Priceless Words and Fallible Memories: Joseph Smith as Seen in the Effort to Preserve His Discourses

Dean C. Jessee

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol31/iss2/4
Priceless Words and Fallible Memories: Joseph Smith as Seen in the Effort to Preserve His Discourses

Dean C. Jessee

Speaking of Joseph Smith, the Lord told an ancient prophet, "I will not lose his tongue, that he shall speak much, for I will not make him mighty in speaking."1 As if in fulfillment, some who heard Joseph noted that he was "not unusually talented for a Speaker,"2 nor did he appear to be "an educated man."3 "His conversational powers were but ordinary," wrote Peter Burnett, a non-Mormon Missouri lawyer. "You could see at a glance that his education was very limited. He was an awkward but vehement speaker. In conversation he was slow, and used too many words to express his ideas, and would not generally go directly to a point."4 A convert's impression on first hearing Joseph Smith speak was that the Prophet "looked green and not very intelligent."5 A reporter for an eastern newspaper described Joseph as "a bad speaker" who appeared to be "very imperfectly educated."6 After visiting Nauvoo during a summer break, a student recalled that "the Prophet spoke very fluently, but ungrammatically, like an uneducated man; but he possessed the gift of a rough eloquence, and could be most persuasive when he tried."7 Lorenzo Snow, who joined the Latter-day Saints in 1836 but who first saw the Prophet in Hiram, Ohio, in 1831, said that the Prophet would not be called "a fluent speaker."8

The Smith family's economic situation helps explain Joseph Smith's lack of polish when speaking. He wrote that indigent circumstances had deprived him of a formal education's advantages except for the basics of "reading, writing and the ground <rules>[sic] of Arithmatic, which constuted my whole literary acquirements." This lack of formal education meant that his speaking and writing skills developed from his environment and his study of the Bible — so much

Dean C. Jessee is research professor of Church history and senior research historian of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History.
so that his prose reflects the Bible’s imagery and rhythms. His speech also reveals his strong sense of mission. Joseph noted that he had searched the scriptures in his youth and had been “seriously impressed” with concern for the welfare of his “immortal Soul.” As he searched for understanding and salvation, he pondered in his heart “the situation of the world of mankind” and the physical world around him. His search led him into the “wilderness” near his father’s home, where the Lord “opened the heavens” and taught him many things pertaining to the purposes of God.

Consequently, whatever Joseph Smith’s forensic weaknesses, there was still much in his manner and especially in his message that attracted people. A recurring theme among those who heard him was the inspired nature and power of his message. Jared Carter observed that although Joseph’s delivery was disappointing “the Holy Ghost Spoke in him and marvelous was the displays of the power of the Spirit.” Another observer said Joseph’s language was meek, instructive, and edifying: “There is a power and majesty that attends his words and Preaching that we never beheld in any man before.”

Others mentioned the energetic style of his speaking and the “powerful manner” and “impressive terms” in which he exhorted people. “Truly when he spoke light wisdom and intelligence flowed from his mouth in a way not to be heard from an uninspired man,” recalled one convert. “Sabbath after Sabbath I heard Set forth the order of the Kingdom of God in a way well calculated to gladden the hearts of those who were seeking truth for their guide.”

And Parley P. Pratt, a dedicated disciple, said the Prophet’s speech abounded in original eloquence peculiar to himself — not polished — not studied — not smoothed and softened by education and refined by art; but flowing forth in its own native simplicity, and profusely abounding in variety of subject and manner. He interested and edified, while, at the same time, he amused and entertained his audience; and none listened to him that were ever weary with his discourse. I have even known him to retain a congregation of willing and anxious listeners for many hours together, in the midst of cold or sunshine, rain or wind, while they were laughing at one moment and weeping the next.

Many others who heard Joseph Smith after his early religious experiences were awed by the “light and wisdom” of his speech. “We soon felt and knew we were listening to one that had not been taught of men — so different were all his thoughts and language,” wrote one observer. It was said that when Joseph spoke “all ears were opened and the most profound silence was observed.” He could teach God’s law so plainly “that on reflection one would think [he had] always new it, [and] he . . . had the appearance of one . . . sent
from the heavenly worlds on some divine mishon.” For many of his contemporaries, the Prophet’s teachings were a refreshing departure from common pulpit fare. “His words were meat & Drink for us for with wisdom & edification Did he Speak to us & made plain the way of life & Salvation & made the glories of the kingdom Shine with a more brilliant luster than before,” noted one of the earliest Church converts.

Brigham Young said that prior to meeting Joseph Smith “all the priests of the day could not tell me anything correct about heaven, hell, God, angels, or devils: they were as blind as Egyptian darkness.” In contrast, Joseph “took heaven, figuratively speaking, and brought it down to earth; and he took the earth, brought it up, and opened up, in plainness and simplicity, the things of God; and that is the beauty of his mission.”

After listening to Joseph Smith for the first time, Wilford Woodruff wrote, “There was more light made manifest at that meeting respecting the gospel and Kingdom of God than I had ever received from the whole Sectarian world.” On 6 April 1837, Wilford heard the Prophet speak for three hours “clothed with the power, spirit, & image of God. . . . He presented many things of vast importance to the minds of the Elders of Israel. O that they might be written upon our hearts with an iron pen to remain forever.” Three days later he saw Joseph stand before an audience “like a lion of the tribe of Judah. . . . His mind like Enochs swells wide as eternity. Nothing short of a God can comprehend his soul.” Years later, Wilford noted, “My Soul has been much edifyed . . . from time to time in hearing Joseph the Seer. . . . Truly God is with him & is making him mighty in wisdom & knowledge.”

