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Joseph Smith's Visions: His Style and His Record



Ronald O. Barney

My primary purpose today, necessarily too brief, is to portray a few insights from the extant documentary record that must be considered in any appraisal of Joseph Smith and his claims as an authentic prophetic figure. This essay is part of a chapter from a book I am writing on Joseph Smith and his prophetic style.

I want to say at the outset that there have been many among the faithful scholars of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who have plowed some of this ground previously, though differently than I will today. Their objective, and mine today, was to demonstrate that the study of the documentation and contextual circumstances surrounding Joseph Smith's life corroborates and affirms the authenticity of his claims to have received heavenly visitations. To these other scholars we owe a great debt. I am one who has benefitted by the great work of the faithful explicators of the past and the present.

Perhaps, paradoxically, we also owe a great debt to the critics of Joseph Smith who, in their attempt to undermine the Prophet and the LDS Church, have demanded answers to hard questions and drawn conclusions, however misguided they have been, that have provoked us into a response. When it comes to the serious study of the Prophet's life we can no longer assume that reliance upon a sincere testimony will be enough to allay the aggressive charges against the Prophet and his work, because they are using, or, as I contend, misusing the Church's own documentary record.

I recognize that belief in Joseph Smith's experiences is a matter of faith, as is belief that God exists and that Jesus is his son. But I also believe that there are empirical matters that can either disqualify or corroborate an expression of faith. In the case at hand, those empirical matters are the documentary record that survives today regarding Joseph and his claims to having been divinely appointed by God to restore what is now known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

There are, in my judgment, several factors that provide compelling evidence that Joseph Smith was a truth-teller, despite the absence of the necessary context to fully understand his reports, and that he was not the "pious fraud" that some charge. Defenders of Joseph Smith in the past generation have written a great deal about the primary historical evidence of Joseph's visions, and the circumstantial evidence of the same. And while what I say may not be the most important factor in this prophetic evaluation, Joseph's sensibility about sacred matters, for want of a better description, I believe to be essential and persuasive and will briefly try to make that case today. Indeed, I argue that the salient features of Joseph Smith's ministry must be seen today through this lens, and a couple of other ones that are subjects for another day, or the surviving records that describe his life will be misunderstood.

It is from the documentary record created during the early Church period that we find the evidence, sometimes in fragments and shards that confirm the divine appointment of Joseph Smith as an authentic prophet. We've never claimed that Joseph Smith was perfect or anything but a mortal. But I assert that this documentary record substantiates the posture that Joseph Smith was a truth-teller and that he experienced what he said he witnessed, however limited our understanding may be of the same. However, the selective use of some of these same documents by his critics, who seem to ignore the full range of the records that exist, can significantly skew the panoramic picture by a distortive arrangement of the evidence.

For example, regarding what is known as Joseph Smith's First Vision, Fawn Brodie wrote in the second edition of her confrontational biography of Joseph *No Man Knows My History*, "The awesome vision he described in later years was probably the elaboration of some half-remembered dream stimulated by the early revival excitement and reinforced by the rich folklore of visions circulating in his neighborhood. Or it may have been sheer invention, created some time after 1830 when the need arose for a magnificent tradition."¹ And in 1984, Ed Decker and Dave Hunt of *The Godmakers* fame, wrote, "All of the evidence points to the conclusion that the [visionary accounts portrayed in Joseph's *History of the Church* were] fabricated in order to enhance the image of the Mormon Church in the eyes of its critics and to shore up the 'Prophet's' sagging authority in the face of mounting rebellion." After baiting the hook, they then cloud the water so that inquirers after Joseph Smith who

do not understand the circumstances or prophetic style of the first Mormon prophet jump to conclusions that are not warranted by the evidence. “Had these events actually occurred,” Decker and Hunt declare, “they would undoubtedly have been among the first ‘proofs’ mentioned to prospective converts then as now; and had they been known, it is unthinkable that they wouldn’t have been mentioned by *anyone*. One can only conclude that these crucial events for the establishment of the Mormon Church did not in fact ever happen.”² Messrs. Decker and Hunt present a faulty premise based upon their assertions that any reasonable person would use what I will call their “confining presentistic logic” in examining Joseph Smith. That is, they prepare the reader to accept their biased thinking by posturing their own limited twenty-first century perspective to a milieu that they do not understand and, based upon the documentary sources they use, apparently have made no attempt to acquire.

My purpose today is to examine a number of features from the historical record to establish for you the surrounding context of Joseph Smith’s prophetic style, demonstrating understanding of what survives as the documentary record of his life and of the restoration of the what he described as the gospel of Jesus. This analysis refutes in particular the shortsighted criticism that Mrs. Brodie and Messrs. Decker and Hunt use in painting their skewed picture of Joseph and his visions through the selective use of documentation and the deliberate neglect of other evidence that give credibility to Joseph’s assertions. And, of course, legions of debunkers since their time have echoed their perspectives.

