

INTERPRETER

— ∞ —
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 4 · 2013 · Pages 75-83

Trusting Joseph

Neal Rappleye

Offprint Series

© 2013 Interpreter Foundation. A nonprofit organization.



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 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

TRUSTING JOSEPH

Neal Rappleye

Abstract: The “first steps” of Mormon history are vital to the faith claims of the Latter-day Saints. The new volume Exploring the First Vision, edited by Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper, compiles research into the historical veracity of Joseph Smith’s First Vision narrative which shows the Prophet to have been a reliable and trustworthy witness. Ultimately, historical investigation can neither prove nor disprove that Joseph had a theophany in the woods in 1820. Individuals must therefore reach their conclusions by some other means.

Review of Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper, eds. *Exploring the First Vision*. Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012. 338 pp. with index. \$25.99

If the beginning of the promenade of Mormon history, the First Vision and the Book of Mormon, can survive the crisis, then the rest of the promenade follows and nothing that happens in it can really detract from the miracle of the whole. If the first steps do not survive, there can be only antiquarian, not fateful or faith-full interest in the rest of the story.

Martin E. Marty¹

1. Martin E. Marty, “Two Integrities: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 9, capitalization altered.

I would like to thank Ted Jones and William J. Hamblin for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of this review.

As Martin Marty keenly observed, the “first steps” of Latter-day Saint history are absolutely vital to the rest of the story. As the very first step in that history, the First Vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith holds a prominent and crucial position—if the first step was a misstep, then what of all the other steps that follow? Recognizing this, critics of the faith from both secular and sectarian persuasions have for decades now sought by all means possible to tear down the historical veracity of the vision, and they will continue to do so in the future. Hence, to safeguard against these attacks, Latter-day Saints would be well to familiarize themselves with the careful historical investigations into the vision’s history and background done by faithful and believing historians over the last forty years. In this task the Saints have been greatly assisted by Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper, who have collected several of the seminal articles on the First Vision and combined them with some new research in this volume, *Exploring the First Vision*. Both editors stress that this volume has been published to ensure this research gets into the hands of the “rising generations” of Latter-day Saints (see pp. vi and viii, both referencing Doctrine and Covenants 69:8). As the papers brought together in this volume rigorously demonstrate, Joseph Smith’s early experiences, including the First Vision, stand up well to historical scrutiny.

As a sort of introduction to the topic, editor Samuel Alonzo Dodge’s essay “Joseph Smith’s First Vision: Insights and Interpretation in Mormon Historiography” provides a short intellectual history on the First Vision, placing particular emphasis on how the critical approaches of Fawn Brodie and Wesley Walters influenced and shaped Mormon scholarship on the vision (pp. ix–xxi). Dodge’s introduction is followed by “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” Dean C. Jessee’s presentation of all the contemporary

accounts, both first and second hand (pp. 1–40).² This paper by Jessee provides transcripts of all eight documents based on the five accounts given by Joseph Smith, five contemporary accounts from people who heard the story straight from the Prophet, and a couple of later reminiscences after his death. In the introduction and conclusion, Jessee discusses Joseph’s limited education and the “broad record-keeping setting” (p. 33) as the context under which to evaluate the First Vision accounts, and Jessee also provides some historical background as he introduces each account. Access to the primary documents is essential when studying any historical event, making this article by Jessee invaluable to those interested in the Prophet Joseph Smith’s First Vision.

The next paper, James B. Allen and John W. Welch’s “The Appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820”³ (pp. 41–89), discusses all ten accounts and thirteen documents,

2. Originally published as Dean C. Jessee, “The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 275–94. This version of the paper only includes four accounts, all from the Prophet himself. The fifth account from Joseph, in the Wentworth Letter, is printed just after this article on pp. 295–96 of the same issue of *BYU Studies*, which was a special issue dedicated to scholarship on the First Vision. This paper was extensively updated and revised for publication in 2005 as Dean C. Jessee, “The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch with Erik B. Carlson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 1–33. No additional changes were made for publication in this new volume.

3. First published in the official magazine of the Church, as James B. Allen, “Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?” *Improvement Era* 73/4, April 1970, 4–13. In this article, Allen introduced each of the known accounts (three first-hand from the prophet, and five second-hand reports), discussed some reasons why there might be differences, addressed the two differences he felt were most problematic, and provided a synthesis of the accounts, utilizing each of the eight reports. It was first substantially revised, expanded, and updated with the assistance of John W. Welch for publication in 2005 in *Opening the Heavens*, like the Jessee paper. See James B. Allen and John W. Welch, “The Appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820,” in *Opening the Heavens*, 35–75. Some additional updates and minor changes were made to the article for its appearance in this volume.

provides more historical background on each account and the audiences for whom they were written, some discussion of the differences in the accounts, and a thorough synthesis of all ten available contemporary narrations.⁴ At the end there is a table that includes over seventy details that appear throughout the accounts, demonstrating an overall consistency throughout each of the reports (pp. 79–83).⁵ Allen and Welch show that none of the reports “is incompatible with the other accounts,” that there exists a “striking consistency throughout the narratives,” and that “they combine impressively to give a consistent and coherent picture” (p. 78).

