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MORONI AS ANGEL AND AS TREASURE GUARDIAN

Mark Ashurst-McGee

Over the last two decades, many historians have reconsidered the origins of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the context of the early American tradition of treasure hunting. Well into the nineteenth century there were European Americans hunting for buried wealth. Some believed in treasures that were protected by magic spells or guarded by preternatural beings. Joseph Smith, founding prophet of the Mormon religion, had participated in several treasure-hunting expeditions in his youth. The church that he later founded rested to a great degree on his claim that an angel named Moroni had appeared to him in 1823 and showed him the location of an ancient scriptural record akin to the Bible, which was inscribed on metal tablets that looked like gold. After four years, Moroni allowed Smith to recover these “golden plates” and translate their characters

I presented an early version of this paper in 1999 at Halstead, Pennsylvania, as part of the BYU Department of Church History and Doctrine Summer 1999 New York Faculty Symposium. The paper was later published as “Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?” in *Mormon Historical Studies* 2/2 (2001): 39–75. Its findings on the topic were almost diametrically opposed to those published two years later in an essay by Ronald V. Huggins, “From Captain Kidd’s Treasure Ghost to the Angel Moroni: Changing *Dramatis Personae* in Early Mormonism,” *Dialogue* 3/4 (2003): 17–42, which was reviewed in a recent issue of the *FARMS Review* by Larry E. Morris, “I Should Have an Eye Single to the Glory of God’: Joseph Smith’s Account of the Angel and the Plates,” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 11–81. My original article appears here, courtesy of *Mormon Historical Studies*, with a few minor revisions. A postscript responding to recent work by Huggins and Morris is appended.

into English. It was from Smith's published translation—the Book of Mormon—that members of the fledgling church became known as “Mormons.” For historians of Mormonism who have treated the golden plates as treasure, Moroni has become a fantastical treasure guardian. In this essay, I argue for the historical validity of the traditional understanding of Moroni as an angel.

In May 1985, a letter to the editor of the *Salt Lake Tribune* posed this question: “In keeping with the true spirit (no pun intended) of historical facts, should not the angel Moroni atop the Mormon Temple be replaced with a white salamander?”¹ Of course, the pun was intended. Document forger Mark Hofmann's “salamander letter” was at the height of public attention at this time. Allegedly penned by Book of Mormon witness Martin Harris, the letter has Harris describing Moroni as a white salamander that bit Joseph Smith and then transformed into a capricious spirit guardian of the golden plates. This letter and other Hofmann forgeries portrayed Joseph Smith's early religious experiences in terms of treasure seeking and magic. The startling new documents caused Latter-day Saint historians to reconsider the founding events of the restoration of the church.² As one recent critic poses the question: “Was he [Moroni] a magical guardian of a treasure or a biblical angel of the gospel?”³

Many clamored for a radical reinterpretation of the origins of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Latter-day Saint historian Ronald W. Walker responded to the din:

As quieter perspectives inevitably settle in, the breathless ‘antithesis’ gives way to a more sedate “synthesis.” During this second phase, what once seemed so revolutionary is reconciled and merged with the still valid legacies of the past. To illustrate, our understanding of Joseph Smith's encoun-

1. W. J. Robinson, “Replace Moroni?” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 12 May 1985, A18.

2. Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*, with a new afterword, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989); Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

3. Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 84.

ters with Moroni will not be insightful if we focus narrowly on Martin Harris's "trickster spirit" and forget the several contemporaneous statements . . . that speak of Cumorah's "angel." These apparent conflicts must be weighed, somehow harmonized, and molded into a new, more complex understanding."⁴

Walker predicted that after a reevaluation of the treasure-seeking and magical influences, historians would return to the traditional story as the more accurate interpretation of Mormon origins.⁵

Eventually, Hofmann's forgery was exposed. The white salamander fell from grace along with its creator. But Walker had also rightly noted that "the question of whether the Smith family participated in money digging and magic does not rely on the recently found letters [the Hofmann forgeries]. The weight of evidence, *with or without* them, falls on the affirmative side of the question."⁶ Early Mormon history still needed to be reconsidered. And so historians continued to explore the influence of treasure seeking in particular and magic in general. In 1986, Signature Books published Dale Morgan's unfinished history of early Mormonism, which contained his argument that Mormonism had evolved from Joseph's treasure seeking and magic. Morgan had grown up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but had lost his faith and become disaffected.⁷ In 1987, D. Michael Quinn produced *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. Although a believing Latter-day Saint, Quinn perceived a strong influence of magical tradition in early Mormonism.⁸ A few years later, in 1994, H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, former authors of anti-

4. Ronald W. Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Palmyra Seer," *BYU Studies* 24/4 (1984): 463.

5. Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Palmyra Seer," 470–71.

6. Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Palmyra Seer," 463–64, emphasis in original.

7. William Mulder, preface to *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History*, ed. John Phillip Walker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 1–21; Richard Saunders, "'The Strange Mixture of Emotion and Intellect': A Social History of Dale L. Morgan, 1933–42," *Dialogue* 28/4 (1995): 39–58.

8. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. and enl. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998); Quinn, "On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath)," in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 69–111.

Mormon literature, presented a new-and-improved, kinder, gentler anti-Mormonism with their book *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*.⁹ Each of these books drew heavily on the early American history of treasure seeking and magic to interpret the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

In particular, these books argued that Joseph Smith originally spoke of Moroni as a treasure guardian. It was years later—these authors held—that Smith’s creative mind or developing exigencies transformed Moroni into an angel. Morgan, Quinn, and Marquardt and Walters all portrayed Moroni’s initial visits to Joseph as treasure-seeking experiences. They cast his interactions with Moroni as encounters between a treasure seer and a treasure guardian. Then they argued that as Joseph matured into the leader of an organized church, he reformulated his story and its meaning to better suit his needs.¹⁰ In fact, whereas Latter-day Saints usually refer to Moroni as the “angel Moroni,” in *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, he is called “the treasure-guardian Moroni.”¹¹ For Morgan, as with Marquardt and Walters, revealing Moroni as a treasure guardian showed that Joseph’s religious claims were illegitimate.¹²

9. H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 63–115. For examples of Marquardt’s previous publications, see *The Use of the Bible in the Book of Mormon and Early Nineteenth Century Events Reflected in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1979); and *The Book of Abraham Revisited* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1983). For examples of Walter’s previous publications, see “New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival,” *Dialogue* 4/1 (1969): 60–81; “From Occult to Cult with Joseph Smith, Jr.” *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 1/2 (1977): 121–37; “Mormon Origins: A Tale of Spirits and Salamanders,” *Presbyterian Journal* 44/7 (1985): 7–10; *The Human Origins of the Book of Mormon* (Clearwater, FL: Ex-Mormons for Jesus Ministries, 1979).

10. Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 266–75; Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 136–77, especially 138–40; Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 89–115, especially 105. See also Rodger I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith’s New York Reputation Reexamined* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 46–47; William D. Morain, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr. and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1998), 58–64; R. D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith*, 40, 72–73.

11. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 167.

12. And see the recent work of Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 45.

These revisionist histories carried out the explorations into treasure seeking and magic that the Hofmann forgeries had initially sparked. However, they did so at the expense of other interpretations—and in some cases at the expense of reliable sources and historical standards. These authors did not go beyond the “breathless antithesis” to synthesis. The revolutionary was not reconciled or merged with the still valid, traditional understanding of early Mormonism. In sum, these works did not provide the new and complex understanding that Walker had anticipated.

And so—strangely enough—this area of Mormon history finds itself today in a position not unlike that described by Walker during the heyday of the salamander. In this essay, I reassert his position with reference to Moroni in particular and to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in general. Although Joseph Smith may have understood Moroni to some extent as a treasure guardian, this was a secondary level of meaning for him. An application of basic historical standards to relevant sources confirms that Joseph understood Moroni primarily as an angel in the context of a divine restoration.¹³

The problem addressed here maintains its validity regardless of one’s opinion of Joseph Smith and his claims. Whether or not one believes an actual being appeared to Joseph Smith, the question is whether Moroni evolved from a treasure guardian into an angel in Joseph’s telling of the event.¹⁴ Before I proceed to answer this question,

13. As some accounts identify the messenger as Nephi, some may wish to quibble over the angel/guardian’s proper name. On the name of Joseph’s visitor, see Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:277 n. 1. In this essay, I use “Moroni” to refer to Joseph Smith’s visitor to abstain from calling him either an angel or a treasure guardian.

14. Most historians of Mormonism, whether believing Latter-day Saints or otherwise, agree that Smith was sincere. That is, they agree that whether or not a preternatural being actually appeared to him, Smith believed that this did occur. Even Mark Thomas, who asserts that Smith dishonestly reworked the Moroni story over time, argues that Smith did in fact experience some kind of sensory perception in which he thought he saw “a spirit or angel.” For Thomas, however, this was quite possibly a case of abnormal psychology, not necessarily actual revelation. Thomas, “Was Joseph Smith for Real? How He Lied, Perhaps Even to Himself,” *Free Inquiry* 20/1 (1999): 37–39; Thomas, “Form Criticism of Joseph Smith’s 1823 Vision of the Angel Moroni,” *Dialogue* 35/3 (2002): 145–60.

it will be useful to review the early American practice of treasure seeking and Joseph Smith's involvement in this practice.

Treasure Seeking

For the most part, the quest for buried wealth and its associated belief system have slipped away into a forgotten world. Though strange to us today, treasure-seeking beliefs probably influenced hundreds of thousands of Europeans and thousands of early European Americans. Many early Americans believed that treasures had been secreted in the earth by ancient inhabitants of the continent, by Spanish explorers, by pirates, or even by the dwarves of European mythology. Treasure hunters usually looked for caves and lost mines or dug into hills and Native American mounds to find these hidden deposits. A legend, a treasure map, or a dream of buried wealth initiated the hunt. Local specialists were enlisted to use their divining rods or seer stones to locate the treasure. To hide from the scrutiny of skeptics and the notice of other treasure seekers, they worked under the cover of darkness.

Gathering at the designated spot, the treasure seekers staked out magical circles around the treasure. They used Bible passages and hymns, prayers and incantations, ritual swords and other magical items, or even propitiatory animal sacrifices to appease or fend off preternatural guardians of the treasure. Excavation usually commenced under a rule of silence. Should someone carelessly mutter or curse, the treasure guardian could penetrate the circle or carry the treasure away through the earth.¹⁵ For one reason or another, the treasure seekers usually returned home empty-handed.

15. On the treasure-seeking tradition, see William R. Jones, "'Hill-Diggers' and 'Hell-Raisers': Treasure Hunting and the Supernatural in Old and New England," in *Wonders of the Invisible World: 1600-1900*, ed. Peter Benes (Boston: Boston University Press, 1995), 97-106; Wayland D. Hand, "The Quest for Buried Treasure: A Chapter in American Folk Legendry," in *Folklore on Two Continents: Essays in Honor of Linda Dégh*, ed. Nikolai Burlakoff and Carl Lindahl (Bloomington, IN: Trickster, 1980), 112-19; Alan Taylor, "The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780-1830," *American Quarterly* 38/1 (1986): 6-34; Ronald W. Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," *BYU Studies* 24/4 (1984): 429-59; Gerard T. Hurley, "Buried Treasure Tales in America," *Western Folklore* 10/3 (1951): 197-216. See also Byrd H. Granger, *A Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures Applied to Redaction of Arizona*

Joseph Smith's Involvement in Treasure Seeking

In the major work of church history that he began in 1838, Joseph Smith addressed the rumors regarding his pursuit of buried wealth. Most Latter-day Saints are familiar with his account as found in the Pearl of Great Price:

In the month of October, 1825, I hired with an old gentleman by the name of Josiah Stool [Stowell], who lived in Chenango county, State of New York. He had heard something of a silver mine having been opened by the Spaniards in Harmony, Susquehanna county, State of Pennsylvania; and had, previous to my hiring to him, been digging, in order, if possible, to discover the mine. After I went to live with him, he took me, with the rest of his hands, to dig for the silver mine, at which I continued to work for nearly a month, without success in our undertaking, and finally I prevailed with the old gentleman to cease digging after it. Hence arose the very prevalent story of my having been a money-digger. (Joseph Smith—History 1:56)¹⁶

Although Joseph downplayed his involvement, he nevertheless admitted it.

Lucy Mack Smith, when dictating her history of the Smith family, explained that Stowell hired Joseph because “he possessed certain keys, by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye.”¹⁷ Lucy also used the term *key* in her history to refer to the Urim and Thummim spectacles, which Joseph would later obtain with the golden plates. She also used the phrase *Urim and Thummim* to refer to Joseph’s seer stone(s).¹⁸

Legends, and to Lost Mine and Treasure Legends Exterior to Arizona (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1977).

16. Cf. *History of the Church*, 1:17; and *History of the Church*, Book A-1 Collection, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter Church Archives), 8; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:282.

17. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: Richards, 1853), 91–92.

18. “That of which I spoke, which Joseph termed a key, was indeed, nothing more nor less than the Urim and Thummim.” Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 106.

Smith's apostles used this same terminology. For example, on 27 December 1841, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal a meeting of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles with Joseph Smith in the Prophet's home. "I had the privilege," Woodruff wrote, "of seeing for the first time in my day the URIM & THUMMIM."¹⁹ We know that Joseph had returned the spectacles to the angel Moroni over a decade earlier. Brigham Young's journal account of the same meeting clarifies that Woodruff was writing about one of Joseph's seer stones: "I met with the Twelve at brother Joseph's. He conversed with us in a familiar manner on a variety of subjects . . . [and] he showed us his seer stone."²⁰ The terms *key* and *keys*—like the terms *urim* and *Urim and Thummim*—could be applied to seer stones and to the spectacles found with the golden plates.²¹ Since Stowell hired Joseph in 1825, two years before Joseph received the spectacles, the "keys" that Lucy mentioned were Joseph's seer stones.

In 1826, Peter Bridgeman, Stowell's nephew, attempted to stop his uncle's participation in treasure seeking by hauling Joseph Smith into court on grounds of deception. However, Stowell testified in Joseph's defense. Notes of the legal proceedings record Stowell's testimony "that Prisoner [Joseph Smith] looked through [a seer] stone and described Josiah Stowels house and out houses, while at Palmyra at Simpson Stowels . . . he had been in company with prisoner digging for gold, and had the most implicit faith in Prisoners skill."²²

According to Book of Mormon witness Martin Harris, Joseph also used his seer stone to try to find treasures near his home in

See also 101, 104, 126, 135, where Lucy used the term *Urim and Thummim* to refer to the seer stones.

19. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal: 1833–1898 Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 2:144.

20. "History of Brigham Young," *Millennial Star* 26 (1864): 118–19. See also Richard Van Wagoner and Steve Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" *Dialogue* 15/2 (1982): 49–68; Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 57, 174–75, 243–45, 250.

21. Van Wagoner and Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" 49–68; Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 174–75.

22. *People of State of New York v. Joseph Smith*, 20 March 1826, Bainbridge, New York, in "A Document Discovered," *Salt Lake City Utah Christian Advocate*, January 1886, 1.

Manchester, New York.²³ A number of former neighbors and other acquaintances from New York and Pennsylvania later recounted the Smith family's involvement with treasure seeking.²⁴ In fact, the people who tried to steal the plates from Joseph Smith in 1827 had hunted for treasure with him in earlier years. They viewed the ancient record as a treasure—as plates of *gold* rather than as inscribed tablets. Now that precious metal had finally been unearthed, they wanted their share.²⁵ Before the Hofmann forgeries forced a serious consideration of Joseph's involvement in the folk practices of his time, Latter-day Saints knew little of Joseph's treasure seeking. Latter-day Saint historian Richard L. Bushman notes that now, because of the efforts of believing scholars to understand these events, "the magical culture of nineteenth-century Yankees no longer seems foreign to the Latter-day Saint image of the Smith family."²⁶

Treasure Guardians

Although treasure seeking was common during Joseph's youth, by the end of his life the practice had dwindled.²⁷ The accompanying belief system likewise faded away along with its lore of treasure

23. "Mormonism—No. II," *Tiffany's Monthly*, June 1859, 164.

