

INTERPRETER

— ∞ —
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 25 · 2017 · Pages 67-80

Looking Deeper into Joseph Smith's First Vision: Imagery, Cognitive Neuroscience, and the Construction of Memory

Robert A. Rees

Offprint Series

© 2017 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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, The 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

You may subscribe to this journal at MormonInterpreter.com/annual-print-subscription

LOOKING DEEPER INTO JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION: IMAGERY, COGNITIVE NEUROSCIENCE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY

Robert A. Rees

Abstract: Critics of Joseph Smith assert that he invented or imagined the First Vision and then deliberately altered the details in his subsequent first-person accounts of the event (also reflected in accounts recorded or related by others) to mislead his followers. That the details of the narrative changed so dramatically between the first version (1832) and the last authorized version (1842) is considered prima facie evidence that Joseph was deliberately inventing and embellishing his narrative to make it more credible. The only thing, say critics, that could possibly explain such divergent, and in some cases, radically different versions of the same event is either incredible forgetfulness or deliberate falsification. This paper, based on close textual analysis and the findings of contemporary scientific research on memory acquisition and retention — particularly memories of dramatic and powerful events — offers an alternative explanation, one that preserves the credibility and integrity of the prophet.

A tenet of modern Mormon criticism is that Joseph Smith invented the narrative of his First Vision and then deliberately altered the details in subsequent retellings over the years to mislead his followers. That the details of the narrative changed so dramatically between the first version (written in 1832) and the authorized version (written in 1838) is seen by some critics as incontrovertible evidence that Joseph fraudulently invented and reinvented his theophany to make it more

dramatic, more hagiographic, and more self-aggrandizing.¹ This paper, based on evidence from both textual analysis and cognitive neuroscience, posits a possible alternative explanation.

The contours of the story of the First Vision as it was first told are rather straightforward, and known by heart to Mormons the world over: An earnest fourteen-year-old frontier boy named Joseph Smith finds himself confused by the religious contention aflame both in his family and in his community. Reading the epistle of James one day, he is struck by what he sees as the simple admonition to ask God for an answer to his burning question as to which of the many contending sects is true. Taking the scriptural advice literally, he repairs to the nearby woods to pray. He reveals that he has never before prayed vocally, but on this occasion, he does so. As soon as he begins, he is frightened and almost overcome by the presence of some dark power that seems intent on his destruction. In desperation, he calls on God to deliver him; at that moment the heavens open and the darkness is dispelled by a pillar of light descending just above him, the brightness of which he describes as being greater than that of the sun. As the light descends and envelops him, he looks up and sees two beings whose brightness and glory are beyond his powers of description. One of the personages calls him by name and, pointing to the other, says, “This is my Beloved Son. Hear Him!” Then ensues a conversation in which Joseph asks the question for which he had been seeking an answer. He is told that he should join none of the churches because they are all corrupt. He is also told “many other things” which he says he cannot reveal. The experience overpowers him, and he awakens later to find himself “looking up into heaven,” the vision gone (JS–H 1:20). Although challenged immediately by incredulous hearers and experiencing “bitter persecution and reviling,” Smith nevertheless later affirms his experience: “I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true ... I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it.”²

1. See “Scientific Literature on Memory and Recall” at MormonThink.com which tries to take some of what scientists say about memory recall and apply it to Smith, but does so in a manner that attributes the differences among accounts to Joseph Smith’s deliberate self-serving manipulation and deception. <http://mormonthink.com/firstvisionweb.htm#memoryrecall>.

2. See my “Joseph Smith and the Face of Christ,” unpublished MS; copies available upon request at bobrees2@gmail.com.

That affirmation, along with the countervailing acceptance and skepticism that have ensued for two centuries, lies at the heart of Mormonism. On that singular event hinges what Mormons refer to as the Restoration — the claim that the original Church of Jesus Christ fell into apostasy and therefore required a restoration in the latter days. From that dramatic beginning in a frontier forest, the panoply of modern Mormonism has unfolded and flowed progressively into the world.

