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Abstract Review of *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (2002), by Grant H. Palmer.

A One-sided View of Mormon Origins

Mark Ashurst-McGee

To Latter-day Saints there can be no objection to the careful and critical study of the scriptures, ancient or modern, provided only that it be an honest study—a search for truth.

John A. Widtsoe[1]

Thoughts and expressions compete in the marketplace of thought, and in that competition truth emerges triumphant.

Hugh B. Brown[2]

In the new Signature Books publication *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins,* Grant Palmer, a retired instructor from the Church Educational System (CES) of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

1. John A. Widtsoe, *In Search of Truth: Comments on the Gospel and Modern Thought* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 80 (1930 ed., 81); quoted in Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 39.

2. Hugh B. Brown, *An Abundant Life: The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown,* ed. Edwin B. Firmage (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 137–38, quoted in Palmer, *Insider's View,* xi. Hereafter, references to Palmer's book will appear in parentheses in the text.

Review of Grant H. Palmer. *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins.* Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002. xiii + 281 pp., with selected bibliography and index. $24.95.

Saints, writes for a lay audience on the intensely controversial history of Mormonism's founding events. To this audience, Palmer projects both sincerity and sensitivity. "Lest there be any question," he writes, "let me say that my intent is to increase faith, not to diminish it." Nevertheless, he quickly reminds us that "faith needs to be built on truth—what is, in fact, true and believable" (p. ix). From this overarching intent, Palmer derives two specific purposes for writing the book.

The first of these stated objectives is "to introduce church members who have not followed the developments in church history during the last thirty years to issues that are central to the topic of Mormon origins" (p. x). Thus Palmer carries on in the role of educator, offering to serve as a faithful guide to the ordinary Latter-day Saint who would like to learn more about the new discoveries in early Mormon history.

This brings us to the book's curious title. To what group is Palmer an "insider," and why does that perspective matter? The title apparently refers to his career as an instructor in the CES. But one may question whether Palmer's career as a gospel teacher furnishes him with more knowledge of "Mormon origins" than could be obtained by an "outsider." This is demonstrably not the case. Moreover, other "insiders" do not view things the way Palmer does. So what is really at work in the book's title? Essentially, it is a piece of disingenuous advertising. It intends to present Palmer as a seasoned gospel teacher who will shepherd those who wish to learn more about the origins of their faith.[3]

The prospects for learning at Palmer's feet sound promising indeed. He encourages the reader to come and partake of the knowledge that is now available:

> We now have a body of authentic, reliable documents and a near-consensus on many of the details. From this base, the overall picture of Mormon origins begins to unfold. This pic-

3. In fairness to Palmer, he did not compose the title. He explains that Signature Books changed the title "for sales purposes" at www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/insider's2.htm (accessed 28 January 2003).

> ture is much different from what we hear in the modified versions that are taught in Sunday school. But demythologized—placed in its original time and place, amid all the twists and turns that exist in the real world—it rings true. (p. ix)

For the uninitiated, *An Insider's View* claims to offer "an entirely new and exciting perspective" of what really happened at the very beginning, "before everything was recast for hierarchical and proselyting purposes" (p. ix). In Palmer's own words: "I hope my survey will be enlightening and useful to anyone who has wanted to understand what has been termed the New Mormon History" (p. x).

Historian D. Michael Quinn finds the essence of the New Mormon History in its "effort to avoid using history as a religious battering ram."[4] Before the flowering of the New Mormon History in the late twentieth century, historical treatments of things Mormon were, as a rule, polemic—whether written for or against the church and its beliefs. The history offered by Palmer falls squarely within the polemical tradition of the old Mormon history. He provides only one side of the issues and presents them according to his own agenda.

Palmer's second stated objective in writing is more personal: "I would like church members to understand historians and religion teachers like myself." Implicitly, he asks readers not to put the book down if the history they find therein seems unfamiliar or disturbing. "When I or my colleagues talk or write about the LDS past," he explains, "we tend to avoid superlatives that members expect when hearing a recital of our history." He notes a common reaction of church members to the New Mormon History, which is to "assume that we have secularized the story." But Palmer insists that this is not fair. "In truth," he declares, "we are salvaging the earliest, authentic versions of these stories" (p. x).

Any historian writing to a Latter-day Saint audience would share Palmer's concern, and he wisely takes the time to psychologically

4. D. Michael Quinn, ed., *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), viii.

prepare the Latter-day Saint reader for his view of what took place in the decade before the church was organized. Palmer also gives the reader fair warning in his preface that evidence for many of the traditional foundational stories is "either nonexistent or problematic" (p. xii). But Palmer would have been more forthright to have divulged the full intent of his argumentation from the very beginning. The book labors to completely discredit the integrity of the foundational claims upon which the faith of the Saints rests. *An Insider's View* teaches us that Joseph Smith never really saw the Father and the Son, that he borrowed his story about Moroni from a book, that he based the Book of Mormon on ideas from his own time, that he put together a fake set of metal plates, and that he never received priesthood from angels.

A straightforward statement of my position is likewise called for. As a historian, I find that the book fails to follow the basic standards of historical methodology. As a believing Latter-day Saint scholar, I perceive alternative interpretations of the founding events that Palmer neglects to consider or even acknowledge. Reviewing the entire book, chapter by chapter, an open-minded reader may find that, in most cases, interpretations favorable to the integrity of Joseph Smith and his revelations are as reasonable as or even more reasonable than those presented by Palmer. In this overview, I will not cover every single point of controversy but will address the central thesis of each chapter. I will also highlight some of the new ideas that Palmer has worked into this generally secondary study.

Joseph Smith as Translator/Revelator

An Insider's View is essentially a sustained attack on the Book of Mormon, which Joseph Smith himself had identified as "the keystone of our religion."[5] Palmer attempts to expose what he perceives as Smith's real motives and methods for producing the book, to identify the cultural resources that he drew upon for the content of the

5. *History of the Church,* 4:461.

plates and the story of how he found them, and to explain why the testimonies of the men who claimed to have seen the plates are unreliable. To this multifaceted attack on the Book of Mormon, Palmer tacks on two chapters that cover the first vision and the restoration of the priesthood.

In the opening chapter, Palmer surveys various episodes in which Joseph Smith acted as a "translator." Palmer seeks to understand what can be meant by that term as used by Smith and his associates and thereby to "consider what we can conclude about the way in which the Book of Mormon was dictated" (p. 1). He begins this survey with an examination of the Book of Mormon translation itself.

The Book of Mormon

Palmer notes his objection to images of Joseph Smith translating by looking intently and studiously at the plates, as any secular translator would do. Latter-day Saints commonly believe that Smith translated by looking at the plates through the Urim and Thummim—an instrument resembling a pair of spectacles—but Latter-day Saint artists have apparently not known how to illustrate this or have felt uncomfortable depicting it. Actually, Smith apparently translated most of the Book of Mormon by using a seer stone. Palmer emphasizes the eyewitness accounts of this method such as that given by Smith's brother-in-law Michael Morse, who described Smith "placing the Seer Stone in the crown of a hat, then putting his face into the hat, so as to entirely cover his face" (p. 2).[6] This evokes an image even less familiar—and one that Joseph Smith's critics often relish. It is graphically represented in the book (p. 3, fig. 2). While the image may seem strange today, there is no functional difference between Smith looking into a single seer stone and looking through a pair of ancient seer stones bound together by a frame like spectacles. The point is that the special stones allowed Smith to see things that he would not ordinarily be able to see (see Mosiah

6. Michael Morse, interview by William W. Blair, in letter to the editor, *Saints Herald,* 15 June 1879, 191.

8:16–18). Evidence from the original manuscript affirms the accounts given by those present during the process that the words of the English translation appeared to Smith in the stones, and he then dictated them to a scribe.[7] As Palmer succinctly puts it, Smith "was a reader rather than a translator" (p. 5).

Palmer asserts that Joseph Smith must have been reading from the Bible as well. In fact, Palmer provides another illustration to make a mental impression on his readers. This graphic depicts Oliver Cowdery transcribing as Joseph Smith reads to him from a Bible lying open on a desk (p. 84, fig. 19). Palmer had objected to Latter-day Saint illustrations of Smith translating without a seer stone because such an image "is not supported by what Joseph Smith's scribes and other witnesses said" (p. 2). I question Palmer's illustration on the same grounds but remain open to the possibility that Joseph Smith consulted the Bible as a tool in the translation process.

This, however, does not require that one view the Book of Mormon translation in the way that Palmer presents it. Many Latter-day Saint scholars believe that when Joseph encountered material in the plates that mirrored biblical passages, the Lord revealed them in King James English. A revelation dictated by Smith in the early years of the church explains that the Lord gives revelation to his servants "in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come unto understanding" (D&C 1:24). Some Latter-day Saint scholars are even comfortable with the idea that when Joseph Smith came upon passages in the golden plates that paralleled material in the Bible, he used the wording from the King James Version of the Bible to present them. A version of this theory presented a century ago by the influential Book of Mormon scholar and General Authority B. H. Roberts was published in the official church periodical of the time.[8]

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7. Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins,* ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 61–93.

8. "Bible Quotations in the Book of Mormon; and Reasonableness of Nephi's Prophecies: Letters of Inquiry from an Investigator, and a Reply Thereto by B. H. Roberts," *Improvement Era,* January 1904, 179–96.

The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible

Palmer next treats Joseph Smith's revision of the Bible, which Smith himself called the "new translation."[9] Believing that the Bible as it had been transmitted through the ages was a corrupted version of the scriptures, Smith changed a number of passages. Palmer questions the historical authenticity of Smith's revisions because none were confirmed by the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1947, which "provided us with Hebrew manuscripts for all of the Old Testament (except Esther) that are a thousand years earlier than any previously known (100 B.C.)" (p. 11). This misrepresents the viability of the scrolls for testing Smith's revisions. Texts of the Old Testament books have survived among the Dead Scrolls mostly in fragments or in commentaries, not as complete books. Moreover, most scholars believe that the Old Testament scriptures had been altered centuries before the scribes at Qumran copied the Dead Sea Scrolls. So whether Smith restored original textual material may not be detectable.

Moreover, Smith did not necessarily consider all his revisions bound to any text, ancient or modern. Some of his changes were apparently made as direct revelations of historical events or as additions of new details that never had been recorded. In a quite different revision, Smith noted in his new translation that the word *unicorns* as given in Isaiah 34:7 KJV was "Re-em," Hebrew for wild ox. He evidently made this change during or after his study of the Hebrew language in the winter of 1835–36, and the inscription of the Hebrew word suggests that he understood and acknowledged that the change was made not by revelation but from his study of Hebrew. Finally, there is a class of revisions consisting of punctuation, word choice, clarification, and harmonization for which it seems Smith was merely providing a "plainer translation." In fact, he never claimed that all his

9. Robert J. Matthews, *"A Plainer Translation": Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible; A History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), 12–13.

revisions resulted from revelation.[10] Palmer's simplistic criticism of Smith's Bible revisions assumes that the revisions are all of a kind.

The Book of Abraham

Smith's interpretations of the Egyptian papyri that he acquired while in Kirtland receive a similar simplistic treatment. Some of the extant papyri have been translated by professional Egyptologists, but they do not yield the Book of Abraham text given by Smith.[11] Palmer states flatly that the extant papyri were the source used by Smith for the Book of Abraham translation (p. 12). A vigorous argument for this position can and has been made[12] but has not amounted to a closed case. The material from which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham may be among the papyri that are missing or destroyed.[13] In contrast, there is near certainty that Smith interpreted three illustrations from the papyri that are extant in the original or in printed facsimile. Smith's publication of the Book of Abraham included facsimiles of these illustrations, accompanied by an "explanation."[14] Citing the

10. Matthews, *"A Plainer Translation,"* 213, 233–53. See also Kent P. Jackson and Peter M. Jasinski, "The Process of Inspired Translation: Two Passages Translated Twice in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible," *BYU Studies* 42/2 (2003): 35–64. For Smith's use of the expression "plainer translation," see Joseph Smith, "Journeying," to "the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints," Nauvoo, Illinois, 6 September 1842, page 6, in Revelations Collection, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter Church Archives), Salt Lake City, Utah (compare D&C 128:18).

11. See Robert K. Ritner, "The 'Breathing Permit of Hôr' Thirty-Four Years Later," *Dialogue* 33/4 (2000): 97–119; and Michael Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002).

12. See, for example, the popularized version presented in Charles M. Larson, . . . *By His Own Hand upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyrus* (Grand Rapids: Institute for Religious Research, 1992).