Joseph Smith left a tradition wherein it is clear that he claimed to have experienced a number of divine encounters with heavenly beings. Brodie, Decker, and Hunt would have you believe that any reasonable person, after witnessing these heavenly manifestations, would have run home, grabbed his diary to carefully describe in great detail what he experienced before sprinting from neighbor to neighbor shouting, “Guess what happened to me?” And then after the next heavenly event he witnessed, they demand, he would have done the same thing: “Guess what happened to me this time,” and so on. The best historical evidence demonstrates that this line of thinking concerning Joseph Smith is a defective premise, entirely.

The first point that I wish to make identifies how Joseph Smith reacted to the heavenly visitations in which he participated. I proceed with the supposition that if he truly did have heavenly experiences there would likely be a consistency of principles and procedures that bear the same authentic markers of prophetic figures who preceded him. The abundant documentation from the modern revelations that Joseph received bear that authenticity. Let me illustrate with just a few of many examples of this divine protocol.

During the course of translating the Book of Mormon he verbalized this significant passage to Oliver Cowdery, his scribe: “It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart, only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men.”³ Those who receive revelation from God, it states, are “under a strict command” to keep it to themselves and share it only as appropriate. While receiving the revelation known as the Book of Moses he was told twice, “Show them not unto any except them that believe,” and “See thou show them unto no man, until I command you, except to them that believe.”⁴ Clearly there is a sensibility emphasized here that could not have escaped Joseph imposing restraint in revealing the revelations of God.

Now we will look at documentation that shows that not only was Joseph tutored by the Lord through revelation about this important expectation about keeping sacred confidences, from Joseph’s own history we learn that he also had a natural instinct for this qualification even before his prophetic role was made known to him. There is a popular Church film about Joseph Smith’s First Vision, *The Restoration*, one that I actually like very much, that, however, erroneously shows Joseph running from the Grove, yelling, “Mother, mother,” suggesting that the first thing he did after the remarkable encounter was to race home to tell his mother. However, his own account, the one that he had prepared to represent his experiences and the one now identified by the LDS Church as the authorized account, contains this revealing expression about his immediate behavior upon leaving the grove. When he reached home Joseph said, “I leaned up to the fire piece [place]. Mother enquired what the matter was.”⁵ In other words, his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, recognized that something had happened to her boy and she wanted to know what it was. Instead of relieving her mind by describing the otherworldly event he had just witnessed he simply said, “Never mind. all is well, I am well enough off.” He chose to keep silent. The extent of what he told her was that “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.”⁶

Not only did he initially refrain from describing his experience to his mother, he apparently told no one in his family at the time, though it is certain that he told them later. The one person he did tell, according to his record, was one of the local clergymen of the area, a man of the cloth whom he thought would understand and one whom he could trust. Instead, Joseph said that upon relating the experience he was rebuffed and ridiculed by the man he trusted: “he treated my communication not only lightly but with great contempt, saying it was all of the Devil.”⁷ He evidently also shared his experience with a few other locals who, he said, heaped upon him “severe persecution.”⁸ Naturally, after a while the teenaged Joseph learned his lesson. Thereafter, he was particularly careful about divulging what had happened to him, and when he did relate his experience, he had specific reasons for doing so.⁹

We know, of course, that later Joseph actually wrote about or had published accounts of his heavenly experiences, but these reports were proposed several years after 1820. So what I am asserting is that:

1. initially, Joseph had personal instincts that precluded him from flaunting his experiences
2. despite this instinct, in his youth he apparently shared the vision with people he thought would sympathize with his circumstances
3. being subject to rejection and disdain from these confidences he learned his lesson thereafter and protected his experiences
4. eventually he sensed the need of informing his intimates of what had happened to him
5. later his audience broadened to others outside his immediate circle
6. he made an early attempt to establish his story in writing in 1832 but the project stalled for reasons about which we can only speculate
7. finally, recognizing the necessity of publishing his story as a counter to his contemporary critics to advance the cause of the Church, he had prepared what we now know as the *History of the Church* [published between 1902-1912].

Admittedly, this scenario is complicated. But the documentary record affirms the progressive change in his behavior. Those who have tried to dismiss Joseph's authenticity have looked at this process without considering the entire scope of his record, and because it is intricate, have fashioned their conclusion by selectively emphasizing sources to disqualify Joseph as legitimate. I will briefly try to demonstrate the sequence I purport.

As I suggested much has been written in the last generation about the primary historical evidence and circumstantial evidence of the First Vision. The first recounting of that vision on paper was 1832 (this one in Joseph's own hand), the second in 1835 (notes recorded by a scribe), the third in 1838-39 (compiled for publication), and the fourth in 1842 (also prepared for publication). But these rehearsals of his experience were not created, as the critics claimed, because of insecurity, vulnerability, and the need to create a "magnificent tradition."

