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Circumstantial Confirmation Of the First Vision Through Reminiscences

Richard Lloyd Anderson*

Historical sources, like the people who make them, are rarely either completely perfect or totally unreliable. The bread and butter work of the historian is less the divining of bias than a careful reading of his documents to determine just what is said, whether his source is in a position to know the information related, and to what extent each one tells a partial or complete story. Because it is claimed that Joseph Smith's account of the events surrounding his First Vision are not factual, the foregoing procedures must be applied to his own statements and to all other accounts that claim to relate first-hand information about his earliest activities.¹

Joseph Smith described "great multitudes" as joining various sects at the time of his First Vision, and a recent investigator concludes that the only authentic frame of reference for such an event is 1824-25, when the *Wayne Sentinel* in late 1824 observed, "a reformation is going on in this town to a great extent,"² and in early 1825 reported 400 converts to the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist Churches in the Palmyra area, with a progressive spread of this work "in the neighboring towns."³ Moving back in time, major revival

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¹This article could not have been written without the complete cooperation of several librarians, chief of which is the LDS Historian, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith and his assistants Earl Olson and A. William Lund. The following have also been most helpful: Thelma C. Jefferies at Rochester Public Library, Mrs. Clarence Nesbitt at King's Daughters Free Library (Palmyra), and Niagara County Historian, Clarence O. Lewis.

²*Wayne Sentinel*, September 15, 1824.

³*Ibid.*, March 2, 1825.

activity is not reported in Palmyra until the winter of 1816-17. Because of this gap during 1819 through 1823, it is asserted that Joseph Smith's story of an 1820 revival "*can not be true*,"⁴ for there is an "absence of any revival in the year 1820." Because of this conclusion and its implications, "all students of Mormon history will be forced to reconsider the reliability of Joseph's first vision story."⁵

JOSEPH SMITH

Before one can prove that Joseph Smith contradicts history, he must be sure of what Joseph Smith claimed. There are four official accounts of the First Vision from the Prophet. The three manuscript texts are printed in Dean Jessee's article in this issue. As he shows, their dates of composition are 1831-32, 1835, and 1838. This 1838 account was published as the "History of Joseph Smith" in 1842.⁶ The fourth account is Joseph Smith's "Wentworth Letter," also published in 1842.⁷ It is most convenient to refer to these accounts by their dates of composition.

A synoptic view of Joseph Smith's four accounts adds dimension to our view of his experience. First, revivals are not described in any other account but the 1838 history. Apparently the Prophet was not primarily concerned with them, for he did not constantly emphasize them as central to his personal experience. Second, all accounts identify his early religious position, like that of his father and mother before him, as that of a seeker, finding no church to satisfy him, but continually investigating various sects. Third, all accounts allude to contact with local church leaders or to his attendance at church meetings up to the time that his vision informed him that no church was divinely approved. He recalls: "my intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations" (1831-32); "looking at the different systems taught the children of men" (1835); "I attended their several meetings

⁴Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N. Y.) Revival," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 10 (Fall 1967), p. 228.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁶*Times and Seasons*, Vol 3, No. 10 (March 15, 1842), pp. 726 ff.

⁷*Ibid.*, Vol. 3, No. 9 (March 1, 1842), pp. 706 ff. It is now clear that the phrases of the Wentworth Letter originated at least as early as 1840, a point which requires development in later writing.

as often as occasion would permit" (1838); and "if I went to one society they referred me to one plan, and another to another" (1842). Even though the 1831-32 account expresses his negative evaluation of existing churches prior to the vision, all accounts suggest that in practice he participated to some extent in church meetings up to the time that his revelation confirmed this tentative judgment.

The most striking insight into the earliest religious experiences of the Prophet comes from the 1831-32 manuscript history. Whereas his shortest narrations (the 1835 account and the 1842 Wentworth Letter) summarily link an apparently brief religious confusion to the prayer and answer, the earliest record describes Joseph Smith's religious reflections as continuing from the age of twelve through fifteen. He remembers actively searching for the right church during these full years of 1818 through 1820. With this specific information in mind, the language of the 1838 history may imply a longer period of investigation than is generally supposed. He reflected again and again "in the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions," he attended occasional meetings when possible, and came to favor the Methodists only "in process of time." Since the 1838 history is very specific that the vision took place "early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty," the religious investigation just alluded to in this version must have extended back into 1819 or earlier. But a greater question of interpretation is seriously posed.

If years of religious activity are summarized in the short sentences of abbreviated accounts, did Joseph Smith's 1838 history really intend to portray all revival events as happening just before his vision? In that narrative the Prophet identifies the "unusual excitement" as beginning "in the second year after our removal to Manchester," but the outcome may move considerably beyond this sequence. Beginning in the Smith's area, revival spread through "that region of country," then to the "whole district of country." Even though Joseph alludes to himself as fifteen then, it is possible that "this time of great excitement" may refer to the entire period of revivals in his youth, with special reference to excesses, irrespective of chronology. When William Smith paraphrased his brother's words, his mental image was certainly not time or locality bound. The "unusual revival in the neighborhood . . . spread from

town to town, from city to city, from county to county, and from state to state.”⁸ In the April Conference of 1860, Brigham Young referred to having “been brought up in the midst of those flaming, fiery reformations from his childhood.”⁹ In that case the convert-president pictured years of New York revival patterns in the single “in the midst of” expression. There is no reason why Joseph Smith might not have viewed the intense 1824-25 Palmyra revivals as part of a period beginning earlier than his vision. All his 1838 narrative really demands is unusual religious activity in his region prior to 1820, and his own attendance at meetings and “desire to be united” with the Methodists. His only other circumstantial details that definitely require this approximate date are the religious awakening that “commenced with the Methodists” and the involvement of more than one preacher of that faith. “Some few days” after the vision, Joseph was shocked at the reaction of “one of the Methodist preachers” who had been prominent in the “religious excitement.”¹⁰

ORSAMUS TURNER

The main non-Mormon recollection of the Prophet’s earliest religious views corroborates what he describes. Most statements from Palmyra-Manchester people are more interested in proving his religious views ridiculous than factually describing his life at this time. They are consequently of limited historical value because they generally elevate community gossip into formal affidavits. Orsamus Turner is not exempt from this criticism, but he differs from practically all others who recalled the Smiths in that he distinguishes specifically between public report and personal knowledge.

Turner led a relatively short but distinguished life spanning the years 1801 to 1855. Born on the bare frontier of civilization in western New York, he had a log cabin childhood and grew with the country to become a respected editor

⁸William B. Smith, Sermon at Deloit, Iowa, June 8, 1884, *Saints’ Herald*, Vol. 31, No. 40 (October 4, 1884), p. 643.

⁹Brigham Young, Sermon at Salt Lake City, Utah, April 6, 1860, *Deseret News*, April 11, 1860.

¹⁰For a discussion of the Presbyterian affiliation of Joseph Smith’s family during this early period, see footnote 55 below. For the features of Joseph Smith’s description that particularly fit Methodist conference patterns, see footnote 27 below and the accompanying text.

and author.¹¹ In 1852 he published a sketch of Joseph Smith and Mormonism in his *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase*, in which he partially drew from his own experience. Because the time of Turner's residence in Palmyra is fairly pinpointed, his recollections of young Joseph Smith can be dated. He remembers their Manchester "rude log house, with but a small spot underbrushed around it," in "the winter of '19, '20." He recalls the Wayne County countryside because he had been assigned during his apprenticeship "in a newspaper office at Palmyra" to accompany a blind newspaper carrier "in the years 1818, '19."¹² This employment did not begin before October 1818, when the *Palmyra Register* was first issued by Timothy S. Strong, who moved from Palmyra in 1823.¹³ Strong's apprentices were Luther Tucker, Pomeroy Tucker, and "the author of this work." But young Turner did not serve his whole time in Palmyra, for he also notes that he served an apprenticeship under James Bemis at Canandaigua.¹⁴ Since he expressed a great admiration for Bemis based on intimate contact, he probably spent the years 1821 and 1822 at Canandaigua, where he "finished his apprenticeship."¹⁵

Turner later recounted that he heard of the need of a printer-editor at Lockport, about a hundred miles west of Palmyra, where he had evidently returned from Canandaigua for a brief period of school. He traveled to the new locality, arrived "but a few days after we had reached the age of 21 years" (about August 1, 1822), and purchased the new *Lockport Observatory*.¹⁶ Concerning the year 1822, Turner recalled,

¹¹The two most extensive biographies are Morley B. Turpin and W. De Witt Manning, "Orsamus Turner," *Rochester Historical Society Publications*, Vol. 17 (1939), pp. 273-290; Harry S. Douglass, *Historical Wyoming*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (January 1959), pp. 33-46.