13. See John Gee, "Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson,* ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 188–92; Michael D. Rhodes, "Why doesn't the translation of the Egyptian papyri found in 1967 match the text of the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price?" I Have a Question, *Ensign,* July 1988, 51.

14. *Times and Seasons* 3/9 (1 March 1842): 703; 3/10 (15 March 1842): insert; 3/14 (16 May 1842): 783–84.

work of Stephen E. Thompson, Palmer claims that Egyptologists have dismissed Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles as well (p. 19).[15] But Palmer pays no attention to the work of Hugh Nibley or Michael Rhodes that has found remarkable parallels between the Egyptian content in the facsimiles and Smith's explanations of them.[16]

At first, one might expect that either all or none of Smith's explanations would agree with a modern interpretation of the facsimiles. Why would some of Smith's explanations parallel modern interpretations and others not? If the illustrations Smith acquired contained any elements with an intellectual pedigree reaching back to Abraham, his "explanation" could actually be something of a restoration of original ideas communicated by Abraham when in Egypt. In some form or another, however indirect, these teachings may stand behind the illustrations in the papyri that Smith acquired.[17] This is not an ad hoc reconstruction. It is a plausible explanation suggested by the precedent of Joseph Smith's "translation" of the King James Version of the Bible, wherein he took a corrupted version of an original record of events and restored original textual material or even historical information that was never recorded. Palmer, however, does not consider Smith's translations on their own terms. He attacks simplistic and historically inaccurate perceptions of what the translations are instead of what Joseph Smith most likely understood them to be.

Returning to the text of the Book of Abraham, Palmer identifies the Bible as source material:

> The primary source for chapters 2, 4, and 5 of Abraham is Genesis 1, 2, 11 (vv. 28–29), and 12. Sixty-six out of seventy-seven verses in this section of Abraham (86 percent) are quotations

15. Stephen E. Thompson, "Egyptology and the Book of Abraham," *Dialogue* 28/1 (1995): 143–52.

16. See Hugh Nibley, "The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham," *Sunstone,* December 1979, 49–51; Nibley, "Figure 6 of Facsimile 2" (FARMS paper, 1995); Michael D. Rhodes, "A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus," *BYU Studies* 17/3 (1977): 259–74; and Rhodes, "The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Seventeen Years Later" (FARMS paper, 1994).

17. See John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 30.

> or close paraphrases of KJV wording. The few Hebrew names and words in the Abraham text reflect Joseph's study under the Hebrew scholar Joshua Seixas in Kirtland, Ohio, during the winter of 1835–36. The differences between these Genesis and Abraham chapters appear to be Joseph's "targumizing" (interpreting or paraphrasing) of the Bible. (p. 19)[18]

The example of "targumizing" given by Palmer is the plurality of gods that appears in the Book of Abraham's creation narrative (pp. 19–21). He concludes that the parallel material in the Book of Abraham is entirely a product of Smith's developing theology.

Again, Palmer is unwilling to take Smith's translations on their own terms or to consider other plausible reconstructions that are consistent with Latter-day Saint belief. Applying B. H. Roberts's theory that Smith utilized the King James Version when translating the Book of Mormon, one would expect, by the same rule, that Smith used the King James Version in his translation of the Book of Abraham when he came upon parallel material. Moreover, if by this point in his life Smith had studied Hebrew and had begun to critically assess the work of the King James translators, it would be reasonable to expect him to use his training to improve the translation by secular means—as he did in his new translation of the Bible. Thus his use of the King James Version in the Book of Abraham translation would naturally have been informed by his study under Joshua Seixas, the instructor of the Kirtland Hebrew School. Why would Smith have followed the King James Version's singular "God" after he had learned that the "-im" at the end of "Elohim" generally denoted a plural?[19] At the same time, such "targumizing" would not exclude the possibilities of revisions based on inspiration

18. Compare the work of Louis C. Zucker, "Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew," *Dialogue* 3/2 (1968): 41–55; and Michael T. Walton, "Professor Seixas, the Hebrew Bible, and the Book of Abraham," *Sunstone,* March/April 1981, 41–43.

19. See *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph,* ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 379 (16 June 1844); and Walton, "Professor Seixas," 41–43.

as well. Critics may object that such a reconstruction does not allow for Smith's translations to be tested. This is an understandable complaint but one that has nothing to do with whether or not the reconstruction is historically plausible. In the Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham debates, scholars on both sides are challenged (as are scholars in many areas of academic inquiry) with finding testable hypotheses. Palmer does not even hint at the complicated nature of such issues.

As for the content of the Book of Abraham and parallels drawn to ancient Egypt, Palmer merely criticizes the well-known but relatively early work of Hugh Nibley (p. 16). He does not address the recent scholarship of Michael Rhodes, John Gee, John Tvedtnes, or others in this area.[20] Palmer presents parallels between extrabiblical data in the Book of Abraham and the Abrahamic traditions available in Joseph Smith's world (pp. 37–38) but never acknowledges those elements of the Book of Abraham that find support in ancient traditions unavailable in Smith's world.[21] Palmer supplies some impressive parallels between the astronomical data in the Book of Abraham and astronomical ideas available in nineteenth-century America (pp. 21–25), yet he fails to mention the parallels between the Book of Abraham and astronomical ideas available in Abraham's time and place.[22]

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20. See, for example, Rhodes, "Joseph Smith Hypocephalus"; John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, "Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures,* ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 63–98; Gee, *Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri;* Gee, "Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence"; and John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, comps. and eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001).

21. For example, Pharaoh allowed Abraham to sit on his throne, Abraham had special stones through which he learned about the stars, and he saw the premortal spirits of mankind. See Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham.*

22. John Gee, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson, "'And I Saw the Stars': The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant,* ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: FARMS, forthcoming). Daniel C. Peterson's presentation of this paper at the symposium "The Book of Abraham: Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant" on 16 October 1999 has been available on videotape.

The Greek Psalter

Henry Caswall, an Anglican cleric from St. Louis, visited Nauvoo in April 1842. After being shown the Egyptian papyri that had been acquired in Kirtland, Caswall showed Joseph Smith an old Greek manuscript of the book of Psalms that he had in his possession. According to Caswall's account, when he asked Smith what he thought of it, he replied that the characters looked like Egyptian to him. Caswall wrote that when he challenged Latter-day Saint apostle Willard Richards with Smith's mistaken identification, Richards responded that "sometimes Mr. Smith speaks as a prophet, and sometimes as a mere man."[23] Knowing that Smith had a great interest in languages and studied them when he could, Richards understood this, but Caswall failed to grasp the distinction. Apparently Palmer struggles with the distinction as well. He takes the episode as evidence against Joseph's ability to translate anything.[24]

The Kinderhook Plates

In late April 1843, a year after the Caswall episode, Smith was brought a set of six metal plates that had been dug out of a mound near Kinderhook, Illinois, downriver from Nauvoo. Unbeknownst to Smith, the plates had been recently created as a spoof of the golden plates in order to play a trick on local members of the church. Before planting them in the earth, the forgers had inscribed meaningless characters on the plates in order to make them appear like an ancient record.[25] William Clayton, Smith's clerk, wrote on 1 May 1843 that

23. Henry Caswall, *The City of the Mormons: Or, Three Days at Nauvoo, in 1842* (London: n.p., 1842), 43.

24. On the reliability of Caswall's account, see Hugh Nibley, "The Greek Psalter Mystery or Mr. Caswall Meets the Press," in *Tinkling Symbols and Sounding Brass: The Art of Telling Tales about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 304–406; and Craig L. Foster, "Henry Caswall: Anti-Mormon Extraordinaire," *BYU Studies* 35/4 (1995–96): 151–52.

25. Stanley B. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates Brought to Joseph Smith Appear to Be a Nineteenth-Century Hoax," *Ensign,* August 1981, 66–74.

Joseph Smith had seen the plates and had "translated a portion."[26] Palmer quotes from this journal, as well as from a letter written the following day by a young woman named Charlotte Haven, who was staying with Latter-day Saint relatives in Nauvoo. Haven wrote that she had visited with a man named Joshua Moore, who had the Kinderhook plates and had shown them to Smith. According to Haven, Moore said that Smith thought the inscriptions were "similar to [those] in which the Book of Mormon was written, and if Mr. Moore could leave them, he thought that by the help of revelation he would be able to translate them."[27]

Palmer justifiably trusts Clayton but uncritically accepts Haven's thirdhand account that Smith might try to translate the plates "by the help of revelation." No other primary source pertaining to the Kinderhook plates episode corroborates this claim. However, the claim that Smith compared the characters on the Kinderhook plates with the reformed Egyptian characters from the golden plates finds some contextual support in the 7 May letter of Parley P. Pratt, who wrote that the Kinderhook characters had been compared with the characters from Smith's Egyptian papyri. On the same day, in the journal Willard Richards kept for Joseph Smith, Richards recorded that Smith was "visited by several gentlemen concerning the plates which were dug out of a mound near quincy[;] sent by W[illia]m Smith to the office for Hebrew Bible & Lexicon."[28] Rather than sending for a seer stone or attempting to translate by direct revelation, Smith sent for the linguistic tools that he used in his ordinary study of Hebrew. All of this suggests that Smith took a secular approach to deciphering the plates and that he did so openly. As the characters on these plates did not convey any genuine meaning, it was impossible for him to have produced any quantity of actual translation. Apparently he thought he had, but this would only mean that he made a mistake—something he never

26. Clayton, Nauvoo Journal, 1 May 1843, quoted in James B. Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear: The Story of William Clayton* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 393.

27. Charlotte Haven, letter dated 2 May 1843, in "A Girl's Letters from Nauvoo," *Overland Monthly* 16 (December 1890): 630.

28. Joseph Smith, diary, 7 May 1843, Church Archives.

thought himself above.[29] There is, in fact, no solid evidence that Smith viewed the "portion" Clayton said he had translated as a revelation from God or that he presented it as such.[30]

Palmer wraps up his survey of the various translations with the conclusion that there is "no substantial evidence to support his claim to have ever literally translated any document, leaving me to appreciate his writings at face value rather than because of their antiquity" (p. 36). This assessment fails to make the qualitative differentiation between the translations Smith presented as inspired and those he did not. There is no substantial evidence to support Palmer's claim that Smith regarded the process of his translation of either the Book of Mormon or the Book of Abraham as the term *translate* is generally understood. Rather, he claimed that these translations were given to him by the "gift and power of God."[31] The underlying issue is whether Joseph Smith restored ancient truth. The history of Smith's translations is far more complicated than Palmer would have his audience believe. Not willing to confront Smith's translations on their own terms, he forges ahead through the various translation episodes, deftly knocking down one straw man after another. In this, the first chapter, Palmer entirely fails to present a balanced survey of either the relevant literature or the evidence on which it rests.

The Book of Mormon

Authorship

Joseph Smith's claim that he received the English translation of an ancient record by the "gift and power of God" serves as a plausible

29. Three months earlier, Smith had explained that "a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such." *History of the Church,* 5:265.

30. Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph Smith, the Kinderhook Plates, and the Question of Revelation," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, Snowbird, Utah, 17–19 May 1996; copy in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter Perry Collections).

31. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 17; cf. Doctrine and Covenants 135:3.

explanation for the Book of Mormon narrative. In taking the position that the Book of Mormon is entirely a product of Smith's mind, Palmer finds it necessary to provide an alternative explanation for how he could have created the book. In addition to offering such an explanation, Palmer attempts to identify Smith's motives for producing the book and the sources that he used to do it. His reconstruction of Smith's authorship begins with the proposition that the loss of the initial 116 pages of translation actually turned to Smith's advantage.

> An apprenticeship had been served, and the vision that was unfolding in Joseph's mind may have become more clear. The dictation probably progressed haltingly at first, perhaps as a kind of stream-of-consciousness narrative. Before Oliver Cowdery became his new scribe in April 1829, the prophet had had nine months to ponder the details of the plots and subplots and to flesh out the time line. . . . Over the next eight months, before the book was published in March 1830, he had the opportunity to make textual refinements. He thus had three years to develop, write, and refine the book—six years from the time he told his family about the project. (pp. 66–67)

Here Palmer provides a fascinating, if problematic, reconstruction of the creation of the Book of Mormon. Had Smith spent six years developing the intricacies of the story in his mind, it is not impossible that he could have narrated the plotline of the book. This, however, does not explain his ability to dictate the actual text of the book word for word in the manner confirmed by eyewitness accounts and by the dictation transcription in the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon.[32] Palmer claims that Joseph Smith had an opportunity to make "textual refinements" but does not admit that in almost every case these are minor changes that improve already readable passages.[33]

32. Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited,* 61–93.