The standard argument against Joseph Smith's account of his First Vision is that there are many conflicting accounts — or at least, many conflicting details among the accounts — leading to the conclusion that Joseph simply couldn't keep his story straight. The differences among the various versions are neither subtle nor trivial and lead to multiple and valid questions. Was there a religious revival in the Palmyra area at the time Joseph says? Was Joseph's intent in seeking divine help for forgiveness of his sins or in acquiring wisdom as to which church he should join? How many divine or angelic personages did he see, and who were they? Was Joseph commissioned by the divine personages to open the Last Dispensation of the gospel? How does one begin to approach a story for which four primary accounts survive (1832, 1835, 1838, and 1842), along with additional documentation by at least five other writers?

As a textual critic, I am convinced that our most productive focus is on the texts themselves. One cannot ignore whatever historical material exists relative to the texts, but since that information is itself often incomplete and open to dispute, what we are ultimately left with are the words of the texts — the vocabulary, syntax, rhetorical devices, narrative patterns, and stylistic expressions of the author or authors. What do these reveal beyond the obvious, surface differences? Do they offer any clues to the resolution of the question of Joseph's veracity and integrity? What details in the text are most revelatory, both of the reliability of Joseph's account of his vision and of him as the teller or reliable narrator of his story? In considering such questions, we will first examine the text itself and then consider the vagaries of memory and how memory itself is affected by what we understand of modern cognitive neuroscience in relation to powerful, emotionally resonant experiences commonly called "flashbulb memories."

An assignment I regularly give students in my Mormon Studies courses at Graduate Theological Union and University of California, Berkeley, is to undertake a close comparative reading of the various versions of the First Vision. I urge them to pay particular attention to the details, especially the degree of rhetorical sophistication and the use of

such stylistic devices as imagery, repetition, and symbolism. Generally, they do not see what I hope they will, so I have to point things out as we read the texts together. What follows are examples of the kind of close reading I feel the First Vision texts deserve.

The text I consider the most authentic and reliable, as far as capturing Joseph's experience in the Sacred Grove is concerned, is the first, the 1832 version penned by Frederick G. Williams and Joseph Smith himself. It clearly reveals Joseph's lack of sophistication and expressive skills (something his wife noted in relation to his translation of the Book of Mormon). Joseph acknowledges his stylistic insufficiency in a letter to William W. Phelps, admitting his account is written in a "crooked broken scattered and imperfect Language."³ Of the various versions, to my mind this one rings true in a way later, more consciously constructed, sophisticated, and coherent accounts do not.

One of the things that seems highly significant in comparing the texts is the imagery related to epistemology, that having to do with cognitive and spiritual ways of knowing. All the accounts use language relating to inquiry, searching, and finding truth, but their respective uses of rhetoric and imagery are quite different. For example, in the 1832 version the word "mind" occurs three times and "heart" five times. Thus, Joseph speaks of his mind becoming "seriously imprest" "with regard to the ... wellfare of [his] immortal Soul," but then speaks of pondering "many things in [his] heart," an expression that echoes Mary's encounter with divinity in her Magnificat.⁴

The clear focus of this first version is on emotional or spiritual — as opposed to cognitive or rational — experience. For example, Joseph's association of "mind" in this version is not with light or enlightenment but with "darkness" and "distress," whereas the associations with "heart" are linked with the more positive words "considers" and "exclaims." Although there is one negative association with "heart," it is presented in God's words, not Joseph's (God says, "Their hearts are far from me"). The account ends with what I consider an exultant summary of the entire experience, one clearly centered on the heart: "my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me but [I] could find none that would believe in the hevny vision

3. "Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832," Church History Library (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City), <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperssummary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-27-november-1832>.

4. Original spelling, grammar, and syntax are retained in all quotations from this narrative

nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart,” a framing, as pointed out earlier, that echoes Mary’s theophany. That “nevertheless” illustrates Joseph’s determination throughout his life to seize the light in the face of darkness.