24. For a variety of perspectives on the Smith family's involvement with treasure seeking, see Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984, 1988), 64–76; Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Palmyra Seer," 461–72; Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching," *BYU Studies* 24/4 (1984): 489–560; Richard L. Bushman, "Treasure-Seeking Then and Now," *Sunstone*, September 1987, 5–6; Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*; Richard L. Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Family Background," in *The Prophet Joseph: Essays on the Life and Mission of Joseph Smith*, ed. Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 1–18; R. I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined*; Dan Vogel, "The Locations of Joseph Smith's Early Treasure Quests," *Dialogue* 27/3 (1994): 197–231; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York City: Knopf, 2005), 41–52.

25. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 83–84; and Andrew H. Hedges, "All My Endeavors to Preserve Them': Protecting the Plates in Palmyra, 22 September–December 1827," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 14–23.

26. Richard L. Bushman, "Just the Facts Please," review of *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*, by Marquardt and Walters, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 132.

27. Taylor, "Early Republic's Supernatural Economy," 25–27.

guardians. The preternatural beings that guarded treasure took many forms. Most treasures were guarded by ghosts or spirits—usually deceased humans. This particular class of treasure guardians seems to have grown out of the practice of grave robbing. In many ancient societies, people were buried with their valuables in order to retain them in the next life.²⁸ The dead did not take kindly, therefore, to anyone who tried to plunder their wealth. In fact, dying kings and nobles hoping to protect their sepulchers from ransack may have generated this treasure-guardian lore in an effort to frighten off tomb raiders. Frequently, treasure-guarding ghosts were either the spirit of the person who had hidden the treasure or the spirit of a person who had been killed and deposited with the treasure to watch over it.²⁹ This latter scenario was considered the customary practice of pirates.³⁰ In some treasure tales, the unfortunate conscript lost his head.³¹

The devil and his minions made up the next major group of treasure guardians.³² These satanic guardians apparently owed their existence to the notion that God dwells in the heavens above the earth and the devil lives beneath the earth. Satan laid claim on the treasure deposited within his subterranean dominion.³³ Also, since burying treasure was often associated with greed, robbery, and murder, the devil found his

28. Charles R. Beard, *The Romance of Treasure Trove* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1933), 15.

29. Hurley, "Buried Treasure Tales in America," 200–201.

30. B. A. Botkin, ed., *A Treasury of New England Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the Yankee People* (New York: Crown, 1947), 533–34; Charles M. Skinner, *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land* (1896; repr., Detroit: Singing Tree, 1969), 2:268–69; Sara Puryear Rodes, "Washington Irving's Use of Traditional Folklore," *New York Folklore Quarterly* 13/1 (1957): 5; Henry Buxton, *Assignment Down East* (Brattleboro, VT: Daye, 1938), 169–70; and Harold W. Thompson, *Body, Boots and Britches* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1940), 22. This practice served a double function: Killing the spade man meant that there was now one less person who knew where the booty lay buried.

31. For headless guardians in general, see Granger, *Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 3.1.2.1, 3.1.2.2, 3.1.3.1.

32. Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), N571; Granger, *Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 3.4.

33. Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer, ed., *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1936), s.v. "Schatz," 7:1004. I thank H. Brandon Spencer for help with this and other German sources.

way into many a treasure tale.³⁴ In 1825, a Palmyra newspaper explained the recent failure of one group to recover a buried treasure: “His Satanic Majesty, or some other invisible agent, appears to keep it under marching orders; for no sooner is it dug on to in one place, than it moves off like ‘false delusive hope,’ to another still more remote.”³⁵

Animals formed the third most common class of guardians—dogs being the most prevalent. There were treasures guarded by ghost dogs, headless dogs, yellow dogs with two tails, black dogs, scarlet dogs, and wolves. Other treasures were guarded by horses, bulls, a goat, a black cat, a black panther, a wild boar, and a big black hog with enormous white tusks.³⁶

An amphibian-reptilian assortment of sentinels constituted an important subset of the animals said to guard treasure.³⁷ For example, an old European tradition held that people who had hidden away treasures during their mortality could afterwards appear in the form of a toad to guard them.³⁸ About 1870, a company of treasure diggers from Niagara County, New York, were said to have been foiled by a large toad that threatened to kill them.³⁹ The amphibian-reptilian category of guardians extended beyond the natural species of this phyla complex—such as frogs, toads, lizards, and snakes—to include dragons and other monsters.⁴⁰ Many people are familiar with the

34. Hurley, “Buried Treasure Tales in America,” 203.

35. “Wonderful Discovery,” *Palmyra (NY) Wayne Sentinel*, 27 December 1825, 2.

36. Hurley, “Buried Treasure Tales in America,” 201–2; Granger, *Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, motif g: “Guardians of Mine or Treasure”; Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index*, N571.2; Wayland Hand Collection of Superstition and Popular Belief, Fife Folklore Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Milton R. Merrill Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, s.v. “treasure.”

37. Granger, *Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 2.2.

38. *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, s.v. “Kröte” and “Schatz”; “Exempla of Odo of Cheriton,” c. 1250–1300, no. 122; cited in J. A. Herbert, *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London: Printed by order of the Trustees, 1910), 3:70.

39. Julia Hull Winner, “The Money Diggers of Niagara County,” *New York Folklore Quarterly* 16/3 (1960): 224.

40. Granger, *Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 2.5; Jonathan D. Evans, “The Dragon,” in *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide*, ed. Malcolm South (New York: Greenwood, 1987), 27–58; see especially 29 and xxxii, s.v. “dragon.”



Figure 2. A dragon from Richard Huber, *Treasury of Fantastic and Mythological Creatures: 1,087 Renderings from Historic Sources* (New York: Dover Publications, 1981), plate 36, figure 5. Used by permission.

dragon named Smaug who guarded treasure in a mountain in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Tolkien based Smaug on the classic dragon treasure guardian.⁴¹

The dwarf is another classic medieval guardian of subterranean treasure that persisted into the nineteenth century.⁴²

Everyone who has heard the Germanic tale of Snow White remembers the seven dwarves who mined gold and copper from a treasure mountain.⁴³ Gnomes—who constituted one of the four classes of elemental spirits—lived within the earth and held

charge of many underground treasures.⁴⁴ In the early nine-

teenth century, treasure seer

Zimri Allen looked into his seer stone and saw subterranean treasures near Rochester, New York, that had been buried by

gnomes.⁴⁵ We are even more familiar with a Celtic counterpart—the leprechaun—who hoards his pot of gold but can be affected by lucky charms.

41. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, rev. ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 215–25.

42. *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, s.v. "Schatz," 7:1005; Carol Rose, *Spirits, Fairies, Gnomes, and Goblins: An Encyclopedia of the Little People* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 1996), s.v. "dwarf"; Granger, *Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 3.6, 3.7; Geo[rge] H. Harris, "Myths of Onanda, or Treasure Hunters of the Genesee," "the first manuscript," 1886, Local History Division, Rochester Public Library, Rochester, New York, 6–7.

43. "Little Snow-White," in *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, 1944), 249–58.

44. Beard, *Romance of Treasure Trove*, 67; Rose, *Spirits, Fairies, Gnomes, and Goblins*, s.v. "gnome."

45. Harris, "Myths of Onanda, or Treasure Hunters of the Genesee." Harris uses the term *pygmie*. *Pygmie* and *gnome* are the two proper names for earth elementals.

Giants also appear here and there as guardians of treasure.⁴⁶ Because of their size and strength, they made formidable guardians.⁴⁷ According to early Mormon Martin Harris, members of Joseph Smith's treasure-hunting group had encountered a giant: "Samuel Lawrence told me that while they were digging, a large man who appeared to be eight or nine feet high, came and sat on the ridge of the barn, and motioned to them that they must leave. They motioned back that they would not; but that they afterwards became frightened and did leave. . . . These things were real to them."⁴⁸ The capricious or even malevolent efforts of the guardians helped explain the failure to secure buried treasure.

Moroni as Both Angel and Treasure Guardian

A few of Joseph Smith's former acquaintances described Moroni as a treasure guardian. For some modern historians, these accounts reflect Joseph's early understanding of his supernatural experiences—before he founded a church and changed the Moroni story to suit his needs. It is equally possible, however, that Joseph Smith's former neighbors changed the story to suit *their* needs. Did Joseph "baptize" Moroni, or was Moroni "defrocked" by others? The question may be formally stated: *Did Joseph Smith's successive narratives eventually transform a treasure guardian into an angel, or did his antagonists' successive narratives eventually transform an angel into a treasure guardian?* The position that Joseph changed his story may be called the treasure-guardian thesis. The position that Joseph's critics changed the story may be called the angel thesis.

Some early critics saw Moroni only as a treasure guardian. A few of the modern historians who have emphasized that interpretation seem to acknowledge the possibility that Joseph understood Moroni as an angel as well, even in early years. The possibility of a

46. Lewis Spence, *The Fairy Tradition in Britain* (New York: Rider, 1948), 25; Thompson, *Body, Boots and Britches*, 22; also *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, s.v. "Schatz," 7:1010.

47. Janis L. Pallister, "Giants," in *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures*, 320–21.

48. "Mormonism—No. II," 165. See also Frederic G. Mather, "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Lippincott's Magazine*, August 1880, 200.

dual interpretation needs further emphasis, for treasure guardians and angels are not necessarily mutually exclusive beings. “Angel” is listed as a category of treasure guardian in folklorist Stith Thompson’s classic *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*.⁴⁹ Likewise, “Treasure Angel” is listed in a recent bestiary by Carol Rose.⁵⁰ W. H. McIntosh’s *History of Wayne County, New York*, includes a circa 1840 story wherein a treasure guardian introduces itself as an angel to a company of treasure seekers by Rose (about twenty miles east of Palmyra).⁵¹

Angels exist as guardians of treasure in Mormon thought as well. In 1837, Joseph Smith Sr. blessed Wilford Woodruff: “Thou shalt have access to the treasures hid in the sand to assist thy necessities. An angel of God shall show thee the treasures of the earth that thou mayest have riches to assist thee in gathering many orphan Children to Zion.”⁵² In 1877, President Brigham Young taught, “These treasures that are in the earth are carefully watched, they can be removed from place to place according to the good pleasure of Him who made them and owns them. He has his messengers at his service, and it is just as easy for an angel to remove the minerals from any part of one of these mountains to another, as it is for you and me to walk up and down this hall.”⁵³ Because angels can guard treasure in both Mormon and non-Mormon belief, there is no need to adopt an evolutionary model in which a treasure guardian is gradually changed into an angel. Book of Mormon witness David Whitmer may have blended both interpretations when he called Moroni “the angel, the guardian of the plates.”⁵⁴

49. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends*, rev. and enl. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), N583; see also N536. See also Granger, *Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 5.2.

50. Rose, *Spirits, Fairies, Gnomes, and Goblins*, 356.

51. W. H. McIntosh, *History of Wayne County, New York; with Illustrations Descriptive of Its Scenery, Palatial Residences, Public Buildings, Fine Blocks, and Important Manufactories, from Original Sketches by Artists of the Highest Ability, 1789–1877* (Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign & Everts, 1877), 155.

52. *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 1:143.

53. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 19:36–37.

54. P. Wilhelm Poulson, Ogden, to the editors, *Deseret News*, Salt Lake City, 13 August 1878; in *Deseret Evening News*, 16 August 1878. Poulson had interviewed Whitmer

This analysis, which attempts to fulfill Walker's anticipation of a synthesizing of the two interpretations, requires a reformulation of this essay's central question: *Was Moroni initially more meaningful to Joseph Smith as an angel or as a treasure guardian?* This modified version of the question defines a modified "treasure-guardian thesis" and a modified "angel thesis." Walker conjectured that the angel thesis would ultimately prevail. What does the historical record have to say?

To argue the treasure-guardian thesis, its proponents bring forth a number of historical sources that describe Moroni as a treasure guardian or a spirit. They contrast these accounts with the traditional account of Moroni's visits. Whereas Joseph's 1838 history presents Moroni as a divine messenger, these other accounts describe him as a treasure guardian—thus invalidating Joseph's claims to revelation from God. Abner Cole, editor of the *Palmyra Reflector*, composed the first extant source that explicitly identified Moroni as a treasure guardian. "The Book of Pukei," his parody of the Book of Mormon, narrated that "Jo. made a league with the *spirit*, who afterwards turned out to be an angel."⁵⁵ Later, in the fourth installment of his "Gold Bible" series of news articles, Cole flatly stated the same as historical fact. "It will be borne in mind," he wrote, "that no *divine* interposition had been *dreamed* of at the period."⁵⁶ Then, in the following issue, Cole expounded the point: "It is well known that Jo Smith never pretended to have any communion with angels, until a long period after the *pretended* finding of his book, and that the juggling of himself or father, went no further than the pretended faculty of seeing wonders in a 'peep stone,' and the occasional interview with the spirit, supposed to have the custody of hidden treasures."⁵⁷ What was first

at Whitmer's home in Richmond, Missouri (Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003], 5:39).

55. Obediah Dogberry [pseudonym for Abner Cole], "The Book of Pukei," *Palmyra Reflector*, 12 June 1830, 37, emphasis in original.

56. Obediah Dogberry [Cole], "Gold Bible, No. 4," *Palmyra Reflector*, 14 February 1831, 101, emphasis in original.

57. Dogberry [Cole], "Gold Bible, No. 5," *Palmyra Reflector*, 28 February 1831, 109, emphasis in original.

given in parody was restated as fact and then expounded as a historical framework.⁵⁸

Joseph and Hiel Lewis, cousins of Emma Hale, also claimed that Joseph initially described Moroni to them as a treasure guardian of gold plates. “In all this narrative,” the Lewis brothers wrote, “there was not one word about ‘visions of God,’ or of angels, or heavenly revelations. All his information was by that dream, and that bleeding ghost. The heavenly visions and messages of angels, etc., contained in Mormon books, were after-thoughts, revised to order.”⁵⁹ Like Abner Cole, Joseph and Hiel Lewis articulated the theory that Moroni evolved from a treasure guardian into an angel.

Joseph’s former neighbor Orlando Saunders disagreed. He stated that Joseph “always claimed that he saw the angel.”⁶⁰ And, more importantly, Joseph and his family presented Moroni as an angel from the start. Thus Abner Cole and those detractors who followed him have nothing on Joseph Smith. The detractors asserted that Joseph converted a treasure guardian into an angel. Joseph and others maintained that Moroni was always an angel. This takes us nowhere. Adequately addressing the question at hand requires an application of the basic standards of source criticism and good history.

Eyewitness Testimony

Eyewitness testimony is the most important standard of historical reliability. The only mortal eyewitness to Moroni’s 1823–28 visits is Joseph Smith. All of Joseph’s extant narrations maintain that Moroni is an angel. Aside from Joseph’s accounts, the only other firsthand accounts of seeing Moroni come from Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer. In June 1829, Moroni showed the golden plates

58. For Morgan’s acceptance of Cole, see Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 266. On Quinn’s basic acceptance of Cole, see Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 140.

59. Statements of Joseph and Hiel Lewis, in “Mormon History,” *Amboy Journal* (Amboy, Illinois), 30 April 1879, 1, emphasis removed, in *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:305.

60. Orlando Saunders, interviewed by William H. and Edmund L. Kelley, Palmyra, New York, 6 March 1881; quoted in W[illiam] H. Kelley, “The Hill Cumorah, and the Book of Mormon,” *Saints’ Herald* 28 (1 June 1881): 165.

to these “three witnesses of the Book of Mormon.” They consistently described Moroni as a Judeo-Christian angel in the context of a gospel restoration, not as a guardian spirit in the context of a treasure quest.⁶¹ Therefore, all eyewitness accounts agree on Moroni’s identity. Whether or not Smith, Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris actually saw a preternatural being named Moroni, their accounts are firsthand. The Moroni story began with those who claimed to have seen him.

