

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.

