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## Joseph Smith History 1:1-20

Rebecca L. Reynolds

Before he dictated the 1838 version contained in the Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith had already dictated or written two formal accounts of the first vision, and had recited the story informally many times. A careful rhetorical analysis shows that, while reflecting many of the same sentiments as earlier versions, the style of this account supports Joseph's claim to truth and shows, in its style, the effects of maturity, rationality, and balance.

Joseph Smith-History 1:1-20 can be divided structurally according to a conventional introduction setting out motivation, purpose, and genealogy of the author (1-4), an account of the religious turmoil among the various churches (5-6), Joseph's personal turmoil (7-10), Joseph's personal answer (11-13), a reply to Joseph, as a prophet, addressing the more universal issue of "which church was right" (14-20 beginning), and finally, returning full circle, the "epilogue" (-20 to end of verse) set once again in the context of his family and their religious tradition.

Such a structure, roughly chiasmic, sets out in very clear terms the central unity of Joseph's search for knowledge and the search of all men for the true church. The 1832 account, on the other hand, mainly emphasizes Joseph's personal search for redemption--an aspect minimized to the extent of non-existence in the canonized version. He writes:

"At about the age of twelve years my mind became seriously impressed with regard to the all important concerns for the wellfare of my immortal Soul which led me to Searching the Scriptures believing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God . . . I felt to mourn for my own Sins and for the Sins of the world . . ."

Later, when he is actually visited by the Lord, the important message recorded in both the 1835 and as I shall quote, in the 1832 version is as follows:

"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 . . ." (Backman pp.156-7).

Why the difference? Simply because in 1838, he wrote a history, a history of the Church motivated by a desire to answer aspersions against the Church. In the repetition of the first two verses this is rhetorically clear. The word "Church" is emphasized through epanalepsis five times while, joined with the phrase "as they have transpired," the second and third repetitions form the center of antimetabole: ". . . and put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts **as they have transpired, in relation both to myself and the Church . . . in relation to this Church**, in truth and righteousness, **as they have transpired** (JSH 1:1-2). If the structure of language reflects, or indeed shapes the meaning of discourse, then stylistically these verses add evidence to the claim that Joseph is concerned with himself only to the extent that his history relates to that of the Church. He is not putting himself forward in any way. But methodical, and curiously matter-of-fact, he describes the events, "so far as <he has> such facts in <his> possession" (vs.1).

Because he is addressing an attack made by enemies of the church the tone of the first verse differs somewhat from the rest of the introduction. This is reflected particularly in the CONDEMNing repetition of plosives and dentals in the phrase "evil-disposed and designing persons". This combines with the militant repetition of "t", "ch" and hard velars heard in "progress of the Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints" and reports designed to "militate against its character as a church and its progress in the world."

The first verse is also characterized by a clausal hyperbaton which Joseph Smith often employs. Numerous dependent clauses precede the main clause of the sentence. In addition, these dependent clauses are interspersed with parenthetical comments and prepositional phrases. Pleonastic pairs such as "evil-disposed and designing", "rise and progress", "truth and righteousness", and parison as in "its character as a Church and its progress in the world," "to disabuse the public mind and put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts", "both to myself and the Church", and finally, "various events . . . as they have transpired, or as they at present exist" These devices would, on a superficial level, seem to presage vain and empty "rhetoric" in its worst sense. Concerning the hyperbaton it is useful to note at once that though the clauses are consistently "out of order" grammatically, they often follow the same kind of semantic or chronological order as is found in direct speech. Verses one and two illustrate semantic ordering, carefully laying out of a motivation for writing this history.

Owing to the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons in relation to the rise and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, All of which have been designed by the authors thereof to militate against its character as a Church and its progress in the world--I have been induced to write this history, to disabuse the public mind and put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts . . ." (vs.1)

This style of course, has the merit of being able to capture and maintain interest, as the reader is held in suspension until he hears the main clause. Chronological order is illustrated in the next two verses, which begin with the main clause, appending the rest of the descriptions to that:

I was born

in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and five,

on the twenty-third day of December

in the town of Sharon, Windsor county, State of Vermont . . .(vs.3)

The painstakingly factual tone underlies the methodical honesty of the narrative. This extensive use of subordination, the pleonastic pairs, and the parison have the effect not of periphrasis but of balance and reason. The style allows us, indeed compels us, to believe that Joseph Smith is indeed setting forth the facts "in truth and righteousness."