One of Mormonism's most important twentieth-century scholars, Hugh Nibley, has summarized Joseph's motives and behavior in a way that perfectly corroborates what we know of the young prophet: "One may ask," Professor Nibley states, "why should Joseph Smith have waited so long to tell his story officially [as charged by Fawn Brodie and Ed Decker]? From his own explanation [i.e., the 1838-39 authorized account of the First Vision] it is apparent that he would not have told it publicly

at all had he not been ‘induced’ [the word used by Joseph himself] to do so by all the scandal stories that were circulating. It was a rule among those possessing the gospel in ancient times that the greater teachings be not publicly divulged.”¹⁰ Well, the documentary records indicate that this is exactly how Joseph behaved. “What the present state of the evidence most strongly suggests,” Nibley continues, “is that Joseph Smith did tell his story to some of his followers at an early date, that the story got abroad, as such things will. . . . [But] he did this reluctantly, confining his report to bare essentials. Throughout his life Joseph Smith was never eager to tell the story of his first vision.”¹¹

Now that may sound surprising to this generation because in the past couple of generations we, as a people, have used this sacred story of the First Vision to demonstrate the young prophet’s divine appointment, something in the form of “proof” that he was appointed from God.¹² The extant record shows, however, that the Prophet’s own reluctance to recount his First Vision is consistent with how he handled many of the other sacred experiences he witnessed.

In another event that shortly followed his recounting of the First Vision in his official history, Joseph, as we know, was visited three times in one night by the Angel Moroni. With no sleep, Joseph went to work the next morning with his father on their farm. But, he said, in the authorized account:

I found my strength so exhausted as to render me entirely unable. My father, who was laboring along with me, discovered something to be wrong with me, and told me to go home. I started with the intention of going to the house; but in attempting to cross the fence out of the field where we were, my strength entirely failed me, and I fell helpless on the ground, and for a time was quite unconscious of anything. The first thing that I can recollect was a voice speaking unto me, calling me by name. I looked up, and beheld the same messenger [who had previously appeared to me] standing over my head, surrounded by light as before. He then again related unto me all that he had related to me the previous night, and commanded me to go to my father and tell him of the vision and commandments which I had received.”¹³

If we believe the skewed logic previously mentioned, the first thing that Joseph would have done after the angel left would have been to run down the stairs of his log home to his parents screaming, “Guess what happened to me last night?” Or, suppose that for one reason or another he didn’t tell his parents first thing that morning, once the father and his sons were in the field working that day and his father noticed Joseph’s weakened condition, that would have been a good time to state, “Father, there’s a reason I have no strength. I’ve been up all night,” followed by a rehearsal of what had just happened to him. However, that was contrary to his instincts. Indeed, he likely would not have said anything to his father or anyone else if the angel hadn’t told him to go back and tell his father “of the

vision and commandments which I had received.” Joseph was clearly inclined to keep this sacred matter to himself until he was told by the angel to return to his father and tell him what happened.

In October 1830, not too long after the Church was organized, while Joseph stayed with the Whitmer family in Fayette Township, New York, a visitor curious about what he had heard about Joseph Smith paid a visit to the Whitmer family farm for the purpose of interviewing Joseph. Word, of course, was out by this time about the Book of Mormon. Peter Bauder, who later wrote about his visit to the Whitmer farm, said that he inquired of Joseph, “searching into the mystery of his system of religion, and had the privilege of conversing with him alone, several hours, and of investigating his writings, church records, &c.” But when Peter Bauder asked Joseph whether he had had an intimate experience with God common to those of the time who professed a special familiarity with Deity, Bauder wrote that Joseph “could give me no christian experience,” meaning clearly that Joseph told him nothing about his First Vision.¹⁴

Another revealing event occurred the following year at a conference held in the village of Orange, Ohio, about thirteen miles southwest of Kirtland, Ohio. Attending the small gathering of elders on October 25th, 1831, were several of Joseph Smith’s most intimate associates: the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon—Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer, several of the eight witnesses of the Book of Mormon—including his father Joseph Sr. and his brother Hyrum, two men who would later become members of the First Presidency—Sidney Rigdon and Frederick G. Williams, and several who would later become charter members of the Quorum of the Twelve. This was truly the inner circle. The minutes of that meeting, taken by Oliver Cowdery, describe an exchange between Joseph and his brother Hyrum that tells us much about Joseph’s religious privacy. Remember, this is just a year-and-a-half after the Book of Mormon was published. This is the book, of course, upon which the religion was founded and was the most noted feature of the religion both in and out of the Church. Midway through the meeting, “Br. Hyrum Smith said that he thought best that the information of the coming forth of the book of Mormon be related by Joseph himself to the Elders present that all might know for themselves.”¹⁵ Because the story of Moroni and the plates was already quite well known to the public, Hyrum’s inquiry suggests that Joseph was being asked particulars about the angel and how he actually translated the plates. There was a real curiosity of how it all happened. Despite being surrounded by those who already believed him to be a prophet, including men who had actually seen the angel themselves, “Br. Joseph Smith jr. said it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon, & also said that it was not expedient for him to relate these things.”¹⁶

