

The First Vision Controversy: A Critique and Reconciliation

Ever since Fawn Brodie wrote *No Man Knows My History* in 1946 and emphatically denied that there was any valid evidence that Joseph Smith experienced a visitation from the Father and the Son in 1820, an enormous amount of energy has been expended by scoffers and Latter-day Saints to disprove or prove the First Vision story. Until recently both sides have agreed that the truth or untruth of Mormonism was at stake, and neither side has conceded merit to the opposing point of view.¹ It is my purpose to review the issues and arguments, and offer a critique and a tentative interpretation based on available evidence that I believe may reconcile some of the disagreements while giving fair consideration to the various accounts written by Joseph Smith.

Brodie argues that Joseph Smith fabricated his vision in 1838 when he began dictating his history to provide a starting point for his prophetic career that would counter the charge that he was a money digger and charlatan turned prophet. She quotes part of the vision, noting that after a revival, at the age of fourteen, Joseph Smith said that he sought divine guidance in a wooded grove:

I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me. . . . Thick darkness gathered around me. . . . at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head. . . . It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name, and said—pointing to the other—'This is my beloved Son, hear him. . . .'

I asked the personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right—and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in His sight.

Brodie observed that similar visions were commonplace in western New York in this period; that the Palmyra newspapers made no mention of Joseph's vision although he said he was persecuted for telling it; that his mother and close relatives ignored it, or confused it with the visit of Moroni as did Oliver

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Cowdery in the first published history of the Church; and that Joseph himself did not publish his account until 1842.²

What started as an hypothesis in a scholarly biography soon became a dogma to many of the church's enemies. Brodie, out of the church when she revised her volume in 1971, clung tenaciously to her thesis despite much new evidence, adding a supplement to her original work to defend her position.³ She insisted that the recent new discoveries "bear out my original speculation that the first vision, if not an invention, was an evolutionary fantasy beginning in a half-remembered dream stimulated by the early revival excitement and reinforced by the rich folklore of visions circulating in his neighborhood."⁴

In the fall of 1967 Reverend Wesley P. Walters, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Marissa, Illinois, and vigorous opponent of Mormon proselyting,⁵ wrote "New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival" in support of Brodie's position in the *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*. He questions whether a revival of the size which Joseph describes, where "great multitudes" joined various churches in Palmyra, could have occurred in 1820. Walters says "such a revival does not pass from the scene without leaving some traces in the records and publications of the period."⁶

Walters points out that in the first published version of the vision in 1834,⁷ Oliver Cowdery said the revival occurred in 1823, when Joseph was seventeen years old, and that Reverend George Lane of the Methodists preached up the Palmyra revival.⁸ Walters insists that Cowdery in 1834 and Joseph in 1838 had the same revival in mind, since they both agree that the revival started with the Methodists, that Baptists and Presbyterians were also involved, and that large additions were made to these denominations. In both accounts, Walters says, Joseph was confused by sectarian controversy and refrained from joining any church. In both Joseph prayed and received a vision. Walters argues that Joseph Smith could not have been confused about which group was right in 1820, been enlightened by vision that all were wrong, and then have become confused on the same point again in 1823.⁹ There was but one revival, in 1824, so that Joseph Smith was quite wrong in dating it in 1820, and wrong in much of the rest of his First Vision story.

Walters notes that the prophet's younger brother, William, agreed with Cowdery that it was Reverend Lane who stirred the Palmyra revival and states that this minister suggested the James 1:5 text, "If any of you lack wisdom," to which Joseph initially responded. Walters also cites William Smith as saying that Reverend Stockton, a Presbyterian, was also involved in the revival but that Joseph Smith, Sr., did not like him because he affirmed at Alvin Smith's funeral that Alvin had gone to hell. As a result, Walters concludes that the revival must have occurred after Alvin's death in 1824,¹⁰ and scores most Mormon writers who have made use of these details without acknowledging the inconsistencies.¹¹

Walters adds that Stockton first ministered to the Palmyra congregation in October 1823 but was not installed as pastor until 18 February 1824. George Lane labored in the Susquehanna district over 150 miles from Palmyra until

July of 1824 when he was assigned to Palmyra. Thus, Stockton and Lane could not have worked together in Palmyra before the summer of 1824.

Walters cites an account by George Lane in the *Palmyra Wayne Sentinel* for 15 September 1824, which says that the great revival began at Palmyra and soon spread abroad. Walters also cites a Baptist periodical that by the end of the year more than three hundred souls had joined churches in Palmyra.¹² But Walters says "when we turn to the year 1820 . . . the 'great multitudes' are conspicuously missing." The Presbyterians had no awakening in 1820, as James Hotchkin makes clear, and the Baptist records show no significant increase in membership. The Methodist figures for the entire circuit show net losses of twenty-three for 1819 and six for 1820. In addition, the religious press makes no mention of any revival in 1820, although it does so for 1817 and 1824.¹³ Thus Joseph's recollections of great multitudes joining the churches seem accurate only if the date is 1824, not 1820.

