

Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?

Mark Ashurst-McGee

Over the last two decades, historians have reconsidered the origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the context of the early American tradition of treasure hunting. Well into the nineteenth century there were European Americans hunting for buried wealth. Some believed in treasures that were protected by magic spells or guarded by preternatural beings. Joseph Smith, founding prophet of the Church, had participated in several treasure-hunting expeditions in his youth. The church that he later founded rested to a great degree on his claim that an angel named Moroni had appeared to him in 1823 and showed him the location of an ancient scriptural record akin to the Bible, which was inscribed on metal tablets that looked like gold. After four years, Moroni allowed Smith to recover these “golden plates” and translate their characters into English. It was from Smith’s published translation—the Book of Mormon—that members of the fledgling church became known as “Mormons.” For historians of Mormonism who have treated the golden plates as treasure, Moroni has become a treasure guardian. In this essay, I argue for the historical validity of the traditional understanding of Moroni as an angel.

In May of 1985, a letter to the editor of the *Salt Lake Tribune* posed this question: “In keeping with the true spirit (no pun intended) of historical facts, should not the angel Moroni atop the Mormon Temple be replaced with a white salamander?”¹ Of course, the pun was intended. Document forger Mark Hofmann’s “salamander letter” was at the height of public attention at this time. Allegedly penned by Book of Mormon witness Martin Harris, the letter has Harris describing Moroni as a white salamander that bit

MARK ASHURST-MCGEE is a graduate student in history at Arizona State University. He received his M.A. in history from Utah State University, Logan, Utah in 2000.

Joseph Smith and then transformed into a capricious spirit guardian of the golden plates. This letter and other Hofmann forgeries portrayed Joseph Smith's early religious experiences in terms of treasure seeking and magic. The startling new documents caused Latter-day Saint historians to reconsider the founding events of the Restoration.²

Many clamored for a radical reinterpretation of the origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. LDS historian Ronald W. Walker responded to the din: "As quieter perspectives inevitably settle in, the breathless 'antithesis' gives way to a more sedate 'synthesis.' During this second phase, what once seemed so revolutionary is reconciled and merged with the still valid legacies of the past. To illustrate, our understanding of Joseph Smith's encounters with Moroni will not be insightful if we focus narrowly on Martin Harris's 'trickster spirit' and forget the several contemporaneous statements . . . that speak of Cumorah's 'angel.' These apparent conflicts must be weighed, somehow harmonized, and molded into a new, more complex understanding."³ Walker predicted that after a reevaluation of the treasure seeking and magical influences, historians would return to the traditional story as the most accurate interpretation of Mormon origins.⁴

Eventually, Hofmann's forgery was exposed. The white salamander fell from grace with its creator. But Walker had also rightly noted that "the question of whether the Smith family participated in money digging and magic does not rely on the recently found letters [the Hofmann forgeries]. The weight of evidence, *with or without them*, falls on the affirmative side of the question."⁵ Early Mormon history still needed to be reconsidered. And so historians continued to explore the influence of treasure seeking in particular and magic in general. In 1986, Signature Books published Dale Morgan's unfinished history of early Mormonism, which contained his argument that Mormonism had evolved from Joseph's treasure seeking and magic. Morgan had grown up in the LDS church, but lost his faith and became disaffected.⁶ In 1987, D. Michael Quinn produced *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*. Although a believing Latter-day Saint, Quinn perceived a strong influence of magical tradition in early Mormonism.⁷ A few years later, in 1994, H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, former authors of anti-Mormon literature, presented a new-and-improved, kinder, gentler anti-Mormonism with their book, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*.⁸ Each of these books drew heavily on the early American history of treasure seeking and magic to interpret the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

In particular, these books argued that Joseph Smith originally spoke of Moroni as a treasure guardian. It was years later—these authors held—that

Smith's creative mind or developing exigencies transformed Moroni into an angel. Morgan, Quinn, and Marquardt and Walters all portrayed Moroni's initial visits to Joseph as treasure-seeking experiences. They cast his interactions with Moroni as encounters between a treasure seer and a treasure guardian. Then, they argued that as Joseph matured into the leader of an organized church, he reformulated his story and its meaning to better suit his needs.⁹ In fact, whereas Latter-day Saints usually refer to Moroni as "the angel Moroni," in *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, he is called "the treasure guardian Moroni."¹⁰ For Morgan, as with Marquardt and Walters, revealing Moroni as a treasure guardian showed that Joseph's religious claims were illegitimate.



Frontispiece of Pomoroey Tucker's Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1867). Here, Moroni appears as a cross between a Greco-Roman tutelary goddess and a Judeo-Christian angel. Tucker's frontispiece illustrates the propensity for detractors to misrepresent the accounts of Moroni's visits to Joseph Smith. Smith described Moroni as a wingless, male angel.

Photo from Merrill Library, Utah State University

These revisionist histories carried out the explorations into treasure seeking and magic that the Hofmann forgeries had initially sparked. However, they did so at the expense of other interpretations—and in some cases at the expense of reliable sources and historical standards. These authors did not go beyond the "breathless antithesis" to synthesis. The revolutionary was not reconciled or merged with the still-valid, traditional understanding of early Mormonism. In sum, these works did not provide the new and complex understanding that Ronald Walker had anticipated.

These revisionist histories carried out the explorations into treasure seeking and magic that the Hofmann forgeries had initially sparked. However, they did so at the expense of other interpretations—and in some cases at the expense of reliable sources and historical standards. These authors did not go beyond the "breathless antithesis" to synthesis. The revolutionary was not reconciled or merged with the still-valid, traditional understanding of early Mormonism. In sum, these works did not provide the new and complex understanding that Ronald Walker had anticipated.

And so—strangely enough—this area of Mormon history finds itself today in a position not unlike that described by Walker during the heyday of

the salamander. In this essay, I reassert his position with reference to Moroni in particular and to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in general. Although Joseph Smith may have understood Moroni to some extent as a treasure guardian, this was a secondary level of meaning for him. An application of basic historical standards to relevant sources confirms that Joseph understood Moroni primarily as an angel in the context of a divine restoration.¹¹ In this essay, I will attempt to demonstrate this position.

The problem addressed here maintains its validity regardless of one's opinion of Joseph Smith and his claims. The question is whether Moroni evolved from a treasure guardian into an angel in Joseph's telling of the event.¹² Before I proceed to answer this question, it will be useful to review the early American practice of treasure seeking and Joseph Smith's involvement in this practice.

Treasure Seeking

For the most part, the quest for buried wealth and its associated belief system has slipped away into a forgotten world. Though strange to us today, treasure-seeking beliefs probably influenced hundreds of thousands of Europeans and thousands of early European Americans. Many early Americans believed that treasures had been secreted in the earth by ancient inhabitants of the continent—by Spanish explorers, by pirates, or even by the dwarves of European mythology. Treasure hunters usually looked for caves and lost mines or dug into hills and Native American mounds to find these hidden deposits. A legend, a treasure map, or a dream of buried wealth initiated the hunt. Local specialists were enlisted to use their divining rods or seer stones to locate the treasure. To hide from the scrutiny of skeptics and the notice of other treasure seekers, they worked under the cover of darkness.

Gathering at the designated spot, the treasure seekers staked out magical circles around the treasure. They used Bible passages, prayers, hymns and incantations, ritual swords and other magical items, or even propitiatory animal sacrifices to appease or fend off preternatural guardians of the treasure. Excavation usually commenced under a rule of silence. Should someone carelessly mutter or curse, the treasure guardian could penetrate the circle or carry the treasure away through the earth.¹³ For one reason or another, the treasure seekers usually returned home empty-handed.

Joseph Smith's Involvement in Treasure Seeking

In his 1839 history, Joseph Smith addressed the rumors regarding his

pursuit of buried wealth. Most Latter-day Saints are familiar with his account as found in the Pearl of Great Price:

In the month of October, 1825, I hired with an old gentleman by the name of Josiah Stool [Stowell], who lived in Chenango county, State of New York. He had heard something of a silver mine having been opened by the Spaniards in Harmony, Susquehanna county, State of Pennsylvania; and had, previous to my hiring to him, been digging, in order, if possible, to discover the mine. After I went to live with him, he took me, with the rest of his hands, to dig for the silver mine, at which I continued to work for nearly a month, without success in our undertaking, and finally I prevailed with the old gentleman to cease digging after it. Hence arose the very prevalent story of my having been a money-digger. (Joseph Smith—History 1:56)¹⁴

Although Joseph downplayed his involvement, he nevertheless admitted it.

Lucy Mack Smith, when dictating her history of the Smith family, explained that Stowell hired Joseph because “he possessed certain keys, by which he could discern things invisible to the natural eye.”¹⁵ Lucy later used the term “key” in her history to refer to the Urim and Thummim spectacles, which Joseph later obtained with the golden plates. She also used the term(s) “urim and thummim” to refer to Joseph’s seer stone(s).¹⁶

Later, Joseph’s apostles used this same terminology. For example, on 27 February 1841, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal a meeting of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles with Joseph Smith in the prophet’s home. “I had the privilege,” Woodruff wrote, “of seeing for the first time in my day the URIM & THUMMIM.” We know that Joseph had returned the spectacles to the angel Moroni over a decade earlier. Brigham Young’s journal account of the same meeting clarifies that Woodruff was writing about one of Joseph’s seer stones: “I met with the Twelve at brother Joseph’s. He conversed with us in a familiar manner on a variety of subjects . . . [and] he showed us his seer stone.”¹⁷ The terms “key” and “keys”—like the terms “urim” and “Urim and Thummim”—could be applied to seer stones and to the spectacles found with the golden plates.¹⁸ Since Stowell hired Joseph in 1825, two years before Joseph received the spectacles, the “keys” that Lucy mentioned were Joseph’s seer stones.

