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The Night Watches: Dreams, Oneiromancy, and Early Mormonism

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THE NIGHT WATCHES:
DREAMS, ONEIROMANCY, AND
EARLY MORMONISM

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	1
Chapters	
I. Introduction	3
II. The Dream Narrative.....	11
<i>The Early Sources</i>	11
<i>Visions, Dreams, and Visionary Dreams</i>	20
III. American Dream Culture	23
<i>Visionary Dreams and Popular Religion</i>	23
<i>The Seven Dreams of Joseph Smith Sr.</i>	31
IV. Oneiromancy and American Folk Magic	37
<i>Treasure Dreams</i>	37
<i>Conjuring Dream Spirits</i>	45
V. Conclusion	55

I. Introduction

In 1830, the first copy of the Book of Mormon came off the printing press. Five thousand were to follow, and soon, Joseph Smith Jr.'s rumored scripture would be released to the public. Gossip had circulated around the small rural community of Palmyra, New York for years about the book – how Smith claimed to have uncovered golden plates from a nearby hill, how an ancient Native American record was inscribed on these plates, how only he was allowed to see the artifact, and how he translated its sacred language with magic stones. The translation occurred over three years with the help of four different scribes who recorded Smith's translation as he dictated it. What resulted from this effort was, to believers, an earth-shattering new development in the affairs of God and man – a scripture as significant as the Bible which would usher in a new dispensation. To its critics, it was an exhaustively executed con by a known swindler in the community.

The manuscript itself is a fascinating document worthy of study, regardless of how it is interpreted. Like its Old and New Testament counterparts, the record is divided into distinct books, each bearing the names of their authors (1 Nephi, 2 Nephi, Jacob, Enos, etc.). The plot follows the history of the Native Americans – a subject largely mysterious to the continent's relatively new arrivals. It tracks their origins to the Levant where a prophet, Lehi, and his family fled the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and sailed across the ocean to the New World, populating the new promised land. The descendants diverged into two tribes: the Nephites – a Judeo-Christian, civilized race – and the Lamanites – a primitive, violent, and wicked people. The text follows these factions over generations through war, political intrigue, miracles, and

religious conflict until the Nephites were ultimately destroyed at the hands of the Lamanites. The last survivor of the Nephites, the prophet Moroni, compiled the history of his people and buried it to be found centuries later. The Native Americans – heathenish and uncivilized in the nineteenth-century American mind – are understood in the text to be the progeny of the Lamanites.

The scripture clearly reflects the historical context in which it emerged. Most obviously, it answers the question of what preceded the European arrival in the New World. Americans could see their landscape dotted with ancient burial mounds and wooden forts but could not find among the Native Americans any civilization sophisticated enough to create such monuments.¹ The inevitable theorizing produced ideas of a noble, pre-Columbian civilization exterminated by the contemporary Native Americans. Who any of these people were and where they came from was another mystery. Theories abounded about how an entire race had managed to become isolated on the continent for millennia. The “Lost Tribes of Israel” theory – which the Book of Mormon lent credence to – had long been hypothesized. Notable religious leaders in America, dabbling in amateur anthropology, had found loose similarities between the Native American and Israelite cultures and extrapolated from there.²

Yet the Book of Mormon reflects its religious contexts as much as its historical context. The young Joseph Smith was raised in the Second Great Awakening’s culture of immense

¹ The Iroquois had built forts in earlier wars with settlers, but centuries later the remains were misunderstood by Americans to be far more ancient relics of an earlier civilization. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 34-35.

² *Ibid.*, 47.

devotional fervor. Upstate New York, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, was awash in the religious excitement of the times, leading to its nickname, the “burned-over district.”³ He himself reported coming of age in a “time of great excitement” with “confusion and strife among the different denominations” in a “war of words and tumult of opinions.”⁴ Alongside Smith and his church, the region produced William Miller and the Millerites,⁵ John Humphrey Noyes and his Christian perfectionists in Oneida, and a massive revival among the Shakers.

The Book of Mormon was not framed as a newly discovered historical artifact like the Dead Sea Scrolls, stumbled upon by an unsuspecting passer-by. When Joseph Smith uncovered the plates in 1827, he explained that he was acting on divine instruction given to him by an angel four years earlier. This angelic visitation is a keystone in the theology of Mormonism, providing authority to two foundational beliefs: that Joseph Smith was a prophet and that the Book of Mormon is a true scripture. This story, more than any other, sits at the core of Mormonism’s obscured and scarcely documented earliest years, and the narrative was the earliest foundation of Smith’s claims to prophethood.⁶ No story was more widely publicized and circulated among members and outsiders alike. How we understand this story has major consequences for how we understand Joseph Smith and his early church. Therefore, if any sense is to be made of the

³ Attributed to Charles G. Finney, who referred to the region as the “burnt district.”

⁴ JS-H 1:8-10.

⁵ Presently, the Seventh-day Adventists.

⁶ Smith will later claim that three years prior to seeing the angel, he had seen a vision of God and Jesus Christ, dubbed the “First Vision.” However, no account of this was given until after the 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon. Therefore, for the years prior to his first telling of the First Vision, his only reported visionary experience was with the angel.

mysterious period of Mormonism which produced the Book of Mormon and the church, addressing Smith's angelic encounter is a necessary step.

Tracking this story through the historical record is complicated. The surviving sources are rare and often contradictory. The narrative, over the course of the church's earlier years, seems to be fluid, constantly evolving to add and remove details. The identity of the angel is a useful example of this. Left unnamed in the earliest accounts, he was first identified in 1836 as Gabriel the Archangel.⁷ In 1838, he is Moroni, the final prophet in the Book of Mormon who buried the plates. On another occasion, he is Nephi, the author of the Book of Mormon's first book and father of the Nephites.⁸ Ultimately, it is Moroni who won out against the others in the official narrative. The evolution of this identity demonstrates just one dimension in which significant aspects of the narrative fluctuated over time before crystallizing.

The narrative is confused even further as many people report wildly different versions of the story. Only two versions come from Joseph Smith, with secondhand accounts in diaries, letters and newspapers being the overwhelming majority. Why did the accounts vary so much? Two possibilities come to mind: (1) the confusion comes from the sources themselves, either through faulty memory or the inevitable slippages between secondhand accounts; or (2) Smith himself was reporting different versions of the story, intentionally or unintentionally. Given the complication, it may be easiest to begin by laying out the final, official narrative before working backwards toward earlier narratives.

⁷ "Sidney Rigdon Account, Circa 1836," in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), p. 48.

⁸ "History of Joseph Smith" in *Times and Seasons*, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-of-joseph-smith/6>.

The official 1839 account is only one of two narratives to come directly from Joseph Smith himself. This version, included toward the end of modern copies of the Book of Mormon, places the encounter in 1823.⁹ On the night of September 23, Joseph knelt by his bed and prayed, both for forgiveness of his sins and for divine instruction. A light then illuminated in his room, and a “personage” appeared, floating above the ground by his bedside. He wore a loose-fitting, white robe and called himself Moroni, a messenger sent from God. “He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang.”¹⁰ Buried alongside the book were two stones, the Urim and Thummim, which were to be used to translate the book. The messenger then quoted prophecies from scripture, starting with Malachi, then Isaiah, then Acts, then Joel. Afterwards, he warned Joseph not to show the plates to anyone unless commanded by God. Before Moroni left, “the vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited, and that so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it.”¹¹ Throughout the night, Moroni reappeared two more times, reiterating the message exactly. In the morning, Smith travelled to a nearby hill where the plates were buried yet was turned away by the angel. Every year, on the same September date, Smith would return to the plates hoping to retrieve them yet was unsuccessful each time. However, according to the account, he was finally successful during his 1827 visit, when Moroni allowed him to take the plates home and begin the translation.

⁹ *Joseph Smith – History* (JS-H), where the narrative is recorded, is part of the Pearl of Great Price, a collection of other religious texts from early Mormonism.

¹⁰ JS-H 1: 34.

¹¹ JS-H 1: 42.