Walters maintains that all of this evidence leaves the Mormon believer in a quandary. Walters says some Mormons will try to imagine that a great revival did occur in 1820, but he doubts that there is sufficient factual confirmation. A better line of argument, Walters says, would be to maintain that Joseph was wrong about the date but such arguments would force Mormon apologists to place the vision in the spring of 1825, at which time Smith would be nineteen years old, not an innocent young boy, and his vision would have occurred after the supposed visit of Moroni in September 1823.¹⁴

Walters next compares the version of the First Vision written by Joseph Smith in 1832 with that written in 1838 and notes that the former makes Joseph sixteen instead of fourteen years old, records the appearance of one divine personage, not two, the single personage being Jesus Christ, and has Joseph seek the plates to "obtain riches." This version makes no mention of a revival.¹⁵

These discrepancies, Walters concludes, discredit the 1838 account and thus undermine Joseph's credibility. A more plausible interpretation, he argues, would be that suggested by Obediah Dogberry and E. D. Howe, in the earliest form of the story. In this account Joseph discovered the plates by means of a seer stone, and a spirit came to him to inform him where they were located. Only later did the story take on a religious tone, with the coming of an angel and then a visitation of Jesus Christ as the story gets more elaborate.¹⁶ Thus, Walters takes a position similar to Brodie's, seeing fraud and deception at the root of early Mormonism, as Joseph Smith moved from money digger to prophet.

Two additional heirs of Brodie are Jerald and Sandra Tanner, whose 1968 *Case Against Mormonism* has a chapter on the First Vision. Like Brodie, the Tanners are renunciants of the Church. Their disillusionment was considerably influenced by *No Man Knows My History*, which is maintained as the standard against which the Church's position on Joseph Smith is measured.

Less professional and less historically oriented than Brodie or Walters, the Tanners have been mostly concerned with discrediting Church leaders who have written on the First Vision, often making use of the latest arguments by

active Mormons published in scholarly works. In their 1968 treatment, the Tanners quote the 1838 version of the vision, and then cite various LDS leaders on the importance of the vision for the Mormon believer. James B. Allen is quoted as saying that the First Vision is a fundamental belief to which all loyal Mormons must adhere, George Q. Cannon that there can be no true faith without a true knowledge of God as set forth in the vision, and Bruce R. McConkie that the visitation in the grove was the most important historical event since the end of Christ's ministry, for by this means the "creeds of Apostate Christendom were smashed." Apostle John A. Widtsoe is quoted that upon the reality of the vision "rests the truth and value" of Joseph Smith's subsequent work, and David O. McKay that the First Vision is the "foundation of the faith."¹⁷

The Tanners have had a running debate with Mormon apologists, attempting to demonstrate factual discrepancies in the pro-Joseph interpretations. They dispute Hugh Nibley's contention that Joseph considered his vision sacred and thus did not mention it often, citing Joseph's own remark that his telling of the story in 1820 led to a relentless persecution by sectarian leaders.¹⁸ They argue that one of the most damaging evidences against Joseph's 1820 account is that section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants indicates that no man can see God and live without possessing priesthood authority and ordinances. Joseph, they say, violated his own principle by claiming a vision of the Lord before he received the priesthood.¹⁹

The Tanners picked up on Brodie's argument that the First Vision story was not published until 1842 and noted that James Allen affirms that, if Joseph told the story in the 1820s, he had ceased to do so by the 1830s, since there is no evidence that the story was being circulated at that time. True, they admit, Alexander Neibaur retells the story in his journal, but this is not until 1844, after the vision had been reported in the *Times and Seasons*. Pomeroy Tucker referred to the vision in 1867, but had an angel coming to Joseph in 1823 to say all the churches were wrong.²⁰

Oliver Cowdery's version of the vision seems to the Tanners to confirm their interpretation. Cowdery stated that he would provide a full and correct history of the rise of the Church and tells his readers that Joseph Smith had offered to assist him. But Cowdery affirmed that the vision came in 1823 with but one personage, who delivered the message that Joseph's sins were forgiven and then told him that a history had been deposited in a place nearby. The Tanners note the many contradictions between this and the 1838 story and declare that "certainly this history refutes the story that the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820."²¹

The Tanners base much of their theorizing about the writing of Mormon history on a conspiratorial theme. When they learned of the discovery of another version of the First Vision in Joseph Smith's letter book, the main question they asked was, "Why wasn't this made known earlier?" They quote Levi Edgar Young, a Mormon General Authority, as saying that he had seen a "strange account of the first vision" in 1958 but was told to say nothing about

what it contained. They do not indicate who advised him to say nothing. The Tanners assume that this was probably the 1832 version and state that "a careful reading of this document reveals why the Church leaders have never published or referred to it." They point out that in this version Joseph had already decided that the existing churches were untrue before he went into the woods to pray, which contradicted his statement in 1838 that "it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong." In 1832 Joseph's age is given as sixteen, not fourteen, and only Jesus Christ visited him, rather than appearing with the Father. The Tanners conclude that "the only reasonable explanation for the Father not being mentioned is that Joseph Smith did not see God the Father and that he made up this part of the story after he wrote the first manuscript."²²

