

Form Criticism of Joseph Smith's 1823 Vision of the Angel Moroni

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Review of well-conducted studies of the past three decades shows that about one-half to eighty percent of bereaved people studied feel this intuitive, sometimes overwhelming "presence" or "spirit" of the lost person. . . . These perceptions happen most often in the first few months following death but sometimes persist more than a year, with significantly more women than men reporting these events. . . . The American Psychiatric Association, author of The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—IV, considers these phenomena (when "one hears the voice of, or transiently sees the image of, the deceased person") as non-pathological. They are viewed as common characteristics of uncomplicated grief, and not attributed to mental disorder. . . . During this process, accurate recording and telling of the dead person's life is of utmost importance to the bereaved.)

Hopes and fears, dreams and apparitions are not the same as delusions and hallucinations. . . . It is part of reality to know which is which. . . . Trance and ecstasy, vision and apparition are perfectly normal and natural phenomena. Altered states of consciousness, such as dreams and visions, are something common to our humanity, something hardwired into our brains, something as normal as language itself.¹

THIS PAPER WILL EXAMINE the vision or purported vision of the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith on the night of 21-22 September 1823, announcing the location of the gold plates containing the Book of Mormon. The 1839 history of Joseph Smith² contains by far the most detailed description of

1. John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), xvi-xviii, 3-6. Crossan took the first paragraph of the quote from a paper delivered at the 1985 Jesus Seminar by Stacy Davids.

2. For the source of the Joseph Smith 1838-39 history, I use here Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996).

the vision, but there are details in this account which could not have occurred prior to 1834. The process used here (as in New Testament “form criticism”³) will be to distinguish the original historic core of the visionary narrative and experience from later anachronistic redactions. Finally, if Joseph Smith did see what he claimed to see on that night, what does that represent—a dream, a representation of a being actually in his room, an altered state of sight, etc.?

FORM CRITICISM OF THE 1823 VISION

The first task of form criticism is to identify the literary form and then find its historical setting. The form of the story differs from version to version. Any particular version could contain elements from the typical evangelical vision that offers the forgiveness of sin by an angel (Joseph Smith 1832 history), a guardian spirit in treasure digging lore (as reported by Emma Smith’s brothers), or it could be both religious and treasure digging (Willard Chase). Several persons who heard the story in the 1820s stated that it changed each time it was told. Of course that is the case with performance variations in any oral story. But this is more likely in the case of the 1823 vision because the story seems to combine forms, and the audience may have reported the story differently, depending on their perception of the story form. It is likely that Joseph Smith emphasized the treasure digging, evangelical, or ancient religious book elements, depending on his audience and on what he wanted to get across. But all of the forms came from early versions of the story that circulated in the 1820s. It is unlikely, for instance, that the story changed forms from an exclusively treasure hunting story to a purely hidden religious book story in as much as religion seems to have been part of all the stories Joseph Smith related to his family for years prior to obtaining the plates. In short, the literary form seems to be a mixed one, whose elements were emphasized more or less depending on the audience. The combination of forms is highly unusual. But all the major forms place the original story in an 1820s historical setting. So the first thing that we can say about the original story is that it was in a variable form with a setting in the early 1820s, as Joseph Smith stated. This, however, does not assure us that the story was always told in the same way.

3. New Testament form criticism originated in the works of Martin Debelius (1883-1947) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1974), who sought to reconstruct the earliest oral and written traditions which were the sources of the gospels. One of the purposes of form criticism was to determine which forms originated with the historical Jesus and which were a product of the early Christian church. For an introduction to New Testament form criticism, see Edgar V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

The first critical issue to be addressed here regards the evolution of a vision narrative. Since the Joseph Smith vision has been told with these many variations over the years, the question becomes: Is it a single story with mere performance variations, or are the variations in the story due to mis-remembrances? Has the telling of one version been affected by other versions? Or do we have an evolutionary tale which starts in the 1820s as one thing and ends up as something quite different by the end of the prophet's life? I will attempt to answer these questions by testing the hypothesis proposed by Michael Marquardt and Wesley Walters, which suggests that the variations in the 1823 narratives reflect a fundamental evolution of the narrative over time.⁴

To test this hypothesis, I will examine one detail of the vision as related by Joseph Smith in his 1838-39 history and in the Pearl of Great Price, namely, the citation of Malachi 3 and 4 by the angel Moroni:

[The angel] first quoted part of the third chapter of Malachi and he quoted also the fourth or last chapter of the same prophecy though with a little variation from the way it reads in our Bibles. Instead of quoting the first verse as it reads in our books, he quoted it thus, "For behold the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud <yea> and all that do wick-edly shall burn as stubble, for <they day> that cometh shall burn them saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch." And again he quoted the fifth verse thus, "Behold I will reveal unto you the Priesthood by the hand of Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord." He also quoted the next verse differently [p. 5]. "And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers, if it were not so the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming."⁵

This citation of scripture provides our best means to test the hypothesis of Marquardt and Walters that the variations in the 1823 narratives evolved over time. Malachi 3 and 4 were cited frequently in early Mormon scriptures and publications, and those citations show an evolving understanding of the passage over time. Thus, if the 1838-39 history reflects an 1820s Mormon understanding of Malachi, this would tend to discredit the Marquardt-Walters thesis. If, on the other hand, the understanding of Malachi matches an 1838-39 historical setting, the Marquardt-Walters thesis would be substantiated.

Let us begin with general Protestant interpretations of the Malachi passages. Nineteenth century Protestant views of Malachi 3-4 were quite

4. H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 105-106.

5. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:64-65. The "y" in "they day" has been crossed out in the original text.

varied. Several interpreters believed that the burning of the wicked by fire was figurative, a symbol of God's anger against sin or his burning sin out of sinners.⁶ Others, such as Adam Clarke, understood the fire to be a literal destruction by God. Clarke wrote in his 1827 commentary that these last chapters of Malachi (the coming of Elijah and fire burning the wicked) refer to the coming of John the Baptist to prepare for Jesus Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.⁷ This is a representative view among biblical commentaries of the time; commentaries by Lowth, Scott, Gill, Henry, and others have very similar views.⁸ Thomas Scott's commentary was published more times in early nineteenth-century America than all other commentaries combined, and he echoes Clarke's statement above. Scott adds that the destruction of the wicked mentioned in Malachi also points to the second coming of Christ, but he makes no mention of a second coming of Elijah other than the original coming of John the Baptist. In addition, Clarke believed that the coming of John the Baptist in "the spirit and authority of Elijah" ushered in a new dispensation of the gospel at the time of Christ.

More radical prophetic movements such as the Robert Matthews group and the Shakers acknowledged that this scripture in Malachi referred to John the Baptist but also believed this coming of Elijah was a prototype of the coming of a particular person within their own movements to prepare the way, i.e., Ann Lee or Robert Matthews. Apparently, prophetic movements tended to see this passage through eschatological eyes. This demonstrates the distinction between the commentaries and prophets of the nineteenth century: While the commentaries tended to be more historical and exegetical, the prophets tended to see biblical prophecy fulfilled by events occurring in their own time and religious movement.

Likewise, Mormons have always understood this passage in an eschatological sense as a reference to events before or at the coming of Christ when the earth will be burned by fire. Such a view dates back to the early Christian fathers.⁹ The earliest Mormon citation of Malachi 3-4

6. For symbolic interpretations of Malachi, see Ethan Smith, *A Key to the Figurative Language Found in the Sacred Scriptures, in the Form of Questions and Answers* (Vt.: Smith and Shute, 1825), 32-33, and Zenas, *An Affectionate Address of a Son to His Father on the Doctrine of Universalism* (New York: 1819), 8.

7. *The Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 10: 342 argued against interpretations such as Clarke's.

8. For two representative samples of this view of Malachi 4, see Mr. Reverend Osterwald, *The Bible, the Old and New Testaments with. . . Observations Illustrating Each Chapter* (New York: Sage and Clough, 1803), and Thomas Scott, *Holy Bible. Containing Old and New Testaments with Original Notes and Practical Observations* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1818).