¹²Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester, 1852), pp. 213, 400.

¹³Strong suspended publication of his Palmyra newspaper in the spring of 1823 by existing issues. Turner recalls the date of his move away from Palmyra as 1823 (*Ibid.*, p. 499), which is verified in two other works: Arad Thomas, *Pioneer History of Orleans County, New York* (Albion, N.Y., 1871), pp. 111-112; Milton W. Hamilton, *The Country Printer, New York State, 1785-1830*, 2nd ed. (Port Washington, N.Y., 1964), p. 302.

¹⁴Turner, *Phelps and Gorham's Purchase*, pp. 499, 459.

¹⁵This phrase is from John Kelsey, who wrote his sketch while Turner was still alive, *The Lives and Reminiscences of the Pioneers of Rochester* (Rochester, 1854), p. 71.

¹⁶Orsamus Turner, "Then and Now—1822, 1854," *Niagara Democrat*, ca. May 4, 1854, cit. *Lockport Daily Courier*, May 5, 1854, copy furnished by

“the author . . . became the editor and publisher of the paper, in August, of that year.”¹⁷ In 1847 a fellow editor summed up his career in Lockport as continuous to that time: “[E]ither as publisher, editor, or assistant editor, [he] has continued at his post from 1822, to the present time.”¹⁸ Turner’s personal recollections of Joseph Smith of necessity refer to the period prior to the late summer of 1822 and are probably no later than 1820, the latest date of Palmyra memoirs in his writings.

Orsamus Turner declined to dignify Mormonism with a serious treatment. Instead he preferred satire, admitting that his sketch was made “lightly—with a seeming levity.” Although it relies heavily upon community hearsay, and in sardonic tone reads like Gibbon on Christianity, certain portions of the sketch bring the early life of the Smiths into the focus of personal contact. One conclusion is based on “those who were best acquainted with the Smith family” and reports that “there is no foundation for the statement that their original manuscript was written by a Mr. Spaulding, of Ohio.”¹⁹ But the most notable break in the semiserious tone of derision is occasioned by the introduction of Joseph Smith into his narrative. At this point Turner gives impressions of his early life, prefacing these remarks with, “The author’s own recollections of him are distinct ones.”²⁰ A series of vignettes follow, portraying the young farmer’s son bringing small loads of wood into the village, doing odd jobs, and performing errands, one of which was to get the weekly paper. On one occasion Turner and another apprentice blackened Joseph’s face for his curiosity about the press. The sketch lapses back to more distant narration after the following final paragraph of personal recollection:

Chester O. Lewis, Niagara County Historian. Turner was born July 23, 1801. Turner’s complete words pertaining to his pre-Lockport life show that he did not stay long in Palmyra after completing his Canandaigua apprenticeship: “Resuming . . . a position . . . which had a commencement, but a few days after we had reached the age of 21 years.—(32 years ago) . . . *Then*, just out of our apprenticeship, and at school, we heard that a place called “Lockport” . . . had been made the county seat . . . and hearing further that a printer was wanted there, we journeyed from Palmyra passing through Rochester . . .”

¹⁷Turner, *Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase of Western New York* (Buffalo, 1849), p. 655.

¹⁸Frederick Follett, *History of the Press of Western New York* (Rochester, 1847), p. 65. Cf. Hamilton, *The Country Printer*, p. 304.

¹⁹Turner, *Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase*, p. 214.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 213.

But Joseph had a little ambition; and some very laudable aspirations; the mother's intellect occasionally shone out in him feebly, especially when he used to help us solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics, in our juvenile debating club, which we moved down to the old red school house on Durfee street, to get rid of the annoyance of critics that used to drop in upon us in the village; and subsequently, after catching a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting, away down in the woods, on the Vienna road, he was a very passable exhorter in evening meetings.²¹

Turner gives from his personal contact the time, place, and subject of the Prophet's early conversion. The time is probably during the editor's Palmyra apprenticeship, presumably 1820 or before, and is certainly no later than the summer of 1822. The semi-conversion is to Methodism, precisely the belief that Joseph Smith said he was partial to. The place is a "camp meeting" *away from Palmyra*. Consequently, the revivals in Palmyra during 1824-25 are in fact not germane to the Prophet's early religious experiences. "Camp meeting" is a technical term from that period, meaning extended preaching in a rural setting, ordinarily by several ministers of various ranks. Turner's "Vienna road" plainly means for him the road running diagonally between Palmyra and Vienna (now Phelps), about a dozen air miles away. The road is still identified by that name today on the official Wayne County map, and Turner's definition is proved by his location of a mill site "a mile east of the village [of Palmyra], on the Vienna road."²² "Away down in the woods" on this road

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 214. Although the Methodist records of the period in Palmyra are not now available, Turner's early history of that denomination shows that he personally knew more about its history in Palmyra than about any other church there: "The Methodist Church was organized in 1811. At first, few in number, and feeble in resources, its places of worship alternated from school house to school house; sometimes in an apartment at a private dwelling; at others in a vacant log dwelling;—until having largely recruited its numbers, it emerged from its feeble condition, and in 1821 erected its present church edifice."

Early existence of the "juvenile debating club" at the "old red school house on Durfee Street" is confirmed by periodic newspaper notices to "the young people of the village of Palmyra and its vicinity" inviting attendance at "a debating school at the school house near Mr. Billings'." See *Western Farmer*, January 23, 1822. The similarity of later notices shows that this particular one did not inaugurate the society, which had a history of moving around considerably before locating in the schoolhouse, according to Turner.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 389. Cf. a traveler's sarcastic reaction to an obstruction blocking this well-traveled highway "as I was entering your village, on what I understood to be the Vienna road." *Wayne Sentinel*, April 7, 1826. Cf. the complaint

would certainly be a considerable distance away from Palmyra; normally the camp meeting would not be held in the immediate neighborhood of any settlement.

Itinerant Methodist preachers were at the peak of their influence in Joseph Smith's youth, and their rural protracted meetings were so common that they were taken for granted. One was noticed in 1820 in the *Palmyra Register* because of the unfortunate death of one James Couser as a result of his intoxication on June 25 at "a camp meeting which was held in this vicinity." In the following issue the editor denied that he intended "to charge the Methodists with retailing ardent spirits" at their camp ground, thus identifying the sponsoring sect.²³ The preachers' memoirs of this period are filled with references to these "forest gatherings," which drew their audience from the countryside of up to ten to twenty miles' radius. This is quite inconceivable to many in the present sedentary culture, but the pioneer's life was lonely, and he paid the price of travel for his religious and social meetings. Turner remembers an eight-mile trip by ox-sled as nothing unusual for "an evening's visit," and he quotes a settler as recalling the "itinerating Methodist ministers; we used to go through the woods, generally on foot, whenever we heard of one of their appointments."²⁴

The most dramatic possibility among camp meetings in the period of Joseph Smith's investigations is the annual Genesee Conference held in July of 1819 at Vienna, both geographically and chronologically near Turner's recalling Joseph Smith's "catching a spark of Methodism." Over a hundred Methodist ministers were obligated to attend the business sessions, which ran from July 1 to July 8, suspending formal business on Sunday, July 4, for the typically spectacular preaching services.²⁵ This Sabbath meeting of the annual conference is depicted in the recollections of the preacher-historian George Peck. Al-

of the later deterioration of "the road between this village and Vienna." *The Reflector*, Palmyra, N.Y., Sept. 23, 1829.

²³*Palmyra Register*, June 28, 1820, July 5, 1820. The extended services were presumably being held prior to these dates.

²⁴Turner, *Holland Purchase*, pp. 542, 555.