Not only did Joseph understand this principle, he tried to teach this protocol to Church leaders helping them to understand that keeping sacred experiences sacred was expected of all of those to whom the Lord revealed divine matters. As Joseph taught the newly called Quorum of the Twelve in November 1835 about the anticipated outpouring of spiritual gifts as they prepared for the Solemn Assembly associated with the dedication of the Kirtland Temple a few months in the future, he said to them regarding their ministries, as recorded in his own diary: “. . .we must be clean evry whit. let us be faithful and silent brethren, <and> if God gives you a manifestation, Keep it to yourself [that is, it is not only unnecessary to flaunt one’s sacred experiences, it is imperative that they be kept sacred].”¹⁷

Of course, this was a very exciting period for the Kirtland, Ohio, Saints. The faithful had labored for three years, with great sacrifice, to construct the magnificent edifice that was known then as the Kirtland House of the Lord. There were, as witnessed by numerous attendees, remarkable spiritual events that accompanied the Solemn Assembly and the temple’s dedication. But it was a week later when Joseph and Oliver Cowdery were in the western pulpits of the temple that the most noted occurrence during the dedicatory period transpired. It was remarkable in every way, and paralleled the great vision described in the New Testament where Jesus participated in what occurred on the “Mount of Transfiguration.” This most sacred Kirtland Temple event of April 3, 1836, was recorded in Joseph’s own journal shortly after the event occurred—the last entry in his 1835-1836 journal, penned by Joseph’s scribe at the time, Oliver Cowdery’s brother Warren. You are familiar with the story: after the Savior appeared to Joseph and Oliver to accept the labors of the Saints in constructing the “House of the Lord,” Joseph and Oliver acquired something they had never previously received and perhaps did not expect: significant keys from heavenly messengers that opened more doors as part of the restoration of all things. The account continues, “the heavens were again opened unto us; and Moses appeared before us. . . After this, Elias appeared. . . After this vision had closed, another great and glorious vision burst upon us; for Elijah the prophet, who was taken to heaven without tasting death, stood before us. . .”¹⁸ Thus, after Jesus appeared, they were successively visited by Moses, Elias, and Elijah, all administering essential powers to Joseph and Oliver.

We well know the story today because Elder Orson Pratt included that last entry in Joseph Smith’s 1835-1836 journal as Section 110 of the Doctrine and Covenants among the twenty-six additional “revelations” that were added to the revised Doctrine and Covenants in 1876—the composition of the compilation that we know today (with the exception of sections 137 and 138). By this time, of course, the story of the remarkable series of visions may have been widely known in the Church. But what most of us fail to realize is that Joseph Smith discreetly kept the revelation to himself. In other words, despite the magnitude and importance of the event, the evidence suggests that Joseph told few if any

about it. So what about his collaborator, Oliver? Oliver, too, was also disinclined to speak about the experience, and as far as we know never spoke of it thereafter—at least there is no record of him doing so.

Oliver had already demonstrated his own sensibilities about the dissemination of sacred matters that he had experienced. Earlier in the first days of the restoration, while it is not well known today, Oliver Cowdery according to Joseph Smith himself, had been visited by the Savior in 1829 near the time that Oliver departed for Harmony, Pennsylvania, to assist Joseph in translating the Book of Mormon. Joseph’s account from his 1832 history reads: “and it came to pass after much humility and affliction of Soul I obtained them [the plates] again [after having them taken away due to the 116 pages being lost] when [the] Lord appeared unto a young man by the name of Oliver Cowdery and shewed unto him the plates in a vision and also the truth of the work and what the Lord was about to do through me his unworthy servant.”¹⁹ Magnificent as this vision to Oliver must have been, Oliver kept it to himself, and as Joseph reported: “he had kept the circumstance entirely secret, and had mentioned it to no one.”²⁰

Thus, because neither Joseph nor Oliver talked about what had happened to them that unforgettable April 3, 1836 day, the Church membership at the time had no idea that Jesus, Moses, Elias, and Elijah, had appeared to Joseph and Oliver and bestowed upon them the keys of heaven. It was not until Joseph’s story was finally published serially in the *Deseret News* in Salt Lake City, Utah, in November of 1852, as part of the “History of Joseph Smith.” As important as this episode is in our history, Joseph apparently kept the matter to himself—something that we now know was entirely consistent in the way that he did most things of this nature. And, incidentally, it should be no surprise that after the transfiguration of Jesus as recounted in Matthew 17, which parallels the Kirtland event in many ways, he told his witnesses, Peter, James, and John to “Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of Man be risen again from the dead.”²¹ This sacred moment was not something to be spread abroad.

