The Foundation of Our Religion

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The importance of the volume under review, *Opening the Heavens,* may perhaps best be appreciated by recounting a lighthearted but apt analogy once made by Martin Marty, the eminent professor emeritus of modern Christian history at the University of Chicago:

> "When Cardinal de Polignac told Madame du Deffand that the martyr St. Denis, the first Bishop of Paris, had walked a hundred miles carrying his head in his hand, Madame du Deffand correctly observed, 'In such a promenade it is the first step that is difficult.'"
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> By analogy, if the beginning of the promenade of Mormon history, the First Vision and the Book of Mormon, can survive the crisis, then the rest of the promenade follows and nothing that happens in it can really detract from the miracle of the whole. If the first steps do not survive, there can be only antiquarian, not fateful or faith-full, interest in the rest of the story.[1]

1. See Martin E. Marty, "Two Integrities: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography," in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History,* ed. George D.

Review of John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson, eds. *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844.* Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press and Deseret Book, 2005. xii + 500 pp., with index. $32.95.

Allow me to illustrate Marty's observation with a concrete example. Several years ago I attended my first annual conference of the Mormon History Association (MHA) in Kirtland, Ohio. I have managed to make it back every year since. It seems that every year someone makes a presentation on the Mountain Meadows massacre. I have learned by experience to get a seat early to these sessions since they are always packed to the rafters. There is understandably a great interest in this episode. Suppose for a moment that Richard Turley, Ronald Walker, and Glen Leonard, in their ongoing research for their forthcoming book on that event for Oxford University Press, were to uncover actual evidence supporting Will Bagley's apparent position in *Blood of the Prophets* that Brigham Young ordered the massacre.[2] Would such a revelation mean the downfall of the church? Surely not. The massacre is already a stain on Latter-day Saint history. While evidence that Brigham played a more direct role would be a negative aspect for the modern church to confront, it would not lead to a mass exodus of Saints from the membership rolls. In the great scheme of things, it would be a negative detail, not a deal breaker.

Conversely, imagine for a moment that archaeologists working in upstate New York were to discover a faked set of "gold" plates made from tin and somehow were able to determine that they were made by Joseph. This would be a much more serious matter. Such a discovery would work directly against the validity of the Book of Mormon and would therefore be a foundational matter, and not a mere detail as most later Latter-day Saint church history is.

Since *Opening the Heavens* deals with the most basic, foundational claims of the church, it should be apparent that this book is extremely important. Included are chapters on the first vision, the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the priesthood, visionary experiences, the restoration of temple keys and powers, and succession in the presidency. These are not matters of minor historical detail; they

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Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 176, for the story citing Paul Elmen, *The Restoration of Meaning to Contemporary Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958), 189.

2. Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

go rather to the very heart of the truth claims made by the church and therefore to its reason for being.

This book is a production of *BYU Studies.* When I first received it, I was not overly excited about it since I had seen many of the materials before. I am a longtime subscriber to and reader of *BYU Studies,* and therefore I had already read previous versions of a number of the studies published in this volume. But as I actually delved further into the book, I noted that some of the pieces that had appeared previously were greatly improved from their original publication in the journal and that some of the pieces were either new or essentially new. I then saw the value and wisdom of bringing all this material together into a single, convenient volume. Knowing right where everything is, I will be much more likely to make use of this material in the future as opposed to having to rifle through my extensive print collection of the journal trying to find the more dated individual articles.

Many of the contributions to this volume reflect a particular genre that has been pioneered in Mormon scholarly publication by *BYU Studies*—the lengthy, organized collection of primary sources preceded by an introductory and interpretive essay that puts the documents in context. This genre plays to the historic strengths of *BYU Studies* in documentary editing. I greatly appreciate these comprehensive document collections. For similar reasons I favor such attempts at organized completeness as Dan Vogel's *Early Mormon Documents*[3] and the forthcoming Joseph Smith Papers series. Although I appreciate some guidance, as the introductory essays provide, ultimately I want to examine all the primary documents for myself and draw my own conclusions. The chapters of this book are designed for exactly that sort of detailed examination.

Just how extensive the documentation is in this volume may perhaps best be appreciated by a summary table:

3. Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents,* 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003).

Table Showing Numbers of Documents

Chapter Topic	Number of Documents/Events
First Vision Accounts	13
Book of Mormon Translation	202
Priesthood Restoration	70
Visionary Experiences	76
Kirtland Temple Experience	6
Mantle of Joseph on Brigham	121

The first chapter in the book is Dean C. Jessee, "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision" (pp. 1–33), which is a reorganized and expanded version of his seminal article on this topic from 1969.[4] As important as the original article was in its time, subsequent document discoveries had rendered it incomplete in its coverage of first vision accounts. I have taught an LDS institute class on early Latter-day Saint church history twice and both times felt it necessary to create my own spiral-bound collection of first vision accounts for my students, drawing the material from a variety of published sources. With the appearance of this enhanced version of Jessee's study, such a homemade edition is no longer necessary. The expanded documentation and improved organization is superb and makes this article the most complete resource for the early first vision accounts. Jessee first presents eight numbered documents produced by the Prophet, then five contemporaneous documents produced by others (reflecting a total of ten accounts, factoring out duplicates), followed by a discussion of other likely contemporaneous accounts and subsequent recollections of first vision accounts. The organization of this material is crisp and logical. Jessee's commentary on these accounts is appropriately spare, conveying first the historiographical context and then just what we need to know about each account, and no more.[5]

4. Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 275–94.