An English convert said Joseph Smith spoke “with great power and much assurance” and expounded the scripture in a way that “it could not be misunderstood for plainness. . . . My Soul found food, as a hungary mans body that Sits to the lu[x]eries of the Earth.” The non-Mormon, Peter Burnett, found “Joseph’s views were so strange and striking, and his manner was so earnest, and apparently so candid, that you could not [help] but be interested” in what he said. One Kirtland, Ohio, resident noted both the eagerness with which people gathered to hear the Prophet and the “glorious preaching that cheered and animated” them: “How often while listening to the voice of the prophet have I wished, Oh that my friends, parents, brothers, and sisters, could hear the things that I heard, and their hearts be made to rejoice in them, as mine did.” An English convert confided that one lecture from the Prophet’s mouth well repaid him for all the troubles and privations of his journey to America, which were not a few.
As Joseph Smith’s influence has spread during the century and a half since his death, interest in him has increased. His teachings, eagerly sought, are often read with scriptural reverence. Yet too often their sources are taken at face value without determining how clearly those sources represent his mind and personality. These windows to his life and thought reflect varying levels of proximity to him, a factor that must be dealt with in any serious study of him. Indeed, one of the main historiographic problems confronting students of the Prophet is understanding how to sift the source material to reach the real Joseph. As noted by E. H. Carr, “History cannot be written unless the historian can achieve some kind of contact with the mind of those about whom he is writing.”

Fawn Brodie’s biography of Joseph Smith suffers directly because she failed to understand the nature of the sources behind his published history. “There are few men . . . who have written so much and told so little about themselves,” she wrote. “To search in [Joseph Smith’s] six-volume autobiography for the inner springs of his character is to come away baffled.” One reason for Mrs. Brodie’s confusion was her failure to evaluate the documents underlying Joseph Smith’s history. To use letters, reports of speeches, and other sources to reconstruct a man’s life is impossible unless, as Ernest May has written, his own contributions can be winnowed from what ghostwriters produced for him. Indeed, all who would seriously study the Latter-day Saint leader must come to grips with the complexity of the source materials. In the case of his published discourses, this task requires a look at the process by which they were originally recorded and eventually became part of the official history of his life.

Several factors have impinged on the clarity with which Joseph Smith’s thought has filtered through written history. One factor was the difficulty of preserving everything he said. Because of his prominence in introducing a new dispensation of the gospel, the esteem with which he was regarded by his people, a revelation given on the day of the Church’s inception commanding record keeping, and the Latter-day Saints’ reputation for diligent record keeping, we might assume that clerks followed the Prophet and recorded everything he said. In reality, due largely to the problem of implementing the record-keeping enterprise, the records do not measure up to the stature of the life they chronicle, and only a fraction of the Prophet’s discourses was preserved. This partial success occurred even though a major concern of the Prophet after the Church’s organization was setting up a history-keeping procedure that would preserve a full account of the rise of the Church and of his own experiences. His struggle to meet this
challenge is outlined by Church historiography during his lifetime. Nonetheless, by the time Joseph Smith and his clerks settled on a reasonably satisfactory solution, much valuable information had been lost.31

Among the items lost is information about most of Joseph Smith’s discourses. During the last eighteen months of his life, the Prophet is known to have given 78 public addresses, or an average of a little more than one a week. Assuming conservatively that he averaged 30 speeches a year during earlier years, the total discourses of his public ministry (1830–44) would number about 450. Available sources, however, identify only about 250 discourses, and his published history gives reasonably adequate summaries of only about one-fifth of these. Not until the last eighteen months of his life were the Prophet’s speeches reported with reasonable consistency. Of the 52 addresses reported in some detail in his history, 35 date from that time period. The remaining 17 average about two a year between 1834 and 1842. These figures suggest that probably not more than one in ten of Joseph Smith’s discourses were recorded, and most of these come from the last three years of his life.32

During its first decade, the Church attended to the preservation and publication primarily of the Prophet’s revelations. A substantial number of these revelations and some of his correspondence and other records from the early years outline the doctrinal foundation of the work he established. Missing from the early years, however, are reports of discourses that would no doubt give added insights not only to the doctrines set forth in the revelations, but also to his views on a wide range of subjects, including his own experiences.

The lack of reported speeches by Joseph Smith prior to 1842 illustrates the dictum “No records, no history.” Without question, this lack limits our understanding of the development of his thought. For example, only three accounts of Joseph’s first vision are reported in any detail prior to 1840. And yet, among references to unreported discourses are several dealing with the Prophet’s early visions. For example, Lorenzo Snow, who first heard Joseph speak in 1831, wrote:

His remarks were confined principally to his own experiences, especially the visitation of the angel, giving a strong and powerful testimony in regard to these marvelous manifestations. He simply bore his testimony to what the Lord had manifested to him, to the dispensation of the Gospel which had been committed to him, and to the authority that he possessed... As I looked upon him and listened, I thought to myself that a man bearing such a wonderful
testimony...could not have been deceived, it seemed to me, and if he was a deceiver he was deceiving the people knowingly; for when he testified that he had had a conversation with Jesus, the Son of God, and had talked with Him personally, as Moses talked with God upon Mount Sinai, and that he had also heard the voice of the Father, he was telling something that he either knew to be false or to be positively true.33

In October 1834 Edward Stevenson heard Joseph speak in the old log schoolhouse in Pontiac, Michigan: "The Prophet stood at a table for the pulpit where he began relating his vision and before he got through he was in the midst of the congregation with uplifted hand. I do believe that there was not one person present who did [not believe] at the time being or who was not convicted [sic] of the truth of his vision, of an angel to him."34

William W. Phelps heard Joseph give an address in 1835 titled "This is My Beloved Son: Hear Ye Him." Phelps describes it as one of the greatest sermons he ever heard, lasting about three and one-half hours.35 Later that year the Prophet gave an account of his boyhood experiences from the time he was six to the time of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon; this account included his first vision.36

On two occasions Parley P. Pratt heard the Prophet recount his early visions. Writing to Church members in Canada in 1836, Pratt told of an important meeting he had attended in Kirtland, Ohio:

One week before [the meeting] word was Publicly given that Br. J. Smith Jr. would give a relation of the coming forth of the Records and al also of the rise of the church and of his Experience accordingly a vast concourse assembled at an Early hour Every seat was crowded and 4 or 5 hundred People stood up in the Aisles Br. S[mith] gave the history of these things relating many particulars of the manner of his first visions &c. The Spirit and Power of God was upon him in Bearing testimony Insomuch that many if not most of the Congregation was in tears — as for my Self i can say that all the reasonings in uncertainty and all the conclusions drawn from the writings of others... however great in themselves Dwindle into insignificance when compared with Living testimony when your Eyes sea and your Ears hear from the Living oracles of God.37

Parley also heard the Prophet address a large congregation in Philadelphia in 1839 in which Joseph "spoke in great power, bearing testimony of the visions he had seen, the ministering of angels which he had enjoyed; and how he had found the plates of the Book of Mormon, and translated them by the gift and power of God. . . . The entire congregation were astounded; electrified, as it were, and overwhelmed with the sense of the truth and power by which he spoke, and the wonders which he related."38
Priceless Words and Fallible Memories

For none of the foregoing instances are there known records of the speech. It is hard to explain the paucity of records of Joseph Smith’s discourses during the first decade of the Church on grounds other than the slow development of a record-keeping consciousness among members and the problem of establishing a historical enterprise in the unsettled conditions that beset the Church during those years. Although many who heard the Prophet speak were convinced they were in the presence of one sent from God and “feasted upon his words,” they left no record of what he said.

Those who reported hearing him frequently mentioned nothing more than the fact of his having spoken. The first recorded minutes of an official Church meeting, a conference at Fayette, New York, on 9 June 1830, refer to an “exhortation by Joseph Smith,” but nothing else. Likewise, the recorder of the second conference, held 26 September that same year, also at Fayette, merely wrote, “remarks by Brother Joseph Smith jr.” In 1835 William E. McLellin reported hearing a three-hour discourse of the Prophet in Huntsburgh, Ohio, but made no reference to its content.

As late as 1844, after record-keeping procedures had become better established in the young Church, some speeches of the Prophet were still not recorded even when competent reporters were present. On 18 February 1844 Willard Richards, who was keeping the Prophet’s diary, noted only that Joseph Smith “preached at the temple to a large collection” of people, and the talented English clerk Thomas Bullock, who was also in attendance, recorded that “Joseph spoke to an immense congregation.” A week later Richards noted that the Prophet “preached at or near the temple”; Wilford Woodruff wrote in his diary, “President Smith preached at the temple”; and Thomas Bullock went to the temple with his wife and “heard Joseph preach on cardinal points [to] an immense congregation.” William Rowley’s report of “listening to one that had not been taught of men” is the only known reference to the Prophet’s speech of 12 November 1843. And two weeks before his death, the records say only that Joseph “made some observations” at the Seventies Hall in Nauvoo. On these and other occasions nothing more was recorded than the fact that he had spoken.

At other times the topics of the Prophet’s discourses were reported but nothing else. On 13 December 1835 Warren Parrish, Joseph Smith’s secretary, reported the Prophet had attended a marriage ceremony where he made some “preliminary remarks upon the subject of matrimony, touching the design of the Almighty in its institution, also the duties of husbands and wives towards each other.” After singing and prayer, he spoke another forty minutes. In May 1838 George W. Robinson wrote that Joseph “instructed the
Church in the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, giving them a history of the planets &c. and of Abraham’s writings upon the planetary system, &c.” Robinson added that later in the day the Prophet “spoke upon different subjects; he dwelt some upon the subject of wisdom, & upon the Word of Wisdom, &c.” Another time Joseph spoke to the Saints in the Kirtland Temple on the topic of “the gathering of the Saints in the last days and the duties of the different quorums [in] relations thereto.” On the occasion of Wilford Woodruff’s thirty-fifth birthday, the young Apostle had killed a turkey and invited his friends of the First Presidency and Twelve to a feast at his home in Nauvoo. According to Willard Richards, Joseph “explained many important principles in relation to progressive improvement in the scale of intelligent existence.” Wilford noted that “after supper the evening was mostly spent in hearing Joseph the Seer converse about the blessings of the kingdom of God much to our edification.” In July 1842 Wilford experienced an “interesting day” when about six thousand people in Nauvoo were “addressed by Joseph the Seer much to our edification. He read the 7th Ch. of Daniel and explained about the kingdom of God set up in the last days and said many things which were truly edifying.” Six weeks before the Prophet was killed, a Nauvoo newspaper reported a discourse he gave in the upper room of his red brick store: “He spoke with much talent, and ability and displayed a great knowledge of the political history of this nation, of the cause of the evils under which our nation groans, and also the remedy.” On each of these occasions, as with many others, nothing more was reported than the topic of the speech.

Since Joseph Smith almost always spoke extemporaneously, without a prepared text, there are no drafts to help document his discourses. In 1843 he told an audience, “I am not like other men, my mind is continually occupied with the business of the day, and I have to depend entirely upon the living God for everything I say on such occasions as these.” This was his common practice, a practice suggested by revelation in 1830: “It shall be given thee in the very moment what thou shalt speak and write.” Occasionally the theme of his address suggested itself as he faced his audience. In March 1842 the Prophet approached a Nauvoo congregation to deliver a discourse on the subject of baptism, “but as a young child was dead & his Corpses presented in the assembly,” he changed his remarks to the topic of death and the resurrection. The following year he told a gathering of Saints in the temple that the subject of his discourse had presented itself after he came to the stand. In the absence of personal drafts of his speeches, the study of Joseph
Priceless Words and Fallible Memories

Smith’s discourses and of his ability as a speaker is dependent on the reports of those who heard him.

