

# INTERPRETER

— ∞ —  
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 2 · 2012 · Pages 17-33

## Evaluating Three Arguments Against Joseph Smith's First Vision

Steven C. Harper

Offprint Series

© 2012 *Interpreter Foundation*



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

The goal of the Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided on this site are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at [MormonInterpreter.com](http://MormonInterpreter.com)

## EVALUATING THREE ARGUMENTS AGAINST JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION

*Steven C. Harper*

*Abstract: Historically there have been just three basic arguments against the authenticity of Joseph Smith's first vision. They all begin with the a priori premise that such a vision simply could not have happened. The arguments originated with the Methodist minister to whom Joseph related his vision, author Fawn Brodie, and the Reverend Wesley Walters. The minister's critique is explained by Methodism's shift away from ecstatic religious experience. Fawn Brodie is shown to have made innovative yet flawed arguments within the narrow scope allowed by her conclusion that Joseph was a charlatan—a conclusion that did not allow for alternative interpretations of new evidence. Walters is shown to make fallacious arguments of irrelevant proof and negative proof in his understandably determined effort to undermine Joseph Smith's credibility. Close-minded believers in Joseph's vision are similarly likely to make unfounded assumptions unless they become open to the rich historical record Joseph created. Belief in the vision should correspond to Christian empathy for and civility toward critics.*

Numerous books and many more websites work to undermine faith in Joseph Smith's first vision. Historically this criticism has taken the form of just three main arguments that have been repeated by various critics and are even current today. The first argument arose when the minister to whom Joseph reported his vision announced that there were no such things as visions in modern times. More than a century later,

Fawn Brodie, writing with literary grace to mask historical deficiencies in her argument, claimed that Joseph concocted the vision in 1838, years after he said it happened. Then a generation later, the third argument emerged when Wesley Walters charged Joseph with inventing the story of a revival in western New York around 1820. Walters claimed that a lack of historical evidence “proved” there was no revival and hence no subsequent vision. For some it is a foregone conclusion that there are no such things as visions, that Joseph failed to mention his experience for years, and that he gave conflicting accounts that do not match historical facts.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the three arguments begins with the premise that Joseph’s initial vision simply could not have happened, at least not as he described it. Philosophers call that kind of premise *a priori*, a Latin term that refers to knowledge that is, essentially, presumed or self-evident. In other words, *a priori* knowledge does not rely on firsthand experience for verification but, rather, is based on definitions, widely shared beliefs, and rational assumptions. By contrast, knowledge derived from experience is termed *a posteriori*. The epistemology in Joseph’s first vision accounts is a *posteriori*. He testified that he actually experienced a divine revelation. The epistemology of his critics’ counterclaims is generally *a priori*. They know that what Joseph said happened could not have happened because all reasonable people know that such things as heavenly visions do not happen.

### The Methodist Minister

“Some few days after I had this vision,” Joseph reported, “I happened to be in company with one of the Methodist preachers” who had contributed to the religious fervor. “I took occasion to give him an account of the vision. . . . I was greatly surprised at his behavior; he treated my communication not only

---

1. For example, Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), xv.

lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them" (Joseph Smith—History 1:21). The preacher's premises were all a priori, namely:

- Joseph's story was of the devil.
- There were no such things as revelations in what Dickens later called the "age of railways."
- Visions or revelations ceased with the apostles.
- There would never be any more visions.

This fellow was probably sincere in each of these beliefs and striving as best he knew to prevent Joseph from becoming prey to fanaticism. But he did not know from experience the validity of any of the four premises he set forth as positive facts. All he knew a posteriori is that he had not had a vision or a revelation. On what basis, then, could this minister evaluate Joseph's claims and make such sweeping statements?

An answer lies in understanding the pressures placed on a Methodist minister in Joseph's area in 1820. Joseph did not name the minister to whom he reported the vision. It is not clear that it was George Lane, whom Joseph's brother William and Oliver Cowdery credited with awakening Joseph spiritually. Joseph could have heard or visited with Reverend Lane more than once during his ministry that frequently took him from his home in Pennsylvania to Joseph's district between 1819 and the early 1820s.<sup>2</sup> There were local Methodist ministers to whom Joseph may have reported his experience. All of them were conscious that Methodism was tending away from the kind of spiritual experiences Joseph described and toward presumably more respectable, reasonable religion. John Wesley, the found-