²⁵For basic dates and general information on the 1819 conference, see F. W. Conable, *History of the Genesee Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1876), pp. 158-161. The statistics of the ministers obligated to attend are found in *Minutes Taken at the Several Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America for the Year 1819* (New York, 1819), pp. 51-52.

though held in the country area of Genoa in 1818, only a "neighboring grove" could accommodate "the crowds which gathered from far and near." In 1816 in the relatively rural Sauquoit-Paris locality there was an attendance of between 3,000 and 4,000, which is some measure of the 1821 gatherings in the same place where "sermons in the grove" were given "before a crowded congregation."²⁶ The Sunday meeting of the annual conference at Palmyra in 1826 was held "in a fine grove" nearby, and "it is said that not less than ten thousand persons were on the ground during the day."²⁷ Within a few years of the 1819 Genesee Conference at Vienna, it was a regular item of business at the opening session to appoint supervisors of preaching, and impressive services were undoubtedly held in that year which drew crowds from the area in which fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith lived.^{27a}

POMEROY TUCKER

Joseph Smith may have had a double reason to attend the camp meetings in his vicinity. The main evidence on this point comes from Turner's fellow apprentice in Palmyra, Pomeroy Tucker. Tucker's career was remarkably like Turner's, though he lived longer. Born in Palmyra August 10, 1802, he evidently remained there until the time of his apprenticeship at the

²⁶George Peck, *The Life and Times of Rev. George Peck, D. D.* (New York, 1874), pp. 65, 93, 122. The rivalry for proselytes at conversion appears regularly in the memoirs of Methodist preachers. For instance, Peck comments (p. 110): "When conversions began to occur among us, the Baptists, by whom we were surrounded, began to practice their usual strategy. . . . [T]wo preachers of that persuasion . . . were very attentive to our converts."

²⁷W. H. McIntosh, *History of Wayne County, New York* (Philadelphia, 1877), p. 149. The basic concept of the Prophet's history of an expanding regional revival fits the Methodist conference context. Compare, for instance, the pattern described for the 1817 Genesee Conference. The "daily and powerful preaching" brought the following result: "a flame of religious excitement spread out among the circuits . . ." Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, n.d.), Vol. 4, p. 278. Although the number of converts in that case is perhaps unusual, the idea of one conference affecting wide areas is fairly typical in Methodist literature. All of this shows that it is unduly restrictive to assume that Joseph Smith's descriptions refer only or essentially to the narrow area of his residence.

^{27a}The very specific history of Methodism in Vienna-Phelps later alluded to the "deep impression upon the entire community" of the 1819 Genesee Conference there, after which "another great revival followed," bringing "numerous accessions," including several named individuals. W. H. McIntosh, *History of Ontario County, New York* (Philadelphia, 1876), p. 170. The historian must be concerned with religious awakenings as perceived by Joseph Smith, not general statistics that he would not have been aware of.

Palmyra Register around 1820.²⁸ After serving as a journeyman printer at Canandaigua, he returned to Palmyra to purchase and manage the *Wayne Sentinel* in the fall of 1823.²⁹ His professional life as a journalist continued over thirty years, mostly with that paper, though he was also a public servant at various levels and author of a book on Mormonism in 1867, three years before his death.

From the point of view of history, Tucker's *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* is a disappointing performance. With access to the generation that remembered the establishment of the Prophet's work, the experienced editor is content to quote the Hurlburt-Howe affidavits, to repeat common gossip, to quote extensive portions of the Book of Mormon and articles about Brigham Young for the bulk of the book. Although but weakly living up to the subtitle ("Personal Remembrances and Historical Collections Hitherto Unwritten"), Tucker does relate much valuable information concerning the period of the publication of the Book of Mormon. He also claims knowledge of the Smiths "since their removal to Palmyra from Vermont in 1816, and during their continuance there and in the adjoining town of Manchester."³⁰ There is no reason to question this firsthand contact, provided one is on guard not to take his western New York prejudice for fact. It is to his credit that he could at least distinguish between the two. He repeats tattered stories about Joseph Smith's dishonesty, only to admit in "common fairness" that such allegations were "not within the remembrance of the writer."³¹ Although Tucker is content to repeat the armchair observations about the laziness of the Smiths, every one of his specific descriptions proves the opposite. Most of Tucker's unattributed particulars of the Smiths' early Palmyra life are probably based on his observation. His negative material from Palmyra is generally traceable to known statements, and the "hitherto

²⁸Turner, *Phelps and Gorham's Purchase*, p. 499.

²⁹Tucker's first issue of the *Wayne Sentinel* (October 1, 1823) still exists. Information on his apprenticeship at Canandaigua appears in the best sketch of his life, written as an obituary for the *Troy Times* by his son-in-law, John M. Francis, copied in the *Palmyra Courier*, July 8, 1870, and the *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, July 2, 1870. See also Follett, *History of the Press in Western New York*, p. 63, and Hamilton, *The Country Printer*, pp. 303-304.

³⁰Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York, 1867), p. 4.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 15.

unwritten" incidents are typically details of human interest. The descriptions of the Smiths in Palmyra prior to 1820 tend to belong to this category.

Tucker is particular with regard to the Smiths' arrival in 1816 and removal to the pioneer homestead in Manchester in 1818, and he has a fairly accurate knowledge of their physical and financial arrangements, evidently quite independent of the already published details of Lucy Smith. There is no reason to question the picture of the refreshment shop of the Smiths in Palmyra, which catered to holiday crowds. Even after the move to Manchester, there was "the continued business of peddling cake and beer in the village on days of public doings." Tucker remembers Joseph in particular "as a clerk" in such selling.³² This activity, somewhat attested in contemporary sources, provides a practical reason for camp meeting attendance.³³ Such meetings were notoriously places of socializing and festivity. De Witt Clinton left a classic description of the typical campground of that decade, featuring not merely the preaching and the crowds, but the "persons with cakes, beer, and other refreshments for sale."³⁴ It appears to be the Smiths' business and Joseph's special charge to be present at such public events in the vicinity.

Pomeroy Tucker also verifies the circumstances of the First Vision, all the more important because his main support is unintended. Assuming 1827 as the beginning of Joseph Smith's revelations, the editor relates the "remarkable vision" that

³²*Ibid.*, p. 14. Tucker's summary of the Smith's Manchester holiday business stresses that young Joseph was regularly vending and sometimes tricked by "the boys of those by-gone times."

³³In 1831 young James Gordon Bennett wrote his tongue-in-cheek impressions of the Smiths from interviews with some who had known them. It is probably better-than-average hearsay when he reports the father as a former "country pedlar" dealing in "the manufacture of gingerbread and such like domestic wares." His son Joseph is portrayed as being "a partner in the concern," who aimlessly hung around the "villages," perhaps an indication of the travelling to special gatherings that Tucker specifically mentions. See *New York Courier and Enquirer*, August 31, 1831. One of Bennett's sources was E. B. Grandin, who was closely associated with Tucker in business and social affairs, so it is perhaps no accident that the story of the Smiths' holiday business should be similar from these two sources. Tucker's fullest description of their goods for sale is in the setting of the Palmyra residence: "gingerbread, pies, boiled eggs, root-beer, and other like notions of traffic." (*Origin of Mormonism*, p. 12.)

³⁴The citation of Clinton's "Private Canal Journal, 1810" is found in William W. Campbell, *The Life and Writings of De Witt Clinton* (New York, 1849), p. 107. Increasing population makes such activity even more likely for camp meetings in 1820.

came "about this time" in response to the youth's prayer "in the wilderness." The words of this experience are generally placed in quotation marks, and the phrases are borrowed in sequence from Orson Pratt's pamphlet, *Remarkable Visions*.³⁵ Tucker depends verbally on this written source, although he seems to have some memory of what young Joseph Smith said about the First Vision while still in Palmyra. But in Tucker's first chapter, where Mormon writings are not in evidence and the editor's personal reminiscences are heavily concentrated, the following description of the early religious life of the Prophet is given:

Protracted revival meetings were customary in some of the churches, and Smith frequented those of different denominations, sometimes professing to participate in their devotional exercises. At one time he joined the probationary class of the Methodist Church in Palmyra, and made some active demonstrations of engagedness, though his assumed convictions were insufficiently grounded or abiding to carry him along to the saving point of conversion, and he soon withdrew from the class. The final conclusion announced by him was, that all sectarianism was fallacious, all the churches on a false foundation, and the Bible a fable.³⁶

No other source is this particular in identifying young Joseph Smith as a member of the Methodist "probationary class." Since Tucker immediately follows with a reference to "all the early avowals and other evidences remembered," he seems to be saying that he has firsthand knowledge of Joseph's temporary religious affiliation and reason for its abrupt termination: he publicly "announced . . . that all sectarianism was fallacious. . . ." A study of Turner requires a date of about 1820 for this tentative Methodist association, and Tucker emphasizes that "he soon withdrew from the class," a specific description that explains Turner's metaphor, "a spark of Methodism." This evidence indicates that about 1820 Joseph Smith was openly expressing the identical convictions that he later

³⁵Tucker, *Origin of Mormonism*, p. 28. Compare the descriptions of the First Vision and the angel's first revelation of the Book of Mormon in any of the editions of Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*. Proof that this source was used over other possibilities with the same phrasing is the quotation of Pratt's rendering of the Moroni visitation. Compare Turner's quotation of the closing portion of *Remarkable Visions*, pp. 139-145.