5. My own preference would have been for Jessee to include the German text of Orson Hyde's 1842 tract *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste* together with the English translation, rather than presenting the translation alone. Not to do so is contrary to the theme of

A companion essay to Jessee's presentation of the sources is James B. Allen and John W. Welch, "The Appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in 1820" (pp. 35–75). I believe it was a wise editorial decision to separate the presentation of the documents themselves from this detailed analysis of those documents.[6] This essay begins by tracing the intellectual history of scholarly engagement with the first vision accounts, beginning with Paul Cheesman's 1965 master's thesis.[7] It then undertakes a detailed analysis of the first vision accounts, noting that many of the differences among the accounts reflect the different audiences for whom they were prepared. The key feature of this essay is not a lengthy appendix of documents, but a series of detailed charts comparing and contrasting the various accounts concerning background conditions mentioned, Joseph's quest and struggle, what Joseph saw and asked, what Joseph heard, and the aftermath of the vision. I found the visual summary of the information in the article in tabular form to be very helpful.

The Allen and Welch essay is a lucid and fine contribution to the literature and is a great place for interested students to begin. I must confess, however, that my absolute favorite article on this topic continues to be Richard Anderson's "Circumstantial Confirmation," which appeared in the same 1969 issue of *BYU Studies* as the Jessee article updated in this volume.[8]

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comprehensiveness that is significant in this book. For the German text, see Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:402–25.

6. Similarly, Dan Vogel published both a generally neutral presentation of documents in his *Early Mormon Documents* and his interpretation of many of those documents in his *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004). In my view this is the way it should be done. For reviews of Vogel's interpretive biography, see Andrew H. Hedges and Dawson W. Hedges, "No, Dan, That's Still Not History," *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 205–22; Alan Goff, "Dan Vogel's Family Romance and the Book of Mormon as Smith Family Allegory," *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 321–400; and Larry E. Morris, "Joseph Smith and 'Interpretive Biography,'" *FARMS Review* 18/1 (2006): 321–74.

7. Paul R. Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965).

8. Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences," *BYU Studies* 9/3 (1969): 373–404. This article is cited in *Opening the Heavens* under "Further Early Church Historical Documents Originally Published in *BYU Studies*" (p. 481).

Allen and Welch disclaim any attempt at providing all the details or answering all the questions that may be raised regarding the first vision accounts (p. 70). Personally, however, given the long-standing controversy on the subject, I would have liked to see them expand their discussion of "Dating the Vision" beyond the less than two pages devoted to that topic (pp. 54–55). I did, however, think the discussion of the "Lord" of the 1832 account (pp. 63–64) was well done. The authors recount Alexander Neibaur's memory of the time when Joseph asked, "Must I join the Methodist Church[?]" (p. 65). It would have been useful at this point to include a note dealing with Joseph's attending a probationary class of the Palmyra Methodist Church in 1828, as has been claimed.

The next essay in the volume is John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon" (pp. 77–213). This essay has roots in a number of previous efforts. Welch has a genuine gift for organizing and presenting large amounts of complex information in clear ways, and the chronological approach he takes to this material is exactly what is needed. In this version of the material, Welch appends a section called "Documenting the Translation Chronology" that sets forth 202 documents relevant to the Book of Mormon translation process in an organized fashion. Without a doubt, this essay provides essential background material for anyone interested in that process.

Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff, "Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents" (pp. 215–63), is one of the pieces I well recall reading in its first incarnation in the pages of *BYU Studies*.[9] This document collection is a sort of brief *contra* the commonly stated critical position that Joseph simply made up the priesthood restoration in 1834 in order to shore up his standing within the church.

Cannon's essay illustrates why I like these extensive document collections. Cannon makes it clear that he prefers the majority view of a Melchizedek Priesthood restoration in 1829. I, along with Richard

9. Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff, "Priesthood Restoration Documents," *BYU Studies* 35/4 (1995–96): 162–207.

Bushman,[10] prefer the minority view that dates that event to 1830. While Cannon expresses his preference, he describes why some favor the later dating and presents the relevant documents as well. This is one of those questions on which reasonable people may disagree, and the format of this material allows the reader to draw her own conclusions on such matters.