In the primary 1835 version, the emphasis shifts to cognitive processes, with no mention of “heart” at all. Thus, Joseph is “wrought up” and “perplexed” in his mind, and he speaks of “the different systems taught the children of men,” suggesting systematic thought and possibly belief. Further, he speaks of “a realizing sense” and seeking and finding as he searches for “information” with a “fixed determination,” all of which suggest rational processes. As with the 1832 account, this one ends with Joseph being filled with “joy unspeakable.”

Whereas the 1832 version emphasized the heart, and the 1835 version focused more on the mind (with no mention of the heart), the 1838 version includes references to both mind (four times) and heart (five times) but leans more heavily on reason and ratiocination than on intuitive or heart-based knowing. Thus, Joseph speaks about “inquirers after truth,” “facts as they have transpired,” “priest contending against priest,” “strife of words,” and “contest about opinions.” In addition, he speaks of “great excitement” of mind; “serious reflection”; an inability to “come to any certain conclusion”; Presbyterians who, in contending with Baptists and Methodists, use “their powers of either reason or sophistry to prove their [respective] errors”; and Baptists and Methodists “endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others.” This “war of words” and “tumult of opinions” leaves Joseph wondering (that is, trying to figure out) who is right and who is wrong and, the ultimate question, “How shall I know it?” In other words, he is left bewildered by this flurry of verbal, cognitive, and rational conflict.

There are references to the more emotional, intuitive, or spiritual ways of knowing in the 1838 version, including Joseph’s having “deep and often pungent” feelings, the passage in James entering “with great force into every feeling of [his] heart,” and his offering up “the desires of [his] heart to God,” but clearly, as in the 1832 version, the major focus is not on the heart but rather on the mind.

After focusing on the contrast between heart and mind imagery in my classes for a number of years, I read Steven C. Harper’s *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (2012). I was pleased to see that he had arrived at the same conclusion I had. He writes, “When we listen to Joseph carefully, we also hear his subtle but significant distinction between his mind and his heart ... Each of his accounts

narrates a struggle between his head and his heart.” He adds, “What seems like inconsistency in Joseph’s story can be interpreted as the very point he intended to communicate, namely that his head and his heart were at odds, and he desperately needed wisdom from ‘God in order to discern which, if either, he should favor.’”⁵ I differ from Harper in that I believe Joseph’s use of heart and mind imagery, especially in the 1832 version, is not conscious but rather an inadvertent, unconscious revelation of the deep inner conflict between his rational and intuitive faculties which led to his young mind and heart becoming troubled.

What I think accounts for the dramatic shift from the heart to the mind between 1832 and 1838 (with a short interval in 1835) is that by the early to mid-1830s, Joseph was in the process of establishing a rational theology for his new religion. This was influenced not only by the criticism and persecution he had experienced over his initial telling of the First Vision, but also by people like Oliver Cowdery and Sidney Rigdon, two close associates who possessed skills of reasoning, rhetoric, and expression significantly superior to Joseph’s.

Discussion of rhetoric and style alone does not address the criticism of the substantive differences and discrepancies among the various accounts of Joseph’s seminal visionary experience — those having to do with his age, his reason for seeking guidance, the identification and number of heavenly visitors, the presence of a dark or demonic power, etc. In other words, it isn’t just the imagery; a number of significant details change with each telling. Harper addresses such criticism under the category of “Invention and Embellishment,” as this is the common charge among those dismissive of Joseph’s claims. The consensus among those who do not consider Smith a prophet is that the First Vision was an invention created by the young Joseph, that as time and circumstance dictated, he continued to revise and embellish his original story, apparently forgetting what he had written earlier — or believing no one would compare the versions and expose him. My belief is that there is an alternative explanation for the wide variation of key elements in the respective versions of Joseph’s theophany.

Other factors are relevant in considering the variances in the accounts: the autobiographical details of Joseph’s life during each of the accounts (events in his personal life might have affected his memory, or even his motives, as he shaped his narrative); the cultural milieu in which each version was related; and the nature of the audience to which

5. Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 92, 93.

the accounts were directed. The intended audience frequently affects the delivery of a story, address, or sermon — one wouldn't recount the story of Noah and the Flood or Jesus being tempted of the Devil in the same way to a seminary class as one would to a scholarly audience. The details, narrative flow, rhetorical flourishes, and tone would differ — either slightly or dramatically. In each respective version, Joseph wrote both with a specific purpose as well as for a specific audience.