Speaking of Peter, James, and John, it should also not be surprising that we have no account of their ministration to restore the Melchizedek Priesthood rendered by either Joseph or Oliver. While Oliver published an overview of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood in 1834,²² Joseph chose not to elaborate on Oliver’s account until his history was prepared in 1838-39. We have small fragments and shards that serve as evidence that they experienced what they said that they did, but no narrative describing this event of supernal importance. It was the absence of this account that Ed Decker and Dave Hunt were stewing about, as noted above. If Decker and Hunt’s reasoning represented Joseph’s problems at the time, then he likely would have created a mighty account of Peter, James, and John visiting him and Oliver. It appears that they had considered mentioning it, but in the end they

apparently concluded that it was not necessary or appropriate. That's what the documentary record demonstrates.

The items previously mentioned are those with which we have some familiarity. However, there were many other instances where Joseph had significant experiences of which we know virtually nothing other than brief references that they occurred. For example, Joseph Smith's recounting of the early history of the Church in what has become known as the Wentworth letter contains this provocative statement relating to the time between Moroni's first visit to Joseph in 1823 and delivery of the plates in 1827. In preparation for the latter event in September 1827, Joseph stated: "After having received many visits from the angels of God unfolding the majesty, and glory of the events that should transpire in the last days, on the morning of the 22d of September A.D. 1827, the angel of the Lord [Moroni] delivered the records into my hands."²³ In other words, during that four year period between 1823 and 1827, when Joseph was improving and learning, he received the ministrations from "the angels of God unfolding the majesty, and glory of the events that should transpire in the last days." But predictably, he told no one of these experiences, including Oliver Cowdery, his translation collaborator.

Oliver, when recounting a number of the significant restoration events for the Church membership in the Church periodical the *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, wrote in 1834 that during this period that we've just described—i.e., 1823-1827, that nothing occurred of importance in Joseph's life. He wrote, "From this time [that is, Moroni's first visit] to September, 1827, few occurrences worthy of note transpired."²⁴ Thus, despite Joseph witnessing numerous heavenly manifestations over those four years, he obviously chose to keep knowledge of the visitation of angels even from Oliver, his intimate collaborator. Again, this is consistent with what we know of Joseph's discreet prophetic manner.

Among the most intriguing of Joseph's experiences were those he hinted at in his epistle to the Saints written on September 6, 1842. This account, published in the Church's Nauvoo periodical, the *Times and Seasons*, was of such consequence that it was later codified as Section 128 in the Doctrine and Covenants, part of Orson Pratt's revision of the Doctrine and Covenants mentioned previously. This letter, covering several significant matters on Joseph's mind, principally new information about baptism for the dead, gives an enlarged context for the Lord's method of restoring the gospel in the latter days. About two-thirds of the way into the letter, which in the 128th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants is the middle of verse 18, it reads:

[18.] it is necessary in the ushering in of the dispensation of the fullness of times; which dispensation is now beginning to usher in, that a whole, and complete, and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glories should take place, and be revealed, from the days of Adam even to the present time; and not only this, but those things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent, shall be revealed unto babes and sucklings in this the dispensation of the fullness of times.²⁵

There is no mistaking Joseph's intent here. He said that in order for "the dispensation of the fullness of times" to unfold, those from antiquity who held "keys, and powers, and glories" from the beginning to the present had to return and bestow those keys, powers, and glories in some way that would serve as the foundation of the latter-day work. He then awakened the Saints further, "and not only this, but those things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent, shall be revealed unto babes and sucklings in this the dispensation of the fullness of time."²⁶ He then further underscored this declaration by stirring our imaginations:

[20.] And again, what do we hear? Glad tidings from Cumorah! Moroni, an Angel from heaven, declaring the fulfillment of the prophets – the book to be revealed. [Of course, we know about Moroni. It continues:] A voice of the Lord in the wilderness of Fayette, Seneca county, declaring the three witnesses to bear record of the book. [We even know a little about this. But then we learn:] The voice of Michael on the banks of the Susquehanna, detecting the devil when he appeared as an angel of light. [We know little about this; Ezra Booth's review of early Mormonism may be the only other reference to the event.²⁷ Joseph continued:] The voice of Peter, James, and John, in the wilderness between Harmony, Susquehanna county, and Colesville, Broom county, on the Susquehanna River, declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom and of the dispensation of the fullness of times. [Because of the construction of the verbiage here, we don't know if this has specific reference to the restoration of the priesthood or to some other visitation. Of course, we must remember what Joseph's intent was in this letter—to state that what was required had happened. He went on:]