In their tract, the Tanners also consider an 1835 version of the vision which again fails to mention any revival and has one personage appearing followed by another, contrary to the 1838 account which has them appearing simultaneously. Thus, the Tanners remark, "if this is not bad enough, Joseph also states that there were 'many angels.'" They conclude: "Now we have three different accounts of the First Vision, *AND EVERY ONE OF THEM IS DIFFERENT*. . . . We would, of course, expect some variations in any story, but we feel that there are so many variations . . . that they make it impossible to believe."²³

The Tanners also borrow from Brodie again to maintain that others had visions similar to Joseph's. They affirm somewhat credulously that Joseph Smith was influenced by Charles G. Finney, although they fail to notice that Finney's autobiography was not published until the 1870s and that there is no evidence whatsoever that the story of Finney's vision ever reached Joseph Smith. They say Asa Wild and Stephen Bradley were two who had visions like Joseph's.²⁴

Tenacious in their efforts to disembowel Mormonism, the Tanners give Walters' article full consideration.²⁵ They also hit back at Hugh Nibley, who in 1961 accused Mormon critics of garbling the First Vision account. The Tanners argue that Joseph himself did not always get the story straight, nor did Orson Pratt in 1840, nor George A. Smith, Andrew Jenson, and others.²⁶

The Tanners charge that Joseph Smith changed his doctrine concerning the Godhead, and see this as evidence of deceit. They cite Ether 3:14 and Mosiah 15:1, 5 as evidence that Joseph Smith was initially a trinitarian, that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were physically one. They also cite the "Lectures on Faith" to show that Joseph taught that the Father was a personage of spirit. They comment cynically, "Can anyone honestly look at these three different accounts of the First Vision and not admit that Mrs. Brodie was right" in claiming that Joseph Smith was a "mythmaker of prodigious talent."²⁷

When Mormon scholars responded to the challenges made to the First Vision story, it was Walters' revival thesis that largely concerned them. In 1969 *BYU Studies* ran an entire issue on the First Vision controversy, including a piece by Dean Jessee which contained authenticated accounts of the 1832, 1835, and 1838 versions of the vision taken from manuscript sources in the Church

Archives.²⁸ Also in this issue Milton Backman of the BYU Religion Department challenged Walters on the basis of 1820 church records, newspaper reports, and historical accounts to argue that there was some revival activity in Joseph's immediate neighborhood in that year and a great deal more in the "region" and "district of country" where Joseph Smith said the "multitudes" joined the churches. Backman argues that there were camp meetings held by the Methodists in 1819-1820 at Phelps, a few miles from Palmyra, where five joined the Freewill Baptists, and that here Joseph himself caught a spark of Methodism and became temporarily converted. Backman stresses that while Joseph said the excitement began in his town, the vast numbers of converts came from outside it. Backman also says that within a radius of twenty-five miles there were revivals at several towns, and that all of western New York ("the district of country" as Joseph called it) was caught up in the revival. Backman claims that there were 1,513 converts in the Presbyterian churches in the "burned-over district" in 1819 with comparable gains among the Baptists. He adds that the Smiths could have read in the *Palmyra Register* of the revivals sweeping through eastern New York and Joseph could have been thinking of these when he wrote his history.²⁹

In that same year, 1969, *DIALOGUE* ran a roundtable discussion on the First Vision, printing an early version of Walters' article with a critique by Richard Bushman and a new response by Walters.³⁰ Walters takes exception to Backman's thesis that "district of country" meant a statewide revival, arguing that Joseph would not have considered statewide revivals significant for they were occurring regularly in New York; Joseph's point was that an unusual excitement was going on right in "the place where we lived." Walters also questions whether there was a large enough revival at Vienna (Phelps) to meet the requirements since Methodist Abner Chase speaks of a spiritual decline at the time of the 1819 conference. Walters hypothesizes that the revival on the Vienna road took place not fifteen miles from Palmyra in the town of Vienna, but at the campground on the Vienna road just outside Palmyra, Walters questions whether those at this camp meeting or the converts to the Presbyterian and Baptist faith at Phelps added up to "great multitudes." He affirms that Joseph's error in dating and other details "is far deeper than a mere lapse of memory. . . . it enters into the very fabric of the story itself."³¹

In his response Bushman repeats many of Backman's points and maintains that it is folly to try to explain every change in the vision accounts as the result of Joseph's calculated efforts to fabricate a convincing story. Bushman questions Walters' point that Lane could only have been there in 1824, saying this depends on Cowdery's account, which may be wrong. Bushman notes that Cowdery placed the revival in 1823, two years sooner than Walters' explanation would allow. Thus, how can Mormon apologists or Walters accept Cowdery's narrative uncritically?³²

Borrowing from a point made by Larry Porter, Bushman affirms that George Lane could have been heard by Joseph in 1819 when he passed near Palmyra but warns again that the Lane story was told by Cowdery, not Joseph.