Of approximately two dozen persons who wrote for the Prophet in an official capacity, nine reported one or more of the discourses published in his history: Thomas Bullock, William Clayton, Warren Parrish, Willard Richards, Franklin D. Richards, Sylvester Smith, Eliza R. Snow, Robert B. Thompson, and Wilford Woodruff.56 Since none of these scribes was sufficiently skilled in shorthand prior to Joseph Smith’s death to record verbatim what the Prophet said, the reports preserve main themes rather than a detailed reflection of his personality and prose. Pitman shorthand, which provided a major breakthrough in speed and accuracy, had been developed in England in 1837 but was not mastered by anyone in the Latter-day Saint community in time to be of value in reporting the Prophet’s speeches.57

Among those who reported Joseph Smith’s addresses, Willard Richards and Wilford Woodruff deserve particular attention. Reports of forty of the fifty-two discourses published at some length in Joseph Smith’s history were produced by these two men. In terms of quantity, Richards made the most substantial contribution, but he arrived on the scene late. He did not join the Church until December 1836 and was engaged in missionary work in England from 1837 to 1841. Richards began keeping the Prophet’s journal at Nauvoo in December 1841 but left the next year to get his family in Massachusetts. In December 1842 he was “appointed private Sect. & Historian” to the Prophet. The diaries kept by Richards form the basis for the Prophet’s history during the last two-and-a-half years of the Prophet’s life and account for the increased detail in the latter part of that work.58 Prior to the Richards appointment, there had been little continuity or consistency in reporting Joseph Smith’s addresses. However, Richards tended to take brief, almost illegible notes and to leave gaps with the intention of later filling them. This practice required substantial editing and fleshing out.

Wilford Woodruff, whose diary is one of the most substantive historical sources on the nineteenth-century Church, became acquainted with Joseph Smith in 1834. Wilford felt divinely prompted to keep careful records, a prompting which motivated his extensive diary keeping: “It may be thought Strange why a man of as busy a life as I have lead, Should spend as much time as I have in journalizing,” he reflected later in his life, adding, “I have been inspired and required of the Lord to do it.”59 He was proud that “some of the most glorious Gospel Sermons truths & revelations that were given from God to this people through the mouth of the
Prophets Joseph, Brigham, Heber, & the Twelve Could not be found upon the Earth on record ownly [i.e., except] in my Journals." However, missionary and other assignments that took him away from Church headquarters for extended periods prevented the energetic diarist from reporting more than sixteen Joseph Smith discourses. Of these, nine are exclusive reports, recorded by no one else. Although Wilford’s diary shows some knowledge of shorthand (probably that of the eighteenth-century Englishman, Samuel Taylor), Wilford was not skilled enough to make an exact record of a speech. Reflecting upon his ability later in his life, he recalled, "I could write a sermon of Josephs a week after it was delivered almost word for word & after it was written it was taken from . . . my mind. This was a gift from God unto me." But as the sermons themselves confirm, this statement should be interpreted to mean that Wilford Woodruff had a gift to preserve the general content of the Prophet’s addresses — not a verbatim record.

In addition to the inability of clerks to report verbatim all that Joseph Smith said, years elapsed between the delivery and the editing of most of the discourses. When Joseph Smith was killed in June 1844, the manuscript of his history had been completed to August 1838, and by the time the Saints began leaving Nauvoo in 1846, the history had been compiled to March 1843. Nevertheless, most of the reports of Joseph Smith’s discourses were not incorporated into the history until labor resumed on that work several years after the arrival of the Saints in Salt Lake Valley; the boxes containing the contents of the Historian’s Office were not unpacked until 7 June 1853. Even then, more than a year elapsed before work recommenced on the Prophet’s speeches.

The death of Willard Richards in 1855 further hampered editorial work. As Church historian, Richards had become the guiding mind behind the compilation of the history after the death of Joseph Smith. But ill health and the strain of the exodus to Salt Lake Valley brought his death before he was able to prepare the reports of Joseph Smith’s speeches for the history, a work that would have included fleshing out the gaps in his own records of the discourses.

In 1855, when newly appointed Church Historian George A. Smith, assisted by Wilford Woodruff, began work on the history, he faced complex editorial challenges. Where the Prophet’s discourses had been reported in coherent, connected prose, the editors simply copied the original reports into the history. But where the original reports were less complete, the task was more complicated. Using procedures typical of the literary world of their
Priceless Words and Fallible Memories

day, the editors inserted words, phrases, and sometimes even a paragraph, to smooth out or bridge gaps in the reported text of a speech without indicating that the added material was an editorial expansion of the original report.64

The Historian’s Office Journal for 1854 to 1856 documents the work of preparing the Smith sermons for inclusion in the history — a process that consisted of blending reports where more than one existed, fleshing out and filling gaps where reports were incomplete, and reading the final product to the President of the Church and others who may have heard the original speech. Wilford Woodruff noted on 16 February 1855 that he spent “part of the day at the Historian’s Office examining my journals containing Joseph’s sermons preparatory for publication in the Church History.”65 The following day Robert Campbell was “copying [a] sermon of Joseph’s reported by W. Woodruff.” The day after, Wilford spent “most of the day making out & filling up one of Joseph’s sermons,” while George A. Smith and Jonathan Grimshaw were “up at [the] Presidents office reading Joseph’[s] Sermon” of 11 June 1843.66

On 29 March George A. Smith and Thomas Bullock visited President Young to read to him the finished text of a discourse the Prophet gave to the Nauvoo Relief Society. But the President referred them to Eliza R. Snow since she had written the original report of the address. She in turn gave them both “the original Sermon in the Female R[elief] S[ociety] Record” and one of her own journals, whereupon Smith and Bullock returned to the office and worked until 10 P.M. The next day Heber C. Kimball came to the Historian’s Office, “heard Joseph’s sermon Read,” and “liked it better as revised.” On 8 August Brigham Young spent some time in the Historian’s Office listening to “the remarks of Prest. Joseph Smith before the Female Relief Socy. . . . Tho[mas] Bullock read them to him, and he was much pleased with them.”67

Repeatedly in the months from November 1854 to July 1856, George A. Smith, Wilford Woodruff, Robert Campbell, John L. Smith, Jonathan Grimshaw, Leo Hawkins, and Thomas Bullock “amalgamat[ed]” reports of Joseph Smith’s speeches, read them to the President, and copied them into the history. George A. Smith described his work on the discourses as “an immense labor, requiring the deepest thought and the closest application.” He emphasized that the editors took the utmost care “to convey the ideas in the prophet’s style.”68 To assure the greatest accuracy, they read their work to Church leaders who had heard the original discourses in some instances and were in a position to insure the doctrinal integrity of what was said. “Prest B. Young called & staid
a couple of hours this afternoon, and heard minutes and sermons of March 7th 1844 read by T[omas] B[ullock] and also Joseph’s sermon of the 10th March 1844, and sanctioned them,” according to the Historian’s Office Journal, and “G.[eorge] A. S.[mith was] revising sermons & minutes for History & conferring with Prest. Young all day.”