The following chapter will trace this polished and detailed story to its rudimentary origins. A significant development stands out: rather than describing a *vision* of an angel, the earliest accounts describe a *dream*. Each of the four accounts that date to before the publication of the Book of Mormon use dream rather than vision. What is more, the word dream almost entirely disappears in the sources written post-publication. The few scholars that mention this divergence treat it primarily as an incidental detail with little bearing on their analysis. They focus primarily on the two official accounts written by Smith years later. But surely if any historical event is to be properly analyzed, the sources closest to the event itself should be given proper attention, if not primacy. What will ultimately be argued in the following chapter is that this narrative evolution repays scholarly attention. Rather than being a meaningless vocabulary change, it seems to reflect a distinct “dream narrative” which the earliest sources are reporting on. The “vision narrative” which preoccupies much of the scholarship is a later development which emerged after the 1830 publication. This dream narrative, more than the vision narrative, is most fruitful for our understanding of early Mormonism and the context in which it developed.

Today, listening to someone recount a dream can be a tedious chore. It can be difficult to imagine any dream causing significant religious excitement, and yet it did among Smith’s earliest followers. Clearly, the way in which dreams were perceived was radically different than our contemporary approach to them. Without delving too deeply in an analysis of the current, materialist world view, it will suffice to say that it originates from a set of assumptions taken for granted by modernity about perception, reality, meaning, and one’s relationship to the world. Many of these assumptions would not have been shared by the main subjects in this story. Their own unique assumptions about the world constructed what D. Michael Quinn referred to as the “magic world view”; a kind of animistic and semiotic lens where the boundary between the self

and the material world is blurred.¹² The Smith family gave dreams serious consideration and took them to be a valid form of divine communication, and they were not unusual in their time.

If there was indeed an earlier dream narrative, it is necessary to explain how this narrative fits within its context. Without a context in which it makes sense, the dream narrative may in fact be an aberration. However, there exists extensive evidence that there was, what I call, a “visionary dream culture” in early America, particularly in upstate New York. There was significant overlap between the Smith family and this dream culture, most notably in the field of folk magic. The Smith family’s involvement in magic and treasure digging would have exposed them to oneiromancy (dream magic).¹³ One oneiromantic practice (the summoning of spirits in dreams to reveal treasure) suggests a genre that the dream narrative seems to explicitly echo. When Joseph Smith recounts how a spirit in a dream revealed to him the location of a buried treasure, he is engaging with a broader culture which he was already participating in. The ultimate argument I will present is that the dream narrative, rather than being sidelined by the literature, should be given appropriate attention as the primary version of the story which Smith based his new scripture which was later modified into the vision narrative.

Much of this work delves into the folk magic and treasure digging traditions of nineteenth-century America, a well-established and intimidating field of research. D. Michael Quinn’s encyclopedic *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* provided an exhaustive account of Joseph Smith’s involvement with the folk magic tradition. Despite being an adamant

¹² D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), i-x.

¹³ J. Gordon Melton, “Oneiromancy,” in *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, 4th ed. (Detroit: Gale Research, 1996), 954.

believer himself, Quinn remains controversial in apologist circles, yet his work is a remarkably thorough and revealing piece of scholarship. This research is deeply indebted to his. Thirty-four years after Quinn's 1987 publication (and twenty-three years after his 1998 revised edition, which more than doubled the length of the original text), it can feel redundant to enter a field so thoroughly investigated. Indeed, much of the information included in this research may seem repetitive to the well-informed scholar of early Mormonism. For the sake of the uninitiated reader, I feel it necessary to incorporate much of it nonetheless, yet that is only part of the reason for the repetition. Quinn's work generally neglects oneiromancy in its discussion of folk magic, which leads him to dismiss the dream narrative in favor of the vision narrative in his analysis. A primary goal of this research is to introduce a new perspective (the visionary dream and oneiromantic cultures) into the conversation. In order to do so, it is necessary to lay out the existing facts as we know them and reassemble them in a new light.

II. The Dream Narrative

At 1,224 words, Joseph Smith's 1839 account of his encounter with Moroni is the longest of the existing versions. Its details – the exact date, the clothes of the angel, and the precise dialogue – are more thorough than any that came before it. This account, it seems, was intended by Smith to be definitive. Smith's previous attempt to record his official narrative in 1832 is compatible with his later account, with minor differences. Smith is content in 1832 to simply call his visitor an unidentified "angel of the Lord." The date of the event – 1822 in the first account, and 1823 in the second – is another notable difference. These edits and omissions do not suggest any major changes in the narrative aside from a further crystallization of details. What is important here are two key similarities. The first is that both accounts explicitly describe the experience as a "vision." The other is that both were recorded after the March 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon and the establishment of Joseph Smith's Church of Christ the following month. Moreover, both were written roughly a decade after the event they describe.

The Early Sources

Of the 36 accounts collected for this research, four predate the 1830 publication. Although far less detailed than the later accounts recorded by Smith, all four are united in describing a "dream." What makes them particularly noteworthy is where they originate. Though

none of the pre-publication sources come from Smith himself, they do come from close associates.

The earliest of these sources is an interview with Martin Harris dating between 1827 and 1828. Harris, a resident of Smith's hometown of Palmyra, New York, was one of the religion's first converts and plays a pivotal role in the earliest years. It was Harris who would eventually become one of Smith's scribes in the translation process, and it was his money (from mortgaging his farm) that funded the first printing of the Book of Mormon. The exact relationship between Harris and Smith is often debated in the scholarship. The character of Harris weaves between analyses as gullible victim, righteous servant, and co-conspirator. Regardless, it would be safe to say that Harris would have been a reliable source for the narrative being pushed by Smith.

John A. Clark, the former pastor of Zion's Episcopal Church in Palmyra, held two interviews with Harris around 1827 and 1828.¹⁴ These interviews are described by Clark in two 1840 letters to the *Episcopal Reader*.¹⁵ Though the gap between the actual interviews and the publication of their details may provoke suspicion, the details provided are compatible with the other pre-publication sources. Given the date of the interviews, Harris' account of Smith's angelic encounter is the earliest surviving source. Not only does this source predate the publication of the Book of Mormon, but it may also predate the translation process, as Harris and Smith would not begin working together on the manuscript until April 1828. Clark's account is as follows:

¹⁴ Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* vol. II, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), p. 260.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

According to Martin Harris, 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. ...Smith awoke from his *dream*, and according to Harris, started off towards Pennsylvania, not knowing to what point he should go.¹⁶

Here, in the earliest account, is a clear reference to the experience as a dream. More than simply using the word *dream*, it describes an entire dreamlike context in which Smith is in bed at night and awakens at the end. It should be acknowledged that Clark's account is not friendly to Mormonism.¹⁷ This is a quality that will be shared by all these sources. Yet, this has little bearing on the "dream" vocabulary, as I will argue later.

The following two sources appeared in New York newspapers, the *Rochester Gem* and the *Palmyra Freeman*. In mid-1829, Martin Harris and Joseph Smith travelled to Rochester, New York. By this point, Harris was no longer Smith's scribe, having been replaced by Oliver Cowdery that year.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Harris was still an avid supporter of Smith. The *Gem* piece on

¹⁶ John A. Clark to Dear Brethren, 24 August 1840, *The Episcopal Recorder* (Philadelphia) 18 (5 September 1840) in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, p. 260-1. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁸ Martin Harris' tenure as scribe ended in June 1828, when the manuscript's first 116 pages (dubbed the Book of Lehi) went missing while in Harris' possession. Joseph Smith was unable to recreate the lost pages, leading to none of Harris' manuscript being included in the published version of the Book of Mormon.

Smith was published in June, shortly after the duo’s visit, and cites an interview with Harris. The *Freeman* article appears the following month.¹⁹ The textual similarities between these articles suggests that *The Freeman* article was copied directly from *The Gem*. Where *The Gem* describes that Smith was “visited by the spirit of the Almighty in a *dream*,” *The Freeman* reports that he had been “visited in a *dream* by the spirit of the Almighty.” Clearly, the latter source is a reshuffled version of the first, and it may be more accurate to refer to them as a single source. *The Rochester Gem*, like the Clark source, seems adamant on the dream vocabulary, using the phrase multiple times. The repetition of the term suggests intentionality. “Dream” was not a casual turn of phrase; rather, it was precisely the word the author intended. This account is also the first to suggest that the angel appeared to Smith three times in the night (“...after a third visit from the same spirit in a *dream*...”)²⁰ – a motif which will survive into Smith’s official 1838 account. The *Freeman* account, of course, shares this detail.