Further unity is added to these verses by the use of several passage binding repetitions such as "relation", "progress", "history", "truth", "facts" "eighth", and a particularly interesting example of antimetabole between verses three and four in the repetition of "father"/ "family"/ "family"/ "father" which binds the two verses and at the same time shows the father encompassing the family and emphasizes his patriarchal nature, repeating his title and putting him at the head of the list of family members.

As we move from the introduction to the main body of the passage the tone changes, and with it the length of sentences. Now the sentences are short, episodic, with independent clauses following one another in more rapid succession. The phrases are still straightforward syntactically, the unoffensive pleonasm in "stir and division" still seeks for a better term, balance, or loose parison such as "some crying, "Lo, here!" and others, "Lo, there!" and anaphora in the repetition of "Some were contending for the Methodist faith, some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist" still gives the impression of precision. However the rhythm is faster and the emotional involvement has increased. The quickened pace is also reflected in the movement from predominantly perfect tense verbs to imperfect (as far as that can be determined in English from the sense of

continuous or habitual action implied by the rest of the sentences.)

We can see the beginnings of a curbed irony in this verse as the repetition of "s" and "c" (i.e. " unusual, excitement, subject, commenced, sects, country, district, seemed...) culminates in the litotic "created no small stir and division . . ." (vs.5).

The next verse continues the immediacy of verse five in its verb tense but it reverts to the previous hyperbaton which is the most important factor here in producing a circumlocution that increases irony and suspension. Suspension heightens the sense of ironical ambiguity in what is being said. What is meant? When the answer comes however, it comes clearly--with slight humor perhaps but not satire:

For, notwithstanding the great love  
which the converts to 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 everybody 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 . . .**(vs.6).

Other factors which increase the irony are the mocking and almost immediate repetition of "great" comparing the "great love" of the converts and the "great zeal" of the priests. This is further modified by the careful choice of ambiguous words such as "expressed", "manifested", "pleased (to call it)", and "seemingly".

The repetition of "feeling" in this verse modulates from "a scene of religious feeling" to "seemingly good feelings" to "bad feelings" and finally to a very apparently bad "good feelings" when he writes, "so that all their good feelings, if indeed they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions." What is stated ironically is thus repeated in straightforward terms.

The third important repetition is the epanadiplosis of "priest contending against priest, and convert against convert". The contention is made more clear by the harsh repetition of velar, "p" and "t" sounds (confusion . . . priest contending against priest, and convert against convert).

This last example also emphasizes the careful nature of balance and antithesis already noted in Joseph Smith's writing. Priests and converts have parallel actions expressed in loose parison, their feelings, antithetically expressed, "were more pretended than real".

In addition, the irony in this verse is heightened by the **only** move in the passage from a normal and straightforward lexical register. For example, the word "extraordinary" is, in 1838, a neologism. It modifies "scene" which is still very closely tied to its theatrical connotations. The least histrionic definition given in the 1855 Webster is "the whole series of actions and events connected and exhibited . . . any remarkable exhibition." The self-consciousness of the sects and the priests' awareness of acting for an audience is thus still very evident in this definition.

Another word which should give us pause is "party". Webster, with careful didacticism defines this as (quote) "a number of persons united in opinion or design, in opposition to others in the community. It differs from faction, in

design, in opposition to others in the community. It differs from faction, in implying a less dishonorable association or more justifiable designs." (unquote) The didactic nature of this definition might imply that the usage is confused, and that we would not be wrong in interpreting Joseph's use of the word "party" here as a euphemism for "faction". This interpretation is strengthened by the presence of other aggressive words such as "strife", "contention", and "contest."

In the earlier Wentworth letter of ----, Joseph, speaking of the same contradictions between the churches also uses a change from normal lexical register as a factor of irony. Inserting the slightly pretentious Latin phrase he says, "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 . . ." (Backman p.168 emphasis mine).