Concern for the integrity of the editorial work is evident from the diligence of the historian in having the finished product read to President Young. In November 1855 George A. Smith and Thomas Bullock went to see the President to read a completed Joseph Smith speech but found that “he was gone up to the Canal terminus.” They tried again the same evening, but the President “had just rode out.” The journal adds that this was the sixth time the historian had tried to read the account to the President “but failed each time.”

Recognizing that surviving longhand reports were the only sources for Joseph Smith’s speeches, George A. Smith and his associates in the Historian’s Office took the utmost care to report them as completely and accurately as possible according to the standards of their time.

One aspect of the editing process that required careful comparison and concentration was the fusing of texts where more than one report was made of an address. A prime example is the King Follett discourse delivered by Joseph Smith on 7 April 1844. Lasting a reported two and a quarter hours, the published discourse was derived by dovetailing the reports of four persons who heard the speech: Wilford Woodruff, Willard Richards, Thomas Bullock, and William Clayton. The original reports reveal the comparative ability of these men to record what they heard on that occasion.

Assuming Joseph Smith spoke approximately one hundred words per minute on the average (with no loudspeaking system to amplify his voice, he would have spoken somewhat slowly), the entire speech would have contained about 13,500 words. The longest of the four reports is Thomas Bullock’s 4,500-word summary, which represents about 25 percent of the total discourse. William Clayton’s 2,800-word report represents about 17 percent of the original; Wilford Woodruff’s 2,400 words, 14 percent; and Willard Richards’s 900 words, about 5 percent of the original. These incomplete reports bear out Wilford Woodruff’s comment recorded by John Whitaker: “You can imagine how little we could get during an address of several hours, and the notes taken in long hand.”

When dovetailed together, the four reports comprise the 6,700-word version of the discourse published in the History of the Church. Although this version represents only about half the length of the total speech, it is no doubt an accurate representation of the
main themes. What is missing is the precise word order and sentence structure that would most clearly reflect Joseph Smith's personality and thought.

In comparing the published discourses of the Prophet with original reports of what he said, one finds elements of harshness, hypercriticism, egotism, ill humor, boasting, etc., cropping up at the points of heaviest editing — traits that have filtered into the record during the reporting and editing process and that appear to be more characteristic of the reporters and editors than of Joseph Smith. Thus the editing process has superimposed the personality of others over that of the Prophet. The following quotations, for example, were added editorially to original reports of the Prophet's speeches to bridge disconnected thoughts or to flesh out ideas that were partially preserved:

The only principle upon which they [Joseph Smith's enemies] judge me is by comparing my acts with the foolish traditions of their fathers and nonsensical teachings of hireling priests, whose object and aim were to keep the people in ignorance for the sake of filthy lucre; or as the prophet says, to feed themselves, not the flock.74

The Constitution should contain a provision that every officer of the Government who should neglect or refuse to extend the protection guaranteed in the Constitution should be subject to capital punishment; and then the president of the United States would not say, "Your cause is just, but I can do nothing for you," a governor issue exterminating orders, or judges say, "The men ought to have the protection of law, but it won't please the mob; the men must die, anyhow, to satisfy the clamor of the rabble; they must be hung, or Missouri be damned to all eternity." Executive writs could be issued when they ought to be, and not be made instruments of cruelty to oppress the innocent, and persecute men whose religion is unpopular.75

[Speaking of the Bible] Ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors.76

Willard Richards's 19 April 1843 report of an address reads in part, "If you can get hands onto the House, it will give such an impetus to the work, it will never stop till it is completed." This passage was edited to read, "If you can get hands onto the Nauvoo House, it will give such an impetus to the work, that it will take all the devils out of hell to stop it."77

In the case of Joseph Smith's 21 May 1843 speech, Richards reported one segment in five words: "rough stone rolling down hill."78 This phrase was fleshed out by the editors to read:

I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by
coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, priestcraft, lawyer-craft, doctor-craft, lying editors, suborned judges and jurors, and the authority of perjured executives, backed by mobs, blasphemers, licentious and corrupt men and women — all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty, who will give me dominion over all and every one of them, when their refuge of lies shall fail, and their hiding place shall be destroyed, while these smooth-polished stones with which I come in contact become marred.79

While this version may very well reflect the imagery the Prophet used, the phrasing and word choice may be later creations. Richards reported a portion of Joseph Smith’s discourse of 23 July 1843 in these words:

Although I am under the necessity of bearing the infirmities of other men, &c — on the other hand the same characters when they discover a weakness in brother Joseph, blast his character, &c — all that law, &c through him to the church. — he cannot be borne with a moment.

Men mouth my troubles, when I in trouble they forget it all I believe in a principle of reciprocity — if we live in a devilish world — &c —

After these lines were edited on 11 July 1856 for inclusion in the history, they read:

Notwithstanding my weaknesses, I am under the necessity of bearing the infirmities of others, who, when they get into difficulty, hang on to me tenaciously to get them out, and wish me to cover their faults. On the other hand, the same characters, when they discover a weakness in Brother Joseph, endeavor to blast his reputation, and publish it to all the world, and thereby aid my enemies in destroying the Saints. Although the law is given through me to the Church, I cannot be borne with a moment by such men. They are ready to destroy me for the least foible, and publish my imaginary failings from Dan to Beersheba, though they are too ignorant of the things of God, which have been revealed to me, to judge of my actions, motives or conduct, in any correct manner whatever.

