



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 15 | Number 2

Article 15

6-1-2003

Trustworthy History?

Steven C. Harper

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Harper, Steven C. (2003) "Trustworthy History?," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 15 : No. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol15/iss2/15>

This Mormon Studies is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Trustworthy History?

Author(s) Steven C. Harper

Reference *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 273-307.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (2002), by Grant H. Palmer.

TRUSTWORTHY HISTORY?

Steven C. Harper

From the perspective of denominational history, it is interesting to note the incredible interest in the history of their community shown by many of the people who have forsworn the theological tenets that are the reason for the community's existence and have rejected the authority of the institution around which it is organized. In some (perhaps many) instances, study of the community's history appears to be a surrogate for lost faith. In other instances, however, it becomes an effort to find hard evidence that can serve as justification for abandoning the community's creedal base. If it is the latter and if the interest in history becomes a preoccupation that leads to writing about the community, very often the outcome is history that is tendentious in the extreme—history the community dismisses as “apostate.” Although such slanted accounts do not provide good models for the scholarly writing of denominational history, they are useful

Review of Grant H. Palmer. *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002. xiii + 281 pp., with selected bibliography and index. \$24.95.

to scholars as evidence of what can happen when the religious basis of personal identity is shattered.¹

Jan Shipps

Though common, this phenomenon described by Methodist scholar of Mormonism Jan Shipps has never had a clearer manifestation than in Grant Palmer's *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*. Beginning with his three and a half decades of employment in the Church Educational System (CES), Palmer emphasizes how well suited he is to write for Latter-day Saints on the contested history of events upon which the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded. Palmer projects a welcomed mixture of candor and empathy. This subtle packaging invites readers to receive the book as a benevolent act of a knowledgeable, official church teacher, self-commissioned to save the Saints from ignorance (p. vii). His CES tenure is roughly equivalent to the life span of "what has been termed the New Mormon History" (p. x), to which Palmer acknowledges his debts. Thus readers are primed for a marriage of inspiring, authoritative instruction (as one would expect to receive in a Latter-day Saint institute course) and "demythologized" church history. Readers are assured that this book will return them to the "real world" that existed "before everything was recast for hierarchical and proselyting purposes" (p. ix). The conductor of the train bound for this promised land is a fearless, now retired CES man with a mission. He cites Hugh B. Brown, who "admire[d] men and women who have developed the questing spirit, who are unafraid of new ideas as stepping stones to progress," to justify dissension without fear of consequence and resistance to all efforts to enslave the mind (p. xi). Who could resist getting aboard?

Palmer does not realize that there is no promised land where the past is unmediated, where the truth about what really happened is only as far away as the last edition of original documents, where a

1. Jan Shipps, "Remembering, Recovering, and Inventing What Being a People of God Means: Reflections on Method in the Scholarly Writing of Religious History," in *Sojourner in the Promised Land: Forty Years among the Mormons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 179–80.

consensus reigns, and where things simply “ring true.” This train is bound, instead, for the place New Mormon History had once vowed to leave, never looking back. Once aboard Palmer’s train, the reader is not returned to an “original time and place” or a “real world” (p. ix) but, rather, to a tendentious, polemical past that both the historical profession generally and New Mormon History specifically abandoned around the time Grant Palmer completed his master’s degree in history in 1968.² This destination is obvious to informed readers intimate with the sources Palmer uses as well as those he neglects. His interpretation relies undeviatingly on reading, selecting, and arranging evidence in ways that support the bias that his press—Signature Books—often manifests. Palmer employs the same tactics for which he criticizes traditional Mormon historiography. Though he promises to present the findings of New Mormon History, his methods and findings are merely the latest in the long line of polemical accounts of the Latter-day Saint past.

Palmer suggests that he is single-mindedly interested in presenting the findings of an objective history that scholars at the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, Brigham Young University, and elsewhere have collectively gathered, arriving at “a near-consensus” (p. ix; see p. 255 above). This shows a fundamental misunderstanding of what he calls “New Mormon History.” The practitioners of the history to which Palmer refers are not in consensus. They are New Mormon historians merely because they agree in principle on a generally shared methodology. In addition, some New Mormon historians contest the “facts” that Palmer regards as the truth about the Latter-day Saint past. The incongruence between Palmer’s approach and New Mormon History is striking.

Professional historians of the Latter-day Saint past do not claim to present ultimate truths. They strive, rather, for a much more tentative,

2. Judging by James B. Allen, Ronald W. Walker, and David J. Whitaker, eds., *Studies in Mormon History, 1830–1997: An Indexed Bibliography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 324, *An Insider’s View* is Grant Palmer’s first published work in Mormon history. His master’s thesis, “The Godbeite Movement: A Dissent against Temporal Control” (Brigham Young University, 1968), is the only entry under his name.

contextual understanding of the past, which is often not a conclusion on the ultimate veracity of the religious claims involved. A practitioner of New Mormon History, for example, asks questions about the significance of Mormonism without presuming to prove or disprove whether Joseph Smith saw God and angels or translated by the gift of God.³ Palmer, by contrast, is sure he has proven that Joseph Smith did not translate or receive ministering angels. Palmer's history is bound, perhaps unconsciously, by an ideological tradition abandoned by the historical profession generally. Sometimes called "scientific" history, this ideology is informed by the Enlightenment's skepticism of revelation and faith and by an assurance that discerning what really happened in the past is possible. Articulated by the German scholar Leopold von Ranke, among others, scientific history is based on the idea that an objective scholar with access to all the data can decipher what really happened just as it occurred.⁴ This is Palmer's premise.

A couple of comparisons show the distinction. Jan Shipps is known to be guided by the question, What difference does religion make? She does not seek to establish whether John the Baptist actually ordained Joseph Smith. She seeks instead to understand the significance of Joseph's certainty that he was ordained by John the Baptist. Palmer argues that John the Baptist did not ordain Joseph Smith. He assures readers that his history has been "demythologized—placed in its original time and place, amid all the twists and turns that exist in the real world—it rings true" (p. ix). In *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, a definitive example of New Mormon History and the best "insider's view of Mormon origins,"

3. For example, Mark Ashurst-McGee distinguishes between Joseph's efforts to translate by scholarly means and the translations he accomplished by the gift and power of God in "Joseph Smith, the Kinderhook Plates, and the Question of Revelation," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, Snowbird, Utah, 16–19 May 1996; typescript in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter Perry Collections).

4. See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Richard L. Bushman indicates that his “method has been to relate events as the participants themselves experienced them, using their own words where possible. Insofar as the revelations were a reality to them, I have treated them as real in this narrative.”⁵ Palmer is certain that “a body of authentic, reliable documents” will result in a *real or true* history of Mormonism (p. ix). Bushman is less sure. His hesitancy stems from the recognition that the Enlightenment ideal has gone unrealized. There is no unmediated reality, or, rather, no mortal capable of “seeing” the past without its being simultaneously refracted by the necessarily subjective lenses of those who recorded the texts and the historians who interpret them. Bushman is “loath to go all the way with the postmodernist thinkers” and forsake the Enlightenment ideal altogether, yet he acknowledges that all written history is inevitably shaped by the social contexts of its producers.⁶ That is true of the type of history Palmer has written, which is the kind Jan Shipps has described.⁷ Moreover, it is true of this very review essay. “Objectivity,” wrote Bushman, “disguises a play for power by those who pretend to the authority of objective scholarship when they are every bit as self-interested in the outcome as any religious apologist.”⁸ It would be better not to make pretensions to writing “without any agenda” (p. viii), as Palmer does. His feigned claims to objectivity thinly veil his transparent prejudices.

To support my claim that Palmer’s book is polemical pseudo-history presented as a synthesis of “New Mormon History,” I will examine his chapters on what he considers to be evidences of evangelical Protestantism identifying the Book of Mormon as a nineteenth-century text, on the testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses,

5. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 3.