³⁶Tucker, *Origin of Mormonism*, pp. 17-18. See footnote 39 below. Tucker is the origin of derivative material in McIntosh, *History of Wayne County*, p. 150.

maintained came at that early time through the First Vision. Since such negative attitudes could have only brought scorn upon him, it is unlikely that a fourteen-year-old boy would take this extreme position without some religious experience to solidify his personal convictions.

The historical reconstruction of Joseph's announcement about 1820 that the churches were wrong throws a different light on subsequent community opinion. None of the Hurlburt-Howe affidavits reach back to this critical early period, and therefore all are suspect on the ground of merely reporting public reaction to Joseph's early religious experiences. Mrs. Brodie classically stated a thesis that is found in Palmyra sources in several contradictory forms. By this theory, the earlier Joseph Smith was a seeker of buried treasure, not the sincere religious investigator that he describes himself to be in all of his vision accounts. Supposedly, the metamorphosis from adventuring to outward religion took place about 1827. A standard and crucial proof in building this image is Abner Cole's 1831 summary of the evolutionary hypothesis: ". . . it however appears quite certain that the prophet himself never made any serious pretensions to religion until his late pretended revelation."³⁷

Contemporaneous quotations, however, are not the same thing as contemporaneous sources. Cole, alias Dogberry, attributes his information on the mother and father of the Prophet to others, and also implies secondhand information on Joseph Smith. In 1820 Abner Cole was middle-aged and a successful lawyer-entrepreneur, with no reason to notice a teenager from rural Manchester. But the apprentices Tucker and Turner were near the young Prophet's age level and moved in the same social and perhaps religious circles. Yet Cole's statement is not merely uninformed. Tucker's initial chapter of impressions about the Smiths shows that Cole virtually means the opposite of what he says. Pomeroy Tucker portrays Joseph as a young man of unusual "taciturnity," speaking mainly to "his intimate associates" and generally ridiculed because he could relate a "marvelous absurdity with the utmost apparent gravity."³⁸ Is this the community response to Joseph's limited narration of his vision? The Palmyra editor has his own evolutionary

³⁷*The Reflector*, Palmyra, N.Y., February 1, 1831.

³⁸Tucker, *Origin of Mormonism*, p. 16.

theory of the young Prophet advancing from reading worthless fiction to serious study of the Bible. In fact, as a student of the Scriptures, he became so capable that he could discuss texts "with great assurance," and with "original and unique" interpretations. What all this proved to Tucker is highly instructive. Joseph Smith came to "disgustingly blasphemous" conclusions which, coupled with his religious investigation and announcement that he would join no sect, disclosed that he and his family "were unqualified atheists," an inevitable "hypothesis" based on "their mockeries of Christianity."³⁹

Tucker's reasoning shows that most epithets applied to the Smiths may well be grounded in their religious dissent. If he can equate unorthodoxy with atheism, then the historian knows that he is dealing with a rigid social structure whose labels on nonconformity cannot be taken at face value. Cole's report that the early Joseph Smith "never made any serious pretensions to religion" really means that he declined to affiliate with any church. Paradoxically, the original announcement of religious convictions created a reputation for irreligion, and the closed society that so perceived the young Prophet largely concentrated on its own terminology and lost the memory of his earlier religious investigations and convictions about 1820, which were recorded by his acquaintances Turner and Tucker.⁴⁰

No one can seriously test Joseph Smith's first revelations without treating in depth the leading source of his early personal life, his mother's *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*. Its importance requires a brief survey of its composition and

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 17-18. The knowledge of the Bible attributed to Joseph Smith by Turner make his remark suspect that Joseph announced the "Bible a fable." The memoirs of Lucy, Joseph, and William all agree that reverence for the scriptures characterized the Smith home.

⁴⁰Tucker's chapter immediately following Joseph's announcement that the churches stood on a "false foundation" is a recital of the community tradition of his money-digging activities. This repetition adds nothing, for he is merely warming over "affidavits" in print thirty years before his book. But the Palmyra editor repeatedly insists that Joseph's deceptions began late in 1819 and continued "from 1820 to 1827" (p. 22). If these stories originated in community prejudice after the Smiths began telling of Joseph's revelations (as William Smith spiritedly insists), then the existence of the rumors dates the early religious claims of the Smiths at around 1820. Tucker accepted this same chronology a decade before his book, as shown in his newspaper recollections of June 11, 1858, in the *Palmyra Courier*. Talking then about "the origin of Mormonism," he dates Joseph's "gift of supernatural endowments" as beginning "as early as 1820." His odd identification of Joseph Smith as then "at the age of about 19 years" may be accounted for by the young Prophet's large physical stature.

publication. Since Lucy Mack Smith dictated rather than personally wrote the book, the first question is whether it is really her history. Both author and secretary expressed clear opinions on this subject. As the compilation closed late in 1845, Mother Smith in a public speech "gave notice that she had written her history, and wished it printed before we leave this place."⁴¹ The motivation for the history and the intention to make it her own was earlier stated in the midst of its composition:

People are often inquiring of me the particulars of Joseph's getting the plates, seeing the angels at first, and many other things which Joseph never wrote or published. I have told over many things pertaining to these matters to different persons to gratify their curiosity, indeed have almost destroyed my lungs giving these recitals to those who felt anxious to hear them. I have now concluded to write down every particular as far as possible . . .⁴²

The above claims of Lucy Smith are specifically confirmed by the remarkable pair who produced the history, Martha Jane Knowlton Coray, and her husband, Howard Coray. The latter, a young schoolteacher, was asked by Brigham Young to drop regular work and devote his entire time to the project.⁴³ His wife, a woman of native brilliance and intense dedication, had first agreed to be Lucy Smith's secretary—Howard Coray later insisted "to act, in the matter, only as her, Mother Smith's, amanuensis."⁴⁴ In 1902 Martha Jane's daughter described her mother as essentially the recorder of dictation: "She then read over, several times, what she had written, making such changes and corrections as Mother Smith suggested."⁴⁵ In 1865 Mrs. Coray evaluated her own work by indicating that her experiences in regularly taking down the discourses of Joseph Smith and other Church leaders in Nauvoo had fitted her "to transmit to paper what the old lady said, and prompted me in

⁴¹Address of October 8, 1845, cit. *Times and Seasons*, Vol. 6, No. 16 (November 1, 1845), p. 1014.

⁴²Letter of Lucy Smith to William Smith, June 23, 1845, Nauvoo, Illinois, ms., LDS Historian's Office. Modifications in quotations in this article are restricted to punctuation and spelling.

⁴³Autobiography of Howard Coray (1883), p. 16; Xerox at LDS Historian's Office, original held by Jennie N. Weeks, Salt Lake City. For the payment of Coray for the services, see Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, 1932), Vol. 7, p. 519.

⁴⁴Coray, *Autobiography*, p. 16.

⁴⁵Martha J. C. Lewis, "Martha Jane Knowlton Coray," *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 5 (1902), p. 440.

undertaking to secure all the information possible for myself and children . . . ”⁴⁶

Howard Coray's function was evidently to transcribe the final copy from his wife's corrected interview notes. Three manuscripts are known to have existed: the loose sheets of Mrs. Coray's corrected notes; the copy presented to Mother Smith, which found its way into Orson Pratt's hands as the basis for the first printed edition; and the beautifully written, leather-bound presentation copy to the Church, with which the quotations in this article have been checked.⁴⁷ Textual differences between Orson Pratt's printing and the last-named finished manuscript may reflect different drafts of the Corays, but most variants are matters of form (word order, synonyms) and not substance. The finished manuscript thus supports the printed texts in content, varying essentially in minor ways familiar to the student of the closely similar manuscripts of the Greek New Testament.