In his first account, Joseph seems to be writing in response to a command to begin a history of the Church (D&C 85:1–2) rather than with a definite audience in mind. Essentially, he seems intent on recalling and recording the facts and impressions of the vision as he remembered them at the time. It is also important to keep in mind that, as Richard Bushman reminds us, “At first, Joseph was reluctant to talk about his vision.”⁶ Given the skeptical — even hostile — responses he received when he did begin telling what happened, it would have been natural for him to be even more reluctant to speak of his experience; that reluctance would likely have affected both his memory and his selection of specific details when he began his initial record of what happened.

In contrast to the unspecified general audience of the 1832 account, the two 1835 versions (one on November 9th and the other on November 14th) were addressed as responses to requests from two individuals: “an eccentric visitor from the east”⁷ and Erastus Holmes. Based on the accounts, the circumstances of the inquiries — although similar — seemed to have dictated different tellings. The first began immediately with the visionary experience, whereas the second covered Joseph's experience from age six to fourteen when he received “the first visitation of angels.” It is probable that, having already experienced negative response to his claim to having seen God and Christ, Joseph chose the more generic, less specific “personages” and “angels” for these accounts.

The 1838 account, like the one from 1832, was written as a result of a desire to record the particulars of the vision in a history of the Church commenced by Joseph and Sidney Rigdon. Variations of this account, which constitutes the current official version found in *The Pearl of Great Price*, are found in “Times and Seasons” (15 March 1842) and constitute the current official version found in *The Pearl of Great Price*. As with the first account, this version appears to be directed to a general audience. A polished orator and preacher, Rigdon's influence

6. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (NY: Knopf, 2006), 39.

7. Harper, 41.

may account for the more elevated vocabulary, sophisticated rhetorical style, and narrative structure of the 1838 account.

The influence of the various scribes who assisted — either by writing or transcribing the oral dictation or speech — must also be considered. Undoubtedly, some were more reliable recorders than others. Any changes during the printing of the various accounts might also explain some minor differences as well as stylistic infelicities.

However, as important as all these factors are in accounting for variations in the texts, the most significant may be the nature of memory itself. The scientific understanding of memory is relatively modern, although attempts to understand and classify it go back at least as far as Aristotle, who was the first to posit that upon birth the human brain is a “*tabula rasa*” — a blank slate on which experience imprints memories. Over the intervening centuries, various hypotheses about what we remember and how we remember it didn’t significantly advance the understanding of memory until the past two centuries when serious scientific research began to expand our understanding of this central human function.

Although we now know much more about the brain and memory than in the past, there is still much to learn and many erroneous assumptions to correct. As LDS scientist Jeffrey Bradshaw states:

There are many popular, persistent myths about the way the brain works — for example the erroneous idea that we use only a small percentage of the brain or exaggerated notions about people’s being right-brained or left-brained. Here, I will touch briefly on only two of these: 1) the myth that the human visual system works like a simple camera, and 2) the myth that human memory works like today’s computer “memory.” The first thing to know about such human sensory and cognitive processes is that they are active, not passive. Visual data is not simply taken in passively as in a simple camera that focuses the light from an entire scene through the lens and onto a sensor; memory is not laid down in the brain as simple traces of experience that, in principle, could be retrieved intact at a later time, like a series of bits in computer memory. Instead, the brain relies not only on complex feedback mechanisms that shape learning based on past experience but also on

feedforward mechanisms that direct cognitive processes by anticipating future experience.⁸

Bradshaw's last point is worth considering in relation to Joseph Smith's versions of the First Vision. The skeptical and hostile responses he received when he first felt emboldened to tell his experience to people outside his family could certainly have "direct[ed his] cognitive processes by anticipating future experience."

