mention is made.
- D. "...all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines; and, consequently, that none of them was acknowledged of God, as his church and kingdom. And he was expressly commanded, to go not after them...." (71-74)
- E. "...all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was expressly commanded to 'go not after them' at the same time...." (20-23)
- F. "...that I must join none of them for they were all wrong, and the personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt, they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrine the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof. He again forbade me to join with any of them...." (98-104)

Comment

It is not totally clear (A) that the phrase, "none doeth good" is a direct reference to religious denominations, although the latter part of the narrative would appear to indicate so. Also, it should be noted that an important factor in Joseph's motivation to pray initially, according to (A), was his 1831-1832 recollection that he had searched the scriptures at age twelve and realized how far the denominations of his day were missing the mark in terms of a "holy walk and Godly conversation." This had been a grief to Joseph's soul from his twelfth to his sixteenth year, when he cried to the Lord for mercy (3-11; 14-18). (F) relies on (A) to a notable degree, although the former is more detailed. This suggests a sizable impact of all the persecution endured by Joseph and the church at the hands of many mainline Protestant churches since the inception of the LDS movement. By today's standards the language of (F) is intemperate. Since (D) and (E) are nearly

identical it probably follows that Joseph relied on Pratt's account as he prepared his brief synopsis for Wentworth.

XI. Instruction on the fulness of the gospel

- A. No mention is made.
- C. No mention is made.
- D. "...he received a promise that the true doctrine--the fulness of the gospel, should, at some future time, be made known to him...." (75)
- E. "...receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me...." (24)
- F. No mention is made.

Comment

Pratt's articulate witness to the Book of Mormon as the fulness of the gospel in the larger tract from which (D) is extracted probably shaped his language at this point, i.e., indicating that the "fulness of the gospel should, at some future time, be made known to Joseph."

The fact that the other accounts do not contain this aspect can probably be explained on the basis that the purposes for each were notably less related to an explication of the Book of Mormon as the fulness of the gospel than was Pratt's narrative.

XII. Other instructions during the theophany, peculiar to specific accounts

- A. "...go thy way walk in my statutes and keep my commandments...." (36)
"...Behold, the world lieth in sin at this time...." (39)
"...Mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Apstles behold and lo I come quickly as it was written of me in the cloud clothed in the Glory of my Father...." (42-47)
- C. "...He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God...." (30)
- F. "...and many other things did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time...." (104)

Comment

There is a similarity of language used in several of the records of revelation later included in the Doctrine and Covenants from the 1831-1832 period--the time frame of the (A) account: Section 81:1e, April 26, 1832: "...and the anger of God kindleth against the inhabitants of the earth; and none doeth good, for all have gone out of the way...." Section 49:5, March 1831: "...behold, I am Jesus Christ, and I come quickly...." Sections 39:6, 34:6, 49:5, 54:3, and 68:4, all dated 1830-31, contain the phrase, "Behold, I come quickly. Even so." These eschatological themes were of large general significance to Joseph and the church

during 1831-1832 during which time he also did his revision on Matthew 25. The revisions made accentuate the lively interest in final things.

In speaking with the Jewish minister, Joseph would likely recall from his early visionary experience the witness born in the 1820 theophany that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He would be more impressed to recall this in speaking with the Jewish minister than with any other audience.

We do not know what Joseph refers to in saying "many other things did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time" (F:104), nor do we know why he felt unable to write them.

XIII. Joseph's feelings about the vision immediately afterward

- A. "...my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me...." (46)
- C. No mention is made of this.
- D. "...leaving his mind in a state of calmness and peace, indescribable." (77)
- E. No mention is made of this.
- F. "...When I came to myself again I found myself laying on my back, looking up into heaven." (105)

Comment

Joseph's most revealing indication of his inner feelings in response to his First Vision is, understandably, his earliest recorded statement (A). Indescribable calmness and peace of mind is Pratt's way of summarizing Smith's response; this is suggestive of Cowdery's earlier expression of Joseph's state following the encounter with the angel in 1823: "...He also saw him depart, the light and glory withdraw, leaving a calmness and peace of soul past the language of man to paint...."

