

"Joseph the Historian"
Presented at the Joseph Smith Restoration Conference 2020

Meridian, Idaho
June 20, 2020
Denver C. Snuffer, Jr.

I don't have any computers to run amok with. My wife pointed out that I know how to do that but commended me for having the self-discipline not to do so.

Joseph Smith was a better historian than historians—was a better and more capable describer of the truth of events that took place than people that devote their lives to the skill of becoming a historian.

In the Book of Mormon record, Nephi wanted to understand more clearly the vision that his father Lehi had received. So, Nephi prayed to have a similar experience so that he could comprehend what his father had seen. Nephi records in his record an account of what Lehi told him, and then he records in his record his own experience saying the same thing that was shown to his father. He stops his account because he was told he was forbidden from proceeding with a complete account of the things that he had seen. And so, he interrupts his account, and he doesn't complete it.

Nephi was a literate man—he could read not only the Hebrew language and command that, but he also was familiar with another language in which the Plates of Brass were recorded (which you get all the way down to the time of King Benjamin and Mosiah before you find out that the Plates of Brass were in fact written in an Egyptian language). Then the Nephites used a modification of the Egyptian language that they called Reformed Egyptian, which is now a third language that Nephi would have been familiar with. And so, I have to assume, as a literate man, that at the time the incidents happened in which Nephi had the heavens open to him that he would've created some kind of a record contemporaneous with that event.

Then they migrate across the peninsula of Arabia to the shore, a journey of some four years. Then they settle down, build a boat, and they migrate to the Americas (likely a route that stayed close to the shore) and went around the Horn of Africa, where there was this horrible storm that lasted until the brothers relented and finally un-tied Nephi from the mast. And then they sailed up and around—and ultimately passed British Isles and Greenland, Iceland—into the Americas, where they would have settled.

Things remained (as an intact family) until the death of Lehi, at which point the older brothers resented the younger brother's status among them, and it became intolerable (in fact, life-threatening) for the group to remain together, and so, they separated. And after the separation, Nephi prepared what are called the Large Plates of Nephi, on which he recorded the history.

Many, many years later Nephi got a commandment: make some small plates, and on the small plates, you don't record the history. You only record the things that are sacred to you. And so, the Small Plates of Nephi were prepared by Nephi to record the religious history some three or four **decades following** the time when the vision had occurred before their migration across the Arabian peninsula. During that ensuing three or four decades, Nephi records what he had accomplished in the interim that allowed him to write the sacred history.

*And upon these I write the things of my soul and many of the scriptures which are engraven upon the plates of brass. For my soul delighteth in the scriptures, and my heart pondereth them and writeth them for the learning and the profit of my children. Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord, and my heart **pondereth continually** upon the things which **I have seen and heard**. (2 Nephi 3:6 RE, emphasis added)*

Four decades of reflection went into the account that Nephi put onto the Small Plates of Nephi. This account was so good that when Mormon abridged the Book of Mormon and Joseph translated the beginning of the Book of Mormon consisting of the abridgment that had been made by Mormon, those were deliberately lost. It took a whole series of events (and the Lord foresaw those events would take place), but that was lost, and in its place, the Small Plates of Nephi were substituted.

Now, the Small Plates of Nephi were put at the **end** of the plates. The abridgment of Mormon was how the translation process began. All of the abridgment of Mormon was completed (and the beginning had been lost) before the translation of the Small Plates began, which would then become the beginning of the Book of Mormon. These testimonial words of Nephi were so important that they not only were something that Mormon was not permitted to abridge and include, but they were also withheld in the translation process until Joseph Smith had reached the greatest part of his competency in serving as a person with the gift and power of God to translate the record. And so, the beginning of the Book of Mormon, now, is 40 years of reflection by Nephi upon the things which he had seen and heard—and the account is the greatest, most powerful, most accurate translation rendered by Joseph Smith after obtaining competency in the rest of the record.

