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**Abstract** Review of *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (1994), by H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters.

H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Smith Research Associates, 1994. xxxvi + 244 pp., appendices, bibliography, index. \$28.95.

## Just the Facts Please

Reviewed by Richard L. Bushman

The title of *Inventing Mormonism* arouses expectations that are not actually realized in the reading of the book. Latter-day Saints use verbs like *revealed* or *restored* to explain how Mormonism came about. The word *inventing* implies that somebody concocted Mormonism; it was made up by an inventor of religion. The name of Wesley Walters as second author increases the expectation that the book will tell how Joseph Smith invented his visions, the doctrines, the Book of Mormon—the whole story. Walters's 1969 *Dialogue* essay on the Palmyra revival had concluded with the thought that Joseph got mixed up about the date of the revival—saying it was 1819–20 rather than 1824 when the records all say it happened—because he was fabricating the story of the vision. The logical extension of this line of attack would be to discover more contradictions between the “tradition” that Joseph made up about himself and the facts of the “historical record.” The tone of the book would be iconoclastic, skeptical, and argumentative, and the book would expose Joseph Smith in the act of inventing the Mormon religion.

If Wesley Walters had not died in 1990, the book might have taken that tack. Walters had a debater's temperament. He loved to take on an opponent's proposition and score points against it. A mild-mannered, courteous explication of historical documents would not have been to his taste. Michael Marquardt writes in another spirit. He makes no effort to show Joseph making up Mormonism. Marquardt claims only that “as the documents

reveal, some events differed from what has been traditionally taught." He explicitly refuses to say Joseph was a charlatan: "we have long since abandoned the simple prophet–fraud dichotomy that others still find so compelling. Our intent is to understand, not to debunk" (p. 197). Marquardt rejects the conscious-fraud hypothesis; in his opinion Joseph was sincere. "Smith believed that he spoke with supernatural beings, and he produced impressive transcripts of interviews with them. Whether he actually did is ultimately a matter of faith" (pp. 197–98).

Marquardt and Walters have searched the archives for thirty years looking for documents related to Joseph Smith's story of his evolution from farm boy to prophet. In that time, they have dug up a lot of material, not elaborate new reminiscences, but tiny fragments, like Joseph Smith, Sr.'s, name on a Palmyra road tax list. These small clues can be helpful, especially when there are questions about the exact location of the family at a given time. Since Joseph Smith looms so large today, we want to know everything about him. For the early years before he stepped into his public role, these tiny details are especially valuable. The authors deserve full credit for their arduous search and for adding new material to the record of Joseph Smith.

The chief target of Marquardt's and Walters's analysis is the story Joseph wrote about his early life in 1838, the familiar account now found in the *Pearl of Great Price*. In their prologue, the authors quote the story in its unedited form up through the first meeting with the messenger at Cumorah in 1823. Although Marquardt and Walters deal with events through the fall of 1830, they highlight this account of the early years as the core of the "tradition" against which they wish to compare the "historical record."

What is new or interesting in their findings? There are lots of small matters that elaborate the story and can be incorporated without controversy. For long stretches in the book the narrative seems to follow a slightly idiosyncratic path dictated by sources that the authors have discovered or choose to emphasize, but without veering far from the traditional account. In these passages, a reader will encounter few surprises while appreciating the new light thrown on familiar events and people.

In three places, however, narrative gives way to argument as the authors attempt to dynamite a segment of the traditional story and cut a new path. The first argument has to do with the time when the Smiths moved to their Manchester farm. The main point is that they could not have purchased the land until July 1820 when power of attorney was passed from the owners of the land, the Nicholas Evertson heirs, to their agent in the Manchester area. Before that date, no one in the Palmyra area had the authority to sell the farm. Moreover, as late as April 1822, Joseph, Sr., and Alvin were still listed on the Palmyra tax list, suggesting that they did not move to the farm until the following summer.

The late date is troublesome because the First Vision events which occurred on the Manchester farm are dated by Joseph Smith to the spring of 1820, three months before title could have passed. The point is that Joseph's chronology does not appear to jibe with the historical record taken from documents in Palmyra and Ontario County archives.