[21.] And again, the voice of God in the chamber of old father Whitmer, in Fayette, Seneca county [we must guess at exactly what it is to which this pertains, but it continues with this compelling reminder that the voice of Jesus had also come to him] at sundry times, and in divers places, through all the travels and tribulations of this Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.²⁸

This was exciting and brand new information to most of the Saints as they read it in the pages of the *Times and Seasons* where it was first published.²⁹ But Joseph didn't just stop with the announcement of the many instances of hearing the voice of God [Christ], he specified others of the visitors who came to him. "And the voice of Michael, the archangel; the voice of Gabriel, and of Raphael [the latter two also traditionally being referred to as archangels, but Raphael is not a named biblical character, although he is mentioned in the apocryphal book of Tobit], and of divers angels, from Michael or Adam, down to the present time, all declaring each one of their dispensation, their rights, their keys, their honors, their majesty and glory, and the power of their priesthood."³⁰

Following these revealing references, Joseph then reminded us of the process by which this all took place; the empowerment, he wrote, came "line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little."³¹ Truly, this man, who had remarkable experiences, privately cared for the information until he felt comfortable in disclosing the information to others.

We have discussed with brief illustrations Joseph Smith's prophetic style: he kept sacred things sacred until it was otherwise required. As he did throughout his life, he desired his followers to have a measure of the same things that he experienced. They, too, would need to exercise discretion in caring for what was revealed to them. In a sermon on November 19, 1841, he told his audience, according to Wilford Woodruff: "The reason we do not have the secrets of the Lord revealed unto us is because we do not keep them, but reveal them. . . . I can keep a secret till dooms day."³²

The Lord had, according to Joseph, emphasized this precept to not only himself but to Church members at large in an 1834 revelation when he warned, "reveal not the things which I have revealed unto them, until it is wisdom in me that they should be revealed."³³ By the end of his ministry Joseph had actually institutionalized this religious precept to the Church, as illustrated by this reminder given to the Saints by his brother Hyrum not long before he and Joseph were assassinated:

Beware what you teach! [Hyrum stated,] for the mysteries of God are not given to all men; and unto those to whom they are given they are placed under restrictions to impart only such as God will command them; and the residue is to be kept in a faithful breast, otherwise he will be brought under condemnation. By this God will prove his faithful servants, who will be called and numbered *with the chosen*."³⁴

What I have described above I believe to be a compelling rejoinder to those who argue that Joseph made up his religious experiences later in life. Instead, he had an innate sense of integrity in handling the ministrations of God. It is clear that his early instincts and early instructions from the Lord caused

him to treat his experiences with great care. Later, when it became expedient, he was more forthcoming about what had happened to him. But even then, we have just glimpses and squints at the scope of his experiences.

I want to close by describing two other features of Joseph's ministry that help us recognize his instincts and personality. These characteristics illustrate his modesty and religious dignity, and along with what we have learned about his instincts to keep sacred matters sacred they help underscore the veracity of his behavior as a prophet. While these two idiosyncrasies may not appear to be related to what we have discussed, we gain insight about the Prophet's style to further illustrate his reticence in revealing his innermost thinking and his experiences. This, of course, flies in the face of those who demand that we consider him a calculator who invented his sacred experiences for acclaim and influence.

In the first example, I will use his contemporary churchman and rival, Alexander Campbell—one of the founders of the Disciples of Christ church in America, as a contrast to Joseph's public demeanor. Alexander Campbell was widely known at the time as a Christian reformer who ensured that his thinking was known far and wide. After earlier ventures when Sidney Rigdon, Parley P. Pratt, and Isaac Morley followed him before their conversions to Mormonism, Alexander Campbell began publication of a monthly periodical called the *Millennial Harbinger* in 1830, coincident to the organization of the LDS Church. Campbell's prodigious publication appeared every month until he died in 1866. During the 1830s the *Millennial Harbinger* was composed of forty-eight pages each issue, with Campbell himself supplying between ten and fourteen articles per number. It was a phenomenal output of religious teaching. Surely, those who followed him knew Alexander Campbell's thinking and his "Christian experience."

One can imagine that public notice with substantive literary output was a key to propagating religious opinion at the time. Indeed, there were dozens of religious journals printed throughout the United State at the time, most of them ardently representing a religious philosophy. However, the LDS Church didn't get into the game until the middle of 1832, two years after the Church had been organized. The Church's first publication, after the Book of Mormon, was a periodical called the *Evening and the Morning Star*, printed initially in Independence, Missouri, and later in Kirtland after the Saints had been displaced from Missouri. One might imagine that Joseph welcomed the chance to communicate broadly with the church membership and beyond through regular articles in the church's only ongoing publication. However, unlike Alexander Campbell who filled his periodical with his thinking, Joseph Smith posted but one "short note" during the entire run of the *Evening and the Morning Star* from June 1832 to September 1834. This note appeared on the very last page of the

very last issue. Coincidentally, it was a “short note” to Oliver Cowdery about Alexander Campbell himself, responding to Campbell’s attacks upon him and the Book of Mormon.