The most significant contribution to the volume is Richard Lloyd Anderson’s “Joseph Smith’s Accuracy on the First Vision Setting: The Pivotal 1818 Camp Meeting,” the third chapter of the book (pp. 91–169).⁶ Expanding on arguments Anderson originally made in a lecture given on 20 March 2009,⁷ This new paper brings the importance of the June 1818 revival near Palmyra into focus.⁸ Drawing together a variety of historical

4. In Allen’s original 1970 article, the differences were address separately and independently, while in this version, discussion of the differences is interwoven into the “composite story” (p. 60) of Joseph’s First Vision.

5. The table in the original paper only consisted of eighteen items. See Allen, “Eight Contemporary Accounts,” 12. The table is divided into five separate tables appearing throughout the paper in the *Opening the Heavens* version. See *Opening the Heavens*, 56, 60, 62, 66, and 68.

6. This is essentially a new paper, though it does incorporate, and update, substantial portions of Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision Through Reminiscences,” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 373–404.

7. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Probing the Lives of Christ and Joseph Smith,” *FARMS Review* 21/2 (2009): 16–18. I appreciate Alison Coutts and Kevin Christensen for reminding me of Anderson’s comments in this lecture.

8. In that respect, Anderson is building on the work of D. Michael Quinn, “Joseph Smith’s Experience of a Methodist ‘Camp-Meeting’ in 1820,” *Dialogue Paperless*, E-Paper 3, Expanded Version (Definitive), December 20, 2006, online at <http://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/QuinnPaperless.pdf>. Anderson builds on Quinn’s emphasis of the June 1818 camp-meeting as the beginning of Joseph’s seeking, but does not follow Quinn

sources, Anderson argues that the Methodist camp-meeting held near Palmyra in June 1818 and the events that followed in 1818–19, including the Genesee Conference in Vienna (twelve miles from Palmyra) during the summer of 1819, sufficiently satisfy the all requirements of the “unusual excitement on the subject of religion” described in Joseph’s First Vision narrations (Joseph Smith—History 1:5). Anderson thus argues that there is no need to suppose that Joseph is conflating pre-1820 events with the later revivals of 1824–25. Anderson concludes that “Joseph’s accounts coalesce not only with each other but also with family, local, and revival records, showing that his First Vision setting is historically authentic” (p. 138).

Other articles that appear in this volume include classics like Milton V. Backman’s article on the religious atmosphere of western New York in 1819–20 (pp. 171–97), Larry C. Porter’s paper on the Methodist Preacher Rev. George Lane and his potential influence in moving young Joseph to ask God regarding which Church is true (pp. 199–226),⁹ two additional articles from James B. Allen (pp. 227–60, and 283–306), each of which discusses the development of the First Vision in later Mormon

on the importance of the June 1820 camp-meeting, which Quinn argues was ultimately the catalyst of Joseph’s going to God in prayer and having the First Vision. Anderson also does not follow Quinn’s line of reasoning that Joseph retroactively conflated the pre-1820 events with the events of 1824 and its accompanying revivals. See the body of the text for a summary of Anderson’s argument.

9. Each of these was originally published in 1969 as a part of the special First Vision issue of *BYU Studies*. See 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): 301–20; Larry C. Porter, “Reverend George Lane—Good ‘Gifts,’ Much ‘Grace,’ and Marked ‘Usefulness,’” *BYU Studies* 9/3 (Spring 1969): 321–40. These papers are reprinted essentially as they appeared in 1969. The only differences I noticed were both in the Porter paper: (1) an extra footnote (p. 219, 225 n.74) explaining that Joseph probably informed Oliver Cowdery of Rev. Lane’s influence, and (2) an additional two sentences, plus footnote, explaining that both Cowdery and William Smith identify Lane’s influence on Joseph Smith (pp. 219–20, 226 n.77).

thought, and Richard L. Bushman's response to Wesley Walters (pp. 261–81).¹⁰

The final article in the volume is a contribution by co-editor Steven C. Harper, who evaluates the arguments of Fawn Brodie, Wesley Walters, and the response of the Methodist minister Joseph Smith discusses in his 1838 account (pp. 307–23).¹¹ Though Harper critiques their arguments against Joseph Smith's First Vision, he also empathizes with each of these critics' attempts at dealing with Joseph Smith's claims in light of

10. These were all originally published, with no substantial differences from their current form, as the following: James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–61; James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1/3 (1966): 29–46; Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue* 4/1 (1969): 82–93. Bushman is responding to the article just preceding his, Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue* 4/1 (1969): 60–81. After Bushman's response, Walters closes the exchange with "A Reply to Dr. Bushman," *Dialogue* 4/1 (1969): 94–100.