9. Gill attempts to refute this interpretation of Malachi 4 in John Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament*, (Philadelphia: William Woodward, 1817).

is found within the Book of Mormon itself. Here Malachi is quoted, alluded to, and interpreted in the Nephite record nearly identically to the KJV, and it is interpreted literally ("according to the flesh") by Nephi to refer to the destruction of the wicked in the last days before the second coming of Christ.¹⁰

Joseph Smith's inspired version of the Bible followed the publication of the Book of Mormon. On July 2, 1833, Joseph Smith had the word "correct" written above the Book of Malachi to indicate that he agreed, as did the Book of Mormon, with the biblical text of Malachi. We also see references to Malachi 3-4 in the Book of Commandments 29:9-11 (D&C 29:9-11) from 1830; 65:30-34 (D&C 64:23-24) from 1831; in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants 100:1, 6-7 (D&C 133:1-2, 57-64) from 1831; and D&C 98:16-17 (August 6, 1833).¹¹ In 1832, an editorial in *The Evening and the Morning Star* interpreted the Malachi 4 prophecy of the turning of the hearts of the children by Elijah as being fulfilled by the future restoration of the tribes of Jacob.¹² A similar statement can be found in D&C 98:16-17 (1833 revelation; 1835 text):

[T]herefore renounce war and proclaim peace, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of their children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children. And again the hearts of the Jews unto the prophets; and the prophets unto the Jews, lest I come and smite the whole earth with a curse, and all flesh be consumed before me.

This passage represents the earliest period in the Mormon interpretation of Malachi. It interprets the coming of Elijah and the turning of the hearts as the restoration of the gospel—in particular, the return of the Jews to their ancient religion; a restoration which would bring a degree of righteousness, thus avoiding total destruction prior to the second coming.

This interpretation has apparently changed by 1834 when the coming of Elijah is also understood as entailing a restoration of "keys" or "priesthood." In October 1834, Oliver Cowdery stated that John the Baptist ordained him and Joseph Smith to the priesthood, "which shall remain upon the earth, that the sons of Levi may yet offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness!"¹³ This quote from Malachi 3 hints that Cowdery—in line with the standard Protestant view—understood the coming

10. Nephi 22:1-31. See also the other major allusions to Malachi 3-4 in the Book of Mormon, in 2 Nephi 25:13, Ether 9:22, 3 Nephi 24:1-25:6, 2 Nephi 26:1-9. The last citation employs wording from Malachi to describe the destruction of the Nephites, which destruction serves as a prototype for the destruction of the wicked in the last days.

11. I am indebted to Michael Marquardt for his help in locating these citations.

12. "The Ten Tribes," *The Evening and the Morning Star*, vol. 1, no. 5 (October 1832): 34.

13. *The Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 14-16.

of the messenger and Elijah in Malachi 3-4 as the coming of John the Baptist. However, Cowdery further believed that the 1829 appearance of the Baptist specifically to restore priesthood also fulfilled Malachi's prophecy. This is the beginning of the second interpretive period in which the coming of Elijah was understood as the restoration of authority.

Chapter 28 of the Book of Commandments was expanded in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants (50:2) to include a statement regarding Elijah as a messenger separate from John the Baptist, who restored the Aaronic priesthood. This is the Elijah "unto whom I have committed the keys of the power of turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers, that the whole earth may not be smitten with a curse." This statement further corroborates the second stage, with Elijah restoring priesthood keys. In April 3, 1836, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery received a vision in the Kirtland temple in which Elijah restored keys of the dispensation (an interpretation reminiscent of Adam Clarke). Here is clearly an establishment of religious authority by a literal visit of Elijah the prophet.

The third stage in the Mormon interpretation of Malachi began September 6, 1842, when the prophet declared that the coming of Elijah referred to the restoration of baptism for the dead (D&C 128:17-18). Thus, the three interpretive stages in Mormonism are: (1) the pre-1834 understanding of the coming of Elijah as a general restoration of the gospel (in particular to the Jews) prior to the coming of Christ; (2) the 1834-42 stage when the coming of Elijah began to be understood as a restoration of keys and authority; and (3) the post-1842 stage when Malachi was used to refer to baptism for the dead. Thus, the interpretive trend went from general to increasingly specific. Present-day Mormons have further taken the mission of Elijah from the 1842 understanding specifying baptism for the dead to an extended understanding entailing all temple work for the dead.¹⁴

Now we must return to our original question: In which interpretive setting does the 1839 quote of Moroni fit? If it fits an 1820s setting, the Marquardt-Walters thesis would be suspect. If it fits an 1838-39 setting, the Marquardt-Walters thesis would be substantiated. In the 1838-39 Pearl of Great Price, the angel first quotes Malachi 4:1: "[A]ll that do wick-edly shall burn as stubble, for<they day> that cometh shall burn them saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch." This wording is different from the KJV, in that humans become the means of destroying the wicked in the last days. Various Mormon articles from the 1830s used this scripture in reference to the destruction of

14. See as an example James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1963), 156.

the enemies of Mormonism,¹⁵ so it could fit an 1830s setting when Mormons were seeking revenge against their persecutors. However, this scripture could also fit an 1820s setting. The Book of Mormon speaks of the Native Americans ("Lamanites") destroying the Gentiles if they do not repent. So, the revision of this portion of the Malachi text could match either an 1820s or 1830s setting. This verse does not give us a certainty as to its historical setting, but the next citation by the angel does:

"Behold I will reveal unto you the Priesthood by the hand of Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord."