So, if we had Nephi's record that he put down contemporaneous with the events, before the trans-Arabian migration, would it have read like what we have in the Small Plates of Nephi in First and Second Nephi? If we had, instead, the Large Plates of Nephi's account (that perhaps was written 20 years after the incident and 20 years before the Small Plates), would **that** account of what it was that Nephi experienced read the same as what we get on the Plates of Nephi?

So, what we do have is the final product of decades of reflection to put into words the things that he saw and he heard. And in the process of putting together his testimony, he tells you, "This is what happened to me, and this is what I'm permitted to say about what it is that happened to me. However, the Lord told me a whole lot more which I was forbidden

from saying, but he mentioned that it had been shown to others. And so, here's my testimony that I **can** tell you. Now let me incorporate the words of another prophet. And I will apply them, and I will liken them, and I will tell you the rest of what the Lord showed me by resorting to the words of Isaiah. And if you can't get what I'm telling you, then in the final chapters of the Second Book of Nephi, I'm gonna give you the interpretive key so that you can get that I'm not talking about **Isaiah**, and I'm not employing the testimony of Isaiah as Isaiah's words. I'm adopting and I'm incorporating the words of Isaiah as **my** testimony of what I saw and what I heard that I was forbidden from writing so that you can understand what it was that was shown unto me.”

Well, I'm talking about the **First** Vision. Joseph Smith experienced something in the Spring of 1820 that Joseph Smith likely did not write down that Spring. And when he did make a first attempt to record it, what he recorded was incomplete and inadequate. Joseph Smith relied on scribes; he relied on others. He had an actual historian that was called to record the events of the Church. And in 1838 in Far West, the entire presidency in Zion...

(That's what it was called. There was a Church President; that was Joseph—and they were in Kirtland; and there was a presidency in Zion—that was in Missouri; David Whitmer was the head of that; Oliver Cowdery was one of the counselors in that First Presidency. In fact, that had been who would be the successor to Joseph Smith—identified as his successor in the event of Joseph's death.)

Except that in 1838, David Whitmer left the Church, and Oliver Cowdery left the Church, and members of the Quorum of the Twelve left the Church. In fact, the entire presidency in Zion was compromised. And the Church Historian left the Church and took with him all of the Church's records.

And Joseph wrote a letter to John Whitmer asking for the records back, but the letter doesn't appear to make a legitimate effort at trying to recover it. He more or less says (sort of like General Moroni writing back to the king when he wasn't getting support for the army), Joseph writes to him: “You are a lousy historian; there's nothing you've got that's of any value. It's just a pile of crap, but I want it back. Will you give it to me?” And with such persuasive prose, of course, John Whitmer didn't do anything.

So, Joseph Smith is left with the dilemma of what to do about the history of the Church in 1838—when the Church is in complete turmoil, when he's lost his successors, when members of the Quorum of the Twelve are signing affidavits to try and put him in prison, when everything is a mess—and he sets about in this period of conflict to write the history of the Church, starting over again.

At this point, Joseph Smith has had 18 years to reflect upon the things which he had seen and heard. At this point, Joseph faces the daunting task of trying to restate (again) the reasons for and the legitimacy of the Restoration that commenced in the Spring of 1820. At this point, Joseph Smith has finished the translation of the Book of Mormon. He's had numerous revelations and visions. Most of the work (all but a tiny fraction of what we find

in the Doctrine and Covenants) had already been received and recorded by revelation. Joseph Smith was now an accomplished Prophet who had slightly less than two decades to reflect back upon what it was that occurred in the Spring of 1820. He has the ability to put it into context that his expanded mind could put into writing in a way that he previously could not have attained unto. And fortunately, the circumstances were such that he was forced to do just that.