The previous three sources all tie back to Martin Harris. It could reasonably be argued that the only thing this would suggest is that Harris understood the experience to have been a dream – whether this is what Smith had told him or not. Yet the fourth source introduces another perspective outside of Harris’ which corroborates the “dream narrative.” Fayette Lapham was a farmer from Perinton, New York, but his work brought him to Palmyra often. During one visit in either 1829 or early 1830, he conducted an interview with Joseph Smith Sr., the father of Palmyra’s aspiring prophet.²¹ Although the source was not published until 1870, its details are nonetheless reliable. Mormon scholar Don Bradley writes of Lapham’s account: “his accuracy

¹⁹ Vogel, *Documents*, vol. 2, 272. Emphasis added.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

²¹ Vogel, *Documents*, vol. 1, 456.

on many obscure but confirmable details... lends credence to additional, unique details he provides.”²² In Dan Vogel’s analysis, “many of the details are supported by contemporary sources, some of which remained unpublished in 1870.”²³ It seems likely that Lapham’s account, though published forty years late, was written based on detailed notes taken from the original 1830 interview.²⁴

The elder Joseph Smith is himself an interesting character. The patriarch’s influence on Joseph Smith Jr. will be evident throughout this research, and much of the prophet’s world view can be traced directly back to Joseph Sr., particularly his beliefs and practices relating to magic and treasure digging (Chapter IV). By the time of the Lapham interview, the Smith family had largely rallied around Joseph Jr.’s religious claims. This source’s description of the experience follows:

Soon after joining the [Baptist] Church, he had a very singular *dream*; but he did not tell his father of the *dream*, until about a year afterwards. He then told his father that, in his *dream*, a very large man appeared to him, dressed in an ancient suit of clothes, and the clothes were bloody. And the man said to him that there was a valuable treasure, buried many years since, and not far from that place...²⁵

²² Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon’s Missing Stories*, 122.

²³ “Editorial Note,” in Vogel, *Documents*, vol. 1, 456.

²⁴ Bradley, *116*, 122.

²⁵ “Joseph Smith, Sr., Interview with Fayette Lapham, 1830,” in Vogel, *Documents*, vol. 1, 458. Emphasis added.

As with the previous sources, the “dream” vocabulary is repeatedly emphasized, used three times in the in the account’s first two sentences. What is also noteworthy is the description of a “bloody” spirit, as blood is mentioned nowhere in Smith’s official 1839 account. This quality of the angel, much like his name, may be another dimension in which the narrative evolved. There exists another account, written many decades later, which also includes this detail.

In 1879, Joseph and Hiel Lewis gave their recollections of what Smith had told them early in his career. The two were cousins of Emma Smith, who had married Joseph Jr. in 1827. It is around this time that the cousins would have met Smith and heard his story. In the account of the cousins, Smith had encountered a “ghost” with his “throat cut from ear to ear, and the blood streaming down.”²⁶ The pair also report that the ghost had appeared to Smith in a dream: “He said that by a *dream* he was informed that at such a place in a certain hill, in an iron box, were some gold plates with curious engravings, which he must get and translate, and write a book...”²⁷ Although this source is certainly suspect given that it was published fifty years later by two sources hostile to Smith, its similarity to an earlier, friendly source (Joseph Sr.) is interesting. The fact that the “dream” and the “bleeding spirit” are reported by both friendly and hostile relatives suggests that these details were present in the account Joseph Jr. had told his relatives early on.

Every one of the sources which come before the Book of Mormon’s publication and the establishment of the Church of Christ refer to Smith’s encounter as a dream. Yet starting in 1831, effectively none of the sources use this vocabulary, and instead use the word “vision”

²⁶ “Joseph and Hiel Lewis Statement,” 30 April 1870 in Dan Vogel, *Documents*, vol. 4, 304.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 303-304.

exclusively. In his discussion of the Moroni encounter in *Magic World View*, Quinn takes a brief look at these dream sources. He determined that there was significant overlap between dreams and visions in the context of early American religion.²⁸ When the sources stop describing a dream and starts describing a vision, the change is primarily a semantic change and suggests that Smith was refining the details rather than changing them.²⁹ Quinn takes this no further, arguing that this change in vocabulary should not be overanalyzed. I, however, suggest that the distinction between “dream” and “vision” was not arbitrary to nineteenth-century Americans. The two were understood to have clear differences, and when the sources describe a dream, that is exactly what they mean. The later change to vision suggests that at some point after the 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon, the narrative was intentionally changed.

If the two words were as interchangeable as Quinn argues, you would expect to see “dream” seep into the post-1830 sources. Yet the total absence of the term suggests that it was different enough to be totally avoided. The avoidance of the word “dream” was intentional, as is explicitly stated in some later sources. In an 1835 letter, Oliver Cowdery³⁰ clearly denounces the dream narrative. Although the Lord can certainly communicate through dreams, he argues that what Smith experienced was different:

²⁸ Quinn, *Magic World View*, 138.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁰ Cowdery was the primary scribe for the Book of Mormon translation after Harris. It is Cowdery’s manuscript which comprises most of the published version of the Book of Mormon. By 1835, Cowdery was “Second Elder” in the church under Smith and remained in Smith’s close circle until his 1838 falling out and eventual excommunication.

In ancient times, the Lord warned some of his servants in dreams... But the one of which I have been speaking is what would have been called an open vision. And though it was in the night, yet it was *not a dream*. There is no room for conjecture in this matter, and to talk of deception would be to sport with the common sense of every man who knows when he is awake, when he sees and when he does not see.³¹

To suggest that Smith confused a dream for a vision, Cowdery argues, is to insult Smith's common sense. Dreams and "open visions" were clearly distinct experiences that could be easily differentiated by the experiencer. If Smith had experienced a vision as clearly as Cowdery suggests, then "dream" would be immediately understood to be the wrong descriptor. This is exactly what Smith describes in his own accounts, stating that after the experience, "I supposed it had been a dreem [sic] of Vision but when I consid[e]red I knew that it was not."³² The change in sources from dream to vision was not semantic but was rather a total reframing of the experience. Far more than refining the details (as Quinn suggests), the change tells an entirely different story by changing the location from a dream to waking life. This suggests that although there may be some overlap between dream and visionary experiences, the distinction is clear enough to not invite confusion. If Smith's later account is accurate, why is it that the primary sources closest to the encounter all make the supposed mistake of describing a dream rather than a vision?

³¹ "Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps," July 1835 in Vogel, *Documents*, vol. 2, p. 445-6. Emphasis added.

³² Joseph Smith, "History, circa Summer 1832," Joseph Smith Papers Project, p. 4.

One easy explanation is to question the motives of these sources. As I have stated before, the sources relaying the details were not friendly to Smith. I will not go so far as to assume that they were hostile, but the authors were certainly not themselves believers. One interpretation of these sources would argue that the sources intentionally replaced “vision” with “dream” to kill the credibility of the account. I am not convinced of this for two reasons. First, it assumes that dreams were understood to be less serious than visions. Even if this were true, it is not obvious to me that modifying Smith’s account to be *less* fantastical would have the desired effect. Second, if using “dream” is an expression of hostility, why does it not appear in the hostile sources published after 1830? Hostility towards Mormonism only grew after the publication of the Book of Mormon. Smith’s experience after 1830 was marked by escalating threats and mob violence, culminating in his 1844 murder in Illinois. Hostility towards Mormonism only grew more intense in proportion to the popularity of the church. As the church expanded, it was matched by growing opposition. If the dream vocabulary is indeed a strategy for undermining Smith’s claims, it does not follow that it would be *less* present in hostile sources as they became more numerous.

This clear delineation before and after 1830 complicates any attempt to explain away the dream vocabulary. The straightforward approach seems to be the most compatible with the evidence: when the sources heard “dream,” they wrote “dream.” When the sources after 1830 describe a “vision,” they do so for the same reason. The “dream narrative” thus emerges as a distinct predecessor to the official “vision narrative.”

Visions, Dreams, and Visionary Dreams

But what exactly distinguished a dream from a vision? The obvious first place to look is contemporary dictionaries. Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* defines a dream as "the thought or series of thoughts of a person in sleep." This, of course, is no different than our current understanding. However, the dictionary includes a religious definition, stating that "dreams were sometimes impressions on the minds of sleeping persons, made by divine agency."³³ Dreams were therefore commonly understood as being potential conduits for divine communication. The religious definition of "vision" proposed by Webster is "a revelation from God; an appearance or exhibition of something supernaturally presented to the minds of the prophets."³⁴ Putting these two together, it seems best to conceive of visions as a type of experience, and the dream as a conduit for experience. A visionary dream (or, as Smith calls it, a "dream of Vision") is therefore a specific type of vision. Vision is the umbrella term which encompasses a variety of experiences which includes both visionary dreams and Cowdery's "open visions." It would therefore make sense to refer to any visionary dream as a vision; however, it would not make sense to refer to any vision as a dream, unless that is how it occurred. To do so would be substituting the broad category for the specific one. The two are not interchangeable in both directions.