*The impact of these facts, however, is mitigated by others that the authors turn up. The most important is that by April of 1820—perhaps as early as the spring of 1819—Joseph Smith, Sr., was residing at the southern boundary of Palmyra, on the edge of what was to become Manchester, land which belonged to Samuel Jennings, a Palmyra merchant. The family built a cabin on a site within fifty feet of the farm they were to buy formally in the summer of 1820. They may not have purchased the farm until July 1820, but they were there in time for the traditional dating of the First Vision.*

The question, then, is why build a cabin so near the farm and yet not quite on the property? A variety of explanations for that peculiar fact suggest themselves. The misplaced cabin could have been an error on the Smiths' part, as Larry Porter has argued. The Smiths simply misjudged where the boundary was. We can imagine how the mistake came about. The family was interested in the land and was waiting for the power of attorney to be transmitted before closing the deal. While they continued with odd jobs and sales of craft items to support themselves, they wanted to start clearing land so as to be able to plant in the spring of 1820; a few months' delay would have deprived them of an entire year's harvest. The Evertson agent would have been happy to have them

clearing land and putting in crops before title passed; cleared land was more valuable than forested in those days. The Smiths were the ones taking the risk, and as impoverished farmers who had rented land for over fifteen years, they were more than willing. Why else would they have built a cabin on the Manchester boundary if not to work on the land, which they fully expected to contract for within a few months? Without the benefit of the owner's surveyor, they misjudged the location of the boundary and built on the wrong spot.

The authors say Samuel Jennings "would hardly have allowed Smith to mistakenly build on his land" (p. 11). But why not? He would get a log cabin out of the deal with possibly no expense to himself. Many owners of large tracts granted developmental leases at extremely low rents for the very purpose of having land cleared and buildings constructed. If Jennings was anything like other landowners, he would have been delighted to have the Smiths dropping trees and putting up buildings.

Possibly neither Jennings nor the Smiths knew where the cabin stood when it first went up. One of the authors' valuable findings is a Palmyra record that says the Stafford road was laid out from the Smiths' cabin to Main Street in the village center. The survey was run on June 13, 1820, which means that there was not a road to the cabin when the Smiths built it in 1819. It was probably on a tiny path deep in the woods. With no sign at the Manchester boundary telling them where their property began, they could easily have erred.

A simple explanation of the episode comes from Pomeroy Tucker, a Palmyra resident who claimed to know the Smiths. He says the Smiths squatted on the Evertson land before they contracted for it. In his memory, the farm was in Manchester and the "one-story, smoky log-house, which they had built prior to removing there" was on the farm.<sup>1</sup> The fifty-foot discrepancy did not register with Tucker.

The confusion caused by the location error plagued the official records for two years. In 1821 and 1822 Joseph, Sr., continued to be listed on the Palmyra road tax list, because the cabin was in the town, and yet in 1820 he appears on the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> *Origin, Rise and Progress of Mormonism*. . . . (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1867), 12-13.

Census as a resident of Manchester since his farm was there. For a couple of years, the Smiths were of two towns.

In the end, the new documents amplify rather than disrupt the traditional record. Indeed they confirm it in a number of small ways. We now have further evidence that the Smiths were living within fifty feet of Manchester by the spring of 1820 when the First Vision occurred, just as Joseph's 1838 account says. At the end of the chapter, the authors attempt to insert one new twist. They claim that the Smiths had two cabins, one on the Jennings property before they purchased the farm, and the other on their own farm erected probably by 1822 when Joseph, Sr., finally moved out of Palmyra to his own land. But that puts the Smiths in the anomalous position of building a new cabin in 1822, at the very moment when they were planning an expensive new frame house. With the evidence given us, even accepting some dubious chronology in the authors' account, the second cabin hypothesis looks like an implausible surmise.

The Palmyra revival, the subject of another of the argumentative chapters, presents more serious problems. There are two incongruities to be explained. One is the date of the "unusual excitement on the subject of religion" in the place where Joseph lived.<sup>2</sup> The other is an apparent chronological contradiction in Joseph Smith's own story.

Palmyra underwent known revivals in 1816–17 and 1824–25, but none in 1819–20 in the months preceding the First Vision. The authors assemble evidence from many sources to demonstrate the intensity of the 1824–25 revival and claim this emphatic experience must have been the memory that Joseph referred to. Milton Backman and I have assumed that Joseph was thinking of revivals in nearby towns; "the place where we lived" included more than Palmyra village or Manchester. That still may be the best explanation, with newly discovered evidence now available of Methodist camp meetings going on through the spring of 1820 in the "vicinity" of Palmyra.<sup>3</sup> But Marvin Hill accepts the

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<sup>2</sup> Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 269.