Bushman says that Cowdery was in Missouri when he started his 1834 history, and after moving to Ohio, lived in Norton, too far from Kirtland to have worked very closely with Joseph Smith when he wrote his account.³³

Bushman says that when it comes down to it, Walters' argument is subjective: it rests on the judgment of how far is far and how big is big. How close do towns have to be to come within the "region of country" Joseph described? How many converts have to be made for a fourteen-year-old to call it "multitudes"? When Walters describes his 1824 revival, he includes towns like Williamson, Ontario, Manchester, Sulphur Springs, Vienna, Lyons, and Macedon as nearby, and Mendon, Geneva, Gorham, and Clye, another four, as somewhat further away. For 1820 Backman and Walters agree that Farmington, Penfield, Rochester, Lima, West Bloomfield, Junius, and Oaks Corners were within a twenty-five-mile radius and thus within the "region of country."³⁴ Since the Lyons circuit of the Methodist church alone saw an increase of 280 in 1820, even by Walters' standards the 1819-1820 season of revivals was not so dull as Walters said.³⁵

Bushman reemphasizes what for the Mormon position is a critical point—that Joseph only said of the "place where he lived" that there was "an unusual excitement on the subject of religion," while he said the "multitudes" who joined the churches came within the "whole region of the country." Bushman argues that seven revivals within a twenty-five-mile area are sufficient. Further, the Smiths probably covered considerable territory when they sold their cakes and beer at various social gatherings and were thus familiar with a much larger area than Palmyra or Manchester.³⁶

Walters, reacting to Bushman, argues (correctly, I believe) that Cowdery's history cannot be so easily dismissed since Joseph's own history informs us that he and Oliver Cowdery were together on several occasions in the latter part of 1834 and thus it was quite possible for Joseph to fulfill his pledge to help Oliver with his 1834 narrative.³⁷ The 1832 account places Joseph's vision at age sixteen, which is closer to Cowdery's age of seventeen than the fourteenth year which appears in the 1838 account. Walters questions whether, in a day when canal boats carried passengers four miles a day, it is realistic to consider towns ten, fifteen, and in some cases twenty-five miles away as "the place where we lived,"³⁸ but misses the point that Bushman made—that Joseph said only that a religious excitement occurred in Palmyra and that large conversions came in the "region of country." But Walters insists that Joseph was talking about his home town, that the excitement was near enough to Joseph's home that there was pressure on the family to join the local Presbyterian church. It was close enough for Joseph to observe that "a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued" and that converts filed off, "some to one party and some to another." Walters thinks these details make it clear that Joseph was talking about a place he knew very intimately, which could only be Palmyra.³⁹

In 1972, in their enlarged edition of *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality*, the Tanners make use of a discovery by Wesley Walters that the Session Records of the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra show that Lucy Smith and some

children were active members of the Presbyterian Church until 1828, eight years after Joseph was supposedly told that all the churches were wrong. The Tanners question whether Lucy and her children took Joseph's claim of a vision seriously.⁴⁰

The Tanners also make use of another discovery by Walters, that the *Ambony Journal* for 30 April 1879 and 11 June 1879 presented the testimony of Joshua McKune, a minister, and Michael Morse, a brother-in-law to Joseph Smith, that Joseph himself sought membership in the Methodist church at Harmony, Pennsylvania, in 1828. The Tanners say this destroys any credence one can give to Joseph's statement that the Lord told him not to join any church.⁴¹

In 1980 Walters and the Tanners further elaborated on their arguments. Walters calls Backman's study "a mere screen to confuse the average reader," and Walters states that, in citing Blakeslee as to a "flaming spiritual advance" in 1820, Backman misread the date, for Blakeslee meant the denomination's calendar year, or 1821. In writing of a "religious cyclone" in the Lyons Circuit, Blakeslee was three years too early, as Reverend Chase indicates that there was no revival there until 1824.

To reinforce his view that when Joseph said the "place where I lived" he meant Palmyra, Walters cites Joseph's statement in the *New York Spectator* that the reformation took place "among the different denominations in the neighborhood where I lived," and Lucy Mack Smith that the "whole neighborhood . . . flocked to the meeting house" during the revival.⁴² Furthermore, Walters says that in the *History of the Church*, 5: 356, Joseph speaks of the Mormon settlements at Nauvoo as in a "region of country," an area that did not have a radius of more than twenty miles.⁴³ Walters says that Joseph would not be taking hikes of thirty miles to learn what was happening in other villages. On this, Walters perhaps misunderstood Peter Crawley's point in a *DIALOGUE* article where he argued that David Marks in Junius did exactly this in 1821—walking twenty-five and thirty miles at a time to attend revivals without considering it unusual, and thus implying that Joseph Smith could have walked that far at times also.⁴⁴

Walters finds confirmation of his view that the revival in question occurred in 1824 in the manuscript of Lucy Mack Smith's history. Her original narrative reported that the revival at which she became a Presbyterian was after Alvin's death, which occurred in November 1823. Walters then concludes that recent validation of Joseph's 1838 account is wishful thinking by Mormon historians, saying Dale Morgan was right when he said that there is little reality in Joseph Smith's early history.⁴⁵