Joseph and Hiel Lewis, who claimed to have heard their version from Joseph, gave secondhand testimony.⁶² Of course, their secondhand account describing a treasure guardian could be weighed against dozens of secondhand accounts given by Mormons and others describing an angel. The accounts given by David Whitmer regarding his mother deserve mention. He reported that Mary Musselman Whitmer saw “an holy angel” who showed her the plates.⁶³

Revisionists also use the accounts given by neighbor Willard Chase and by local businessman Fayette Lapham. Both claimed that Joseph Smith Sr. described Moroni to them as a treasure guardian. As Joseph Smith Sr. would have gained his knowledge of the matter directly from his son, Lapham and Chase provided thirdhand evidence.⁶⁴ Of course,

61. See “The Testimony of Three Witnesses,” appended to *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra, NY: Grandin, 1830). For other firsthand accounts of the angel by Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:336, 499. For other firsthand accounts of the angel by David Whitmer, see A Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon [David Whitmer], *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO: Whitmer, 1887), 7, 12, 13, 29, 32, 43–44; Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 245–47. Numerous secondhand accounts of their eyewitness experiences with the angel can be given for each of these three men (for Harris and Cowdery, see *Early Mormon Documents*, 2: Part III, F–G; for Whitmer, see Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*).

62. Statements of Joseph and Hiel Lewis, “Mormon History,” 1.

63. It is unclear whether this messenger was Moroni, Nephi, or one of the three Nephites. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 13, 28, 33, 50, 182, 214, 216, 217, 218; Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 30–32.

64. Fayette Lapham, “The Mormons,” *Historical Magazine* 7, 2nd series (May 1870): 305–9; Willard Chase statement, Manchester, New York, 1833; quoted in E[ber] D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville, OH: By the author, 1834), 240–48.

these accounts could be weighed against hundreds, if not thousands, of thirdhand accounts in which Moroni is an angel.

As stories get passed along, they become more and more susceptible to being distorted by biases. According to Oliver Cowdery's serial history written 1834–35, which is clearly informed by his discussions with Joseph Smith, Moroni had given Joseph a warning: "When it is known that the Lord has shown you these things, . . . they will circulate falsehoods to destroy your reputation."⁶⁵ William Smith, Joseph's brother, remembered that as soon as Joseph obtained the plates, these rumors prophesied by Moroni began to proliferate.⁶⁶ In 1840, Elder Orson Pratt wrote that when the "inhabitants of that vicinity" (western New York) heard about Moroni and the golden plates, they "began to ridicule and mock at those things." Before long, "The news of his discoveries spread abroad throughout all those parts. False reports, misrepresentations, and base slanders, flew as if upon the wings of the wind in every direction."⁶⁷ In his 1838 history, Joseph stated that after he returned the plates to Moroni, "The excitement however still continued, and rumour with her thousand tongues was all the time employed in circulating tales about my father's family and about myself. If I were to relate a thousand[d]th part of them it would fill up volumes."⁶⁸

Some of these tales found their way to Abner Cole, the editor of the local tabloid. Cole explained his historical methodology on more than one occasion. For example, in a 6 January 1831 article on Mormonism, he announced his plans to expose the fledgling church and promised to provide readers with the "facts" of the matter—"so far as they may come to our knowledge."⁶⁹ These "facts" came not through careful investigative journalism but from local rumor solicited through his paper. Later, Cole specified the origins of his description of Moroni as

65. Oliver Cowdery, "Letter VIII," *Messenger and Advocate* 2/1 (October 1835): 199.

66. "Another Testimony," *Deseret Evening News*, 20 January 1894, 11.

67. Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840; repr., Liverpool: James, 1848), 13.

68. Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, p. 8; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:284.

69. Dogberry [Cole], "Gold Bible," *Palmyra Reflector*, 6 January 1831.

a treasure guardian: “This tale in substance, was told at the time the event was *said* to have happened by both father and son, and is well recollected by many of our citizens.”⁷⁰ Tales told by local residents amount to no more than neighborhood gossip.

When we apply the criterion that firsthand accounts should be favored over secondhand accounts, thirdhand accounts, and gossip, the angel thesis forcefully asserts itself. Some skeptics may be tempted to reject this analysis by arguing that Joseph and maybe even the Book of Mormon witnesses had changed their story. Logicians call this kind of an argument “begging the question.” Sources that speak of a treasure guardian may also have changed their story. An unbiased analysis must consider both possibilities. Firsthand accounts fall on the side of the angel thesis.

Earliest Sources

The second most important standard of historical methodology is to favor sources composed closer to the time of the event in question over sources composed later on. A historian prefers to work with contemporaneous sources. In their absence, a historian will tend to rely on the earliest sources available. What do the earliest documents tell us about Moroni?

Exponents of the treasure-guardian thesis cite the 1879 account given by Joseph and Hiel Lewis and the 1870 account given by Fayette Lapham. These sources postdate the events they describe by half of a century, which severely reduces their reliability. They could be weighed against hundreds of Mormon accounts given in the middle decades of the nineteenth century that describe Moroni as an angel.

Philastus Hurlbut collected Willard Chase’s description of Moroni as a treasure guardian in 1833. However, at the same time, Hurlbut collected Abigail Harris’s statement describing Moroni as “the spirit of one of the Saints that was on this continent” as well as Henry Harris’s statement identifying Moroni as an “angel.”⁷¹ Although the

70. Dogberry [Cole], “Gold Bible, No. 4,” 101, emphasis in original.

71. Abigail Harris statement, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 253; Henry Harris statement, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 252.

Chase account predates the official history of the church, it does not predate Joseph Smith's 1832 history, which describes Moroni as "an angel of the Lord."⁷²

Abner Cole first described Moroni as a treasure guardian in June 1830 in "The Book of Pukei," his parody of the Book of Mormon. This is a very early source; it predates the official history and even the 1832 history. However, it does not predate the "Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ," which state that "God visited him [Joseph Smith] by an holy angel, whose countenance was as lightning, and whose garments were pure and white above all whiteness, and gave unto him commandments which inspired him from on high."⁷³ In fact, every relevant source that predates Cole's Book of Pukei calls Moroni an angel or implies as much. The "Articles and Covenants" was the latest of these sources. Five others are given here in chronological order, starting with the latest and working back to the earliest:

- On 2 June 1830, the *Cincinnati Advertiser and Ohio Phœnix* reprinted a recent article from the *Wayne County Inquirer* reporting that Joseph had claimed to have been "entrusted by God with a golden bible" and a "Divine commission."⁷⁴ Moroni is not explicitly mentioned, but contextual phraseology clearly favors the angel thesis. This account describes the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in terms of a traditional Christian view—not as a treasure quest.

- In August 1829, an article appearing in the *Palmyra Freeman* described Moroni as "the spirit of the Almighty."⁷⁵ Morgan and Quinn

72. Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives, 4; quoted in Jesse, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:8.

73. This document had been composed by 9 June 1830 when it was read in the first conference of the Church, held in Fayette, New York. The Articles and Covenants were first printed in "The Mormon Creed," *Painesville Telegraph*, 19 April 1831, 4; cf. *A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ, Organized According to Law, on the 6th of April, 1830*, 24:7.

74. [no author], [no title], *Cincinnati Advertiser and Ohio Phœnix*, 2 June 1830, 1, reprinted from *Wayne County Inquirer (PA)*, in *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:274.

75. "Golden Bible," *Rochester Daily Advertiser and Telegraph*, 31 August 1829, 2. This is a reprint from the *Palmyra Freeman*, circa 1829. A week later the *Rochester Gem* identified the source of the *Palmyra Freeman* article as Martin Harris and added further detail concerning "the same spirit." Quinn takes this to mean a spirit guardian of treasure, but the *same* spirit is the previously mentioned "spirit of the Almighty"—a messenger

have emphasized the word *spirit* in this source and have read it to mean spirit guardian of treasure. The prepositional phrase “of the Almighty,” however, clearly gives the origin of the messenger in question. Whether this being had a tangible body or not, it was an angel by definition.⁷⁶

- “The Testimony of Three Witnesses,” included in the back of the first edition of the Book of Mormon, was probably composed in late June 1829 when the Three Witnesses had their experience. It was certainly composed before 26 March 1830 when the Book of Mormon was advertised for sale.⁷⁷ Their testimony speaks of Moroni as “an Angel of God.”⁷⁸

- On 26 June 1829, the *Wayne Sentinel* reported the local stir concerning the discovery of “an ancient record, of a religious and divine nature and origin” that could be translated only “by inspiration.” In this article, talk of things “divine” and “religious” brings this source down on the side of the angel thesis.⁷⁹

- On 17 June 1829, Jesse Smith wrote a letter to his nephew Hyrum Smith.⁸⁰ Jesse wrote in response to letters from the Joseph Smith family written about the fall of 1828.⁸¹ In at least one of these

from God, not a treasure guardian. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 114–19.

76. Lorenzo Saunders, who lived just over the hill from the Smith family farm, stated that on one occasion “the angel touched him [Smith] on the shoulders”—imputing tangible corporeality to Moroni (Saunders, interviewed by William H. Kelley, 17 September 1884, E. L. Kelley Papers, Community of Christ [RLDS Church] Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, 9, in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:131). Accounts given by Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Mary Musselman Whitmer, which speak of Moroni holding the golden plates and turning them leaf by leaf, also imply his tangible corporeality. On Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery, see *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:325, 355, 358, 364, 367, 375, 377–78, 380, 391, 510. On David and Mary Whitmer, see Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 10, 11, 13, 20–21, 218; and Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 30–32.

77. “The Book of Mormon,” *Palmyra (NY) Wayne Sentinel*, 26 March 1830, 3.

78. *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi*, appended; cf. *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Royal Skousen (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 977.

79. “The Book of Mormon,” *Wayne Sentinel*, 26 June 1829, 3.

80. Jesse Smith, Stockholm, New York, to Hyrum Smith, Palmyra, New York, 17 June 1829; transcribed in Joseph Smith Letterbook, 1837–43, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Archives, 59.

81. See the editorial note to this document in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:551.

letters from the Joseph Smith Sr. family, Moroni was evidently called an angel. Citing the first of these letters, which had been written by Joseph Smith Sr. or Joseph Smith Jr., Jesse commented:

He writes that the Angel of the Lord has revealed to him the hidden treasures of wisdom & knowledge, even divine revelation, which has lain in the bowels of the earth for thousands of years [and] is at last made known to him, he says he has eyes to see things that are not and then has the audacity to say they are; and the Angel of the Lord (Devil it should be) has put me in possession of great wealth, gold and silver and precious stones so that I shall have the dominion in all the land of Palmyra.

Apparently, Joseph Sr. or Joseph Jr. had written a letter to Jesse that placed Moroni in a treasure-guarding context as well as an angelic context. As Jesse relates it, Moroni put the Smiths in possession of several local treasures. Jesse even used the words “hidden treasures.” Here, however, the treasures were not gold and silver but rather “treasures of wisdom & knowledge, even divine revelation.” Most importantly, this early letter cited by Jesse makes it quite clear that Joseph or his father referred to Moroni as “the Angel of the Lord.” This letter, the earliest relevant source, demonstrates the legitimacy of the treasure-guardian interpretation. At the same time, it manifests the primacy of the angel interpretation.

According to Quinn, “By 1830 Smith and his followers were emphasizing that the otherworldly messenger was an angel.”⁸² But Jesse’s letter of 1829—the earliest relevant document—indicates that in 1828, either Joseph or his father had called Moroni “the Angel of the Lord.” All relevant sources predating Abner Cole’s 1830 news articles identify Moroni as an angel or support this version of the story. By 1830, Smith’s detractors were emphasizing that the otherworldly messenger was a treasure guardian.⁸³

As with eyewitness testimony, a historical analysis of the early sources overwhelmingly favors the angel thesis. Some skeptics may

82. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 139.

83. My analysis of early sources was surpassed by Larry Morris in a recent issue of the *FARMS Review*; see Morris, “Joseph Smith’s Account,” 11–81.

reject this analysis on the grounds that Joseph Smith had changed his story before the earliest sources were recorded. Unfortunately, we have no directly relevant sources that were produced between Moroni's first visits in 1823 and the recovery of the plates in 1827. If there were only one Joseph Smith account, given at any time during his life, that portrayed Moroni as more of a treasure guardian than an angel, one might reasonably take this account as an accurate representation of Joseph's initial interpretation of Moroni's 1823 appearances. On the other hand, if there were an 1823 account from *any* source—Joseph himself, his family, a friend of the family, or even a bitter enemy—wherein Moroni was described primarily as an angel, valiant defenders of the treasure-guardian thesis would probably argue that the story had already been changed. Ultimately, the treasure-guardian thesis is unfalsifiable and therefore, in a sense, falls outside the domain of history into the realm of belief.

Reminiscence

Proponents of the treasure-guardian thesis avoid the course of analysis followed in the previous section by focusing on the dates their sources claim for themselves rather than the dates on which these sources were actually recorded. Many accounts recorded in later years were based on conversations that took place much earlier. However, the passage of years easily obscures, filters, and even distorts memories. For this reason, historians generally favor the earliest possible accounts of the events under investigation. Proponents of the treasure-guardian thesis, however, have had to place their focus on later accounts that claim to be based on early conversations.⁸⁴

84. For example, Quinn writes that the “earliest Mormon accounts stated that Smith’s 1823 epiphany was the nocturnal visit of a spirit” (*Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 138). As evidence for this assertion, Quinn cites Abigail Harris, the *Palmyra Freeman*, the *Rochester Gem*, Joseph and Hiel Lewis, and Fayette Lapham (Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 138, see also 140). Taken as a whole, though, these sources are neither early nor Mormon. The Lapham and Lewis accounts are anything but early; they gave their accounts decades after the fact. Abigail Harris made her statement in 1833. She identified Moroni as neither an angel nor a treasure guardian but as “the spirit of one of the Saints that was on this continent” (Harris statement, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 253). Henry Harris, possibly a relative of Martin Harris,

But even if we adopt this less-rigorous standard, the angel thesis holds. Fayette Lapham reported that he spoke with Joseph Smith Sr.

made a statement at the same time that Abigail Harris did. He identified Moroni as an “angel” (Henry Harris statement, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 252). The newspaper articles Quinn cites are indeed early, but the Jesse Smith letter and the testimony of the Three Witnesses—which predate these articles—call Moroni an angel. Quinn calls the sources he marshals “Mormon,” although none is directly so. It could be argued that these sources are indirectly Mormon—that they came from people who spoke with Mormons or recorded their words—but *every* source that claims to say something historical about Moroni must trace itself back to the Mormons who claimed to have seen him. The truly “Mormon” accounts—those produced by early Latter-day Saints—say nothing of spirits or treasure guardians.

In *Inventing Mormonism*, Marquardt and Walters write, “The earliest versions [of the Moroni story] linked . . . obtaining the plates with magical rituals traditionally associated with winning treasure from its guardian spirits” (p. 89). They cite Willard Chase, Joseph Knight, Fayette Lapham, Joseph and Hiel Lewis, and Lucy Mack Smith. Willard Chase and Joseph Knight did not give their accounts before 1833. Lapham and the Lewises did not give their accounts until decades later. Lucy Mack Smith called the plates a “treasure” but called Moroni “the angel.” She gave her narrative in 1845. None of these sources is particularly early. The earliest versions of the Moroni story linked obtaining the plates with the required obedience traditionally associated with commandments given by God and his angelic messengers.

In defense of the treasure-guardian thesis, Dale Morgan cited Abner Cole’s account of 1831, Fayette Lapham’s account of 1870, the Joseph and Hiel Lewis account of 1879, and the Abigail Harris account of 1833. Morgan seems to have taken Cole’s dwarf and Lapham’s giant as early versions of the treasure guardian. Then, Joseph opted for something less strange—a human guardian—the Spaniard with a gashed throat as described by the Lewises. Next, Joseph decided this guardian ghost was actually an ancient American Christian, as described by Abigail Harris. Finally, “not long after, so far from being a mere spirit, he was recognized to be an actual angel of the Lord” (Walker, *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 266). Cole claimed that the Smiths were talking about a dwarf just after finding or getting the plates. Abigail Harris spoke with Father and Mother Smith between December 1827 and February 1828. See *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:31 n. 2. The Lewises claimed that Joseph Smith Jr. told them about the bleeding human ghost in April 1828. Fayette Lapham spoke with Joseph Smith Sr. in 1830. As Harris gained her information before Lapham and the Lewises, the evolution that Morgan seems to sketch is highly unlikely.