33. Ibid., 82–84; Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 5–7, 13–24.

Thus, while the Book of Mormon presents a complex and yet consistent narrative involving interwoven subplots and hundreds of personal and place names, perhaps the more challenging problem facing skeptics is the verbatim dictation of the text. Writers know how much revision is involved in the writing process and may read the Book of Mormon prose with this in mind. For those who do not write regularly, the horrific first drafts of Palmer's book and of this review may stand as examples.[34] To explain away the Book of Mormon, Palmer would have to argue not only that Smith had fully mastered the complex story line, but that he had memorized this epic virtually word for word. There was a class of men in ancient Greece who could recite epics, and some medieval bards had similar capabilities. While storytelling was a skill known in early New England, nothing like these older traditions has been found in Smith's environment.

Apparently, it is an appreciation of this problem that caused David Persuitte and Jerald and Sandra Tanner to hypothesize that Smith was indeed reading, but not from what he saw in a seer stone. Rejecting a revealed translation, they deduce that he must have been reading from a set of previously composed crib notes and/or pages torn from a Bible. But if Smith had his face in a hat, how could he have seen anything to read except the words that appeared in the seer stone? Here, the image of Joseph translating with his face buried in his hat so beloved by critics comes back to haunt them. The Tanners were forced to conjecture that Joseph let light shine into the hat.[35] But the very sources that mention Joseph translating with the stone in the hat also undermine this reconstruction. David Whitmer explained that Joseph would "put his face in the hat, *drawing it closely*

34. For an early draft of *An Insider's View,* see Grant H. Palmer [Paul Pry Jr., pseudo.], "New York Mormonism," Linda Sillitoe Salamander Papers, box 6, folder 7, MS 577, Manuscripts Division, University of Utah Marriott Library, Salt Lake City (hereafter Marriott Library); and the Papers of Louis C. Midgley (MSS 2806), Perry Collections. Louis Midgley, "*Pry*ing into Palmer," also discusses this early draft in this number, pages 365–412.

35. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Answering Mormon Scholars: A Response to Criticism of the Book "Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*" (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1994), 1:160.

around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine."[36] Joseph's wife Emma recounted that her husband translated with "his face buried in his hat," and her brother-in-law Michael Morse—a translation eyewitness who never sympathized with Joseph's religious claims—stated that Joseph placed his face into the hat "so as to entirely cover his face" (p. 2).[37] Apparently confronting this evidence, Persuitte could only speculate that Joseph slipped notes into the hat and quickly read them before sealing the hat around his face, or that he had cut a slit in the side of the hat through which light could come in and illuminate the notes.[38]

Palmer posits two principal motives for producing the Book of Mormon. First, Smith wanted to save America from unbelief. Drawing on the work of Robert Hullinger, Palmer views the Book of Mormon sermons on faith and its counterheroic anti-Christs as responses to the challenge to Christianity posed by Deism and Enlightenment skepticism.[39] No mention is made of the fact that Book of Mormon prophets intended their record to last until the end of time, that they claimed to have been inspired by a God who knew the future, or that they delivered a message that is just as relevant in our day as it was in Joseph Smith's.

According to Palmer, Smith's second motive was to unite his family, particularly his parents. His mother had not been able to get his father to attend church with her, but both parents joined the fledgling church that their son organized on the pattern set down in the

36. A Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon [David Whitmer], *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, Mo.: Whitmer, 1887), 12, emphasis added; see also various items in the "David Whitmer Collection," in *Early Mormon Documents,* comp. and ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), part VI:A.

37. Joseph Smith III, notes of interview with Emma Smith Bidamon, February 1879, Miscellany, RLDS Church Library Archives, Independence, Missouri; as reproduced in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 1:539; Morse as quoted in Palmer, 2; see also Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 4:340–44.

38. David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon,* 2nd printing with corrections (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1991), 88.

39. Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

final chapters of the Book of Mormon. This theory has recently been developed by Dan Vogel[40] but was pioneered by believing Latter-day Saint historians who did not find that this aspect of the Smiths' family dynamics outruled the Book of Mormon's historicity.[41]

Finally, Palmer's chapter on the authorship of the Book of Mormon introduces his focused criticism on the sources behind the thematic content of the Book of Mormon. In particular, he singles out the King James Version of the Bible, early American evangelical Protestantism, and contemporaneous ideas about the origins of the American Indian as the intellectual resources informing Smith's fecund imagination.

Material from the Bible

Palmer's chapter on the Bible takes as its thesis the following statement from the eminent Bible scholar and theologian Krister Stendahl:

> The Book of Mormon . . . shows many of the typical signs of the Targums [interpretations or paraphrasings] and the pseudepigraphic recasting of biblical material. The targumic tendencies are those of clarifying and actualizing translations, usually by expansion and more specific application to the need and situation of the community. The pseudepigraphic, both apocalyptic and didactic, tend to fill out the gaps in our knowledge about sacred events, truths, and predictions. (p. 69)[42]

What Stendahl calls "targums" in the Book of Mormon can be explained in more than one way. For example, the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi himself explicitly states that he is providing an

40. Dan Vogel, "Joseph Smith's Family Dynamics," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 22 (2002): 51–74.

41. See, for example, Richard L. Bushman, "Joseph Smith's Family Background," in *The Prophet Joseph: Essays on the Life and Mission of Joseph Smith,* ed. Larry C. Porter and Susan Easton Black (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 1–18.

42. Quoted from Krister Stendahl, "The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels,* ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 152.

interpretation and application of Isaiah—a targum, in Stendahl's view (1 Nephi 19:23; 2 Nephi 25:1–6). Thus the Book of Mormon's treatment of Isaiah is internally self-consistent. Moreover, Christian targums of pre-Christian history from the "large plates" of Nephi may be the result of the editorial hand of the Christian prophet Mormon, rather than of Joseph Smith, as Palmer assumes.

Many of the parallels between Jesus Christ's message in the New Testament and his words to the Book of Mormon peoples may be explained in a similar fashion. In a rare case of considering the perspectives of faithful Latter-day Saint scholars, Palmer quotes John W. Welch's theory that in these cases God may have "projected a text similar to the [KJV] biblical text through Joseph Smith, or the power of God brought that text especially to his memory" (p. 84).[43] However, Palmer then asks, "If Joseph received these portions of the Book of Mormon by revelation, why would they include the modern mistakes as part of that revelation? Why would God reveal to Joseph Smith a faulty KJV text?" (p. 84). The answer to these questions relates not only to the Book of Mormon but to the entire genre of restoration scripture, where imperfect authors compose imperfect texts with God's approbation. The ancient record inscribed on the golden plates was itself faulty, as was readily acknowledged by the Book of Mormon authors, who asked their readers not to condemn their mistakes.[44] These confessions, as well as the mistakes, were not edited out by God during the translation. The God of Mormon scripture is more concerned with the transmission of texts conveying salvific truth through history—narratives of the gospel as lived and recorded by humans—than with the revelation of a timeless ideal. The King James Version of the Bible, with all its faults, sufficed.

The Book of Mormon also includes postexilic biblical material that was not available to the Book of Mormon record keepers.

43. Quoted from John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount: A Latter-day Saint Approach* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 136. The passage as quoted in the text reflects this original source.

44. Book of Mormon title page; 1 Nephi 19:6; 2 Nephi 33:4, 11; Ether 12:23–40.

Yet Palmer admits that God could reveal "similar concepts to different people at different times and that such similarities in theme are to be expected" (p. 55). Palmer does not seem to comprehend the degree to which he has essentially surrendered the point in this admission. He asks whether we should expect to find parallels "in identical sequences of ideas, phrases, and sentences" (p. 55), but if God can reveal similar concepts to different people at different times, and revealed to Joseph Smith a translation of such concepts in Smith's own culturally informed language, this may account for both biblical doctrines and King James English from any part of the Bible appearing in any part of the Book of Mormon. As the majority of the parallels drawn by Palmer are doctrinal in nature, they may be readily explained within a theology of revelation inherent in early Latter-day Saint history and scripture.

However, where such sequences involve not only doctrine but independent historical episodes, they pose a more difficult problem. Palmer makes a stronger argument with this class of biblical parallels. In particular, Palmer finds remarkable parallel plot and language in the accounts of the raisings of Lazarus and Lamoni, the conversions of Saul and Alma, and the decapitations of Laban and Holofernes (pp. 48, 50–51, 55). However, his most extensive treatment of parallel historical material is his comparison of the Israelite and Lehite exoduses (pp. 74–78). But Latter-day Saint scholars had pointed out these parallels long before, arguing that Nephi was familiar with the Israelite exodus and had interpreted his family's own journey into the wilderness from this perspective.[45] Nephi's portrayal of his family's emigration thus exemplifies Stendahl's theory that the Book of Mormon recasts

45. See, for example, George S. Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience,* ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 245–62; S. Kent Brown, "The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 111–26; Terrence L. Szink, "Nephi and the Exodus," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon,* ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 38–51; see also James E. Faulconer, "Scripture as Incarnation," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures,* 17–61.

biblical accounts, and at the same time it exemplifies Palmer's recurring failure to adequately address alternative interpretations that are both reasonable and consistent with Book of Mormon historicity.

Evangelical Protestantism

Palmer finds evidence in the Book of Mormon that Smith borrowed not only from the Bible, but from a specifically Protestant reading of the Bible. In Palmer's view, the teachings attributed to the Book of Mormon prophets who lived before the meridian of time manifest too much knowledge about Jesus Christ. To a great extent, the analysis in this chapter begs the question of Book of Mormon historicity. It assumes that these prophets could not have received revelations about the future when the reality of revelation is an inherent claim in the book's narrative and in its very existence.

Palmer, however, focuses his analysis on parallels to specific elements of early American religious culture. He compares stories and doctrines from the Book of Mormon with frontier revival settings and preaching styles, contemporaneous conceptions of human depravity and spiritual conversion, and the dynamic religious politics of the Jacksonian era. Presenting a number of parallels, Palmer argues that the Book of Mormon derives from Joseph Smith's religious environment. Together with the treatment of historical parallels from the Bible, this chapter provides Palmer's strongest evidence against the Book of Mormon and includes some of the book's best argumentation. However, Palmer's analysis is flawed because he fails to consider another impressive set of parallels—those between the Book of Mormon and the ancient religious environment from which it claims to come.

In Palmer's own estimation, one of the strongest parallels to American religious culture in the Book of Mormon is King Benjamin's famous farewell speech to his people, which Palmer compares to the setting of an early American frontier revival camp meeting. As an example, Palmer describes a camp meeting held by the Methodists in 1826 near Palmyra, New York. Gathering from miles around, over ten thousand people came and pitched their tents facing a stand. At this

meeting, the venerable Bishop M'Kendree delivered a memorable farewell speech. The resemblance to King Benjamin's farewell speech and its setting may be granted, but a balanced approach would require considering parallels to the ancient Near East as well.

In fact, though unacknowledged by Palmer, a robust parallel to the ancient Near East exists. In King Benjamin's farewell address, which includes the appointment of his son Mosiah as his royal successor, Latter-day Saint scholars with expertise in the ancient Near East have discovered elements of ancient coronation ritual and other parallels with Israelite kingship ideology, as well as parallels to the covenant-treaty and prophetic lawsuit patterns of Old Testament prophetic rhetoric and evidence of an Israelite festival setting.[46] Benjamin's farewell address does bear some similarity to that given by Bishop M'Kendree in 1826, but it parallels point by point the twenty common elements of ancient Near Eastern farewell addresses as outlined by Bible scholar William S. Kurz.[47]

As another evidence for the Book of Mormon's dependence on early American religious culture, Palmer draws a parallel between conversion narratives in the book and conversion as understood and experienced in Second Great Awakening evangelism. For example, Palmer compares the conversion of Alma as recorded in Alma 36 with the published conversion memoirs of Methodist preachers Lorenzo Dow and Eleazer Sherman (pp. 102–3). The language describing Alma's conversion bears some similarity to those of Dow and Sherman, which could be accounted for by a combination of factors: the actuality of Christian revelation among the Book of Mormon peoples, commonalities of conversion as actually experienced, and Smith's working transla-

46. Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals"; John W. Welch, "Benjamin's Speech as a Prophetic Lawsuit"; and Stephen D. Ricks, "Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6," in *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom,"* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 147–275.