After weighing the arguments in this long and sustained controversy, where does one come down with respect to the Walters-Tanner, Backman-Bushman-Crawley debate? Three nationally known scholars who have mentioned the First Vision recently do not wholly agree with either side. Jan Shippo, a non-Mormon, admits with Walters that the events described by Joseph better fit the 1824 revival, but she adds that the confused chronology in the official history is no reason to doubt that Joseph had an early vision which

led him to stay away from organized religion. Lawrence Foster, also a non-Mormon, states flatly that "at least as early as 1823, young Joseph began experiencing a series of visions or what might be described as waking dreams of unusual force and vigor which totally reoriented his life." Klaus Hansen, a Mormon writing for a non-Mormon audience, says that "because of their fragmentary nature, these accounts do not support firm conclusions for either side" but holds that Mormon scholars "have raised valid objections" to the contention that there is conclusive evidence that the revival did not occur.⁴⁶

I believe that both sides have overlooked some important points and that a plausible argument can be made for the basic Church chronology despite contradictions between some sources, provided that it is recognized that there are some inaccuracies in the 1838 account. It seems to me that everybody has approached the issue from the wrong end, by starting with the 1838 official version when the account they should be considering is that of 1832. Merely on the face of it, the 1832 version stands a better chance of being more accurate and unembellished than the 1838 account which was intended as a public statement, streamlined for publication. When Joseph dictated his 1838 version (if he did in fact actually dictate it), he was aware of what had been previously published by Oliver Cowdery and aware of his stature as the prophet of a new and important religious movement. It would be natural for him to have smoothed out the story, making it more logical and compelling than perhaps it first seemed in 1820.

In the Walters-Backman "war of words," it seems to me that Walters has scored some important points, although not nearly as many as he professes. I am inclined to agree that the religious turmoil that Joseph described which led to some family members joining the Presbyterians and to much sectarian bitterness does not fit well into the 1820 context detailed by Backman. For one thing, it does not seem likely that there could have been heavy sectarian strife in 1820 and then a joint revival where all was harmony in 1824. In addition, as Walters notes, Lucy Mack Smith said the revival where she became interested in a particular sect came after Alvin's death, thus almost certainly in early 1824.

Indicating that the angel had told Joseph of the plates prior to the revival, Lucy added that for a long time after Alvin's death the family could not bear any talk about the golden plates, for the subject had been one of great interest to him and any reference to the plates stirred sorrowful memories. She said she attended the revival with hope of gaining solace for Alvin's loss. That kind of detail is just the sort that gives validity to Lucy's chronology. She would not have been likely to make up such a reaction for herself or the family nor mistake the time when it happened.⁴⁷ I am persuaded that it was 1824 when Lucy joined the Presbyterians.⁴⁸

Lucy's testimony is the most compelling part of Walters' argument. But Walters has not proved his point about the neighborhood revival beyond doubt since, as Bushman makes clear, Joseph never said that multitudes joined in Palmyra itself. But Walters is right in countering Bushman on Oliver Cowdery. Joseph and Oliver were together frequently in the latter part of 1834 so that

something of the 1834 narrative probably came from him. But we do not know how much.

Cowdery had a lot of things right—that the revival in question came no earlier than 1823, that Lane was there, and that Moroni came afterward.⁴⁹ Larry Porter's argument, that everything occurred when George Lane passed through in July 1819,⁵⁰ does not fit what Joseph said, for he indicated that he attended the revival meetings "as often as occasion would permit." The revival Joseph described was a protracted one covering several days, not a one-night stand.

Walters maintains that an 1824 revival destroys the credibility of Joseph Smith's whole story since the revival occurred after Moroni's visit. Here Walters' scholarly objectivity gives way to anti-Mormon zeal. An 1824 revival creates problems for the 1838 account, not that of 1832. Walters overlooks the fact that Joseph said nothing in his 1832 account about a revival prompting his prayer. According to this version,

At about the age of twelve years my mind became seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul which led me to Search the Scriptures believing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God thus applying myself to them and my intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly for I discovered that instead of adorning 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 thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind the contentions and divisions the wickedness and abominations . . . my mind became exceedingly distressed for I became convicted of my Sins and by Searching the Scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ . . . and when I considered all these things . . . I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go . . . the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord in the 16th year of my age a pillar of light above the brightness of the Sun at noon day came down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the Spirit of God and the Lord opened the heaven upon me and I saw the Lord and he Spake unto me Saying Joseph my Son thy Sins are forgiven thee, go thy way walk in my Statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world . . . the world lieth in sin at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned asside from the Gospel and keep not my commandments they draw near to me with their lips while hearts are far from me. . . .

Not only does this account ignore the revival, so too does the 1835 account, in which Joseph merely reports that he was "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 . . . Being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove."⁵¹

Neither did Lucy Mack Smith mention a revival when she described Joseph's first vision where an angel told him that the churches are "man made"

and also told him about the plates.⁵² She indicated that this vision occurred during the third year after their move to Manchester, which would have been 1820, since they left Palmyra for Manchester in 1818.⁵³ Not only has Walters conveniently ignored this statement by Lucy, he fails to perceive that the absence of a revival in these sources makes his entire argument based on the dating of the revival dubious.