6. Richard L. Bushman, “The Social Dimensions of Rationality,” in *Expressions of Faith: Testimonies of Latter-day Saint Scholars*, ed. Susan Easton Black (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1996), 73.

7. See note 1.

8. Bushman, “Social Dimensions of Rationality,” 73; see also Richard L. Bushman, “Faithful History,” *Dialogue* 4/4 (1969): 11–25.

on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery's assertion (or, in his opinion, their conspiratorial claim) that ministering angels restored the priesthood, and on Joseph Smith's 1838 history of his first vision. In each case Palmer can be shown to present a partisan polemical argument. In addition, he is guilty of censorship, and he repeatedly privileges late hearsay over early eyewitness accounts.⁹ As will be shown, the relevant texts support interpretations more affirming of Joseph Smith's integrity than Palmer claims.¹⁰

Evangelical Protestantism in the Book of Mormon

Alexander Campbell, a contemporary of Joseph Smith and principal founder of the Disciples of Christ, claimed that Joseph Smith simply cobbled together the Book of Mormon from a variety of popular doctrinal, political, and class conflicts that filled the news of the time.¹¹ Drawing on Campbell and other contemporaries of Joseph Smith, Palmer argues that parts of the Book of Mormon are "artful adaptations" of the fervent evangelical Protestantism that pulsed

9. John Gee, "Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyrus," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 175–217, especially 176–77, discusses the inherent problems of giving later hearsay the same credence as early eyewitness accounts. Gee, who earned his Ph.D. in Egyptology from Yale University in 1998, is also the author of *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000). LDS Egyptologist Kerry Muhlestein (Ph.D., UCLA) noted, "Palmer's description of P. JS 11 is not completely accurate, but it is sufficiently so for any general purposes. The big problem comes in his line at the bottom of page 12 which reads 'Joseph Smith used this papyrus as his source for Abraham 1 through 2:18.' Just how he determined this is a mystery to me. He, and others, have apparently assumed that since the Book of Abraham text refers to facsimile 1 as the drawing at the beginning of the book that the source of the text of the Book of Abraham is the text appearing directly after the picture. This is an assumption, and nothing more. It is not unusual for pictures to be far from the text with which they go, both in ancient Egypt and in books today. Palmer himself refers to figures in his own book that are not right next to the text with which they are associated." Muhlestein to Harper, 17 May 2003.

10. Some of Palmer's other claims are dealt with in other reviews in this number, pages 257–71 and 309–410.

11. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: Greene, 1832), 13.

through America during Joseph Smith's lifetime (p. 95). Numerous other Book of Mormon critics have sought evidence to support the original Campbell thesis. They disparage Joseph Smith's honesty, yet they are willing to acknowledge that he was a kind of genius capable of such a remarkable feat. Palmer grants that Joseph Smith was indeed brighter than he is pictured in the early affidavits attacking him. Drawing on the earlier critics' work, Palmer compares passages from the Book of Mormon with the Jacksonian world—frontier revival settings and preaching styles, conversion dynamics, ideas of human nature. He draws a number of parallels to support the Campbell thesis that the Book of Mormon was authored by Joseph Smith and therefore reflects his world. There is nothing ancient about it, says Palmer, repeating a conclusion going back to at least 1832.

Sources for Joseph's clever fiction, Palmer argues, came from an 1826 Methodist camp meeting near Palmyra, where the anticipated farewell address of a respected, aged preacher, Bishop M'Kendree, summoned as many as ten thousand who pitched tents and listened intently. He reportedly preached powerfully on "the whole process of personal salvation." Many were moved and committed to Christ. "This," says Palmer, "is reminiscent of King Benjamin's speech to the Zarahemlans" (p. 97; cf. Mosiah 2–5). The question is whether this or other experiences in Joseph Smith's America inspired him to write the Book of Mormon, or whether Joseph translated an authentic ancient history by "the gift and power of God" (Testimony of Three Witnesses). To address that question honestly, one must not only examine the early American republic, as Palmer does, but the ancient world, which Palmer avoids, along with the vast literature produced by those who have dealt with this issue.

Hugh Nibley writes, "Of all the possible ties between the Book of Mormon and the Old World, by far the most impressive in our opinion is the exact and full matching up of the long coronation rite described in the book of Mosiah with the 'standard' Near Eastern coronation ceremonies as they have been worked out through the years by the 'patternists' of Cambridge. Imagine a twenty-three-year-old backwoodsman [or even a Harvard professor] in 1829 giving his version of what

an ancient coronation ceremony would be like.”¹² Other scholars have confirmed Nibley’s conclusion and presented further evidence that King Mosiah’s coronation ritual, including Benjamin’s sermon, belongs less to the setting of a camp meeting in the early American republic than to an ancient Jewish Feast of Tabernacles.¹³

As long as one ignores the ancient Near East, however, superficial parallels seem to suffice. That a sermon in some ways similar to Benjamin’s occurred near Joseph’s home is, to Palmer, proof that Joseph Smith wrote Mosiah 2–5 based on it. Never mind that Joseph Smith is not known to have been at the 1826 camp meeting. Neither Joseph, his mother, Joseph Knight, nor other known sources of information on Joseph’s activities in 1826 mention the event. Even supposing that the 1826 camp meeting profoundly influenced Joseph Smith, his 1832 written history largely bears out Emma Smith’s later recollection that he could hardly have composed a well-written letter at the time of their marriage in 1827. Palmer’s argument demands that Joseph Smith must have heard Bishop M’Kendree, remembered his sermon, crafted King Mosiah’s sermon from it at least two years later (without, as Emma Smith testified, any written sources to jog his memory), and positioned it coherently in the midst of a complex book that ran to nearly six hundred pages (pp. 97–98).

Relying on the critics’ research of patterns in nineteenth-century conversion accounts, Palmer asserts that Alma’s conversion narrative in Alma 36, among others, is typical of Joseph Smith’s America. Specifically, Palmer asserts that Alma’s account mirrors the conversion narrative of Eleazer Sherman, published in Rhode Island in the same year as the Book of Mormon (p. 103). Granted, there are simi-

12. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 247.

13. See Stephen D. Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6,” and Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, “King Benjamin’s Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 233–75, 183–90; and John A. Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:197–237.

larities between conversion dynamics in the Book of Mormon and those in the early 1800s. Why would there not be? The striking fact here is that by attributing Alma's conversion to Smith's observations, Palmer fails to explain how Smith acquired knowledge of a variety of ancient evidence. Book of Mormon witness Hiram Page testified that Joseph Smith could hardly pronounce the name Nephi, let alone produce the Book of Mormon without divine help (see page 304 below). So how can Palmer's argument possibly explain Joseph's knowledge of the demonstrably ancient name Alma, the ancient literary form of his narrative, and the distinctiveness of his literary voice?

Around 1960, the "Israeli scholar Yigael Yadin found a land deed near the western shore of the Dead Sea dating from the early second century. One of the names on the deed was 'Alma son of Yehudah,' demonstrating Alma to be 'an authentically ancient Semitic masculine personal name.'"¹⁴ Alma's conversion narrative at Alma 36 is narrated in an ancient literary form of inverted parallelisms called chiasmus.¹⁵ Scholars have identified many examples of inverted parallelism, or chiasmus, in the Old Testament. Placed beside the strongest of those examples, the parallelism of the conversion narrative in Alma 36 is impressive.¹⁶ Although scholars had discovered chiasmus before Smith translated the Book of Mormon, it is unlikely that he had heard of it

14. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 144. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Is the Book of Mormon True? Notes on the Debate," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 146, who cites Yigael Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba* (New York: Random House, 1971), 176. See also Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Alma as a Hebrew Name," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 72–73; Terrence L. Szink, "Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 70.

15. John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds and Charles D. Tate (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 33–52.