Next is Alexander L. Baugh, "Parting the Veil: Joseph Smith's Seventy-six Documented Visionary Experiences" (pp. 265–326). This essay explores Joseph's role as "seer." In cataloging Joseph's visionary experiences, Baugh had to determine which ones, based on his definition, were actually of a visionary character. For instance, Baugh did not include in his catalog Joseph's physical description of the apostle Paul (p. 266), which might have been based on visionary experience, but may derive from apocryphal literature to which Joseph had access. This was the correct decision, and Baugh consistently shows a fine sense of judgment in making such determinations.

Baugh's essay makes three major points: (1) the experiences were numerous; (2) such experiences never became commonplace or routine; and (3) sometimes others experienced these visions with Joseph (p. 267). For purposes of presentation, Baugh divides his analysis into two time periods: 1820–1830 and 1831–1844. For analytical purposes, he classifies the experiences into three types: "personal visitations of deity"; visions received with the aid of interpreters, the seer stone, or the Urim and Thummim; and "visions opened to the mind" (p. 268).

When I was an undergraduate at Brigham Young University, there was at one time a display in the previous Joseph Smith Building—based, I believe, on the research of H. Donl Peterson—that claimed Moroni had visited Joseph thirty-one times. I remember the number because I was shocked by how large it was; I had had no idea there had been so many such visits. Peterson later indicated in print that, while the total number of such visits is uncertain, twenty-two have been documented.[11] Baugh mentions Peterson's work and claims "over twenty"

10. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 118 and 588 n. 35.

11. See H. Donl Peterson, "Moroni: Joseph Smith's Tutor," *Ensign,* January 1992, 22–29.

appearances, appropriately reflecting this later and more conservative approach to this class of visitations (pp. 268–69).

Included in Baugh's catalog are numerous angelic ministrants not specifically identified, experiences with Satan, additional visions of the Father and the Son together or the Son alone, visions of the future, and visionary information regarding temple patterns.[12]

Steven C. Harper's "'A Pentecost and Endowment Indeed': Six Eyewitness Accounts of the Kirtland Temple Experience" (pp. 327–71) situates the remarkable outpouring of the Spirit at the Kirtland Temple in 1836 as a series of events in continuity with the Pentecost described in Acts 2. Most students know in general outline the nature of these experiences, but to read these actual eyewitness accounts makes the Kirtland Temple experiences all the more vivid. The essay includes a table summarizing the features of the experiences in the accounts, including washing and anointing ordinances, the Hosanna Shout, solemn assemblies, visions, gifts of prophecy, speaking in tongues, and the washing of feet, all culminating in the April 3 vision of the Savior and the reception of priesthood keys from ministering angels (p. 332).

The final contribution to the volume is Lynne Watkins Jorgensen, "The Mantle of the Prophet Joseph Passes to Brother Brigham: One Hundred Twenty-one Testimonies of a Collective Spiritual Witness" (pp. 373–480). This is another of the pieces that I read in its original form in the pages of *BYU Studies*. In some ways this is the least significant of the articles in the book. Does it really matter whether numerous Saints saw something of Joseph in Brigham that day? What truly matters is that the keys were passed from Joseph to Brigham, not whether Brigham was perceived as Joseph.

This article is, however, a very useful corrective to simplistic understandings of this event. I recall that, at the MHA meetings in Kirtland a few years ago, in a session on Joseph Smith biography, this topic of the passing of the mantle of the Prophet from Joseph to Brigham came

12. The discussion of the so-called Cumorah cave (pp. 278–79) would have benefited by a citation of Cameron Packer's *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* article on the subject. Cameron J. Packer, "Cumorah's Cave," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13/1–2 (2004): 50–57.

up, and the discussion that ensued was a sort of microcosm of the different approaches taken to this issue. Someone in the audience mentioned that the Saints all perceived Joseph in Brigham that day. This is probably a common, if simplistic, view of the event. The assumption is that everyone had this experience and that we must have good contemporaneous evidence of that fact. Then someone raised his hand and challenged the original comment, with the perspective that there is no evidence that the event occurred at all, that it is a sort of Mormon urban legend. Finally, a number of people, referencing the Jorgensen article from *BYU Studies,* gave a more realistic recounting of the experience. Most people present at that event did not make a written record of the day's events at all, and the accounts of the transformation of Brigham that we do have are later recollections, not contemporaneous accounts. But, with those limitations understood, we actually do have a substantial number of accounts by individuals who did in some way perceive Joseph in Brigham. The more cautious approach to the event suggested by the documentation collected by Jorgensen takes us on a course between the naive simplicity of youthful assumptions and the nihilistic cynicism of one who has been burned by such expectations one too many times. I myself traveled over time from the naive, simplistic position to the more cynical, nihilistic position, and finally to a more balanced understanding of this event, thanks to Jorgensen's research. So I appreciate this contribution to the volume very much, as it had a profound influence on my own perception of the events of that day.

In conclusion, this is an excellent, well-conceived, well-organized, well-researched, and well-written volume—one for which there is certainly a need. Everyone with an interest in the origins of Mormonism, whether as a matter of faith or simply as an academic interest, should read this book.