Joseph Smith also quoted the next verse differently:

"And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers, if it were not so the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming."

Joseph Smith claimed in 1838-39 that these were the words of the angel in 1823. Here the angel tells the prophet that Elijah will restore the priesthood, but this is not possible since the wording reflects an understanding that appeared only in the second period (post-1834), in which the coming of Elijah was understood in Mormon literature and scripture as a restoration of priesthood. It is highly improbable—inconceivable in my mind—that Joseph Smith's quote of Moroni in his 1838-39 history and the Pearl of Great Price could have been uttered before 1834. The words of the angel in Joseph Smith's 1838-39 history—and, therefore, in the Pearl of Great Price—are anachronistic. In other words, in 1838-39 Joseph Smith placed new words in the mouth of the angel—not to relate history, but to address the theological concerns of Mormonism in 1838. The wording of Moroni seems to be a message to the 1838 audience that God would avenge the wrongs done to them in Missouri and that God was on their side because he had revealed the power of Elijah (perhaps as a priesthood power to seal the heavens against Mormonism's enemies, as the prophecy foretold).

This evidence of anachronism supports the thesis of Walters and Marquardt that the details of the 1823 vision evolved based on changing theological concerns.¹⁶ There are other anachronistic details in the 1838-39 narrative of the 1823 vision, but this is the strongest evidence and in itself reveals the evolutionary nature of the story.

15. *The Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 3 (December 1835): 232-33; also 2, no. 7 (April 1836): 294-95; *Oration Delivered by Mr. S Rigdon on the 4th of July, 1838 at Far West, Caldwell County, Missouri* (Far West, Missouri: 1838; available on Signature Books *New Mormon Studies* CD-ROM database).

16. This evidence also demonstrates that one of the primary functions of the angelic

THE HISTORICAL CORE

The question immediately arises: "If the narrative evolved, what was the original core of the tale relating events of the night of 21-22 September 1823?" Here we must be careful. Is it inappropriate to speak of the original story, since story telling, like musical performance, often contains variations of the same story? There were, however, certainly multiple and very different versions of the story consisting of more than just performance variations. For example, the money-digging versions could refer to the spirit as a bleeding ghost whose throat was slit, while other accounts refer to pure white raiment without seams on a radiant angel. These two versions of the supernatural visitor's clothing seem to have stepped well beyond mere performance variations. Again, the details seem to have evolved with the telling for theological reasons. And there may have been misremembered details by the audiences.

I will use the criterion of multiple attestation to arrive at the core of the story. Multiple attestation tends to weed out religious bias and errors in memory. (However, since the genealogy of the stories has not been carefully worked out and different versions may have influenced each other, we must be cautious about claiming multiple attestation; what appear to be two independent versions may actually have influenced each other.) Even though the long work of determining the relationship of each story has not begun in earnest, we can still arrive at a method.

The place to begin is to determine which narratives are truly independent. These are almost certainly those stories which speak of the 1823 vision in the vocabulary of money digging, versus those with a more religious sound. This distinction constitutes the great dividing line. These two traditions are the least likely to have influenced each other, and both claim origins in the 1820s. Thus, if one finds a particular portion of the story in both the money digging versions and in the religious versions, one can claim on the grounds of multiple attestation that we are dealing with a core element in the original narrative. With this criterion of multiple attestation, we can determine that the minimum historical core of the story is as follows:

Joseph Smith claimed that on the night of 21-22 September 1823, a spirit or angel appeared to him three times in a dream or vision; the being told him the location of an ancient record buried in a box in a hill near his father's farm. Joseph Smith was

visitations in early Mormonism was to establish the primacy of Mormon religious claims. Visions serve the building of social and theological power. Both the first vision and the 1823 vision seem to have originated in the search for religious forgiveness. In the 1823 vision there was some initial motive on Joseph Smith's part to use the story for financial gain, but in the end, the vision narratives establish theological authority.

given a vision of the hill (a vision within a vision). He was told that this ancient, buried record contained an important message for the world.