16. John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 114–31. See also Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon"; John W. Welch, "What Does Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Prove?" in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, 199–224.

and implausible to suppose that he had mastered the technique.¹⁷ His wife was certain that he was incapable of literary complexity, ancient or otherwise. Others who knew him (or read the Book of Mormon) shared her judgment.¹⁸ Smith's holograph writings during this period reveal a man more adept than some have supposed but of limited literary ability.¹⁹ Finally, a "sophisticated analysis by a Berkeley group concluded that it is 'statistically indefensible to propose Joseph Smith or Oliver Cowdery or Solomon Spaulding as the author of the 30,000 words . . . attributed to Nephi and Alma. . . . The Book of Mormon measures multiauthored, with authorship consistent to its own internal claims. These results are obtained even though the writings of Nephi and Alma were "translated" by Joseph Smith."²⁰

Terryl L. Givens argues that, "to be widely plausible," alternative explanations for the Book of Mormon's origin need both to "credit the book's indisputable complexity—its rich mix of history, warfare, theology, allegory, and characters—and to *discredit* Joseph as author. He had to have received, in other words, the help of a collaborator."²¹ Palmer's argument does just the opposite. He takes pains to minimize the complexity of the Book of Mormon while arguing that Joseph Smith, though uneducated, was sufficiently clever and observant enough to have authored it himself from beginning to end. The first 116 pages—which were subsequently lost—served, according to Palmer, as an "apprenticeship." The intervening nine months provided Joseph time to "ponder the details of the plots and subplots," and then, in the next

17. John W. Welch, "How Much Was Known about Chiasmus in 1829 When the Book of Mormon Was Translated?" *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 47–80.

18. Emma Smith Bidamon Interview with Joseph Smith III, in *Early Mormon Documents*, comp. and ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 1:539. See also Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 157–59.

19. Emma Smith Bidamon Interview with Joseph Smith III, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:539 n. 24.

20. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 156–57, quoting John L. Hilton, "On Verifying Wordprint Studies: Book of Mormon Authorship," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, 241. Givens, *passim*, presents a thorough assessment of Book of Mormon claims and deals substantively with the Book of Mormon–related arguments Palmer makes while providing a presentation with integrity conspicuously missing from Palmer's discussion.

21. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 159.

ninety days, Joseph dictated the final manuscript, which, Palmer says, must have become “progressively easier,” considering his “familiarity with the Bible and with American antiquities” (p. 66). Palmer’s own less complex book, by contrast, took much longer to write—twenty years—though it is only half as long and was written with the benefit of a graduate education, modern technology, “colleagues,” extensive library resources, “years of research,” and an editor (p. xii).

After giving a presentation on architectural proportions pervasive in the ancient world, a Jewish scholar marveled that the monetary system set forth in Alma 11:5–19 was informed by identical mathematical principles. Though he was unwilling to grant that the entire Book of Mormon was ancient, he was convinced that those verses were “unthinkable” when the Book of Mormon was published in 1830. Recent scholarship suggests that the Nephite monetary system has Egyptian, Babylonian, and Israelite analogues.²² One wonders when Joseph Smith worked out the arithmetic of Alma 11:5–19 or what unlikely source informed him. One finds nothing remotely like it in the culture of the early American republic.

Witnesses of the Book of Mormon Plates

In his treatment of the “Witnesses to the Golden Plates” (pp. 175–213), Palmer attempts to discredit the testimonies of the eleven men whose eyewitness testimonies are printed in each copy of the Book of Mormon. To that end (agreeing with the Hurlbut affidavits now), he claims that Joseph Smith was adept at treasure seeking and trickery²³

22. John W. Welch, “Weighing and Measuring in the Worlds of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 36–45. Earlier research appears in Robert F. Smith, “Weights and Measures in the Time of Mosiah II” (FARMS, 1983). See also “Egyptian Hieroglyphs for Grain Measurement,” chart 113 in *Charting the Book of Mormon: Visual Aids for Personal Study and Teaching* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999).

23. For a much different account, see Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?” *Mormon Historical Studies* 2/2 (2001): 39–75, which addresses a wider array of evidence than Palmer and, in the process, shows that characterization of Joseph Smith as a treasure seeker actually *began* in 1830, when Palmer said it stopped; this reveals one of the demonstrably false assertions in Palmer’s argument.

and that his mastery of the magical folklore of nineteenth-century America gave him power over the men who witnessed the plates, all of whom, he states, believed in what he calls “second sight” (p. 175). Palmer argues that Joseph Smith wrote the testimonies printed in the Book of Mormon (pp. 195, 202) and implies throughout this chapter that he somehow induced the visionary experiences of the witnesses by playing on their credulity. Though the testimony of the Eight Witnesses says that they actually hefted the plates for themselves, Palmer claims that this is not so. “If the three witnesses and others inspected the plates *in a vision*, perhaps the eight did also” (p. 204). That is an incredible “perhaps,” given the testimony of the eight and those who heard one or more of them say that they had hefted actual plates. A hearsay report that John Whitmer claimed the plates “were shown to me by a supernatural power” is enough for Palmer to draw the conclusion “that the eight, like the three, saw and scrutinized the plates in a mind *vision*” (pp. 205, 206). That same report, by the way, has Whitmer saying, “I handled those plates” (p. 205).²⁴ Daniel Tyler reported hearing Samuel Smith say that “he had handled them and seen the engravings thereon” (p. 205). Emma Smith once “felt of the plates, as they lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would <rustle with a metallic sound> when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.”²⁵ Palmer’s attempt to get the plates out of the hands of the Eight Witnesses fails. But it reveals a challenge historians face when dealing with the Book of Mormon witnesses. The historical record is overwhelmingly hearsay.

Their actual statements included in every copy of the Book of Mormon are, of course, the exception. By Palmer’s rule that early, eye-witness sources are the most reliable (p. ix), these statements should be privileged over later secondhand materials. But Palmer impeaches

24. Both comments of John Whitmer appear as quotations reported by Theodore Turley and recorded in *History of the Church*, 3:307.

25. Emma Smith Bidamon Interview with Joseph Smith, III, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:539.

their testimonies without cause; he decides instead to credit an array of hearsay statements arranged carefully to demonstrate that what the witnesses actually experienced was what he calls “visionary” and hence not “real” (p. 194); “thus it may not be as significant as we have assumed that three signatories to the Book of Mormon saw and heard an angel” (p. 195). Discrediting the witnesses by “spiritualizing” their testimonies is reflective of Palmer’s obsession with the scientific history idealized by the Enlightenment skeptics. On that point, Givens writes:

At least one historian has written of Martin Harris’s alleged equivocation about his vision, pointing out that he claimed to have seen the plates with his “spiritual eyes,” rather than his natural ones, and thus that he “repeatedly admitted the internal, subjective nature of his visionary experience.” It is not clear, however, that visionaries in any age have acquiesced to such facile dichotomies. . . .

Paul himself referred to one of his own experiences as being “in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell” (2 Cor. 12:3). He obviously considered such a distinction irrelevant to the validity of his experience and the reality of what he saw. It is hard to imagine a precedent more like Harris’s own versions in which he emphatically asserts until the day of his death the actuality of the angel who “came down from heaven” and who “brought and laid [the plates] before our eyes, that we beheld and saw,” while also reporting, *according to others*, that he “never claimed to have seen them with his natural eyes, only with spiritual vision.”²⁶

“It must have been relatively easy,” Palmer concludes, “for the witnesses to accept Joseph’s golden plates as an ancient record. Appreciating their mindset helps us understand Mormon origins in

26. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 41–42, emphasis added; the two former quotations come from the Testimony of Three Witnesses in the front of the Book of Mormon, and the latter one is the statement of Reuben P. Harmon, made in about 1885, cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:255. Note how Givens, unlike Palmer, distinguishes between firsthand and hearsay accounts.

their terms” (p. 213). What Palmer calls their “mindset” is merely his bias attributed to the witnesses. This chapter does not give us access to their minds. And Palmer’s patchwork of “testimony” carefully stitched together is emphatically not in their terms. Instead we are told “the witnesses believed that a toad hiding in the stone box became an apparition that struck Joseph on the head” (p. 195). That notion comes from Willard Chase, a contemporary of Joseph Smith who was at least as involved in treasure seeking as Joseph Smith. Chase envied Joseph’s discovery of a seer stone and golden plates and tried to wrest them from him. In his second- or thirdhand account, Chase claims that Joseph Smith “saw in the box something like a toad, which soon assumed the appearance of a man, and struck him on the side of the head.”²⁷