---

2. *The Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland), October 1834, 42. William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, Iowa, 1883), 6. *Deseret Evening News* (Salt Lake City), 20 January 1894, 11. Larry C. Porter, "Reverend George Lane—Good 'Gifts,' Much 'Grace,' and Marked 'Usefulness,'" *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 336.

er of Methodism, had worried that Methodists would multiply exponentially in number only to become “a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.”<sup>3</sup> And Methodism indeed grew abundantly because it took the claims of people like Joseph so seriously. Its preachers encouraged personal conversions that included intimate experiences with God like visions and revelations. But then, as Wesley had worried, Methodism became less welcoming to such manifestations.<sup>4</sup> As Joseph was coming of age, Methodism was becoming embarrassed by what respectable people regarded as its emotional excesses. Methodism had risen to meet the needs of the many people who could not find a church that took their spiritual experiences seriously. But with Methodism’s phenomenal growth came a shift from the margin to the mainstream.

Joseph was likely naive about that shift, which is easier to see from the perspective of history than it was for the people of Joseph’s day. Probably all Joseph knew is that he had caught a spark of Methodism and wanted to feel the same spiritual power as the folks he saw and heard at the meetings. He finally experienced that power in his encounter with heavenly messengers in the woods, as so many Methodist converts, encouraged by their preachers, appeared to have done before him. So it was shocking to him when the minister reacted against what Joseph assumed would be welcome news.

---

3. John Wesley, “Thoughts upon Methodism,” in *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, vol. 9 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984–), 527.

4. Christopher C. Jones, “The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37/2 (Spring 2011): 88–114. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 241. John H. Wigger, “Methodism Transformed,” in his *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

As for the minister, he may have heard messages in Joseph's story that led him to respond negatively, especially if Joseph told how he had learned that religious professors spoke well of God but denied his power. No Methodist minister wanted to hear that his founder's fear had been realized. Yet by 1820 many such ministers were concerned about what had for nearly two hundred years been termed "enthusiasm," a term "derived from Greek *en theos*, meaning to be filled with or inspired by a deity."<sup>5</sup> To be accused of enthusiasm in Joseph Smith's world was not a compliment. It meant that one was perceived as mentally unstable and irrational. Methodists had for several generations tried to walk a fine line that valued authentic spiritual experience yet stopped well short of enthusiasm. Young Joseph likely was not attuned to the sophisticated difference worked out by Methodist theologians. He reported to the minister what he thought would be a highly valued experience, one resembling that of other sincere Christians, but his account of his vision was received as an embarrassing example of enthusiasm and thus condemned.

### Fawn Brodie

Fawn Brodie largely shaped the more recent skeptical interpretations of Joseph's first vision. She first articulated major criticisms that others have since adopted and published and that continue to circulate widely today. In the first edition of her biography of Joseph Smith (1945), Brodie cited his 1838 history, the one excerpted in the Pearl of Great Price. She reported that her efforts to research at the LDS Church's archives had been thwarted.<sup>6</sup> For example, she had sought but had been denied access to Joseph's 1832 diary. Though that document

---

5. Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 17.

6. Newell G. Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie: A Biographer's Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 84–85.

does not include an account of Joseph's first vision, both his 1832 letterbook and 1835 journal do. Discovery and publication of those accounts would wait until the 1960s, when Brodie would work them into her second edition. Not knowing of the evidence that Joseph had repeatedly reported the vision earlier than she recognized, Brodie concluded that no one had spoken of the vision between 1820 and about 1840. She interpreted the evidence she had to mean that Joseph concocted the vision in the wake of the 1837 banking crisis, "when the need arose for a magnificent tradition."<sup>7</sup>

She did not change her assumptions and conclusions when she revised her biography of Joseph after the 1832 and 1835 accounts had been discovered and published. She did not reconsider her interpretation in light of the evidence that showed Joseph had written and spoken openly of the vision on more than one occasion before 1838. Rather, with characteristic insinuation, she simply substituted 1830 for 1834 in this sentence about the vision: "It may have been sheer invention, created some time after 1830 when the need arose for a magnificent tradition."<sup>8</sup> She also noted in her second edition the differences in details between the accounts, suggesting that their inconsistencies evidenced Joseph's invention and embellishment of the story. So the second edition of Brodie's biography adjusted some sentences to accommodate new factual evidence without altering the fundamental, a priori premise that the vision did not occur as Joseph said it did.