The only principle upon which they judge me is by comparing my acts with the foolish traditions of their fathers and nonsensical teachings of hireling priests, whose object and aim were to keep the people in ignorance for the sake of filthy lucre; or as the prophet says, to feed themselves, not the flock. Men often come to me with their troubles, and seek my will, crying, Oh, Brother Joseph, help me! help me! But when I am in trouble, few of them sympathize with me, or extend to me relief. I believe in a principle of reciprocity, if we do live in a devilish and wicked world where men busy themselves in watching for iniquity, and lay snares for those who reprove in the gate.80
A reading of these extracts raises the question, How accurately could even a witness to the original speech reconstruct the missing words of his own report more than a decade after the event? Studies of memory suggest the difficulty of recalling such precise detail. Probably the best that can be hoped for in reconstructing missing segments is that the disconnected elements of the available reports provided the prompts necessary to preserve the general theme. George A. Smith summarized his editorial work as an immense labor, requiring the deepest thought and the closest application, as there were mostly only two or three words (about half written) to a sentence. The greatest care has been taken to convey the ideas in the prophets style as near as possible; and in no case has the sentiment been varied that I know of; as I heard the most of his discourses myself, was on the most intimate terms with him, have retained a most vivid recollection of his teachings, and was well acquainted with his principles and motives.

In the instances cited here, the death of one of the prime witnesses, Willard Richards, complicated the editorial work even further. A recent study indicates that a person’s motives, biases, mood, etc., at the time of reconstructing past events, rather than proximity to the events, have a crucial impact upon the way the events are remembered. Since Joseph Smith’s discourses were edited following the trauma of his murder and the exodus of the Latter-day Saints from Nauvoo in the wake of mob violence and frayed feelings, these events may have had at least some effect on the way certain missing elements of the Prophet’s speeches were remembered. However clearly the above editorial insertions reflect the gist of Joseph Smith’s discourses, there appears to be a postmartyrdom personality unintentionally injected by the editors to lash back at those forces that killed their prophet and persecuted the Saints.

This finding supports the conclusion that the main value of reports of Joseph Smith’s speeches lies in the insight they give to the teachings and doctrines of the Prophet and the early Church, but as a window for observing his personality, these sources are not as informative as others that more accurately preserve his prose.

In the absence of videotape and movie footage, one of the best avenues, which is undistorted by clerical and editorial barriers, for studying Joseph Smith’s personality as a speaker is the Prophet’s holograph writings — those materials produced by his own hand and hence by his own mind. Note for example the following lines from an 1833 Joseph Smith holograph letter:
O thou disposer of all events, thou dispenser of all good! In the name of Jesus Christ I ask thee to inspire my heart, indite my thoughts, guide my pen, to note some kind word to these my Brethren in Zion that like the rays of the sun upon the Earth warmeth the face thereof so let this word I write warm the hearts of my Brethren. Or as the gentle rain descendeth upon the earth or the dews upon the mountains refresheth the face of nature and causeth her to smile, so give unto thy servant Joseph a word that shall refresh the hearts and revive the spirits yea souls of those afflicted ones who have been called to leave their homes and go to a strange land not knowing what should befall them.¹⁴¹

Elinore Partridge, in her important analysis of Joseph Smith’s style, an analysis based upon a careful study of his holographs, has provided valuable insight to the Prophet’s personality as a speaker.¹⁴² She identified several stylistic markers that characterize Joseph Smith’s prose. Perhaps the most prominent of these was his tendency to use a long, unbroken sentence structure composed of interrelated thoughts with no clear stopping point, connected by the conjunctions and, but, for, so, etc. Another characteristic was his tendency to use an unusually large number of demonstratives and pronouns, words such as that, this, those, they, these, which, who, etc., that have little meaning without specific referents. He used modifying phrases separated from the parts of speech they modify: “I have visited a grove which is just back of the town almost every day where I can be secluded from the eyes of any mortal”; “they are called to contend with the beast of the wilderness for a long time whose jaws are open to devour them.” Partridge also noted Joseph’s use of the demonstratives this/these (“in this my lonely retreat,” “know this that,” “these my brothers”) and his frequent use of a gerund or participle in place of an infinitive or nominal form (“this led me to searching the scriptures,” “to the astonishing of every beholder”). An exception to his use of the participle rather than infinitive was his recurring use of the infinitive with the verb feel (“I feel to trust,” “feel to thank,” “feel to exclaim,” “feel to humble myself,” “feel to mourn”). To repeat or emphasize a particular point, Joseph Smith used words such as exceeding, ever, yea (“it was with exceeding joy,” “ever full of love,” “ever winning,” “called to give up their wives and children, yea and their own lives also,” “may I not say thou wilt, yea I will say Lord thou wilt”). He also provided emphasis by repeating key words in a phrase (“prepare you that you might be prepared,” “pray in my prayers,” “rejoice with great joy”). He used certain expressions common in the nineteenth century among the uneducated, such as seeing or seeing that (“it cannot be seeing that”), but what (“there is not one place in me but what is filled,” “I know nothing but what you have
done the best you could”), for to (“the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the book”). Finally, he used above in the place of comparatives (“pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noonday”) and the King James Bible word forms thine and mine (“thine enemies,” “mine anger”).

Perhaps more revealing of Joseph Smith’s personality as a speaker than his stylistic word structure are the images he used in his prose. Partridge identifies a number of these. Joseph used words denoting bondage — bind, bound, binding, bonds — to designate emotional ties that unite people (“thus we are bound together in chains as well as the cords of everlasting love,” “binding spirit of the gospel,” “bound by faith”). He used heart to show a binding of thought and emotion (“we are of one heart and one mind,” “it cheered my heart,” “the language of my heart”). He used scriptural images, including the bow, quiver, polished shaft, sword, plowshare, vineyard, grapes, and fruit of the vine. He referred to things hidden or obscured or brought to light by use of images of treasures buried in the ground, and he frequently used natural phenomena — cloudbursts, lightning, thunder, sun, rain, meteors, snow, mountains, cooling streams, and plowed fields.