Modern cognitive neuroscience has completely revised our understanding of memory. In such books as Daniel Schacter's *The Seven Sins of Memory*⁹ and *Memory Distortion*¹⁰ and William Hirstein's *Brain Function*,¹¹ studies reveal memory to be both more complex and more subtle than most people assume. Considering the nature of the First Vision in relation to what is currently understood about memory should cause even the most sophisticated and skeptical textual scholar to be cautious in making judgments about the consistency of the Prophet's various accounts of his experience.

Cognitive neuroscientists have found that, by and large, memories are constructed, not remembered — or at least are a combination of remembered facts and largely unconscious invention; at any given moment we are not likely to be able to distinguish between the two. Israel Rosenfeld (1988) argues that memory is always constructed and that the circumstances surrounding the event affect what and how we remember: "Recollection is a kind of perception, ... *and every context will alter the nature of what is recalled*"¹² (emphasis added). These findings suggest that caution should be exercised in judging an account based on memories.

A particular type of memory — created from dramatic and emotionally powerful (and often disturbing) events — is referred to as a "flashbulb memory" in popular parlance. Cognitive neuroscientists have found these memories to be among our most unstable and

8. "The Future Isn't What It Used to Be: Artificial Intelligence Meets Natural Stupidity," Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and David H. Bailey, eds., *Body, Brain, Mind, and Spirit. Science and Mormonism Series 2* (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation), in preparation.

9. Daniel Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

10. Daniel Schacter, ed., *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

11. William Hirstein, *Brain Function: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

12. Israel Rosenfeld, *The Invention of Memory: A New View of the Brain* (NY: Basic Books, 1988), 89.

unreliable remembrances. Scientific studies across a broad demographic demonstrate that participants in or witnesses to such events have the illusion that they are recalling them with fidelity and precision when in fact the opposite is more likely to be true. The more powerful or disturbing the event, the less reliable the memory and the more likely the recalled experience will morph into even more elaborate or contradictory retellings over time. This phenomenon is described in such books as *Affect and Accuracy in Recall*¹³ and *Trauma and Memory*¹⁴ as well as in scholarly articles in scientific journals.¹⁵ The authors of these studies document the neurological processes that cause inadvertent false, inconsistent, and contradictory memories. Such misremembrance is surprising, for we tend to feel that we would recall such dramatic events with the most accuracy and consistency. Such “fictions of memory” regarding significant emotional events are not deliberate inventions but rather are influenced both by physiological processes occurring at the time of these events and the later more routine, reconstructive processes involved in recall and retelling.

While such memories are common to us all, we are seldom confronted with a question about the accuracy of our recollections, simply because it is generally assumed that our memories of such events are accurate. The dramatic re-telling likely disarms our normal skepticism, and we mistakenly assume that something so vivid is not likely to have been invented. There is also wide latitude for exaggeration or invention of narratives that serve the purpose of binding families, groups, and communities together.

For those who are prominent or in the public spotlight, however, such misremembrances can be embarrassing, precisely because we hold such figures to a higher standard of veracity. Additionally, in the twenty-first century such memories can be checked by audio, video, and other eyewitness accounts. Examples of distorted memories of highly unusual

13. Eugene Winograd and Ulrich Neisser, eds., *Affect and Accuracy in Recall: Studies of “Flashbulb” Memories* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

14. Austin Sarat, Nadav Davidovitch, and Michal Alberstein, eds., *Trauma & Memory: Reading, Healing, and Making Law* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

15. Examples include Patrick S. R. Davidson, et al., “Source Memory in the Real World: A Neuropsychological Study of Flashbulb Memory,” *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology*, 27:7 (Oct., 2005), 915–929; Michelle L. Roehm, “An Exploration of Flashbulb Memory,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 26:1 (June 2015), 1–16.

or dramatic events and experiences include President George W. Bush's misremembered account of hearing the news of the attacks on 9/11; Hillary Clinton's assertion that she came under sniper fire during a trip to Tuzla, Bosnia in 1996; Ronald Reagan's false remembrance that he was present at the liberation of Auschwitz; Mitt Romney's mistaken remembrance of seeing his father "march with Martin Luther King;" and, more recently, TV anchor Brian Williams' misremembrance of what happened during a dramatic US Army mission in Iraq 2003 that he accompanied as a reporter for NBC. Once such stories are told (and usually believed) by the teller and listener alike, unconsciously elaborating on them with successive tellings becomes almost inevitable.