The first edition of Mother Smith's history was published in 1853, three years before her death. Although this printing was recalled for correction, the scope of errors is extremely limited. The basic work of revision was done by the Prophet's cousin, George A. Smith (with the help of Elias Smith), and his correction copies of the first edition are not marked up severely. He modified certain dates, substituted firsthand information for some of Lucy's secondhand impressions, and deleted a few passages where the mother had glorified William Smith. This revised edition was published in 1902 with a preface by Joseph F. Smith recommending the book as a "worthy record" containing "much interesting and valuable information, found in no other publication, relating to the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith . . ."⁴⁸ The accuracy of

⁴⁶Letter of Martha Jane Coray to Brigham Young, June 13, 1865, Provo, Utah, LDS Historian's Office.

⁴⁷The original working sheets were donated to the LDS Historian's Office. Jennie N. Weeks, *et al.*, *Roberts Family* (Salt Lake City, 1965), p. 403. Although the whereabouts of the manuscript Orson Pratt used is unknown, his edition is less perfect textually than is often supposed, a point of vindication of Brigham Young's judgment.

⁴⁸Lucy Smith, *History of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, rev. by George A. Smith and Elias Smith (Salt Lake City, 1902), p. iv. To confuse bibliography further, the latest revision by Preston Nibley was entitled *History of Joseph Smith*. Pratt's *Biographical Sketches* avoids confusion with Joseph Smith's own history, and is also more accurate, since Lucy Smith is not writing a full history, but mainly recollections of the early life of her son.

Mother Smith's recollections of the early history of the family's religious experience was never at any point challenged.

If no expert produces a history without errors, it is beside the point to parade those of Lucy Smith. Her dates that are not precise are nevertheless close approximations. Her inaccuracies are inherent in the nature of her work. A book of dictated memoirs cannot check out events and eliminate the errors of hearsay. This is another way of saying that Mother Smith is highly reliable on the events with which she was personally connected. For instance, Lucy Mack Smith's first eight chapters are devoted to her father's family and harmonize with facts uncovered by rigorous genealogical investigations.⁴⁹ It is questionable whether she ever had access to the Prophet's unpublished addendum concerning his early sickness and the details of the family's move from New England to New York. But the independent recollections of mother and son on these subjects mesh perfectly.⁵⁰ *Biographical Sketches* is at its best in the early period of his life. Whereas the sections pertaining to Mormon history in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois are really short summaries, the largest section (a full third of the book) details the events in Palmyra-Manchester to 1831.

Lucy Mack Smith writes with confident pride in her family and children, but on an apparently factual level with an instinct for the relevant. For instance, her treatment of the childhood of Joseph is marked by sensible restraint that omits a mother's fond memories. Before the First Vision, there are only four items about Joseph: his birth, the terrible physical trauma of his leg operation, his difficulties of recovery, and an unexplained attempt upon his life. She acknowledges that people have constantly questioned her in the hope of hearing "many very remarkable incidents" connected with "his childhood," but Lucy simply observes that the young Prophet's youth was filled with normal "trivial circumstances" that deserve to be passed by "in silence."⁵¹ Because her history is no pious catalog of the marvelous about her son, her emphasis

⁴⁹See Archibald F. Bennett, "Solomon Mack and His Family," *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 58-59 (1955-56), September through May.

⁵⁰Compare *Biographical Sketches*, chapters 16-17 with LDS Historian's Book A-1, note A, p. 132.

⁵¹Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Liverpool, 1853), p. 73.

on his First Vision is likely based on an honest judgment that this was the most significant experience of his youth.

Biographical Sketches accurately recreates the world of Palmyra, New York, in the decade of the 1820's. The pattern of buying land on contract, the pioneer struggle for economic survival, and many prominent personalities are all correctly portrayed. Both Lucy Smith's narrative and the surviving newspapers mention Dr. Robinson, Dr. McIntire, Squire Cole, Henry Jessup, Abner Lakey, or Flanders Dyke.⁵² Even Mother Smith's ambiguities contain basic historical truth. For instance, she described the reprinting of pirated portions of the Book of Mormon in the "Dogberry Paper on Winter Hill." Although these extracts were actually printed in the satirical *Reflector*, the *nom de plume* of its proprietor was Obadiah Dogberry, who referred to his headquarters as "Winter Green Hill," a drumlin connected with Palmyra history. One heirloom survives that symbolizes the accuracy of Lucy Smith's personal history. Her descriptions of family economics include her contribution of preparing and painting oilcloth,⁵³ and the quaintly decorated oilcloth binding of an early Hyrum Smith journal is evidently a piece of her handiwork.⁵⁴

Another event described during the printing of the Book of Mormon is the visit of "three delegates" to persuade the Smith family to drop their new religion. Lucy mingles it with a conspiracy to take the printer's manuscript from her, which is impossible to test. But the official warning by "Deacon Beckwith" is related both in Mother Smith's recollections and also local Presbyterians' records. She reports the committee's conversation about the church to which she "and the most of your children have belonged to."⁵⁵ Upon warning of the pos-

⁵²Not only the names of the individuals listed, but their known personalities and relationships are accurately portrayed in *Biographical Sketches*. An example is her reference to "Deacon Jessup," who is referred to by that title in the *Wayne Sentinel*, April 7, 1826, in a manner that suggests some of the materialistic values attributed to him by Lucy Smith (*Biographical Sketches*, p. 91).

⁵³*Ibid.*, pp. 70, 107.

⁵⁴At this writing it is in the possession of Ralph G. Smith of Salt Lake City, Utah, a direct descendant.

⁵⁵Lucy Smith says that she was baptized but free of "any religious denomination" until Alvin had "attained his twenty-second year." *Biographical Sketches*, pp. 48-49. This date is the spring of 1820, when the normal reading of Joseph Smith's history places the Presbyterian conversion of Lucy and three children. The absence of the earliest Presbyterian records from Palmyra makes it impossible yet to verify the time of formal affiliation of the Smiths with that

sibility of "losing you," Beckwith charged Lucy not to say anything further on the subject of the new revelation. Receiving a defiant reply from the mother, the group sought a recantation concerning the Book of Mormon from Hyrum, who stood firm in his convictions, and a similar unyielding conversation ensued with Samuel.⁵⁶ This incident is confirmed by the Presbyterian minutes in Palmyra, which report that on March 3, 1830, a committee was appointed consisting of Reverend A. E. Campbell and Henry Jessup "to visit Hyrum Smith, Lucy Smith, and Samuel Harrison Smith and report at the next meeting . . ." On March 10, 1830, the group "reported that they had visited them and received no satisfaction . . . and that they did not wish to unite with us any more."⁵⁷ Either the official delegation was accompanied by George Beckwith, named as a fellow elder in the same minutes with Henry Jessup, or Lucy confounded the two men in her recollection. But basic detail is correct and her date is fairly precise.⁵⁸ Thus Lucy Smith's memories of the early events of the rise of Mormonism have a demonstrable degree of accuracy.

Joseph Smith first confided his 1820 vision to his mother,⁵⁹ and she verifies his chronology by incorporating his longest vision account immediately after relating an 1819 event. Before this experience she mentions "a great revival in religion"

church. Since William remembered the resentment of his father against Rev. Stockton for preaching at Alvin's funeral and intimating his damnation, the Presbyterian preference of part of the family by 1823 seems clear, a point confirmed by the Nauvoo addendum incorporated into the present printing of Joseph's history, wherein the Prophet remarks to his mother after the First Vision that "Presbyterianism is not true." Lucy's account of the 1824-25 revivals is ambiguous on the point of whether she then "joined in with" the Presbyterian church or the union meetings. There may be various degrees of "joining" a church.

⁵⁶Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, pp. 145-147.

⁵⁷"Records of the Sessions of the Presbyterian Church in Palmyra," Vol. 2, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁸Lucy inverted the two events of the Presbyterian committee and Joseph's formal warning to Cole against pirating his copyrighted book. She narrates the former event after the "printing went on very well for a season," which would be some months after August 1829, and the second event after that, but some time before April 1830. Cole's Book of Mormon extracts appeared in January 1830, and the committee incident occurred at the beginning of March of that year. But both events, if transposed, are placed within precise time limits in the correct year. Such a performance renders it historically irresponsible to challenge Lucy Smith's chronology without contemporary evidence that is not secondary.