In 1826, Peter Bridgeman, Stowell’s nephew, attempted to stop his uncle’s participation in treasure seeking by hauling Joseph Smith into court on grounds of deception. However, Stowell testified in Joseph’s defense. Notes of the legal proceedings record Stowell’s testimony “that Prisoner [Joseph Smith] looked through [a seer] stone and described Josiah Stowels house and out houses, while at Palmyra at Simpson Stowels correctly . . . that he had been in company with prisoner digging for gold, and had the

most implicit faith in Prisoners skill.”¹⁹

According to Book of Mormon witness Martin Harris, Joseph also used his seer stone to try to find treasures near his home in Manchester, New York.²⁰ A number of former neighbors and other acquaintances from New York and Pennsylvania later recounted the Smith family’s involvement with treasure seeking.²¹ In fact, the people who tried to steal the plates from Joseph Smith in 1827 had hunted for treasure with him in earlier years. They viewed the ancient record as a treasure—as plates of *gold* rather than as inscribed tablets. Now that precious metal had finally been unearthed, they wanted their share.²² Before the Hofmann forgeries forced a serious consideration of Joseph’s involvement in the folk practices of his time, Latter-day Saints knew little of Joseph’s treasure seeking. LDS historian Richard L. Bushman notes that now, because of the efforts of believing scholars to understand these events, “the magical culture of nineteenth-century Yankees no longer seems foreign to the Latter-day Saint image of the Smith family.”²³

Treasure Guardians

Although treasure seeking was common during Joseph’s youth, by the end of his life, the practice had dwindled.²⁴ The accompanying belief system likewise faded away along with its lore of treasure guardians. The preternatural beings that guarded treasure took many forms. Most treasures were guarded by ghosts or spirits—usually deceased humans. This particular class of treasure guardians seems to have grown out of the practice of grave robbing. In many ancient societies, people were buried with their valuables so they could retain them in the next life. The dead did not take kindly, therefore, to anyone who tried to plunder their wealth. In fact, dying kings and nobles—hoping to protect their sepulchers from ransack—may have generated this treasure-guardian lore in an effort to frighten off tomb raiders.²⁵ Frequently, treasure-guarding ghosts were either the spirit of the person who had hidden the treasure or the spirit of a person who had been killed and deposited with the treasure to watch over it.²⁶ This latter scenario was considered the customary practice of pirates.²⁷ In some treasure tales, the unfortunate conscript lost his head.²⁸

The devil and his minions made up the next major group of treasure guardians.²⁹ These satanic guardians apparently owed their existence to the notion that God dwells in the heavens above the earth and the devil lives beneath the earth. Satan laid claim on the treasure deposited within his subterranean dominion.³⁰ Also, since burying treasure was often associated with greed, robbery, and murder, the devil found his way into many a treasure

tale.³¹ In 1825, a Palmyra newspaper explained the recent failure of one group to recover a buried treasure: “His Satanic Majesty, or some other invisible agent, appears to keep it under marching orders; for no sooner is it dug on to in one place, than it moves off like a ‘false delusive hope,’ to another still more remote.”³²

Animals formed the third most common class of guardians—dogs being the most common. There were treasures guarded by ghost dogs, headless dogs, yellow dogs with two tails, black dogs, scarlet dogs, and wolves. Other treasures were guarded by horses, bulls, a goat, a black cat, a black panther, a wild boar, and a big black hog with enormous white tusks.³³

There existed a large amphibian-reptilian assortment of animal treasure guardians.³⁴ For example, an old European tradition held that people who had hidden away treasures during their mortality could afterwards appear in the form of a toad to guard them.³⁵ About 1870, a company of treasure diggers from Niagara County, New York, were said to have been foiled by a large toad that threatened to kill them.³⁶ The amphibian-reptilian category of guardians extended beyond the natural species of this phyla complex—such as frogs, toads, lizards, and snakes—to include dragons and other monsters.³⁷ Many people are familiar with the dragon named Smaug, who guarded treasure in a mountain in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. Tolkien based Smaug on the classic dragon treasure guardian.³⁸

The dwarf is another classic medieval guardian of subterranean treasure that persisted into the nineteenth century.³⁹ Everyone who has heard the Germanic tale of Snow White remembers the seven dwarves who mined gold and copper from a treasure mountain.⁴⁰ Gnomes—who constituted one of the four classes of elemental spirits—lived within the earth and held charge of many underground treasures.⁴¹ In the early nineteenth century, treasure seer Zimri Allen looked into his seer stone and saw subterranean treasures near Rochester, New York, that had been buried by gnomes.⁴² We are even more familiar with a Celtic counterpart—the leprechaun—who hoards his pot of gold but can be affected by lucky charms.

Giants also appear here and there as guardians of treasure.⁴³ Because of their size and strength, they made formidable guardians.⁴⁴ According to early Mormon Martin Harris, members of Joseph Smith’s treasure-hunting group had encountered a giant: “Samuel Lawrence told me that while they were digging, a large man who appeared to be eight or nine feet high, came and sat on the ridge of the barn, and motioned to them that they must leave. They motioned back that they would not; but that they afterwards became frightened and did leave. . . . These things were real to them.”⁴⁵ The capricious or even malevolent efforts of the guardians helped explain the failure to secure buried treasure.



The dragon is a classical guardian in European treasure tales. Richard Huber, Treasury of Fantastic and Mythological Creatures: 1,087 Renderings from Historic Sources (New York: Dover Publications, 1981), plate 36, figure 5.

Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian

A few of Joseph Smith's former acquaintances described Moroni as a treasure guardian. For some modern historians, these accounts reflect Joseph's early understanding of his supernatural experiences—before he founded a church and changed the Moroni story to suit his needs. It is equally possible, however, that Joseph Smith's former neighbors changed the story to suit *their* needs. Did Joseph “baptize” Moroni, or was Moroni “defrocked” by others? As one recent critic poses the question: “Was he a magical guardian of a treasure or a biblical angel of the gospel?”⁴⁶ The question may be formally stated: *Did Joseph Smith's successive narra-*

tives eventually transform a treasure guardian into an angel, or did his antagonists' successive narratives eventually transform an angel into a treasure guardian? The position that Joseph changed his story may be called the treasure-guardian thesis. The position that Joseph's critics changed the story may be called the angel thesis.

Some early critics saw Moroni only as a treasure guardian. A few of the

modern historians who have emphasized that interpretation seem to acknowledge the possibility that Joseph understood Moroni as an angel as well, even in early years. The possibility of a dual interpretation needs further emphasis, for treasure guardians and angels are not necessarily mutually exclusive beings. “Angel” is listed as a category of treasure guardian in folklorist Stith Thompson’s classic *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*.⁴⁷ Likewise, “Treasure Angel” is listed in a recent bestiary by Carol Rose.⁴⁸ McIntosh’s *History of Wayne County, New York*, includes a circa 1840 story wherein a treasure guardian introduces itself as an angel to a company of treasure seekers by Rose (about twenty miles east of Palmyra).⁴⁹

Angels exist as guardians of treasure in Mormon thought as well. In 1837, Presiding Patriarch Joseph Smith Sr. blessed Wilford Woodruff: “Thou shalt have access to the treasure hid in the sand to assist thy necessities. An angel of God shall show thee the treasures of the earth that thou mayest have riches to assist thee in gathering many orphan Children to Zion.”⁵⁰ In 1877, President Brigham Young taught, “These treasures that are in the earth are carefully watched, they can be removed from place to place according to the good pleasure of Him who made them and owns them. He has his messengers at his service, and it is just as easy for an angel to remove the minerals from any part of one of these mountains to another, as it is for you and me to walk up and down in this hall.”⁵¹ Because angels can guard treasure in both Mormon and non-Mormon belief, there is no need to adopt an evolutionary model in which a treasure guardian is gradually changed into an angel. Book of Mormon witness David Whitmer may have blended both interpretations when he called Moroni “the angel, the guardian of the plates.”⁵²

This analysis, which attempts to fulfill Walker’s anticipation of a synthesizing of the two interpretations, requires a reformulation of this essay’s central question: *Was Moroni initially more meaningful to Joseph Smith as an angel or as a treasure guardian?* Or we might pose the question: *Did Joseph Smith initially understand Moroni as an angelic guardian or as a guardian angel?* This modified version of the question defines a modified “treasure-guardian thesis” and a modified “angel thesis.”

The treasure-guardian thesis	The angel thesis
Joseph’s original conception of Moroni more resembled a treasure guardian than an angel.	Joseph’s original conception of Moroni more resembled an angel than a treasure guardian.

Ronald W. Walker conjectured that the angel thesis would ultimately prevail. What does the historical record have to say?

To argue the treasure-guardian thesis, its proponents bring forth a number of historical sources that describe Moroni as a treasure guardian or a spirit. They contrast these accounts with the traditional account of Moroni's visits. Whereas Joseph's 1839 history presents Moroni as a divine messenger, these other accounts describe him as a treasure guardian—thus invalidating his claims to revelation from God. Abner Cole, editor of the *Palmyra Reflector*, composed the first extant source that explicitly identifies Moroni as a treasure guardian. "The Book of Pukei," his parody of the Book of Mormon, states that "Jo. made a league with the *spirit*, who afterwards turned out to be an angel."⁵³ Later, in the fourth installment of his "Gold Bible" series of news articles, Cole flatly stated the same as historical fact. "It will be borne in mind," he wrote, "that no *divine* interposition had been *dreamed* of at the period."⁵⁴ Then, in the following issue, Cole expounded the point: "It is well known that Jo Smith never pretended to have any communion with angels, until a long period after the *pretended* finding of his book, and that the juggling of himself or father, went no further than the pretended faculty of seeing wonders in a 'peep stone,' and the occasional interview with the spirit, supposed to have the custody of hidden treasures."⁵⁵ What was first given in parody was restated as fact and then forwarded as a historical framework.⁵⁶

Joseph and Hiel Lewis, cousins of Emma Hale, also claimed that Joseph initially described Moroni to them as a treasure guardian of gold plates. "In all this narrative," the Lewis brothers wrote, "there was not one word about 'visions of God,' or of angels, or heavenly revelations. All his information was by that dream, and that bleeding ghost. The heavenly visions and messages of angels, etc., contained in Mormon books, were after thoughts, revised to order."⁵⁷ Like Abner Cole, Joseph and Hiel Lewis articulated the theory that Moroni evolved from a treasure guardian into an angel.

Joseph's former neighbor Orlando Saunders disagreed. He stated that Joseph "always claimed that he saw the angel."⁵⁸ And, more importantly, Joseph and his family present Moroni as an angel from the start. Thus, Abner Cole and those detractors who followed him have nothing up on Joseph Smith. The detractors asserted that Joseph converted a treasure guardian into an angel. Joseph and others maintained that Moroni was always an angel. This takes us nowhere. Adequately addressing the question at hand requires an application of the basic standards of source criticism and good history.

Eyewitness Testimony

Eyewitness testimony is the most important standard of historical reliability. The only mortal eyewitness to Moroni's 1823–28 visits is Joseph Smith. All of Joseph's extant narrations maintain that Moroni is an angel. Aside from Joseph's accounts, the only other eyewitness accounts of Moroni's visits come from Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer. In June of 1829, Moroni showed the golden plates to these "three witnesses of the Book of Mormon." They consistently described Moroni as a Judeo-Christian angel in the context of a gospel restoration, not as a guardian spirit in the context of a treasure quest.⁵⁹ Therefore, all eyewitness accounts agree on Moroni's identity. Whether or not Smith, Cowdery, Whitmer, and Harris actually saw a preternatural being named Moroni, their accounts are firsthand. The Moroni story began with those who claim to have seen him.