More recently, Robert D. Anderson has rejected the angel described in the 1834–35 church history in favor of the treasure guardian described in “earlier versions.” R. D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith*, 72. He cites Abner Cole, Abigail Harris, Fayette Lapham, and Joseph and Hiel Lewis. As noted, however, the Lapham and Lewis accounts are not earlier versions. The thirdhand account given by Harris and the neighborhood rumor reported by Cole predate the 1834–35 church history by one year and four years respectively. However, as shown above, Joseph’s 1832 history and all of the accounts that predate Cole’s first treasure-guardian story identify Moroni as an angel.

about a treasure guardian in 1830, and Joseph and Hiel Lewis claimed that Joseph Smith Jr. told them about a treasure guardian about April 1828.⁸⁵ John A. Clark, however, reported that Martin Harris spoke to him about an angel in the fall of 1827.⁸⁶

Neighbor Willard Chase said he talked to Joseph Smith Sr. about a treasure guardian in June 1827.⁸⁷ However, Joseph Knight Jr. related, about November 1826, that Joseph “made known to my father and I, that he had seen a vision, that a personage had appeared to him and told him [where] there was a gold book of ancient date buried, and if he would follow the directions of the Angel he could get it.”⁸⁸ Abner Cole claimed that a treasure-guardian tale “was told at the time the event was *said* to have happened by both father and son.”⁸⁹ However, Lucy Mack Smith and William Smith both remembered that Joseph described Moroni to the family as an angel on the very day Moroni first visited him.⁹⁰ Joseph Smith himself related the same.⁹¹

Proponents of the treasure-guardian thesis do not consider the Smith family accounts as early sources because they suspect that the Smiths distorted the story. And yet that is the very question at issue. Those who described Moroni as a treasure guardian may also have distorted the story. Sound source criticism applied equally to Mormon and non-Mormon accounts supports the thesis that Moroni

85. Statements of Joseph and Hiel Lewis, in “Mormon History,” 1.

86. J[ohn] A. C[lark], “Gleanings by the Way, No. VI,” *Fairfield*, 24 August, 1840, *Philadelphia Episcopal Recorder*, 5 September 1840, 94. Harris himself recalled that in early October 1827, Palmyra village was buzzing with talk about Joseph’s discovery of the record. One man exclaimed, “Damn him! *angels* appear to men in this enlightened age! Damn him, he ought to be tarred and feathered for telling such a damned lie!” “Mormonism—No. II,” 168, emphasis added.

87. Willard Chase statement, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 242.

88. Joseph Knight Jr., Autobiographical Sketch, n.d., Church Archives. Knight states that Joseph Smith at this time was “about 21 years of age. I think it was in November he made known to my father and I.” This suggests November of 1827, but Joseph worked for the Knight family in the fall and winter of 1826.

89. Dogberry [Cole], “Gold Bible, No. 4,” 101, emphasis in original.

90. Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 82. On William Smith, see *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:496, cf. 504.

91. History of the Church, Book A-1, Church Archives, p. 7; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:281.

was transformed from an angel into a treasure guardian—rather than the other way around.

Contextual Interpretation

To this point, I have focused on descriptions of Moroni himself. His visits, however, occurred within the context of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Morgan, Quinn, and Marquardt and Walters spend a great deal of time noting the parallels between this context of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the early American culture of treasure seeking. As context often influences interpretation, we have two questions to consider: In what contexts was Moroni said to have appeared? And which of these contexts was most meaningful to Joseph at that time?

Joseph's 1838 history recounts that Moroni first appeared while Joseph was praying for forgiveness.⁹² Moroni would be more likely to show up in this context as an angel than as a treasure guardian. However, some have jettisoned Smith's version in favor of an account stating that Moroni appeared to him following one of his nocturnal treasure quests.⁹³ This account was given by John A. Clark, Palmyra's Episcopal minister, recounting what he had heard from Martin Harris. "According to Martin Harris," Clark wrote,

It was after one of these night excursions, that Jo, while he lay upon his bed, had a remarkable dream. An angel of God seemed to approach him, clad in celestial splendour. This divine messenger assured him, that he, Joseph Smith, was chosen of the Lord to be a prophet of the Most High God, and to bring to light hidden things, that would prove of unspeakable benefit to the world. He then disclosed to him the existence of this golden Bible, and the place where it was deposited—but at the same time told him that he must follow implicitly the

92. History of the Church, Book A-1, Church Archives, p. 5; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:276.

93. See, for example, Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 139; Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 101; Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 43–44.

divine direction, or he would draw down upon him the wrath of heaven.⁹⁴

Lucy Mack Smith recounted her memory of what took place on the evening of 21 September 1823:

One evening we were sitting till quite late conversing upon the subject of the diversity of churches that had risen up in the world and the many thousand opinions in existency as to the truths contained in scripture. . . . After we ceased conversation he [Joseph] went to bed . . . but he had not laid there long till [he saw] a bright [light] entered the room where he lay he looked up and saw an angel of the Lord.⁹⁵

Was Joseph Smith hunting for treasure that night or discussing the gospel? Reverend Clark and Mother Smith disagree on this matter. Which account is accurate?

Clark's 1840 account predates Lucy's by five years, but neither account is contemporaneous. His reminiscence is based on a conversation he had with Martin Harris in 1827 or 1828.⁹⁶ Did Harris really say that Joseph had been treasure hunting on the night of 21 September 1823? If so, did he hear about or misremember hearing something about a treasure quest on that night from Joseph Smith—which would make Harris a secondhand source—or did Harris get this idea from someone else who had heard it from someone else? Clark's account is thirdhand at best. Lucy was there.

Therefore, reliance on Reverend Clark with regard to this contextual element must be questioned. Even if Joseph had been digging for treasure that night, a treasure-seeking context does not change Moroni's status. Clark recounted Harris describing Moroni as an

94. Clark, "Gleanings by the Way, No. VI," 94, emphasis added.

95. Lucy Smith, "Preliminary Manuscript," Church Archives, 40, in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:289.

96. Regarding the date of Clark's conversation with Harris, see *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:260–61, 261 n. 4. However, Clark's letters were stimulated by a recent visit to the Palmyra area and his conversations about Mormonism with people in the area. His memory may have been infected by these conversations. Of course, Lucy's memory may also have been contaminated by later conversations.

“angel of God . . . clad in celestial splendour” and as a “divine messenger” who spoke of the purposes of “the Most High God.”⁹⁷

Moroni appeared three times that night. Joseph later wrote, “Almost immediately after the heavenly messenger had ascended from me the third time, the cock crew, and I found that day was approaching so that our interviews must have occupied the whole of that night.” Joseph got up and went to work, but he was so tired that his father told him to go home and rest.⁹⁸

Joseph walked back toward the log home but fell to the ground when he tried to climb over a fence. At this moment, Moroni again appeared, delivered the same message he had given during the night, and instructed Joseph to go immediately to the hill that is now known as Cumorah.⁹⁹ Moroni would meet Joseph again on the hill.

The earliest reliable accounts of Joseph Smith’s encounter with Moroni on the hill contain elements of both treasure seeking and angelic dispensationalism. In his 1832 history, Joseph explained why he failed to obtain the plates: “I had been tempted of the adversary and sought the Plates to obtain riches and kept not the commandment that I should have an eye single to the glory of God.”¹⁰⁰ It is difficult to condemn young Joseph, whose family had suffered so much poverty. His candid admission that he intended to financially benefit from the plates of gold invokes the treasure-seeking belief system that he had participated in on occasion. However, it should also be stressed that Joseph attributed his impure intent not to his treasure-seeking background but rather to being “tempted of the adversary.” Moroni filled the role of an angel as he informed young Joseph that God’s purposes were far greater than the Smith family’s financial situation.

Moroni had clearly instructed Joseph as to the purpose of Joseph’s recovery of the plates. And yet, according to Joseph himself, sometime

97. *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:264.

98. History of the Church, Book A-1, Church Archives, 6–7; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:280.

99. History of the Church, Book A-1, Church Archives, 7; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:280–81.

100. Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Archives, 5; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:8.

between Moroni's daytime visit near the farm fence and his appearance on the hill an hour or so later, Joseph's mission to obtain the ancient record devolved into a quest for riches. When did this occur? When he approached the hill, had his mind slipped into a treasure-seeking context? Did he climb the slope of the hill for a golden treasure? Some critics hold that he did. The following cognitive process may have occurred:

1. Joseph began to think of the monetary worth of the golden plates.
2. Thinking of the plates as treasure caused Joseph to think of his recovery of the plates in a treasure-seeking perspective.
3. Thinking with a treasure-seeking perspective caused Joseph to consider Moroni as a treasure guardian.

Or perhaps Joseph's background experience in treasure seeking caused him to begin to see both Moroni and his plates in light of that context.

Accounts of Joseph's first visit to the hill differ as to when he had begun thinking of the plates as treasure. Cowdery's 1834–35 history states that as Joseph began walking to the hill, the power of God and the power of the devil both vied for his attention, and Joseph began to struggle between them. Satan tempted him to desire riches. His family had worked so hard to scrape out a living. Eventually, Joseph gave in. The 1834–35 history continues:

You will have wondered, perhaps, that the mind of our brother should be so occupied with the thoughts of the goods of this world, *at the time of arriving at Cumorah*, on the morning of the 22nd of September, 1823, after having been rapt in the visions of heaven during the night, and also seeing and hearing in open day; but the mind of man is easily turned, if it is not held by the power of God through the prayer of faith, and you will remember that I have said that two invisible powers were operating upon his mind during his walk from his residence to Cumorah, and that the one urging the certainty of wealth and ease in this life, had so powerfully wrought upon him, that the great object so carefully and impressively

named by the angel, had entirely gone from his recollection that only a fixed determination to obtain now urged him forward. In this, which occasioned a failure to obtain, at that time, the record, do not understand me to attach blame to our brother: he was young, and his mind easily turned from correct principles, unless he could be favored with a certain round of experience. And yet, while young, untraditionated and untaught in the systems of the world, he was in a situation to be lead into the great work of God, and be qualified to perform it in due time.¹⁰¹

In this account, Joseph's mind had turned by the time he reached the hill.

Other accounts differ from the 1834–35 history. Based on an 1875 interview with David Whitmer, the *Chicago Times* reported:

He strolled out and away from the house and sought the hill Cumorah. . . . He found the exact spot designated by the white-robed visitor, and at once commenced digging in the rock-ribbed soil. At the depth of two and a half or three feet his faith was rewarded by the discovery of A SQUARE STONE CASKET.

Overpowered by the discovery he rested for a few moments, and *then* visions of worldly emolument flitted through his overwrought brain. He had been singled out as the discoverer of this secret of the infinite! Should he neglect this golden opportunity to amass a fortune? No! . . . While these worldly thoughts occupied Joseph's mind, the angel of the Lord again suddenly stood before him, told him that he had approached this sacred spot in [an] irreverent mood, that the secrets of the casket could never be his until he sought them in the proper spirit, and then hurried him unceremoneously to the plain below.¹⁰²

101. Cowdery, "Letter VIII," 197, emphasis added.

102. "The Golden Tablets," *Chicago Times*, 7 August 1875, 1, emphasis added, in *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:17.

Although this news story was based on an interview with Whitmer, the style and tone are clearly not that of the plainspoken Whitmer. The artistic flair of this dramatic retelling enjoins us to question how far the reporter strayed from Whitmer's narration. The reporter overlays the treasure-digging context, with Joseph digging for the plates, but this *before* he thinks of the deposit as treasure—which does not occur until the moment he sees the stone box.

Other sources indicate that Joseph's mind had not turned until after he opened the box. Congregationalist minister Truman Coe of Kirtland, Ohio—who apparently heard Joseph relate the story of his visit to the hill—wrote that Joseph went “as directed by the angel, and pried up the stone under which he discovered the plates shining like gold, and *when he saw them* his cupidity was excited, and he hoped to make himself rich by the discovery.”¹⁰³

Joseph's mind may not even have turned at this point. Lucy Mack Smith recounted that when Joseph saw the plates, he reached into the box and grasped them. And it was only then, “as he was taking them hence,” that “the unhappy thought darted through his mind.” Lucy places the point at which his mind turned even closer to the moment when “the angel of the Lord appeared to him, and told him that he had not done as he had been commanded.”¹⁰⁴ It would seem that, at this moment, Joseph's treasure-seeking perspective immediately evaporated. Lucy placed Joseph's turn of mind so close to Moroni's appearance that a treasure-seeking context had little time to influence Joseph's perception of Moroni. Indeed, Lucy mentions only a thought of wealth darting through his mind. According to her account, the cognitive process laid out above could not have occurred; Joseph never

103. Truman Coe, [Kirtland, Ohio?], to “Mr. Editor” [of the *Ohio Observer*], [Hudson, Ohio], n.d.; in “Mormonism,” *Ohio Observer*, 11 August 1836, 1, 6; reprinted with editorial comment in Milton V. Backman Jr., “Truman Coe's 1836 Description of Mormonism,” *BYU Studies* 17/3 (1977): 350–51, emphasis added.

104. Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 85. She conflates this visit to Cumorah with Joseph's second trip to the hill in 1824 and identifies the other contents of the stone box as the treasure Joseph sought, “which would be of some pecuniary advantage to him.”

began thinking of Moroni as a treasure guardian. The David Whitmer and Truman Coe accounts suggest the same.

However, as shown, the 1834–35 history—which should be favored as a more historically reliable account—stated that Joseph began thinking of the plates as treasure as he walked to the hill. If so, this would have provided time for Joseph to ponder a treasure-seeking context that could have influenced a change in his understanding of Moroni. Nevertheless, the possibility that Joseph began thinking of Moroni in terms of a treasure guardian as Joseph walked from his house to the hill remains just that—a possibility.

For the most part, whether Joseph began thinking of Moroni primarily in terms of a guardian lacks relevance because the most reliable accounts present Joseph’s perception of his recovery of the plates not as an evolution but as a devolution. Rather than a treasure turning into an ancient record, the ancient record became a treasure. Joseph’s own mind apparently traveled the same pathway that the minds of his detractors later followed. However, as the same source recounts, if Joseph had begun to think of the angel primarily in terms of a treasure guardian, then Moroni’s sudden appearance on the hill and his chastening message put an abrupt end to this shift in interpretation.

The 1834–35 history recounts that because of Joseph’s impure motive, when he attempted to lay hold on the plates, he experienced a shocking sensation. “What was the occasion of this he knew not—*there* was the pure unsullied record, as had been described—he had heard of the power of enchantment, and a thousand like stories, which held the hidden treasures of the earth, and supposed that physical exertion and personal strength was only necessary to enable him to yet obtain the object of his wish.” Yet, failing, he exclaimed, “Why can I not obtain this book?” Unbeknownst to Joseph, Moroni was there with him on the hill. “Because you have not kept the commandments of the Lord,” Moroni answered. Joseph looked “and to his astonishment, there stood the angel who had previously given him the directions concerning this matter.”¹⁰⁵ This account, like others given by Joseph Smith and by other early Mormons, combines elements of

105. Cowdery, “Letter VIII,” 198, emphasis in original.

treasure seeking and angelic ministrations.¹⁰⁶ Which context was most important?

Quinn compares the shock that Joseph experienced with treasure tales including the motif of shock as a deterrent.¹⁰⁷ But as shown above, the 1834–35 history states that Joseph was confused by the shock and did not know what to make of it. Then, seeking to understand this perplexing situation, he drew on his knowledge of treasure tales and reasoned that some enchantment was holding the plates in the earth. Since Joseph did not initially know what to make of this shock, he probably had not approached the hill with a treasure-seeking perspective. By the time he reached the hill, he desired the plates as treasure; but until he was shocked, he apparently had not superimposed any other contextual elements of treasure seeking. It seems that he still understood Moroni primarily as an angel.

In retrospect, Joseph understood that his thoughts had taken a turn for the worse. The reliable accounts that mention Joseph's perception of the plates as treasure also clarify that his perception had strayed from the original meaning as given earlier by an angel. Therefore, if Joseph ever considered Moroni primarily in terms of a treasure guardian, it was for a short period of time and was of secondary significance.

For the believer, the issue is largely irrelevant because these accounts present a treasure-seeking context compatible with the traditional understanding of Moroni as an angel. For example, when Lucy Mack Smith narrated her history, she spoke frankly of the treasure-seeking context. She called the plates a "treasure" and stated that the angel had warned Joseph in the nighttime "that he must beware of covetousness, and he must not suppose the Record was to be brought forth with the view of getting gain, for this was not the case, but that it was to bring forth light and intelligence, which had for a long time been lost to the world; and that when he went to get the plates, he must

106. Other early Mormons who used treasure-tale motifs to tell the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon were Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Knight, Martin Harris, and Brigham Young. See Marvin S. Hill, "Money-Digging Folklore and the Beginnings of Mormonism: An Interpretive Suggestion," *BYU Studies* 24/4 (1984): 473–88.

107. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 147–48.

be on his guard, or his mind would be filled with darkness.”¹⁰⁸ In Lucy’s account, a treasure-seeking context does not rule out angels at all. Moroni is perfectly aware of Joseph’s background and admonishes him accordingly.

Oliver Cowdery composed the 1834–35 history in part to counter the statements that Eber D. Howe had published in *Mormonism Unveiled*.¹⁰⁹ If this early church history downplayed the treasure-seeking context within which Joseph understood the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, it nonetheless admitted it. Moreover, this history deemed Joseph’s treasure-seeking interpretation as incorrect and based on superstitious tales—“he had heard of the power of enchantment, and a thousand like stories, which held the hidden treasure of the earth.” Joseph’s momentary consideration of treasure-seeking beliefs, however, had no bearing on the reality of either the heavenly messenger or the metal plates. From the vantage point of 1835, Joseph and Oliver could differentiate the objective existence of the angel and the plates from Joseph’s culturally informed understanding of them in 1823. Thus, while the 1834–35 history openly admits the validity of the treasure-seeking context, it properly places it in a position of secondary importance to the visits of the angel. To whatever extent Joseph did view the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in the context of the treasure-seeking beliefs of his youth, it may have paved the way for Moroni to deliver his message.¹¹⁰ As stated in the 1834–35 history, because Joseph was “young, untraditionated and untaught in the systems of the world, he was in a situation to be lead into the great work of God, and be qualified to perform it in due time.”¹¹¹

Quinn places the coming forth of the Book of Mormon not only within a treasure-seeking context but also within the larger context of

108. Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 107, 81.

109. See Vogel’s editorial comments in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:416–17.

110. Eugene England, “On Finding Truth and God: From Hope to Knowledge to Skepticism to Faith,” in *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars*, comp. and ed. Philip L. Barlow (Centerville, UT: Canon, 1986), 80.

111. Quinn points to a number of other treasure-seeking parallels in “Visions and the Coming Forth of the *Book of Mormon*,” in Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 136–77. I have addressed what I consider to be the most historically robust evidence for a treasure-seeking context.

“magic,” as opposed to “religion.”¹¹² In its technical sense, stripped of pejorative usage, *magic* is usually more manipulative and coercive in its approach to the preternatural, whereas *religion* is defined more in terms of supplication and submission. Also, magic tends to be individualistic, whereas religion tends to be communalistic.¹¹³ Treasure seers and other scryers attempted to entrap or bind familiar spirits into their seer stones or crystal balls so that the spirits could be forced to reveal buried treasures or occult knowledge. These manipulative actions were conducted to achieve personal ends. With Joseph and Moroni, we get an entirely different picture. Joseph supplicates God for forgiveness; he submits to Moroni’s chastening instruction; and he uses his seer stone to bring about divine purposes that will benefit all of humanity, not himself or even his family. His encounters with Moroni are marked by supplication and submission to bring about communal purposes, as opposed to manipulation and coercion to effect a personal end. Though outside the accepted boundaries of mainstream Christian orthodoxy, these encounters are, by definition, religious, not magical.

The contextual elements of the earliest encounters with Moroni, as given in the most reliable sources, support the angel thesis. Some skeptics may dismiss this conclusion by arguing that Joseph and Lucy and Oliver changed the *entire* story—transforming not only Moroni’s identity but also the treasure-seeking context in which he appeared. Such an argument would rest on presupposition. As with the data that directly impinge on the issue of Moroni’s initial status, historical standards and principles of logic apply to indirect contextual interpretation. Faithful Latter-day Saints should acknowledge that a consideration of the context in which Moroni visited Joseph lends a significant degree of credibility to the treasure-guardian interpretation. Critics

112. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 136–77.

113. Stephen D. Ricks and Daniel C. Peterson carefully review historical and anthropological definitions of magic in “Joseph Smith and ‘Magic’: Methodological Reflections on the Use of a Term,” in *To Be Learned Is Good If . . .*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 129–47. See also Douglas J. Davies, “Magic and Mormon Religion,” in *Mormon Identities in Transition*, ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Cassell, 1996), 143–49.

should acknowledge that contextual considerations lend even more credence to the heavenly messenger interpretation.

Many historians—both believing Latter-day Saints and secular academics—have placed the founding events of the restoration of the church within other contextual frameworks: millenarianism, biblicism, evangelicalism, seekerism, primitivism, restorationism, and dispensationalism.¹¹⁴ Although an interpretive framework of magic suggests that Moroni was a treasure guardian, each of these other legitimate contextual interpretations suggests that Moroni was an angel. A preference for the treasure-guardian thesis probably results in part from an assumption that everything in Mormonism must owe its origins to an evolutionary process. Hence, if Moroni was later understood as an angel, he must have been initially understood as something else. However, if Moroni is an actual being, whom the Lord sent into the Smith garret, that is not the case.

Folklore Analysis

Another way we can attempt to determine the direction in which the Moroni story developed is by considering the alternatives to Joseph Smith's version of the events. What exactly are the treasure tales and how do they compare with the traditional account? Emma Smith's cousins, Joseph and Hiel Lewis of Harmony, Pennsylvania, described Moroni as the ghost of a Spaniard whose throat was "cut from ear to ear, and the blood streaming down."¹¹⁵ Josiah Stowell had hired

114. On Mormonism in a millenarian context, see Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). On biblicism, see Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). On evangelicalism, see Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61/4 (1980): 359–86. On seekerism, see Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988). On primitivism, see Marvin S. Hill, "The Shaping of the Mormon Mind in New England and New York," *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 351–72. On restorationism, see Mario S. De Pillis, "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," *Dialogue* 1/1 (1966): 68–88. On dispensationalism, see John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

115. Statements of Joseph and Hiel Lewis, in "Mormon History," 1.

Joseph to come down to Pennsylvania to locate a legendary Spanish mine.¹¹⁶ Joseph could not find the mine, but he did find true love and eloped with Emma Hale, which upset her family.¹¹⁷ Based on the failed Spanish-mine venture, her Lewis cousins apparently concocted a murdered Spaniard treasure guardian and then superimposed it upon the angel. After describing Moroni as a bloody ghost, the Lewis cousins proceeded to dismiss the revelations that Joseph experienced. We might call this a “strawghost” argument. Unfortunately, this poor old ghost’s severed head finally fell off. The year after the Lewises gave their account of early Mormonism, investigative journalist Frederic Mather talked to residents of Harmony, Pennsylvania, and reported that “a headless Spaniard guarded it [the ancient record] with great vigilance.”¹¹⁸

Fayette Lapham described Moroni as a classical European giant: “a very large and tall man . . . dressed in an ancient suit of clothes.”¹¹⁹ In contrast, Oliver Cowdery, in his 1834–35 history, wrote that the “stature of this personage was a little above the common size of men in this age.”¹²⁰ David Whitmer said the angel stood at about five feet ten inches.¹²¹ Joseph himself related that when Moroni made his initial appearance, he was standing in the garret of the Smith family’s log home—“between the floors of the room.”¹²² As the half-story garret

116. History of the Church, Book A-1, Church Archives, 8; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:282; Vogel, “The Locations of Joseph Smith’s Early Treasure Quests,” 213–19.

117. History of the Church, Book A-1, Church Archives, 8; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:282–83; Cowdery, “Letter VIII,” 201.

118. Mather, “Early Days of Mormonism,” 200. Mather had conducted his interviews in July 1880.

119. Lapham, “II.—The Mormons,” 306. Giants are often from older or less-civilized societies (Pallister, “Giants,” 293–324).

120. Cowdery, “Letter IV,” to W. W. Phelps, *Messenger and Advocate* (February 1835): 79.

121. David Whitmer, interview with Edward Stevenson, 22–23 December 1877, Richmond, Missouri, in Stevenson Diary, Church Archives; quoted in Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 13.

122. History of the Church, Book A-1, Church Archives, 121; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:127. This account was given when Robert Matthews (under the alias Joshua the Jewish Minister) visited Joseph Smith in 1835. Joseph’s 1832 history recorded that the angel “came and stood before me” (Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Archives, 4; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:8). His 1839 history

was probably no higher than six feet, Lapham's giant literally does not fit.¹²³ Whereas Lapham dresses Moroni in an ancient suit of clothes, Joseph remembered him wearing a white robe.¹²⁴

Willard Chase reported that Joseph Smith Sr. had told him that Moroni initially appeared as a creature that looked "something like a toad, which soon assumed the appearance of a man, and struck him [Joseph Smith Jr.] on the side of his head."¹²⁵ Because some species of reptiles and amphibians, and toads in particular, could serve as treasure guardians, Chase reinforced his portrayal of Moroni as a treasure guardian by associating him with a toadlike creature. Decades later, Chase's brother-in-law, Benjamin Saunders, repeated this story but improved upon it, claiming that he heard the story directly from Joseph Jr.¹²⁶ In 1893, Benjamin's nephew Orson Saunders shared some of his home-brewed hard cider with a newspaper reporter, took him to the Hill Cumorah, and *quoted* Joseph Smith Jr. (whom he had never met) as saying that the creature was indeed a toad—an "enormous toad"—and that it turned into not a man but a "flaming monster with glittering eyes."¹²⁷ It is an amphibian story, but it sounds more

records that Moroni appeared "at my bedside standing in the air for his feet did not touch the floor" (History of the Church, Book A-1, Church Archives, 5; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:276). In 1848, early Mormon William I. Appleby recorded an 1839 discourse by Orson Pratt wherein Pratt reported that Joseph "saw a personage about the ordinary size of man in the middle of the room before him." William I. Appleby, "Biography and Journal of William I. Appleby, Elder in the Church of Latter Day Saints," Church Archives, 31.

123. Dale L. Berge, "Archaeological Work at the Smith Log House," *Ensign*, August 1985, 24–26; see also Berge, *Archaeology at the Boyhood Home of Joseph Smith, Jr., Palmyra, New York* (Provo, UT: BYU Museum of Peoples and Cultures, 2003), 67–69.

124. Joseph remembered Moroni wearing "a loose robe of most exquisite whiteness" (History of the Church, Book A-1, Church Archives, 5; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:276). However, I suppose it is possible that Moroni was dressed in an ancient suit of clothes because I keep hearing stories of Nephite soldiers guarding temples, the MTC, and sister missionaries (modern Mormons participate in folklore too).

125. Willard Chase statement, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 242.

126. Benjamin Saunders, interviewed by William H. Kelley, ca. September 1884, in "Miscellany," Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, 23; quoted in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:137.

127. "Mormon Leaders at Their Mecca," *New York Herald*, 25 June 1893, 12. Quinn draws on this account to reassert the salamander thesis in Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 153.

like a “fish story.” In the newspaper reporter’s account of the Orson Saunders account of the Benjamin Saunders account of the Willard Chase account of the Joseph Smith Sr. account of Joseph Smith Jr.’s account of his encounter with Moroni, we can see the process of distortion at work.

Abner Cole provided another description of Moroni. We read in Pukei 2:4 that the “spirit” was “a little old man” and that “his beard of silver white, hung far below his knees.” Cole’s Book of Pukei further informs its readers that the spirit was wearing items of Egyptian, Hebrew, and Native American clothing. The items of costume obviously spoof the Book of Mormon’s Egyptian, Hebraic, and Native American connections. Without this clothing, the “spirit” is described only as a little old man with a long beard. Here we have a textbook description of a gnome—one of the “elemental spirits” and a classical treasure guardian.

Early critics not only portrayed Moroni as a treasure guardian but also imputed evil to him. Abner Cole wrote that when Joseph Smith Sr. arrived in the Palmyra-Manchester area of New York, he revived the “vulgar, yet popular belief” that the treasures buried in that area “were held in charge by some *evil* spirit, which was supposed to be either the DEVIL himself, or some one of his most trusty favorites.”¹²⁸ Cole seems to have equated this “evil spirit” with the “old spirit” that appeared as a little man with a long beard. Anglo-American folk belief included the idea that the devil could appear as a “dwarf” or as “a little, gray old man.”¹²⁹

The Chase and Lapham accounts also seem to impute evil to Moroni by describing him as a toadlike creature and a giant. In European-American folk belief, the toad always represented or embodied evil.¹³⁰ Giants are usually malevolent.¹³¹ By imputing evil to Moroni, these accounts attacked Moroni’s angelic status and even ruled out

128. Dogberry [Cole], “Gold Bible, No. 3,” *Palmyra Reflector*, 1 February 1831, 92, emphasis in original.

129. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 3:315–17, G303.3.1.5, and G303.3.2.3; Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index*, G303.3.2.3.

130. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 152.

131. Pallister, “Giants,” 293–324.

classifying him as an angelic treasure guardian. Their Moroni definitely did not come from heaven. In both the Chase and Lapham accounts, the guardian is dangerously violent. Whereas Chase has the guardian strike Joseph on the side of his head, Lapham has the giant “strike him on the breast.” These accounts bring to mind the *Chicago Times* interview with David Whitmer given above, wherein Moroni “hurried him unceremoniously to the plain below.” Each of these accounts apparently exaggerates the shocking sensation that Joseph experienced when he attempted to remove the plates in 1823.

In his 1829 letter to his nephew Hyrum, Uncle Jesse Smith objected to Joseph Smith’s family calling Moroni an angel. “Devil it should be,” he wrote.¹³² It seems almost inevitable that someone would eventually go beyond demonizing Moroni to identifying him as Satan himself. Former Ohio resident James A. Briggs did just that. In 1834, Briggs heard Joseph publicly relate the story of Moroni and the plates. Briggs must have remembered Joseph saying he had experienced a sensation of shock from an “unseen power”—for this is the phrase that Briggs used when recounting the story on three separate occasions.¹³³ However, in an 1875 letter to journalist John Codman, Briggs recalled Joseph explaining “how he was kicked by the Devil when he uncovered the plates and stooped down to get them.”¹³⁴ The Moroni of Joseph’s public 1834 recital was certainly an angel. How did Briggs change Moroni into the devil? Earlier in the letter to Codman, Briggs had written, “I regret that I have not been successful in obtaining for you a copy of ‘Mormonism Unveiled.’” Briggs had helped Howe in his research for *Mormonism Unveiled*.¹³⁵ The frontispiece of this book contains an illustration of the devil kicking Joseph Smith (see fig. 3). A glance at Howe’s frontispiece was apparently all it took for Briggs to change an angel into the devil.

Actually, the frontispiece of *Mormonism Unveiled* did not depict the “shock” given by Moroni to Joseph when he tried to take the plates

132. Jesse Smith to Hyrum Smith, 17 June 1829.

133. Compare the accounts as given in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:205–6.

134. James A. Briggs, Brooklyn, New York, to John Codman, March 1875; as reproduced in Codman, “Mormonism,” *International Review* 11 (September 1881): 222.

135. *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:13, 13 n. 2.



Figure 3. Frontispiece of E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*. Courtesy LDS Church Archives.

the periphery of the angel's glory. Briggs mistakenly superimposed the image from the frontispiece of *Mormonism Unveiled*—depicting a story of the recovery of the plates in 1827—on his memory of Joseph recounting the shocking sensation he had experienced in 1823. Coincidentally, Howe himself would duplicate this conflation in his autobiography, which was published in 1878.¹³⁷

The sources reviewed here present Moroni as a bleeding Spanish ghost, a giant, a toad, a dwarf, and the devil. It seems that Moroni makes a better chameleon than a salamander. Actually, these Moroni variants mutually exclude one another. For example, there is no such thing as a giant dwarf in any mythology, and the devil is not Spanish. Inconsistencies could be further elaborated, but the point is sufficiently clear. For Moroni, as with Jesus of Nazareth, “Many bare false witness against him, but their witness agreed not together” (Mark 14:56). That these variants of the Moroni story present inconsistent treasure guardians clearly demonstrates that their narrators had strayed from an accurate representation of Joseph's original story. These accounts,

in 1823. Rather, it illustrated a story that Joseph was attacked by evil spirits in 1827 *after* Moroni gave him the plates.¹³⁶ A version of this story is also illustrated in the frontispiece to Pomoroy Tucker's *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (see p. 34 above). Demons clamor in the foreground, waiting to attack Joseph after he leaves

136. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 276.