The tone, however, of our 1838 version is carefully checked and the irony, although sharp, does not become satire with good reason--satire is exclusive and the gospel is not. The points made in irony, are always, as shown above, repeated in an unmistakable and direct way. The Lord's answer to the problem of which church to join is finally made especially clear in (vs.19) in a manner that is not at all ironic, but that makes his answer accessible to all. Even the devices used are moderate and the previously ironic repetition of such words as "great" becomes neutralized to the point that Joseph can use it in verse 16 saying, "at this moment of great alarm" without evoking any particular connotations, and indeed, as we shall discuss later, in a surprisingly bland manner.

Verse seven marks an immediate change in tone as Joseph Smith describes his own situation in a very straightforward manner. We move from the indirect irony of v.6 to the detached recounting of facts. In contrast to the one long sentence and the feeling of suspension in verse six, verses seven through ten consist almost entirely of short alternations between dependent and independent clauses continuing the rhythm of Joseph's style on a smaller scale as the general turmoil becomes more specific--centering on the prophet himself.

The antimetabole of great excitement/my mind/ my mind/ great excitement binds the first half of this section (vs.8). While the adjective "great", repeated on the next line makes clear the distinction between Joseph and the converts and priests of the various sects ironically depicted above, and at the same time modifies the connotations of what is a very common descriptive word.

The distinction is made more clear by the moderation in Joseph's actions. Rather than "great zeal" and an "extraordinary scene of religious feeling" Joseph describes his experience rationally. He "attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit." This reserve is reiterated in such phrases as "In process of time," "somewhat partial," and "some desire."

Perhaps the most interesting and interlocking repetition begins with "strife of words and a contest about opinions" (vs.6) continues in "confusion and strife among the different denominations" (vs.8) and is 'summed up' by "war of words and tumult of opinions" in verse 10 which then refers back to verse nine "cry and tumult were so great and incessant." This repetition not only emphasizes an important theme, binding the turmoil of the churches to Joseph's personal dilemma, but the convoluted repetition and word reference also graphically illustrates the very turbulence of the situation.

Balance and pleonastic pairs continue to typify Joseph's writing as we see in the phrases "my mind was called up to serious reflection/ and great uneasiness", and "it was impossible for a person young as I was/, and so unacquainted with men and things", and also the pairs "deep and often poignant", and "confusion and strife". The anaphora of the antithetical and indirect questions "who was right and who was wrong" presages the direct interrogation of verse ten.

Antithesis is especially well used in verse nine where the description of Presbyterians, on the one hand and Baptists and Methodists, on the other elaborates a smaller antithesis found between these two of reason versus sophistry and their corollaries proof versus persuasion. "The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of both reason and 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 in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others."

The tight construction underlines the forcible and binding nature of the existing confusion. Rhetorically, this is effectively broken by the series of questions in verse ten. These questions begin contrasting the particular with the universal, the correct with the incorrect in antithetical form: "Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together?" But then the structure breaks into slightly emotionally heightened epistrophe "If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?" as the questions continue a logical and thorough progression of thought.

The repetition of the "w" and "wh" in "war of words", "What", "Who", "wrong", "which", "know it" adds to the compelling nature of this series, while the use of a present tense verb in the direct questions heightens again the emotional accessibility of the verse.

The opening lines of verse ten recall briefly the tone of verses five and six, with the exaggerated irony of "extreme difficulties", and as the word "parties" is repeated--this time with the clearly derogatory term "religionists" meaning a bigot of any religious persuasion. (read v.10) In this use Joseph entirely casts off the religionists, and "clears the stage" for a new rhetorical focus.

The tone changes again and Joseph quotes James 1:5 drawing us into the context of his immediate situation as he recounts his experience. Amazingly, there is no attempt to overdramatize the situation or to influence the emotional response of the reader. The previous use of vivid imperfect and present tense verbs is now replaced by a more cool perfect tense. This is almost a dispassionate account of his experience, but paradoxically, a calm and sure emotion in the reader is heightened. This intensification is achieved largely through sentence structure. While the poetic alternation of short and long clauses of thought, and repetition of "again", "wisdom", "did", and "know" moves the reader, suspension through alternation of dependent and independent clauses is used here on a small scale to give the effect of **distancing** the reader from a powerful emotion :

"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 I would never know  
 wisdom than I then had,

The modulation of "o" throughout this passage and the condensed repetition of similar sounds in the previous passage "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" produces a poetic intensification of sound.