Occasional repetitions and awkward constructions in Joseph Smith’s prose further reflect his lack of skill in the formalities of language and support the statements about his being uneducated. (“I want you to take the best care of the family you can which I believe you will do all you can.” He spoke of “things I cannot is not prudent for me to write.”) With little formal education, he wrote in a style that was often colloquial and conversational; with no prepared text, he delivered speeches that were much the same — that were extended conversations. Hence, there is reason to believe that his speaking closely resembled his writing.

In his prose one senses the tremendous importance Joseph Smith placed on the message he had to impart to mankind and the limitations he felt from having to deliver that message through a language delivery system in which he was not perfectly prepared. When chided on one occasion for allowing revelations to be published with grammatical imperfections, he responded that he was more concerned with the message than with the details of spelling and grammar. His discomfort with the language can be seen from apologetic statements in his personal writings — “I hope you will excuse . . . my inability in conveying my ideas in writing” — and his lamentation, “O Lord God deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.” The narrowness of the language prison that
confronted him is hinted in his effort to describe the transcendent experience of his early visions, when he referred to a “pillar” of “fire” (which he changed to “light”), “above the brightness of the sun at noon day” that descended “gracefully” (which he changed to “gradually”) until it fell upon him. He spoke of personages “whose brightness and glory defy all description” and of seeing a heavenly being whose countenance was “like lightning,” who wore clothing of “exquisite whiteness . . . beyond anything earthly” and whose whole being was “glorious beyond description.”

Yet despite Joseph Smith’s limitations in institutional learning and his feelings of inadequacy, literary specialist Arthur Henry King has given Joseph high marks in his craftsmanship in the English language. As a talented stylist, King, who spent most of his life “being disinclined to be impressed” by the things he read, was “deeply impressed” when he first read Joseph Smith’s story. He described Joseph’s account of the First Vision in the beginning pages of his history as “beautiful, well-balanced prose.” And he compared the Prophet with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “perhaps the best English prose writer of that time.” King noted that with Joseph having had almost no formal schooling, the outstanding thing about the Prophet is “what he did with what he got: he translated the Book of Mormon, wrote the Doctrine and Covenants under inspiration, and accomplished other tasks which show the extent of his genius. The fact that he was inspired by the Lord does not diminish his achievements.” King suggested that “the contrast between Joseph Smith’s limited education and the inspiration of his translation” can best be seen by reading in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon: “It brings Joseph Smith home to us in a very different way from the verse-divided, modern-punctuated, spelling-corrected” editions.92

Although we cannot hear Joseph Smith’s voice, Partridge’s study of his holograph writings identifies five distinguishing features of his style that help us picture him as a speaker, features he shared with some of the finest users of the English language: (1) his use of biblical word forms and examples; (2) his ability “to create visual descriptions which allowed his audience to picture what he was talking about”; (3) his keen narrative sense; (4) his familiar, rather than formal, speaking style; and (5) “the tremendous sense of joy and vitality” that permeated his prose. This quality impressed her the most: “In contrast to the dark visions of Calvinism and the dry, rational theology of Unitarianism” of his time, his language emphasizes “the wonder of existence and the love of humanity.”93

Part of the problem of obtaining an accurate historical understanding of Joseph Smith has been the difficulty, to use
Priceless Words and Fallible Memories

Catherine D. Bowen’s phrase, of returning to “that foreign country, the past,” tracking him through a vast thicket where the footprints of other men are interlaced with his. No observer can see Joseph Smith’s personality or innermost feelings in what others wrote for him. Yet much of the source material bearing his signature was written by other people. Students of the Prophet who try to analyze his mind and personality on the basis of given documents, without distinguishing between his thoughts and those of others, will end up with a monstrosity made up of Joseph Smith and numerous other individuals.

To paraphrase Ernest R. May, in the complicated world of historical sources, conscientious writers have had difficulty getting hold of the protoplasm that would bring Joseph Smith to life. Like the bones concealed in the wrappings of an ancient mummy, the sharp outlines of the Prophet lie hidden beneath the personalities of clerks, editors, and ghostwriters. None of those who recorded Joseph Smith’s speeches realized that their efforts to preserve what he said would partially obscure the very greatness and individuality they sought to make immortal. And yet, because they recorded what they did while laboring under disruptive social conditions and while using literary and editorial rules different from our own, we do have an important body of documents related to Joseph Smith, and for that they deserve our everlasting gratitude. Using that work intelligently requires a studious effort to understand its nature and fully appreciate its content — a challenge facing all who seek to probe the mind and personality of Joseph Smith.

NOTES

Unless otherwise indicated, unpublished sources cited here are in the Archives Division, Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives), which are used by permission.

12Nephi 3:17.
13Jared Carter, Autobiography, 17, manuscript.
16Luman A. Shurtleff, Journal, 52.
18Edwin de Leon, Thirty Years of My Life on Three Continents (London: Ward and Downey, 1890), 57.
Joseph Smith, First President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 1965).


Eliza R. Snow, Diary, 15 June 1843, photocopy of manuscript.

John Spiers, Autobiography and Diary, unpagd.


James Palmer, Journal, 69, underlining in the original.

Newel Knight, Journal, March or April 1838 (presumed from internal evidence).


Woodruff, Diary, 6 April 1837, 1:133.


Woodruff, Diary, 19 February 1842, 2:155–56, underlining in the original.


Burnett, Recollections, 40.

Caroline Barnes Crosby, Autobiography and Journal, [35], Utah Historical Society, Salt Lake City.


In response to a question on the subject, Brodie said she was “not permitted to see any manuscript material” in the LDS Church Archives, nor did she take advantage of an opportunity to see “a diary of Joseph Smith in his own handwriting” after her uncle, David O. McKay, told her she could see it. “I felt that I would rather not take advantage of my uncle’s name to use this material. I wrote him saying I would not ask for any more material and I never went back to the church library. So, technically, I was given access, but I didn’t use it” (“Fawn McKay Brodie: An Oral History Interview,” Dialogue 14 [Summer 1981]: 103).