It would be wrong to take for granted that Webster's definition held true for all Americans, Joseph Smith included. For this argument to hold, evidence of Webster's interpretation would need to be found among Smith and his contemporaries. Smith's own

³³ Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

writing, and in particular his translation of the Bible,³⁵ suggests a familiarity with Adam Clarke's *Commentary on the Bible*, which was published in six volumes between 1810 and 1825. In some places, scholarship has uncovered evidence of plagiarism in which Smith directly reused passages from Clarke in his translation, suggesting more than a passing familiarity.³⁶ Clarke writes in his commentary on Genesis (a book Smith pays particular attention to in his translation) that six kinds of dreams exist, ranging from nonsensical exercises of the imagination to demonic temptations. The sixth kind of dream comes from God and carries divine messages.³⁷ Here, dreams are portrayed as conduits, with visions being one kind of message to utilize this medium. Not only is this compatible with the Webster definition, but it is also compatible with the mainstream Western thought on dreams, reflecting ideas from Artemidorus to Aquinas to Calvin.³⁸ Similar ideas fill the cast of nineteenth-century religious visionaries, which will be expounded on in the following chapter.

³⁵ Beginning in 1830, Joseph Smith undertook an effort to use divine revelation to correct errors in the Old and New Testaments that appeared from incorrect translations over time. This edited version is referred to as the Joseph Smith Translation (JST).

³⁶ Thomas A. Wayment, Haley Wilson-Lemmon, "A Recovered Resource: The Use of Adam Clarke's Bible Commentary in Joseph Smith's Bible Translation," in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michal MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020).

³⁷ Adam Clarke *Commentary*, Genesis 41:57.1.

³⁸ Artemidorus, "Dreams are for Instruction," and Thomas Aquinas, "Is Divination Unlawful?" and John Calvin, "The Operation of a Divine Agency in Dreams," in *The World of Dreams*, ed. Ralph Woods, (New York: Random House, 1947).

The conclusion of this analysis is that the use of “dream” in the earliest sources is not a sort of synonym for “vision” and is instead used literally to describe a dream. This does not exclude the possibility that the dream was visionary in nature. A visionary quality is a necessary condition for having a “dream of an angel.” However, a dreamlike quality is not necessary for having a “vision of an angel.” In other words, to call a vision a dream would be incorrect unless the vision occurred in a dream. Because Cowdery and Smith insisted that the vision was not a dream, it would be clearly wrong for sources to suggest that it happened in a dream. Yet, the earliest sources do exactly that, which suggests the existence of two different stories. Therefore, given the differences in definitions and connotations between the two words, it seems the best explanation for why the earliest sources refer to a dream is because two different stories were being told at different times. The first story, which our earliest sources outline, occurred in a dream. The second story, reported years later by Smith himself, describes a traditional waking vision. The task now is to explain the context that would allow for the dream narrative to both exist and find success. Ultimately, I will show that the “dream narrative” not only existed, but made real sense to both Smith and his audience.

III. American Dream Culture

Visionary Dreams and Popular Religion

The Ballou Meeting House was a lonely structure, atop a hill in an empty field in Cumberland, Rhode Island. Down the road which banked around the building were a handful of households, many of them sharing some connection to the Ballou family.³⁹ It was Maturin Ballou that had first brought his family to Rhode Island in 1646, becoming one of the earliest settlers of Providence Plantations.⁴⁰ The family had secured a large tract fifteen miles north of Providence proper, in what the settlers ominously called the “outlands.” The meeting house, which had been regularly occupied by the Six Principle Baptist church and Ballou preachers since its construction in 1740, had gone cold by the new century.⁴¹ Then, in 1813, a pioneer preacher arrived in the town of Cumberland.⁴²

Elder Zephaniah S. Crossman’s anti-establishment brand of preaching set off an eruption of religious excitement in the region. Crossman converted hundreds during his stay in Rhode Island, among them Ariel Ballou and his eight children.⁴³ Crossman’s charismatic influence was

³⁹ Adin Ballou, *Autobiography of Adin Ballou, 1803-1890: Containing An Elaborate Record And Narrative of His Life From Infancy To Old Age*, American Theological Library Association, 1896,, 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

short-lived, but for a brief time Christian zeal returned to the Ballou Meeting House.⁴⁴ In the face of another religious collapse, Ariel and his eldest son Cyrus were adamant holdouts. Yet Cyrus was dead by 1816 before he could join the ministry.⁴⁵ Within eight months, a punishing winter would take Ariel's second son Arnold.⁴⁶ The Ballou Meeting House, which had nurtured Ariel's excitement, quickly became the focal point of tragedy as he buried his two sons in the adjacent cemetery and fell into a crushing depression.⁴⁷

The seventh child, Adin, was less zealous than his father. He was indebted to Crossman for reintroducing him to the Christian faith, but he remained unconvinced of the preacher's methods and doctrine.⁴⁸ For years the young Adin maintained a private practice of religious contemplation as new pastors came and went.⁴⁹ Yet in 1821, the nineteen-year-old Adin's personal meanderings were interrupted by a profound experience. Shortly after midnight, Adin's sleep was interrupted by a dreamlike⁵⁰ vision of a luminous figure, draped in a white robe,

⁴⁴ Ballou, *Autobiography*, 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 47-49.

⁵⁰ Although Ballou remained undecided, he believed that the experience may have been a dream, though a particularly unusual one. He holds out on describing it explicitly as a dream because the state of consciousness he experienced was very unusual. Assuming Ballou is describing a real experience, there are a few explanations for what may have occurred physiologically: Lucid dreams (where the dreamer becomes conscious in the dream), false awakenings (where the dreamer believes they have woken up but are in fact still in a dream), and hypnagogia (the state of consciousness between waking and dreaming). I also do not wish to

standing outside his bedroom window. As the figure entered the room and stood at his bedside, passing cleanly through the solid wall, Adin recognized it as the spirit of his deceased brother Cyrus. Speaking on behalf of God himself, Cyrus commanded Adin to join the ministry, “to preach the Gospel of Christ to your fellow-men; obey his voice or the blood of their souls will be required at your hands.”⁵¹

Adin Ballou’s ministry was both unique and commonplace. His theology led him to develop a concept of Christian anarchism which would culminate in the establishment of his utopian Hopedale Community in 1843 and the publishing of his highly influential *Practical Christianity*.⁵² Yet novelty was mainstream in the era, and Ballou was just one among many renegades undermining the established religious order. As Ballou began his first rounds in the New England revival circuit, Joseph Smith was nearby encountering spirits of his own.

The similarities between Ballou’s experience and Smith’s are notable. Both their narratives describe a young man wrestling with faith who is visited at night by a resurrected spirit who commands him to carry out God’s will. Although Ballou’s circuit crisscrossed the

exclude the possibility of there being a distinct “visionary dream” state of consciousness. It feels fair to include all these possibilities under the category of “dreamlike.”

⁵¹ Ballou, *Autobiography*, 62.

⁵² Ballou’s *Practical Christianity* was a significant influence on Leo Tolstoy’s anarchist philosophy. The two had maintained a regular correspondence until Ballou’s death in 1890. In an interview with Tolstoy, academic Andrew Dickson White had asked who the greatest American writer was, to which Tolstoy named Adin Ballou. Interestingly, Tolstoy also had an immense interest in Mormonism, which inspired White to begin collecting Mormon artifacts upon his return to New York. Andrew Dickson White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White*, vol. 2 (The Century Company: New York, 1905), ch. 37.