Joseph and Hiel Lewis, who claimed to have heard their version from Joseph, gave secondhand testimony.⁶⁰ Of course, their secondhand account describing a treasure guardian could be weighed against dozens of secondhand accounts given by Mormons and others describing an angel. The accounts given by David Whitmer regarding his mother deserve mention. He reported that Mary Musselman Whitmer saw "an holy angel" who showed her the plates.⁶¹

Revisionists also used the accounts given by neighbor Willard Chase and by local businessman Fayette Lapham. Both claimed that Joseph Smith Sr. described Moroni to them as a treasure guardian. As Joseph Smith Sr. would have gained his knowledge of the matter directly from his son, Lapham and Chase provided thirdhand evidence.⁶² Of course, these accounts could be weighed against hundreds, if not thousands, of thirdhand accounts in which Moroni is an angel.

As stories get passed along, they become more and more susceptible to being distorted by biases. According to the 1834–35 history, which Oliver Cowdery composed with Joseph Smith's assistance, Moroni had given Joseph a warning: "When it is known that the Lord has shown you these things . . . they will circulate falsehoods to destroy your reputation."⁶³ William Smith, Joseph's brother, remembered that as soon as Joseph obtained the plates, these rumors prophesied by Moroni began to proliferate.⁶⁴ In 1840, Elder Orson Pratt wrote that when the "inhabitants of that vicinity" (western New York) heard about Moroni and the golden plates, they "began to ridicule and mock at those things." Before long, "The news of his discoveries spread

abroad throughout all those parts. False reports, misrepresentations, and base slanders, flew as if upon the wings of the wind in every direction.”⁶⁵ In his 1839 history, Joseph stated that after he returned the plates to Moroni, “The excitement, however, still continued, and rumour with her thousand tongues was all the time employed in circulating tales about my father’s family and about myself. If I were to relate a thousan[d]th part of them it would fill up volumes.”⁶⁶

Some of these tales found their way to Abner Cole, the editor of the local tabloid. Cole explained his historical methodology on more than one occasion. For example, in a 6 January 1831 article on Mormonism, he announced his plans to expose the fledgling church and promised to provide readers with the “facts” of the matter—“so far as they may come to our knowledge.” These “facts” came not through careful investigative journalism but from local rumor solicited through his paper. In fact, Cole concluded the article with the offer, “Postmasters and others, who can furnish us with interesting notices on any of the above subjects, shall receive a copy of our paper *gratis*.”⁶⁷ Later, Cole specified the origins of his description of Moroni as a treasure guardian: “This tale in substance, was told at the time the event was *said* to have happened by both father and son, and is well recollected by many of our citizens.”⁶⁸ Tales told by local residents amount to no more than neighborhood gossip.

When we apply the criterion that firsthand accounts should be favored over secondhand and thirdhand accounts, the angel thesis forcefully asserts itself. Some skeptics may be tempted to reject this analysis by arguing that Joseph and maybe even the Book of Mormon witnesses had changed their story. Logicians call this kind of an argument “begging the question.” Sources that speak of a treasure guardian may also have changed their story. An unbiased analysis must consider both possibilities. Firsthand accounts fall on the side of the angel thesis.

Early Sources

The second most important standard of historical methodology is to favor sources composed closer to the time of the event in question over sources composed later on. A historian prefers to work with contemporaneous sources. In their absence, a historian will tend to rely on the earliest sources available. What do the earliest documents tell us about Moroni?

Exponents of the treasure-guardian thesis cite the 1879 account given by Joseph and Hiel Lewis and the 1870 account given by Fayette Lapham. These sources postdate the events they describe by half of a century, which severely reduces their reliability. They could be weighed against hundreds of

Mormon accounts given in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, that describe Moroni as an angel.

Philastus Hurlbut collected Willard Chase's description of Moroni as a treasure guardian in 1833. However, at the same time, Hurlbut collected Abigail Harris's statement describing Moroni as "the spirit of one of the Saints that was upon this continent" as well as Henry Harris's statement identifying Moroni as an "angel."⁶⁹ Although the Chase account predates the official history of the Church, it does not predate Joseph Smith's 1832 history, which describes Moroni as "an angel of the Lord."⁷⁰

Abner Cole first described Moroni as a treasure guardian in June of 1830 in "The Book of Pukei," his parody of the Book of Mormon. This is a very early source; it predates the official history and the 1832 history. However, it does not predate the "Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ," which state that "God ministered unto him [Joseph Smith] 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."⁷¹ In fact, each of the six relevant sources that predate Cole's Book of Pukei calls Moroni an angel or infers as much. The Articles and Covenants was the latest of these sources. The other five are given here in chronological order, starting with the latest and working back to the earliest:

5. On 2 June 1830, an article in the *Cincinnati Advertiser, and Ohio Phoenix* reported that Joseph had claimed to have been "entrusted by God with a golden bible" and a "divine commission."⁷² Moroni is not explicitly mentioned, but contextual phraseology clearly favors the angel thesis. This account describes the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in terms of a traditional Christian view—not as a treasure quest.

4. In August of 1829, an article appearing in the *Palmyra Freeman* described Moroni as "the spirit of the Almighty."⁷³ Morgan and Quinn have emphasized the word "spirit" in this source and have read it to mean spirit guardian of treasure. The prepositional phrase "of the Almighty," however, clearly gives the origin of the messenger in question. Whether this being had a tangible body or not, it was an angel by definition.⁷⁴

3. "The Testimony of Three Witnesses" was probably composed in late June 1829 when the Three Witnesses had their experience. It was certainly composed before 26 March 1830 when the Book of Mormon was advertised for sale.⁷⁵ Their testimony speaks of Moroni as "an Angel of God."⁷⁶

2. On 26 June 1829, the *Wayne Sentinel* reported the local stir concerning the discovery of "an ancient record, of a religious and divine nature and origin" that could be translated only "by inspiration." In this article, talk of things "divine" and "religious" brings this source down on the side of the

angel thesis.⁷⁷

1. On 17 June 1829, Jesse Smith wrote a letter to his nephew Hyrum Smith.⁷⁸ Jesse wrote in response to letters from the Joseph Smith family written about the fall of 1828.⁷⁹ In at least one of these letters from the Joseph Smith Sr. family, Moroni was called an angel. Citing the first of these letters, which had been written by Joseph Smith Sr. or Joseph Smith Jr., Jesse commented:

He writes that the Angel of the Lord has revealed to him the hidden treasures of wisdom & knowledge, even divine revelation, which has lain in the bowels of the earth for thousands of years [and] is at last made known to him, he says he has eyes to see things that are not and then has the audacity to say they are; And this Angel of the Lord (Devil it should be) has put me in possession of great wealth, gold and silver and precious stones so that I shall have the dominion in all the land of Palmyra.

Apparently, Joseph Sr. or Joseph Jr. had written a letter to Jesse that placed Moroni in a treasure-guarding context as well as an angelic context. As Jesse relates it, Moroni put the Smiths in possession of several local treasures. Jesse even used the words “hidden treasures.” Here, however, the treasures were not gold and silver but rather “treasures of wisdom & knowledge, even divine revelation.” Most importantly, this early letter cited by Jesse makes it clear that Joseph or his father referred to Moroni as “the Angel of the Lord.” This letter, the earliest relevant source, demonstrates the legitimacy of the treasure-guardian interpretation. At the same time, it manifests the primacy of the angel interpretation.

D. Michael Quinn wrote: “By 1830 Smith and his followers were emphasizing that the otherworldly messenger was an angel.”⁸⁰ But Jesse’s letter of 1829—the earliest relevant document—shows that in 1828, either Joseph or his father had called Moroni “the Angel of the Lord.” All relevant sources predating Abner Cole’s 1830 news articles identify Moroni as an angel. By 1830, Joseph’s detractors were emphasizing that the otherworldly messenger was a treasure guardian.

As with eyewitness testimony, a historical analysis of the early sources overwhelmingly favors the angel thesis. Some skeptics may reject this analysis on the grounds that Joseph Smith had changed his story before the earliest sources were recorded. There is no direct, contemporaneous evidence to support this position. It derives largely from presupposition.

Reminiscence

Proponents of the treasure-guardian thesis avoid the course of analysis, followed in the previous section, by focusing on the dates their sources claim

for themselves rather than the dates on which these sources were recorded. Many accounts recorded in later years were based on conversations that took place much earlier. However, the passage of years easily filters or even distorts memories. For this reason, historians generally favor the earliest possible accounts of the events under investigation. Proponents of the treasure-guardian thesis, however, have had to place their focus on later accounts that claim to be based on early conversations.⁸¹

But even if we adopt this less-rigorous standard, the angel thesis holds. Fayette Lapham reported that he spoke with Joseph Smith Sr. about a treasure guardian in 1830, and Joseph and Hiel Lewis claimed that Joseph Smith Jr. told them about a treasure guardian about April of 1828.⁸² John A. Clark, however, reported that Martin Harris spoke to him about an angel in the fall of 1827.⁸³

Neighbor Willard Chase said he talked to Joseph Smith Sr. about a treasure guardian in June of 1827.⁸⁴ However, Joseph Knight Jr. related, about November of 1826, Joseph “made known to my father and I, that he had seen a vision, that a personage had appeared to him and told him [where] there was a gold book of ancient date buried, and if he would follow the directions of the Angel he could get it.”⁸⁵ Abner Cole claimed that a treasure-guardian tale “was told at the time the event was *said* to have happened by both father and son.”⁸⁶ However, Lucy Mack Smith and William Smith both remembered that Joseph described Moroni to the family as an angel on the very day Moroni visited him.⁸⁷ Joseph Smith himself related the same.⁸⁸

Proponents of the treasure-guardian thesis do not consider the Smith family accounts as early sources because they suspect that the Smiths distorted the story. And yet that is the very question at issue. Those who described Moroni as a treasure guardian may also have distorted the story. Sound source criticism applied equally to Mormon and non-Mormon accounts supports the thesis that Moroni was transformed from an angel into a treasure guardian—rather than the other way around.

Contextual Interpretation

To this point, I have focused on descriptions of Moroni himself. His visits, however, occurred within the context of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Morgan, Quinn, and Marquardt and Walters spend a great deal of time noting the parallels between this context of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the early American culture of treasure seeking. As context often influences interpretation, we have two questions to consider: In what contexts was Moroni said to have appeared? And which of these contexts was most meaningful to Joseph at that time?