For his source of knowledge of what the Book of Mormon witnesses believed, Palmer cites Benjamin Saunders, a brother-in-law of Willard Chase. The Saunders statement is frank, generally favorable to the Smiths, and entirely believable when reporting firsthand knowledge. When he comes to reporting what Joseph Smith found in the box containing golden plates, however, Benjamin Saunders’s report merely mirrors Chase’s opinions. “When he took the plates,” he claims, “there was something down near the box that looked some like a toad that rose up into a man which forbid him to take the plates.”²⁸ It is a useful example of the reliability of eyewitness rather than hearsay testimony, which Palmer fails to discern. Note that neither Chase nor Saunders says that it was an actual toad that Joseph saw. Chase attributes his hearsay knowledge to a conversation with Joseph Smith Sr., which Palmer exaggerates into “the witnesses” (p. 195). Neither Saunders nor Chase nor even Joseph Smith Sr. was actually present when Joseph went to the hill where the plates were deposited. Only Joseph knew firsthand what happened there. Yet his

27. The Willard Chase statement is reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:64–74; the quotation is found on p. 67.

28. The Benjamin Saunders statement is reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:136–40; the quotation is found on p. 137.

testimony seems to be the only one Palmer does not trust. Instead Palmer modifies and amplifies these thirdhand accounts and inserts his version into the minds of the Book of Mormon witnesses to discount their credibility. Whether the questionably motivated, hearsay statements from Chase and Saunders (which tell us about their perceptions but not Joseph's actual experience) are more believable than the eyewitness testimonies of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon witnesses is never questioned by Palmer.

Thus readers are denied access to the authentic voices of Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris. Each of them did speak for himself at length. We have their words in abundance, even if not always directly. Those interested in knowing what the Three Witnesses thought, said, and knew will resent Palmer's selective presentation; they will want to read the witnesses' own words. There is an entire book of David Whitmer interviews.²⁹ And numerous, consistent statements by Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery are readily available in the same compilation Palmer uses when convenient for his purposes.³⁰ An honest inquirer who examines all the evidence as presented by the eleven witnesses themselves will be convinced that they believed that their testimonies—as printed in each copy of the Book of Mormon—were real and true in the most literal sense. Oliver Cowdery wrote in 1835 that his generation's tendency to explain away the divine “figuratively”—what he called *spiritualizing*—was unwarranted since he believed the scriptures “are meant to be understood according to their *literal* reading.”³¹ It seems unlikely, then, that Cowdery, who, of all men, knew whether Joseph Smith's claims were real or not, would mince words or confuse illusions with actual events. Whatever the nuance—which is impossible to conclude, given the variety of hearsay accounts of the Book of Mormon witnesses—

29. Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1991).

30. For Harris and Cowdery statements, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:253–511. Note the distinctions in language between hearsay and eyewitness testimony.

31. Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, February 1835, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:427–28.

not just the preponderance but *all* evidence points to their individual and collective certainty that the Book of Mormon was divine.

Priesthood Restoration

In his chapter on priesthood restoration (pp. 215–34), Palmer charges Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery with inventing in 1834 the idea that angels had ordained them to holy priesthoods beginning on 15 May 1829. Their motive, he argues, was Eber D. Howe’s exposé, *Mormonism Unveiled*, which sought to undermine the Church of Jesus Christ by attacking its origins. Thus Palmer concludes that the “most plausible explanation” of the historical record is that angel stories invented in 1834 “were retrofitted to an 1829–30 time period to give the impression that an impressive and unique authority had existed in the church from the beginning” (p. 230). Howe’s anti-Mormonism, however, did not initiate Joseph Smith’s credibility crisis, which began much earlier. The *Painesville Telegraph*, for example, challenged Cowdery’s authority in 1830 by pejoratively referring to Cowdery’s claim to have a divine mission and to have seen and conversed with angels.³² That account and others show that claims to ministering angels predate Palmer’s 1834 scenario. Most emphatically, though, Joseph Smith claimed in 1832 an angelic restoration of priesthood in his first attempt to write his history. Palmer obliquely asserts that the only significant reference to “authority from angels” before 1835 was the 22 September 1832 reference that is now Doctrine and Covenants 84:28. Palmer keeps silent regarding Joseph’s testimony written that same year:

An account of his marvilous experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Ch[r]ist the son of the living God of whom he beareth record and also an account of the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time

32. “The Golden Bible,” *Painesville Telegraph*, 16 November 1830, 3, quoted in Brian Q. Cannon et al., “Priesthood Restoration Documents,” *BYU Studies* 35/4 (1995–96): 181 (document 20); see also 181–82 (document 21).

according as the Lord brough<t> forth and established by his hand <firstly> he receiving the testamony from on high secondly the ministering of Angels thirdly the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of Aangels to administer the letter of the Gospel<—the Law and commandments as they were given unto him—>and the ordinencs, forthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of God confere upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c.³³

Joseph's own account of "the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time" establishes the "reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of Aangels" as a crucial step in the restoration of the fulness of the gospel.³⁴ Palmer is aware of this source; he quotes it extensively in his discussion of Joseph Smith's first vision (pp. 236–37), censoring conspicuously the passage quoted above.

Instead of acknowledging that Joseph Smith wrote in 1832 that he had received both priesthoods from ministring angels, Palmer privileges statements of David Whitmer and William McLellin dating to the 1870s and 1880s. They claimed, at that late date, that they "never heard" of angelic restoration of priesthood until 1834 or 1835, showing, Palmer insists, that Joseph Smith first thought of it at that time (pp. 217, 224–25). Absent from Palmer's treatment are earlier statements of William McLellin dating to 1847: "When the holy angel visited and ordained Joseph, Oliver was with him." And in 1848 he

33. *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:3.

34. Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, Joseph Smith Collection, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter Church Archives), p. 1, quoted in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, comp. and ed. Dean C. Jessee, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Brigham Young University Press, 2002). See also Cannon et al., "Priesthood Restoration Documents," 176 (document 5); Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:26.

wrote: “We hold that JOSEPH SMITH and OLIVER COWDERY, in May 1829, received the authority of the lesser priesthood, and the keys of it, by the visitation and the administration of the angel John, the Baptist.”³⁵ In 1861 David Cannon visited Oliver Cowdery’s grave in Richmond, Missouri, with David Whitmer, who reiterated Cowdery’s testimony, “saying ‘I know the Gospel to be true and upon this head has Peter James and John laid their hands and conferred the Holy Melchisedic Priesthood.’” Cannon continued, “The manner in which this tall grey headed man went through the exhibition of what Oliver had done was prophetic. I shall never forget the impression that the testimony of . . . David Whitmer made upon me.”³⁶ These statements were among the seventy priesthood restoration documents published by *BYU Studies* in 1996, but readers seeking a reliable account based on relevant early documents will not find them in *An Insider’s View*. Palmer rejects early eyewitness evidence, instead exclusively using late documents produced by men clearly engaged in an effort to recast early Latter-day Saint history.³⁷ Palmer favors these late accounts of *not hearing* of angelic priesthood restoration over early, consistent, eyewitness accounts of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery.

This kind of gnat-straining, camel-swallowing analysis continues when Palmer focuses on Oliver Cowdery’s testimony that he and Joseph received the priesthood from angels “while we were in the heavenly vision” (p. 227).³⁸ For Palmer, visionary means unreliable. But Cowdery thought he was confirming, not compromising, the importance of his experience by describing it as a vision. Still, there was no doubt in Cowdery’s mind that the events were real. He testified that

35. Cannon et al., “Priesthood Restoration Documents,” 195–96 (documents 67–68).

36. David H. Cannon, autobiography, quoted in Cannon et al., “Priesthood Restoration Documents,” 198 n. 10.

37. On this point, see Kenneth W. Godfrey, “David Whitmer and the Shaping of Latter-day Saint History,” in *Disciple as Witness*, 223–56. See also Larry C. Porter, “The Odyssey of William Earl McLellin: Man of Diversity, 1806–83,” in *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836*, ed. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch (Urbana: BYU Studies and University of Illinois Press, 1994), 291–378.