This is the historical core of the story ascertained by using the criterion of multiple attestation. We will add to this historical core once we have examined the historical setting in greater detail. The historical setting of 1823 also confirms that this is the core narrative because the core narrative reflects four separate historical traditions preceding the purported 1823 vision:

- 1) magic/money digging—in the magic/money digging tradition, there is buried treasure controlled by guardian spirits which must be obeyed or appeased;
- 2) nineteenth-century visionaries—in nineteenth-century tradition, visions were associated with evangelical religion, radical prophets, and visions of the next world by those near death (for example, Hyrum Smith told Solomon Chamberlin that the whole Smith family was a visionary family; so such a vision would not be unexpected from one of the Smiths¹⁷);
- 3) evangelical religion—Joseph Smith claimed that he prayed on the night of 21-22 September, seeking forgiveness of sins. This was a common experience of those under the state of "conviction" due to the influence of the preachers of the Second Great Awakening;

17. In an 1858 sketch of his life, Solomon Chamberlin, an early Mormon convert, describes his own visions in a pamphlet published prior to meeting Joseph Smith. An angel or spirit appeared to him in 1816, told him that "there was no people on the earth that was right and that faith was gone from the earth excepting a few and that all churches were corrupt. I further saw in the vision, that he would soon raise up a church, that would be after the Apostolic Order, that there would be in it the same powers, and gifts that were in the days of Christ, and that I would live to see the day, and that there would [be] a book come forth, like unto the Bible, and the people would be guided by it, as well as the Bible." Chamberlin was persecuted and called "deluded" for his beliefs. On a visit to Palmyra, New York, he met Hyrum Smith and promptly asked, "Is there anyone here that believes in visions or revelations? He said Yes, we are a visionary house, I said then I will give you one of my pamphlets, which was visionary." Chamberlin uses the word "visionary" much as Channing did—referring to the experience of sense data vs. a metaphorical description. Channing and others used the term as a derogatory reference to those who received doctrinal visions. Webster's 1828 dictionary defines "visionary" in several ways, including one who has "impractical schemes," a "disturbed person," and, as an adjective, "existing in imagination only; not real." The last definition coincides with Laman's and Lemuel's charge that Lehi was full of "foolish imaginations" (1 Nephi 2:11; 17:20). Since the negative connotation is the only one found in the dictionary, I assume the term was generally understood negatively by readers in the 1830s, even though Lehi, Chamberlin, and nineteenth-century visionaries themselves continued to claim and employ the term positively. (Solomon Chamberlin, "A Short Sketch of the Life of Solomon Chamberlin," quoted in Letter to "Brother Carrington," 11 July 1858, Beaver City, Utah, holograph; LDS Historical Department Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah.)

- 4) a tradition of buried books—various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors claimed to translate a buried ancient text. The sources of these buried books were much the same: The texts were supposed ancient records buried in the ground, which prophets or others found and then translated their divine mandates, warnings, and answers.¹⁸ Besides the more familiar Solomon Spaulding, an example of such a book is *A Copy of a Letter Written by Our Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and Found under a Stone Sixty-Five Years after His Crucifixion* (Boston: Nathaniel Coverly, 1815). This letter was printed a second time in 1815 in Charleston by the printer P. W. Johnston and was published a total of six times between 1800 and 1820. There are numerous other examples.

The core narrative of the purported 1823 vision reflects all these same elements. This is further evidence that the core narrative which we reached using the criterion of multiple attestation fits into the historical setting of 1823 and is, in fact, the minimum historical core of the narrative; in other words, the core narrative has no historical anachronisms and its historicity is supported by both multiple attestation and by historical setting.

WAS THERE A VISION?

We have thus far peeled away the redactions to the core historical narrative of Joseph Smith's vision. What I wish to examine now is the historical evidence supporting or refuting the claim that the original core narrative represents sense data experienced by Joseph Smith. In other words, did Joseph Smith actually see a vision?