North— and indeed took him to New York in 1828 and 1829⁵³ — it would be mere speculation to suggest that Smith had heard anything of Ballou or his account. What is evident is that Smith is not unique in reporting a night vision. Prominent Mormon scholar Richard Bushman has established the existence of a “visionary world” around Joseph Smith.⁵⁴ Nineteenth-century Americans were no strangers to reports of religious visions like Smith’s. Visions of spirits, angels, Christ, or God constantly spread throughout the nation via pamphlets, usually alongside divine messages relayed to the experiencer.⁵⁵ In recounting their visions, neither Smith nor Ballou would have been treading any new ground; rather, they would have been contributing to an already flourishing genre.⁵⁶ However, my interest is limited to the subset of these visionary accounts that relate to dreams. What I wish to do is zoom into Bushman’s “visionary world” and find a more specific culture of visionary dreams — in which individuals believed that dreams could contain divine messages. If it exists, then we can conclude that Smith’s dream narrative would have been far less unusual than it may seem.

Nineteenth-century preachers like Ballou were wont to have a supernatural experience in their pocket which bolstered their credibility. This is not to ascribe cynical motives behind these stories as it does not matter *why* religious leaders told stories like this. My interest is solely in the fact that they *were* told. In 1813, the Methodist evangelist Benjamin Abbot of Pennsylvania

⁵³ Ballou, *Autobiography*, 139.

⁵⁴ Richard Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” in *Brigham Young University Studies* vol. 37, no. 1 (1997), 183.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 185-6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

reported a dream in which an angel appeared to him opposite a river.⁵⁷ Massachusetts Methodist Billy Hibbard dreamed he saw “Jesus at the right hand of God, and the Heavenly hosts surrounding the throne.”⁵⁸ Methodist ministers like George Peck and Freeborn Garrettson regularly recounted their dreams to their audiences.⁵⁹ The culture was shared among the laity as well: Alexander Campbell reports a man from New York who was “regenerated when asleep, by a vision in the night”⁶⁰ in which he heard the voice of God forgiving him of his sins.⁶¹ All of these examples express the same belief in the visionary dream culture. Their geographic distribution also suggest that this culture was not isolated, but instead spans the entirety of Bushman’s visionary world.⁶²

The prevalence of this dream culture seems to fluctuate in the nation over time. As Jon Butler notes, although eighteenth-century Methodists paid great attention to dreams, the following generation seems to have abandoned them altogether. Methodist memoirs – in which

⁵⁷ Benjamin Abbot, *The Experience, and Gospel Labours, of the Rev. Benjamin Abbott*, 1813, 20-22.

⁵⁸ Billy Hibbard, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of B. Hibbard, Minister of the Gospel*, 1825, 118-119.

⁵⁹ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992), 239.

⁶⁰ Unlike “vision” alone, the phrase “vision of the night” is synonymous with dream. Other sources (including the following one from Solomon Chamberlain) use this phrase in an explicit dream context.

⁶¹ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian Baptist*, vol. 1, 50.

⁶² Almost all the pamphlets Bushman analyzes (listed at the end of his article) come from the Northeast, primarily Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts, where our visionary dream evidence originates.

dreams used to make frequent appearances – became entirely devoid of any mention of dreams.⁶³ By the Second Great Awakening, however, Methodism had undergone a reversal. Lorenzo Dow – perhaps the most famous Methodist minister at this time – had adamantly encouraged his followers to heed the messages contained in their dreams.⁶⁴ During the Second Great Awakening, American religion had turned away from adherence to authority and toward a recognition of one’s own authority. One’s relationship with God had come to be understood as a personal affair, and as a result, it was possible to be in dialogue with God. Although the odds of any believer having a significant waking vision were understood to be low, having dreams was a common experience shared by everybody. If one believed that God could communicate with individual believers, dreams were a reasonable place to look for his messages.⁶⁵

Solomon Chamberlain, one of Joseph Smith’s earliest followers, was a firm believer of these “visions of the night.” At nineteen, Chamberlain had an apocalyptic dream and an entity warned him of the eternal torment he had in store if he did not change his ways and follow Christ.⁶⁶ After joining the Quakers, Chamberlain had another dream which told him to abandon the Quakers and continue to search for the true faith.⁶⁷ In his final significant dream, Chamberlain is visited by an angel in his bed. He gets up to follow the angel and notices that his physical body is still laying in the bed alongside his wife. The angel guides Chamberlain to

⁶³ Butler, *Awash*, 241.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 238-239.

⁶⁶ Solomon Chamberlain, *A Sketch of the Experience of Solomon Chamberlin, to Which Is Added a Remarkable Revelation or Trance of His Father-in-Law Philip Haskins*, (Lyons, New York: 1829), 131.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

heaven to visit his mother's spirit before returning him to his body in the morning.⁶⁸

Chamberlain printed these experiences in a visionary pamphlet, published in 1829.⁶⁹ When he met the Smith family in 1829, he shared with them his pamphlet, and a relationship between the two visionaries began.⁷⁰

Like Smith, Chamberlain was a poor, rural New Yorker. By eighteen, both of his parents had died, and the measly inheritance forced him to “earn [his] bread by the sweat of [his] face” as a cooper.⁷¹ Although Smith still had his parents, his situation was not much better. A series of poor business decisions and bad luck had destroyed the Smith family's finances and forced them to move seven times in fourteen years.⁷² Joseph Smith and Solomon Chamberlain could also be described as wanderers in a time of religious confusion. Prior to his conversion to Mormonism, Chamberlain had short-term affiliations with the Presbyterians, Episcopal Methodists, Reformed Methodists, and Quakers.⁷³ Joseph Smith was exposed to a similar level of indecision. His mother Lucy was an earnest seeker but never found a permanent denomination.⁷⁴ Joseph Sr., on the other hand, was primarily indifferent to organized religion, though had his own brief allegiances.⁷⁵ The Smith family's main connection to religion was through folk magic, which

⁶⁸ Chamberlain, *Sketch*, 138-40.

⁶⁹ Larry C. Porter, “Solomon Chamberlain's Missing Pamphlet: Dreams, Visions, and Angelic Ministrants,” in *BYU Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1997), 113.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

⁷¹ Solomon Chamberlain, *Autobiography of Solomon Chamberlain*, (1858).

⁷² Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2007), 18-20.

⁷³ Chamberlain, *Sketch*, 132-133.

⁷⁴ Bushman, *Rough Stone*, 23-27.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

was intimately tied to Christianity (despite the best efforts of religious leaders to separate the two).⁷⁶ Joseph Jr.'s religious leanings were a blend of both his parents, sharing his mother's desire for religious affiliation and his father's interest in folk magic. The vague relationship the Smith family and Chamberlain had with religion was extremely common in early America. In 1830, a presbyterian minister estimated that church attendance in Oneida County, New York was – at most – one in four.⁷⁷ These numbers were consistent across New York state, and it would be reasonable to assume that this extended to Manchester County, where Joseph Smith and Solomon Chamberlain lived.⁷⁸

These two strangers from the same region, social class, and religious persuasion had a shared understanding of dreams. If Chamberlain was confident enough in the visionary power of dreams to publish his own as legitimate religious experiences, why should we assume that Smith would have been any more hesitant? The dream narrative, like the accounts of Chamberlain, Ballou, and others reflects the visionary dream culture they were engaging in. All these characters were comfortable using dream rhetoric in describing their experiences, suggesting a sincere belief in the visionary potential of dreams. Yet it is not enough to simply compare two individuals and conclude that similarities in one area suggests similarities in other areas. To suggest that Smith was as ingrained in this dream culture as the other visionary dreamers requires more evidence specifically related to Smith.

⁷⁶ Quinn, *Magic World View*, 31.

⁷⁷ Butler, *Awash*, 283.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

The Seven Dreams of Joseph Smith Sr.

A large amount of evidence suggests that Joseph Smith's upbringing would have familiarized him with this dream culture. Orrin Porter Rockwell, a childhood neighbor of the Smiths and early convert, recalled how his mother and Lucy Smith could often be found on Saturday evenings "comparing notes" about recent dreams in their families.⁷⁹ Lucy Smith herself reports one instance of having a visionary dream.⁸⁰ Joseph Sr. paid a similar amount of attention to his dreams. The elder Smith himself had a long history of visionary dreams prior to his son's angelic encounter. In a clear expression of the visionary power of dreams, Joseph Sr. recalled before an audience in 1834 how he had often been visited by the Lord in dreams.⁸¹ Between 1811 and 1820, Joseph Sr. had seven dreams he found noteworthy enough to record. Lucy, too, had found them noteworthy, and included five of them in her 1845 history of the Smith family.⁸²

One key takeaway is the regular presence of another entity. Joseph Sr. describes an "attendant spirit" who remains by his side and interprets the dreams as they occur.⁸³ No description of the guide is given, and Joseph Sr. seems to take their presence for granted. We are seemingly expected to assume that the guide is always present, even if Smith does not reference

⁷⁹ "Elizabeth Kane Interview with Brigham Young, Artemisia (Beaman) Snow, and Orrin Rockwell, 1872-1873," in Vogel, *Documents*, vol. 3, 407.