47. William S. Kurz, "Luke 22:14–38 and Greco-Roman and Biblical Farewell Addresses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104/2 (1985): 251–68, especially 262–63; John W. Welch and Daryl R. Hague, "Benjamin's Sermon as a Traditional Ancient Farewell Address," in *King Benjamin's Speech,* 89–117.

tion vocabulary. On the other hand, if Alma's conversion were entirely the product of Smith's imagination, Palmer would have to account for the complex inverted parallelism in which the conversion narrative is structured. Scholars have identified many examples of such inverted parallelism, or chiasmus, in the Old Testament. Placed among the strongest examples of biblical chiasmus, the conversion narrative in Alma 36 stands as a masterpiece.[48]

Although a few Bible scholars had detected chiasmus before Smith translated the Book of Mormon, it is highly unlikely that he had heard of it.[49] In fact, whether or not he had is largely irrelevant. Smith's personal writings from this time period reveal a man more adept with the English language than is sometimes believed, but of relatively limited literary attainments.[50] In fact, when a team of Berkeley scientists compared those writings with the writings attributed to Alma, they found it statistically indefensible to argue that Joseph Smith (or Oliver Cowdery for that matter) had authored the words attributed in the Book of Mormon to Alma.[51] This is the kind of measurable evidence that rises above the never-ending war of the parallels.

Nineteenth-century Archaeology

Palmer holds that Smith drew not only on the religious discourse of his day but on contemporaneous ideas regarding Native American origins. He begins this argument for intellectual dependency by drawing unparallels between the Book of Mormon and ancient

48. John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon,* 114–31. See also John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins,* ed. Noel B. Reynolds and Charles D. Tate (Provo, Utah: FARMS 1982), 33–52; John W. Welch, "What Does Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Prove?" in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited,* 199–224.

49. John W. Welch, "How Much Was Known about Chiasmus in 1829 When the Book of Mormon Was Translated?" *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 47–80.

50. See the earlier documents collected in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith,* comp. and ed. Dean C. Jessee, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002).

51. John L. Hilton, "On Verifying Wordprint Studies: Book of Mormon Authorship," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited,* 225–53.

America as currently understood. He writes that "it is now accepted that Indians are of Siberian and Mongolian extraction and that they migrated from Asia across the Bering Strait" (p. 56). This view is generally accepted but is in dispute among experts in the field.[52] Palmer cites Thomas W. Murphy's analysis of DNA studies that failed to turn up Middle Eastern ancestry among Native Americans (p. 56 n. 36).[53] None of the flaws in Murphy's research design or arguments are mentioned.[54] Citing a symposium presentation by Thomas Stuart Ferguson, Palmer writes that there are no languages indigenous to the Americas with "a demonstrable Hebraic or Egyptian origin" (p. 57). No mention is made of the annihilation of Nephite civilization, the destruction of languages following the European disease pandemics, or parallels between Hebrew and Uto-Aztecan.[55] In fact, no mention is made of any of the parallels between the Book of Mormon and pre-Columbian America.[56] Nor does Palmer acknowledge any of the evidence of ancient Near Eastern influence in the Book of Mormon or related evidences such as the plausible identifications of Nahom and Bountiful in the Arabian peninsula.[57]

But Palmer does not draw many parallels to Smith's intellectual environment either. Instead, he reproduces the findings of Latter-day

52. See, for example, E. James Dixon, *Quest for the Origins of the First Americans* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993); "New Technology and Ancient Questions," *Insights* (December 1996): 2, and (February 1997): 2.

53. Thomas W. Murphy, "Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon,* ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 47–77.

54. See "The Book of Mormon at the Bar of DNA 'Evidence,'" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 4–51; and in this number of the *FARMS Review,* pages 25–198.

55. On Uto-Aztecan parallels with Hebrew, see Brian Stubbs, "Elements of Hebrew in Uto-Aztecan: A Summary of the Data" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1988). Stubbs, unlike Ferguson, has had extensive training in linguistics.

56. See, for example, John L. Sorenson, "How Could Joseph Smith Write So Accurately about Ancient American Civilization?" in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon,* ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 261–306.

57. See, for example, Warren P. Aston, "Newly Found Altars from Nahom," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 56–61; S. Kent Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon,* 55–125.

Saint General Authority B. H. Roberts, who compared the Book of Mormon with Ethan Smith's 1825 work *View of the Hebrews,* an early American survey of archaeological discoveries and theories.[58] Palmer neglects to mention that Roberts's work was a study to preempt criticisms that could be leveled at the Book of Mormon. Roberts had worried that his work might be misunderstood or misused. "Let me say once and for all," his cover letter clarified, "what is herein set forth does not represent any conclusions of mine."[59] In sermons and writings from the final decade of his life, Roberts continued to affirm the historical veracity of the Book of Mormon.[60]

It is curious that Palmer reproduces the parallel Roberts drew between the Book of Mormon "interpreters" and Ethan Smith's discussion of an American artifact that, in his view, resembled the Old Testament Urim and Thummim (pp. 62–63). Palmer himself had earlier argued that Smith had adopted the term *Urim and Thummim* at a later time in order to give the translation spectacles "a sense of biblical authority" (p. 9). More curious is Palmer's acknowledgment that Roberts's study has been superseded by more careful investigations in this area of inquiry, such as that offered by Dan Vogel in his book *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon.*[61] Also, Latter-day Saint scholars have found a number of parallels between the Book of Mormon peoples and life in ancient America and have solved

58. Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews; or the Tribes of Israel in America* (Poultney, Vt.: Smith & Shute, 1825).

59. B. H. Roberts, to the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, March 1923, quoted in Truman G. Madsen, "B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Authorship,* 22.

60. Truman G. Madsen, comp., "B. H. Roberts, His Final Decade: Statements about the Book of Mormon [1922–33]" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985). See also Welch, introduction to *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology,* by B. H. Roberts (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1996), xxvi–xxvii.

61. Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon: Religious Solutions from Columbus to Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986). For other examples, see Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993); Vogel and Metcalfe, *American Apocrypha.*

many of the problems noted by Roberts and by recent critics.[62] Following Palmer's stated reasons for writing the book, one might expect a helpful survey of the arguments for and against the Book of Mormon as they currently stand.[63] Why, then, does Palmer focus his analysis on B. H. Roberts? What is really going on in this section of the book? It seems that the objective in this section is to cause Latter-day Saint readers to question their faith by casting a General Authority and noted Book of Mormon defender as a closet doubter. Palmer has recently stated that Roberts's study played a major role in his rejection of the restoration.[64] He apparently desires to share this experience with his readers.

Moroni and "The Golden Pot"

Following his attempts to situate the Book of Mormon within Joseph Smith's culture, Palmer devotes an entire chapter to showing that Joseph Smith's story about the angel Moroni was borrowed from tales of guardian spirits found in the lore of treasure seeking. Skeptics might hypothesize that what Smith said about Moroni was either entirely a product of his own imaginary creation or a fusion of Bible stories and treasure lore. But Palmer attempts to show that Joseph Smith borrowed the Moroni story from "The Golden Pot," a short work of fantasy by E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776–1822), the author of a number of short stories and novellas, including the famous story of "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King."

"The Golden Pot" is the story of a young man named Anselmus, a student of one Dean Paulmann, who takes a job copying manuscripts

62. See, for example, Sorenson and Thorne, *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon;* Reynolds, *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited;* Hoskisson, *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures;* and Parry, Peterson, and Welch, *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon.*

63. For such an analysis, see Terryl L. Givens's recent *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

64. Grant H. Palmer, "Author Meets Critics: *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins,*" audiocassette recording of a session at 2003 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium and Workshops (SL 03 #275).

for an archivist named Lindhorst. The development of Anselmus's love interests with the daughters of both Paulmann and Lindhorst corresponds with strange, apparently preternatural experiences brought upon him by Lindhorst, whom Anselmus imagines to be a magical fire spirit, and by the former child nurse of Paulmann's daughter Veronica, whom Anselmus imagines to be a witch. Anselmus escapes the clutches of Veronica by giving his love instead to the imaginary daughter of Lindhorst. The story follows Anselmus in his subjective reality as he increasingly retreats into his own derangements, apparently ending in a suicide.[65]

Palmer provides quite another reading—one which forcefully skews the story in order to draw superficial parallels to the Moroni story. Both Hoffmann and Joseph Smith had some contact with traditional European magical lore, which may account for a few weak parallels. Although Palmer attempts to demonstrate that Smith got the Moroni story from Hoffmann, he fails to establish any convincing evidence for dependence. He states that Anselmus was hired "to copy and translate the records of Lindhorst's ancestors" (p. 138). Actually, Lindhorst hired Anselmus only to copy, not to translate. Palmer writes that "Anselmus receives the Atlantean records on the fall equinox (22 September)" (p. 138)—the same date on which Joseph Smith had received the golden plates in 1827. Actually, Anselmus received these records several days later. Paulmann's daughter Veronica and the witch had worked magic on the equinox to try to win Anselmus's heart for Veronica, but this had no relationship whatsoever to Anselmus's work as a copyist. On one occasion, while copying a passage from a manuscript, "Anselmus increasingly and more intensely focused his eyes and his thoughts on the writings on the roll of parchment, and before long, almost as in a vision, he realized that the characters therein could represent nothing other than these words: 'About the marriage of the

65. Here I am following the reading of Hoffmann specialist James M. McGlathery, *Mysticism and Sexuality: E. T. A. Hoffmann,* Part 2: *Interpretations of the Tales* (New York: Lang, 1985), 29–38.

salamander and the green snake.'"[66] This strange, unanticipated event, one of many preternatural experiences that Anselmus had while working at Lindhorst's, is as near as the copyist ever comes to being a translator. It is misleading to say, as Palmer repeatedly does, that Anselmus was hired and commissioned to *translate* the manuscripts, and particularly that he translated Lindhorst's ancestral records by inspiration. Furthermore, in the first chapter, when wishing to focus attention on the unfamiliar seer stone, Palmer had argued that Joseph Smith "was a reader rather than a translator" (p. 5). This anomalous event in Anselmus's life does not parallel Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon as Palmer has previously (and accurately) presented it.

In an attempt to demonstrate Smith's dependence on "The Golden Pot," Palmer lays out a number of parallels between passages of Hoffmann's story and his reconstruction of Smith's encounters with Moroni. These parallels, we are told, are "arranged according to the chronology of Hoffmann's story" (p. 146). Yet this is not always the case. A few key manipulations serve to make "The Golden Pot" more closely resemble the chronology of Smith's encounters with Moroni.[67] Even so, the parallels are generally weak. For example, Palmer states that Anselmus "learns that Lindhorst is a direct descendant of the founders of Atlantis" (p. 153). In fact, Lindhorst did claim to be the descendant of a magical lily that grew in a valley of Atlantis in primeval times. But to compare Lindhorst's descent from this lily with Moroni's descent from Lehi is strained. In other cases, Palmer stretches the meaning of "The Golden Pot" even more. For example, he writes that Lindhorst, like Moroni, was "the last archivist of his race" (p. 153). This is an interpretive leap not supported by the text. In another case, Palmer cites an 1855 entry from a journal kept by William H. Dame,

66. E. T. A. Hoffmann, "The Golden Pot," in *Selected Writings of E. T. A. Hoffmann,* ed. and trans. Leonard J. Kent and Elizabeth C. Knight (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 1:107.

67. For example, the witch's attempt to get the golden pot, which happens in the tenth vigil, appears within Palmer's treatment of the seventh vigil. Similarly, material from the sixth vigil is given in his presentation of the eighth.

wherein Dame recorded that William W. Phelps had given a sermon in which he recalled having heard Hyrum Smith say that Aaron's breastplate was buried with the golden plates (pp. 159–60).[68] He then points out that the golden pot of the story stood upon a porphyry plate, and remarks that porphyry "is a hard Egyptian rock with embedded crystals similar to the design of Aaron's breastplate in the Bible." Palmer stretches both Hoffmann and Dame's thirdhand account to force this parallel.

The analysis is, moreover, studded with factual errors. For example, in parallel with the account of Moroni's second appearance to Smith, Palmer writes: "Later in the evening, Anselmus receives a second vision. This time he learns that Archivarius Lindhorst, whom he encountered earlier, . . . is the archivist of a vast library containing Atlantean books and treasures" (pp. 148–49). Actually, the cited interchange between Anselmus and Lindhorst was not visionary. It was an entirely ordinary meeting of friends at Professor Paulmann's home. Palmer's attempt to reconstruct a night of three visions similar to Joseph Smith's is artificial. Parallels such as these are not overwhelmed or even counterbalanced by parallels of a robust nature. As a rule, Palmer's parallels are weak, forced, or simply nonexistent. Worse, they are misleading.[69] I encourage any readers who have been impressed by Palmer's analysis to read "The Golden Pot" for themselves.[70]

One more parallel drawn by Palmer is of particular interest. When Anselmus first visits the residence of Archivarius Lindhorst, he pulls

68. Southern Exploring Co, Journal, 14 January 1855, Church Archives. A decade earlier, Smith's mother had dictated an eyewitness observation of the breastplate and described a very different artifact. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: Richards, 1853), 107.