So, when you read the Joseph Smith History, what you're reading is the mind of a 33-year-old Prophet that has been tempered by persecution, tempered by betrayal, tempered by years of service in a public setting in which the opponents have railed against him, the critics have shouted him down, and his own closest members have forsaken him and turned their heel against him. And in **that** circumstance, with the sober reflection of nearly two decades, he sits down to write:

*Owing to the many reports...[that] have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons in relation to the rise and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, all of which have been designed by the authors thereof to militate against its character as a church and its progress in the world, [I've] been induced to write **this** history, so as to disabuse the public mind and put all inquirers after truth into possession of the facts as they have transpired, in relation both to myself and the Church, as far as I have such facts in possession. (Joseph Smith History 1:1 RE)*

Well, one of the facts that Joseph Smith did not have in possession was the **date** of the First Vision, as we heard in that video. So, he says, "It was a beautiful morning. It was Springtime. It was 1820, but I can't give you the date." If he could have, he would have. He knew the date on which the visit by ~~the angel Moroni~~ the angel Nephi (later renamed Moroni—he has an alias, "previously known as Nephi"; you wonder if there's a mugshot that he's trying to avoid having identified on the Internet by the assumption of a new name)—he knows that date, and he can fix that date. Probably in the wisdom of the Lord, Joseph didn't know the date of the First Vision so that John Lefgren and John Pratt could perform the research and do the work in order to find the date on which the First Vision took place. Things like "losing the 116 pages" are done in the wisdom of the Lord, and things like "not knowing the date on which the First Vision took place" are likewise done in the wisdom of the Lord.

But Joseph Smith records the First Vision account, and one of the chief arguments by the people who want to detract and criticize Joseph is that it's different from other accounts. Well, if I had Nephi's original notes, and if I had the Large Plates of Nephi... In fact, if I had the Large Plates and Mormon's abridgment of the Large Plates, I'll bet I could advance exactly the same argument against the First and Second Books of Nephi. Because what you get in the final version that we have in print is 40 years of reflection/40 years of mastering the process/of understanding the things which he had seen and heard—and therefore, it was the most worthy account. And that's what we have in the Book of Mormon. And Joseph's most worthy account is what we have when he was put to the extremity of having to re-create the history of the Church after John Whitmer had stolen it and run away.

Now, there's a command given in the Sermon on the Mount—Christ speaking to everyone that wants to follow Him and obey His new and higher law. He rebukes all of us and warns all of us and commands all of us: Don't call your brother a fool. (So, there's a commandment—I can't call you foolish folks a fool.) Christ was resurrected and spent the better part of the day of His resurrection walking on the road to Emmaus with Cleopas and another (likely Luke) on the road, in which He asked them why they were so downcast. And they said, “What, are you new around here? You haven't heard? There was this fellow—we thought Him to be the Messiah. He was crucified, and now it's been three days since then.” And Jesus says, “You fools and slow of heart. Don't you realize that everything in the Law in Moses, everything required that these things be done?” So Christ, immediately after being resurrected, violates the commandment about “don't call people fools.” And as a lawyer, one of the things you try to figure out is: How do you reconcile differences in the law? And the reconciliation is this: **We** can't call each other fools, but the judge of all mankind has the absolute right to call anyone a fool who's a damn fool. So, having said that—

One of the things about Joseph Smith that the Lord said (while he was in Liberty Jail, by revelation) was to Joseph: “Fools shall have you in derision. But the wise and the noble are gonna constantly seek blessings from under your hand and counsel.” So, one of the things that fools have done with the First Vision is to say Joseph wrote different versions of the First Vision; therefore, it wasn't true. Well, here's one of the things that he says (after what Adrian put up a moment ago, I'll start at the end of that):

They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof. (Joseph Smith History 2:5)

Okay, all of that language... All of that language that is put into the mouth of Christ in the First Vision comes from Isaiah/comes from Paul/comes from Scripture. Okay? So he's just... Joseph is trying to convey what happened at the First Vision, and he's putting into the mouth of the Lord in this first encounter all of these scriptural quotes strung together as one statement (and James, too).