38. From Book of Patriarchal Blessings 1:8–9, Church Archives, quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:453.

[Joseph] was ordained by the angel John, unto the lesser or Aaronic priesthood, in company with myself, in the town of Harmony, Susquehannah County, Pennsylvania, on Fryday, the 15th day of May, 1829, after which we repaired to the water, even to the Susquehannah River, and were baptized. . . . And while we were in the heavenly vision the angel came down and bestowed upon us this priesthood: and then, as I have said, we repaired to the water and were baptized. After this we received the high and holy priesthood.³⁹

If Oliver Cowdery and Joseph Smith invented this testimony to establish authority, one wonders why Cowdery did not expose Joseph later when he was removed from priesthood office. Instead, in a deeply moving, private letter to Phineas Young written in 1846, Cowdery wrote:

I have cherished a hope, and that one of my fondest, that I might leave such a character, as those who might believe in my testimony, after I should be called hence, might do so, not only for the sake of the truth, but might not *blush* for the private character of the man who bore that testimony. I have been sensitive on this subject, I admit; but I ought to be so—you would be, under the circumstances, had you stood in the presence of John, <with> our departed brother Joseph, to receive the Lesser Priesthood—and in the presence <of> Peter, to receive the Greater, and looked down through time, and witnessed the effects these two must produce.⁴⁰

It is well attested that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery both testified early and often that angels ordained them to the holy priesthood. Why, though, the question remains, did Joseph Smith seem to

39. Cannon et al., “Priesthood Restoration Documents,” 182–83 (document 24).

40. Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, 23 March 1846, Church Archives, quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:491–92.

publicly proclaim his written *revelations* and safeguard his *visions*, including details of priesthood restoration?

John Wigger's influential book *Taking Heaven by Storm*⁴¹ shows how early Methodism gained converts in great numbers by acknowledging popular spiritual experiences and in appealing to the longings of ordinary people. As America and Methodism became more middle class, however, revelatory experiences became suspect. Samuel Goodrich described this process tersely by saying that "orthodoxy was in a considerable degree methodized, and Methodism in due time became orthodoxed."⁴²

Informed by this larger history, Richard Bushman argues that perhaps Joseph chose not to trumpet his heavenly visions as he did his printed revelations for fear of being marginalized even more. This view finds support in Joseph's own accounts and other early documents. He reported relating his first vision to an influential minister, following which he was persecuted, "but all this did not destroy the reality of his vision" (Joseph Smith—History 1:24).⁴³ He explained that he and Cowdery "were forced to keep secret the circumstances of our having been baptized, and having received this priesthood; owing to a spirit of persecution which had already manifested itself in the neighborhood."⁴⁴ In particular, they "had been threatened with being mobbed."⁴⁵ Martin Harris said at least one Palmyra man threatened Joseph Smith with violence in 1827 for claiming that "angels appear to men in this enlightened age."⁴⁶ Bushman, the most informed

41. John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

42. Samuel G. Goodrich, *Recollections of a Lifetime* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1856), 1:217.

43. The quotation, from verse 24, is in reference to the apostle Paul and the similarity of his situation to Joseph's own.

44. Joseph Smith, "History, 1839," Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives, p. 18; compare Joseph Smith—History 1:74–75. Also in Cannon et al., "Priesthood Restoration Documents," 178 (document 12); Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:76.

45. Joseph Smith, "History, 1839," Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives, p. 18; compare Joseph Smith—History 1:74–75. Also in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:76.

46. "Mormonism—No. II," *Tiffany's Monthly*, June 1859, 168.

scholar on Joseph Smith's world, thus offers an explanation alternative to Palmer for Joseph's apparent reticence to speak casually about ministering angels.⁴⁷ This reading of the evidence is far more compelling than Palmer's exaggerated hermeneutic of suspicion.

The First Vision

To discredit Joseph Smith's 1838 account of his first vision, Palmer borrows an argument made by the late Reverend Wesley Walters in 1969.⁴⁸ Historians Richard Bushman and Milton Backman responded to this argument, and Backman's monograph *Joseph Smith's First Vision* soon followed.⁴⁹ Although there is nothing new in Palmer's discussion, much is missing. Neither Backman nor Bushman is cited; Palmer also pays no attention to the evidence they used or the interpretations they offered. Rather, Palmer cites hearsay by Oliver Cowdery in 1835 and by William Smith in 1841, again violating his own rule that early sources are unfailingly better.⁵⁰

Oliver Cowdery could know of the first vision only by hearing about it from Joseph Smith. Richard Bushman showed the weaknesses in this same Cowdery evidence in his response to Walters in 1969.⁵¹

47. Richard L. Bushman, Joseph Smith Lecture Series (BYU-Hawaii, 13 November 2001), notes in my possession.

48. Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue* 4/1 (1969): 60-67.

49. Richard L. Bushman "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue* 4/1 (1969): 82-93; Milton V. Backman Jr., "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 301-20; Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971).

50. William Hartley, review of *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood*, by Gregory A. Prince, *BYU Studies* 37/1 (1997-98): 225-30, argues that because recollections can be valuable historical sources and are often at least as reliable as contemporary accounts, "Joseph Smith's later perspectives on early events deserve as much trust as do his early statements" (p. 227). Palmer responds directly to this statement with the assertion that to give retrospective accounts that much credence "is contrary to the traditional canons of historiography" (p. 254 n. 52). This is fine irony from a determined debunker of traditional historiography and of the canonical account of Joseph Smith's first vision.

51. Bushman, "First Vision Story Revived," 82-93.

Though Palmer never questions Cowdery's confused hearsay on the first vision, he views Cowdery's eyewitness testimony of actual gold plates and angelic priesthood restoration as incredible (pp. 226–34).

William Smith, Joseph's younger brother, apparently made no mention of the first vision in relating Joseph's history during an interview in 1841 (pp. 241–42). Hearsay that fails to mention the first vision becomes Palmer's evidence that the event did not happen. When, anticipating divine judgment, William wrote his own recollections in 1883, his stated intention was "to correct the errors instilled into the minds of the people—by the many falsehoods and misrepresentations that book writers have set afloat concerning the character of Joseph Smith." In that account, William Smith strongly confirms his brother's own narratives of the first vision, adding that "a more elaborate and accurate description of his vision, however, will be found in his own [that is, Joseph Smith's] history."⁵² That 1883 source—published on pages subsequent to the 1841 account Palmer cites—is selectively ignored.

Walters challenges the credibility of Joseph Smith's 1838 account of his first vision by claiming scant evidence of a revival in Palmyra town in 1819–20. Thus, Walters reasons, the religious anxieties Joseph reported feeling as a result of that revival must be pretense. Writing in 1982, Marvin Hill conjectured that perhaps the first vision occurred in the wake of a documented 1824 Palmyra revival, that Joseph Smith was mistaken chronologically but credible otherwise.⁵³ But both Bushman and Backman have shown that if one listens carefully to Joseph Smith and tests his statements against local history, Joseph's accounts are credible.⁵⁴

Joseph never said that he was influenced by a Palmyra revival. He wrote that after moving with his family to Manchester, about two

52. William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, Iowa: Herald, 1883), 3, 9, quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:493, 496.