⁸⁰ Richard K. Behrens, "Dreams, Visions, and Visitations: The Genesis of Mormonism," in *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, vol. 27 (2007), 173.

⁸¹ "Joseph Smith Sr., Introductory Comments" in Vogel, *Documents*, vol. 1, 469.

⁸² Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches Of Joseph Smith The Prophet And His Progenitors For Many Generations*, 1853, 56-74.

⁸³ Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 57.

them until the end.⁸⁴ The guide is a familiar and reliable facet of Smith's visionary dreams. The presence of an omniscient spirit who is seemingly an independent entity from the dreamer is a regular facet of lucid dreams (in which the dreamer is conscious and aware that they are in a dream). However, for full lucidity it is not enough for the dreamer alone to become conscious. In a fully lucid dream, all entities in the dream seem to be aware that they are in a dream. Some of these seemingly conscious figures "not only become lucid before the dream-ego, [they] also possesses a higher degree of lucidity than the dream-ego later achieves."⁸⁵ Dream guides are a type of these seemingly omniscient entities, and they play roles in various spiritual traditions, including those of the Native American tribes in the Smith family's vicinity.⁸⁶ The spirit of Moroni plays a similar role to these dream guides in Joseph, Jr.'s account. He is a distinct, omniscient entity who imbues the dreamer with knowledge. Although I do not want to fully suggest that the character of Moroni is a kind of dream/spirit guide (I will make a similar, more nuanced argument in the following chapter), there is something to be said about the Smith family belief that entities in dreams are legitimate sources of profound knowledge.

One of Joseph Sr.'s dreams stands out and demands a recounting here. In 1811, Smith dreamed he was wandering through a desolate field (a common setting for his dreams)

⁸⁴ Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 59.

⁸⁵ Paul Tholey, "Overview of the Development of Lucid Dream Research in Germany," (presentation, 6th International Conference of the Association for the Study of Dreams in London, 1989).

⁸⁶ Among the shamanic traditions of the Huron, the *oki* are personal spirit guides/guardians encountered in multiple dreams. Other Iroquoian tribes share a similar concept referred to by other names such as *oyaron* and *okton*. Elizabeth Tooker, *An Ethnography of the Huron Indians, 1615-1649* (U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington D.C., 1964), 78.

accompanied by his dream guide. Finally, he came upon a rope running along a riverbank leading into a valley where a beautiful tree sat. Following the rope, he reached the tree and ate its bright white fruit which was “delicious beyond description.” Wishing to share this discovery, he returned with his family, and they all enjoyed the fruit. On the other end of the valley was a “spacious building,” full of well-dressed people who looked down on the Smith family from the windows and mocked them. The fruit, the guide explained to Joseph Sr., was the “pure love of God,” and the building was Babylon whose inhabitants “scorn and despise” the righteous.⁸⁷

To a reader familiar with the Book of Mormon, this narrative should be recognizable. Lehi, the Israelite prophet who brought his family to the Americas, had an almost identical visionary dream. In the dream, Lehi was guided by a man in a white robe⁸⁸ through a “dark and dreary wilderness.” Lehi and his guide came upon a tree in a field and tasted its white fruit which was “desirable above all other fruit.” He called for his family to join and, following a rod of iron running along a riverbank, they joined Lehi and ate the fruit. Far above them, well-dressed people in a “spacious building” looked down and mocked the family as they ate.⁸⁹

Clearly, these stories did not exist independently, and one was certainly inspired by the other. Either Joseph Jr. adapted a family story to include in his scripture as he authored it, or Lucy Mack Smith confused the narrative from the Book of Mormon for one of her husband’s dreams. The first possibility seems more likely. Lucy’s accounts of the dreams seem to have

⁸⁷ Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 59.

⁸⁸ Note how this dream guide wears a white robe just as Moroni does. Perhaps the robe is evidence that Moroni is indeed a dream guide. However, it is more likely that the white robe is simply the uniform of spiritual entities, including dream guides and angelic messengers.

⁸⁹ 1 Nephi 8:26-28.

been taken directly from an earlier record and is a direct recounting rather than a retelling.⁹⁰ When Joseph Sr. wrote these accounts is unclear, but given the attention he paid to his other dreams, it is unlikely that he confused a Book of Mormon narrative for a personal experience. If it is indeed the case that Lehi's dream is a retelling of Joseph Sr.'s dream, then here is clear evidence that Joseph Jr. shared his father's interest in the visionary dream culture and was involved enough to integrate it into his religious doctrine.

Yet the text of Lehi's dream takes us even further toward a connection between Smith and the visionary dream culture. Prior to recounting his dream for his family, Lehi tells them, "Behold, I have dreamed a dream, or, in other words, I have seen a vision."⁹¹ This may seem in the first analysis to be evidence that dream and vision were synonymous (à la Quinn), yet a deeper analysis of the exact phraseology reveals the opposite. The phrase "or, in other words" (along with similar phrases such as "or, rather" and "that is") is a regular feature within the Book of Mormon. These appear to be remnants of the translation and editing process. Unlike a regular translation, the Book of Mormon was translated through divine revelation, and Smith would have dictated the words he received to a scribe nearby. However, because the translation was ostensibly divinely inspired, any attempt to retroactively edit the text would have challenged the validity of the revelation. Mormons today laud the Book of Mormon as the "most correct of any

⁹⁰ The accounts of the dreams in Lucy Smith's *Biographical Sketches* are written in the first-person and printed in a different typesetting from the rest of the text. Lucy Smith prefaces her recounting by saying, "...I shall relate in his own words, just as he told it to me the next morning." Given the evidence that the Smith family regularly took notes of their dreams (see Elizabeth Kane Interview), it seems probable that these recounting are taken from these notes. Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 57.

⁹¹ 1 Nephi 8:2.

book on earth” precisely because it is untouched by editing and translations like the Bible.⁹² Smith would therefore have needed to edit himself while he recited the narrative, leading him to use phrases such as “in other words” which ended up in the final text. The two words which flank these corrective phrases are often incompatible with one another. An exemplary instance of this is found in Mosiah 7:8 in which subjects to a king “were permitted, *or rather*, commanded” to answer a question.⁹³ When Lehi recounts his dream and correct himself to say vision, Smith is demonstrating that the two were not synonymous to not correct. Furthermore, it also demonstrates that Smith had an understanding of visionary dreams much like his father. It is not enough to simply refer to a noteworthy dream as a dream. Some dreams are *more* than dreams and become visionary in nature.

This aligns Smith with the mass of American clergy and laity who believed that dreams could be legitimate visions with divine origins. In fact, visionary dreams were effective tools among evangelists for bolstering religious authority. But visionary dreams were not just general experiences in America broadly – they were specifically experienced by individuals in Smith’s vicinity, social class, and religious persuasion. More than that, visionary dreams were experiences familiar to members of Smith’s own family prior to his own experience. The evidence suggesting that Joseph Sr. and Lucy Smith were engaged in the visionary dream culture leads us to conclude that Joseph Smith almost certainly was involved with it in some capacity. With that being the case, we can clearly track the origin of the dream narrative back to these beliefs – but only partly. Although this discussion of dream culture has been largely confined to

⁹² Donald B. Doty, “Why is the Book of Mormon the ‘most correct of any book on earth’?” *Ensign*, August 1988.

⁹³ Mosiah 7:8. Emphasis added.

religion, it extends beyond traditional religious practice. The religiously unaffiliated Smith family engaged with dreams in more ways than this, and in ways more influential on the young Joseph and his visionary experience.