137. Eber D. Howe, *Autobiography and Recollections of a Pioneer Printer: Together with Sketches of the War of 1812 on the Niagara Frontier* (Painesville, OH: Telegraph Steam Printing House, 1878), 44.

which are so clearly inaccurate, constitute the primary database used by the proponents of the treasure-guardian thesis.

Although these accounts contradict each other, they are agreed in excluding an angelic interpretation of Moroni. In each case, the narrators transformed Moroni into a specific nonangelic treasure guardian—at times an evil treasure guardian. By casting Moroni as a particular type of treasure guardian incompatible with an angelic messenger, detractors solidified their treasure-seeking interpretations of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. By steering Moroni into specific guardian personas, they could ridicule Joseph Smith with the tropes of treasure quest and thereby dismiss the revelations he presented to the world.

Critics have reasonably argued that Joseph's understanding of his experiences with Moroni underwent some development through the years, but this argument rests upon inference. In contrast, those who described a treasure guardian clearly reconfigured the Moroni story. This folklore analysis indicates that Joseph Smith's accounts of the Moroni visitations are more reliable than those of his detractors.

Conclusion

Returning to the historical record, we can summarize the documentary evidence: (1) All firsthand accounts agree on Moroni's identity as an angel. (2) The earliest accounts say that Moroni is an angel. (3) A contextual consideration indicates that Moroni made a better angel than a treasure guardian. Moreover, a closer look at what the treasure-guardian sources actually say clearly demonstrates that their source is not Joseph Smith but rather run-of-the-mill treasure-lore superimposed upon his story. In this case, it is not difficult to discern the direction in which Moroni's metamorphosis occurred. In conclusion, folklore analysis and the ground rules of history support the thesis that Joseph Smith's encounters with Moroni are best understood as the visits of a heavenly messenger to a prayerful seeker.

The real story that emerges from these documents is not that Joseph Smith transformed a treasure guardian into an angel but rather that Moroni has been transformed from an angel into a trea-

sure guardian by a set of early critics and those historians who have relied on them. Although the historical sources that cast Moroni as a treasure guardian tell us something about Joseph's initial understanding of his experiences, they tell us more about the original need of his community and the current need of his critics to provide an alternative explanation for his encounters with Moroni.

Postscript

Two years after this article was originally published in *Mormon Historical Studies*, Ronald V. Huggins came to nearly opposite findings in an essay published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.¹³⁸ Huggins had set out to conduct “a careful study of the *Traditions-geschichte* (tradition history) of the story of the initial discovery of the plates.”¹³⁹ At the end of his study, his main conclusion was that the angel Moroni of Mormon tradition was initially conceived of “as a type of murdered treasure-guardian ghost particularly (though not exclusively) associated with the story of Captain Kidd’s treasure.”¹⁴⁰ Huggins also closes with a suggestion for why Joseph Smith initially cast Moroni as this particular type of treasure guardian. Among the various types of treasure guardians Moroni might have been, “only the murdered treasure-guardian ghost was, as an innocent victim, morally neutral—that is to say not necessarily evil.”¹⁴¹

In responding to Huggins, I would like to begin by addressing his concluding suggestion. Aware that others before him have argued for Moroni as a treasure guardian, Huggins emphasizes that previous literature has failed to recognize the importance of “the link between Moroni and this particular type of treasure guardian.”¹⁴² He explains that Moroni’s transition to an angel was less difficult having started as a human ghost because, as he puts it, “treasure guardians were almost always regarded as evil in the magic worldview, no matter what form

138. Huggins, “Changing *Dramatis Personae*,” 17–42.

139. Huggins, “Changing *Dramatis Personae*,” 19.

140. Huggins, “Changing *Dramatis Personae*,” 41.

141. Huggins, “Changing *Dramatis Personae*,” 42.

142. Huggins, “Changing *Dramatis Personae*,” 27.

they took. . . . The one exception, and that by no means always, is the murdered treasure-guardian ghost.”¹⁴³ This statement is incorrect and shows that Huggins’s attraction to the pirate stories has narrowed his understanding of the full range of hunted treasures and their guardians. He is apparently aware of only the following guardians, which he lists: the ghost of a person, “an animal familiar spirit,” demons, and the devil.¹⁴⁴ He is correct that the spirits of departed humans are the most common treasure guardians and that they are often victims of whoever secreted the treasure in the earth. He is also correct that demons or even the devil could guard treasure. He is partly correct regarding animal guardians. The animals that guarded treasure were not usually familiar spirits, but preternatural creatures of a different class. There were other types of guardians as well—some from the old European traditions and some from the New World.

American treasure seekers inherited four major classes of treasure guardians from the Old World: gnomes (also sometimes called pygmies or dwarves), magical animals and other creatures (such as toads and dragons), the devil and his minions, and the ghosts of the departed dead. The devil and his minions were by definition diabolical. Animal guardians, to my knowledge, were always or almost always malevolent. Human ghosts were not always malevolent, as Huggins acknowledges, but neither were gnomes. The gnomes were pre-Christian nature spirits, neither divine nor diabolical. In some stories they were spun as capricious or malevolent, but in others they could be friendly (consider the tale of Snow White). Huggins does effectively argue against Quinn’s theory associating Moroni with a salamander.¹⁴⁵ I would add a clarifying note that, of the four classical “elemental spirits”—the gnomes in the earth, the sylphs in the air, the undines in the water, and the salamanders in fire—it was the subterranean gnomes who hoarded and guarded treasure, not salamanders. There were a host of minor Old World guardians as well, which were not necessarily malevolent. As noted in my essay, angels could guard treasure.

143. Huggins, “Changing *Dramatis Personae*,” 29.

144. Huggins, “Changing *Dramatis Personae*,” 26.

145. Huggins, “Changing *Dramatis Personae*,” 28–29.

To this stock of Old World treasures and treasure guardians was added a range of new American treasures and guardians. Often the New World treasures were really the same treasure changing hands. In some stories, the American treasures were initially made by ancient, even antediluvian, aboriginals. And in some accounts, they were then seized by the conquering invaders who displaced them and became the native Americans later encountered by Europeans. The American treasure then changed hands to the Spanish invaders who so famously plundered Aztec and Inca gold and silver. Finally, the American treasures bound for Europe on the Spanish galleons were seized by British and French pirates. Ordinary Americans of European ancestry were also said to haunt treasures they had left behind. Each of these groups of American treasure hoarders might murder a hapless victim and bury him with the treasure under a curse that his ghost must protect it. Assuming (as Huggins does) that at the beginning Moroni was primarily understood as a treasure guardian, which type was he? It is on the pirates and their victims that Huggins focuses his vision.

Huggins points to two main sources as evidence that Moroni was the ghost of a murdered human. These are (1) the joint secondhand account of Joseph and Hiel Lewis, given fifty years after the fact, and (2) the thirdhand account of Fayette Lapham, given forty years after the fact.¹⁴⁶ That Lapham and the Lewises hailed from different regions should be acknowledged. For Huggins, the fact that both include a murdered guardian points to a common thread in an early version of the Moroni story. However, by his own admission, the murdered guardian was a common motif.¹⁴⁷ In fact, it was ubiquitous. Yet he never considers the possibility that Lapham and the Lewises independently superimposed this commonplace detail in their account of the Moroni story. Huggins also points to the testimony of Smith's treasure-seeking companion Jonathan Thompson, as recorded in notes of Smith's 1826 trial, in which Thompson relates that Smith had once seen a vision of one Indian murdering another and depositing

146. Huggins, "Changing *Dramatis Personae*," 25–26.

147. Huggins, "Changing *Dramatis Personae*," 26.

the body with a recently interred treasure.¹⁴⁸ The notes of Thompson's testimony—which stand as the solitary piece of credible evidence for Smith having ever claimed to have seen a treasure guardian—indicate to Huggins that Smith had such a motif at his disposal when he invented the Moroni story. He does not acknowledge, however, that the notes of Thompson's testimony constitute further evidence of the motif's commonality. Huggins gives credence to the Lewises by maintaining that they did not explain the motif because they did not understand it.¹⁴⁹ But this just doesn't wash. There are many treasure tales, some cited by Huggins himself, that assume common knowledge of stock motifs.

Even if the Lapham and Lewis accounts were dependable, they would not necessarily lead us into the context of pirate treasure. Huggins has done a better job than anyone of laying out the evidence for the Smith family's interest in Captain Kidd's treasure.¹⁵⁰ However, the Smiths were interested in other treasures as well. Joseph was reported to have dug for a chest of dollars as well as for a box of gold watches—both recently buried American treasures.¹⁵¹ The notes of Jonathan Thompson's testimony, which Huggins uses, report that Joseph had searched for a treasure buried by American Indians. It is well-known that Joseph traveled to Harmony, Pennsylvania, to dig for treasure left by Spanish explorers or conquistadors. This is why the Lewises gave an account of Moroni as a murdered Spaniard. In the stories of the Harmony treasure, the Spaniards had worked a gold or silver mine in which they coined the precious metal found there. They apparently murdered one of their own when they sealed their mine and moved on for a time. Pirates never entered the stories of that particular Spanish treasure. I would argue that the Moroni described by the Lewises was a victim of other Spaniards, not of Captain Kidd or any other pirate. Similarly, while Lapham described Moroni as a murdered guardian, he was not the victim of pirates. Lapham's Moroni

148. Huggins, "Changing *Dramatis Personae*," 42; "A Document Discovered," 1.

149. Huggins, "Changing *Dramatis Personae*," 25–26.

150. Huggins, "Changing *Dramatis Personae*," 36–41.

151. "A Document Discovered," 1; Joshua Stafford and Joseph Capron statements in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 258–60.

was not even from that era. He was from an ancient aboriginal race of giants.

In fact, for all his talk of Captain Kidd's treasure, Huggins can actually marshal only two sources that could possibly identify Moroni as the ghost of a human murdered by pirates. The first source is the reported rumor of John Ahmanson, a Danish convert to Mormonism who became disaffected and wrote an anti-Mormon exposé in his native tongue. He wrote, "Joseph Smith found his [plates] while he was digging for treasure which was supposed to have been buried by the notorious buccaneer Captain Kidd in the western part of New York State."¹⁵² However, as Ahmanson had converted in 1850 and emigrated to Utah in 1857, he never knew Joseph Smith. In his book, which was published half a century after Moroni's appearances, it is not clear if he was reporting a rumor, forwarding his own hypothesis, or what.

The second source that might point to Moroni as a pirate victim is a newspaper story reporting Jared Nasmith's rendition of Palmyra native Philetus Spear's reminiscences of stories told in the Palmyra area about Joseph Smith. Nasmith's writings were allegedly published around the early 1870s but are only extant in a 1923 newspaper story, which relates that Smith "claimed to find the Gold Bible" while digging for Captain Kidd's treasure.¹⁵³ The Nasmith account also relates that the men searching for this treasure had dug out a mine and had locked the entrance. The story further relates that Smith had made up the golden plates story on a whim and had put a handful of sand in his coat pocket to trick his family (clearly a poorly remembered or passed-along version of the Peter Ingersoll statement published in *Mormonism Unveiled*).¹⁵⁴ The Nasmith account concludes with the

152. John Ahmanson, *Secret History: A Translation of Vor Tids Muhamed*, trans. Gleason L. Archer (Chicago: Moody, 1984 [1876]), 90; quoted in Huggins, "Changing *Dramatis Personae*," 39.

153. *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:131; quoted in Huggins, "Changing *Dramatis Personae*," 40 n. 106.

154. Peter Ingersoll statement, Palmyra, New York, 2 December 1833, quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 232–36.

then common but now discredited Spalding theory of the origins of the Book of Mormon narrative.¹⁵⁵

For comparison, I would like to quickly review the other Moroni treasure tales. Lapham described the ghost of an ancient aboriginal giant, while Abner Cole described a gnomelike spirit. Chase described the ghost of an ancient aboriginal who could appear in the form of a toad, while the Lewises described the ghost of a murdered Spaniard. The Abner Cole material, printed as early as 1830, is relatively contemporaneous to the Moroni events. But Cole only reported neighborhood rumor. The Willard Chase source is late, not given until December 1833, several years after the fact. It is also thirdhand information. The Lewises' source is a secondhand account but is given *fifty* years after the fact. Lapham is weaker still, not only forty years after the fact but thirdhand. None of these depicts a victim of pirates.

The accounts of Ahmanson and Nasmith, which do point to a pirate context, were also given decades after the fact. And, they do not even claim to be firsthand, secondhand, thirdhand, or otherwise traceable to Joseph Smith. As problematic as the specific guardian sources are, the allegations of the Ahmanson and Nasmith sources are far weaker. To my view, of all the alleged treasure guardians Huggins might have argued for, his selection of the pirate victim is the weakest possible candidate. Even if one assumes that Moroni was initially understood primarily as a treasure guardian, he was not Captain Kidd's treasure ghost.

Huggins does make a number of contributions. He draws on many sources illuminating the world of treasure seeking that have not previously been utilized in Mormon studies. He supplies, especially, new material on treasure guardians, including ghosts in general and pirate victims in particular, and a handful of new toad sources. He neglects, however, all of the firsthand accounts and most of the earliest sources that directly relate to the Moroni appearances. The fundamental fallacy that invalidates Huggins's work is that he only uses those sources that

155. "Joseph Smith and Mormonism Which Started 100 Years Ago," *Marion Enterprise* (Newark, New York), 28 September 1923, 1; as transcribed in *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:129–31.

confirm his preconceived conclusion that Moroni was initially understood as a treasure guardian. He never seriously considers the possibility that it is the antagonistic accounts that are changing the story by utilizing the widespread motif of a murdered victim. Moreover, Huggins uses sources in a manipulative fashion as he builds an argument that is strained even with the biased selection of evidence he does use. His prose may read to some as sophisticated source criticism, but there is no rigorous method for analysis.

In a recent issue of the *FARMS Review*, Larry Morris assesses Huggins's essay and indirectly responds to some aspects of my own work.¹⁵⁶ He begins with a helpful analysis of the deeply problematic source material.¹⁵⁷ Because he sees some wrinkles in what I consider early sources or what I consider firsthand or secondhand, I will try to clarify my position here. Because Joseph and Hiel Lewis claim that they heard their story from Joseph Smith in 1828, many consider them an "early" source. But they did not record their remembered story until 1879. Their account is a very late source. Whether it accurately reports an early Moroni story is highly dubious. The same should be said for any 1870s account, whether friendly or antagonistic. For me, an early source is one that was written or printed early. This is the more rigorous standard. In the matter of firsthand and secondhand classification, I take the following view: Because Joseph Smith is the only person who claimed to have seen Moroni on his early visits, only his accounts are firsthand. The Lewises tell a story about hearing his story. This is secondhand. Chase and Lapham tell stories about hearing Joseph Smith Sr. tell stories about the story told by Joseph Smith Jr. These are thirdhand accounts. I would continue to recommend the classification schema in my essay.

Morris brings to his study many sources that Huggins and I had missed. His analysis of early sources, therefore, augments my own and in many respects surpasses it. I was especially impressed with Morris's testing of Huggins's timeline for how the story developed. He expertly

156. Morris, "Joseph Smith's Account," 11–81.

157. Morris, "Joseph Smith's Account," 12–15.

shows that Huggins's analysis does not hold up.¹⁵⁸ Morris also surpasses my analysis in his consideration of corroboration as a criterion for evaluating evidence.¹⁵⁹ In addition, I was impressed with Morris's own reconstruction of the original story and how it developed.¹⁶⁰

I would continue to recommend what I called the "folklore analysis" segments of my essay, wherein I discussed the various types of treasure guardians in general, in Smith's own treasure seeking, and in the Moroni stories. Morris seems to follow Huggins's mistaken tendency to see all treasure as Captain Kidd treasure.¹⁶¹ I would also guard against the tendency manifested by Huggins and Morris to view anything strange in the Moroni stories as treasure motifs. For example, both cite Moroni's requirement that Smith bring someone with him to the hill as a treasure motif.¹⁶² I am not aware of any treasure-tale motif of bringing a designated individual with you in order to secure a treasure. Bringing Alvin or Emma to the hill can only be construed as a treasure motif in the general sense that it is a requirement from a treasure guardian. But angels can give commandments too.