Calculations based on the author’s personal research. The appointment of Sidney Rigdon in 1833 as “spokesman unto this people . . . even a spokesman unto my servant Joseph” (D&C 100:9) may have resulted in fewer speaking opportunities for the Prophet prior to the settlement of Nauvoo; Rigdon’s stature diminished after Nauvoo was established.

Snow, “The Grand Destiny of Man,” 22; see also LeRoy C. Snow, “How Lorenzo Snow Found God,” Improvement Era (February 1937): 83. In October 1833 Lydia Goldthwait Bailey heard Joseph Smith when he came to Mt. Pleasant, Canada: “The Prophet commenced by relating the scenes of his early life. He told how the angel visited him, of his finding the plates, the translation of them, . . . [He] bore a faithful testimony that the Priesthood was again restored to the earth, and that God and His Son had conferred upon him the keys of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods” (Lydia Knight’s History, The First Book of the Noble Women’s Lives Series [Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883], 18).


William W. Phelps to Sally Phelps, 2 June 1835.

Joseph Smith, Journal, 14 November 1835; published in Jessee, Personal Writings, 84.

Parley P. Pratt to the Elders and Brethren of The Church of Latter Day Saints in Canada, 27 November 1836, John Taylor Collection, 1829–1894.


Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1983), 2, 3.
Priceless Words and Fallible Memories

4McLellin to Oliver Cowdery, 16 April 1835, published in Messenger and Advocate 1 (April 1835): 102.
4Joseph Smith, Journal, 18 February 1844; Thomas Bullock, Diary, same date; compare History of the Church 6:221 (different words: “a very large assembly”).
2Ehat and Cook, Words of Joseph Smith, 258.
2Joseph Smith, Journal, 13 June 1844; compare History of the Church 6:461.
2Joseph Smith, Journal, 6 May 1838; compare History of the Church 3:27.
2Kirland Council Minutes, 17 September 1837.
2Joseph Smith, Journal, 1 March 1842.
2Woodruff, Diary, 1 March 1842, 2:156; Joseph Smith, Journal, 1 March 1842.
2Woodruff, Diary, 3 July 1842, 2:181.
2Nauvoo Neighbor, 22 May 1844.
2Joseph Smith, Journal, 13 August 1843; compare History of the Church 5:529.
2Doctrine and Covenants 24:6. One possible exception is the “article” or treatise “composed” by Joseph Smith and read by Robert B. Thompson at the 5 October 1840 conference of the Church (see History of the Church 4:206–12; the manuscript in the handwriting of Thompson is in the Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives).
2Woodruff, Diary, 20 March 1842, 2:159.
2Joseph Smith, Journal, 11 June 1843; compare History of the Church 5:423.
2Franklin D. Richards, “Bibliography,” July 1880, microfilm of the Bancroft Collection, LDS Church Archives.
2See the essay on Willard Richards in Davis Bitton and Leonard J. Arrington, Mormons and Their Historians (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 3–14; Howard C. Searle, “Early Mormon Historiography: Writing the History of the Mormons, 1830–1858” (Ph.D. diss., University of California Los Angeles, 1979), 84–96; and Searle’s article on Willard Richards in this issue of BYU Studies.
2Woodruff, Diary, 17 March 1857, 5:37.
2Woodruff, Diary, 17 March 1857, 5:36.
2About 9 a.m. T.B. [Thomas Bullock] commenced removing heavy boxes of records down to WR’s [Willard Richards’s] office and unpacked 2 of them they not having been seen since TB assisted [to] fasten them down on 4 Feb. 1846” (Historian’s Office Journal, 7 June 1853).
2See the essay on George A. Smith in Bitton and Arrington, Mormons and Their Historians, chapter 2; and Searle, “Early Mormon Historiography,” 101–33.
2Woodruff, Diary, 16 February 1855, 4:305.
2Historian’s Office Journal, 13, 14 February 1855.
2Historian’s Office Journal, 29 March, 30 March, 8 August 1855.
2George A. Smith to Wilford Woodruff, 21 April 1856, in the book containing the docket of the Municipal Court of Nauvoo, 218.
2Historian’s Office Journal, 18 September 1855.
2Historian’s Office Journal, 17 November 1855.
2Calculations based on the author’s personal research.
2John Mills Whitaker, Journal, 7:73, typescript (311), John Mills Whitaker Collection, MS 2, Journal 7, Manuscripts Division, Special Collections, University of Utah, Marriott Library, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84112.
2Compare Willard Richards’s report of Joseph Smith’s 15 October 1843 discourse in Joseph Smith’s journal with History of the Church 6:57.
2Compare Richards’s report of Joseph Smith’s 15 October 1843 discourse in Joseph Smith’s journal with History of the Church 6:57.
2Compare Richards’s report in Joseph Smith’s journal, 19 April 1843, with History of the Church 5:366.
2Joseph Smith, Journal, 21 May 1843.
2History of the Church 5:401.


George A. Smith to Wilford Woodruff, 21 April 1836, in the book containing the docket of the Municipal Court of Nauvoo, 218.

Thelen, “Memory and American History,” 1121.

Joseph Smith to William, John, and others, 18 August 1833; published in Jesse, Personal Writings, 283–84.


Partridge, “Characteristics of Joseph Smith’s Style,” 9–11.


Joseph Smith to Edward, William, and others, 30 March 1834, retained copy in Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, 30–36, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.; published in Jesse, Personal Writings, 315.


Joseph Smith to William Phelps, 27 November 1832, in Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, in Jesse, Personal Writings, 260.

Arthur Henry King, The Abundance of the Heart (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 197–205. Possibly the contrast is even more telling when the extant pages of the original Book of Mormon manuscript are read instead of the first published edition. See Dean C. Jesse, “The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript,” BYU Studies 10 (Spring 1970): 259–78.


May, “Ghost Writing and History,” 465.