*He again forbade me to join with any of them, and **many other things** did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time. (Ibid, emphasis added)*

What you've got from Joseph Smith is a condensed effort, using the words of other prophets to put into the mouth of the Lord—conceptually—exactly what the Lord was attempting to achieve in the First Vision with Joseph, after nearly two decades of reflection on how it might best be put.

There are at least two different ways in which we get the words of Scripture. One way is when the Lord actually **dictates** the words. If the Lord actually dictates the words, then what you're going to get is a statement that the prophet himself may not understand. It may require him years of work in order to figure out what those words mean. A second way in which a revelation can come is a flood of light in which the person is left like Father

Lehi: *he saw and heard much* (1 Nephi 1:3 RE). And that's all Lehi's gonna tell you about it. Or Moses on the mount: he saw all of the inhabitants of the Earth from the beginning unto the end, and not one thing is withheld from his view (see Genesis 1:6 RE).

Okay. Can you organize that into a theme? Can you get... Can you give me some... Can you give me some detail about that? Or you can do as Joseph Smith does in the reflection that he does on the First Vision, and you can say: Many other things did I see which I cannot at this time put out there.

Nephi had 40 years of reflection before he put together his First and Second Book of Nephi. During that time of grappling, who knows how many efforts he made, how many times he tried to articulate it, and how differently he may have put it on different occasions. But what we get in the First Vision by Joseph is an attempt to convey, to the best of his ability, the truth of what came through to him, that in 1838, when he was writing, would be the most meaningful for people who are following the events of the Restoration and trying to understand that the work was afoot and that God was laboring with mankind once again. And so, it's relevant to the circumstances in which Joseph Smith found himself in 1838.

One of the things fools have done is point out he wrote different versions, and a second thing that fools have done is to argue he got the chronology wrong. Well, no, he didn't. He was absolutely right about the Spring of 1820, and through research, we've been able to confirm and find it. Fools also say, "Wait a minute—the burned-over district revivalism was not contemporaneous with the Spring of 1820." Okay... (Now, I'm inclined to resort to my Idaho vocabulary and call it something other than bovine feces.) But here's the problem with that argument. Joseph Smith is writing the account as a 33-year-old man of the recollection that he had of the events taking place as a 14-year-old—in his 14th year—in 1820.

This is a fairly isolated area in Palmyra, New York. Great upheavals that are caused by revivalism in the burned-over district would not settle down simply because tent preachers may or may not have been setting up shop in Palmyra, New York in the Spring of 1820. But the ripples of what they had done would certainly still be reverberating, and in the mind of a 14-year-old observer of the events, Joseph is giving you an absolutely accurate retelling, insofar as he was in possession of the facts of exactly what it was that he experienced as a 14-year-old boy. And so, if you're foolish enough to advance that argument against a prophet of God in order to say, "I reject the testimony of this man," then you deserve the Lord's characterization of yourself as a fool holding in derision a prophet of God. And you deserve to merit the results of that foolishness.

Well, the First Vision that occurred in the Spring of 1820 set in motion things that continue—to this day—to warrant the most serious of inquiry and the most serious of reflection. Time and time again... And I brought a few Scriptures with me, but I'm not going to let this go over; I'm gonna end this on time. Time and time again, the Scriptures take us up to the point that we have an adequate foundation from which to conclude that something profound, something sacred, and something wonderful took place. And then a

veil is drawn over it. It's as if the testimony that we're given in Scripture is deliberately designed to provoke your curiosity, to provoke your inquiry, to provoke your own search into and contemplation of the things of God—deeply, soberly, prayerfully.

I wanna read just one of them that I hope provokes your interest in inquiring further of the Lord.