11. The day after this volume hit the shelves, a somewhat revised version of this paper was published as Steven C. Harper, "Evaluating Three Arguments Against Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): 17–33, online at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/evaluating-three-arguments-against-joseph-smiths-first-vision/>. Also see the similar paper, Steven C. Harper, "Suspicion or Trust: Reading the Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2011), 63–75. Harper has also reiterated these arguments in his own book, released a couple months after this volume. See Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2012), 67–83. Harper's book is a short, well written "guide" for the everyday Latter-day Saint that reprints all the historical accounts, along with providing some historical context (pp. 31–66), stresses the importance of seeking, rather than assuming, when trying to understand the different accounts (pp. 3–12), and also includes several high-quality color photos of the relevant documents. Overall, it is an excellent book that nicely summarizes the scholarship on the First Vision, and makes important new contributions to the literature by discussing the various accounts in terms of both communications theory (pp. 84–93) and memory research (pp. 94–110). I would highly recommend Harper's book, especially to the Latter-day Saint or investigator who might be curious about some of the accounts, but is not well versed in historical matters.

their assumptions. Harper also discusses the different hermeneutic approaches taken by believers and critics, and calls for civil dialogue going forward as discussion of these important documents and the events they record continues.

Adding to the value of this volume, sprinkled throughout the articles are excerpts of interviews of each of the contributing scholars, conducted by Dodge back in 2009.¹² These excerpts provide interesting personal stories about their experience researching the First Vision and how this has strengthened their faith and trust in Joseph Smith. These interviews were recorded and have been used to put together a nice video series on the First Vision to accompany and supplement the book.¹³ One of the highlights of these interviews comes from James B. Allen, as he tells the story of the first time he looked at the 1832 account.

As I read through that first written account of the vision, a powerful spiritual feeling came over me that I don't think I had ever experienced before, and it was not quite like anything I have experienced since. It said to me, "This young man is telling the truth!" It was an absolutely convincing handwritten story. . . . [T]he power that was in it, including the feelings of a young man trying to express how he felt before he went into the grove to pray, was absolutely profound to me. (p. 44)

Allen's experience in reading the 1832 account is representative of the kind of sentiment expressed by these top-notch historians who have studied these accounts thoroughly for decades. Many of them speak of how studying the documents has only strengthened their testimony and conviction that Joseph

12. See pp. 3, 5, 34, 42, 44, 48, 55, 76, 92, 173, 184, 187, 203–204, 218, 263, and 277.

13. *Joseph Smith: Seeking the Accounts*, directed by Johnny Hall and Ryan Haldeman (Orem, UT: Amber Media, 2010), online video series, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ml132jbV120&playnext=1&list=PL2B95672E3DCFA340&feature=results_main.

Smith was telling the truth. Their confidence in Joseph Smith and the reliability of his testimony is worthy of notice, because as Steven C. Harper explains elsewhere, “These are not bumpkins. They include Ivy League-educated historians who have authored prize winning books and have studied the documents and their context for decades.”¹⁴

Although it will never stop the critics from trying to assert their historical interpretation as fact, the historical record ultimately cannot resolve the question of whether or not Joseph Smith really had a vision. That is a conclusion that can only be reached by the individual. Again, to quote from Harper, “Believing or not believing in one of the best-documented theophanies in history is ultimately a conscious, individual decision. One must decide whether to trust or be suspicious of the historical record created by Joseph Smith. That decision reveals much more about the subjective judgments of its maker than it does about the veracity of the claims Joseph made in historical documents.”¹⁵

Dodge and Harper have performed a valuable service in collecting these papers and making them more readily available to the “rising generations” of Latter-day Saints. As the papers in this volume demonstrate, Joseph Smith proves to be a reliable and trustworthy witness on matters that are historically verifiable. From there the individual must decide if they are willing to trust Joseph on the more subjective, yet most important, detail of whether or not he really had a theophany in the woods in 1820.

Neal Rappleye is a student at Utah Valley University working toward a BA in History with a minor in Political Science. He follows with interest LDS scholarship and apologetics, is a volunteer with FAIR and an Editorial Consultant with Interpreter: A

14. Harper, “Suspicion or Trust,” 72.

15. Harper, “Suspicion or Trust,” 73-74.

Journal of Mormon Scripture. *His main research interests are the foundational events in early Latter-day Saint history and the ancient origins of the Book of Mormon. He blogs about Latter-day Saint topics at <http://ldsreasonandrevelation.blogspot.com/>*