This does not mean that any particular memory is inaccurate, conflated, or subject to unconscious transformation, nor does it mean that there are not those who deliberately invent, fabricate, or exaggerate autobiographic episodes. That such deliberate fabrication happens makes it easy to confuse memories of unusual or remarkable experiences with outright falsification. And there is no question that trusted public figures are, and should be, held to a higher standard, but we should be careful not to rush to judgment when retellings of memories prove not as accurate as one would prefer. Of course, we have no audio or video recordings of the First Vision, but even if we did, they likely would not allow us to reconstruct exactly what transpired that day in the Sacred Grove or instruct us how to communicate or relate what was experienced. In truth, our experience, like the Prophet's, would also be subject to the idiosyncrasies of memory, and our ability to describe it would be constrained by the limitations of language and meaning, as recent studies of eyewitness testimonies show.¹⁶

Joseph's varied remembrances of what transpired in the Sacred Grove appear to be the result of such a phenomenon: he was surprised, astonished, and likely even shocked by an overwhelmingly dramatic encounter with the forces of both darkness and light. In relation to the first, which was so threatening that he feared for his very soul ("I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction"), he

16. Laura Engelhardt, "Commentary on a Talk by Barbara Tversky and George Fisher, 'The Problem with Eyewitness Testimony,'" *Stanford Journal of Legal Studies*, 1:1, 25–30; John Bohannon, "How Reliable is Eyewitness Testimony? Scientists Weigh In," *Science* (Oct. 3, 2014); <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2014/10/how-reliable-eyewitness-testimony-scientists-weigh>; Hal Arkowitz and Scott O. Lilienfeld, "Why Science Tells Us Not to Rely on Eyewitness Accounts," *Scientific American* (Jan. 1, 2010), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/do-the-eyes-have-it/#>.

recounts, “Thick darkness gathered around me and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction” (JS–H 1:15–16). “Thick” seems a particularly potent adjective, especially when one considers that its meanings include “marked by haze, fog, or mist” and “extremely intense.”¹⁷ At the point of being overwhelmed by this dark “power of some actual being from the unseen world,” Joseph was delivered by an even more dramatic and powerful presence, one of light and glory. Whatever the nature of this experience, for a teenage boy, it must have been both wondrous and overwhelming.

Like others who have powerful emotional, physical, or spiritual experiences, it would not have been unusual for Joseph to consider if what he had seen was real. Note that following his theophany he says, “When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven” (emphasis added). This indicates an awareness of a physical and psychological break between his state after his experience and what transpired during it. Such an amazing, vivid experience may indeed have seemed dreamlike to him at times, both because it was unlike anything he had ever experienced and because there was almost instant — and nearly universal — skepticism that such experiences were possible or could be of divine origin.

It would have been natural for Joseph to be ambivalent about telling others what he had seen and heard, especially when he soon discovered that he was “hated and persecuted for saying that [he] had seen a vision.” Such reactions likely caused him not only to be more cautious in sharing his experience but also more careful in the way he did so. Given the hostility and rejection he faced, it is also possible that he began to be uncertain as to the particulars of what he had seen and possibly at times even doubtful about the entire experience. The difference between vision and dream, as the scriptures make clear, is not always easy to distinguish. In the face of negative, skeptical, and accusatory responses, Joseph says he felt like Paul who, like himself, was persecuted for claiming a theophany, being “ridiculed and reviled” and accused of being “dishonest” and even “mad” [JS–H 1:24]). In light of such hostile reception, it would have taken considerable resolve for Joseph not to entertain some self-doubt.