<sup>3</sup> Walter A. Norton has discovered a *Palmyra Register* article in the 28 June 1820 issue that reported the death of an intoxicated man in Palmyra village and claimed he obtained liquor at "a camp-meeting held in this vicinity." When

Marquardt–Walters argument that “the place where we lived” must have meant Palmyra. Other little scraps of evidence support the 1824–25 date.

The second incongruity is a chronological contradiction in Joseph’s 1838 account. He says that his father moved from Vermont to Palmyra in Joseph’s tenth year, which by all historians has been interpreted to mean when he was ten, or in 1816. (In other accounts he says he was ten, and a number of facts make 1816 the logical date.) Then Joseph says that “in about four years after my father’s arrival at Palmyra, he moved with his family into Manchester.”<sup>4</sup> Taking advantage of the word *about*, and the question of how to count half years, and knowing that the Smiths made their move to the Manchester boundary before April 1820, we can still fit Joseph’s account with the known facts and put them in their forest cabin perhaps in the fall of 1819 or maybe the winter of 1819–20.

But then comes the contradiction. Joseph goes on to say that “sometime 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.”<sup>5</sup> That sentence moves the vision to at least 1821; Marquardt thinks the text implies 1822 (p. 1). And since the First Vision came after the revival, the vision would be still later by Joseph’s reckoning here, either 1821 or 1822. Yet he says that he was in his fifteenth year during the religious strife, which would be 1820, and states specifically that he went to pray in the spring of 1820. That date and the total of around six years since the move to Palmyra do not jibe.

Marquardt exempts the 1832 account of Joseph’s vision from this chronological tangle. Joseph does not enmesh that experience in family or town history, nor does he make any mention of a revival. He reports that “from the age of twelve years to fifteen I

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criticized, the editor exonerated the Methodists from blame, as if they were the chief users of the campground, but asserted that the dissolute frequently resorted to the campground for liquor, implying that the grounds were commonly in use. “Comparative Images: Mormonism and Contemporary Religions as Seen by Village Newspapermen in Western New York and Northeastern Ohio, 1820–1833” (Ph.D. Diss., Brigham Young University, 1991), 255.

<sup>4</sup> Jesse, *Papers*, 269.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world,” and says nothing about a revival.<sup>6</sup> Because of the absence of contradictions with the historical record, Marquardt believes that in 1820 or 1821 Joseph experienced the personal forgiveness of sins reported in the 1832 account. The problem lies with the later story where so much is made of the revival as a driving motivation for Joseph’s religious inquiry.

Can we reconcile all of the conflicting evidence and get back to the actual chronology of events from 1816 to 1824? At this point, I think we must acknowledge the possibility of an error somewhere in Joseph’s chronology, simply because of the internal contradiction. On the other hand, we are well-advised to take care in overthrowing the report of a person who was on the scene merely because circumstantial evidence raises doubts. Can we be absolutely sure that we know Joseph must have been referring to the 1824 revival when he wrote his story? Marquardt speculates that he conflated events: “Perhaps Smith in retrospect blended in his mind events from 1820 with a revival occurring four years later” (p. 32). Possibly, but that conclusion, based on the confidence that we know better than the person who was there, seems premature to me.

While the evidence is still under review, another hypothesis should be kept in mind. This reconstruction of events grows out of two facts. One is that Joseph’s 1839 story says very little about a revival. It mainly discusses religious turmoil, the contention among pastors and priests over the denominational choices of the converts. Religious competition, not conversions, stirred Joseph’s feelings. So far none of the historical records have shed light on this sectarian warfare, although it loomed larger in Joseph’s mind than the revivals themselves. We will understand the chronology better when we locate evidence of these battles, not the revivals alone. The revivals were usually depicted as times of denominational cooperation and general good feeling, and all of the accounts that the authors cite offer no hint of competition. The stories add up the new members in all of the denominations as if the combined conversions mattered most. Can these be the revivals that Joseph had in mind?