I commend Morris (and the editors of the *FARMS Review*) for again acknowledging the influence of treasure seeking on Smith and his views of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon—a fact that is still discounted by many apologists. I likewise commend Morris for recognizing the strong influence of Christian religion in Joseph Smith's life and for acknowledging that religion and magic were often blended in early American folk belief. Unlike Huggins, who is bent on smearing Moroni with the treasure tales, Morris offers a properly balanced view of magic and religion as they mixed in early American folk culture, in Smith's spiritual life, and in his early perceptions of Moroni.¹⁶³ In this respect, Morris exemplifies the careful study and

158. Morris, "Joseph Smith's Account," 17–21.

159. Morris, "Joseph Smith's Account," 12.

160. Morris, "Joseph Smith's Account," 20, 33; see also appendix C, 60–77.

161. Morris, "Joseph Smith's Account," 31, also 33.

162. Huggins, "Changing *Dramatis Personae*," 21–26; Morris, "Joseph Smith's Account," 21, 33.

163. Morris, "Joseph Smith's Account," 15–17, 41, 43.

considered view of early Mormon history that Walker had anticipated in the 1980s, when serious investigation of the topic first began.¹⁶⁴

Second Postscript: Dan Vogel on Moroni

In addition to extensively responding to Huggins in the *FARMS Review*, Morris also wrote a letter to the editor of *Dialogue* summarizing some of his findings.¹⁶⁵ Morris's letter elicited another letter from Dan Vogel, who agreed with him that Huggins "should have been more critical of the sources." At the same time, Vogel asserted that Morris "did little to improve that situation." In general, Vogel felt that Morris had twisted historical standards into "apologetic devices designed to dismiss out-of-hand undesirable testimony."¹⁶⁶ Those who have read both Morris and Vogel will have to decide whether this is a fair accusation.

The Willard Chase Statement

Vogel pointed to Morris's treatment of the Willard Chase account as the best example of his "misuse of historical methodology."¹⁶⁷ Chase claimed that Joseph Smith Sr. had told him that Moroni initially appeared to Smith on the Hill Cumorah as a creature that looked "something like a toad, which soon assumed the appearance of a man, and struck him on the side of his head."¹⁶⁸ Because some species of reptiles and amphibians, and toads in particular, could serve as treasure guardians, the Chase statement reinforces the portrayal of Moroni as a treasure guardian. Vogel criticized Morris for questioning the accuracy of the Chase statement, asserting that "Morris has no reason to doubt [believe] otherwise."¹⁶⁹

There are, however, two basic reasons for doubting the veracity of the Chase statement. First, as a representation of the early

164. Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Palmyra Seer," 463.

165. Larry Morris, "Folklore Rebutted," letter to the editor, *Dialogue* 38/3 (2005): vi-x.

166. Dan Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," letter to the editor, *Dialogue* 39/2 (2006): vii.

167. Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," vii.

168. Willard Chase statement, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 242.

169. Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," vii.

Moroni visions, the statement is a thirdhand account. Chase recounts Joseph Smith Sr.'s secondhand account of Joseph Smith Jr.'s firsthand account. In fact, one might classify the Chase statement as a fourthhand account since it was collected by Philastus Hurlbut and only appears as published in Howe's anti-Mormon book *Mormonism Unveiled*. Although Chase informed the text of the statement and apparently signed it, the statement was made at the prompting of Hurlbut, who was digging for dirt on the Smiths and is known to have prompted his witnesses.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, the statement was probably inscribed by Hurlbut as a reconstruction of his conversation with Chase based on notes taken at the time. Vogel himself dismisses the many statements collected by Hurlbut that fabricate evidence for the Spalding theory he championed.¹⁷¹

The second basic reason to doubt the historicity of the Chase statement is dating. Hurlbut collected Chase's statement in December 1833. Therefore, when narrating Moroni's first appearance in September 1823, Chase (*via* Hurlbut) is reporting events a full decade after the

170. Richard Lloyd Anderson pointed to parallel phraseology in the statements collected by Hurlbut as one of several evidences of Hurlbut's ghostwriting (R. L. Anderson, "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised," *BYU Studies* 10/3 [1970]: 286–90). Rodger I. Anderson responded to Richard Anderson's charges of ghostwriting with the hypothesis that similarities in the statements "may only mean that Hurlbut submitted the same questions to some of the parties involved" (R. I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined*, 28–29). Richard Lloyd Anderson, in a rejoinder to Rodger I. Anderson, made the point that even this hypothesis leaves Hurlbut guilty of prompting the witness (Richard Lloyd Anderson, review of *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined*, by Rodger I. Anderson, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 [1991]: 59–62). The statements of Roswell Nichols and William Stafford furnish an example of this problem. According to Nichols, "he [Joseph Smith Sr.] had often said, that the hills in our neighborhood were nearly all erected by human hands." William Stafford, interviewed a week later, was reported to have stated, "They [Joseph Smith Sr. and his family] would say, also, that nearly all the hills in this part of New York, were thrown up by human hands" (Roswell Nichols statement, Manchester, New York, 1 December 1833, as transcribed in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 257–58; William Stafford statement, Manchester, New York, 8 December 1833, as transcribed in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 237). According to Rodger I. Anderson's hypothesis, Hurlbut's question to William Stafford would be reconstructed as something like "Did Joseph Smith Sr. say that nearly all the hills in this part of New York were thrown up by human hands?"

171. Vogel finds that these statements "shed no light on Mormon origins." *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:xiv.

fact. Vogel sweeps these basic grounds for suspicion aside with the argument that Chase should only be doubted if he cannot be corroborated.¹⁷² But given the third- or fourthhand nature of the Chase account and the unreliability of distant memories, the burden is not on Morris to challenge the Chase account but on Vogel to demonstrate its reliability.

This is where the criterion of corroboration comes into play. Vogel holds that “a closer look reveals that it is a highly credible account since many of its details are corroborated in other independent sources.”¹⁷³ Vogel relates several instances in which Chase is corroborated by the early Mormon accounts of Lucy Mack Smith or Joseph Knight, whereupon he claims that, “with such documentary support, Morris would have a difficult time demonstrating that Chase’s account is not an ‘accurate reporting of primary testimony.’”¹⁷⁴ Yet in his recent interpretive biography of Joseph Smith’s early life, Vogel is critical in his use of the Chase statement. To be specific, he finds in the statement instances of chronological error, questionable supposition, concealing relevant detail, making an unconvincing claim, and the likelihood of providing a deliberate false impression.¹⁷⁵ Just as the corroborated facts in the Chase account cause us to give it serious consideration generally, the contradicted, unconvincing, and otherwise problematic statements of fact should cause us to maintain some skepticism of the account generally.¹⁷⁶

172. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” viii.

173. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” viii.

174. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” viii.

175. For chronological error, Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 598 n. 46; questionable supposition, 66; concealing relevant detail, 39; making an unconvincing claim, 39; likelihood of intentionally giving a false impression, 88–89.

176. In my master’s thesis, I used the Chase account extensively but with a more critical view (Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet” [master’s thesis, Utah State University, 2000], especially 248–61). I will take this opportunity to respond to Vogel’s assessment of my thesis in his recent biography of Joseph Smith’s early life. I argued that Smith had used his first seer stone to find an even better seer stone, then obtained the ultimate divinatory device (the Urim and Thummim spectacles), and ultimately moved on to unmediated revelation. Vogel classes my thesis with other works that “not only imply that Smith saw objectively real treasures in his stone but embrace as fact a magical world view, including

More to the point, we must ask whether the Chase account can be corroborated on the specific detail in question—the description of Moroni as a treasure guardian who initially appeared on the Hill Cumorah in the form of a toadlike creature. Entering into this area of inquiry, Vogel claims the description is supported by the 1884 account of Benjamin Saunders, another former Smith neighbor. Saunders recounted overhearing Joseph Smith say that when he reached for the ancient record “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.”¹⁷⁷ Richard Lloyd Anderson has argued that the Saunders account was probably based on the Chase statement.¹⁷⁸ Vogel counters Anderson, however, by pointing out that, “rather than hearing the story from Joseph Sr.,” as claimed by Chase, “Saunders claimed he heard it directly from Joseph Jr.”¹⁷⁹

Yet Vogel acknowledges in his recent biography of Smith that “Saunders understood this to have occurred when Joseph took the plates from the hill in September 1827,” not in 1823 as in the Chase

the bleeding ghosts and enchanted treasures that moved through the earth” (Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, xvi). I find this generalization unfair given the statement of historical methodology in the thesis introduction, which explicitly counters this criticism (Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” 29–40). Vogel writes that my thesis “fails to explain how one stone might be better than another or what quality a superior stone might have” (Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 570 n. 43). However, chapter 4 of the thesis describes seer-stone qualities in detail (Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” especially 157–82). Vogel also writes that my thesis “ignores the fact that Smith quickly abandoned the urim and thummim and returned to using his seer stone and that the entire Book of Mormon was dictated using the latter rather than the former” (Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 570 n. 43). However, chapter 5 of the thesis explicitly acknowledges these facts and incorporates them into the larger argument (Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” especially 320–30). Finally, Vogel maintains that my thesis fails to explain how seer-stone revelations could lead Smith to receiving unmediated revelations (Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 570 n. 43). But chapters 4 and 5 of my thesis sketch how this development may have occurred (Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway to Prophethood,” especially 330–36).

177. Benjamin Saunders, interviewed by William H. Kelley, ca. September 1884, in “Miscellany,” Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, 23; quoted in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:137.

178. Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Alvin Smith Story: Fact and Fiction,” *Ensign*, August 1987, 62–63, 71 n. 19.

179. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” viii.

statement.¹⁸⁰ Vogel also states that this chronological problem was “probably due to either faulty memory or method of reporting.”¹⁸¹ If there is a chronological problem in the Saunders account, which was given over half a century after the fact, might not the account also be mistaken as to Joseph Smith being the source of this information?

Elsewhere in his biography of Smith, when discussing the memories of golden plates’ witnesses Martin Harris and David Whitmer, Vogel claims that “differences that might have originally existed between the accounts [of Harris’s and Whitmer’s individual witness experiences] probably became blurred over time as the details faded and general impressions remained. The publication of Smith’s version in 1842 may have influenced Harris’s and Whitmer’s own descriptions.”¹⁸² Recognizing that the Chase statement had also been published years earlier and in a well-known book on the topic, the same reasoning suggests that the Saunders account was influenced by Chase’s description.

In another passage, Vogel questions the memory of Joseph Smith’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith, because he thinks it might have been influenced by her son’s “later emendations.”¹⁸³ In a similar vein, should we not also acknowledge that Benjamin Saunders’s memory of an early conversation may have been influenced by the account of his neighbor and brother-in-law Willard Chase? Vogel, in a footnote, seems to acknowledge this possibility. He more cautiously writes that “similarities *may* reflect the likelihood that they both originated with Smith.”¹⁸⁴

But are we to believe that Saunders’s “some like a toad” and Chase’s “something like a toad” are independent recollections of what Saunders heard Smith say and of what Chase heard Smith’s father say? Vogel does not concede nearly enough. The prior publication of the Chase statement, the Chase-Saunders relationship, the extreme lateness of the Saunders recollection, and the similarity of the words used by both all point to Saunders relying on Chase. The Saunders account simply does not constitute substantial corroboration for the information in the

180. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 49.

181. *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:138 n. 10.

182. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 447.

183. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 47.

184. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 586 n. 74, emphasis added.

Chase statement bearing on Moroni's identity as a treasure guardian. We are left with a healthy skepticism of Chase's version of the events.

Parallels to Treasure Hunting

Vogel emphasizes the general treasure-seeking interpretation of the Moroni stories by noting similarities with several particular motifs, such as the "thrice-repeated dreams" by which treasures were said to be located.¹⁸⁵ And, in his recent biography of Smith, Vogel notes that "locating treasures through dreams was not uncommon in Smith's day, and thrice-repeated dreams were especially significant."¹⁸⁶ But dreams and visions were also well-known as gifts of the spirit in Christian belief. Moreover, there is numerology in the Bible just as there is in treasure-seeking lore. Either a thrice-repeated vision—like the apostle Peter's vision of the unclean animals—or a thrice-repeated dream may have been just as significant to a primitivist Christian as to a treasure seeker.¹⁸⁷ I am not at all excluding the possibility that Smith viewed his three nocturnal visions of Moroni in a treasure-seeking context. I am only attempting to bring balance to the issue by pointing out that Smith may also have viewed them in a biblical context.

Vogel also emphasizes a general treasure-seeking context by noting "the need to follow instructions precisely" in both the Moroni story and treasure lore. His primary example is the instruction that Joseph be accompanied by his older brother Alvin to recover the plates in 1824.¹⁸⁸ In his recent biography of Smith, Vogel similarly notes that Lucy Mack Smith's narration, "with its emphasis on following the treasure guardian's instructions precisely, captures more fulsomely the folk-magic context of the story."¹⁸⁹ Morris had acknowledged this parallel to the world of treasure seeking, but he also recognized that precise instructions from an otherworldly being have a parallel in the

185. Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," ix.

186. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 45.

187. See Acts 10:10–17; Walker, "Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," 455 n. 60.

188. Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," ix.

189. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 47; see also 49.

Bible—as when Moses was instructed by the Lord to be accompanied by his older brother Aaron.¹⁹⁰ There are numerous examples of angels giving precise instructions in both the Old and New Testaments.¹⁹¹ I am not excluding here the possibility that Smith viewed precise instructions from Moroni in a treasure-seeking context. I am only pointing out that Smith may well also have viewed precise instructions much like biblical commandments given by the Lord and his angels. If we draw parallels to the world of treasure hunting only, our analysis becomes a form of assuming the hypothesis instead of testing it.

Noting the precise instruction to bring Alvin and the dilemma brought about by Alvin's subsequent death, Vogel writes: "Smith's inability to get the plates in 1824 because Alvin had died seems more like the trick of a treasure guardian spirit than what Smith's contemporaries would have expected of an angel."¹⁹² Similarly, in his recent biography of Smith, Vogel insists that this requirement "fit within the tricks and other antics for which guardian spirits were known."¹⁹³ Aside, however, from the plat-eyes of South Carolina and the will-o'-the-wisps of the greater American South—which attempted to lead treasure hunters away from treasure—I am not aware of any guardian behavior that could be viewed as tricky.¹⁹⁴ Treasure guardians attempted either to scare the hunters away from the treasure or to move the treasure away from the hunters. Folklorists do not classify treasure guardians as tricksters.¹⁹⁵ The guardian as trickster was invented by Mark Hofmann, the infamous creator of forged Mormon documents.

190. Morris, "Joseph Smith's Account," 34–38.

191. See Genesis 16:9–11; 22:11–12; Numbers 22:34–35; Judges 6:11–20; 13:3–4; 2 Kings 1:3; 1 Chronicles 21:18; Matthew 1:20–21; 2:13, 19–20; 28:5–7; Luke 1:26–31; Acts 5:19–20; 8:26; 10:3–6; 12:7–8; and the book of Revelation, in which an angel gives John precise instructions on what to write to the churches in Asia. Thanks to John Tvedtnes for these references.

192. Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," ix.

193. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 50.

194. Hurley, "Buried Treasure Tales in America," 201, 202.

195. Wayland D. Hand, "The Quest for Buried Treasure: A Chapter in American Folk Legendry," in *Folklore on Two Continents: Essays in Honor of Linda Dégh*, ed. Nikolai Burlakoff and Carl Lindahl (Bloomington, IN: Trickster, 1980), 112–19; Hurley, "Buried Treasure Tales in America," 200–202; also Walker, "Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," 443–44. See also Baughman and Granger motif indexes (Baughman, *Type and*

In his well-known salamander letter, Moroni directs Smith to look in his seer stone in order to see whom to bring instead of Alvin but then shows him nothing and says, “I tricked you again.”¹⁹⁶

Vogel also bolsters the treasure-hunting interpretation of Moroni’s first visits by placing them in close chronological proximity with an actual treasure hunt. He writes that “earlier that evening, according to what Martin Harris later told Palmyra minister John A. Clark, Joseph had acted as seer for a local treasure-seeking expedition.”¹⁹⁷ More accurately, Palmyra minister John A. Clark *claimed* that Martin Harris had stated that Smith had participated in a treasure-hunting expedition that evening.¹⁹⁸ As noted earlier, even if Clark correctly remembered Harris saying this, we do not know from whom Harris would have learned this. Presumably it would have been from a member of the Smith family. However, while neither Clark nor Harris was in the Smith home, Lucy was, and she related that the family had stayed up late this night engaged in religious discussion. In Vogel’s reconstruction, Joseph Smith participated in both the treasure-hunting excursion and then the intense religious discussion. This is a possibility that I had not previously considered. However, in addition to generally doubting the Clark reminiscence, which constitutes a thirdhand account at best, I question whether Smith had time that night for both a treasure-hunting excursion and the long religious discussion noted in Lucy’s eyewitness account.