IV. Oneiromancy and American Folk Magic

Treasure Dreams

In the seventeenth century, as legend has it, a peddler found himself atop London Bridge. He had been there for three days waiting for something, yet he did not know what. He had decided that by the next morning, he would begin the one-hundred-mile journey back home to Swaffham in Norfolk. Everything that had brought him to stand on the bridge for days had begun to seem ridiculous. The recurring dream that had told him to wait on the bridge for "news of great importance" was nonsense, and he should have known better. When a stranger passed by and heard the peddler's story, he replied with much the same. Only a fool would have taken his dreams so seriously. As an example, the stranger said, "last night I dreamed that I was in Swaffham, in Norfolk, a place utterly unknown to me." In the dream, the stranger said that he dug under a certain tree behind a peddler's house and found a chest of money. "I, myself," the stranger said, "were I disposed to trust such things, might now go a hundred miles into the country." However, the stranger was far too wise to act so foolishly. He advised the peddler to return home, which he did enthusiastically. Back home in Swaffham, the peddler found the tree and began to dig. After the hole was a few feet deep, his spade struck an object. It was an iron chest, filled with money, but with a curious inscription reading, "where this stood is another

twice as good.” Returning to the tree and digging once more, he found a second chest – twice the size of the first.⁹⁴

The Peddler of Swaffham is ultimately a cautionary tale. It presents two characters, one who listens to messages in their dreams and another who does not. Although the stranger maintained his sense of superiority, he lost the chance to become exceptionally wealthy. The peddler, earnest and attentive to his dreams, was ridiculed by others but greatly rewarded for his conviction. Why would such a story be told if it did not resonate with its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century audience in some way? The lesson to be learned is to trust in what others may call superstition, and it will inevitably pay off.

In this instance, the “paying off” is literal. Through dreams, the peddler was guided to an immense treasure buried under the earth. Dreams were more than just a pathway to God; oftentimes they concerned themselves with more worldly interests. This motif is prevalent throughout the historical record. A Middle Eastern folktale included in *One Thousand and One Nights* tells a similar story to the Peddler of Swaffham.⁹⁵ A Lombardic text describes how a Burgundian king was led to a buried treasure in a dream by a reptile.⁹⁶ In an Irish tale, a man is abducted by fairies in a dream and shown a treasure.⁹⁷ A Turkish story has the treasure revealed

⁹⁴ Francis Blomefield, *An Essay Towards A Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, vol. 6 (London: W Miller, 1807), 197-228.

⁹⁵ “The Man Who Became Rich Again Through A Dream,” in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, trans. John Payne, vol. 4 (London: 1884), 134-5.

⁹⁶ Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, 3.34.

⁹⁷ Thomas Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, part 2, (London, 1828), 221-233.

by a spirit.⁹⁸ These instances are hardly the beginning. The “treasure dream” genre, in which the dreamer is shown a treasure (often by a dream guide), is littered throughout historical folklore. Much like the “visionary dream” genre, this, too was familiar to Smith.

Treasure digging exploded into a frenzy in the early nineteenth century.⁹⁹ Native American treasures or Spanish gold allegedly littered the countryside, waiting to be uncovered by a searcher with the right qualities. Americans from all backgrounds found solace in the possibility of discovering immense wealth under the ground. Farmers who were swindled into buying infertile land hoped to recover their financial losses with lost treasure under their property. Those who claimed clairvoyance found a career in locating these caches through folk magic. The application of folk magic in finding these treasures was incredibly common. The Smith family’s relationship to folk magic, treasure digging, and the combination of the two has been well established by D. Michael Quinn.¹⁰⁰

To briefly summarize Quinn’s findings, folk magic and treasure digging were family businesses. Soon after his arrival in Palmyra, the elder Smith was excited by the belief that upstate New York was littered with treasures and eagerly participated in treasure digging as a side-job.¹⁰¹ Joseph Jr. often served as his father’s companion on these digs, and the evidence suggests that by the age of eleven he was using divining rods to locate water on neighbors’

⁹⁸ Cyrus Adler, *Told in the Coffee House: Turkish Tales*, (New York: 1898), 35-42.

⁹⁹ Ivan Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration: A History of the Church to 1846* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1973), 57-58.

¹⁰⁰ Quinn, “Divining Rods, Treasure Digging, and Seer Stones,” in *Magic World View*, 30-65.

¹⁰¹ Quinn, *Magic World View*, 33.

properties so they could dig wells.¹⁰² Divining rods (forked wood or metal rods that would point the seeker toward their target) were likely the earliest instrument used by the Smiths in treasure digging.¹⁰³ By 1819, the family had transitioned to using seer (or scrying) stones.¹⁰⁴ By blocking out the light around the stone (usually by placing it in a hat) and looking closely, the scryer would be shown through the stone where treasure was located.¹⁰⁵ Joseph Jr. acquired his first seer stone between 1819 and 1820, and it became his primary method for treasure seeking.¹⁰⁶ According to Martin Harris in his 1827 interview with Clark, “in their excursions for money-digging... Jo used to be usually their guide, putting into a hat a peculiar stone he had through which he looked to decide where they should begin to dig.”¹⁰⁷ In 1827, Joseph Jr. was brought to trial on the unsuccessful charge of being a “disorderly person” in relation to his treasure digging. Josiah Stowell of Harmony, Pennsylvania had hired Smith to find a rumored silver mine on his property, but after two years of payment and no success, Stowell’s nephew brought the young treasure digger to court alleging that his uncle had been defrauded.¹⁰⁸

The practice of using seer stones continued into Smith’s religious career. Upon discovering the gold plates, his stone played a vital role in translating its text. The standard process for translation began with a sheet hung between Smith and his scribe. On Smith’s side,

¹⁰² Quinn, *Magic World View*, 33.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰⁷ John A. Clark to Dear Brethren, 24 August 1840, *The Episcopal Recorder* (Philadelphia) 18 (5 September 1840) in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 2, p. 260-1.

¹⁰⁸ Quinn, *Magic World View*, 56-57.

the plates would be wrapped in cloth while Smith viewed his stone through a hat. How this process allegedly worked exactly is unclear. It was certainly not any traditional translation, as the original document remained covered for the entire session. Somehow, Smith would have received the translation from the stone. Among other possibilities, the translated words may have been directly implanted into Smith's head, the English text may have appeared visually for Smith to read aloud, or the meaning of the words was given to Smith, and he did his best to convey it in English. In whatever way the translation was received, Smith would then report the words to his scribe who would record it in the manuscript. As seen here, Smith's folk magic training played a vital role in his religious pursuits. This is an expression of the "magic world view" described by Quinn. Joseph Jr., like his family, was convinced of the legitimacy of folk magic practices, so seer stones would have been an entirely valid way of decoding the text's secrets. In much the same way, Smith's sincere belief in dreams is likely what led him to describe the dream narrative when explaining the origin of his plates.

Treasure diggers did not limit themselves to seer stones and divining rods. Searchers utilized the entire toolbox of magical practice in their expeditions, from astrology to invoking spirits. Notably among the tools was oneiromancy. This is a topic which has been almost entirely neglected by the scholarship on Mormonism. Derived from the Greek *oneiros* (dream) and *manteia* (divination), Oneiromancy is primarily associated with dream interpretation, but extends to encompass all the ways magic and dreams intersect.¹⁰⁹ One branch of the visionary dream culture is the desire among adherents to apply their work to more practical ends. Hints regarding the location of treasures were embedded in certain dreams, and a searcher who could properly

¹⁰⁹ Melton, "Oneiromancy," *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, 954.

decode a dream's symbols would know where to search. Such practices were seemingly very common in Palmyra. As the local *Palmyra Reflector* reported, "the *mania* of money digging soon began to rapidly diffuse itself through many parts of this country; men and women without distinction of age or sex became marvellous [sic] wise in the occult sciences, many dreamed, and others saw visions disclosing to them, deep in the bowels of the earth, rich and shining treasures."¹¹⁰ Dreams, here, are portrayed as one of the major methods for locating treasure at this time. This is certainly what the Smith family believed. Orrin Porter Rockwell "often heard his mother and Mrs. Smith comparing notes [of dreams], and telling how Such an [sic] one's dream, and Such another's pointed to the same lucky spot."¹¹¹

Smith's own practice of treasure digging utilized (or at least sought to utilize) oneiromancy. James G. Bennett Sr. reports an instance in which the Smith treasure digging company had learned of a resident of Painesville, Ohio who had managed to locate various treasures via dreams. Oneiromancy – as with dowsing and stone scrying – was a skill, and some seemed to have a knack for it, this Ohioan included. The Smiths gathered enough funds to recruit this expert and bring him to New York.¹¹² This may suggest that although the Smiths did dabble

¹¹⁰ *Palmyra Reflector*, *Gold Bible*, No. 3, 1 February 1831; in Vogel's *Documents*, 242-3. Emphasis in original.