⁵⁹Note B, LDS Historian's Book A-1, pp. 132-133, reproduced in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Vol. I, p. 6. As Dean Jessee shows, the notes were dictated by Joseph Smith to Willard Richards.

that extended to "the surrounding country in which we resided."⁶⁰ Such a general term is in marked contrast to her subsequent descriptions of revivals after the death of Alvin (November 19, 1823) that were locally identified as in "the neighborhood." Although the family was actively involved in this later movement, "Joseph, from the first, utterly refused to attend their meetings . . ." The young Prophet had strong views that such participation would be temporary, "for we were mistaken in them . . ."⁶¹ Lucy Smith thus describes her son as having reached the conclusion prior to 1824 that the churches were wrong.⁶² The revivals of that year had nothing to do with his initial religious investigations.

There is additional evidence that this chronology was firmly fixed in her mind. The most shocking experience to the family in that period was the death of the eldest son, the beloved Alvin. Lucy recalls his belief in the early revelations and also relates his deathbed charge to young Joseph to be strictly faithful to divine commandments "to obtain the record." The date of this event is recorded on the gravestone inscription, "November 19, 1823."⁶³ Unless one prefers to believe the gruesome theory that a mother would deliberately put false words into the mouth of a favored dying son, it is clear that the period of Joseph's religious inquiries long preceded his developed convictions of the fall of 1823.

Not claiming firsthand information, Orsamus Turner relates some intriguing stories that supposedly circulated before the death of Alvin. Turner claims that Lucy Smith gave out early hints "that a Prophet was to spring from her humble household." Rumors represented this person to be "Alvah,"

⁶⁰Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, p. 74.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

⁶²The date intended by Lucy for Alvin's death is not clear yet. Orson Pratt's edition gives 1824 (*Biographical Sketches*, p. 87), but the ink of the finished manuscript reads 1822, which is inconsistent with the same document's reading of 1824 in the genealogical chapter (*ibid.*, p. 40). The event, however, appears in proper sequence after the 1823 revelation of the Book of Mormon plates. If the foregoing data accurately represents Mother Smith, then her memory moved a year in either direction of the actual date, though the rediscovery of the original draft of Mrs. Coray at the LDS Historian's Office may throw further light on the question.

⁶³Photographs of the inscription are at the LDS Historian's Office. It reads: "In memory of Alvin, son of Joseph and Lucy Smith, who died Nov. 19, 1823, in the 25th year of his age." Joseph Smith, Sr., counteracted rumors regarding exhuming the body by an advertisement bearing the date September 25, 1824, which proves that Alvin's death was not that year. See footnote 65 below.

designated by "fireside consultations, and solemn and mysterious out door hints."⁶⁴ That crude ridicule filled Palmyra after the death of Alvin is historical fact. Joseph Smith, Sr., became so exasperated that he purchased space in the *Wayne Sentinel* for six weeks beginning September 29, 1824, to refute gossip that Alvin's body had been exhumed and dissected. He added his candid judgment that the originators of such stories "have been stimulated more by a desire to injure the reputation of certain persons than a philanthropy for the peace and welfare of myself and friends."⁶⁵ The Prophet's history claims that public contempt was heaped upon his head because he told of his First Vision, and social scorn of his family is an established reality by the fall of 1824. As to the cause of such ridicule, some have suggested the Smiths' supposed money-digging activities, but that is speculation. Lucy Smith specifically comments on the period after the 1820 First Vision:

From this time until the twenty-first of September, 1823, Joseph continued, as usual, to labour with his father . . . though he suffered, as one would naturally suppose, every kind of opposition and persecution from the different orders of religion.⁶⁶

Since this interpretive comment is added directly after the quoted portions of the First Vision, the author is alleging a natural relationship between the greatness of the new revelation and the shocked reaction of the orthodox. Because of Lucy Mack Smith's historical orientation, the story of the First Vision is told in the words of her son, but her personal observations verify the specific chronology and surrounding circumstances that he claimed for the experience.⁶⁷

OLIVER COWDERY

Since Oliver Cowdery and William Smith narrated early Church history without mentioning the First Vision, it has been

⁶⁴Turner, *Phelps and Gorham's Purchase*, p. 213.

⁶⁵Joseph Smith, "To the Public," September 25, 1824, *Wayne Sentinel*, September 29, October 6, 13, 20, 27, November 3, 1824.

⁶⁶Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, p. 78.

⁶⁷Mother Smith's prologue letter probably indicates an emphasis in her history on the "many other things which Joseph never wrote or published" (see footnote 42 above). The distinct pattern of her work is to quote from established sources and supplement from her personal experiences, which had limited relevance to her son's individual search and answer of 1820.

assumed that their silence proves that the event did not occur. Both associate Joseph Smith's revival investigations with 1823 instead of 1820, but in each case there is an apparent reason for this procedure that is consistent with the reality of the First Vision. Cowdery made the first public attempt to narrate pre-1830 Church history in letters to the 1834-35 *Messenger and Advocate*. It is incorrect to say that he wrote without an awareness of the First Vision. It may be that the reason for leaving it out is ambiguous, but, as shown in this issue by Dean Jessee, the initial manuscript history of the First Vision was entered in official Church records at least two years before Cowdery's history. When he stated that he would utilize "authentic documents now in our possession," it is virtually certain that he was alluding to the 1831-32 account.⁶⁸ There is a clear verbal relationship between the two narrations, although the simple language of the earlier record is obviously not to the taste of Cowdery, with his early talent for ornate eloquence. Essential dependence upon the 1831-32 account is also minimized by the personal availability of Joseph Smith for consultation, a point which the editor stresses at the beginning of his letters and demonstrates by direct quotes in their progress. But at two points where the Prophet's personal experiences are narrated, identical phrases or structural similarities betray Cowdery's use of the earlier document.

ANGEL'S WARNING RECORDED TWICE

The final *Messenger and Advocate* installment (October 1835) depicted an incident that had not yet appeared in any LDS writing except the 1831-32 manuscript history. This was the first view of the plates by the young Joseph, who was so overwhelmed with their value that he reached to take them for selfish motives, only to be checked and rebuked in a sudden appearance of the divine messenger. Both accounts refer to the angel's original warning in identical words: the Prophet was directed to obtain the plates with "an eye single to the glory of God." Both accounts record the same question of

⁶⁸*L.D.S. Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (October, 1834), p. 13. Cowdery confessed his personal incompetence on the early life of the Prophet: "Indeed, there are many items connected with the forepart of this subject that render his labor indispensable." For evidence of Cowdery's early awareness of the First Vision in addition to the 1831-32 manuscript history, see footnote 86 below.

frustration: "Why can I not obtain this book?" And the answer of the angel is identical in each: "You have not kept the commandments of the Lord."⁶⁹

The conclusion of interrelationship is reinforced by comparing the earliest religious conflict of Joseph Smith in the two documents. Mere verbal correlations do not always prove dependence, but added to these is a precise sequence of events that indicates that Cowdery composed his sketch of Joseph's first religious investigations with the 1831-32 manuscript history before him:

1831-32 Manuscript History
 . . . my mind became seriously impressed with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal soul . . .

. . . I discovered they did not adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository. This was a grief to my soul.

. . . there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament, and I felt to mourn . . .

Therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy, for there was none else to whom I could go . . .

December 1834, Cowdery Letter
 . . . his mind was led to more seriously contemplate the importance of a move of this kind.

To profess godliness without its benign influence upon the heart, was a thing so foreign from his feelings, that his spirit was not at rest day or night.

To unite with a society professing to be built upon the only sure foundation, and that profession be a vain one, was calculated . . . to arouse the mind . . .

In this situation where could he go?

If Oliver Cowdery demonstrably followed the 1831-32 document in rehearsing the background of the First Vision, why didn't he report the full event as found in that history? If the reason for the break in narrative is hypothetical, the interruption is obvious. As shown by the above quotations,

⁶⁹The only full text yet published of the 1831-32 manuscript history is that of Paul Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions" (BYU Thesis, 1965). It has some minor inaccuracies. The phrases quoted appear as such in ms. and in Cheesman, p. 130. Cowdery differs from the 1831-32 account in the quoted phrases only by the substitution of "this book" for "them," whose antecedent is "the plates." The phrases are found in Vol. I (February, 1835), p. 80, and Vol. II (October, 1835), p. 198.