To bolster the reality of a treasure hunt, as mentioned in the Clark account, Vogel notes that this night was “an especially propitious night for treasure hunting” because “the moon was full and the eve-

Motif-Index, N500–599; Granger, *Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, motif class g; which are devoid of trickster identifications.

196. Dean C. Jessee, “New Documents and Mormon Beginnings,” *BYU Studies* 24/4 (1984): 403.

197. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 43.

198. According to Clark, “Jo used to be *usually* their guide, putting into a hat a peculiar stone he had through which he looked to decide where they should begin to dig” (Clark, “Gleanings by the Way, No. VI,” 94, emphasis added). Clark, therefore, was not necessarily implying that Smith had used his seer stone that night but only that he had been out with the digging excursion.

ning marked the autumnal equinox.”¹⁹⁹ However, on this point Vogel is citing Quinn’s *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*.²⁰⁰ While it seems more than mere coincidence that Moroni’s first visits happened on the autumnal equinox, Quinn’s evidences for the auspiciousness of spirit conjuration (not treasure digging specifically) on this night are among his generally insubstantial astrological parallels. And while Quinn furnishes sources that recommend digging under a full moon,²⁰¹ there are various sources recommending various times of the day or the night or other phases of the moon for digging.²⁰² Which of these times or seasons, if any, did Joseph Smith prefer?

William Stafford, who had actually dug for treasure with the Smiths, recounted their opinions on when to hunt for treasure: “At certain times, these treasures could be obtained very easily; at others, the obtaining of them was difficult. The facility of approaching them, depended in a great measure on the state of the moon. New moon and good Friday, I believe, were regarded as the most favorable times for obtaining these treasures.”²⁰³ Of course, the Stafford statement, like the Chase statement, is subject to question. Still, on the issue of when the Smiths may have thought it best to dig, the Stafford statement seems as reliable or even more so than the miscellaneous sources cited by Quinn. The new moon appears only as a small crescent or is completely invisible—just the opposite of the full moon discussed by Quinn and Vogel. The Smiths may have preferred to dig without moonlight for the same reason that treasure diggers generally preferred digging without sunlight. Working under the cover of darkness not only concealed the location of the hidden wealth they sought but spared them from the ridicule of genteel onlookers.²⁰⁴ The presence

199. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 43.

200. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 43; quoting Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 141–44.

201. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 144–45; see also Walker, “Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting,” 442–43.

202. See Granger, *Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, motif h 1, especially h 1.6–h 1.6.2.

203. William Stafford statement, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 238.

204. On the Smiths’ hunting for treasure at night in order to conceal the locations of their digging, see Clark, “Gleanings by the Way, No. VI,” 94. Alan Taylor writes that

of a nearly full moon on the night of 21 September 1823 is probably evidence *against* the Clark account of a treasure excursion that night, not for it.²⁰⁵

Core Issues

For Vogel, the part of the Moroni story “that more than anything pointed nineteenth-century minds toward treasure lore” was “the claim that the plates were protected by the ‘spirit’ of a dead mortal.”²⁰⁶ This is a point that I did not adequately address in my original essay. As Vogel explains, even if Smith thought of Moroni as an angel, his contemporaries probably would not have used the word *angel* to describe a messenger returning from the dead—even if the messenger had been an ancient prophet.²⁰⁷ The influence of the Bible and biblical literalism in Smith’s day may have helped some see past this issue. The Epistle to the Hebrews classified angels as “ministering spirits”; the angel appearing to John in his apocalypse stated, “I am thy fellow servant, and among thy brethren the prophets”; and the prophet Elijah had appeared as just such a ministering spirit on the Mount of Transfiguration.²⁰⁸ However, the free-thinking Abner Cole probably held to the traditional notion of angels as entirely otherworldly creatures. In his biography of Smith, Vogel emphasizes that “the earliest accounts identify the heavenly messenger as a ‘spirit.’”²⁰⁹ But this is

“contempt for treasure seeking became universal among the genteel by the early nineteenth [century] as part of their wider criticism of the common folk for inadequate ambition, lackluster work discipline, labor, and attachment to tradition” (Taylor, “Early Republic’s Supernatural Economy,” 16). Such a concern for keeping secrecy by working under the cover of darkness may shed some light on Willard Chase’s claim that Smith went to the Hill Cumorah wearing black clothes and riding a black horse (Willard Chase statement, in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 242).

205. For whatever the Clark account is worth, one should recognize that it describes Moroni as an “angel of God . . . clad in celestial splendour” and as a “divine messenger” who spoke of the purposes of “the Most High God.” Clark, “Gleanings by the Way, No. VI,” 94.

206. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” ix.

207. Revelation 22:8–9 is sometimes cited to show that angels may be dead mortals.

208. See Hebrews 1:13–14; Revelation 22:6–9; and Matthew 17:3–4. My thanks to Matt Roper for these references.

209. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 45.

simply not true. As I demonstrated above, the earliest account uses the word *angel*. As evidence for the (subsequent) use of the term *spirit*, Vogel invokes Abner Cole. “Obviously, for Cole angels were distinct beings from ghosts, or the spirits of dead mortals.”²¹⁰ In the biography, Vogel summons another newspaper source using the word *spirit*. Vogel writes, “Martin Harris told people in Rochester that Joseph had been ‘visited by the spirit of the Almighty in a dream, and informed that in a certain hill . . . was deposited a Golden Bible.’”²¹¹ More accurately, Martin Harris *was reported* to have talked about this “spirit of the Almighty” to some people in Rochester. While Vogel emphasizes the word *spirit*, I would emphasize the phrase *of the Almighty*, which indicates that this “spirit” was a heavenly messenger whether or not Harris had used or would have used the word *angel* to describe Moroni at this time.

In relation to the “spirit” vs. “angel” issue, Vogel challenges the work done by me and by Morris as flawed from the outset:

By assuming that Joseph Smith and his non-Mormon critics shared the same definition of “angel,” I believe Morris and Ashurst-McGee have been led to ask the wrong questions, which in turn has led them to make the overly simplistic conclusion that the “early witnesses described an angel who appeared in a religious context” and “later witnesses ‘defrocked’ Moroni.” The question to answer is not: Did Joseph Smith transform a treasure guardian into an angel? But rather: Did Joseph Smith expand his definition of angel to include a particular treasure guardian?²¹²

Morris and I have addressed the question as it had been formulated historiographically, and I would maintain that the analysis that

210. Vogel adds, “Because he failed to note this distinction, Mark Ashurst-McGee’s references to ‘angels’ guarding treasures are irrelevant.” Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” x. It is true that they are basically irrelevant to Cole’s understanding of Moroni’s status but not necessarily to Smith’s (the real issue).

211. Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 45, quoting “Golden Bible,” *Rochester (NY) Gem*, 5 September 1829, 70, in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:272.

212. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” x.

followed is stable. Vogel's framing of the issue is valid. I agree that it does not really matter that Cole would not have categorized the returning prophet Moroni (whether embodied or not) as an angel. And neither Morris nor I argued that Joseph Smith's religious terminology fell within the parameters of traditional Christian orthodoxy. The Mormon definition of *angel* remains unorthodox today.

I submit that the central issues can best be clarified in this way: The primary question is whether Joseph Smith originally viewed Moroni as merely a profane treasure guardian, devoid of any angelic or otherwise divine status, or if he saw him as both a treasure guardian and a divine messenger. The secondary question is this: If Smith originally viewed Moroni as both a treasure guardian and a divine messenger, which view was more meaningful to him at that time? The tertiary issue is whether Smith would have used the word *angel* to describe the heavenly messenger as early as 1823.

As to the primary issue, while Vogel emphasizes Moroni as a treasure guardian he nevertheless acknowledges that "Lucy and other [Smith] family members make it clear that God was involved from the start."²¹³ To my view, this is the most important point of the entire dialogue.

On the secondary issue, Vogel and I disagree. Vogel's position, if I read him correctly, is this: While Smith's fabricated Moroni stories included a divine element from the very beginning, Moroni was primarily conceived of as a ghost treasure guardian, and the divine messenger aspect of his character was not preeminent until later. Though overstating his case, Vogel has effectively compiled the evidence for Smith dropping treasure motifs from his story and adding religious details²¹⁴—evidence that I acknowledged only briefly in my original essay.²¹⁵ But, by the basic counting rules of arithmetic, it does not necessarily follow from the fact that Smith was dropping treasure-seeking elements or even adding religious ones that in his original conception the treasure-seeking elements outnumbered the religious—in other

213. Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," x.

214. Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," x-xi; also Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 44.

215. Ashurst-McGee, "Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?" especially 65-66.

words, that Moroni was more of a treasure guardian than a heavenly messenger.

In order to bolster his case, Vogel again turns to Palmyra tabloid editor Abner Cole. Vogel maintains that “there is an element of truth in Cole’s statement” and emphasizes that “Cole prefaced his statement with ‘it is well known,’ so Morris’s fabrication-for-the-sake-of-revenge thesis is highly unlikely.”²¹⁶ Nonetheless, while Cole’s indisputable antagonism toward Smith justifies questioning him on these grounds, the main problem with Cole is his reliance on neighborhood rumors, which cannot be disentangled from their June 1830 setting. Palmyra was the scene of a minor religious uproar, which was based more on Smith’s new book of scripture and also his new church than on his treasure-hunting past.²¹⁷

I agree with Vogel that there is an element of truth in the Cole statement but not because of what Cole himself wrote. What persuades me is the letter written by Joseph Smith’s uncle Jesse Smith to Joseph’s brother Hyrum Smith. As a source, the Jesse Smith letter is vastly superior to Cole. Whereas the June 1830 issue of Cole’s tabloid may be reporting the most sensational of Palmyra’s gossip, Jesse Smith’s letter of June 1829 is written in response to, and apparently quotes from, an 1828 letter from a member of the Smith family. In fact, Jesse seems to be quoting a letter from Joseph Smith.²¹⁸ Jesse groused:

He writes that the Angel of the Lord has revealed to him the hidden treasures of wisdom & knowledge, even divine revelation, which has lain in the bowels of the earth for thousands of years [and] is at last made known to him, he says he has eyes to see things that are not and then has the audacity to say they are; and the Angel of the Lord (Devil it should be) has put me in possession of great wealth, gold and silver and precious stones so that I shall have the dominion in all the land of Palmyra.²¹⁹

216. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” x.

217. See *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:215–50.

218. See the editorial note to this document in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:551.

219. Jesse Smith to Hyrum Smith, 17 June 1829, in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:551–52.

Jesse's letter reflects a Smith family understanding of Moroni as both a treasure guardian and as an angel, but primarily as an angel. This is by far the best window into Joseph's early understanding of Moroni, and to me the most accurate. I find it probable that his earliest understanding of the Moroni experiences was influenced to some extent by his exposure to the early American treasure-hunting subculture and even more likely by his involvement in Bible reading, family worship, recent revivalism, and early American Christian culture generally. I do not find either possibility exclusive of the other.

As for the tertiary issue of the appropriateness of the word *angel*, Vogel comments: "I think it's best to regard the word 'angel' (as we do the term 'Urim and Thummim') as anachronistic to the 1823 setting."²²⁰ This term *Urim and Thummim* has been questioned for two reasons, which are related: Mormon usage of the term *Urim and Thummim* has not been documented prior to 1833.²²¹ Conversely, it does not show up in places where one might expect to find it. For example, Smith's 1832 history mentions only that "The Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the Book."²²² By the same reasoning, should we regard the word *angel* as anachronistic to the 1823 setting? No. The word *angel* does appear in the earliest sources. Using the same standard, we have more reason to regard the treasure-guardian motif as anachronistic.

"Given the obvious shift away from 'folk [magic] culture' in Joseph Smith's account," Vogel concludes, "why is it so hard for Morris and Ashurst-McGee to believe that the luminous 'angel Moroni' was once a nameless, bearded treasure-guardian 'spirit'?"²²³ I would like to begin answering Vogel by clearing away some of the less relevant baggage loaded into this crucial question. Whether Smith knew Moroni

220. Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," x. See also Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 44.

221. Van Wagoner and Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" 53.

222. This is my edited version of Joseph's 1832 history: "the Lord had prepared spectice spectacles for to read the Book" (Joseph Smith, "A History of the Life of Joseph Smith Jr.," in Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, MS, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, p. 5, quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:9). The issues surrounding the term *Urim and Thummim* are actually more complex. See Ashurst-McGee, "Pathway to Prophethood," 311–16.

223. Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," xi. See also Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 44.

by that name in 1823 or if he remained “nameless” to Smith for some time is a minor point. The problem of the name *Moroni* is acknowledged at the beginning of my original essay.²²⁴ Whether Moroni was bearded—as described by Cole and by the Lewises—is another red herring. I am unaware of any descriptions of either biblical angels or Moroni as being clean-shaven, and I don’t know why they should be. As for early descriptions of Moroni as a “spirit,” I feel that whether or not Moroni seemed to Joseph to have had a tangible body is less important than whether or not he was a messenger “of the Almighty.” I view the question of whether Moroni was “luminous” in the same light.²²⁵

Having cleared these issues out of the way, I am ready to revisit Vogel’s question: Given the obvious shift away from treasure-seeking elements in Joseph Smith’s account, why is it so hard for me to believe that the angel Moroni was once a treasure-guardian? I cannot answer the question because it is *not* difficult for me to conceive that the young Joseph originally understood Moroni as a treasure guardian. At the same time, one must acknowledge the obvious shift toward profane treasure-guardian motifs in the accounts of Smith’s antagonists.²²⁶ Therefore it is not difficult for me to conceive that Joseph originally understood Moroni as a divine messenger. An unbiased approach requires being open to both possibilities, and this is precisely where my original essay began.

After carefully assessing the sources, I found that all the eyewitness accounts of the Moroni visitations portray him as an angel. This

224. Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?” 67 n. 11.

225. Similarly, in his biography of Smith, Vogel writes, “The wingless angel with long flowing robe that Smith later named ‘Moroni,’ one of the ancient authors of the Book of Mormon, is absent from the earliest accounts” (Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 46). But a winged angel is also absent in the earliest accounts. Neither are there any *late* accounts of a winged angel—unless one counts the frontispiece to Pomeroy Tucker’s 1867 work of anti-Mormonism, which depicts a winged, bare-breasted female (see p. 34 above). The only description of Moroni’s clothing predating Smith’s and Cowdery’s descriptions of a white robe is the ridiculous costume described in Cole’s “Book of Pukei” parody of the Book of Mormon (Book of Pukei 2:4, in *Palmyra Reflector*, 7 July 1830; compare Joseph Smith, “History, 1838,” in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, rev. ed. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002], 233; Cowdery, “Letter IV,” to Phelps, February 1835).

226. Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?” especially 61–65.

is not a matter of interpretation but an indisputable fact. Morris and I have also demonstrated that, in the earliest sources, either Moroni is called an “angel” or his status as a heavenly messenger is implied. Again, this is not a matter of interpretation. It is a fact that Vogel must concede. In proceeding to issues of corroboration and contextualization, we move into interpretation. Here I am not at all implying that the debate is over or that the contextual analysis conducted by Vogel (or by myself or Morris) is irrelevant. But any analysis of this depth should begin with rigorous source criticism. Exploring further into issues of corroboration and context led Morris and me to acknowledge the relevance of the treasure-seeking context of the Moroni visitations and the possibility that Joseph viewed Moroni as a treasure guardian. However, our investigations did not negate the possibility that he also understood Moroni as a divine messenger. Rather, they supported the view that he understood Moroni as a divine messenger—and primarily so—from the very beginning.