Although Brodie persuaded her publisher by emphasizing her "attitude of complete objectivity," privately she and Dale Morgan, her closest adviser, knew of her psychological need to understand Joseph's life and escape his influence. Writing the book, Brodie reflected, enabled her to assert her indepen-

---

7. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 25.

8. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 25.



dence. She called it a “compulsion to liberate myself wholly from Mormonism.” She decided in the process of preparing the biography to see in the historical facts evidence that Joseph consciously concocted the vision with intent to deceive. Having read an early draft of her biography, Morgan wrote that he was “particularly struck with the assumption your MS makes that Joseph was a self-conscious impostor.” Though sympathetic to her work, Morgan worried about what he called her “bold judgments on the basis of assumptions.” A later reviewer noted similarly that she regularly stated “as indisputable facts what can only be regarded as conjectures supported by doubtful evidence.”<sup>9</sup>

It is not hard to empathize with Fawn Brodie. Having been raised as a Latter-day Saint, she chose to leave the faith and underwent a painful reorientation process that required her to account for the Book of Mormon and to reinterpret Joseph's first vision. None of us are so very different from her in the sense that our identities and psychologies are bound up in our various commitments. We cannot escape the import of Joseph's first vision any more than she could, and we work to make sense of the evidence for ourselves in ways that are satisfying to our intellects and to our souls. But whatever her motives and our efforts to empathize, it is Brodie's method that concerns us here. Similar critical interpretations of Joseph's vision often share a common hermeneutic (explanatory method) of skepticism. They presume to know how a person in Joseph's position, or how people in his neighborhood, must have acted if his story were true, and then they attempt to show that his accounts vary from the assumed scenarios. They usually postulate a hypothetical alternative to Joseph's own explanation.<sup>10</sup>

---

9. Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie*, 80, 87, 95, 105, 115.

10. Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie*, 106.

## Reverend Wesley Walters

That is what Wesley Walters did. He originated the enduring argument that Joseph's canonized first vision account is anachronistic. In 1967, as pastor of the United Presbyterian Church in Marissa, Illinois, Walters published an innovative essay asserting that there is no evidence of a religious revival in Palmyra, New York, in the spring of 1820 and that, consequently, Joseph's claim to have been influenced by such religious fervor must be false.<sup>11</sup> Richard Bushman said that Walters "performed a very positive service to the cause of Mormon history because he was a delver. He went deep into the heart of the archives. And Mormons had accepted a lot of things as simple facts—for example, that there was a revival in Joseph Smith's neighborhood around the 1820 period."<sup>12</sup> Walters noted accurately that, prior to his work, Mormon scholars had "*assumed* that Joseph Smith's account must be correct."<sup>13</sup> According to Bushman, Reverend Walters "made us realize that we can't assume anything. Everything had to be demonstrated and proved."<sup>14</sup>

That realization led Truman G. Madsen and the Institute of Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University to sponsor a team of talented, well-educated young Mormon historians to research all the evidence they could find.<sup>15</sup> As a result of their research, it is clear that there are two main weaknesses in the Walters argument, namely, the fallacies of negative proof and of irrelevant proof. Historian David Hackett Fischer defined the fallacy of negative proof as "an attempt to sustain a factual

---

11 See, for example, Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," reprinted in *Dialogue* 4/1 (1969): 60–67.

12. Richard L. Bushman, interview by Samuel Dodge, 31 July 2009, Provo, UT, transcription in possession of the author.

13. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins," 61.

14. Bushman, interview.

15. Truman G. Madsen, "Guest Editor's Prologue," *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 235–40.

proposition merely by negative evidence. It occurs whenever a historian declares that 'there is no evidence that X is the case,' and then proceeds to affirm or assume that not-X is the case."<sup>16</sup> Walters argued creatively that "a vision, by its inward, personal nature, does not lend itself to historical investigation," but "a revival is a different matter." He posited, therefore, that he could disprove Joseph's claim to a vision by showing "that in 1820 there was no revival in any of the churches in Palmyra and its vicinity."<sup>17</sup> In doing so, he disregarded the historical method by arguing that a lack of evidence for a Palmyra revival was proof that a revival, and hence the first vision, did not occur.