Cowdery's entire emphasis in recounting the Prophet's first religious experience was on the question of which church to join, a point of agreement with every official record of Joseph Smith.⁷⁰ Confusion stemmed from the "strong solicitations to unite with one of those different societies," but no man could solve this specific problem:

In this situation where could he go? If he went to one he was told they were right, and all others were wrong— If to another, the same was heard from those. . . . [A] proof from some source was wanting to settle the mind and give peace to the agitated bosom.⁷¹

But after virtually stating that only God could answer the problem of which church was right, Cowdery records no prayer on that subject or any answer to that question. In the next installment, the revivals are glossed over, and a transition is made to a new situation:

[O]ur brother's mind was unusually wrought up on the subject which had so long agitated his mind . . . and *all he desired* was to be prepared in heart to commune with some kind messenger who could communicate to him *the desired information of acceptance with God*.^{71a}

In Cowdery's narrative the answer to this prayer matches the second circumstance where church conflict is not significant:

⁷⁰The point made in the text is not that the quest for personal forgiveness was absent from the first prayer of 1820, but that no vision narrative omits the overwhelming problem that then consumed Joseph's thought, which church to join, a feature totally absent from any relation of the next revelation in 1823.

Only the 1835 account omits the message of the First Vision that all the churches were wrong. But this same version shows the confusion of Joseph on existing churches as the reason for praying. The 1835 narration was not dictated as a comprehensive record but differs from every other account in being the secretary's notes of a private conversation of the Prophet on the subject. So the feature of the vision evaluating the churches as incorrect could have been arbitrarily omitted in the flow of conversation or left out by a scribe who did not keep up entirely with what was said. Yet the background narrated in 1835 logically implies that even on that occasion the Prophet had in mind a revelation including God's evaluation of Christian divisions:

"Being wrought up in my mind respecting the subject of religion, and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong, but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be right . . . Being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove . . . Information was what I most desired at this time . . ."

⁷¹*L.D.S. Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (December 1834), p. 43. Since verbal dependence demonstrates Cowdery's reading of the first manuscript history describing the 1820 theophany, the phrase in the 1823 context regarding the certainty of an answer to prayer "if a Supreme being did exist," must be regarded as Cowdery's rhetoric and of mere logical force in the sentence, not an intended historical reference.

^{71a}*Ibid.*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (February, 1835), p. 76. Italics added.

an angel brought the message "that his sins were forgiven, and that his prayers were heard . . ." By date and verbal dependence, it is known that Cowdery had access to the 1831-32 document, which described two different prayers and two responding visions. Because the logical Cowdery presented differing prayer situations but an answer to only one of them, it must be assumed that he left out reference to the First Vision for a reason.

It is hard to avoid the impression that the second elder was corrected by Joseph Smith and exercised his editorial privilege of saving face. The installment of December 1834, in which the First Vision background was given, dated the "excitement raised on the subject of religion" in the "15th year" of the Prophet's life, a time which is strictly December 23, 1819, to December 23, 1820. That period was presented with certain detail never confirmed in any account of Joseph Smith. Cowdery named the leading minister in these revivals as "one Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist Church," and identified the scene of his labors as "Palmyra, and vicinity." In the next installment (February 1835) this chronology was modified. Pleading "an error in the type," the editor said that the above events happened "in the 17th" year of Joseph Smith's life. Although this adjustment "would bring the date down to the year 1823," the correction is confused, since "the 17th" year is strictly December 23, 1821, to December 23, 1822. "I do not deem it necessary," the editor assures his audience, "to write further on the subject of this excitement." Yet this plan was not strictly followed, for Cowdery's narrative portrays the Prophet's continued search for "assurance that he was accepted of him" until 1823—"while this excitement continued." Is this a hint that the initial installment oversimplified an extended revival period described by the Prophet? It is specifically on the the point of chronology that Cowdery later admits imperfection:

I have now given you a rehearsal of what was communicated to our brother, when he was directed to go and obtain the record of the Nephites. I may have missed in arrangement in some instances, but the principle is preserved . . .⁷²

⁷²*Ibid.*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (April, 1835), p. 112.

Since Cowdery knew of the First Vision and began to describe its circumstances, his failure to continue implies a correction. One might envision a reprimand for giving public details of a sacred experience, though that is inconsistent with Joseph Smith's open description of the event for the Jewish minister Joshua some months afterward. The more likely point of departure is to isolate the only background information not confirmed by other Joseph Smith accounts, which pertains to Rev. Lane. As shown by Larry Porter's accompanying article, this Methodist leader had no Palmyra ministry until several years after 1819-20. Yet it is clear that he attended the 1819 Genesee Conference sessions in nearby Vienna-Phelps, for his name appears in the minutes, and a fellow-minister remembered that "he and I set off together on horseback" for the gathering.⁷³ Joseph Smith's proximity to this impressive occasion and his proven connection with Methodism about this time make it distinctly possible that the two had personal contact several years prior to Lane's residence at Palmyra. If Cowdery mistook an 1820 contact with Lane for a later Palmyra ministry, he probably advanced his chronology abruptly to coincide roughly with the later circumstances that he had unwittingly narrated. The absence of the First Vision in these circumstances is an accident of presentation never rectified because the letter-presentation of early history was terminated some months afterward. The next serious move to record these early events was inaugurated by the Prophet. Perhaps the possibility of misunderstanding convinced Joseph Smith that his personal history could only be accurately written by himself.

WILLIAM SMITH

As one of the more vocal and the latest male survivor of the Smith family, William Smith gave several extended memoirs of his brother's earliest religious experiences. The value of these recollections on the subject of the First Vision is severely limited by his youth. The probable peak of Joseph's intense religious investigation was 1819, and William had just turned eight years of age.⁷⁴ An example of his lack of firsthand in-

⁷³George Peck, *The Life and Times of Rev. George Peck, D. D.* (New York, 1874), p. 104. See also footnote 25 above.

⁷⁴He furnishes his own birthdate in *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, Iowa, 1883), p. 5. It is also found in Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, p. 41: March 13, 1811.

formation about this period is his claim that the family moved from Palmyra village to the Manchester area "in 1821."⁷⁵ This is factually in error because an official survey of June 13, 1820, "taken by the poor old town compass" begins on the south county line and locates the starting point "three rods fourteen links southeast of Joseph Smith's dwelling house."⁷⁶ Orsamus Turner remembered seeing this first log structure the previous winter, and the probable date of the move to this farm is 1816, when William would have been a mere five years old.

One cannot be certain that Joseph Smith told his vision of 1820 to young William—or that the boy would have been receptive to such a religious experience. Up to 1823 he resisted conversion, since he was "quite young and inconsiderate";⁷⁷ during the years 1823-27, he paid "no attention to religion of any kind."⁷⁸ William left two orderly narrations of his early life. In both, the earliest point of recall regarding Joseph's religious experience is the appearance of the angel in 1823: "I remember when Joseph called his father's family together and told them that he had seen an angel, and what this angel had told him."⁷⁹ Lucy and William Smith agree in detail on Joseph's announcement of the angel's message in 1823. Mother Smith draws the vivid image of several formal reports to the family, "all seated in a circle" giving "the most profound attention" to the young Prophet.⁸⁰ William underlines the first reaction: "The whole family were melted to tears, and believed all he said."⁸¹

The close agreement of William and Lucy on these personal events of the Smith household furnishes a reasonable hypothesis of their differences concerning Joseph's experiences prior to that time. Variations must be accounted for by individual perception in two obviously sincere individuals. Mother Smith separates the events surrounding Joseph's vision in 1820 from the later appearance of the angel announcing the plates of the Book of Mormon in 1823. Before then William may not have been told of the first event, or if told, it failed to

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶Palmyra Town Record, Book 1, p. 221.

⁷⁷*William Smith on Mormonism*, p. 6.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷⁹Sermon on June 8, 1884, at Deloit, Iowa, *Saints' Herald*, Vol. 31, No. 40 (October 4, 1884), p. 643.

⁸⁰Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, pp. 83-84.

⁸¹*William Smith on Mormonism*, p. 9.

register as meaningful to him. In 1823 Joseph stood before the family and probably recounted both experiences on the same occasion. It is likely that the two experiences merged in William's mind because he first heard them together. William relates all the elements of the visions described separately by his brother and mother, but he telescopes every detail into a single experience.

There is a fascinating corollary to William's obvious lack of firsthand information prior to 1823. His published memoirs depend heavily upon the Cowdery account for background of Joseph's vision. William's narrations follow the same sequence as the two installments of December 1834, and February 1835, in the *L.D.S. Messenger and Advocate*, though Oliver's expansive style is considerably shortened by William. The following passages are copied quite directly from the early account, with the intervening quotation of Mt. 7:13-14 used similarly by both writers:

Oliver Cowdery in 1834-35

If he went to one he was told they were right, and all others were wrong—If to another, the same was heard from those: All professed to be the true church.⁸²

But if others were not benefited, our brother was urged forward and strengthened in the determination to know for himself of the certainty and reality of pure and holy religion. . . . [H]e continued to call upon the Lord in secret for a full manifestation of divine approbation . . . to have an assurance that he was accepted of him.⁸³

William Smith in 1883

If he went to one he was told they were right, and all others were wrong. If to another, the same was heard from them. Each professed to be the true church.