To be sure, Joseph mentioned the revival in 1838, but Walters gives that account no credence. In Joseph's statement to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* in 1843 he merely said there was a "reformation" in the "neighborhood where I lived" but said nothing about large numbers being involved. In the 1844 Neibaur account, a revival is mentioned where Lucy "got religion," but this was written after the 1838 version had been published and there is no mention here of large multitudes being converted.⁵⁴ Oliver Cowdery stressed the magnitude of the revival, but was obviously thinking of 1824, Lucy's conversion, and the coming of Moroni. William Smith also talked about revivals, but he spoke of several between 1822 and 1823 and said that Joseph's interest in religion came after the "excitement had subsided";⁵⁵ thus, these revivals were not an integral part of Joseph's story. Orson Pratt, in his version published in 1840, said nothing at all about a revival.⁵⁶

The Walters-Tanner argument that Lucy's joining the Presbyterians and Joseph's joining the Methodists destroyed Joseph's credibility fails to consider that, unlike 1838, the 1832 version said nothing about Joseph's being forbidden to join a church. Joseph did indicate here that he himself had decided after studying the Bible that "there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ" and the Lord told him that "none doeth good . . . they have turned aside from the Gospel" but he is not told by divine command to join no church. Thus there is no great inconsistency, as Walters and the Tanners imagine, when Lucy Smith joined the Presbyterians or when Joseph sought to be a Methodist in 1828. He was fairly convinced that all were wrong but perhaps responded to the urgings of his wife, Emma, who had very close ties with the Methodists in Harmony, Pennsylvania.⁵⁷

I am not certain at what point Joseph began to see himself as the leader of a new religious movement, but it may have been later than most Mormons realize. As late as 1829 he received a revelation that told him to pretend to no other gift than that of translation,⁵⁸ as though even this late he had not really assumed the mantle of prophet.

At any rate, if Joseph Smith in 1838 read back into 1820 some details of a revival that occurred in 1824, there is no reason to conclude that he invented his religious experiences. Both 1820 and 1824 were traumatic times in his life; the former because, as a teenager responding to the great pressure that ministers and revivalists put on the youth of that day, he was very much concerned about his soul's salvation and because he found himself in 1824 in the middle between his father, who said he was angry at the Presbyterians and would join no church, and his mother who made the decision to join the Presbyterians and took Hyrum, Samuel, and Sophronia with her. Thus Joseph found himself in

1824 wanting to "feel and shout like the rest,"⁵⁹ but he could not make a commitment without displeasing his father.⁶⁰ If he had been stirred by some local revivals earlier, between the ages of twelve and fifteen, then it was not so hard to confuse some of the details. Revivals had been a key factor in his religious experience.

Giving priority to the 1832 account also makes it more understandable why Oliver Cowdery got his story tangled. He started out telling of Joseph's 1820 vision,⁶¹ perhaps along the lines of the 1832 version with one personage involved. It seems apparent that Joseph must have said something to him in December after he published the story of George Lane and the revival to the effect that the Lane revival was not until 1823. Rather than admitting that his details about the revival were wrong, Oliver decided to jump ahead and tell of Moroni's coming.⁶² I suspect that it was this narrative by Cowdery which influenced William Smith and others to confuse the 1820 vision with the coming of Moroni. But what is significant is that there was no such confusion in Joseph's 1832 account, for the visit of Christ and the coming of Moroni afterward are two distinct events.

Another point deserves comment here. If initially Joseph said one personage came to him in 1820, it became easier for Oliver Cowdery to confuse this visit with the coming of Moroni than it would have been a few years later when Joseph taught emphatically that there were three separate personages in the Godhead.

The Tanners make much of the argument that Joseph Smith changed his view of the Godhead. There is a good deal of evidence that his understanding grew on many points of theology, including his view of man and his potential, his view of salvation, of what it consists and how it is obtained.⁶³ If, as the Tanners argue, Joseph grew in his understanding of the nature of the Godhead, this does not provide evidence of his disingenuousness. I do not agree with the Tanners that the 1835 narrative is no evidence that Joseph believed in two separate personages.⁶⁴ It is true as they note that the two persons are not named, yet it seems unlikely that Joseph would distinguish between them and the "many angels" he said he saw unless he thought the two were other than angels. The 1835 version with its two personages stands at odds with the statement in the "Lectures on Faith" that God is a spirit.⁶⁵ There is a problem here that requires explanation.

It seems to me that if the Latter-day Saints can accept the idea that Joseph gained his full understanding of the nature of God only after a period of time, instead of its emerging fullblown in 1820, then most of the difficulties with chronology can be resolved. There is evidence that some Latter-day Saints have recently come to terms with their history on this point. Two excellent examples are the studies of James B. Allen, and also that of Neal Lambert and Richard Cracroft.⁶⁶ These Mormons examined the evidence first, then drew their conclusions.

What is disturbing about the work of Reverend Walters and the Tanners is that they seem at times to reverse this process. They begin their look at Joseph

Smith by accepting fully Fawn Brodie's basic arguments, and never alter their position regardless of the evidence. The rigid framework within which they perceive their subject, the invariably negative conclusions they reach, the frequent resort to dogmatic declarations, and the finality they assume for their work suggest that they have something more at stake than do most historians.