*Joseph Smith and Angel Moroni at the Hill Cumorah.
Picture courtesy of LDS Church Archives*

Joseph's 1839 history recounts that Moroni first appeared while Joseph was praying for forgiveness.⁸⁹ Moroni would be more likely to show up in this context as an angel than as a treasure guardian. However, some have jettisoned Smith's version in favor of an account stating that Moroni appeared to him following one of his nocturnal treasure quests.⁹⁰ This account was

given by John A. Clark, Palmyra's Episcopal minister, recounting what he had heard from Martin Harris. "According to Martin Harris," Clark wrote:

It was after one of these night excursions, that Jo, while he lay upon his bed, had a remarkable dream. An angel of God seemed to approach him, clad in celestial splendour. This divine messenger assured him, that he, Joseph Smith, was chosen of the Lord to be a prophet of the Most High God, and to bring to light hidden things, that would prove of unspeakable benefit to the world. He then disclosed to him the existence of this golden Bible, and the place where it was deposited—but at the same time told him that he must follow implicitly the divine direction, or he would draw down upon him the wrath of heaven.⁹¹

Lucy Mack Smith recounted her memory of what took place on the evening of 21 September 1823:

One evening we were sitting till quite late conversing upon the subject of the diversity of churches that had risen up in the world and the many thousand opinions in existency as to the truths contained in scripture. . . . After we ceased conversation he [Joseph] went to bed . . . but he had not laid there long till [he saw] a bright [light] entered the room where he lay he looked up and saw an angel of the Lord.⁹²

Was Joseph Smith hunting for treasure that night or discussing the gospel? The Reverend Clark and Mother Smith disagree on this matter. Which account is accurate?

Clark's 1840 account predates Lucy's by five years, but neither account is contemporaneous. His reminiscence is based on a conversation he had with Martin Harris in 1827 or 1828.⁹³ Did Harris really say that Joseph had been treasure hunting on the night of 21 September 1823? If so, did he hear about or misremember hearing something about a treasure quest on that night from Joseph Smith—which would make Harris a secondhand source—or did Harris get this idea from someone else who had heard it from someone else? Clark's account is thirdhand at best. Lucy was there.

Therefore, reliance on the Reverend Clark with regard to this contextual element must be questioned. Even if Joseph had been digging for treasure that night, a treasure-seeking context does not change Moroni's status. Clark recounted Harris describing Moroni as an "angel of God . . . clad in celestial splendour" and as a "divine messenger" who spoke of the purposes of "the Most High God."

Moroni appeared three times that night. Joseph later wrote, "Almost immediately after the heavenly messenger had ascended from me the third time, the cock crew, and I found that day was approaching so that our interviews must have occupied the whole of that night." Joseph got up and went to work, but he was so tired that his father told him to go home and rest.

Joseph walked back toward the log home but fell to the ground when he tried to climb over a fence. At this moment, Moroni again appeared, delivered the same message he had given during the night, and instructed Joseph to go immediately to the hill that is now known as Cumorah.⁹⁴ Moroni would meet Joseph again on the hill.

The earliest reliable accounts of Joseph Smith's encounter with Moroni on the hill contain elements of both treasure seeking and angelic dispensationalism. In his 1832 history, Joseph explained why he failed to obtain the plates: "I had been tempted of the adversary and saught the Plates to obtain riches and kept not the commandment that I should have an eye single to the glory of God."⁹⁵ It is difficult to condemn young Joseph, whose family had suffered so much poverty. His candid admission that he intended to cash in on the plates of gold invokes the treasure-seeking belief system that he had participated in on occasion. However, it should also be stressed that Joseph attributed his impure intent not to his treasure-seeking background but rather to being "tempted of the adversary." Moroni filled the role of an angel as he informed young Joseph that God's purposes were far greater than the Smith family's financial situation.

Moroni had clearly instructed Joseph as to the purpose of Joseph's recovery of the plates. And yet, according to Joseph himself, sometime between Moroni's daytime visit near the farm fence and his appearance on the hill an hour or so later, Joseph's mission to obtain the ancient record devolved into a quest for riches. When did this occur? When he approached the hill, had his mind slipped into a treasure-seeking context? Did he climb the slope of the hill for a golden treasure? Some critics hold that he did. The following cognitive process may have occurred:

- (1) Joseph began to think of the monetary worth of the golden plates.
- (2) Thinking of the plates as treasure caused Joseph to think of his recovery of the plates in a treasure-seeking perspective.
- (3) Thinking within a treasure-seeking perspective caused Joseph to consider Moroni as a treasure guardian.

Or perhaps Joseph's background experience in treasure seeking caused him to begin to see both Moroni and his plates in light of that context.

Accounts of Joseph's first visit to the hill differ as to when he began thinking of the plates as treasure. The 1834–35 history states that as Joseph began walking to the hill, the power of God and the power of the devil both vied for his intentions, and Joseph began to struggle between them. Satan tempted him to desire riches. His family had worked so hard to scrape out a living. Eventually, Joseph gave in. The 1834–35 history continues:

You will have wondered, perhaps, that the mind of our brother should be so occupied with the thoughts of the goods of this world, *at the time of arriving at Cumorah*, on the morning of the 22nd of September, 1823, after having been rapt in the visions of heaven during the night, and also seeing and hearing in open day; but the mind of man is easily turned, if it is not held by the power of God through the prayer of faith, and you will remember that I have said that the two invisible powers were operating upon his mind during his walk from his residence to Cumorah, and that the one urging the certainty of wealth and ease in this life had so powerfully wrought upon him, that the great object so carefully and impressively named by the angel, had entirely gone from his recollections that only a fixed determination to obtain now urged him forward. In this, which occasioned a failure to obtain, at that time, the record, do not understand me to attach blame to our brother: he was young, and his mind easily turned from correct principles, unless he could be favored with a certain round of experience. And yet, while young, undrained and untaught in the systems of the world, he was in a situation to be led into the great work of God, and be qualified to perform it in due time.⁹⁶

In this account, Joseph's mind had turned by the time he reached the hill.

Other accounts differ from the 1834–35 history. Based on an 1875 interview with David Whitmer, the *Chicago Times* reported:

He strolled out and away from the house and sought the hill Cumorah. . . . He found the exact spot designated by the white-robed visitor, and at once commenced digging in the rock-ribbed soil. At the depth of two and a half or three feet his faith was rewarded by the discovery of A SQUARE STONE CASKET. Overpowered by the discovery he rested for a few moments, and *then* visions of worldly emolument flitted through his overwrought brain. He had been singled out as the discoverer of this secret of the infinite! Should he neglect this golden opportunity to amass a fortune? No! . . . While these worldly thoughts occupied Joseph's mind, the angel of the Lord again suddenly stood before him, told him that he had approached this sacred spot in an irreverent mood, that the secrets of the casket could never be his until he sought them in the proper spirit, and then hurried him unceremoniously to the plain below.⁹⁷

Although this news story was based on an interview with Whitmer, the style and tone are clearly *not* that of the plainspoken Whitmer. The artistic flair of this dramatic retelling provokes us to wonder how far the reporter strayed from Whitmer's narration. The reporter overlays the treasure-seeking context, with Joseph *digging* for the plates, but this *before* he thinks of the deposit

as treasure—which does not occur until the moment he sees the stone box.

Other sources imply that Joseph’s mind had not turned until *after* he opened the box. Congregationalist minister Truman Coe of Kirtland, Ohio—who apparently heard Joseph relate the story of his visit to the hill—wrote that Joseph went “as directed by the angel, and pried up the stone under which he discovered the plates shining like gold, and *when he saw them* his cupidity was excited, and he hoped to make himself rich by the discovery.”⁹⁸

Joseph’s mind may not even have turned at this point. Lucy Mack Smith recounted that when Joseph saw the plates, he reached into the box and grasped them. Then, “as he was taking them hence, the unhappy thought darted through his mind.” Lucy places the point at which his mind turned even closer to the moment when “the angel of the Lord appeared to him, and told him that he had not done as he had been commanded.”⁹⁹ It would seem that, at this moment, Joseph’s treasure-seeking perspective immediately evaporated. Lucy placed Joseph’s turn of mind so close to Moroni’s appearance that a treasure-seeking context had little time to influence Joseph’s perception of Moroni. Indeed, Lucy mentions only a thought of wealth darting through his mind. According to her account, the cognitive process laid out above could not have occurred; Joseph never began thinking of Moroni as a treasure guardian. The David Whitmer and Truman Coe accounts suggest the same.

However, as shown, the 1834–35 history—which should be favored as a more historically reliable account—stated that Joseph began thinking of the plates as treasure as he walked to the hill. If so, this would have provided time for Joseph to ponder a treasure-seeking context that could have influenced a change in his understanding of Moroni. Nevertheless, the possibility that Joseph began thinking of Moroni in terms of a treasure guardian as Joseph walked from his house to the hill remains just that—a possibility.

For the most part, whether Joseph began thinking of Moroni primarily in terms of a guardian lacks relevancy because the most reliable accounts present Joseph’s perception of his recovery of the plates not as an evolution but as a devolution. Rather than a treasure turning into an ancient record, the ancient record became a treasure. Joseph’s own mind apparently traveled the same pathway that the minds of his detractors later followed. However, if Joseph had begun to think of the angel primarily in terms of a treasure guardian, Moroni’s sudden appearance on the hill and his chastening message put an abrupt end to this shift in interpretation.

The 1834–35 history recounts that because of Joseph’s impure motive, when he attempted to lay hold on the plates, he experienced a shocking sensation. “What was the occasion of this he knew not—*there* was the pure

unsullied record, as had been described—he had heard of the power of enchantment, and a thousand like stories, which held the hidden treasure of the earth, and supposed that physical exertion and personal strength was only necessary to enable him to yet obtain the object of his wish.” Yet failing, he exclaimed, “Why can I not obtain this book?” Unbeknownst to Joseph, Moroni was there with him on the hill. “Because you have not kept the commandments of the Lord,” Moroni answered. Joseph looked “and to his astonishment, there stood the angel who had previously given him the directions concerning this matter.”¹⁰⁰ This account, like others given by Joseph Smith and by other early Mormons, combines elements of treasure seeking and angelic ministration.¹⁰¹ Which context was most important?

D. Michael Quinn compares the “sensible shock” that Joseph experienced with treasure tales including the motif of shock as a deterrent.¹⁰² But as shown above, the 1834–35 history states that Joseph was confused by the shock and did not know what to make of it. Then, seeking to understand this perplexing situation, he drew on his knowledge of treasure tales and reasoned that some enchantment was holding the plates in the earth. Since Joseph did not initially know what to make of this shock, he probably had not approached the hill within a treasure-seeking perspective. By the time he reached the hill, he desired the plates as treasure; but until he was shocked, he apparently had not superimposed any other contextual elements of treasure seeking. It seems that he still understood Moroni primarily as an angel.