If Joseph Smith was anxious to dazzle, control, and manipulate his followers like Fawn Brodie and Ed Decker/Dave Hunt assert, he clearly missed the opportune moment. But, as we have learned, this was not Joseph’s style, nor his ambition.

The second unusual idiosyncrasy about Joseph that contributes to our limited understanding of the way that he conducted his ministry had to do with the sermons that he delivered. Of course, a principle means of disseminating religious faith and polity by the clergy during the early American republic was through the regular delivery of sermons. Most every clergyman used this vehicle to regularly gather, solidify, and inspire their followers. And while Joseph preached sermons, perhaps as many as 450 during his ministry (according to Dean C. Jessee), not one was ever captured verbatim!³⁵ And while Joseph used nearly thirty scribes during his lifetime, none, apparently, were assigned to capture his words of inspiration and revelation for publication. As a result, there are substantive accounts or reports taken by followers of only about 20% of his sermons. And, again, none of these were taken verbatim. For reasons that we do not know, and can only speculate upon, he never felt constrained to have his actual words fixed on paper for his contemporaries or for posterity. He was obviously content to let his delivery, driven by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, work on the minds and hearts of his followers.

To underscore this unusual characteristic of his prophetic style, in April 1843 an English convert immigrated to Nauvoo. George D. Watt was already noted among his fellow Saints as the first convert in Great Britain to be baptized during the first apostolic mission to England. George Watt had at the time a very useful skill. He knew and taught what was then called “phonography,” shorthand. George Watt could listen to a speaker and write down in abbreviated strokes the speaker’s words just as they were delivered. As soon as he got to Nauvoo, he made an arrangement with Joseph Smith to use the upper floor of the Prophet’s red brick store to teach “phonography” to the Saints in Nauvoo, and advertised his services in Nauvoo’s newspaper, the *Wasp*, accordingly. Now in 1843 in full strength, Joseph Smith, had he wished to use Watt, had someone in close proximity who could capture his very words. However, not once, apparently, did he do so. Between April 1843 when George Watt moved to Nauvoo and June 1844 when Joseph was killed, the Prophet delivered at least fifty-five sermons that are known of in and around Nauvoo. Yet not once did he use George Watt and his useful skill of shorthand to have his words captured and then disseminated in print thereafter. Yet after Joseph’s death, Brigham Young started almost immediately to use Watt as a scribe, an arrangement that continued for over twenty years.

Another instance that emphasizes this peculiarity in Joseph was a letter written by Brigham Young to the English Saints upon Brigham's return to the Nauvoo after the second apostolic mission to Great Britain. Of course, the English Saints clamored for Mormonism in print. While a periodical for the British Saints, the *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* had been published in England since May 1840, with news from Nauvoo regularly printed therein, there is a conspicuous absence of prophetic messages from Joseph to the English saints. Of course, the Saints in Britain wanted the teachings of Joseph and the grand things that he was revealing to the Saints as much as did the American Mormons. But upon Brigham's return to Nauvoo he wrote to the British Saints to say that in order to hear Joseph they would have to immigrate to the Mormon center on the Mississippi. Even though the *Millennial Star* was a most suitable vehicle to dispense the sermons and teachings of Joseph Smith, he was never inclined to do so. As Brigham wrote for a broadside that was published in England: "the saints may enjoy the teachings of the Prophet; [but] those teachings. . . can be had only at this place."³⁶

The father of the study of Joseph Smith, Dean C. Jessee, emphasized a generation ago that Joseph Smith was uncomfortable with not only his writing skill but also with the ability to transfer his thoughts to paper, as illustrated by the numerous apologies he made to correspondents about his literary weaknesses. But there is little evidence, however, that Joseph was ever shy about the delivery of his sermons to the Saints. Almost uniformly those who took personal notes of his preaching identified him as one who spoke with power and authority. Yet, he never capitalized on this oft-used ministerial vehicle to lead his growing flock by having his sermons, which I reemphasize were a primary means of his delivery of new revelation to the Saints, written for dissemination.

Why Joseph Smith did not use George Watt or why he didn't write to the British Saints or why he was content to let his sermonizing words alone influence the Saints is speculation. But along with his disposition to keep sacred things sacred and his hesitancy to push himself in front of the people with literary flourish, we see a prophet who the evidence suggests was not the fanciful manipulator hungering for power and influence over his people as portrayed by Brodie, Decker, Hunt, and others. Rather, there is evidence that he was cautious, sensitive to spiritual matters, and content to let the Providential hand guide matters of the Church.