All this however was beneficial to him, as it urged him forward, and strengthened him in the determination to know for himself of the certainty and reality of pure and holy religion. He continued in secret to call upon the Lord for a full manifestation of his will, the assurance that he was accepted of him . . .⁸⁴

Significantly, William Smith relied upon what he remembered for the appearance and message of the angel (differing here considerably from Cowdery), but he relied upon published records for the background of the vision. This raises

⁸²*L.D.S. Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (December 1834), p. 43.

⁸³*Ibid.*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (February 1835), p. 78.

⁸⁴*William Smith on Mormonism*, pp. 7-8.

a serious question concerning William's own confidence in his memory of the events preceding Joseph's announcement concerning the angel and the plates. By his own performance, William is not likely to have a comprehensive picture of events or chronology prior to 1823, although he may be accurate on certain details within his experience prior to that time. He made his own comparison of the quality of his early recollections and Joseph's narrative: "A more elaborate and accurate description of his vision, however, will be found in his own history."⁸⁵

CONCLUSION

Historical analysis of Joseph Smith's earliest religious experiences raises the larger question of what documentation can reasonably be expected for such events. A few writers on this subject virtually claim that one could not accept the vision if it were not headlined by the regional press in the spring of 1820. But that is projecting twentieth century journalism onto the patterns of another age, for precious little local news reached the columns of the country newspaper of Joseph Smith's youth. A more realistic criterion is the outside publicity given the rise of Christianity. Contemporary mention of this obscure religious reform is absent until it became an influential force, and at that point comment emerges in Roman sources. Non-Mormon references to the First Vision follow this parallel. The earliest known newspaper allusion is a reaction to the first great success of Latter-day Saint proselyting, the Ohio-Missouri mission. "Our Painesville correspondent" forwarded a report of the 1830 preaching of "Cowdery and his friends" in Ohio: "Smith (they affirmed), had seen God frequently and personally."⁸⁶

At the peak of his career in Nauvoo, Joseph Smith was a creative religious innovator, but every important First Vision

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 9. Further research might probe the question of the earlier recollections of William Smith. In 1883 and 1884, he described the appearance of a "personage" or angel in the woods, where the brilliant light descended upon the trees without affecting them. In an apparently well-reported interview of 1841, William's 1823 setting of the single vision appears, but the location of the vision follows Joseph's history: "The glory of the Lord filled the chamber with a dazzling light . . ." Letter of Rev. James Murdock to the *Hartford Observer*, June 19, 1841, cit. *Peoria Register and North-western Gazetteer*, Sept. 3, 1841, cit. Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, rev. ed., Vol. 2 (Salt Lake City, 1959), p. 410.

⁸⁶*The Reflector*, Palmyra, New York, February 14, 1831.

account antedates that period. The visions of the 1820's were historically recorded in the 1830's, with the first detailed account of the First Vision framed in 1831-32, about a decade after the event. This compares favorably to the best parallel, the New Testament record of Christian revelations. For instance, Paul's first vision occurred about 33 A.D., but his only detailed descriptions are speeches given in the period 58-60 A.D., also the earliest date for the composition of Acts, in which these speeches and Luke's historical account of Paul's vision appear. In present terms, many readers of this article in 1969 remember very well certain episodes of December 7, 1941 (a quarter of a century ago), because of their aroused emotions on "a day that will live in infamy." Some twenty years after the death of his brother Alvin, Joseph Smith said that the vivid memories of that event had not left him.⁸⁷ The First Vision, an experience of greater emotional impact, was entered in the early ledger book after about half that time. This paper has shown that Joseph Smith's memory is basically accurate for the external events of his early life.

Although not commenting upon the circumstances of the First Vision, Joseph Smith's father alluded to the experience itself. The occasion was a formal gathering of the entire Smith family and a few trusted Church leaders in 1834 to receive their blessings from the appointed patriarch of the Church. The meeting was opened by brief observations of the sixty-three-year-old leader, surveying his personal and family history. He recalled that the Lord had "often" given him "visions" and "dreams," a supporting statement for the seven related in detail by his wife, the last of which is dated 1819 by her. He reviewed God's favor on the family in their "many afflictions," mentioning specifically the tragedies of the "untimely birth" of a son (about 1797), the death of another child "in his infancy" (1810), and the 1823 death of Alvin, "taken from us in the vigor of life, in the bloom of youth."⁸⁸ Obviously, Joseph Sr. was voicing the personal convictions and traditions of an entire household. After a prayer, the initial blessing was given to his prophet-son. The opening words of Joseph Smith, Sr., summarized the spiritual career of the twenty-eight-year-

⁸⁷See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Vol. 4, p. 587 (April 9, 1842) and Vol. 5, pp. 126-127 (August 22, 1842).

⁸⁸L.D.S. Historian's Patriarchal Blessing Book 1, p. 1.

old Joseph Smith, Jr., as then accepted by those who knew him most intimately:

The Lord thy God has called thee by name out of the heavens; thou hast heard his voice from on high from time to time, even in thy youth.⁸⁹

In a series of revelations given "from time to time," the initial experience mentioned is not the coming of an angel, but an incident in which the youth is addressed personally by God from the heavens.⁹⁰ Thus the patriarch spontaneously gives the same sequence for the First Vision as found in the writings of his wife and prophet-son.

To recapitulate, the reality of the First Vision has recently been challenged on the ground that no revivals are found in the village of Palmyra in the years immediately surrounding Joseph Smith's date of 1820. But a study of the leading non-Mormon recollection of the Prophet's early religious investigations makes this line of investigation largely irrelevant. Orsamus Turner, printer's apprentice in Palmyra until about 1820, recalled young Joseph's "catching a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting, away down in the woods . . ." Thus the "religious excitement" that the Prophet identifies as preceding his First Vision must be seen in a rural setting, what a contemporary minister of the Genesee Conference termed "forest gatherings."⁹¹ The documented camp meeting near Palmyra in 1820 is no doubt typical of many others not noted in the press. But a constellation of Methodist preachers comprising all circuits of western New York gathered in their annual meeting at nearby Phelps in 1819. The impact of their public preaching is measured by the description of the "crowds which gathered from far and near" for the conference of the previous year.⁹²

A careful study of the quality of recollection found in the writings of William Smith and Oliver Cowdery render them

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

⁹⁰The terminology of the Prophet's father carries significant connotations. Although "youth" is inexact and variable in different contexts, the concept of Joseph being "called . . . by name" is found in the direct address of the 1831-32 account and the language of the 1838 history ("One of them spake unto me, calling me by name . . ."). Also the "voice from on high" in the patriarch's statement finds a parallel in the definite reference to the First Vision at the beginning of the 1831-32 account: "firstly, he receiving the testimony from on high."

⁹¹Peck, *Life and Times*, p. 48.

⁹²*Ibid.*, p. 93.

not prime sources for the First Vision itself. This means in essence that recent challenges to the Prophet's first religious experience have set up the problem with improper sources and have attempted a solution by studying only one type of revival in an unduly restricted locality. When the personal recollections that reach back to 1820 are isolated, the few Mormon and non-Mormon sources that qualify are in basic agreement. Though scornful of Mormon claims and preoccupied with money-digging gossip, Orsamus Turner and Pomeroy Tucker agree that Joseph Smith loosely affiliated with Methodism but shortly announced a negative evaluation of all Christian churches. A study of Turner's early life, combined with the shortness of Joseph Smith's Methodist association indicated in Tucker, requires a date of approximately 1820 for these events. By far the best independent source on Joseph's early personal life is his mother, who confirms the religious excitement about 1819 "in the surrounding country," relates his vision, describes his ostracism afterwards, and emphasizes that his conviction that the churches were wrong prevented his following the majority of the adults of his family in participation in the local revivals of 1824-25. Beyond these historical details, it is most impressive that both parents express acceptance of the First Vision. An exacting study of existing recollections of the early 1820 period leaves the distinct impression that Joseph Smith is more accurate on his early history than any of his current critics.