Reverend Walters also erred in arguing an irrelevant proof. Joseph's accounts do not claim that the revivalism centered in Palmyra itself, as Walters argues, or that the revivalism occurred in 1820. Rather, Joseph said the excitement began in the second year after his family moved to Manchester, New York, meaning in 1819, and he located the "unusual excitement on the subject of religion" around Manchester, not Palmyra. Joseph used a Methodist term to describe a wider geographical scope than Walters's emphasis on the village of Palmyra. Joseph said that "the whole *district* of country seemed affected" by the revivalism (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). To nineteenth-century Methodists, a district was somewhat akin to today's LDS stake or a Catholic diocese. Joseph claimed only that there was unusual religious excitement in the region or district around Manchester that began sometime in 1819, during the second year after his family's move there (JS—H 1:5).

There is evidence that an intense revival stirred Palmyra in 1816–17, when Joseph moved there with his family. It may have catalyzed his 1832 description of his mind becoming seriously concerned for the welfare of his soul "at about the age of

---

16. David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper, 1970), 47.

17. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins," 61.

twelve years.”<sup>18</sup> About 1818 Joseph’s family purchased a farm in Manchester, a few miles south of Palmyra. The next summer, Methodists of the Genesee Conference assembled at Vienna (now Phelps), New York, within walking distance of the Smith farm. The Reverend George Lane and dozens of other exhorters were present. One participant remembered the result as a “religious cyclone which swept over the whole region.”<sup>19</sup> Joseph’s contemporary and acquaintance Orsamus Turner remembered that Joseph caught a “spark of Methodism” at a meeting along the road to Vienna.<sup>20</sup> A Palmyra newspaper and the diary of a Methodist minister confirm a weekend camp meeting in Palmyra in June 1820 at which “about twenty were baptized and forty united with the [Methodist] Church.”<sup>21</sup> Had Walters known about this evidence, given the way he consistently interpreted evidence in support of his conclusion, he may have objected that a June 1820 camp meeting would have been too late to have catalyzed Joseph’s early spring vision. And he might have been quite right, but not necessarily. It snowed heavily on May 28 that year, and given his realities in that environment, Joseph’s conception of “early spring” may have been quite different from our own. But Joseph’s descriptions are not depen-

---

18. Quoted in John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson, eds., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, 4.

19. Quoted in Milton V. Backman Jr., “Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision,” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 308.

20. Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase, and Morris’ Reserve . . .* (Rochester, NY: William Alling, 1851), 214. Richard L. Anderson evaluates Turner’s credibility as a witness in “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences,” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 373–404.

21. Aurora Seager wrote in his diary, “I attended a camp-meeting at Palmyra” in June 1818. He said that over the weekend about twenty people were baptized and forty became Methodists. See E. Latimer, *The Three Brothers: Sketches of the Lives of Rev. Aurora Seager, Rev. Micah Seager, Rev. Schuyler Seager, D.C.* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1880), 12, quoted in D. Michael Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience of a Methodist ‘Camp Meeting’ in 1820,” *Dialogue* Paperless E-Paper 3, 20 December 2006, 3.

dent on external events in Palmyra or in 1820. The diaries of Methodist itinerant preacher Benajah Williams evidence that Methodists and others were hard at work in Joseph's district all the while. They combed the countryside and convened camp meetings to help unchurched souls like Joseph get religion. The response was phenomenal, especially in western New York, the home of nearly one-fourth of the six thousand Presbyterian converts in 1820. Baptist churches expanded similarly.<sup>22</sup> Methodism expanded most impressively as traveling preachers like Williams gathered anxious converts.<sup>23</sup>

Reverend Walters focused on the word *reformation*, used by Oliver Cowdery to describe the scope of the religious excitement, and on the Reverend George Lane, whom both Cowdery and William Smith, Joseph's brother, credited with being "the key figure in the Methodist awakening." Walters wrote that "there is no evidence" for these claims, which was an unwise thing to do.<sup>24</sup> Undiscovered evidence is not the same as nonexistent evidence, and when Walters made the bold claim that no evidence existed, researchers quickly set out to see for themselves. Among the several evidences discovered since are the Williams journals. They document much religious excitement in Joseph's district and region of country in 1819 and 1820. They report that Reverend Lane was indeed in that area in both of those years and that while there in July 1820 he "spoke on Gods method in bringing about Reffermations."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the Williams diaries attest that not only Lane but also many other Methodist preachers in Joseph's time and place catalyzed unusual religious excitement as Joseph described. Writers who have not studied this evidence continue to parrot Walters

---

22. Butler, *Christianizing the American People*, 268–69. Backman, "Awakenings in the Burned-over District."

23. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 3–6.

24. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins," 62, 76.

25. Diaries of Benajah Williams, in possession of Michael Brown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (original spelling maintained).

and claim that “there was no significant revival in or around Palmyra in 1820,” but the evidence fits Joseph’s description nicely.<sup>26</sup>

Although Walters consistently interpreted them otherwise, Joseph’s accounts are consistent with the mounting evidence. Joseph said that the unusual religious excitement in his district or region “commenced with the Methodists” and that he became “somewhat partial” to Methodism (JS—H 1:5–8). The Walters thesis, though tenaciously defended by him and uncritically accepted and perpetuated by others, no longer seems tenable or defensible.<sup>27</sup> Walters succeeded in establishing the fact that “his [Joseph’s] immediate neighborhood shows no evidence of an 1820 revival,” but without showing that anything Joseph said was false.<sup>28</sup> Thin evidence for revivalism in Palmyra village in 1820 is not evidence that there was not a vision in the woods near Manchester in the wake of well-documented religious excitement “in that region of country” (v. 5).

Latter-day Saint historians of the first vision have credited Walters with awakening them to investigate the context of Joseph’s accounts, but they fault him for forcing his thesis.<sup>29</sup> We can easily understand, however, the reasons behind his determined efforts and unwillingness to give up his point. Joseph’s most definitive account of his vision relates how he told his mother, “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.” He also quoted the Savior saying that the Christian creeds “were an abomination” (JS—H 1:19–20). Latter-day Saints who

---

26. Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999).

27. Backman, “Awakenings in the Burned-over District,” 309; Bushman “First Vision Story Revived,” 85.

28. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins,” 69.

29. Dean C. Jessee, James B. Allen (27 July 2009), Richard L. Anderson (29 July 1009), Larry Porter (30 July 2009), Richard L. Bushman (31 July 2009), Milton V. Backman Jr. (12 August 2009), interviews by Samuel Dodge, tape recording, transcriptions in possession of author.

feel defensive about the Reverend's efforts to discredit the vision should be able to empathize with his response to Joseph's testimony. In one sense, his determined and enduring devotion to his cause is admirable. Even so, his arguments are not as airtight as they may seem, and his evidence—or lack thereof—does not prove what he claimed it did.

### A Hermeneutic of Suspicion

The critics' *a priori* certainty that the vision never happened as Joseph said it did is not a proven historical fact based on the testimony of witnesses or on textual evidence. Rather, those determined beliefs reflect each critic's heartfelt, reasoned belief about what was possible. Their commitment to skepticism about the kind of supernatural events Joseph described prevented them from believing in the possibilities that the historical accounts offer. In other words, all of the unbelieving explanations share a common hermeneutic—the hermeneutic of suspicion, which in this case simply means interpreting Joseph Smith's statements skeptically, with an unwillingness to trust that he might be telling the truth. One historian said that he could not trust the accounts of the first vision because they were "subjective" and that it was his job to figure out what really happened. But how will this skeptic discover the truth when he is unwilling to trust the only eyewitness or the process of personal revelation?

Such historians assume godlike abilities to discern the truth while denying both God's ability to impart truth and their own ability to receive it. They do not seem to grasp the profound irony that they are replacing the subjectivity of historical witnesses with their own. I call their method "subjectivity squared." They dismiss the historical documents and severely limit possible interpretations by predetermining that Joseph's story is not credible.

When Joseph's 1832 account was discovered in the 1960s, opening to Fawn Brodie new interpretive possibilities, she did not respond with willingness to consider that Joseph might be telling the truth; rather, she simply fit the new evidence into her previous conclusion. And because the evidence is now more abundant than ever, parts of Fawn Brodie's thesis are not as compelling as they once were. The evidence she analyzed in her second edition suggested to her that Joseph embellished each telling of the vision until it matured into the canonized 1838–39 account. But even the later accounts do not become longer, more detailed, or elaborate. Rather, these accounts return to sounding like Joseph's earlier, less-developed accounts.<sup>30</sup> This evidence can be interpreted as Joseph's intention to make his 1838 account definitive and developed for publication, whereas some of the less-developed accounts, including ones later than 1838, were created for other purposes. Some were delivered on the spur of the moment and captured by someone remembering and writing later.