Heightened language is also evident in the moving subjunctive of "could get" and "would know" which, while escaping from the coolness of the perfect tense, also illustrate Joseph's deep humility. The verse is framed by the repetition of the phrase "passage of scripture," on the one hand the passage which entered every feeling of his heart, and on the other the scripture incomprehensible to

religionists engaged in a war of words and tumult of opinion.

The hesitation of this boy is emphasized again in verses thirteen and fourteen. The moderation is also still evident in opening phrase "at length". The 1832 account makes this duration of time more clear. Joseph had been wondering and studying the scriptures for at least three years before he decided to "ask God". The parallel phrase repetition illustrates how unassuming Joseph was. He says "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 ..." This would imply that after coming to his initial decision, Joseph hesitated again--he seriously considered the alternative of remaining in darkness and confusion.

Then he continues: concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that **lacked wisdom**, and would give liberally, and **not upbraid**, I might venture" (vs.13). The careful antithetical argument he works out in the remainder of the verse, the feeling of suspension, and the final subjunctive of "might venture" testify eloquently to his modesty and humility.

How different this is from Orson Pratt's brash and assuming account of the same experience:

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 should obtain a knowledge, which of all the doctrines, was the doctrine of Christ (Backman p.171).

"Not only a possibility, but a probability, yea, more, a certainty!" Yet Joseph Smith was still uncertain for he repeats his "determination" again in verse fourteen and fifteen, while he repeats his effort to "make the attempt" three times in verse fourteen alone, ending the verse in an admission that he "had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally."--no meaningless pleonasm.

Verses fifteen and sixteen fall into a three part repetition of key words and ideas. Joseph calls upon God, he is seized by some power, he seems doomed to destruction. Verse sixteen shows him again calling upon God, still under the power of "this enemy which had seized upon me", and finally again "ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction." The parallels in verse sixteen expand the outline of the previous verse. and again are combined with the use of dependent clauses in a periodic sentence to increase tension. The alternation in verse fifteen, of dependent and independent clauses, is frequent but in the next verse we are almost completely suspended grammatically in this way, and also by the semantic break where the author writes, "at this very moment" and then digresses until we are again called back by the repetition "just at this moment" and the summation "I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head. . ."

That this suspense isn't designed to be some kind of frantic appeal is again evident in the use of perfect verbs and moderate phrases like "it seemed to me", "for a time" "as if I were doomed". Even in the mention of "great alarm", the adjective is so commonly used the intensity is watered down. If suspense is employed, and it is, we are meant to hang on to the description of the incident Joseph has written, not to participate in it.

The repetition in verse sixteen of "d" in "destruction" "deliver", "despair", "abandon", and "destruction" is recalled in verse seventeen, "I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound." This ties the appearance of God and his Son to the prayer phonetically, and lexically their appearance answers

the young boy's questions. The word chain of "light", "brightness", "sun", "light", "brightness", "glory", and "light" again unifies the three verses (16-18) and overwhelmingly dispels the "thick darkness". In much the same way, the polyptoton of "spake", "said", and "speak" loosens Joseph's tongue.

In verse eighteen, Joseph twice asks, in parallel structure, a) which of all the sects was right? b) which to join a) which of all the sects was right? b) "which I should join". At the center of this parallel, as it reads in the text, the question is addressed to the Personages standing in the light. Their answer picks up the "all" used three times by Joseph in a modified way (which of all?) and makes it a harsh absolute--"none . . . for they were all wrong.) The all is again repeated three times.

As Joseph quotes the Personage here he does so almost completely in independent, short clauses. This brevity, combined with the absolute nature of his answer, is an essential part of the forcefulness of this verse. Asyndeton accentuates the power and the repetition of "that", "that", and the personal pronoun "they", "their", "they", "they" preceding rational judgments laid out in antithesis, culminates the final scorn and condemnation of these religionists:

. . . all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: "they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof"(vs.19)

In verse 20 this warning is repeated for emphasis. After the vision ends, the style reflects an incredible movement from intense to more common prose. The alternation of dependent/independent clauses returns to normal and the repetition of words ceases almost entirely. Joseph goes home and in answer to his mother's query he replies "Never mind, all is well-I am well enough off." You can imagine the humorous grin as he continues in an incredible understatement--momentarily reducing the entire immensity of his vision to a family joke, he replies "I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true."

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