In retrospect, Joseph understood that his thoughts had taken a turn for the worse. The reliable accounts that mention Joseph’s perception of the plates as treasure also clarify that his perception had strayed from the original meaning as given earlier by an angel. Therefore, if Joseph ever considered Moroni primarily in terms of a treasure guardian, it was for a short period of time and was of secondary significance.

For the believer, the issue is largely irrelevant because these accounts present a treasure-seeking context compatible with the traditional understanding of Moroni as an angel. For example, when Lucy Mack Smith narrated her history, she spoke frankly of the treasure-seeking context. She called the plates a “treasure” and stated that the angel had warned Joseph in the nighttime “that he must beware of covetousness, and he must not suppose the Record was to be brought forth with the view of getting gain, for this was not the case, but that it was to bring forth light and intelligence, which had for a long time been lost to the world; and that when he went to get the plates, he must be on his guard, or his mind would be filled with darkness.”¹⁰³ In Lucy’s account, a treasure-seeking context does not rule out angels at all. Moroni is perfectly aware of Joseph’s background and admon-

ishes him accordingly.

Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery composed the 1834–35 history in part to counter the statements that Eber D. Howe had published in *Mormonism Unveiled*.¹⁰⁴ If their early Church history downplayed the treasure-seeking context within which Joseph understood the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, it nonetheless admitted it. Moreover, this history deemed Joseph's treasure-seeking interpretation as incorrect and based on superstitious tales—"he had heard of the power of enchantment, and a thousand like stories, which held the hidden treasure of the earth." Joseph's momentary consideration of treasure-seeking beliefs, however, had no bearing on the reality of either the heavenly messenger or the metal plates. From the vantage point of 1835, Joseph and Oliver could differentiate the objective existence of the angel and the plates from Joseph's culturally informed understanding of them in 1823. Thus, while the 1834–35 history openly admits the validity of the treasure-seeking context, it properly places it in a position of secondary importance to the visits of the angel. To whatever extent Joseph did view the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in the context of the treasure-seeking beliefs of his youth, it may have paved the way for Moroni to deliver his message.¹⁰⁵ As stated in the 1834–35 history, because Joseph was "young, untraditionated and untaught in the systems of the world, he was in a situation to be lead into the great work of God, and be qualified to perform it in due time."¹⁰⁶

D. Michael Quinn places the coming forth of the Book of Mormon not only within a treasure-seeking context but also within the larger context of "magic," as opposed to "religion."¹⁰⁷ In its technical sense, stripped of pejorative usage, *magic* is usually more manipulative and coercive in its approach to the preternatural, whereas *religion* is defined more in terms of supplication and submission. Also, magic tends to be individualistic, whereas religion tends to be communalistic.¹⁰⁸ Treasure seers and other scryers attempted to entrap or bind familiar spirits into their seer stones or crystal balls so the spirits could be forced to reveal buried treasures or occult knowledge. These manipulative actions were conducted to achieve personal ends. With Joseph and Moroni, we get an entirely different picture. Joseph supplicates God for forgiveness, he submits to Moroni's chastening instruction, and he uses his seer stone to bring about divine purposes that will benefit all of humanity, not himself or even his family. His encounters with Moroni are marked by supplication and submission to bring about communal purposes, as opposed to manipulation and coercion to effect a personal end. Though outside the accepted boundaries of mainstream Christian orthodoxy, these encounters are, by definition, religious, not magical.

The contextual elements of the earliest encounters with Moroni, as

given in the most reliable sources, support the angel thesis. Some skeptics may dismiss this conclusion by arguing that Joseph and Lucy and Oliver changed the *entire* story—transforming not only Moroni’s identity but also the treasure-seeking context in which he appeared. This argument would rest on presupposition. As with the data that directly impinge on the issue of Moroni’s initial status, historical standards and principles of logic apply to indirect contextual interpretation. Faithful Latter-day Saints should acknowledge that a consideration of the context in which Moroni visited Joseph lends a significant degree of credibility to the treasure-guardian interpretation. Critics should acknowledge that contextual considerations lend even more credence to the heavenly messenger interpretation.

Many historians—both believing Latter-day Saints and secular academics—have placed the founding events of the Restoration within other contextual frameworks: millenarianism, biblicism, evangelicalism, seekerism, primitivism, restorationism, and dispensationalism.¹⁰⁹ Although an interpretive framework of magic suggests that Moroni was a treasure guardian, each of these other legitimate contextual interpretations suggests that Moroni was an angel. A preference for the treasure-guardian thesis probably results in part from an assumption that everything in Mormonism must owe its origins to an evolutionary process. Hence, if Moroni was later understood as an angel, he must have been initially understood as something else. However, if Moroni is an actual being, whom the Lord sent into the Smith garret, that is not the case.

Folklore Analysis

Another way we can attempt to determine the direction in which the Moroni story developed is by considering the alternatives to Joseph Smith’s version of the events. What are the treasure tales and how do they compare with the traditional account? Emma Smith’s cousins, Joseph and Hiel Lewis of Harmony, Pennsylvania, described Moroni as a Spanish ghost whose throat was “cut from ear to ear, and the blood streaming down.”¹¹⁰ Josiah Stowell had hired Joseph to come down to Pennsylvania to locate a legendary Spanish mine.¹¹¹ Joseph could not find the mine, but he did find true love and eloped with Emma Hale, which upset her family. Based on the failed Spanish-mine venture, her Lewis cousins apparently concocted a murdered Spaniard treasure guardian and then superimposed it upon the angel. After describing Moroni as a bloody ghost, the Lewis cousins proceeded to dismiss the revelations that Joseph experienced. We might call this a “straw-ghost” argument. Unfortunately, this poor old ghost’s severed head finally fell off. The year after the Lewises gave their account of early Mormonism,

investigative journalist Frederic Mather talked to residents of Harmony, Pennsylvania, and reported that “a headless Spaniard guarded it [the ancient record] with great vigilance.”¹¹²

Fayette Lapham described Moroni as a classical European giant: “a very large and tall man . . . who dressed in an ancient suit of clothes.”¹¹³ In contrast, Oliver Cowdery, in his 1834–35 history, wrote that the “stature of this personage was a little above the common size of men in this age.”¹¹⁴ David Whitmer said the angel stood at about five feet ten inches.¹¹⁵ Joseph himself related that when Moroni made his initial appearance, he was standing in the garret of the Smith family’s log home—“between the floors of the room.”¹¹⁶ As the half-story garret was probably no higher than six feet, Lapham’s giant literally does not fit.¹¹⁷ Whereas Lapham dresses Moroni in an ancient suit of clothes, Joseph remembered him wearing a white robe.¹¹⁸

Willard Chase reported that Joseph Smith Sr. had told him that Moroni initially appeared as 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.”¹¹⁹ Because some species of reptiles and amphibians, and toads in particular, could serve as treasure guardians, Chase reinforced his portrayal of Moroni as a treasure guardian by associating him with a toad-like creature. Decades later, Chase’s brother-in-law, Benjamin Saunders, repeated this story but improved upon it, claiming that he heard the story directly from Joseph Jr.¹²⁰ In 1893, Benjamin’s nephew Orson Saunders shared some of his home-brewed hard cider with a newspaper reporter, took him to the Hill Cumorah, and *quoted* Joseph Smith Jr. (whom he had never met) as saying that the creature was indeed a toad—an “enormous toad”—and that it turned into not a man but a “flaming monster with glittering eyes.”¹²¹ It is an amphibian story, but it sounds more like a “fish story.” In the newspaper reporter’s account of the Orson Saunders account of the Benjamin Saunders account of the Willard Chase account of the Joseph Smith Sr. account of Joseph Smith Jr.’s account of his encounter with Moroni, we can see the process of distortion at work.

Abner Cole provided another description of Moroni. We read in Pukei 2:4 that the “spirit” was “a little old man” and that “his beard of silver white, hung far below his knees.” Cole’s Book of Pukei further informs its readers that the spirit was wearing items of Egyptian, Hebrew, and Native American clothing. The items of costume obviously spoof the Book of Mormon’s Egyptian, Hebraic, and Native American connections. Without this clothing, the “spirit” is described only as a little old man with a long beard. Here we have a textbook definition of a gnome—one of the “elemental spirits” and a classical treasure guardian.

Early critics not only portrayed Moroni as a treasure guardian but also

imputed evil to him. Abner Cole wrote that when Joseph Smith Sr. arrived in the Palmyra-Manchester area of New York, he revived the “vulgar, yet popular belief” that the treasures buried in that area “were held in charge by some *evil* spirit, which was supposed to be either the Devil himself, or some one of his most trusty favorites.”¹²² Cole seems to have equated this “evil spirit” with the “old spirit” that appeared as a little man with a long beard. Anglo American folk belief included the idea that the devil could appear as a “dwarf” or as “a little, gray old man.”¹²³

The Chase and Lapham accounts also seem to impute evil to Moroni by describing him as a toad-like creature and a giant. In European American folk belief, the toad always represented or embodied evil.¹²⁴ Giants are usually malevolent.¹²⁵ By imputing evil to Moroni, these accounts attacked Moroni’s angelic status and even ruled out classifying him as an angelic treasure guardian. Their Moroni definitely did not come from heaven. In both the Chase and Lapham accounts, the guardian is dangerously violent. Whereas Chase has the guardian strike Joseph on the side of his head, Lapham has the giant “strike him on the breast.” These accounts bring to mind the *Chicago Times* interview with David Whitmer given above wherein Moroni “hurried him unceremoniously to the plain below.” Each of these accounts apparently exaggerates the shocking sensation that Joseph experienced when he attempted to remove the plates in 1823.

In his 1829 letter to Hyrum Smith, Uncle Jesse Smith objected to Joseph Smith’s family calling Moroni an angel. “Devil it should be,” he wrote.¹²⁶ It seems almost inevitable that someone would eventually go beyond demonizing Moroni to identifying him as Satan himself. Former Ohio resident James A. Briggs did just that. In 1834, Briggs heard Joseph publicly relate the story of Moroni and the plates. Briggs must have remembered Joseph saying he had experienced a sensation of shock from an “unseen power”—for this is the phrase that Briggs used when recounting the story on three separate occasions.¹²⁷ However, in an 1875 letter to journalist John Codman, Briggs recalled Joseph explaining “how he was kicked by the Devil when he uncovered the plates and stooped down to get them.”¹²⁸ The Moroni of Joseph’s public 1834 recital was certainly an angel. How did Briggs change Moroni into the devil? Earlier in the letter to Codman, Briggs had written, “I regret that I have not been successful in obtaining for you a copy of ‘Mormonism Unveiled.’” Briggs had helped Eber D. Howe in his research for *Mormonism Unveiled*.¹²⁹ The frontispiece of this book contains an illustration of the devil kicking Joseph Smith (see figure). A glance at Howe’s frontispiece was apparently all it took for Briggs to change an angel into the devil.

