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Abstract Olsen explains why historical documentation is essential to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

THE THEOLOGY OF MEMORY: MORMON HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Steven L. Olsen

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was formally organized in upstate New York on April 6, 1830. On that day, the founding prophet, Joseph Smith, received a revelation that inaugurated the church's ambitious enterprise to preserve records of enduring historical value. Simply and without equivocation, this revelation addressed the youthful religious leader, "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you; and in it thou shalt be called a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the church" (Doctrine and Covenants 21:1). This and subsequent revelations clarified the types of records the church was to preserve and for what purposes.

A later revelation appointed John Whitmer, who had been one of the eight special witnesses to the Book of Mormon, to be the second church historian and recorder (D&C 47:1–3). Eight months after receiving this divine calling, Whitmer was given his principal charge: "Let my servant John Whitmer travel many times from place to place, and from church to church, that he may the more easily obtain knowledge—preaching and expounding, writing, copying, selecting, and obtaining all things which shall be for the good of the church, and for the rising generations that shall grow up on the land of Zion," meaning wherever the church was formally organized (D&C 69:7–8).

This paper was originally presented as a lecture at the Museum of Natural History, University of Utah, on 13 March 2004.

A survey of Latter-day Saint scriptures suggests four primary purposes for keeping and using historical records: (1) to testify to the truth of the restoration of the gospel as effected by Joseph Smith and subsequent church leaders, (2) to help preserve the revealed order of the church, (3) to formally remember the great things that God has done for his children, and (4) to extend the blessings of salvation to all of God's children. While the church allows its historical records to be used for academic, pragmatic, personal, and other comparable purposes, the central justification for its extensive historical enterprise is spiritual.

The office of church historian and recorder was one of the first offices to be formally defined in the newly restored church. The office has remained a key position in the church's administrative hierarchy until the present. Nearly all church historians have been General Authorities, members of governing ecclesiastical councils in the church. As the church has grown, so have the responsibilities of this office. Eventually the staff of the church historian's office was organized into an administrative department at church headquarters. The Family and Church History Department currently has several hundred full- and part-time employees and a few thousand additional full- and part-time volunteers. They are involved in a variety of professional services, including acquisitions, collections management, research and exhibition, preservation, product development, and patron service.

The Family and Church History Department consists of several complementary institutions. These include the Church History Library and Archives, currently located in the four floors of the east wing of the Church Office Building; the Museum of Church History and Art and the Family History Library, located on the block just west of Temple Square; the Granite Mountain Records Vault, located in Little Cottonwood Canyon in south Salt Lake Valley; some 4,200 family history centers located nearly everywhere the church is formally organized; approximately four dozen architecturally distinctive historic landmarks that serve as operating temples, tabernacles, and meeting-houses, located mostly in North America; two dozen restored historic

sites and site complexes that document church origins in the United States; and hundreds of historic markers throughout North America and elsewhere. Except for the Granite Mountain Records Vault, which is closed to the public, these various facilities accommodate several million visitors and patrons annually. In addition, the Family and Church History Department constitutes a major private repository of historical materials. Permanent collections include nearly 300,000 publications (e.g., books, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, maps), 30,000 audiovisual materials (e.g., films, videos, audiotapes), 3.5 million manuscripts (e.g., letters, diaries, official church records), more than 100,000 historic photographs in all media, 5,000 oral histories, more than 60,000 artifacts, 7,500 works of art in all media, 2.5 million rolls of microfilm, and 670,000 microfiche. These numbers are exclusive of historical collections at the 4,200 family history centers.

It is not a trivial question to consider of what necessity such an ambitious historical enterprise is to the church. Why should a vibrant and deep-seated historical consciousness be so essential to Latter-day Saints? From the perspective of my formal training in cultural anthropology and my quarter-century career working in the Family and Church History Department, may I speculate on this seeming necessity? I suggest two key reasons why the church's historical enterprise is central to Mormon religious identity.