Jesus groaned within himself, and saith, Father, I am troubled because of the wickedness of the people of the house of Israel. And when he had said these words, he himself also knelt upon the earth, and behold, he prayed unto the Father, and the things which he prayed cannot be written; and the multitude did bear record, who heard him. And after this manner do they bear record: The eye hath [not] seen, neither hath the ear heard before, so great and marvelous things as we saw and heard Jesus speak unto the Father. And no tongue cannot speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as we both saw and heard Jesus speak. And no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard him pray for us unto the Father. (3 Nephi 8:4 RE)

That sounds pretty interesting. That should arouse your curiosity. That should make you want to hear such a prayer and to witness such a thing—because mortals who wrote this record “saw and heard.” It's not that it is forbidden from anyone to see or to hear. It's that some things that are seen and heard are forbidden from being put on public display to be profaned by people who will do far more injury to themselves by acting the part of the fool in relation to them than they already do to themselves by mocking and holding in derision things that are most sacred that **are** on public view.

So, the vision of the Three Degrees of Glory ends with these words:

*But great and marvelous are the works of the Lord, and the mysteries of his kingdom which he shewed unto us, which surpasseth all understanding, in glory, and in might, and in dominion, which he commanded us we should not write while we were yet in the spirit, and are not lawful for men to utter, neither is man capable to make them known, for they are only to be seen and understood by the power of the holy ghost, which God bestows on those who love him and purifieth themselves before him, to whom he grants the privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves, that through the power and manifestation of the spirit, **while in the flesh**, they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory. (T&C 69:29, emphasis added)*

—not something to happen in the great and glorious afterlife but to be done while in the flesh. And it's purposeful. It has a relationship between the exposure of the individual to the information about these things in the flesh, so as to preserve and to prepare them for what will take place in the world of Glory, that they might be able to occupy a position there and do something meaningful to help advance the work of the Lord.

We've spent too long, as believers in the Restoration, quibbling over who's got the button. That "button, button, who's got the button" game that was put up on the board awhile ago. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," although what? That's now censored. So, "Dude, where's my car?" Oops, someone gets that...

Okay, so—it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter who's got the button, because I can tell you none of them do. If they had it, they really wouldn't talk about it. They wouldn't put it on display. They wouldn't boast themselves. They wouldn't go about chest-thumping. They wouldn't buy a toupe to put on their elderly chest in order to expose chest hair and the gold necklace to say with (turn the reverberation on...), "I am the man." Because if they really were the man, their interest would not be in being celebrated; their interest would be in helping to elevate others.

Joseph Smith grew to hate what he had created in the organized Church. You see, it was the positions of authority within the Church that created the crisis that resulted in the war in Missouri and the apostasy of the leadership in Far West that created the mess that got Joseph Smith arrested for treason. It was the position of authority within the hierarchy that gave legitimacy to the affidavits that were saying that Joseph Smith was, in fact, a treasonous traitor. And so, sitting in Liberty Jail and contemplating everything that had gone on, Joseph Smith took the hierarchical model that had turned on him—the model that had created the presumption that if you were in a position of authority, then you obviously had credibility and throw-weight and power and influence—and he threw it all away with *no power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood; only by meekness, gentleness, persuasion, long-suffering, and pure knowledge, that will greatly enlarge the soul* (see T&C 139:6). He changed the paradigm in the dungeon in Liberty Jail, and there he said, "Your position doesn't matter."

And a true messenger sent from God, interested in the salvation of others, is never going to stand up and say, "I need to be supported by your tithes and offering. I need to be the boss, and I need to jerk you around and tell you which way's up, and you shouldn't question. You shouldn't have any thoughts of your own. Those thoughts are mischievous, and if you get too far with that, we're gonna excommunicate your ass," but...

That whole approach was thrown out in Liberty Jail, and then when he talks to the Relief Society sisters in 1842, he says, "Your minds in times past have been darkened because you're depending too much upon the prophet. You're neglecting the duties that are devolving upon yourselves." He's rescinding authority. He's saying, "Let's take everyone—myself, Joseph, included—and let's say everyone is on exactly the same level. There's no greater; there's no lesser." The question is who preaches truth? What is it that comes out of the teachings of a man that appeals to your heart, that appeals to your soul?