To some extent Reverend Walters, and to a considerable extent, the Tanners, suffer from what Sidney E. Mead called an anti-historical bias. They allow for no development in Joseph Smith's thought, holding up a very absolutistic model to which he is supposed to conform. They always assume that the worst motives influenced the Mormon prophet. They begin with Brodie's absurd notion that unless Joseph Smith told about his vision sufficiently that the newspapers picked it up and unless all the details are exactly alike, Joseph made the story up. It makes no difference to them that the story does appear in the first history which Joseph wrote in 1832 and that it appears in some form in all the accounts with which he had anything to do.

The sort of rationalistic demands they make of Joseph Smith would play havoc with any belief in the resurrection of Christ. Nothing was written about this event for thirty years after and then only by Jesus' most loyal followers. In telling the story of the resurrection, the gospel writers hardly agree on details as to who saw Jesus first, when and where, under what circumstance, and who else saw him, and in what sequence. To be sure, as Hans Kung says, this is a religious literature, early Christians were not scientists, and we cannot expect the kind of precision that would come in a scientific paper.⁶⁷

A tolerant viewpoint is required in handling any religious sources. Sectarians like Walters and the Tanners will allow for it in their own religious preference but will not extend the same courtesy to the Mormons. Walters accepts the gold digging stories told by Obediah Dogberry in the *Palmyra Reflector* quite uncritically, as he does the testimonies of E. D. Howe.⁶⁸ These stories have been examined with care by Hugh Nibley and Richard Anderson,⁶⁹ and they have demonstrated that there are major inconsistencies and an extreme one-sidedness. Why should one give unqualified credence to Dogberry, who so often resorts to hyperbole and who had a run-in with Joseph Smith regarding his publishing part of the Book of Mormon without permission? Dogberry was obviously contemptuous and this biased what he wrote. Why accept E. D. Howe when Hurlbut went to Palmyra deliberately to get something on the Mormons? Walters' scholarship is one of sectarian advantage, not objectivity.

The sources Walters and the Tanners employ, the conclusions they reach, the places where they publish, and their strong anti-Mormon missionary activities suggest they have other than scholarly concerns.

All the sources that I have considered agree that Joseph had an early vision between the ages of fourteen and fifteen. Even Oliver Cowdery said this at first. All agree that Joseph was troubled about religion and that he sought the Lord in prayer. As James Allen shows,⁷⁰ Joseph never cited his vision with respect to the nature of the Godhead. This use of the vision came long afterward. For

Joseph, it meant something else. He was in quest of finding God in his life, to gain a forgiveness of sins, to know the Lord's will concerning him. All accounts agree that the vision started him on the road to becoming a prophet. It seems to me that more can be explained historically by including rather than excluding the First Vision. For those who begin with an historical inquiry in mind—what happened, why, what the consequences were—this seems to be the starting place. For those who have other objectives this may not be sufficient.

NOTES

1. See Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Case Against Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Company, 1968), pp. 89-91 for quotations from Mormon leaders on the crucial nature of the vision, as well as the negative Tanner response.
2. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), pp. 21-25.
3. See the revised edition, 1979, pp. 21-25 and 405-25.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 409.
5. Walters' anti-Mormon attitudes are reflected in an article he wrote in *Eternity* (May 1980), a magazine for "committed Christians," in which he argues erroneously that the Mormons give the Book of Mormon no credence. Significantly, the editor at the close of the article offers free tracts to be given to the Mormon missionaries when they knock.
6. Vol. 10, p. 228.
7. *Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate* 1 (Dec. 1834): 42 and (Feb. 1834): 78.
8. Walters, "New Light," p. 228.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 229-30.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 231, 233.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 234-36.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 236-38.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.
17. Tanner and Tanner, *Case*, pp. 89-91.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-95.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-98.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-106.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-9. Their conclusion that Finney influenced Joseph Smith comes from Gilbert Seldes, *The Stammering Century*, but seems to me to be absurd. A much more sensible approach is seen in Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, "Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 31-42.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-15.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-19. They referred to Nibley's "Censoring the Joseph Smith Story," *Improvement Era* 64 (Oct., Nov., 1961) 490-92, 522, 524, 526, 528.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-29.
28. Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9 (Spring 1969), pp. 275-94.
29. Milton V. Backman, Jr., "Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9 (Spring 1969): 301-302, but especially pp. 306-309, 311, 313, 317-18.
30. "The Question of the Palmyra Revival," 4 (Spring 1969): 59-100.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-70.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 85-86.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 89.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 95; and see Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1971) 2:168-69, 174, 176.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
40. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Company, 1972), p. 161.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
42. Wesley P. Walters, "Joseph Smith's First Vision Story Revisited," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 4 (1980): 95, 99, 103, 105.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 96. In Doctrine and Covenants 58:52 the Lord tells the Saints to "purchase the whole region of country as soon as time will permit." While the Mormons probably bought no large amount of land in western Missouri in 1833, there is no reason to think they had a small area in mind ultimately. Max Parkin has prepared a map showing that at the end of the year the Saints had already bought land over on the western border, some ten miles out of Independence.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 96. See Peter Crawley, "A Comment on Joseph Smith's Account of His First Vision and the 1820 Revival," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6 (Spring 1971): 106-107.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99. Lucy Mack Smith's original manuscript, written by Howard Coray, is in the Church Archives in Salt Lake City. Its pages are unnumbered, but the crucial comments by Lucy come toward the middle of the lengthy manuscript.
46. Jan Shipps, "The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith," *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974): pp. 3-20; Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 129; Klaus Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 23.
47. She does confuse Joseph's First Vision and Moroni's visit, but in light of Lambert and Cracroft's analysis of the 1832 version, the vision does not seem to have been as significant in starting the Church as the 1838 account made it seem. In Lucy's mind, Moroni's telling of the plates seemed more important.
48. Although Lucy does not specifically name the church she considered joining after Alvin's death, there can be no doubt that she refers to the Presbyterian Church of Palmyra. She indicates that Joseph told her that she would not remain in the church for long, for she would learn of its wickedness. Joseph warned her that "deacon Jessup" was a man who "would not hesitate to take the last cow from the widow and orphans." Jessup was a deacon in the church at Palmyra. Since we know that Lucy did join the Presbyterians and remained active in that church until 1828, and a member of record until 1830, her joining had to have come after Alvin's death, as she records. She would not join in 1820 and then reconsider joining in 1824. Lucy and her family's withdrawal in 1828 from the Presbyterians is reproduced in Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981), pp. 182-83. Some additional support for my general view comes from William Smith, who indicated in his notes on Chambers in the Church Archives that Lucy and family "belonged to the Presbyterian Church, of whom the Rev. M. Stockton was the presiding pastor." This would suggest Lucy first joined after Stockton had come to Palmyra in 1824.
49. *Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate* 1 (Dec. 1834) and (Feb. 1834): 42, 78-79.