1. *The nature of Latter-day Saint theology.* The belief systems of many Christian denominations are expressed in formal terms, that is, as logical deductions from metaphysical or supernatural premises that are organized more or less in a systematic manner. By contrast, the core religious beliefs of Latter-day Saints derive largely from spiritual experiences and are expressed in narrative terms. That is, Latter-day Saint theology is more experiential than propositional. For example, the church's standard works—consisting of the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price—are structured largely as historical narratives, or they have clear and direct reference to historical events and contexts. In addition, personal testimonies of individual Latter-day Saints are often expressed as spiritual experiences or events, and moral, ethical, and doctrinal

principles are often taught by actual or metaphorical examples. This experiential basis of Latter-day Saint doctrine has more than heuristic or pedagogical value. Rather, it seems to partake of the very essence of Latter-day Saint identity.

This is not to say, as some have suggested, that Mormonism is fundamentally anti-intellectual and has not produced profound religious thinkers. Nor does this point of view necessarily engender pessimism about the future of Latter-day Saint thought, as has been expressed by such notables as Thomas O’Dea and Mark Leone.¹ However, this perspective does acknowledge that Latter-day Saint truth claims result more from spiritual experiences than from logical inferences, reasoned abstractions, or other formal philosophical or rational processes. Such confirming experiences for Latter-day Saints occur in real time and real space, with real people, often in response to real circumstances, which have the effect of influencing all dimensions of a person’s consciousness (see D&C 8:2).

For Latter-day Saints, the process of getting to know God—the ultimate goal of theology and the essence of the concept of eternal life (see John 17:3)—is similar to that of getting to know an earthly loved one: a process contingent upon a lifetime of experiences that are motivated by devotion, tempered by service, and refined by reflection. While much about intimate human relations can be abstracted into thought or speech, these abstractions can neither perfectly and totally comprehend nor substitute for the complexities or the rewards of personal experiences and interpersonal relationships. In short, the theological process in Mormonism is at least as relational as it is rational.

From this perspective, religious beliefs cannot be separated from genuine experiences, and genuine experiences are rarely devoid of spiritual significance. The traditional dichotomy between history and doctrine is ultimately an artificial and unsatisfactory construct in Latter-day Saint thought. The eminent historian of religion Martin Marty addressed this point when he traced its ultimate truth claims

1. Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 224–42; Mark P. Leone, *Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 167–93.

to two experiences: Joseph Smith's first vision and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Said he:

If the beginning of the promenade of Mormon history, the First Vision and the Book of Mormon, can survive the [historiographical] crisis, then the rest of the promenade follows and nothing that happens in it can really detract from the miracle of the whole. If the first steps do not survive, there can be only antiquarian, not fateful or faith-full interest in the rest of the story.²

For Latter-day Saints, the occurrence of the first vision is both chronologically and logically prior to any particular doctrinal significance that is ascribed to this event.

Leone correctly observes that Mormon thought has a great deal of flexibility, but he incorrectly concludes that it is therefore a “do-it-yourself” theology.³ Its rigor, which escaped Leone's notice, is in its experiential foundations. Latter-day Saints can have personal beliefs that vary quite widely about particular points of doctrine, as long as they hold fast to the experiential foundations of the faith.

Hence, a keen historical consciousness is essential to a proper appreciation of the faith's moral, ethical, theological, and metaphysical beliefs. Such tangible, empirical, and intimate dimensions of faith are essential for a religion that claims that God is a distinct physical being, that mankind are his spiritual offspring, that spirits consist of a rarefied matter, that individual human consciousness existed long before birth and will continue forever after death, that the true history of the earth is the unfolding of God's plan of salvation, and that earth will eventually become a heaven for those worthy to live with their loved ones in the literal presence of God. The ambitious historical enterprise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be best appreciated within this context of an experiential theology.

2. Martin E. Marty, “Two Integrities: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 9.

3. Leone, *Roots of Modern Mormonism*, 7.

2. *The nature of Latter-day Saint covenants.* For Latter-day Saints, covenants are the foundation of eternal relationships with God and with beloved family members. Covenants are established by means of sacred rituals that are performed by authorized priesthood officials. Covenants have associated with them specific codes of conduct. Those who live faithful to their covenants are promised blessings that approximate the glorious conditions of heaven. Those who willfully reject their covenants, once made, are threatened with dire spiritual consequences.