Notes

1. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, second edition, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 25.
2. Ed Decker and Dave Hunt, *The Godmakers* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1984), 203-204.
3. Alma 12:9.
4. Moses 1:42; Moses 4:32.
5. Insertion in Willard Richards's hand, December 1842, Church Historians' Office, "History of the Church, 1839-circa 1881" Book A-1, p. 132, note B, LDS Church History Library. My thanks to Smith family expert Donald L. Enders for bringing to my attention Joseph Smith's initial reluctance to inform his family about his theophanies.
6. Insertion in Willard Richards's hand, December 1842, Church Historians' Office, "History of the Church, 1839-circa 1881" Book A-1, p. 132, note B, LDS Church History Library.
7. Draft 2, History Drafts, 1838-Circa 1841, *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832-1844*, Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2012), 216.
8. Draft 2, History Drafts, 1838-Circa 1841, *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832-1844*, Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2012), 216.
9. There was a period in November 1835, for example, that he related some of his story to others. Joseph Smith, 9, 14 November 1835, Journal 1835-1836, *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 1: 1832-1838* (Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds. (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2008), 88, 100.
10. Hugh Nibley, "Censoring Joseph Smith's Story" *Improvement Era* 64, nos. 7, 11 (July, November 1961): 522, 813.
11. Hugh Nibley, "Censoring Joseph Smith's Story" *Improvement Era* 64, nos. 7, 11 (July, November 1961): 522, 813.

12. See for example, John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820-1844* (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press and Deseret Book Company, 2005).
13. Draft 2, History Drafts, 1838-Circa 1841, *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832-1844*, Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2012), 230, 232. My thanks to Smith family expert Donald L. Enders for bringing to my attention Joseph Smith's initial reluctance to inform his family about his theophanies.
14. Peter Bauder, *The Kingdom and Gospel of Jesus Christ: Contrasted with That of Anti-Christ. A Brief Review of Some of the Most Interesting Circumstances, Which Have Transpired Since the Institution of the Gospel of Christ, from the Days of the Apostles* (Canajoharie, New York: Printed by A. H. Calhoun, 1834), 36–38.
15. Conference Minutes and Record Book of Christ's Church of Latter Day Saints (also known as the "Far West Record"), 25 October 1831, LDS Church History Library.
16. Conference Minutes and Record Book of Christ's Church of Latter Day Saints (also known as the "Far West Record"), 25 October 1831, LDS Church History Library.
17. Joseph Smith, Journal, 12 November 1835, *The Joseph Smith Papers, Journals, Volume 1: 1832-1839*, Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 98.
18. Joseph Smith, 3 April 1836, *The Joseph Smith Papers, Journals, Volume 1: 1832-1839*, Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 219-222.
19. History, Circa Summer 1832, *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832-1844*, Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2012), 16.
20. Draft 2, History Drafts, 1838-Circa 1841, *The Joseph Smith Papers: Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832-1844*, Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2012), 284.
21. Matthew 17:9.

22. *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 15-16.
23. "Church History" *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (1 March 1842): 707.
24. *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 1 (October 1835): 200.
25. "Letter from Joseph Smith" 6 September 1842, *Times and Seasons*, 3, no. 23 (1 October 1842):935-936.
26. "Letter from Joseph Smith" 6 September 1842, *Times and Seasons*, 3, no. 23 (1 October 1842):935-936.
27. Ezra Booth, *Ohio Star*, 27 October 1831; E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time. . .* (Painesville, Ohio: By the author, 1834), 187.
28. "Letter from Joseph Smith" 6 September 1842, *Times and Seasons*, 3, no. 23 (1 October 1842):935-936.
29. "Letter from Joseph Smith" 6 September 1842, *Times and Seasons*, 3, no. 23 (1 October 1842):935-936.
30. "Letter from Joseph Smith" 6 September 1842, *Times and Seasons*, 3, no. 23 (1 October 1842):935-936.
31. "Letter from Joseph Smith" 6 September 1842, *Times and Seasons*, 3, no. 23 (1 October 1842):935-936.
32. Joseph Smith, in Wilford Woodruff, Journal, 19 November 1841, at the Old Homestead (in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 81.
33. D&C 105:23.
34. "To the brethren of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints, living on China Creek in Hancock County," 15 March 1844, *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 6 (15 March 1844): 474 (italics in original).
35. Dean C. Jessee, "Priceless Words and Fallible Memories: Joseph Smith as Seen in the Effort to Preserve His Discourses" *BYU Studies* 31, no. 2 (1991): 23.
36. Brigham Young and 9 others of the Twelve, "An Epistle of the Twelve, To the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, in its various Branches and Conferences in Europe," 20 March 1842, Nauvoo, Illinois. (Broadside)