69. For even more misleading presentations of "The Golden Pot," see the Signature Books press release for the book and Palmer's comments at the 2003 Sunstone Symposium. "Mormon Founder Borrowed Ideas, Says Scholar," *Signature Books News,* 26 November 2002; Palmer, "Author Meets Critics: *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins.*"

70. The 1827 English translation by Thomas Carlyle is readily available in a one-dollar Dover Thrift Edition: E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Nutcracker and the Golden Pot* (New York: Dover, 1993). An English translation is also available at www.blackmask.com/books72c/goldpot.htm (accessed 28 January 2004).

on the bell-rope at the front door, which transforms into a snake and attacks him. Palmer identifies the snake as Lindhorst (the Moroni analogue), but the story attributes this malevolence to the witch's magic.[71] Palmer parallels this misinterpretation with accounts of the golden plates being protected by a violent treasure guardian. In particular, Palmer quotes Willard Chase, who stated that when Joseph Smith first uncovered the plates, he saw a creature that looked "something like a toad, which soon assumed the appearance of a man, and struck him on the side of his head" (p. 151).[72] As D. Michael Quinn explains, in the early American folk tradition, "the toad has always been associated with Satanism, black magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. . . . If anything changed from the appearance of a toad to the appearance of a person, that thing was an evil spirit, or a witch, or a bewitched person."[73] Chase, like others, intentionally portrayed Moroni as a particular type of treasure guardian incompatible with an angel.[74]

Why would Palmer pursue such unconvincing parallels? This question may be answered by examining an early draft of Palmer's book, which was composed before the forgeries of Mormon document dealer Mark Hofmann had been exposed. Hofmann had forged a letter wherein early Book of Mormon scribe Martin Harris states

71. Again, Palmer has Lindhorst attacking Anselmus on the equinox during the incantations of Veronica and the witch. Anselmus, however, was not present on this occasion.

72. The quotation is from Willard Chase, statement, Manchester, New York, 1833, quoted in Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed* (Painesville, Ohio: by the author, 1834), 242. Palmer also cites Benjamin Saunders, who stated in 1884 that when Smith looked in the hole he saw a creature that "looked some like a toad that rose up into a man." Benjamin Saunders, interviewed by William H. Kelley, circa September 1884, 19–30, Miscellany, RLDS Library Archives, Independence, Missouri, quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:137. Saunders is given as a corroboration of Chase, but his account was given fifty years after the publication of E. D. Howe's influential *Mormonism Unvailed,* which contained the statement of his brother-in-law Willard Chase. Parallel descriptions of this alleged creature that looked "something like a toad" and "some like a toad" argue rather for Saunders's dependence on Chase.

73. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View,* rev. and enl. ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 152.

74. Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?" *Mormon Historical Studies* 2/2 (2001): 61–65.

that when Smith first uncovered the plates, he saw a white salamander, which then transformed into Moroni and struck him three times. When this letter became public, Mormon historians (both professionals and buffs) scrambled to understand this strange new variant of the familiar story and to look for cultural sources that could explain such an idea. Palmer's early draft engaged in a laborious effort to demonstrate that Smith borrowed his idea of the salamander from "The Golden Pot,"[75] in which it is gradually revealed to Anselmus that Archivarius Lindhorst belongs to "the marvelous race of salamanders."[76] When Palmer first analyzed "The Golden Pot," his work on Lindhorst the salamander may have seemed very promising. Mark Hofmann's salamander went up in flames, but Palmer's analysis of "The Golden Pot" has survived, if in a somewhat altered form. Lindhorst is still identified in the footnotes as a salamander, but at the surface of the text his true identity is not disclosed.

Palmer uses his comparison between "The Golden Pot" and accounts of early Mormonism to argue that in Joseph Smith's early stories, Moroni was a capricious treasure guardian alien to the Christian tradition (p. 171). He asserts that as Smith moved toward founding a church, he had to recast the treasure guardian as a Judeo-Christian angel. Therefore, Palmer states that "many of the magical elements of the story began disappearing around 1830. At least, no one reported hearing such details from Joseph after 1828 or from Joseph Sr. after 1830" (p. 173). Actually, subscribers to the *Messenger and Advocate* could read such details in 1835 from none other than Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. Smith helped Cowdery compose a serially published history in part to counter the statements that Eber D. Howe had published in *Mormonism Unvailed*.[77] If this early church history downplayed Joseph Smith's past involvement with treasure seeking, it nevertheless admitted it. Moreover,

75. Palmer [Pry, pseud.], "New York Mormonism." Compare Palmer's comments in "Author Meets Critics: *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*."

76. Hoffmann, "The Golden Pot," 108.

77. On Smith's role in the Cowdery history, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:416–17.

this history deemed Smith's attempt to understand his interactions with Moroni as partially incorrect and based on superstitious tales—"he had heard of the power of enchantment, and a thousand like stories, which held the hidden treasures of the earth."[78] However, from the vantage point of 1835, Smith and Cowdery could differentiate the actual existence of the angel and the plates from Smith's culturally informed understanding of them in 1823. Smith thus demythologized his own history and was yet left with the integrity of his religious claims.

While Palmer tells us that the "magical elements of the story began disappearing around 1830," the historical record in fact suggests just the opposite. Detractors are not on the record undercutting Smith's claims with the tropes of treasure quest until *after* the organization of the church and the religious stir that it caused. Whereas the earliest accounts of Moroni depict a biblical angel, the later accounts cited by Palmer depict Moroni in a variety of treasure-guardian types, including a gnome, a giant, the toadlike creature mentioned above, and the bleeding ghost of an early Spanish explorer. These contradictory sources have clearly strayed from an accurate representation of Joseph Smith's original account by overlaying run-of-the-mill treasure lore upon it. Firsthand accounts by Joseph Smith and others who claimed to have seen Moroni describe an angel in the biblical tradition.[79]

Witnesses of the Golden Plates

As with the chapter on Moroni and "The Golden Pot," in his treatment of those who claimed to have seen the golden plates from which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, Palmer attempts to root Mormon origins in the culture of European American folk magic generally and treasure seeking specifically. Within this context, he attempts to explain away the many testimonies given by these men throughout their lives.[80] Much of Palmer's argument presents one side of the current debate over the va-

78. Oliver Cowdery, "Letter VIII," *Messenger and Advocate* 2/1 (October 1835): 198.

79. Ashurst-McGee, "Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?" 39–75.

80. For a summary of the testimonies, see Richard L. Anderson, "Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited,* 39–60.

lidity of the testimony of the Eight Witnesses.[81] However, his chapter on the witnesses also develops a new line of argument. Older critiques often attempted to portray the eleven witnesses as dishonest men, an approach that was answered by Richard Lloyd Anderson's demonstration that the witnesses were honest, trustworthy men who were respected in their communities.[82] Instead of attacking their moral integrity, Palmer asserts that they were irrational and gullible. This approach has been taken before, but not in the manner followed by Palmer. He opens by stating that the witnesses "shared a common world view, and this is what drew them together in 1829" (p. 175). The chapter therefore "seeks to understand the mindset, the shared magical perspective of these men as a key to understanding their affirmations of seeing and handling the golden plates" (p. 176).

Palmer constructs this worldview by using accounts that describe the various witnesses and their families, but that which is true of the parts is not always true of the whole. Palmer's analysis does not constitute a sophisticated reconstruction of the witnesses' worldview, but rather a textbook example of the fallacy of composition. For example, he writes: "The witnesses believed that a toad hiding in the stone box became an apparition that struck Joseph on the head" (p. 195). Thus Palmer accepts the antagonistic report by Willard Chase of what Joseph Smith Sr. allegedly believed and projects it on all the witnesses. Throughout the chapter, Palmer's general line of argumentation combines an uncritical use of sources with the fallacy of composition.

Palmer's tactic is to portray all the witnesses as treasure seers. He writes that the "Smiths shared freely with neighbors and relatives

81. The side of the debate presented by Palmer is championed by Dan Vogel. See his "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," in *American Apocrypha,* 79–121. For the other side of the debate, see Larry E. Morris, "'The Private Character of the Man Who Bore That Testimony': Oliver Cowdery and His Critics," *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 311–51; Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Direct and Indirect Reports from the Eight Witnesses of the Book of Mormon," presentation delivered on 23 May 2003 at "Varieties of Mormon Experience in a Pluralistic World," the thirty-eighth annual conference of the Mormon History Association, Kirtland, Ohio, 22–25 May 2003, forthcoming in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies.*

82. Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981).

about their ability to see subterranean chambers in the local hills" (p. 186). Here Palmer relies on the statement of neighbor William Stafford gathered by anti-Mormon Philastus Hurlbut. According to the statement, the Smiths "would say, also, that nearly all the hills in this part of New York, were thrown up by human hands, and in them were large caves, which Joseph, Jr., could see" (p. 186).[83] The belief that treasure was buried within hills was so common that some treasure seekers were called "hill diggers." So if the Smiths really did express this belief it would not at all imply that they meant they had seen into the hills themselves. In fact, in the statement only the Prophet is attributed with such powers.[84] Again, Palmer writes: "The fact that the Smiths organized and participated in treasure digging expeditions indicates their belief in the physical reality of what they saw by second sight" (p. 189). Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith were said to have located places to dig by his rod and by her dreams, but neither is reported to have viewed subterranean treasures by supernatural means.[85] The documentary record of early Mormonism is

83. Quoted from William Stafford, statement, Manchester, New York, 8 December 1833, quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed,* 237.

84. A week before taking Stafford's statement, Hurlbut had taken the statement of Roswell Nichols. Whereas Stafford was recorded as stating that the Smiths "would say, also, that nearly all the hills in this part of New York, were thrown up by human hands," Nichols had been recorded as saying that Joseph Smith Sr. "often said, that the hills in our neighborhood were nearly all erected by human hands." Roswell Nichols, statement, Manchester, New York, 1 December 1833, quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed,* 257. Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reappraised," *BYU Studies* 10/3 (1970): 286–90, points to this parallel phraseology as one of several evidences of Hurlbut's ghostwriting. Rodger I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 28, responds to Anderson's charges of ghostwriting with the hypothesis that similarities in the statements "may only mean that Hurlbut submitted the same questions to some of the parties involved." Richard Lloyd Anderson, review of *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined,* by Rodger I. Anderson, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 59–62, responds to Rodger I. Anderson with the point that this hypothesis leaves Hurlbut guilty of prompting the witness. Hurlbut's question to Stafford can be reconstructed as something like "Did the Smiths say that nearly all the hills in this part of New York were thrown up by human hands?" which would indeed constitute a severe case of witness prompting.

85. On Smith Sr. using a divining rod to locate places to dig for treasure, see Fayette Lapham, "II.—The Mormons," *Historical Magazine* [Boston], May 1870, p. 306; Peter Ingersoll, statement, Palmyra, New York, 2 December 1833, as reproduced in Howe, *Mormonism*

problematic enough without such careless interpretation. Not only is Palmer's use of the sources uncritical, but he often goes beyond what is attributed to Joseph Smith and others in even the most suspect sources.

Palmer attempts to portray the Whitmer witnesses as treasure seers by arguing that "two or three of the Whitmers—Jacob, David, and perhaps John—owned seer stones" and possessed the "seeing gift" (pp. 180–81). Actually, the sources he cites only report that David and Jacob Whitmer owned seer stones and that they had children or grandchildren who used them. Two stones that were passed down in the Whitmer family are *gorgets,* perforated stones that had been tooled by early indigenous Americans. If David and Jacob Whitmer found such stones, they probably would have identified them as seer stones and would therefore have kept them. David and Jacob Whitmer probably did own these gorgets and considered them seer stones, but that does not mean that they used them. Joseph Smith apparently found a gorget on the shores of Nauvoo that he identified as a seer stone and kept, but there is no evidence of him ever using it.[86] According to David Whitmer, Joseph Smith gave Oliver Cowdery the brown stone used in translating the Book of Mormon only as a memento of their translation work together and taught that the church would no longer use them.[87] Brigham Young later inherited this stone but apparently never used it.[88]

Timing is also a crucial issue in Palmer's argument. Even if David and Jacob Whitmer did use these seer stones, there is no evidence

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Unvailed, 232–34. On Lucy locating a "lucky spot" in her dreams, see Norman R. Bowen, ed., *A Gentile Account of Life in Utah's Dixie, 1872–73: Elizabeth Kane's St. George Journal* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Library Tanner Trust Fund, 1995), 74.

86. Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet" (master's thesis, Utah State University, 2000), 164–69.

87. [Whitmer], *An Address to All Believers in Christ,* 32; see also 30–36.

88. In fact, while Young was in possession of at least one of Smith's stones, he stated, "I don't no [*sic*] that I have ever had a desire to have one." Council of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "Council," 30 September 1835, minutes taken by Thomas Bullock, MS, General Church Minutes Collection, Church Archives.

that they used them before their witness experiences. In fact, according to one of the sources cited by Palmer, David Whitmer obtained his stone in Kirtland (p. 183 n. 22)[89]—after his witness experience and after he heard Joseph Smith's instruction to no longer use seer stones. These stones were probably obtained after the Whitmers had met Smith and participated in the founding events of the restoration. Palmer's argument that the Whitmer witness experiences grew out of a shared background in stone seeing is most likely an anachronistic reversal of causality. In a related reversal, Palmer emphasizes the family connections, telling us that "Oliver Cowdery, Hiram Page, and the five Whitmers were related by marriage" (p. 179). Actually, Cowdery did not marry into the Whitmer family until after the organization of the church. Palmer states that the witness experiences grew out of a mindset shared within family relationships, but actually the Cowdery marriage grew out of the experiences that Cowdery had shared with the Whitmer family, such as viewing the golden plates.

Even if the Whitmers had owned and used seer stones before they met Joseph Smith, we don't know that they used them for treasure seeking. Some "seers" of the era used stones only to see into the future or to find missing objects. While later accounts smeared Joseph Smith with accusations of treasure quest, a different picture emerges in the only source contemporaneous to the period of Smith's treasure digging, the 1826 court record. Notes of Joseph's testimony tell us that "he had a certain stone, which he had *occasionally* looked at to determine where hidden treasures in the bowels of the earth were . . . and while at Palmyra he had *frequently* ascertained in that way where lost property was of various kinds."[90]

89. John L. Traughber, "David Whitmer, 'The Last Witness' of the Book of Mormon," J. L. Traughber Collection, 1446/2:39, Marriott Library.

90. A reproduction of the court minutes appears in "A Document Discovered," *Utah Christian Advocate* [Salt Lake City], January 1886, 1, emphasis added. This point was originally made by Richard Lloyd Anderson in "The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching," *BYU Studies* 24/4 (1984): 533.

Hiram Page owned and used a seer stone in New York,[91] but again, we do not know whether Page obtained this stone before meeting Smith or even before his witness experience. We do not know whether he ever tried to find buried treasure with it. Concerning Oliver Cowdery, Palmer writes that he "was a treasure hunter and 'rodsman' before he met Joseph Smith in 1829" (p. 179). Like seer stones, rods were used for various purposes—most commonly for locating artesian water. There is no evidence that Cowdery used his rod to hunt for treasure.[92] Citing Barnes Frisbie's *History of Middletown, Vermont,* as excerpted in Dan Vogel's *Early Mormon Documents,* Palmer asserts that Cowdery's father "was associated with a treasure-seeking group in Vermont, and it is from them, one assumes, that Oliver learned the art of working with a divining rod" (p. 179). This exemplifies Palmer's uncritical and biased use of source material. Historians have long discounted Frisbie's allegations.[93] Even Vogel's warning that "Frisbie's late account must be approached cautiously" went unheeded by Palmer.[94]

Palmer's treatment of Martin Harris is similarly suspect. He relies mainly on Palmyra rumors of Harris being a gullible visionary and on a Mormon account—apparently given four decades after Harris died—of his having participated in a treasure hunt. Palmer confuses treasure scrying with mere treasure hunting. When treasure hunting parties went out for a dig, there was usually only one carrying a seer stone or a dowsing rod. The rest carried shovels and picks.

Having surveyed the various witnesses, Palmer then asks the reader: "Did the witnesses perceive secular and spiritual personages

91. See section heading of Doctrine and Covenants 28.

92. Divining rods were sometimes used to answer yes/no questions. A revelation to Oliver Cowdery dictated by Joseph Smith stated that "it has told you things." Book of Commandments 7:3.

93. See, in particular, David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791–1850* (Montpelier: The Vermont Historical Society, 1948), 242; Larry E. Morris, "Oliver Cowdery's Vermont Years and the Origins of Mormonism," *BYU Studies* 39/1 (2000): 113–18.

94. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 1:600.

and their treasures within the local hills by a spiritual gift or by their creative imaginations?" (p. 191)[95] After casting the witnesses as unreliable "visionaries," Palmer states that "the eleven witnesses gazed on and handled the golden plates the same way they saw spectral treasure guardians and handled their elusive treasures, in the spirit, not in the flesh" (p. 260). Actually, there is not a single account of any witness handling treasures or viewing spectral treasure guardians. Joseph Smith Jr. is the only Book of Mormon witness, if counted as such, that was ever said to have seen a treasure guardian. Whether he actually did so is uncertain. The testimony of his treasure-seeking companion Jonathan Thompson, as recorded in the notes of the 1826 court, stands as the solitary piece of credible evidence for such a vision.[96] Palmer's treatment of the witnesses essentially attempts to project the treasure-seeking stories told about Joseph Smith upon the witnesses and thereby to discredit their experiences. In particular, he casts the experience of the Eight Witnesses as a subjective vision.

The most interesting historiographical contribution made by Palmer to writings on the witnesses deals with the well-known story, told by Brigham Young and others, regarding an archive within the Hill Cumorah. According to the story, when Joseph returned the plates to the angel, the hill opened up, revealing an underground room filled with stacks of Nephite records. David Whitmer stated that after the angel showed the plates to him and Cowdery, the plates "were taken away by the angel to a cave, which we saw by the power

95. In an earlier section, Palmer writes that Joseph Smith "gave many other vivid descriptions of secular and spiritual heroes from the past and their treasures hidden in the hills of New York and Pennsylvania" (p. 42). No citation is given. As far as I am aware, this assertion is not documentable. Perhaps Palmer refers to the account given by Lorenzo Saunders of a dig that took place prior to 1825. Sixty years after the fact, Saunders recalled that Joseph Smith used his seer stone to look into a hill and saw "a king of one of the ~~Nephites or Lamanites~~ <tribes> who was shut in there in the time of one of their big battles." Lorenzo Saunders, interviewed by William H. Kelley, 17 September 1884, E. L. Kelley Papers, pp. 7–8, cited in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:130.

96. "A Document Discovered," *Utah Christian Advocate* [Salt Lake City], January 1886, 1.

of God while we were yet in the Spirit."[97] In secondhand and third-hand accounts of this experience, including those given by Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball, the story becomes exaggerated.

In Palmer's treatment the story receives further embellishment. His quotation of Brigham Young's well-known version published in the *Journal of Discourses* ends with Young's statement that he had heard the story "not only from Oliver Cowdery, but others who were familiar with it . . . Carlos Smith . . . was a witness to these things. Samuel Smith saw some things, Hyrum saw a good many things" (pp. 191–92). Palmer's ellipses distort the original source, which requires a more thorough examination. Young began by telling the story of a treasure dig that he had heard from Porter Rockwell and added that he had "heard others tell the same story." Then Young recounted the story regarding the repository of Nephite records within the hill, and stated, "I relate *this* to you, and I want you to understand it." Young explained that he had taken the "liberty of referring to *those things* so that they will not be forgotten and lost." The referent of "those things" is apparently not only "this" story about the records repository, but also the previously told treasure-seeking story. Young stated that both stories had been related to him by people who were familiar with them. Finally, Young stated that Don Carlos "was a witness to these things. Samuel Smith saw some things, Hyrum saw a good many things."[98] It is more likely that Hyrum and Samuel, and especially Don Carlos, had seen or participated in a treasure dig like that described by the Smith family's New York neighbor Porter Rockwell and not in the vision of the records in the hill.

Palmer claims that William W. Phelps included Hyrum as one of the Cumorah cave visionaries. The actual source is the journal kept by William Horne Dame, who recorded that he heard Phelps recount "a story told him by Hyrum Smith."[99] As quoted by Palmer, the Dame

97. David Whitmer, interview by Edmund C. Briggs, in letter from Edmund C. Briggs to Joseph Smith III [4 June 1884], *Saints Herald,* 21 June 1884, 396.

98. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 19:37–38, emphasis added.

99. Southern Exploring Co, journal, 14 January 1855, Church Archives.

diary states that "Joseph, Hyrum, Cowdery & Whitmere[s?]" were all in the cave (p. 192). Palmer's editorial "[s?]"—entirely unwarranted by the text—attempts to open up the cave to the rest of the Whitmer witnesses. As he later writes, "The Smith brothers Hyrum, Carlos, and Samuel, Joseph Sr., Oliver Cowdery, at least one of the Whitmers, and unnamed 'others' participated in the remote viewings of Cumorah's cave" (p. 193). The reason that Palmer tries to pack everyone into the cave is to argue that their witness experience is indistinguishable from the cave vision. If I am reading him correctly, he implies that these experiences are one and the same.[100]

Palmer consistently relies on Joseph Smith's early critics to overplay the treasure-seeking interpretation of the recovery of the golden plates. To provide another example, he writes that the "plates were able to 'sink' and 'glide' underground and could be heard 'rumbling' through the hill, according to contemporary accounts" (p. 206). But, checking the footnote citations, one finds that these "contemporary" accounts are (1) John A. Clarke's 1840 reminiscence of a conversation he had had with Martin Harris thirteen years earlier and (2) the 1880 report of an investigative journalist who collected stories from Palmyra residents. I have provided only a few examples of Palmer's reckless use of sources in his treatment of the golden plates witnesses. Historians who have spent considerable time in early Mormon documents will find this chapter particularly aggravating.

Other Heavenly Manifestations

The content of the writings translated from the plates had led Smith and Cowdery to pray concerning baptism. In response to their prayers, John the Baptist appeared and conferred upon them the Aaronic Priesthood. John also informed them that he was acting under the authority of the New Testament apostles Peter, James, and John, who would later confer upon them the Melchizedek

100. Compare Palmer's comments in "Author Meets Critics: *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*."

Priesthood. As with the appearances of the angel Moroni, Latter-day Saints view the visits of these angels to restore priesthood authority as cornerstones of the faith. They view Smith's first vision of God and Jesus as perhaps the chief cornerstone. Having closed his attack on the Book of Mormon, Palmer then turns his critique to the restoration of the priesthood and the first vision.

Priesthood Restoration

Palmer opens his analysis of priesthood restoration with the statement that early historical accounts "are more nuanced and fascinating than the simple, unified story that is told today" (p. 215). Many Latter-day Saint historians would agree up to this point but would not go as far as Palmer when he argues that Smith and Cowdery never saw the priesthood angels in the early years, nor did they think they had. *An Insider's View* insists that they made up the angel stories later and then further developed them into increasingly literal and detailed accounts.

Palmer begins with Lucy Mack Smith's 1845 dictated biography of her son, which only recounts that Joseph and Oliver baptized each other after receiving a commandment to do so through the seer stone. Though Lucy did not go down to the river with them, Palmer contends that nothing happened that she did not record. While Lucy's account does not corroborate the appearance of John the Baptist, it is not inconsistent with those accounts given by Joseph and Oliver. Yet Palmer takes his narrow reading of Lucy's account as if it was Smith's and Cowdery's original understanding of the event, thus violating the basic standards of source criticism: he rejects the earlier accounts given by the eyewitnesses in favor of a solitary secondhand account given a decade later.

Palmer then argues that implicit in the Book of Mormon and the earliest church documents is a theology of priesthood dispensation more like that in contemporaneous Protestant belief than in the later Latter-day Saint understanding of priesthood conferral by heavenly messengers. This is a reasonable reading of the sources but is

certainly open to interpretation. Palmer finds a test case in the Hiram Page peep stone episode of September 1830, when Oliver Cowdery apparently gave heed to the visions Page saw in the stone. Palmer asks whether Cowdery, if he had really received the "exclusive keys of apostolic succession from Peter, James, and John," would "seek direction and revelation from one holding the office of a teacher in the church?" (p. 225). But the answer to this question is inherent in the basic elements of the episode. Reception of priesthood keys did not necessarily exclude the "gift of seeing" or any other gifts of the Spirit.[101] Cowdery took Page's claims seriously because Page said he had had a vision. The issue of priesthood office is moot.