The covenant I wish to address on this occasion is that of formally becoming a member of the church. The rituals of baptism and confirmation symbolize the spiritual rebirth of individuals and their purification from sin as they take upon them the name of Jesus Christ and promise to remember him and keep his commandments. In turn, baptismal candidates receive the promise of the continuing influence of the Holy Spirit.

The details of this covenant are expressed not so much in the contents of baptism and confirmation per se, but in the weekly renewal of this covenant in another ritual called the sacrament, or communion as it is generally known in Christianity. The sacrament is the centerpiece of the Sunday worship services of the Latter-day Saints. In it the emblems of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ are blessed and distributed to the faithful. The prayers that consecrate the emblems of the sacrament are two of only three fixed prayers in Latter-day Saint public worship. The other is that of baptism. Reinforcing the crucial nature of their wording, the sacramental prayers are specifically defined in two separate scriptures, once in the Book of Mormon and another time in the Doctrine and Covenants (Moroni 4:3; 5:2; D&C 20:77, 79). In both sacramental prayers, the covenantal obligations of the faithful are summarized in the verbs *witness* and *remember*. As an essential tenet of church membership, Latter-day Saints are expected to remember and to witness to certain essential truths.

The spiritual imperative for Latter-day Saints to remember is not confined to the sacramental prayers. In the Book of Mormon, for example, the verb *remember* and its various cognates appear more

than two hundred times, making remembering one of the most frequently repeated messages in this “keystone” of Latter-day Saint faith. Furthermore, in most instances, the message to remember appears as a spiritual imperative, as in the plea “remember, and perish not” (Mosiah 4:30).

Similarly, the importance of witnessing finds numerous applications in the standard works. Most often, witnesses are selected *people* who, because of their unique relationship to a gospel truth, can testify to the world of its eternal veracity. But the law of witnesses is not restricted to the oral or written testimony of holy men and women. Latter-day Saint scriptures are replete with examples of *places* or *things* that serve as physical, tangible witnesses of spiritual experiences or other divine realities. Finally, historical *events* often serve as witnesses of sacred truths, as in the following example from a revelation that is generally considered a kind of constitution for the church.

Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants defines basic organizational structures, operational processes, and spiritual principles for the church. In the formal introduction to this revelation, Jesus Christ accepts the church and Joseph Smith as its leader. The revelation then makes reference to two key historical events—the first vision and the emergence of the Book of Mormon—that prepared Joseph Smith to assume his duties as prophet (D&C 20:5–12). The introduction concludes in terms reminiscent of other church covenants: “Therefore, having so great witnesses, by them shall the world be judged, even as many as shall hereafter come to a knowledge of this work. And those who receive it in faith, and work righteousness, shall receive a crown of eternal life; but those who harden their hearts in unbelief, and reject it, it shall turn to their own condemnation” (vv. 13–15). This passage suggests that the founding of the church was signaled by certain historical events that serve collectively as a witness to the world of the central message of this religion, namely that the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ is once again upon the earth and that the church serves as a means by which all people can avail themselves of its blessings. Historic sites, historical collections, museum exhibitions, and other historical resources and products of the church serve as a witness in

all three senses—human, material, and experiential—and preserve an institutional memory of those things that are central to the church’s spiritual mission.

I conclude with some reflections on the role of memory in defining the historical beginning and central truth claims of the church, namely, Joseph Smith’s first vision. These reflections address the theology of memory on two levels: the individual memory of Joseph Smith regarding this defining event in his life and the symbolic significance of this event in defining the religious identity of the Latter-day Saints.

Joseph Smith’s first vision occurred in a grove of trees on the family farm in Manchester Township, New York, in the early spring of 1820. Four separate firsthand accounts of this experience were written or dictated by the Prophet between 1832 and 1843, and several other secondhand accounts exist, written by Joseph’s contemporaries and based on his oral testimony. These various accounts are remarkably similar, given the differences in time, place, and context in which they were given. These accounts also differ from one another in significant ways. I wish to compare briefly two of the firsthand accounts, the first one in 1832 and the one he wrote six years later, which is the only account of this experience accepted as scripture by the Latter-day Saints.