Visions have often been viewed as personal experiences outside the realm of historical investigation since they are not subject to verification, but all perception is personal—inside the head and indirect. We cannot directly perceive reality except through the lens of a long series of neurological and chemical reactions. There is a perceptual box inside our heads from which we can never escape. We all know that our internal perceptions are only an incomplete and filtered reflection of the outside

18. For examples, see the excursus following chapters 2 and 5 in my book *Digging in Cumorah: Recovering Book of Mormon Narratives* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000). See also Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 23-28, 162. E. D. Howe, one of Mormonism's severest critics, mistakenly claimed that one such document, purportedly found in the ground under a large, flat stone and translated from Latin by Solomon Spaulding, was the source of the Book of Mormon. For a summary of this claim, see Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 126-27.

world. Hence, visions operate with the same internal perceptual mechanism as normal perception: In both mundane perception and in visions, sense data appear inside the consciousness.

Thus, in theory, visions should be subject to verification in the same manner as any other private sense data—with, if nothing else, a lie detector. "Mr. Joseph Smith, did you on the night of 21-22 September see a seamless patch of brilliant white in your visual field with the appearance of a robe? Did you see skin-colored sense data in your mental visual field resembling a head extending from the robe-like sense data?" So the questions might go if we had Joseph Smith in front of us, hooked up to a lie detector, to determine the "reality" of his vision. (By "reality" I do not mean the external referents, the supernatural visitors, but rather the internal phenomena of perception.) There are other, more mundane ways of verifying the presence of such a vision. Was the prophet in his room on that night or was he, say, all night at a friend's drinking? If he'd been at his friend's home, his friend could witness to us that Joseph Smith could not possibly have seen the sense data he claimed he saw when he claimed he saw them. In this case, however, as in the former one, the answer would be either yes or no—Joseph Smith either did or did not see sensory data of a patch of white in his visual field on the night of 21-22 September 1823.

In theory, this is not too terribly different from my claiming to see the Queen of England in my private garden with no other witnesses nearby. In both cases, we are questioning a private perception for which there were no witnesses. Historians would have no problem addressing the historical claims of a private visit of the queen. Certainly circumstantial evidence could be researched to determine the plausibility of such a visit.

In summary, I believe that the sense data we call "a vision" constitute an historical event (in some sense of the word "historical") and, therefore, are subject to some limited degree of critical historical analysis, however difficult that analysis might be. The pertinent evidence may be somewhat circumstantial, as in the case of a private visit to my garden of the Queen, but so, in fact, is most historical evidence. That should not stop us *a priori* from the attempt at historical analysis. History is making sense of the small, last remaining sliver carried on the arc of the past.

Let us begin with the night of 21-22 September 1823. Dan Vogel has recently suggested that the story of Laban in the Book of Mormon holds a key to understanding what really happened that night. Vogel suggests that the prophet was playing the role of Nephi on 21-22 September. Joseph did not wrestle with an angel. He wrestled with himself all night and reached the conclusion that he should deceive people by claiming he had seen an angel who directed him to uncover the gold plates. According to Vogel, it was all a fabrication. Like Nephi, Joseph Smith "sinned"

to accomplish a greater good. It is better that one man lie than that a whole nation should perish in unbelief. This is Vogel's thesis. It is based on the broad thesis that Joseph Smith lied for a divine cause in which he profoundly believed. This is important and provocative as a general thesis concerning Joseph Smith's motives. It is an important contribution that must be taken seriously, but as a general discussion of Joseph Smith's motives, it cannot tell us much about concrete historical events. Vogel's suggestions about what happened on the night of the 1823 vision are historically possible but quite speculative. Assuming Joseph Smith had a motive to lie for God, that still does not give us many clues as to *when or if* Joseph Smith actually lied. So let us look closer at the evidence to support the thesis that Joseph Smith may have experienced some kind of sense data in 1823 similar to his vision narratives.

I believe there are two pieces of evidence supporting the plausibility of the prophet's claim. First, I have already summarized the evidence that no historical anachronisms exist in the original core narratives: The setting consisted of money digging, the nineteenth-century visionary tradition and evangelical religion, in both of which his family participated, and the tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors who claimed to translate a buried ancient text. This historical setting actually provides evidence that the prophet probably did see a vision: Joseph Smith is reflecting the visionary experience in his family and in the broader social setting, something we would expect to happen if he claimed it happened. There were dozens of such visions in Joseph Smith's time and place. No historian I know of seriously questions them. I see no reason to exclude Joseph Smith from this visionary tradition.