The discovery of considerable evidence of camp meetings and revivals in both 1819 and 1820 in and around Palmyra, and especially in the broader region that Joseph described, did not alter the argument that Wesley Walters continued to make. No matter what evidence came to light, he interpreted it according to his original conclusion. He chose not to see the possibilities available to those who approach Joseph's accounts on a quest to discover if he could possibly be telling the truth.

For those who choose to read Joseph's accounts with the hermeneutic of suspicion, the interpretation of choice is likely to remain that Joseph elaborated "some half-remembered dream" or concocted the vision as "sheer invention."<sup>31</sup> Those are not historical facts. They are skeptical interpretations of the fact that Joseph reported he saw a vision. There are other ways

---

30. Quoted in Welch and Carson, *Opening the Heavens*, 17–29.

31. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (1995), 25.



to interpret that fact. Indeed, the several scholars who have studied the accounts of the vision for decades and published seminal findings share what one of them described as a “hermeneutic of trust.”<sup>32</sup>

One will arrive at the same conclusions as the skeptics if one shares their assumptions about what the facts mean. But if one is open-minded, other meanings for the same facts are possible. The danger of close-mindedness is as real for believers as for skeptics. Many believers seem just as likely to begin with pre-conceived notions rather than a willingness to go where Joseph's accounts lead them. The reasoning process of many believers is no different than Fawn Brodie's. Some *assume*, for instance, that Joseph obviously would have told his family of the vision immediately, that he would have written it down immediately, that he understood all of its implications perfectly or consistently through the years, that he would always remember or tell exactly the same story, and that it would always be recorded and transmitted the same. But none of those assumptions are supported by the evidence. Unfortunately, some believers become skeptics in short order when, upon learning of Joseph's various accounts of his first vision, they find that their own assumptions of what would have happened if Joseph were telling the truth are not supported by the historical record. Yet upon closer examination and in light of the latest findings, the very difficulties that once could be seen as posing challenges to the authenticity of Joseph's visionary experience turn out to be points in its favor.

### Toward a Civil Dialogue

Richard Bushman had just won the historians' prestigious Bancroft Prize when he responded with civility and grace to Reverend Walters. When I asked him why he chose that method, Bushman replied, “Simply as a tactical matter in any kind

---

32. Bushman, interview.

of controversy, it never serves you well to show scorn towards your opponent. That may make the people who are on your side rejoice and say, 'Kick them again.' But for those who are in the middle who are trying to decide which truth is right, you just alienate them, you just drive them into the hands of your opponent."<sup>33</sup> Sometimes, in an effort to defend the faith, Latter-day Saints have reacted with hostility to the critics of Joseph's vision. If there ever was an appropriate time for such a response, it is now passed.

We are removed enough from the battlefield that we can respond less defensively and try instead to meet the needs of those who are undecided. Although I disagree with the a priori assumptions and historical interpretations of Fawn Brodie, Reverend Walters, and the Methodist minister who reproved Joseph, I empathize with these people. I may well have responded as they did if I were in different circumstances. Indeed, the minister's and the reverend's responses were not so different from many LDS defenses of Mormonism. Each of these critics is a vulnerable personality, like the rest of us. They worked hard to figure out how to relate to Joseph Smith's first vision. I wish to treat them as I would like to be treated by them—and as Joseph taught the Relief Society sisters in Nauvoo. To them he said, "The nearer we get to our heavenly Father, the more are we dispos'd to look with compassion on perishing souls—to take them upon our shoulders and cast their sins behind our back. . . . If you would have God have mercy on you, have mercy on one another."<sup>34</sup>

---

33. Bushman, interview.

34. Discourse, 9 June 1842, Nauvoo, Illinois. See "A Record of the Organization and Proceedings of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, 61–64, LDS Church Archives. Also in *History of the Church*, 5:23–25; and Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 122–24.

*Steven C. Harper is a historian for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was professor of church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University from 2002–2012 and at BYU Hawaii from 2000–2002. Since 2002 he has served as an editor of the Joseph Smith Papers and as document editor of BYU Studies. He earned a PhD in early American history from Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and is the author of a book on colonial Pennsylvania titled Promised Land and of Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants, along with several articles. His book, Joseph Smith's First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts, is forthcoming from Deseret Book.*