Actually, the frontispiece of *Mormonism Unveiled* did not depict the



*The devil kicking Joseph Smith after Joseph's recovery of the golden plates. From the frontispiece of E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville, Ohio: Eber D. Howe, 1834).
Courtesy of LDS Church Archives*

“shock” given by Moroni to Joseph when he tried to take the plates in 1823. Rather, it illustrated a story that Joseph was attacked by evil spirits in 1827 after Moroni gave him the plates.¹³⁰ A version of this story is also illustrated in the frontispiece to Pomoroy Tucker’s *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism*. Demons clamor in the foreground, waiting to attack Joseph after he

leaves the periphery of the angel’s glory. Briggs mistakenly superimposed the image from the frontispiece of *Mormonism Unveiled*—depicting a story of the recovery of the plates in 1827—on his memory of Joseph recounting the shocking sensation he had experienced in 1823. Coincidentally, Eber D. Howe himself would duplicate this conflation in his autobiography, which was published in 1878.¹³¹

The sources reviewed here present Moroni as a bleeding Spanish ghost, a giant, a toad, a dwarf, and the devil. It seems that Moroni makes a better chameleon than a salamander. Actually, these Moroni variants mutually exclude each other. For example, there is no such thing as a giant dwarf in any mythology, and the devil is not Spanish. Inconsistencies could be further elaborated, but the point is sufficiently clear. For Moroni, as with Jesus of Nazareth, “Many bare false witness against him, but their witness agreed not together” (Mark 14:56). That these variants of the Moroni story present inconsistent treasure guardians clearly demonstrates that their narrators had strayed from an accurate representation of Joseph’s original story. These accounts, which are so clearly inaccurate, constitute the primary database used by the proponents of the treasure-guardian thesis.

Although these accounts contradict each other, they are all agreed in excluding an angelic interpretation of Moroni. In each case, the narrators transformed Moroni into a specific nonangelic treasure guardian—at times an evil treasure guardian. By casting Moroni as a particular type of treasure guardian incompatible with an angelic messenger, detractors solidified their treasure-seeking interpretations of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. By steering Moroni into specific guardian personas, they could ridicule Joseph Smith with the tropes of treasure quest and thereby dismiss the revelations he presented to the world.

One could reasonably argue that Joseph's understanding of his experiences with Moroni underwent some development through the years, but this argument rests upon inference. In contrast, those who described a treasure guardian clearly reconfigured the Moroni story. This folklore analysis indicates that Joseph Smith's accounts of the Moroni visitations are more reliable than those of his detractors.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, we have no directly relevant sources that were produced between Moroni's first visits in 1823 and the recovery of the plates in 1827. If there were only one Joseph Smith account, given at any time during his life, that portrayed Moroni as more of a treasure guardian than an angel, it would be reasonable to take this account as an accurate representation of Joseph's initial interpretation of Moroni's 1823 appearances. On the other hand, if there existed an 1823 account from *any* source—Joseph himself, his family, a friend of the family, or even a bitter enemy—wherein Moroni was described primarily as an angel, valiant defenders of the treasure-guardian thesis would probably argue that the story had already been changed. Ultimately, the treasure-guardian thesis is unfalsifiable and therefore—in a sense—falls outside the domain of history into the realm of belief.

Returning to the historical record, we can summarize the documentary evidence: (1) All firsthand accounts agree on Moroni's identity as an angel. (2) The earliest accounts say that Moroni is an angel. (3) A contextual consideration indicates that Moroni made a better angel than a treasure guardian. (4) A closer look at what the treasure-guardian sources actually say clearly demonstrates that their source is not Joseph Smith but rather run-of-the-mill treasure-lore superimposed upon his story. In this case, it is not difficult to discern the direction in which Moroni's metamorphosis occurred. In conclusion, folklore analysis and the ground rules of history support the thesis that Joseph Smith's encounters with Moroni are best understood as the visits of a heavenly messenger to a prayerful seeker.

The real story that emerges from these documents is not that Joseph Smith transformed a treasure guardian into an angel but rather that Moroni has been transformed from an angel into a treasure guardian by a set of early critics and those historians who relied on them. Although the historical sources that cast Moroni as a treasure guardian tell us something about Joseph's initial understanding of his experiences, they tell us more about the original need of his community and the current need of his critics to provide an alternative explanation for his encounters with Moroni.

The following poem published in *Sunstone* magazine indirectly addresses this issue:

There once was a white salamander
who stirred up everyone's dander—
the forges he stoked
'til he went up in smoke
and left the histories much blander.¹³²

Indeed, it seems that for some the cremation of the salamander made early Mormon history much blander. However, for those who really believe in angels and who believe that an angel appeared to Joseph Smith and began unfolding God's plans to him, history is as exciting as ever.

Notes

1. "Replace Moroni?" *Salt Lake Tribune*, 12 May 1985, A18.
2. Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders, with a New Afterword*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989); Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
3. Ronald W. Walker, "Joseph Smith: The Palmyra Seer," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (fall 1984): 463.
4. *Ibid.*, 470–71.
5. *Ibid.*, 463–64; emphasis in original.
6. *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History*, ed. John Phillip Walker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 1-21; Richard Saunders, "The Strange Mixture of Emotion and Intellect: A Social History of Dale L. Morgan, 1933-42," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1995), 39-58.
7. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987, 1999); "On Being a Mormon Historian (and its Aftermath)," *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, edited by George A. Smith (SLC: Signature Books, 1992), 69-111.
8. H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 63-115. For examples of Marquardt's previous publications, see *The Use of the Bible in the Book of Mormon and Early Nineteenth-Century Events Reflected in the Book of Mormon* (Salt

Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1979); and *The Book of Abraham Revisited* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1983). For examples of Walter's previous publications, see "New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (spring 1969): 60-81; "From Occult to Cult with Joseph Smith, Jr.," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 1, no. 2 (summer 1977): 121-37; "Mormon Origins: A Tale of Spirits and Salamanders," *Presbyterian Journal* 44, no. 7 (June 1985): 7-10; *The Human Origins of the Book of Mormon* (Safety Harbor, Florida: EMFJ Ministries, n.d.).

9. Dale Morgan on *Early Mormonism*, 266-75; Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 136-77, see especially 138-40; Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 89-115, see especially 105. See also Rodger I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 46-47; William D. Morain, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr., and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1998), 58-64; Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 40, 72-73.

10. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 167.

11. As some accounts name the messenger Nephi, some may wish to quibble over the angel/guardian's proper name. On the name of Joseph's visitor, see Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:277 n1 (hereafter cited as *Papers of Joseph Smith*). I use "Moroni" to refer to Joseph Smith's visitor to abstain from calling him either an angel or a treasure guardian.

12. Most historians of Mormonism, whether believing Latter-day Saints or otherwise, agree that Smith was sincere. That is, they agree that whether or not a preternatural being actually appeared to him, Smith believed that this did occur. Even Mark Thomas, who asserts that Smith dishonestly reworked the Moroni story over time, argues that Smith did in fact experience some kind of sensory perception in which he thought he saw "a spirit or angel." For Thomas, this was a case of abnormal psychology, not divine revelation. Thomas, "Form Criticism of Joseph Smith's 1823 Vision of the Angel 'Moroni,'" presentation given at the 1991 Annual Meeting of the Mormon History Association, Ogden, Utah, 21 May 1999, session 17; Thomas, "Was Joseph Smith for Real? How He Lied, Perhaps Even to Himself," *Free Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1999): 37-39.

13. On the treasure-seeking tradition, see W. R. Jones, "'Hill-Diggers' and 'Hell-Raisers': Treasure Hunting and the Supernatural in Old and New England," in *Wonders of the Invisible World, 1600-1900: The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings, 1992*, ed. Peter Benes (Boston: Boston University Press, 1995), 97-106; Wayland D. Hand, "The Quest for Buried Treasure: A Chapter in American Folk Legendry," in *Folklore on Two Continents: Essays in Honor of Linda Dégh*, ed. Nikolai Burlakoff and Carl Lindahl (Bloomington, Indiana: Trickster Press, 1980), 112-19; Alan Taylor, "The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780-1830," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (spring 1986): 6-34; Ronald W. Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (fall 1984): 429-59; Gerard T. Hurley, "Buried Treasure Tales in America," *Western Folklore* 10, no. 3 (July 1951): 197-216. See also Byrd Howell Granger, *A Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures Applied to Redaction of Arizona Legends, and to Lost Mine and Treasure Legends Exterior to Arizona* (N.p., Finland: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica; Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1977).

14. Cf. *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 1:17; and *Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, Joseph Smith Papers*, Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints Office Building, Salt Lake City, Utah, p. 8; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:282.

15. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: Published for Orson Pratt by S. W. Richards; London: Sold at the Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1853), 91–92.

16. “That of which I spoke, which Joseph termed a key, was indeed, nothing more nor less than the Urim and Thummim.” *Ibid.*, 106. See also pp. 101, 104, 126, 135, where Lucy used the term “Urim and Thummim” to refer to the seer stones.

17. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal: 1833–1898 Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 2:144; “History of Brigham Young,” *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star*, 20 February 1864, 118–19. See also Richard Van Wagoner and Steve Walker, “Joseph Smith: ‘The Gift of Seeing,’” 49–68; *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 57, 174–75, 243–45, 250.

18. Richard Van Wagoner and Steve Walker, “Joseph Smith: ‘The Gift of Seeing,’” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 2 (summer 1982): 49–68; Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 174–75.

19. People of State of New York vs. Joseph Smith, 20 March 1826, Bainbridge, New York, in “A Document Discovered,” *Utah Christian Advocate* (Salt Lake City), January 1886, 1.

20. “Mormonism—No. II,” *Tiffany's Monthly*, June 1859, 164.

21. For a variety of perspectives of the Smith family's involvement with treasure seeking, see Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984; Illinois Books edition, 1988), 64–76; Walker, “Joseph Smith: The Palmyra Seer,” 461–72; Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching,” *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (fall 1984): 489–560; Richard L. Bushman, “Treasure- Seeking Then and Now,” *Sunstone* (September 1987): 5–6; Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*; 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; Rodger I. Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New York Reputation Reexamined*; Dan Vogel, “The Locations of Joseph Smith's Early Treasure Quests,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (fall 1994): 197–231.

22. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 83–84; and Andrew H. Hedges, “‘All My Endeavors to Preserve Them’: Protecting the Plates in Palmyra, 22 September–December 1827,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 14–23.

23. Richard L. Bushman, “Just the Facts Please,” Review of *Inventing Mormonism*, by Marquardt and Walters, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6, no. 2 (1994): 132.

24. Taylor, “The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy,” 25–27.

25. Charles R. Beard, *The Romance of Treasure Trove* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1933), 15.

26. Hurley, “Buried Treasure Tales in America,” 200–1.

27. B. A. Botkin, *A Treasury of New England Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the Yankee People* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), 533–4; Charles M. Skinner, *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land* (Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott, 1896; Reissued, Detroit: Singing Tree Press, Book Tower, 1969), 2:268–9; Sarah Puryear Rodes, “Washington Irving's Use of Traditional Folklore,” *New York Folklore Quarterly* 13 (1957): 5; Henry Buxton, *Assignment Down East* (Brattleboro, Vermont: Stephen Daye Press, 1938), 169–70. This practice served a double function: Killing the spade man meant that there was now one less person who knew where the booty lay buried.

28. For headless guardians in general, see Granger, *A Motif Index for Lost Mines and*

Treasures, g 3.1.2.1, 3.1.2.2, 3.1.3.1.

29. Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966), Indiana University Folklore Series, no. 20, p. 376, N571; Granger, *A Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 3.4.

30. Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer, ed. *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), s.v. "schatz," 7:1004. I thank H. Brandon Spencer for help with this and other German sources.

31. Hurley, "Buried Treasure Tales in America," 203.

32. "Wonderful Discovery," *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, New York), 27 December 1825, 2.

33. Hurley, "Buried Treasure Tales in America," 201; Granger, *A Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, motif g: "Guardians of Mine or Treasure"; Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*, p. 376, N571.2; Wayland Hand Collection of Superstition and Popular Belief, Fife Folklore Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Milton R. Merrill Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, s.v. "treasure."

34. Granger, *A Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 2.2.

35. *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, s.v. "kröte," s.v. "schatz," 7:1013; "Exempla of Odo of Cheriton," c. 1250–1300, no. 122; cited in J. A. Herbert, *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London: Printed by order of the Trustees, 1910; sold at the British Museum), 70.

36. Julia Hull Winner, "The Money Diggers of Niagara County," *New York Folklore Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (autumn 1960): 224.

37. Granger, *A Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 2.5; Jonathan D. Evans, "The Dragon," in *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide*, ed. Malcolm South (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 27–58, see especially 28–29, see also xxxii.

38. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, rev. ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 220–25.

39. Carol Rose, *Spirits, Fairies, Gnomes, and Goblins: An Encyclopedia of the Little People* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1996), s.v., "Dwarf"; Granger, *A Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 3.6, 3.7; Geo[rg]e H. Harris, "Myths of Onanda, or Treasure Hunters of the Genesee," "the first manuscript," 1886, Local History Division, Rochester Public Library, Rochester, New York, 6–7.

40. "Little Snow White," in *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1944), 249–58.

41. Beard, *The Romance of Treasure Trove*, 67; Rose, *Spirits, Fairies, Gnomes, and Goblins*, s.v. "Gnome."

42. Harris, "Myths of Onanda, or Treasure Hunters of the Genesee." Harris uses the term "pygmie." *Pygmie* and *gnome* are the two proper names for earth elementals.

43. *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, s.v. "schatz," 7:1010; Lewis Spence, *The Fairy Tradition in Britain* (New York: Rider and Company, 1948), 25; Harold W. Thompson, *Body, Boots, and Britches* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1940), 22.

44. Janice L. Pallister, "Giants," in *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures*, ed. Malcolm South, 320–21.

45. "Mormonism—No. II," *Tiffany's Monthly*, June 1859, 165. See also Frederic G. Mather, "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Lippincott's Magazine* (August 1880), 204.

46. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith*, 84.

47. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-*

Books and Local Legends, rev. and enl., vol. 5 (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), N583, see also N536. See also Granger, *A Motif Index for Lost Mines and Treasures*, g 5.2.

48. Rose, *Spirits, Fairies, Gnomes, and Goblins*, 356.

49. W. H. McIntosh, *History of Wayne County, New York; with Illustrations Descriptive of Its Scenery, Palatial Residences, Public Buildings, Fine Blocks, and Important Manufactories, from Original Sketches by Artists of the Highest Ability, 1789–1877* (Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign & Everts, 1877), 155.

50. Wilford Woodruff's *Journal*, 1:143.

51. "Discourse by President Brigham Young, Delivered at a Special Conference Held at Farmington, for the Purpose of Organizing a Stake of Zion for the County of Davis, on Sunday Afternoon, June 17, 1877," in *Journal of Discourses* 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–1886), 9 (1878): 36–37.

52. P. Wilhelm Poulsen, Ogden, to Editors *Deseret News*, Salt Lake City, 13 August 1878; in *Deseret Evening News*, 16 August 1878. Poulsen had interviewed Whitmer at Whitmer's home in Richmond, Missouri.

53. Obediah Dogberry [pseudonym for Abner Cole], "The Book of Pukei," *Palmyra Reflector*, 12 June 1830, 37.

54. Obediah Dogberry [Abner Cole], "Gold Bible, No. 4," *Palmyra Reflector*, 14 February 1831, 101.

55. Obediah Dogberry [Abner Cole], "Gold Bible, No. 5," *Palmyra Reflector*, 28 February 1831, 109.

56. For Morgan's acceptance of Cole, see *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism*, 266. On Quinn's basic acceptance of Cole, see *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 140.

57. Statements of Joseph and Hiel Lewis, in "Mormon History," *Amboy Journal* (Amboy, Illinois), 30 April 1879, 1.

58. Orlando Saunders, interviewed by William H. and Edmund L. Kelley, Palmyra, New York, 6 March 1881; quoted in William H. Kelley, "The Hill Cumorah, and the Book of Mormon," *Saints' Herald* (Plano, Illinois), 1 June 1881, 165.

59. See "The Testimony of Three Witnesses," appended to *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra: Printed by E. B. Grandin for Joseph Smith, 1830). For other firsthand accounts of the angel by Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery, see Dan Vogel, comp. and ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, vols. 1 and 2 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996, 1998), 2:336, 499 (hereafter cited as *Early Mormon Documents*). For other firsthand accounts of the angel by David Whitmer, see *A Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* [David Whitmer], *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, Missouri: David Whitmer, 1887), 7,12,13,29,32,43-44; *David Whitmer Interviews: Restoration Witness*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 245–47. Numerous secondhand accounts of their eyewitness experiences with the angel can be given for each of these three men (for Harris and Cowdery, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2: Part III, F-G; for Whitmer, see *David Whitmer Interviews*).

60. Statements of Joseph and Hiel Lewis, "Mormon History," 1.

61. It is unclear whether this messenger was Moroni, Nephi, or one of the three Nephites. *David Whitmer Interviews: Restoration Witness*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 13, 28, 33, 50, 182, 214, 216, 217, 218; Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 30–32.

62. Fayette Lapham, "The Mormons," *Historical Magazine* (May 1870): 305–9; Willard Chase, statement, Manchester, New York, 1833; quoted in E[ber] D. Howe,

Mormonism Unveiled: Or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time (Painesville, Ohio: Eber D. Howe, 1834), 240–48.

63. Oliver Cowdery, “Letter VIII,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835, 199.

64. “Another Testimony,” *Deseret Evening News*, 20 January 1894, 11.

65. Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840; reprint, Liverpool: Printed by R. James, 1848), 6.

66. Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, p. 8; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:284.

67. Obediah Dogberry [Abner Cole], “Gold Bible,” *Palmyra Reflector*, 6 January 1831, 76.

68. Dogberry [Cole], “Gold Bible, No. 4,” 101.

69. Abigail Harris statement; quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 253; Henry Harris statement, quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 252.

70. Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, p. 4; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:8.

71. This document had been composed by 9 June 1830 when it was read in the first conference of the Church, held in Fayette, New York. The Articles and Covenants were first printed in “The Mormon Creed,” *Painesville Telegraph*, 19 April 1831, 4; cf. *A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ, Organized According to Law, on the 6th of April, 1830*, 24:7.

72. [no author], [no title], *Cincinnati Advertiser, and Ohio Phoenix*, 2 June 1830, 1.

73. “Golden Bible,” *Rochester Daily Advertiser and Telegraph*, 31 August 1829, 2. This article reprints an article from the *Palmyra Freeman*. A week later the *Rochester Gem* identified the source of the *Palmyra Freeman* article as Martin Harris and added further detail concerning “the same spirit.” Again, Quinn takes this to mean a spirit guardian of treasure, but the *same spirit* is the previously mentioned “spirit of the Almighty”—a messenger from God, not a treasure guardian.

74. Lorenzo Saunders, who lived just over the hill from the Smith family farm, stated that on one occasion “the angel touched him [Smith] on the shoulders”—imputing tangible corporeality to Moroni (Saunders, interviewed by William H. Kelley, 17 September 1884, E. L. Kelley Papers, RLDS Church Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, p. 9; quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:131). Accounts given by Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Mary Musselman Whitmer, which speak of Moroni holding the golden plates and turning them leaf by leaf, also imply his tangible corporeality. On Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:325, 355, 358, 364, 367, 375, 377, 380, 391, 510. On David and Mary Whitmer, see *David Whitmer Interviews*, 10, 11, 13, 20–21, 218; and Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 30–32.

75. “The Book of Mormon,” *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, New York), 26 March 1830, 3.

76. *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra: Printed by E. B. Grandin for Joseph Smith, 1830), appended; c.f. *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, edited by Royal Skousen (Provo, Utah: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2001), 977.

77. *Wayne Sentinel*, 26 June 1829, 3.

78. Jesse Smith, Stockholm, New York, to Hiram Smith, Palmyra, New York, 17 June 1829; transcribed in Joseph Smith Letterbook, 1837–43, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS

Church Archives, 59.

79. See the editorial note to this document in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:551.

80. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 139.