Jesus didn't come on the road of Emmaus to put on any kind of display, and He didn't glow in the dark. In fact, their eyes were holden that they could not recognize who it was that walked alongside them. It wasn't until he departed from them that they said, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he spoke with us yet in the way?" That! That is the sign. That is

the evidence. That is how you know the words contained within them, the power of God unto redemption. And when I read the First Vision, I read a record that to me resonates with the truth, even without the research having been done to confirm that it occurred in May 26th of 1820.

[Audience Member]: March.

March, yeah. Yeah, it was before April. It was in March. Even without that research having been done, I knew that only fools would criticize and hold Joseph in derision. I have never been disappointed in the search into the life of Joseph and the teachings of Joseph.

Nephi saw and heard unspeakable things and found a way to make that information available public by using the words of Isaiah and then, at the end, giving a targum in order to explain what it was he just did for you in the words that he'd been quoting.

Joseph Smith saw and heard things that he couldn't at that time speak of, and throughout his ministry, he would get up and expound upon a passage in Genesis or words that show up in Ezekiel. And he would lift the veil a bit, and he talked about how he always delighted in uncovering some new thing using the Scriptures. Joseph Smith practically confined his sermonizing to the Old and New Testaments because of the audience. Had the audience been a little different, he may have expanded what it was that he used as his text material (from the Old and New Testaments) into the Book of Mormon (because he rarely cited it), and he may have expanded further into some of his own revelations had he been around long enough and had the people been prepared adequately in order to receive it.

You have to wonder how often Joseph looked at Christ teaching the Nephites—getting to the point that he saw they were saturated and said, “I can't tell you what I've been sent here to tell you because you're just not ready. Here's what we'll do. Let's send you home tonight and prepare your minds, and maybe tomorrow we can get there,” and then he has the idea, “Hey, bring any sick here.” And they bring the sick, and he heals them; and “Hey, bring the children.” And they bring the children, and he ministers to the children so that He (in an audience whose hearts are pure enough) can convey information; and the others—the older audience members—can be voyeurs, looking in on the sermon that He wanted to conclude.

Well, I think—just like Nephi used Isaiah—Joseph Smith used the Scriptures, and he was able (by teaching the Scriptures) to lift the veil on things that he saw and heard that were not otherwise permitted to be put out there. And so, when you get to something like the King Follett Discourse, you may be getting a peek into what (in section 76—the vision of the Three Degrees of Glory) the words of that were forbidden from being recorded. He found another way in which to testify about these things.

It's one of the tricks that Nephi used, that Joseph used, and the question always is: At what point are you hearing about things from beyond the veil that are forbidden from being otherwise put out in the public?

Well, let me end by saying Joseph Smith was not only a better historian of his own life, but one of the most remarkable things that Joseph Smith gave us was also a more accurate history of the father of the righteous in the book of Abraham. The book of Abraham is one of the single most important revelations that have ever been handed out. It's been badly handled by people who defend the faith. It's been left subject to criticism that is so unwarranted that, once again, you have fools holding in derision a work that should not be criticized—should be upheld, should be studied, and should be prayerfully approached. Maybe, at some point, I'll mount a defense of that.

I'm out of time. Thank you for coming. Thank you for organizing this. Thank all those who have participated in the talks that have been given in the conference. I really appreciate how despite... I mean, Tausha never learns the same lesson. She has to repeat it—year in, year out. This stuff is kind of brutal on her, and you know, sometimes we get a phone call or an email that kind of reflects the Lamentations of Tausha about trying this again. I mean, Boise State University short-sheeted her, speakers declined to travel, things just became awkward. And you know, she's only set back for a few hours, and then she's right back at it and persisted through. So, for everyone who's helped, including all the technical people involved, thank you for organizing it again. Thank you.