



Early Mormon Documents, Volume 3

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In this collection of primary sources, editor Dan Vogel offers readers the pleasures and frustrations that greet professional historians. Raw and uncensored, all the documents upon which a history of Mormon origins could be based are here, with strengths and weaknesses inherent in any eyewitness account. They are colorful and detailed, opinionated and inconsistent. In tone they range from ultra-devotional to antagonistic. Yet each also contributes an important piece to the overall puzzle.

Note the personal odyssey of Ezra Thayre (see below) which tells about the world view of that place and time. Yet what should readers make of Thayre's claim that an angel taught him how to blow a trumpet? Similarly in Solomon Chamberlain's frank admission that he did not know whether "some genie or good spirit" had led him to Palmyra, New York, should one read into this a literary metaphor or an actual belief in supernatural guidance?

In part, the value one places on a source is determined by the questions one hopes to have answered by it. If one wants to know how the public initially reacted to the Book of Mormon, then the Rochester Gem's light, gossipy report is welcome, though it is not a fair representation of the Book of Mormon's contents.

Compare this to the more thoughtful work of Palmyra native Orsamus Turner. Though not a Mormon, he nevertheless strove to understand what effect Joseph Smith's religiously divided parentage had on his life and church, a topic that remains of interest today. However, Turner cannot provide the details offered by those who were more intimately acquainted with the Smith family.

Nor should one expect to find a witness who is uncontaminated by his or her environment or by the tug of folklore. For example, it was reported that two pranksters one night convinced Calvin Stoddard—husband of Joseph Smith's sister, Sophronia—that God was speaking to him from their hiding place near his door. No doubt this happened: that is, the jokesters probably played this trick. What is not known without corroboration is exactly how Stoddard responded, and there is thereby a high probability of embellishment.

People interpret "facts" according to prior expectations. For example, rumors that circulated among church members included the claim that "pyrotechnics" lit the sky when Joseph Smith removed the gold plates from the Hill Cumorah. These reminiscences—despite the fact that they were remembered years after the fact—describe everything from what seems to be shooting stars to one man's memory of the literal armies of heaven marching across the firmament.

Therefore readers will find themselves making judgments along with the editor about which details are most valid, aided by Vogel's comprehensive annotation. It is his hope that readers will consult the sources in tandem rather than in isolation, because only out of this collective pool of information can a reliable reconstruction of events be made.

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