53. Marvin S. Hill, "The First Vision Controversy: A Critique and Reconciliation," *Dialogue* 15/2 (1982): 31–46.

54. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 53–59; and Backman, "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District," 309.

miles south of Palmyra, “there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). One must force a Palmyra revival into Joseph’s account, which Palmer does, citing Oliver Cowdery’s 1835 hearsay statement that a Methodist minister, Reverend George Lane, was in “Palmyra and vicinity” in 1823 (p. 242). Palmer refers to Palmyra repeatedly, with virtually no discussion of “the whole district of country” that is the locus of Joseph Smith’s history (Joseph Smith—History 1:5), apparently unaware that a religious excitement occurred in the region of Manchester at the time Joseph Smith said it did. Lucy Mack Smith confirmed that “a great revival in religion” stirred “the surrounding country in which we resided.”⁵⁵

A contrast is illustrative here. Backman shows that local newspapers regularly featured news of religious revivals throughout the region of western New York. Narrowly focused, Palmer says simply, “there is not a single reference to a *Palmyra* revival between 1818 and 1821 in any of the major [note the qualifying term] religious periodicals” (p. 244, emphasis added). But that is not quite right. Backman did find one reference to a Palmyra “revival.” “In June 1820, the *Palmyra Register* reported on a Methodist camp meeting in the vicinity of Palmyra because an Irishman, James Couser, died the day after attending the gathering.”⁵⁶ Otherwise, it seems, the familiar revival customs—even including an event as public as a camp meeting—hardly seemed newsworthy. Backman’s article gives all the relevant statistical information, showing how “great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties,” as Joseph Smith said (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). The groups Joseph Smith mentioned specifically—Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians—gained significant numbers in 1819–20 (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). Of the 6,500 who became Presbyterians in the United States in 1820, nearly one-fourth lived in western New York.⁵⁷

55. Lucy Mack Smith, “Lucy Smith History, 1845,” in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:288.

56. Backman, “Awakenings in the Burned-Over District,” 309.

57. *Ibid.*, 317.

Joseph Smith said that this excitement “commenced with the Methodists” (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). In July 1919, Methodists of the Genesee Conference assembled at Vienna (now Phelps), well within walking distance of the Smith farm. The Reverend George Lane and perhaps a hundred other exhorters were present. One participant remembered the result as a “religious cyclone which swept over the whole region,” and Joseph Smith may have been in the eye of the storm.⁵⁸ Joseph’s contemporary and acquaintance Orsamus Turner reported in his “own recollections” that Joseph caught a “spark of Methodism” at a camp meeting on the road to Vienna, which must have occurred between 1819 and 1822.⁵⁹

Joseph Smith’s first vision is the best documented theophany in history. Several extant accounts, including Joseph’s first attempt at a written history in 1832, have been published by Backman and also by Dean Jessee.⁶⁰ The polished 1838 account, of course, is canonized in the Latter-day Saint Pearl of Great Price. Palmer draws attention to differences in the details Joseph recorded in 1832 as compared to 1838. The earlier account (which Palmer quotes at length, leaving out the key introductory section, in which Joseph claims to have received the priesthood from angels after the first vision), emphasizes a personal quest for salvation. “I cried unto the Lord for mercy” in the wilderness. A “pillar of light” brighter than the sun appeared, and Joseph “was filled with the spirit of God.” He then “saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph <my Son> thy Sins are forgiven thee.” Then follows a summary of other things

58. M. P. Blakeslee, “Note for a History of Methodism in Phelps, 1886,” 7, in newspaper clippings and histories, 1883–1911 (Perry Collections), quoted in Backman, “Awakenings in the Burned-Over District,” 308. For a discussion of this issue, see Larry C. Porter, review of *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*, by H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 126–36.

59. Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase and Morris’ Reserve . . .* (Rochester, N.Y.: Alling, 1852), 214. Richard L. Anderson evaluates Turner’s credibility as a witness in “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences,” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 376–81.

60. See, for example, Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision*; Dean C. Jessee, “The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 275–94; *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*; and Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols.

Joseph was told, briefer than but nevertheless consistent with the 1838 account.⁶¹ Assuming (uncharacteristically, but, for once, according to the canons of traditional historiography) that Joseph's earliest account is necessarily the most reliable—particularly since it fails to mention two divine beings, says nothing about a religious excitement, and is generally typical of a visionary subculture of Joseph's era—Palmer concludes that the 1838 account must be an untrustworthy elaboration. Bushman, however, interpreted this language differently.

Behind the simplest event are complex motives and many factual threads conjoining that will receive varying emphasis in different retellings. In all accounts of his early religious experiences, for example, Joseph mentions the search for the true church and a desire for forgiveness. In some accounts he emphasizes one, in some the other. Similarly, in the earliest record of the first vision he attributes his question about the churches to personal study; in the familiar story written in 1838 or 1839 he credits the revival and the consequent disputes as raising the issue for him. The reasons for reshaping the story usually have to do with changes in immediate circumstances. We know that Joseph suffered from attacks on his character around 1834. As he told Oliver Cowdery when the letters on Joseph's early experiences were about to be published, enemies had blown up his honest confession of guilt into an admission of outrageous crimes. Small wonder that afterward he played down his prayer for forgiveness in accounts of the vision. Such changes do not evidence an uncertainty about the events, as Mr. Walters [and, following him, Palmer] thinks, as if Joseph were manufacturing new parts year by year. It is folly to try to explain every change as the result of Joseph's calculated efforts to fabricate a convincing account. One would expect variations in the simplest and truest story.⁶²

61. Joseph Smith History, 1832, quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:28.

62. Bushman, "First Vision Story Revived," 83; cf. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 49–54.

Joseph Smith's accounts of his first vision are remarkably consistent. His descriptions are, in fact, portraits of the time and place in which he lived. Indeed, if Joseph had repeated well-rehearsed statements verbatim from year to year rather than the thoughtful accounts he gave in specific contexts, historians would rightly find him more calculating and less credible. As it is, Joseph's testimony compels many to belief—perhaps most notably the British literary scholar Arthur Henry King, who wrote:

When I was first brought to read Joseph Smith's story, I was deeply impressed. I wasn't inclined to be impressed. As a stylistician, I have spent my life being disinclined to be impressed. So when I read his story, I thought to myself, this is an extraordinary thing. This is an astonishingly matter-of-fact and cool account. This man is not trying to persuade me of anything. He doesn't feel the need to. He is stating what happened to him, and he is stating it, not enthusiastically, but in quite a matter-of-fact way. He is not trying to make me cry or feel ecstatic. That struck me, and that began to build my testimony, for I could see that this man was telling the truth.⁶³

Conclusion

Palmer claims to recapitulate the findings of New Mormon History, but *An Insider's View* is old-fashioned polemics. It is, as Shipps said, "tendentious in the extreme." It is a pitiful failure to write credible history because Palmer fails to obey rules of historical methodology that he simultaneously professes to be inviolable. He cannot, with any degree of credibility, for instance, pretend Joseph's 1832 testimony of receiving priesthood from angels does not exist and then uphold the same document as the authentic record of Joseph's first vision experience. He concludes *An Insider's View* by reviewing his

63. Arthur Henry King, *Arm the Children: Faith's Response to a Violent World* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1998), 288.

reasons why Joseph Smith's claims to having translated ancient records by divine means cannot be true. He similarly dismisses Joseph Smith's testimony of the first vision, the restoration of priesthood, and the testimonies of Book of Mormon witnesses. He uncritically follows Enlightenment ideas of rationality. But at the end of his book, he does an abrupt about-face and adopts a stance Givens has called "a strangely irrational position."⁶⁴ Discarding his Enlightenment standards, Palmer wants Mormonism to be ineffable—like it was in some imaginary beginning before, he argues, it was ruined by Joseph and Oliver (pp. 260–61). "I cherish Joseph Smith's teachings on many topics," Palmer concludes, "such as the plan of salvation and his view that the marriage covenant extends beyond death. Many others could be enumerated. But when it comes to the founding events, I wonder if they are trustworthy as history" (p. 261).⁶⁵

Palmer unconvincingly strives to separate the few of Joseph Smith's teachings he accepts from the Prophet's claims to angelic ministrations or translation of actual documents by the gift and power of God. He wants to keep eternal marriage but jettison priesthood. He wants Latter-day Saints to emphasize Jesus at the expense of the revelations attested by Joseph Smith of Jesus Christ. He wishes that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would reorganize like its cousin, recently rechristened the Community of Christ, so that "anyone willing to covenant with Christ" may enjoy full fellowship, "regardless of their belief in the claims of their founding prophet" (p. 263). This conclusion is the most peculiar part of the book, the most incongruent.

64. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 178: "To consider 'the historical validity of the Book of Mormon . . . strangely irrelevant to the experience of finding spirituality through the Latter-day Saint scriptural tradition' is itself a strangely irrational position." The internal quotation comes from Ian G. Barber, "Beyond the Literalist Constraint: Personal Reflections on Mormon Scripture and Religious Interpretation," *Sunstone*, October 1997, 22, and reflects a viewpoint essentially identical to Palmer's.

65. Givens ably deals with this theme in "'This Great Modern Abomination': Orthodoxy and Heresy in American Religion," in *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82–93.

Palmer approvingly quotes a declaration by Joseph Smith in 1838: “The fundamental principles of our religion is the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, ‘that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended up into heaven’; and all other things are only appendages to these” (p. 261).⁶⁶ Can it be that neither Palmer nor his editors recognized this inconsistency? How could one who distrusts the claims of Joseph Smith based on Enlightenment standards of rationality accept the testimony of Peter or Paul of a risen Christ? As Givens demonstrated, “the protest against Mormonism turns out to be, in the final analysis, much the same as the Enlightenment’s protest against Christianity itself.”⁶⁷ If, as Palmer asserts, “there is no evidence that he [Joseph Smith] ever translated a document as we would understand that phrase” (p. 259), what evidence exists that Jesus “rose again the third day”? If the Book of Mormon can be attributed to the creativity of an observant nineteenth-century farmer, cannot the New Testament be dismissed even more easily as the creation of first-century Jews? Cannot Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus be dismissed far more easily than the eyewitness testimonies of eight men who hefted the Book of Mormon plates and three men who claimed to their deathbeds that a heavenly messenger displayed the same plates to them? Here Palmer partakes of an old, oft-repeated effort to debunk Mormonism, precisely because Mormonism demystifies the ineffable and forces choice. As Terryl Givens wrote, “Mormonism’s radicalism can thus be seen as its refusal to endow its own origins with mythic transcendence, while endowing those origins with universal import since they represent the implementation of the fullest gospel dispensation ever. The *effect* of this unflinching primitivism, its resurrection of original structures and practices, is nothing short of the demystification of Christianity itself.”⁶⁸

66. Quoted from Joseph Smith Jr., answers to questions, *Elders Journal* 1/3 (July 1838): 44. The portion in single quotation marks is reminiscent of the wording of several of the Catholic and Protestant creeds familiar in Joseph Smith’s day. Compare also 1 Corinthians 15:3–4; D&C 20:23–24.

67. Givens, *Viper on the Hearth*, 93.

68. *Ibid.*, 83.

In contrast to Palmer, Bushman proposes a philosophically consistent way to know: “I hold to my beliefs not because of the evidence or the arguments but because I find our Mormon truth good and yearn to install it at the center of my life. After losing many followers when he taught an especially hard doctrine, Jesus asked his disciples, ‘Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life’ (John 6:67–68). The truth we have is truth to live by.”⁶⁹ The truth of which Bushman speaks is also irreducibly historical. It is necessarily grounded on actual gold plates revealed by a resurrected inhabitant of ancient America whose Near Eastern colleagues restored priesthood authority to Joseph Smith Jr. beginning on 15 May 1829 near Harmony, Pennsylvania.

Historicity is the crux of Palmer’s problem. In a genuinely moving passage (the most autobiographically revealing one in a confessional book), Palmer relates, “I was about fourteen years old when I heard [Congressman Douglas R. Stringfellow] speak, and it was a truly inspiring experience” (p. 132). Indeed, when this formative episode, which Palmer received as a completely factual recital (based on feelings that he and others attributed to the Holy Ghost), was later shown to be a fabrication, seeds of doubt sprouted. Similar experiences later eroded his faith more, until he rejected as unreliably subjective the experiences of goodness of which Bushman speaks, shifting his faith to Enlightenment rationalism as the way to discern truth. “Is something true because I and others find it edifying?” (p. 131), he wonders plaintively, lamenting his youthful vulnerability and failure to discern between a sensational yarn and the work of the Holy Spirit. Now seasoned and skeptical, Palmer wonders whether there is any difference. Still he clings tenaciously, if irrationally, to a thread of faith in revelation. But in doing so, he fails to discern that one cannot aim Enlightenment skepticism at the historical claims of the restoration and then propose as an antidote a pragmatic embrace of “the testimony of the prophets and apostles concerning Jesus Christ” (p. 261). Early converts understood and explained why. Eli Gilbert wrote of the

69. Bushman, “Social Dimensions of Rationality,” 77.

Book of Mormon: “I gave it a close reading. And it bore hard upon my favorite notions of universal salvation. I read it again, and again with close attention and prayer. I examined the proof; the witnesses, and all other testimony, and compared it with that of the bible, (which book I verily thought I believed,) and found the two books mutually and reciprocally corroborate each other; and if I let go the book of Mormon, the bible might also go down by the same rule.”⁷⁰

William McLellin asked Hyrum Smith to baptize him on 20 August 1831, a month after meeting David Whitmer, who “bore testimony to having seen an Holy Angel who had made known the truth of this record to him.” Compelled, McLellin closed his school and followed the Mormon missionaries to Missouri. He met Martin Harris and, on 19 August 1831, “took Hiram the brother of Joseph and we went into the woods and set down and talked together about 4 hours. I inquired into the particulars of the coming forth of the record, of the rise of the church and of its progress and upon the testimonies given to him.” McLellin writes that the next day “I rose early and betook myself to earnest prayr to God to direct me into truth; and from all the light that I could gain by examinations searches and researches I was bound as an honest man to acknowledge the truth and Validity of the book of **Mormon** and also that I had found the people of the Lord.”⁷¹

Samuel Smith, another Book of Mormon witness, later served a mission with McLellin after a call received in a revelation that McLellin requested of Joseph, secretly testing Joseph to see whether he could discern the answers to five questions known only to McLellin and God (D&C 66). This intimate contact with Book of Mormon witnesses, whose testimonies McLellin solicited and examined, combined with the receipt of revealed answers to McLellin’s questions, was powerful evidence to him that Joseph Smith translated by the gift of God. McLellin later disobeyed one of the command-

70. Eli Gilbert to the editor, 24 September 1834, *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 10. For another example, see Milo Andrus, *Autobiography of Milo Andrus 1779–1875*, Perry Collections; and Benjamin Brown, *Testimonies for the Truth* (Liverpool: Richards, 1853), 3–9.

71. Shippes and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 29, 33.

ments revealed in answer to his request—“commit not adultery” (D&C 66:10)—and was cut off from the church. He spent many of his remaining years searching for ways to discredit Joseph Smith, probably to minimize cognitive dissonance. It is these efforts that Palmer emphasizes (pp. 224–25, 247).⁷²

Palmer is silent on McLellin’s dogged conviction that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon and received divine revelations. Speaking of his personal experience with Joseph as he received that revelation for McLellin on 25 October 1831, McLellin declared in print in 1848, ten years after his final excommunication: “I now testify in the fear of God, that every question which I had thus lodged in the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, were answered to my full and entire satisfaction. I desired it for a testimony of Joseph’s inspiration. And I to this day consider it to me an evidence which I cannot refute.”⁷³ That testimony, absent from Palmer’s book, is located just pages from a Hiram Page statement Palmer manipulated to compromise Page’s witness of the Book of Mormon plates (see fig. 1 on pages 304–5).⁷⁴ In 1880 McLellin reaffirmed his 1831 conviction of the Book of Mormon:

When I thoroughly examine a subject and settle my mind, then higher evidence must be introduced before I change. I have set to my seal that the Book of Mormon is a true, divine record and it will require more evidence than I have ever seen to ever shake me relative to its purity I have read many “Exposes.” I have seen all their arguments. But my evidences are above them all! . . .

continued on p. 306

72. For a study of McLellin’s conversion and excommunication, see Steven C. Harper, “Drawing Lessons from a Life: William McLellin 1831–1832,” in *Lives of the Saints: Writing Mormon Biography and Autobiography*, ed. Jill Mulvay Derr (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, 2002), 77–82.