50. Larry C. Porter, "Reverend George Lane—Good 'Gifts,' Much 'Grace,' and 'Marked Usefulness,'" *BYU Studies* 9 (Spring 1969): 135.
51. Dean Jessee reproduces the 1835 account told by Joseph Smith to his scribe, Warren Parrish, in *Dialogue* 6 (Spring 1971): 85-88.
52. Lucy Mack Smith Mss., Church Archives.
53. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise and Progress of Mormonism* (New York, 1867), p. 12 says that the Smiths moved to Manchester in 1818.
54. See the *Pittsburgh Spectator* account, and that by Neibaur in Backman, "Awakenings," pp. 176-77.
55. "William Smith on Mormonism" (1883) is conveniently reproduced in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, 2 vols. (Independence, MO: Zion's Printing and Publishing Company, 1951), 2:414-17.
56. Orson Pratt's version may be found in Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, pp. 170-72.
57. See Dean Jessee, "Early Accounts of the First Vision," pp. 278-80; and Larry C. Porter's "Reverend George Lane," pp. 331-32 for Emma Smith's close connections to Methodist leaders at Harmony.
58. *Book of Commandments for the Government of the Church of Christ* (Zion: 1833), p. 10.
59. As recalled by Joseph Smith in his retelling to Alexander Neibaur. See Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, p. 177.
60. I commented on this in "A Note on Joseph Smith's First Vision and Its Import in the Shaping of Early Mormonism," *Dialogue* 12 (Spring 1979): 90-99.
61. *Latter Day Saint Messenger and Advocate*, 1 (1834): 42.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.
63. Best evidence for this is a contrast between certain passages in the Book of Mormon which bear on theology and some revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, as well as the King Follett discourse. In the Book of Mormon, man is a free agent but corrupt and inclined to sin and self-destruction. There is no suggestion of his potential godhood. Salvation in the Book of Mormon comes by cultivation of the seed of faith (grace) planted by the Lord, and by repentance and baptism, and the gifts of the spirit. There is nothing about a graded salvation, or the implication that punishment might not be eternal. There is nothing about man's potential exaltation coming through temple ordinances. Appropriate passages in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon are found on pages 38, 63-65, 81, 85, 118-20, 188-89, 233, 315, 338. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 19:6 where it is said that torment and punishment may not be without end, and section 76 where the degrees of glory are clarified. In section 132:4, the Saints are told that they must accept the new and everlasting covenant of marriage or be damned, "for no one can reject this covenant of marriage to enter into my glory." In the King Follett discourse Joseph Smith told the Saints that to become heirs of God and Christ meant that they would "arrive at the station of a god, and ascend the throne of eternal power, the same as those who have gone before." See *History of the Church* 4:306. For an excellent treatment of some aspects of this early evolution in doctrine see Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone* 5 (July-Aug. 1980): 24-46; see also James B. Allen, "The Emergence of a Fundamental; The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 47-48.
64. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: The Moody Press, 1980), 156.
65. The statement that God is a spirit appears in the Fifth Lecture on Faith, *Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate*, 1 (May 1835): 122.
66. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," pp. 24-45, "Emergence of a Fundamental," 43-62; and Lambert and Cracroft, "Literary Form."
67. Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), p. 346. Kung details many of the contradictions in the gospel accounts, pp. 346-47.
68. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins," p. 239.
69. See "Digging in the Dark," in Nibley, *The Mythmakers* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1961), pp. 91-190, and Richard L. Anderson, "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised," *BYU Studies* 10 (Spring 1970): 238-314.
70. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental," pp. 51-52.