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

The second fact is that in the 1832 account Joseph does not brood over these matters for six months or a year as is assumed in the usual interpretation of the 1839 account. Religious confusion troubled him from his twelfth to fifteenth year. For three years he suffered “grief to my soul” as he contemplated “the contentions and divi[s]ions the wicke[d]ness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind.” During this time he became convicted of his sins and found that mankind had “apostatized from the true and living faith.”<sup>7</sup>

Nothing in the 1838 account contradicts the protracted chronology of the 1832 story. In the later version, Joseph says that the revival started the contention; how long it took before the conflicts broke out, or how long before his questions came to a head is not indicated. In fact, the chronologies of the two would coincide if one word in Joseph’s 1839 account were changed. If the text read “sometime in the second year after our removal to Palmyra,” rather than “after our removal to Manchester,” the stories would blend. Two years after the removal to Palmyra, Joseph was twelve, the year in the 1832 account when his mind became “seriously imprest.”<sup>8</sup>

While we are reexamining the various stories looking for a key to reconcile the contradictions, we should search the years around 1817, Joseph’s twelfth year and the second year after the Smiths’ removal to Palmyra, for signs of religious turmoil. We know there was a revival in 1816–17. How does it fit the description of the 1839 account? Is there evidence of denominational competition in its aftermath that could account for Joseph’s three years of religious grief? Oliver Cowdery reported that the Methodist minister George Lane had an influence on Joseph. Lane attended a conference in the town next to Palmyra in the summer of 1819. An interview then might have brought Joseph’s anguished quest to a point and led to the prayer in the woods. The authors try to move the date of the revivals forward to 1824–25. In the search for the religious turmoil that prompted Joseph’s inquiry, we should also look back to 1817.

In the final argument, the authors take up the strange matter of the place where the Church was organized. How can there be a

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

question when so many people were present, and we have agreed on Fayette and the Whitmer house for so long? The authors argue for Manchester and Hyrum Smith's house because of three primary bits of evidence. (1) In the spring of 1833, *The Evening and Morning Star* twice named Manchester as the location; (2) the headings of six revelations in the original Book of Commandments are dated April 6, 1830, and are located in Manchester, including the current D&C 21 which is associated with the organization of the Church; and (3) William Smith in his later account of Mormonism, published in 1883 as *William Smith on Mormonism*, located the organization at Manchester.

The story changed by May of 1834. The later editions of *The Evening and Morning Star* published in Kirtland, Joseph's 1838 history, and virtually every other history named Fayette. The two exceptions, anomalously, are Orson Pratt's 1840 *Remarkable Visions* and Joseph Smith's own letter to John Wentworth in 1842. In his 1887 *Address to All Believers in Christ*, David Whitmer insisted the Church was organized in his father's house.

Where does this leave us? Not a lot is at stake in terms of the prophet's integrity, the divinity of the Church, or the ongoing flow of the story. The authors quote T. Edgar Lyon on the importance of accuracy about trivial facts, and who can disagree? It is just that right now there seems to be no way of definitively adjudicating the conflict. In the meantime, Joseph's and David Whitmer's naming of Fayette as the site of the organization must be given due weight. The presumption of truth is in their favor considering that both were present. The case for Manchester is weakened because the evidence in *The Evening and Morning Star* and the Book of Commandments can be accounted for by the error of one man, William W. Phelps, the editor in Independence who oversaw the publication of both texts. Once an error like that creeps in, shadows can turn up in subsequent accounts, such as Orson Pratt's *Remarkable Visions* and even William Smith's story of Mormonism. It seems more parsimonious to attribute an error to Phelps than to both Joseph Smith and David Whitmer, eyewitnesses of the organization. The authors have assembled various scraps of additional circumstantial evidence in support of their case, but not enough to be determinative. While they try to

explain why Joseph may have changed the story, we should look equally hard for reasons why Phelps would err.