73. William E. McLellin, response to J. Tyler on succession to First Presidency, *Ensign of Liberty of the Church of Christ 1/4* (January 1848): 61.

74. Hiram Page to Bro. William, *Ensign of Liberty of the Church of Christ 1/4* (January 1848): 64.

I close by subscribing myself your affectionate father, and well wisher, until death.

CHARLES McCLANEN.

After sixteen years absence, we visited our father, relatives, and friends, in April, 1845, and had the privilege of preaching six discourses to them; setting before them the principles of the work of the last days, as we then understood them. Our father believed our testimony, and was immersed on the 4th day of May, '45. I made him a present of the book of Mormon, and he read, he told me, during my absence while visiting among our relatives, 80 pages in two days, although he was more than 79 years of age. And when I returned from the west this fall, to find among others, a letter from my aged father, still breathing his faith in God, and in that strange and marvelous work in which we are engaged—rejoiced my heart exceedingly.—O God! sanctify my father, and prepare him whether in life or death, to meet thy Son at his coming. O, may he be one of thy jewels, to stand on thy right hand in peace and glory—Amen. As to our visit again with him in our native land, we know not at present, when we can make him one; but hope to see him again in the flesh, and preach and organize a church there with which he can associate, and enjoy himself according to his desires. Ed.

RAY COUNTY, MO., May 30, '47.

Bro. William:—Yours of May 4th, came to hand the 28th, and it is so full of questions, and of such magnitude, that my little sheet will only give room for an introduction, and the plain simple truth is always the best without exaggeration. * * * I have received the two first numbers of the paper you are publishing, and I find in them some things which are worthy of notice.—The name of Christ is as good a name as I want to wear.

Zion cannot put on her beautiful garments that she may be adorned as a bride adorneth herself for her husband, neither can she be redeemed until all her abominations are confessed and proclaimed as upon the housetops, and she forsake all evil practices; the Ark being steadied by him whom God has appointed, and if he whom God has appointed will not do the work in his time, the Lord will put him down, and raise up another that will. Although I hold the office of High Priest, yet I dare not raise a finger to move the ark forward without a "thus saith the Lord," through the Lord's Secer; yet I can set myself in order, and try to persuade others to do likewise.

In the next place, you want to know my faith relative to the book of Mormon, and the winding up of wickedness. As to the book of Mormon, it would be doing injustice to myself, and to the work of God of the last days, to say that I could know a thing to be true in 1830, and know the same thing to be false in 1847. To say my mind was so treacherous that I had forgotten what I saw. To say that a man of Joseph's ability, who at that time did not know how to pronounce the word Nephi, could write a book of six hundred pages, as correct as the book of Mormon, without supernatural power. And to say that those holy Angels who came and showed themselves to me as I was walking through the field, to confirm me in the work of the Lord of the last days—three of whom came to me afterwards and sang an hymn in their own pure language; yea, it would be treating the God of heaven with contempt, to deny these testimonies, with too many others to mention here.

The next thing is, whether wickedness will be wound up in this generation, for the space of a thousand years? There are various reasons for believing that it will.—Besides those testimonies which have fallen into our hands, we have the gathering of the Jews at Jerusalem. It is said that a messenger has been sent from the ten tribes, to see whether the way was prepared for them to come home; which will agree with Zech. 12: 6, 7; and also with Isaiah 49.—The ten tribes no doubt have been visited by some messenger, to let them know that the time has come for them to prepare to come home.

I am yours in the bonds of truth,

HIRAM PAGE.

EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS.

DAYTON, Ohio, March 22, '47.

Bro. McLellen:—I herewith enclose one dollar for the Ensign of Liberty. I wish to know the truth with regard to that strange work about which you write. Direct your papers to, ———.

WM. DELONG.

LONG BRANCH, N. J., April 1, 1847.

Dear Brother McLellen—

I have received the first No. of your worthy paper, and I feel grateful that such a one is started. Please to continue to send it to me. I enclose one dollar for the first volume. Please to answer this and let me know if you receive it.

Yours, in the new and everlasting covenant,
S. WARDELL.

Of the eight signatories, only three individually reported that they saw and touched the records. A fourth, Hiram Page, curiously mentioned neither handling nor seeing plates. He said that he could not deny “what I saw. To say . . . that [I did not see] those holy Angels who came and showed themselves to me as I was walking through the field . . . would be treating the God of heaven with contempt.” (p. 205)

Here one can see how Palmer manipulates evidence. In the actual statement, Page confirms that his 1830 testimony as it appears in each copy of the Book of Mormon is both true and consistent with his position in 1847, by which time he was antagonistic toward Joseph Smith. Page’s integrity would not allow anything else. Being familiar with Joseph and his capabilities, Page is sure that Joseph Smith could not have composed the Book of Mormon without divine help. Finally, Page says, his experience of hefting the plates and his certainty that Joseph Smith was not the author of the Book of Mormon were confirmed by ministering angels. Palmer elides the Page statement to make it appear that he never saw the plates and that a misplaced faith in angels compromises Page’s credibility. But Page’s actual testimony is multifaceted, emphatic, and emasculated by Palmer’s highly selective cut-and-paste act.

When a man goes at the Book of M. he touches the apple of my eye. He fights against truth—against purity—against light—against the purist, or one of the truest, purist books on earth. I have more confidence in the Book of Mormon than any book of this wide earth!⁷⁵

As Bushman asserts and as early converts who interviewed Book of Mormon witnesses testify, “a more persuasive argument can be made for belief in God and Christ through the Book of Mormon than through any of the arguments of conventional Christianity.”⁷⁶

Then why was *An Insider's View* written? It certainly will not serve Palmer's stated “hope for a greater focus on Jesus Christ in our Sunday meetings” (p. 263). To the degree that a “lingering distrust” of history not sanctioned by the Church of Jesus Christ exists (p. viii), this book will exacerbate it, not cure it. Is it possible that Palmer is so naïve as to imagine that attacking Joseph Smith's theophany, reception of priesthood at the hands of resurrected angels, tutelage by a messenger sent from the presence of God, and divinely aided translation of an authentically ancient record will endear his work to mainstream Latter-day Saints or win the support of church leaders? If so, surely his astute “colleagues” at Signature Books could have disabused him (p. xii). Perhaps, though, they intended to exploit his status with the Church Educational System to push their agenda under a sophistic guise. The book will appeal to those already dissatisfied with Latter-day Saint faith for reasons other than its historical claims. Suspicious of church leaders and seeking salve for cognitive dissonance, this group is a good audience for what Shipps described as tendentious history written by those who share the need to address anxieties that stem from abandoning faith. This is true regardless of their employment, church membership status, or calling, all of which are featured prominently on and in the book, concealing the mes-

75. William E. McLellin to James T. Cobb, Independence, Missouri, 14 August 1880, Manuscripts Collection, New York Public Library, quoted in Porter, “Man of Diversity,” 291.

76. Bushman, “Social Dimensions of Rationality,” 71.

sage behind a seemingly trustworthy messenger. Palmer's book will reassure the self-assessment of this demographic and may meet its author's psychological needs, but to scholars it provides "evidence of what can happen when the religious basis of personal identity is shattered."⁷⁷ The book bespeaks incongruity. It feigns objectivity. It defines incredibility. As Shipps indicated, when one's motive for writing history is an identity crisis engendered by forsaken faith, the result is intensely revealing—though, alas, for this very self-serving reason, it is not trustworthy history.

77. Shipps, "Remembering, Recovering, and Inventing," 180.