In his final account Joseph simply describes his physical position at the end of the vision--in this, the most detailed account of all in other respects. Brodie's lament comes to mind: Smith dictates much "official history," but tells little of himself.⁷

XIV. Ensuing persecution when Joseph tries to tell others of the vision

- A. "...but could find none who would believe the heavenly vision...." (48)
"...and my Fathers family have suffered many persecutions...." (53)
- C., D., and E. No mention is made of this.
- F. "...Some few days after I had this vision, I happened to be in company with one of the methodist preachers who was very active in the before mentioned religious excitement, and conversing with him on the subject of religion I took occasion to give him an account of the vision which I had had. I was greatly surprised at his behavior, he treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there was no such thing as visions or revelations in these days....I soon

found...that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion and was the cause of great persecution which continued to increase, and though I was an obscure boy only between fourteen and fifteen years of age and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world; yet men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create a hot persecution, and this was common among all the sects: all united to persecute me...and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision yet it was true, and while they were persecuting me, reviling me and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for saying so, I was led to say in my heart, why persecute for telling the truth?...I continued to pursue my common avocations in life until the twenty first of September, one thousand eight hundred and twenty three, all the time suffering severe persecution at the hands of all classes of men, both religious and irreligious because I continued to affirm that I had seen a vision...." (106-113; 15-123; 145-149; 158-162)

Comment

Only in (F) are the cryptic comments of (A) expanded; this is understandable in view of the continuous persecution endured in the 1830s by the church and its leaders, which must have shaped Joseph's recollections of the earlier period. Therefore, when critics point to the total lack of evidence in non-Mormon sources of this extreme persecution (1820-1823) allowance should be made for the cumulative impact of the anti-Mormon persecutions of the 1830s and early 1840s on the style Joseph chose to convey his impressions of the public reactions to his First Vision. This raises the question of how literally we need to take Joseph's reflections on this pre-1823 persecution without doing violence to what we know of the way the present impacts the past as we strive to discern the meaning of history.

Conclusion

This brief examination of a number of distinct aspects drawn from first generation accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision ought to make us wary of trying to reconcile all the anomalies that have come to our notice. Those who have sought to discredit Joseph and the movement he established have used the anomalies with vigor and skill. They have felt that they have achieved their design, using historical research and analysis as their weapons. Those who have sought to shore up Joseph's integrity in the face of negative findings and conclusions based on what seems to many to be compelling historical evidence have ranged far and wide in an energetic search for the right evidence to overturn his detractors.

In view of the foregoing analysis, however, it seems to me that such defensiveness may not have been all that productive. For one thing it has led to a serious oversimplification of an immensely intricate process--that of interpreting events that are beyond history. I hope that such diverse interests as those historical, theological, pastoral,

literary, dramatic, and educational might combine their disciplines and imaginations to make a "saga" or "faith story" approach to Latter Day Saint beginnings. Such a course would deliberately minimize the scientific-historical-analytical stance toward what are essentially suprahistorical, symbolic meanings of these founding events which are, in the final analysis, forever lost to the processes of empirical historical reconstruction. Joseph Smith, Jr., discovered the difficulty of reconstruction in his various attempts to convey the truth of what had happened in his life so many years before. I do not know the basis of such an approach, but two things seem rather clear: the task must be an intentional one, and several generations will have come and gone before it is finished.

And what might be the results? I would conjecture that there would be less defensiveness, more spontaneity, imagination, and curiosity marking our collective tradition. We might gain a deeper sense of the inescapable irony and humor concerning our history. I would also look for a deeper capacity to sense and live comfortably with the chasm between event and interpretation. That gift would ensure an even greater talent--the ability in a single act of the imagination to embrace the whole historical tradition as it is understood at any given moment. A by-product of that would be the courage to leave behind those aspects of it that engender idolatry at the altar of precedent--that distract the body of Christ from its true mission.

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2. "How Lovely Was the Morning," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Vol. VI, No. 1, Spring, 1971, 86.
3. Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate, Vol. 1, No. 1, October, 1834, 13.
4. Jessee, "The Early Accounts," 283.
5. This account is found in Smith, Joseph, "History," Book A-1, pp. 120-122 (numbering from the back of the book).
6. The text of this published version corresponds closely in substance to its MS source which is cited as Smith, Joseph, "History," Book A-1, pp. 1-4. This MS was written in 1839 in the hand of James Mulholland, and was based on an earlier writing done in 1838. See Jessee, "The Early Accounts," 286-294.
7. Fawn M. Brodie, No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1946, vii.