These are *Inventing Mormonism's* substantive challenges to the traditional story. Beyond the specific findings, however, the book raises questions about method. The investigation makes certain commonsense assumptions which may not be as evident as the authors say. The structure, the tone, and the claims of the book are based on the distinction between interpretation and fact, a distinction which they believe is obvious. The authors' primary endeavor is to bring forward the facts, leaving the interpretation to their readers. As they say in the conclusion, "Although it has become fashionable in some quarters to quote Martin Heidegger's axiom that 'there are no facts, only interpretation,' we believe that facts exist and that an array of different interpretations is possible" (p. 197). In the opening pages, they present an eleven-page "Chronology of Mormon Origins" where they summarize the facts as they understand them. The authors' narrative posture is that they have assembled these facts from trustworthy historical documents, some of which are in clear contradiction to the traditional account. The readers are then left to choose between the facts of the historical record and the "fabrications" of the traditional account.

The authors are probably right in thinking that most readers believe facts can be separated from interpretation. We all know what they mean by the distinction. But *Inventing Mormonism* moved this reader to reconsider the truth of Heidegger's insight about "facts" being inevitably enveloped in interpretation. The distinction may not be entirely obvious after all.

Interpretation trespasses upon fact in one clear instance in the chronology of Mormon origins. The authors list under 1825 the admission of Lucy and three of the Smith children into the Palmyra Presbyterian church as if this were a well-attested fact. But the authors have no direct evidence that this highly contested event occurred in 1825. It takes a number of less-than-rock-solid deductions to turn a collection of circumstantial scraps into a fact.

More significant is the entire cast of the chronology and what the authors choose to deem as fact and what they choose to leave in the realm of interpretation. One of the interpretive themes of the book is the large role of money-digging in Smith family

culture. In a chapter titled "Manchester Stryer," the authors quote liberally from the Staffords, Willard Chase, and a collection of others who spoke of treasure-seeking. Since the magical culture of nineteenth-century Yankees no longer seems foreign to the Latter-day Saint image of the Smith family, the decision to include material from E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*<sup>9</sup> or *Naked Truths about Mormonism*<sup>10</sup> does not itself provoke debate.

The question is why these factual materials are introduced while others from sources equally close to the time period produced by people who were indisputably present are left out. A book with a title so encompassing as *Inventing Mormonism* implies that all the relevant facts will find a place. Why then are the statements of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon plates not listed in the chronology? Martin Harris, David Whitmer, and Oliver Cowdery are cited for other purposes, particularly Martin Harris. Their statement about the angel and the plates appeared in the first edition of the Book of Mormon published in 1830 and was never repudiated by any of them. It is one of the earliest texts on early Mormon history. Why is it not part of the "invention" of Mormonism?

The answer is obvious. The appearance of an angel with golden plates is so far beyond the realm of conventional experience that the authors are reluctant to consider it among their "facts." The testimony of the three witnesses exists in the realm of the fabulous along with Joseph's revelations, even though the documentation, from a narrow methodological viewpoint, is entirely authentic. Revelations cannot be facts in the schema of this book. Events recorded in contemporaneous documents only become facts if they are judged believable. As Heidegger was trying to tell us, facts presume interpretation.

To give the authors credit, they weave at least one fabulous occurrence into their account. Honoring sources close to the event, they include the trip to the hill for the plates among their facts. Their methodology compels them to list that event because it appears in the sources, not just in Joseph's official account, but in Lucy Smith's and Joseph Knight's. Despite any wish to explain away the plates, the authors remained true to their methodology

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<sup>9</sup> Painesville, Ohio: By the author, 1834.

<sup>10</sup> Yale University Library.

and bravely recorded in their chronology under 22 September 1829, "Joseph Jr. visits a nearby hill taking Emma with him in Joseph Knight's wagon. He finds gold plates in a stone box and hides the plates in a fallen tree top" (p. xxx). The reason for the inclusion is clear. To eliminate the trip to the hill, along with the transportation of the plates and the hours of translation, requires tortuous textual acrobatics. In terms of the raw materials of history, it is far easier to tell the story of Mormon origins with the divine events left in because people close to the history told it that way.

All in all, *Inventing Mormonism* is a far cry in both spirit and substance from the iconoclastic studies of Mormonism that descend from E. D. Howe and Alexander Campbell to Fawn Brodie and the early Wesley Walters. The book assembles material that has not been part of the record before, and in good faith offers variant readings of Joseph Smith's history. I have taken exception to the most critical conclusions, but I like the book. I admire the research, and I appreciate the generous, fair-minded tone of the writing. The book makes a genuine effort to be irenic, and I hope that Mormon readers will accept the work in the spirit in which it is offered.