One of the things we know about memories of dramatic and traumatic experiences is that over time they not only tend to become distorted, but they can also become conflated with other, especially similar experiences. Thus, it would not be surprising if Joseph’s recollection in 1832 of what had happened in Palmyra eighteen years previously was

17. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/thick>.

not influenced by the various appearances of Moroni close to the time of the First vision, just as his 1838 account may have been influenced by the visitation of other heavenly messengers, including John the Baptist, Moses, Elijah, and Peter, James, and John, among others. The most likely influences would have been his other theophanies. In his *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* article, "Latter-day Appearances of Jesus Christ," Joel A. Flake records:

In 1832, Jesus Christ again appeared in a vision to Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon.

Both men saw and conversed with him (D&C 76:14) and also witnessed a vision of the kingdoms to which mankind will be assigned in the life hereafter. The Lord also appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in April 1836 in the Kirtland Temple shortly after its dedication and manifested his acceptance of this first latter-day temple (D&C 110:1–10).

A revelation pertaining to the salvation of the dead was given to Joseph Smith in an earlier appearance of Jesus Christ and the Father in the Kirtland Temple on January 21, 1836: "The heavens were opened upon us, and I beheld ... the blazing throne of God, whereon was seated the Father and the Son" (D&C 137:1, 3). Joseph Smith said that visions were given to many in the meeting and that "some of them saw the face of the Savior" (HC 2:382).

Joseph Smith also recorded other occasions when Church members beheld the Savior. On March 18, 1833, he wrote of a significant meeting of the School of the Prophets: "Many of the brethren saw a heavenly vision of the Savior, and concourses of angels, and many other things, of which each one has a record of what he saw" (HC 1:335). He wrote of a similar experience of Zebedee Coltrin (HC 2:387) and on another occasion reported that "the Savior made His appearance unto some" at a meeting the week after the dedication of the Kirtland Temple (HC 2:432).¹⁸

According to what cognitive neuroscientists say about the unconscious construction and reconstruction of highly emotional

18. Joel A. Flake, "Latter-day Appearances of Jesus Christ," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Vol. 2, http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Jesus_Christ#Jesus_Christ:_Latter-Day_Appearances_of_Jesus_Christ.

or dramatic memories, such an abundance of heavenly visions and visitations could indeed account for some of the discrepancies among the various versions of the First Vision.

As we begin to understand more of the ways in which the brain constructs memories, particularly of highly emotional or dramatic events, it seems plausible that any discrepancies in Joseph's varying accounts of the First Vision may have more to do with the vagaries of memory, as he recalled his initial powerful vision at different times over the course of his life, than that he deliberately falsified, invented or changed the particulars of that experience. Of course, we will never know for sure what explains the differences in the Prophet's various First Vision narratives, but the discovery of the unique way in which spectacular experiences are imprinted on our cognitive and limbic systems, along with the evidence from the texts themselves, provide a reasonable defense of the prophet's intention and integrity. Most importantly, it is consistent with what believers consider the necessarily dramatic inauguration of the Restoration, an event so important in the history of humankind that it required a visitation by the Father and the Son to a humble American farm boy.

Robert A. Rees (born November 17, 1935) is an educator, scholar, and poet. He teaches and is the Director of Mormon Studies at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. He has also taught at UCLA, UC Santa Cruz, and UC Berkeley and was a Fulbright Professor of American Studies in Lithuania (1995-96). Rees has published widely on Mormon and Religious Studies as well as on art, literature, politics, culture, and LGBT issues. He is the editor of *Proving Contraries: A Collection of Writings In Honor of Eugene England* (2005) and *Why I Stay: The Challenges of Discipleship for Contemporary Mormons* (2011) and (with Eugene England) *The Reader's Book of Mormon* (2008). He is the co-author of *Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Latter-day Saint Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children* (2012) and the soon to be published *Love One Another: A Guide for LDS Families & Congregations When Someone Separates from the Faith*. His collection of poetry, *Works of Grace*, is scheduled for publication in 2017. Rees has served as a bishop, stake high councilor, institute teacher, and member of the Baltic States Mission Presidency. He is the co-founder and current vice-president of the *Liahona Children's Foundation*, which addresses malnutrition among Latter-day Saint children in the developing world.