No mention is made by Palmer of the report given two months later in the *Painesville Telegraph* that Cowdery claimed "to have a divine mission, and to have seen and conversed with Angels."[102] This and other sources from the first years of the church can be read as confirmations of priesthood restoration through angels. Here, Palmer neglects the careful work of Gregory A. Prince.[103] Palmer especially downplays the significance of Smith's 1832 history of the church. In this self-described account of "the rise of the church of Christ in the eve of time," Smith establishes the "reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of Aangels [*sic*]" as a fundamental step in the restoration of the gospel.[104]

Nevertheless, mention of priesthood restoration is not widespread in the early documentary record. And it is true that many

101. On the term *gift of seeing* as used by early Latter-day Saints, see Richard Van Wagoner and Steven Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" *Dialogue* 15/2 (1982): 49–68; *Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* 6 May 1849, 2, Church Archives; Orson Pratt, *A Series of Pamphlets* (Liverpool: Richards, 1852), 72.

102. "The Golden Bible," *Painesville Telegraph,* 16 November 1830, 3, quoted in "Priesthood Restoration Documents," *BYU Studies* 35/4 (1995–96): 181 (document 20); see also 181–82 (document 21).

103. Gregory A. Prince, *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 4–15.

104. Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, p. 1 [i], Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives. Also in "Priesthood Restoration Documents," 176 (document 5); Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 1:26.

details, such as the names of the angels, were apparently not widely publicized until 1834 and 1835. Palmer contends that Smith and Cowdery invented the angelic ordinations in these years to establish authority in the midst of a credibility crisis caused by an investigation of Joseph Smith's past. He argues that the two men were primarily motivated by the research and publication of E. D. Howe's exposé, *Mormonism Unvailed,* which sought to undermine the legitimacy of the church's origins. Thus Palmer concludes that the "most plausible explanation" of the historical record is that the angel stories as developed in 1834 "were retrofitted to an 1829–30 time period to give the impression that an impressive and unique authority had existed in the church from the beginning" (p. 230).

Smith himself provided a rationale for withholding the details of priesthood restoration, explaining that he and Cowdery "were forced to keep secret the circumstances of our having been baptized, and having received this priesthood; owing to a spirit of persecution which had already manifested itself in the neighborhood." In particular, they "had been threatened with being mobbed."[105] When placed in historical context, Smith's explanation is also plausible. When he related his vision of God to a Methodist minister, his story was treated with "great contempt," the minister saying "that there was no such thing as visions or revelations in these days."[106] Smith's visions of Moroni provoked a similar reaction. Martin Harris recalled that in 1827, when Palmyra village was buzzing with talk about Moroni and the golden plates, one particularly perturbed man exclaimed, "Damn him! angels appear to men in this enlightened age! Damn him, he ought to be tarred and feathered for telling such a damned lie!"[107] In this hostile climate, is it really a wonder that Smith and Cowdery kept the priesthood visions to

105. "Manuscript History of the Church," book A-1, 18 (hereafter Manuscript History), Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives; compare Joseph Smith—History 1:74–75. Also in "Priesthood Restoration Documents," 178 (document 12); Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 1:76.

106. Manuscript History, book A-1, 3.

107. "Mormonism—No. II," *Tiffany's Monthly,* June 1859, 168.

themselves?[108] Smith's own account of withholding the story is more convincing than Palmer's conspiracy theory.

Incidentally, in April 1836, a time when Joseph Smith was keeping records, his vision with Oliver Cowdery of Moses, Elias, and Elijah restoring priesthood keys was recorded in Smith's journal by Warren A. Cowdery, Joseph's scribe and Oliver's brother.[109] And, within his lifetime, Smith apparently never publicized this vision. He did, however, begin producing and publishing a documentary history, by which the account of the restoration of keys through these angels would eventually become available. Smith explained that he had been "induced to write this history so as to disabuse the publick mind."[110] He wanted to counter "the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons."[111] Similarly, Smith and Cowdery may have begun providing the details of priesthood restoration in response to the bad publicity caused by the publication of Howe's *Mormonism Unvailed.* It may be that Palmer has made a historical contribution not in identifying the cause for *inventing* the priesthood stories, but in identifying a reason for Smith and Cowdery making them public. They had initially kept them confidential in order to avoid persecution, but after the publication of *Mormonism Unvailed* they may have found that false reports "put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons" were a form of persecution that outweighed the persecution they would receive from publicizing the details of priesthood restoration. The reason for keeping the story to themselves became the reason for sharing it.

Palmer goes on to argue that Smith and Cowdery developed the story from a visionary experience of angels to an actual visitation (pp. 229–32). He begins with Oliver Cowdery's 1834 and 1835 accounts

108. Palmer can accept that they would keep the angel visitations secret from enemies but feels that they should have told believers (p. 218 n. 3). This turn of logic manifests no appreciation for the real-world problems of maintaining confidentiality.

109. Joseph Smith, diary, 1835–1836, 3 April 1836, pp. 191–93, Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives.

110. Manuscript History, book A-1, 1.

111. Manuscript History, book A-1, 1.

that he and Joseph received the priesthood from angels while "rapt in the vision" and "while we were in the heavenly vision" (pp. 226–27).[112] Next, as evidence of a development, Palmer cites material regarding the angels that was added to the revelation as recorded on 4 September 1830.[113] Debate may continue as to whether Smith was inventing new details as he went along or becoming more willing to disclose information about an actual visitation, but the added information does not explicitly state that the experience did not have a visionary element. While Palmer asserts that Smith and Cowdery removed the visionary element, he does not demonstrate this with sources. In fact, when earlier arguing for a purely visionary story, Palmer cites a sermon delivered by Smith in 1844 in which he "related the *vision* of his ordination to the priesthood of Aaron" (p. 227).[114]

Palmer's analysis of Cowdery in this chapter differs from his earlier treatment of the eleven witnesses. Palmer had earlier argued that Cowdery was a rodsman and a treasure seer, that he and the other witnesses shared a magical worldview conducive to psychological manipulation. Yet in this chapter, Palmer unwittingly acknowledges that Cowdery challenges this interpretation. Cowdery

112. Quoted from Oliver Cowdery, "History of the Rise of the Church of the Latter Day Saints," *Messenger and Advocate* 1/1 (October 1834): 15–16, quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:420–21 and Joseph Smith—History as a note to 1:71; Patriarchal Blessings Book, 1:8–9, Church Archives, quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents,* 2:453.

113. See *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text & Commentary,* comp. H. Michael Marquardt (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 72–80 (document 28). These verses, not present in the revelation as published earlier in the Book of Commandments, first appeared in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. *A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ, Organized According to Law, on the 6th of April, 1830* (Zion [Independence, Mo.]: Phelps, 1833), section XXVIII; *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints: Carefully Selected from the Revelations of God . . .* (Kirtland, Ohio: Williams, 1835), 50:2–3 ; compare Doctrine and Covenants 27, especially verses 8–12.

114. Franklin D. Richards reporting on Joseph Smith's sermon of 10 March 1844, in *Words of Joseph Smith,* 334, emphasis added. But see in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith,* 327, 332, other summaries by Wilford Woodruff and James Burgess of this same sermon that use language indicating a visitation rather than a vision.

claimed that he and Smith saw not only the golden plates, but also Moroni, John the Baptist, Peter, James, John, Moses, Elias, Elijah, and Jesus Christ himself. To reject the testimony of Oliver Cowdery is to argue either that Cowdery was a complete psychological slave to Smith's impositions or that he was a co-conspirator. Palmer vacillates inconsistently between the two interpretations, neither of which is supported by the historical record.

The First Vision

For the first vision, as with the current understanding of priesthood restoration, Palmer finds that the Latter-day Saints "simplify and retrofit later accounts to provide a seemingly authoritative, unambiguous recital" (p. 235). Actually, most church members are familiar with only one account: the version given in the 1838 history, which has been published in the Latter-day Saint scriptures. And it is true that many Latter-day Saints often do read into the first vision unwarranted conclusions. That Joseph Smith was called by God to his prophetic mission in the first vision was an understanding that developed in the church in the late nineteenth century.[115] In Joseph Smith's time, it was generally understood that he received his prophetic mission from the angel Moroni. Nevertheless, Smith considered his first vision of Deity an important part of the restoration, and Latter-day Saint scholars who have investigated early accounts of this vision and their historical contexts still find the 1838 account of crucial historical importance. When this vision would or could have occurred and how Smith understood or portrayed it has been the subject of vigorous debate. However, rather than presenting a balanced survey of the various arguments, Palmer essentially refurbishes the theory initiated by the Reverend Wesley P. Walters, refined by H. Michael Marquardt, and popularized in various anti-Mormon tracts.[116] Research on the first vision by believing Latter-

115. 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.

116. Wesley P. Walters, "New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10/4 (1967): 227–44; H. Michael Marquardt

day Saint historians Dean C. Jessee, Richard L. Bushman, Milton V. Backman Jr., Richard L. Anderson, Larry C. Porter, and James Allen is ignored.[117]

Many critics of the first vision make an argument for Smith's developing conceptions of the Godhead by emphasizing that God the Father is not mentioned in the first narrative account of the first vision. This point is not passed up by Palmer, but his central thesis is that Smith's original experience was a mere forgiveness of sins. It was not until much later in life, Palmer argues, that Smith changed the story into a momentous vision in which he was called of God to a special prophetic mission.

While many treatments of Smith's accounts of the first vision begin with his 1832 narrative, Palmer correctly identifies the Articles and Covenants (now Doctrine and Covenants 20) presented at the first conference of the church as the first extant account of the experience:

> For, after that it truly was manifested unto this first elder, that he had received a remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world; But after truly repenting, God ministered unto him by an holy angel, whose countenance was as lightning, and whose garments were pure and white above all whiteness, and gave unto him commandments which inspired him from on high, and gave

and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1994).

117. See, for example, Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 275–94; Richard L. Bushman, "The First Vision Story Revived," *Dialogue* 4/1 (1969): 82–93; Milton V. Backman Jr., "Awakenings in the Burned-Over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 301–20; Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision,* 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980); Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences," *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 373–404; Anderson, "Joseph Smith's Testimony of the First Vision," *Ensign,* April 1996, 10–21; Larry C. Porter, "Reverend George Lane—Good 'Gifts,' Much 'Grace,' and Marked 'Usefulness,'" *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 321–40; James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?" *Improvement Era,* April 1970, 4–13; and Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental."

> unto him power, by the means which were before prepared, that he should translate a book.[118]

Instead of reading the Articles and Covenants as a discrete reference to Smith's theophany, Palmer takes this account as Smith's full understanding of the event—a mere experience of forgiveness. The prophetic calling, Palmer emphasizes, came from Moroni (whom Palmer has already identified as a capricious treasure spirit).

Palmer next treats Smith's 1832 narration of the first vision, wherein Smith records experiencing spiritual turmoil from age twelve to fifteen (1818–21). Finally, Smith wrote, "I cried unto the Lord for mercy." In response, the resurrected Christ appeared and said, "Joseph my Son thy sins are forgiven thee."[119] This account, written by Smith himself in a private letter book, contains the details of the vision most important to him personally. Though Smith writes of the "different denominations," Palmer emphasizes that in this account Smith had perceived a state of universal apostasy before he experienced his vision. He also emphasizes that Smith was forgiven of his sins but received no special calling.

Having laid some groundwork, Palmer begins his assault on the well-known 1838 account of the first vision—the version which has been published in the Pearl of Great Price (Joseph Smith—History 1:5–26). Palmer reworks Wesley P. Walters's argument that the details in this account regarding an intense local revival must apply to the great Palmyra revival of 1824–25, which began over a year after the first appearance of Moroni. It was apparently as a result of this revival that Lucy had eventually affiliated with the Presbyterians, an incident recorded in the 1838 account.[120] Palmer holds that only this revival could have provoked confusion over which church to join. Therefore, he reasons, the 1838 motif of finding a true church could not have been an issue for Smith in 1820. Smith's 1820 "epiphany," it follows, could only have been

118. Book of Commandments XXIV:6–7; compare D&C 20:5–7.

119. "A History of the Life of Joseph Smith Jr.," in Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, p. 3 [iii], Joseph Smith Collection, Church Archives.