81. For example, D. Michael Quinn writes that the “earliest Mormon accounts stated that Smith’s 1823 epiphany was the nocturnal visit of a spirit” (138). As evidence for this assertion, Quinn cites Abigail Harris, the *Palmyra Freeman*, the *Rochester Gem*, Joseph and Hiel Lewis, and Fayette Lapham (138, see also 140). Taken as a whole, these sources are neither early nor Mormon. The Lapham and Lewis accounts are anything but early; they gave their accounts decades after the fact. Abigail Harris made her statement in 1833. She identified Moroni as neither an angel nor a treasure guardian but as “the spirit of one of the Saints that was upon this continent” (Harris statement; quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 253). Henry Harris, possibly a relative of Martin Harris, made a statement at the same time that Abigail Harris did. He identified Moroni as an “angel” (Henry Harris statement, quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 252). The newspaper articles Quinn cites are indeed early, but the Jesse Smith letter and the testimony of the Three Witnesses—which predate these articles—call Moroni an angel. Quinn calls the sources he marshals “Mormon,” although none is directly so. It could be argued that these sources are indirectly Mormon—that they came from people who spoke with Mormons or recorded their words—but every source that claims to say something historical about Moroni must trace itself back to the Mormons who saw him. The truly “Mormon” accounts—those produced by early Latter-day Saints—say nothing of spirits or treasure guardians.

In *Inventing Mormonism*, Marquardt and Walters write, “The earliest versions [of the Moroni story] linked obtaining the plates with magical rituals traditionally associated with winning treasure from its guardian spirits” (89). They cite Willard Chase, Joseph Knight, Fayette Lapham, Joseph and Hiel Lewis, and Lucy Mack Smith. Willard Chase and Joseph Knight did not give their accounts before 1833. Lapham and the Lewises did not give their accounts until decades later. Lucy Mack Smith called the plates a “treasure” but called Moroni “the angel.” She gave her narrative in 1845. None of these sources is particularly early. The earliest versions of the Moroni story linked obtaining the plates with the required obedience traditionally associated with commandments given by God and His angelic messengers.

In defense of the treasure-guardian thesis, Dale Morgan cited Abner Cole’s account of 1831, Fayette Lapham’s account of 1870, the Joseph and Hiel Lewis account of 1879, and the Abigail Harris account of 1833. Morgan seems to have taken Cole’s dwarf and Lapham’s giant as early versions of the treasure guardian. Then, Joseph opted for something less strange—a human guardian—the Spaniard with a gashed throat as described by the Lewises. Next, Joseph decided this guardian ghost was actually an ancient American Christian, as described by Abigail Harris. Finally, “not long after, so far from being a mere spirit, he was recognized to be an actual angel of the Lord” (266). Cole claimed that the Smiths were talking about a dwarf just after finding or getting the plates. Abigail Harris spoke with Father and Mother Smith between December of 1827 and February of 1828. See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:31 n2. The Lewises claimed that Joseph Smith Jr. told them about the bleeding human ghost in April 1828. Fayette Lapham spoke with Joseph Smith Sr. in 1830. As Harris gained her information before Lapham and the Lewises, the evolution that Morgan seems to sketch is highly unlikely.

More recently, Robert D. Anderson has rejected the angel described in the 1834–35 Church history in favor of the treasure guardian described in “earlier versions.” He cites Abner Cole, Abigail Harris, Fayette Lapham, and Joseph and Hiel Lewis. Anderson,

Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith, 72. As noted, the Lapham and Lewis accounts are *not* earlier versions. The thirdhand account given by Harris and the neighborhood rumor reported by Cole predate the 1834–35 Church history by one year and four years respectively. However, as shown above, Joseph’s 1832 history and all of the accounts that predate Cole’s first treasure-guardian story identify Moroni as an angel.

82. Statements of Joseph and Hiel Lewis; in “Mormon History,” 1.

83. J[ohn] A. C[larke], “Gleanings by the Way, No. VI, Fairfield, August 24th, 1840,” *Episcopal Recorder* (Philadelphia), 5 September 1840, 94. Harris himself recalled that in early October of 1827, Palmyra village was buzzing with talk about Joseph’s discovery of the record. One 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!” “Mormonism—No. II,” *Tiffany’s Monthly*, June 1859, 168; emphasis added.

84. Willard Chase, statement, Manchester, New York, 1833; quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 242.

85. Joseph Knight Jr., Autobiographical Sketch, n.d., LDS Church Archives. Knight states that Joseph Smith at this time was “about 21 years of age. I think it was in November he made known to my father and I.” This suggests November of 1827, but Joseph worked for the Knight family in the fall and winter of 1826.

86. Dogberry [Cole], “Gold Bible, No. 4,” 101.

87. Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations*, 82. On William Smith, see Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:496, cf. 504.

88. Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, p. 7; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:281.

89. Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, p. 5; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:276.

90. See, for example, Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 139; Marquardt and Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*, 101.

91. Clark, “Gleanings by the Way, No. VI, Fairfield, August 24th, 1840,” 94; emphasis added.

92. Lucy Smith, “Preliminary Manuscript,” LDS Church Archives, 40; in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:289.

93. Regarding the date of Clark’s conversation with Harris, see col. 4, and Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:260–261, 261 n4. However, Clark’s letters were stimulated by a recent visit to the Palmyra area and his conversations about Mormonism with people in the area. His memory may have been infected by these conversations. Of course, Lucy’s memory may also have been contaminated by later conversations.

94. Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, 6–7; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:279–81.

95. Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, 5; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:8.

96. Cowdery, “Letter VIII,” 197; emphasis added.

97. “The Golden Tables,” *Chicago Times*, 7 August 1875, 1; emphasis added.

98. Truman Coe, [Kirtland, Ohio?], to “Mr. Editor” [of the *Ohio Observer*], [Hudson, Ohio], n.d.; in “Mormonism,” *Ohio Observer*, 11 August 1836, 1, 6; reprinted with editorial comment in Milton V. Backman Jr., “Truman Coe’s 1836 Description of Mormonism,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (spring 1977): 350–51; emphasis added.

99. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Several Generations*, 85. She conflates this visit to Cumorah with Joseph’s second trip to the hill in 1824 and identifies the other contents of the stone box as the treasure

Joseph sought, "which would be of some pecuniary advantage to him."

100. Oliver Cowdery, "Letter VIII," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835, 198.

101. Other early Mormons who used treasure-tale motifs to tell the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon were Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Knight, Martin Harris, and Brigham Young. See Marvin S. Hill, "Money-Digging Folklore and the Beginnings of Mormonism: An Interpretive Suggestion," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (fall 1984): 473–88.

102. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 147–48, 464 n105.

103. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Several Generations*, 81.

104. See Vogel's editorial comments in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:416–17.

105. Eugene England, "On Finding Truth and God: From Hope to Knowledge to Skepticism to Faith," in *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars*, comp. and ed. Philip L. Barlow (Centerville, Utah: Canon Press, 1986), 80.

106. Quinn points to a number of other treasure-seeking parallels in "Visions and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 136–77. I have addressed what I consider to be the most historically robust evidence for a treasure-seeking context.

107. Quinn, "Visions and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 136–77.

108. Stephen D. Ricks and Daniel C. Peterson carefully review history and anthropology definitions of magic in "Joseph Smith and 'Magic': Methodological Reflections on the Use of a Term," in *To Be Learned Is Good If . . .*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 129–47. See also Douglas J. Davies, "Magic and Mormon Religion," in *Mormon Identities in Transition*, ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Cassell, 1996), 143–49.

109. On Mormonism in a millenarian context, see Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993). On biblicism, see Phillip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). On evangelicalism, see Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 41, no. 4 (October 1980): 359–86. On seekerism, see Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988). On primitivism, see Marvin S. Hill, "The Shaping of the Mormon Mind in New England and New York," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (spring 1969): 351–72. On restorationism, see Mario S. De Pillis, "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 1 (spring 1966): 68–88. On dispensationalism, see John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

110. Statements of Joseph and Hiel Lewis, in "Mormon History," 1.

111. Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, 8; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:282; Vogel, "The Locations of Joseph Smith's Early Treasure Quests," 213–19.

112. Frederic G. Mather, "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Lipincott's Magazine*, (August 1880): 200. Mather had conducted his interviews in July of 1880.

113. Lapham, "II.—The Mormons," 306, 308. Giants are often from older or less-civilized societies (Pallister, "Giants," 293–324).

114. Cowdery, "Letter IV," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835, 79.

115. David Whitmer, interview with Edward Stevenson, 22–23 December 1977, Richmond, Missouri, in Stevenson Diary, LDS Church Archives; quoted in Lyndon W.

Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 13.

116. Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, 121; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:127. This account was given when Robert Matthews visited Joseph Smith in 1835. Joseph's 1832 history recorded that the angel "came and stood before me" (Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, 4; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:8). His 1839 history records that Moroni appeared "at my bedside standing in the air for his feet did not touch the floor" (Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, 5; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:276). In 1848, early Mormon William I. Appleby recorded an 1839 discourse by Orson Pratt wherein Pratt reported that Joseph "saw a personage about the ordinary size of man in the middle of the room before him." William I. Appleby, "Biography and Journal of William I. Appleby, Elder in the Church of Latter Day Saints," LDS Church Archives, 31.

117. Dale L. Berge, "Archaeological Work at the Smith Log House," *Ensign* (August 1985): 24–26.

118. Joseph remembered Moroni wearing "a loose robe of the most exquisite whiteness" (Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1, Joseph Smith Papers, LDS Church Archives, 5; quoted in Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:276). However, I suppose it is possible that Moroni was dressed in an ancient suit of clothes because I keep hearing stories of Nephite soldiers guarding temples, the MTC, and sister missionaries (modern Mormons participate in folklore too).

119. Willard Chase, statement, Manchester, New York, 1833; quoted in Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 242.

120. Benjamin Saunders, Interviewed by William H. Kelley, ca. September 1884, in "Miscellany," RLDS Church Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri, 23; quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:137.

121. "Mormon Leaders at Their Mecca," *New York Herald*, 25 June 1893, 12. Quinn draws on this account to reassert the Salamander thesis (*Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 153).

122. Obediah Dogberry [Abner Cole], "Gold Bible, No. 3," *Palmyra Reflector*, 1 February 1831, 92.

123. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 3:315–17, G303.3.1.5, and G303.3.2.3; Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*, 282, G303.3.2.3.

124. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 152.

125. Pallister, "Giants," 293-324.

126. Jesse Smith to Hyrum Smith.

127. Compare the accounts as given in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:205–6.

128. James A. Briggs, New York, New York, to John Codman, March 1875; as reproduced in Codman, "Mormonism," *International Review*, September 1881, 222–23.

129. Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:13, 13 n2.

130. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 276.

131. Eber D. Howe, *Autobiography and Recollections of a Pioneer Printer: Together with Sketches of the War of 1812 on the Niagara Frontier* (Painesville, Ohio: Telegraph Steam Printing House, 1878), 44.

132. Reed Russell, untitled filler poem, *Sunstone*, April 1997, 30.