However, one additional argument provides still stronger evidence that Joseph Smith experienced the sense data described in the historical core of the narrative. I call this the argument from psychological setting. This evidence is found in Joseph's statement that he prayed in his room seeking forgiveness of sin and that his vision followed this prayer.¹⁹ Conviction was a common evangelical expression for the heightened awareness of one's sinful state which often resulted from evangelical sermons. Dozens, if not hundreds, of visions accompanied this state of conviction in the early nineteenth century.

This historical commonplace, in fact, provides the strongest evidence yet that Joseph Smith actually had a vision. Let me explain why. In the quotes at the beginning of this paper, the American Psychiatric Association, Stacy Davids, and John Dominic Crossan all argue that visions are

19. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:9, 29, 41-42, 43-44, 63, 163, 204. For texts, see also Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Books, 1983).

common during the stress over the death of a loved one. There were dozens (maybe even hundreds) of tales in the early nineteenth century of dying Christians, of those under social strain, or of those under conviction of sin in the Second Great Awakening who saw visions. As Crossan argues, and the early nineteenth century demonstrates, religious visions seem to come as a response to the existential limits of life—as a response to death, guilt, and meaninglessness. With that in mind, note that Joseph Smith's vision came as a response to his conviction of sin, the common setting for evangelical visions. Joseph Smith mentions this conviction as a matter of fact with no particular theological or apologetic significance; it's a simple, throw-away detail of the story. Yet this innocent detail is a most convincing piece of evidence that the historical core of Joseph Smith's narrative reflects sense data in his mind because Joseph Smith was on the existential border, the very psychological setting in the early nineteenth century in which one would expect to find a vision.

On these two pieces of historical evidence (the historical and psychological settings of 1823 New York), I base my rational case that Joseph Smith very likely had an actual vision on the night of 21-22 September 1823.

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Having reached the conclusion that Joseph Smith probably did not lie, but rather actually experienced the vision described in the core historical narrative, our final question is to ask what it meant in the early nineteenth century to have a vision. What is the phenomenology of a vision for Joseph Smith? In practice, mundane vision, visionary vision, imaginary vision, and metaphorical vision are each present and tend to blend together in early Mormonism.²⁰ Joseph Smith himself stated in his 1832 history that, at least once, he had difficulty distinguishing dreams from "real" perception:

[T]hus he appeared to me three times in one night and once on the next day and then I immediately went to the place and found where the plates was deposited as the angel of the Lord had commanded me and straightway made three attempts to get them and then being exceedingly frightened I supposed it had been a dream of Vision but when I considered I knew that it was not. . . .²¹

The point I wish to make is that in Joseph Smith's own writing we find formulaic visionary language at his disposal, evoking a nineteenth-

20. For a detailed catalog and argument see my *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 48-62.

21. Cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:29.

century understanding of visions as a kind of second sight, sometimes expansionary, sometimes physical, sometimes mental, and sometimes purely symbolic. (By symbolic, I refer to those instances where one "sees" God in nature or the Bible.) Yet it is often not clear, even in Joseph Smith's own mind, what a visionary experience consisted of.

In opposition to those who believed in visions, there were those in the early nineteenth-century who for various reasons denounced visions. A common belief was that visions were confined to the biblical age and that the Bible was the only revelation of God's word. The Book of Mormon prophesied that many of the people among whom it would appear would hold this belief "and deny the Holy Ghost, which giveth utterance. . . . And they say. . . the Lord and the Redeemer hath done his work, and hath given his power unto men" (2 Ne. 28:45-6). In a very similar vein, Freeborn Garrettson, another nineteenth-century visionary, relates a vision and then defends it against such disbelievers: "Some suppose that we ought not to put any dependence in dreams and visions. We should lay the same stress on them in this our day, as wise and good men have done in all ages."²²

Many of the opponents of visions were also evangelicals. For example, Benjamin Abbott's acquaintances expressed skepticism about his vision. Some thought he was mad. One minister said his vision was of the devil.²³ Joseph Smith received a similar reception when he related his first vision to acquaintances and to a minister.²⁴ Liberal Protestants also rejected the extreme emotionalism of the entire evangelical movement, including visions, stressing instead a rational religion. William Ellery Channing, a famous Unitarian leader, saw reason as essential to religion. In a widely distributed 1819 sermon, Channing contrasted his view of religion with the visionary view:

The timid and dejected discover [in the Bible] a gloomy system and the mystical and fanatical a visionary theology. . . . We lay no stress on such excitements. We esteem him and him only, a pious man, who practically conforms to God's moral perfections and government. In all things else men may deceive themselves. Disordered nerves may give them strange sights, and sounds, and impressions. Texts of Scripture may come to them from Heaven. Their whole soul may be moved, and their confidence in God's favor be undoubting. But in all this there is no religion.²⁵

22. Nathan Bangs, *The Life of Freeborn Garrettson* (New York: J. Emory & B. Waugh, 1829), 123, 129.

23. Abbott, *Experince [sic] and Gospel Labours of the Rev. Benjamin Abbott* (Philadelphia: D. S. Neal, 1825), 16-17.

24. JSH 1:21-22; also in Dean Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 6.

25. William Ellery Channing, *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing* (London, 1884), 280, 286-87.

Channing's 1819 statement reveals that visionaries often cited scripture, and his statement is substantiated by the visionary texts themselves, which often quoted the Bible and recited new scripture. This is important to our understanding of the 1823 vision. Joseph Smith claimed that the angel visited him on 21-22 September and quoted scripture. I have recently been skeptical of that claim because it does not appear in the earliest versions of the story, and the scriptural quotations appear to justify theological concerns of the late 1830s. However, Channing's statement reminds us that the citation of scripture by angelic messengers fits an 1820s setting.

So we must ask the question: Is it possible that the original story and vision had no scriptural citations? Are all the citations anachronistic and later additions? We have nothing prior to Oliver Cowdery's statement in the *Messenger and Advocate* and the Robert Matthews interview (both in 1835) that Malachi was quoted in the vision. Early accounts do not mention the scripture, but they also do not give much detail. So we are justified in questioning whether the original tale contained citation of scripture or the citation of Malachi, more specifically.

I believe there may indeed have been a historical core of scriptural citation. The tale was always eschatological and literal, and Malachi was a favorite eschatological passage from the beginning of Mormonism. The treasure hunting elements in the early core must also be seen as eschatological. (Slippery treasures in the Book of Mormon were also a sign of the end of a wicked civilization.) All the other scriptures supposedly quoted by the angel/spirit are eschatological. The Book of Mormon is eschatological. Thus, the citation of eschatological scripture fits an 1823 setting. Furthermore, we have Channing's 1819 quote that visions typically contained citations of scripture. This fact can be verified by citing numerous examples of early nineteenth century visionaries. It is therefore possible (I am not prepared to say probable) that there were scriptural citations in the original vision and story.

There are several ways to account for the historical inaccuracies in the latter versions of Joseph Smith's accounts of the vision. One can simply state that Joseph Smith lied and was loose with the facts to get across new theological points in a later historical setting, as Vogel postulates. However, I believe there is a more plausible explanation. Recent research on memory has indicated that memory is more metaphorical reproduction than a storehouse of facts. Memory can therefore blend separate events and conclusions, and lead to misremembering details, combining memories, or remembering events which did not occur.²⁶ I believe Joseph

26. David G. Payne and Jason M. Blackwell, "Truth in Memory: Caveat Emptor," in Steven Jay Lynn and Kevin M. McConkey, *Truth in Memory* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998), 32-61. Thanks to Mary Beth Raynes for this reference.

Smith had rethought the biblical passages—supposedly cited by the angel—so many times, and the actual vision had been so long ago, that he simply mixed up his own meditations on scripture with his previous vision. Whether Joseph Smith was dishonest to himself and others in his erroneous recitations of the details of his vision is a matter I cannot determine, but it strikes me as too simplistic a conclusion in this case.

CONCLUSION

We are now prepared to combine this evidence from form criticism to pull back the husk of historical anachronisms and recover the core of the narrative and the phenomenology of the original 1823 vision of Joseph Smith, which is as follows:

On the night of 21-22 September 1823, Joseph Smith saw what he described as a spirit or angel three times in a dream or vision; the being told him the location of an ancient record buried in a box in a hill near his father's farm. Joseph Smith was given a vision of the hill (a vision within a vision). He was told that this buried record contained an important message for the world. This 1823 vision was understood as eschatological—part of God's plan to save a corrupt world prior to the coming of his Son. The angel or spirit may have cited scripture, but the wording of the citations cannot be recovered. The exact nature of the sense data in the vision cannot be historically ascertained; it could have been a dream, an "eyes of faith" or imaginary image, representation of a physical being in the room, etc.

From historical analysis, this (or something very much like it) is all we can know. It is enough.