Contemporary learning theory acknowledges that what and how we learn from life’s experiences depend upon several factors, including our personal, social, physical, and temporal contexts. That is, learning is not an abstract intellectual activity. It is a complex process by which our consciousness—including our memory, our character, and our worldview—is constructed. Personal expectations and backgrounds, social relationships, environmental conditions, and subsequent experiences all play important roles in defining how we remember and interpret our experiences.

What does this have to do with Joseph Smith’s first vision? In 1832, when Joseph wrote his first known account, he seems to have been concerned primarily with personal redemption, because the message from the heavenly messenger to him at that time was that his sins had

been forgiven him. Furthermore, much of the literary structure of this initial account is reminiscent of conversion narratives of many other New Englanders who were influenced by the religious fervor of the “Burned Over District.”⁴

By the time that he dictated what became the official account of the first vision some six years later, Joseph Smith had received most of the major revelations that would eventually be published in his lifetime. These greatly expanded his understanding of his own prophetic mission, the divine destiny of the church he had founded, the plan of salvation, and the nature of God. As a result, he had come to understand the first vision within this more expansive religious context. Hence the 1838 account not only emphasizes Joseph’s personal struggle for his soul but also becomes an authoritative narrative of the historical beginnings, the doctrinal foundations, and, at a symbolic level, the spiritual destiny of the church. So what is the point? Additional experiences and more mature reflections after 1832 helped Joseph Smith to remember details and express the meaning of the 1820 vision in more profound terms in 1838 than he could have possibly done in 1820 or even 1832.

The first vision also operates within the collective memory of the Latter-day Saints. On this grander stage, the first vision is no longer purely a historical event or an isolated spiritual experience. It has become a spiritual archetype, or model for the identity and behavior of a body of believers that transcends time, space, and cultural boundaries. This sacred story provides a spiritual paradigm for individual conversion, resistance to temptation, persistence in prayer, study of the scriptures, and similar processes that govern the religious lives of Latter-day Saints. The archetypal significance of the first vision was not immediately apparent for the Latter-day Saints. However, once it was canonized in 1880 as a portion of the Pearl of Great Price, it received the authoritative status to become, eventually, a foundational sacred story for the Latter-day Saints.

4. Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, “Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 31–42.

In conclusion, I would like to address the process by which memories seem to be made and refined within these spiritual contexts, at both the individual and collective levels.⁵ Memories are generated from a person's experiencing some kind of event. That event becomes a meaningful experience as it is interpreted within the individual's consciousness. The interpretation of experience is based on four distinct but interrelated contexts. The personal context of interpretation reflects the particular background, interests, and expectations of the individual. In a word, the personal context for learning recognizes that the old adage "seeing is believing" is equally valid in the reverse, "believing is seeing." There is at least a dynamic interplay between perception and conception in the process of interpreting experiences. The social context of the making of meaning considers the influence of a person's interpersonal relationships. Family, friends, colleagues, and other associates all influence how a person interprets life's experiences. The physical setting is a third dimension of the learning process: What else was going on at the time of the initial experience? Were there distractions? How familiar were the surroundings? The more unfamiliar or novel elements of the setting will likely be those that are the least memorable, at least initially and without some kind of subsequent reinforcement. Finally, the temporal context of our memory acknowledges that the meaning of experiences is transformed, refined, erased, or, in some cases, re-created by subsequent experiences and reflections. The meaning of a profound or life-changing experience is rarely if ever fully comprehended at once.

From this perspective, it is not surprising that the memory of spiritual experiences is complex, elusive, even ineffable. Nevertheless, for the Latter-day Saints, the spiritual experiences that define their individual and collective lives are hardly ever exclusively intrapersonal. Hence, church members are counseled to share them with one another, where appropriate, in oral and written forms—in testimony meetings, in gospel discussions, in journals and family histories, and so on. And the church devotes considerable resources to preserve in

5. John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000).

perpetuity the memories of those actual, real-life experiences in written, material, electronic, and other media “for the good of the church, and for the rising generations” (D&C 69:8).