120. Manuscript History, book A-1, 2.

the experience of forgiveness, and the great revival with its context and consequences occurred years after that. Palmer thus argues that Smith "combined these two incidents into his 1838 version" (p. 244).

Palmer entirely neglects to inform his readers of the Palmyra revival of 1816–17, when the Smith family first moved to the area. Palmer grants that Smith may have conflated an isolated 1820 epiphany with the revivals of 1824–25. But it is more likely that he conflated details from the second revival with the first. This would explain why his mother's affiliation with the Presbyterians found its way into the 1838 account, which he recorded over a decade later. But Joseph Smith may have correctly remembered a period of religious competition following the earlier revival. The message of general apostasy recorded in the 1838 account, while slightly different from the account given in 1832, is not out of place in 1820–21.

It was probably this earlier revival that initiated the three to four years of spiritual introspection that Smith recorded in his 1832 account. The 1838 account indicates that he was equally disturbed by the religious contention that followed in the wake of the revival as the various denominations struggled over the particular affiliations of the new converts. Thus, while the revival may have convinced Joseph of his sins, the ensuing sectarian strife led to confusion over true doctrine and which church to join. Smith would eventually take both concerns with him into the grove. And, as Richard Bushman points out, "how long it took before the conflicts broke out, or how long before his questions came to a head is not indicated."[121]

121. Bushman, "Just the Facts Please," review of *Inventing Mormonism*, by H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 129. In July 1819, Methodist minister George Lane, who is credited with introducing young Joseph to James 1:5–6, attended a conference in Vienna (now Phelps), New York, fifteen miles from the Smith farm—well within walking distance. Porter, "Reverend George Lane," 334–35, 336–38. Orsamus Turner remembered that Joseph caught "a spark of Methodism" at a camp meeting on the road to Vienna—apparently this very conference. Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase and Morris' Reserve . . .* (Rochester, N.Y.: Alling, 1852), 214. An interview with Lane, as Bushman puts it, "might have brought Joseph's anguished quest to a point and led to the prayer in the woods." Bushman, "Just the Facts Please," 129.

Palmer rejects the possibility of an early message about apostasy on the grounds that if Joseph Smith had been informed of a general apostasy in 1820, his mother would not have joined or have continued to congregate with the Presbyterians. However, as Joseph Smith himself recalled, he "could find none that would believe the heavenly vision"[122]—perhaps including his own family. In fact, he may never have told them about it. Smith wrote that when he returned home from the woods where he had seen the vision, his mother asked him why he looked weak. His only reply was "never mind all is well.—I am well enough off." He then added that he had learned that "Presbyterinism is not True."[123] Evidently nothing more was communicated. Smith recorded that the only person he told was the Methodist minister—apparently George Lane.[124] But, as Smith recalled, "My telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion and was the cause of great persecution."[125]

Palmer also rejects the first vision because Smith's New York neighbors never recorded hearing about such a claim. For example, when Philastus Hurlbut visited the area in 1833, the Smith neighbors had plenty to say about treasure hunting and treasure guardians, but no one ridiculed a divine vision. But, as just noted, it is unclear just how many or whom Smith tried to convince of his experience. He writes that after telling the Methodist preacher, "men of high standing would take notice sufficiently to excite the public mind against me and create a hot persecution, and this was common <among> all the sects: all united to persecute me."[126] Smith wrote that this persecution became general, but had originated with the sects, which were led by the men who had cooperated in the revival of 1816–17. If they had broken ranks over their competition for converts, they nevertheless found a common enemy in Joseph Smith.

122. "A History of the Life of Joseph Smith Jr.," p. 3 [iii].
123. Manuscript History, book A-1, 3, 132.
124. Manuscript History, book A-1, 3; cf. Joseph Smith—History 1:22.
125. Manuscript History, book A-1, 4; cf. Joseph Smith—History 1:22.
126. Manuscript History, book A-1, 4; cf. Joseph Smith—History 1:22.

Richard Bushman argues that the Methodist minister quickly denounced the vision "not because of the strangeness of Joseph's story but because of its familiarity. Subjects of revivals all too often claimed to have seen visions." Bushman further explains that visions were often used to justify "a breach of the moral code or a sharp departure in doctrine. . . . Joseph's report on the divine rejection of all creeds and churches would have sounded all too familiar."[127] This alone would account for persecution, but why, then, did Smith's neighbors never vilify or even mention his theophany?

Joseph's vulnerability to attack from the sectarian leaders was heightened by his participation in folk religion. His mother was apparently a folk healer and his father witched for water and hunted for buried treasure.[128] Smith himself had apparently taken up the rod by this point in his life and may have begun using it in attempts to locate treasure.[129] Diviners and other religious specialists served a social function in their communities. While practitioners of folk religion drew the disdain of village elites, their skills were appreciated and sought after by ordinary people.[130] Even the common water witch fell under the scornful eye of the genteel, yet few had the confidence to dig a well without having it witched first.[131] The preachers and churches of the day knew full well that they competed with other institutions and individuals for the devotion of the flock. Palmer himself notes that ministers of the various denominations commonly preached against Freemasonry and treasure hunting (p. 118).

Now, in addition to being a folk diviner, Smith was a visionary claiming that all churches were wrong and thus posed even more of a threat to the leaders of the sects. However, due to his participation in folk religion, the ministers could attack him without having

127. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 58–59.

128. Ashurst-McGee, "Pathway to Prophethood," 74–98.

129. Ibid., 134–38, 210–15.

130. Alan Taylor, "The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780–1830," *American Quarterly* 38/1 (1968): 6–34.

131. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 228–29.

to mention his vision of Christian apostasy. As Quinn explains, "it was Joseph Smith's years as a treasure-seer that made his visionary claims ripe for ridicule by Palmyra's residents."[132] As Smith himself recorded, these ministers "were speaking all manner of evil against me falsely."[133] These false evils were probably gross exaggerations of his participation in treasure seeking. This is the kind of material that Hurlbut gathered from Palmyra residents when he came digging for dirt on the Smiths.

Rather than looking closely at Smith's 1838 account, Palmer generally follows the standard anti-Mormon reading. Toward the end of his treatment, however, he introduces the reader to a new argument, which he begins by laying out some of the details of the Kirtland apostasy that began in 1837. In December of that year Martin Harris, one of the Three Witnesses, was excommunicated. In March of 1838, John Whitmer, one of the Eight Witnesses, was excommunicated. Later that month, Martin Harris reportedly discredited the testimony of the Eight Witnesses. Then, on 12 and 13 April, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, the other two of the Three Witnesses, were excommunicated. The apostasy was, in fact, epidemic. Over ten percent of the Latter-day Saints defected at this time.

For Palmer, these events provided the background against which Smith composed the now canonized account of the first vision:

> Fearing the possible unraveling of the church, Joseph Smith took to reestablishing his authority. During this week of 7–13 April, he contemplated rewriting his history. On April 26 he renamed the church. The next day he started dictating a new first vision narrative. . . . He announced that his initial calling had not come from an angel in 1823, as he had said for over a decade, but from God

132. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View,* 485–86 n. 364. Actually, the evidence indicates that Smith did not act as a treasure seer until later. But he apparently did become involved in treasure seeking in 1820 and may have acted as a treasure dowser. Ashurst-McGee, "Pathway to Prophethood," 134–38, 210–15.

133. Manuscript History, book A-1, 4.

> the Father and Jesus Christ in 1820 (JS—History 1:28). This earlier date established his mission independent of the troubling questions and former witnesses associated with the Book of Mormon. Like the 1834–1835 priesthood restoration recitals, the first vision version of April 1838 added significant material that bolstered his authority during a time of crisis. (pp. 248, 251)

However, the account written in 1838 did *not* say that Smith received his prophetic calling during the first vision. As in the earlier accounts, Smith states that it was Moroni who said to him, as he puts it, that "God had a work for me to do."[134] This is the narrative followed in Smith's 1842 history as well.[135] The relevant passage that Palmer cites from Joseph Smith—History 1:28 was actually not composed in 1838. Willard Richards added this material to the history on 2 December 1842.[136] The insertion merely explains that since experiencing the first vision, Smith had been "guilty of Levity, & sometimes associated with Jovial company &c, not consistent with that character which ought to be maintained by one who was called of God as I had been."[137] The point of this redaction was not to move Joseph Smith's initial calling prior to the Moroni visions, but to clarify that although Joseph Smith had admittedly committed some sins, these sins were neither gross nor malignant. Their gravity derived from the fact that, having seen God, Joseph should have behaved better. As it turns out, then, Palmer's key piece of evidence was written at a later time and for a different reason. This invalidates his conclusion that "Joseph's 1838 first vision account served an immediate, institutional purpose in consolidating his authority and quashing dissent" (p. 254).

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134. Manuscript History, book A-1, 5.

135. Joseph Smith, "Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3/9 (1 March 1842): 707.

136. *The Papers of Joseph Smith,* ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:276 n. 2.

137. Ibid., 276.

Achievements and Failures

Purposes Fulfilled

I would prefer to review *An Insider's View* simply as a historian and not as a social critic. However, Palmer has not offered us a conventional work of history. The book is written in a specific style for a specific audience, and it is written for reasons that deserve to be addressed in terms of their own social agenda. Palmer's main objective in writing, as he states it, is "to introduce church members who have not followed the developments in church history during the last thirty years to issues that are central to the topic of Mormon origins" (p. x). Strictly speaking, *An Insider's View* succeeds quite well in introducing major issues to the lay Latter-day Saint reader. But it consistently presents only one side of these issues. Admittedly, the book is successful in its goal to be more sophisticated than a Sunday School lesson, but it does not provide a balanced survey of recent scholarship on Mormon origins. *An Insider's View* is a polemical battering ram that uses the tactics of the worst traditional histories.

Palmer had promised to reconstruct the true history of Mormon origins from the earliest and most primary sources, which were recorded "before everything was recast for hierarchical and proselyting purposes" (p. ix). He assured us that he was not revising the traditional stories of our heritage, but rather, "salvaging the earliest, authentic versions of these stories from the ravages of well-meaning censors who have abridged and polished them for institutional purposes" (p. x). On the contrary, the traditional understanding usually stands up to the canons of historical analysis better than the reconstructions proposed by Palmer, which simplify and retrofit later accounts to provide a seemingly authoritative analysis. Palmer's strained interpretations and unrestrained bias spoil any claim to have provided a history that "rings true" (p. ix).

Palmer's conclusion features his critique of Mormonism's historical identity politics. He asks whether the traditional stories of

Mormon origins have made us "more humble and teachable or more secure in our exclusivity and condescending toward others?" (p. 261). This is a question that some Latter-day Saints should probably spend some time considering. But I doubt that Palmer is in an ethical position to pose the question because he vaunts himself as an insider, a veteran teacher of the gospel, and an enlightened mentor who—in a gesture of paternal beneficence—offers to disabuse us of our childlike beliefs. The book reveals what Palmer had wanted to teach in an LDS institute but could not. Now retired, he can at last teach his view of Mormon origins. But the book bears the imprint of its own origins. In one sense, it is less a history than a piece of confessional literature. As it turns out, the book provides an insider's view of Palmer himself. Thus Palmer has also succeeded in his second stated objective for writing: to help "church members to understand historians and religion teachers like myself" (p. x).

Unintended Consequences

What may be said of Palmer's overarching purpose in writing the book? His last words to the reader are words of counsel: "As Latter-day Saints, our religious faith should be based and evaluated by how our spiritual and moral lives are centered in Jesus Christ, rather than in Joseph Smith's largely rewritten, materialistic, idealized, and controversial accounts of the church's founding. I hope that this study contributes in some way toward that end" (p. 263). Only here, at the very end of the book, does it become clear exactly what Palmer meant in his preface when he stated that he wrote with the intent "to increase faith, not to diminish it. Still, faith needs to be built on truth—what is, in fact, true and believable" (p. ix). In *An Insider's View,* Palmer successfully introduces the reader to the central issues of Mormon origins and conveys the truth as he sees it. But in doing so, will he increase faith or diminish it? When those who accept Palmer as their spiritual and intellectual guide to Mormon origins leave the Book of Mormon behind, will their faith

in Christ increase? In general, I doubt that increased Christian faith will follow in the wake of a rejection of the restoration.[138] With respect to Palmer's overarching intent, as well as to his more specific objectives in writing, I suspect that the book's failures will far outweigh its achievements.

138. For some findings on Latter-day Saint disaffiliation and "doctrinal apostates," see Stan L. Albrecht, "The Consequential Dimension of Mormon Religiosity," in *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and Its Members,* ed. James T. Duke (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 272–75.