¹¹¹ "Elizabeth Kane Interview with Brigham Young, Artemisia (Beaman) Snow, and Orrin Rockwell, 1872-1873," in Vogel, *Documents*, vol. 3, 407.

¹¹² Bennett's account names this man as "Henry Rangdon or Ringdon." He is likely referring to Sidney Rigdon, a religious leader from Ohio who converted to Mormonism along with his congregation. Dan Vogel believes Bennett is confusing Rigdon in this story with Luman Walters, Smith's occult mentor who appeared in New York in the 1820s. "James G. Bennett Account, 1831; in Vogel's *Documents*, vol. 3, 285.

in oneiromancy, it was not their forte. Having a talented oneiromancer on their team would help close that gap. Another source takes this further, suggesting that Smith himself was a seasoned oneiromancer, claiming that Smith would regularly have dreams in which the Lord showed him treasure.¹¹³ These sources, like others, can be reasonably called into question for being unfriendly toward Smith. Yet, even if these sources were attempts to discredit Smith's experience by tying it to his treasure digging, why would they bother mentioning dreams? How would these accounts be relevant or effective if Smith had not been telling people that the treasure was revealed via dream? At the very least, these sources provide evidence for the dream narrative, and suggest that oneiromancy was a known element in treasure digging circles.

As many scholars have pointed out, Smith's encounter with an angel can be viewed clearly through the lens of treasure digs. In much the same manner he had previously sought treasure, Smith discovered the location of a buried "treasure" through a mystical experience. Scholars of this persuasion have drawn fair comparisons between the spirit Moroni and treasure guardians. Treasure guardians were folk entities who had to either be subdued via magic enchantments or satisfied in some way before they would surrender their treasure.¹¹⁴ These guardians were spirits who were intimately tied to the treasure, usually the ghost of the one who buried the treasure or the ghost of somebody killed during the treasure burial for the express

¹¹³ In this account, Henry Sayer states, "...When a young man I spent much of the summers along the Susquehanna River. I became acquainted with Jo, Hyrum, and Bill Smith, whom I often saw hunting and digging for buried money, treasure, or lost and hidden things. Joe claimed to receive revelations from the Lord where to dig. People would say, 'Jo, what did the Lord tell you last night, or *what did you dream?*'" "Henry A. Sayer Statement, 1885"; in Vogel's *Documents*, vol. 4, 367. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁴ Quinn, *Magic World View*, 25.

purpose of becoming the treasure guardian.¹¹⁵ Ronald Huggins points out the ways in which Moroni evolved over time to become less ghostlike (the bleeding ghost described by Joseph Smith Sr. and Emma Smith’s cousins) and more angelic as the story evolved.¹¹⁶ Further, the ways in which Smith was required by Moroni to return yearly to the site of the plates and satisfy certain requirements before retrieving the plates fits the motif of having to appease the guardian before being given access to the treasure.¹¹⁷ Smith’s familiarity with treasure guardians has been established by Huggins through the folklore surrounding Captain Kidd’s treasure and its rumored treasure spirit. Kidd’s treasure was the holy grail of treasure diggers, and the Smith family seems to have made various attempts to recover it themselves.¹¹⁸ Here is another clear display of Quinn’s magic world view. That Palmyra was in upstate New York, hundreds of miles from the coastline where Kidd would have buried any treasure did not bother treasure diggers in the region. Treasures were enchanted objects and able to move on their own. An adept treasure hunter could attract treasures to their location or raise it closer to the surface. Conversely, an unworthy digger would discover that treasures were “slippery” – that treasure could move to a different location before the searcher could dig deep enough to discover it.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Ronald V. Huggins, “From Captain Kidd’s Treasure Ghost to the Angel Moroni: Changing Dramatis Personae in Early Mormonism,” in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2003), 31-36.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

¹¹⁷ Quinn, *Magic World View*, 160.

¹¹⁸ Huggins, “Captain Kidd,” 36-41.

¹¹⁹ Johannes Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting in Europe and North America: A History* (London: MacMillan, 2012), 58.

Yet oneiromancy in pursuit of treasure went beyond simply interpreting dreams. The tradition I have so far described paints the dreamer as a passive recipient, receiving visionary dreams from some greater power. However, some oneiromancers sought to play a more active role in the process. Particular schools of oneiromancy suggested that a practitioner could in fact control their dreams and attract treasure dreams. By performing certain rituals, the oneiromancer could ensure that they would have a dream the following night which revealed to them knowledge, including the location of treasure.

Conjuring Dream Spirits

Within the surviving library of Western occultist texts, one pervasive idea exists within discussions of oneiromancy. It was believed that spirits could be summoned through these dreams. It was these spirits, conjured in the waking world and manifesting in the dream world, that could reveal to the seeker the location of treasures or reveal any other desired knowledge.

Before delving into how these dream spirits were summoned, let us return to Smith's official 1839 account of his angelic encounter. Rather than being a standard visionary dream, in which the dream is unexpected, and the dreamer is a passive recipient, Smith's description of his angelic experience suggests an intentional, ritualistic performance. Ultimately, I will suggest that the experience described aligns with this tradition of ritual dream-conjuring. The first important thing to note is the date – September 21, 1823. This day would have been a Sunday, and the following day was the autumnal equinox. The apparition also appeared around midnight, on the threshold of the equinox. This date was also ostensibly a full moon. The previous night (September 20) was the true full moon, but by the next day the waning gibbous moon would

have been 99.32 percent full, meaning that it would have still appeared to be a total full moon to the naked eye.¹²⁰ All of these qualities contain major ritual significance, and for Smith's dream to occur at the intersection of a Sunday, an equinox, and a full moon should not be ignored. If one wished to perform a powerful magical ritual, that date, more than any other, would have been ideal.¹²¹

There is also one very interesting line included in Smith's official account which is often overlooked and suggests a similar level of premeditation. Prior to going to bed, Smith said a prayer:

...on the evening of the above-mentioned twenty-first of September, after I had retired to my bed for the night, I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, *and also for a manifestation to me*, that I might know of my state and standing before him; for I had full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation...¹²²

Rather than being unexpected – as it is often portrayed – the appearance of the angel was clearly called upon and anticipated by Smith. More than that, he engaged in behaviors prior to the experience that were intended to induce a manifestation. The encounter was clearly intentional. Although Smith does not include any transparently ritualistic behavior in his official account, ritualism is nonetheless suggested. Praying for forgiveness of one's sins was a necessary precondition to many magic rituals, including those for conjuring dream spirits.¹²³ It seems this

¹²⁰ "September 21, 1823," moonpage.com.

¹²¹ Dillinger, "Magical Times and Places," in *Magical Treasure Hunting*, 53-58.

¹²² JS-H 1:29. Emphasis added.

¹²³ Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting*, 167.

was a means of cleansing the practitioner in order to increase the odds of the ritual's success. The specific words Smith used to ask for a manifestation are also excluded from the account, but many incantations for conjuring spirits were recited as prayers.¹²⁴ For example, eighteenth-century treasure diggers often recited the famous 'Christopher Prayer' in order to summon the spirit of St. Christopher, their patron saint, who would then lead them to treasure.¹²⁵

Quinn presents a similar hypothesis, arguing that the Moroni encounter can be seen through the lens of necromancy (though "necromancy" is a loaded term, and he is seemingly too cautious to use it explicitly). In this instance, necromancy refers to magic for contacting spirits.¹²⁶ His argument is predicated on a few details. The first is that the figure of Moroni is more aligned with nineteenth-century "spirits" than "angels," despite the sources referring to him in both ways. As Quinn outlines, angels were understood to be heavenly beings, with no mortal relationship to the Earth. Spirits, on the other hand, were explicitly understood to be manifestations of deceased persons, akin to ghosts.¹²⁷ In identifying the entity as Moroni, the spirit of an ancient Nephite, Smith is referring to a specific kind of supernatural being. The material evidence also provides support for this hypothesis, as the Smith family owned magical devices used for the express purpose of summoning spirits.¹²⁸

I am personally convinced by this argument. It does seem as though Smith's familiarity with conjuring magic is reflected in his account. Yet, as far as Quinn's analysis goes, this is only

¹²⁴ Dillinger, *Magical Treasure Hunting*, 78.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

¹²⁶ Melton, "Necromancy," *Encyclopedia*, 914.

¹²⁷ Quinn, *Magic World View*, 140.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

the case for the vision narrative. However, as I will demonstrate through this tradition of oneiromantic conjuring, Quinn's argument is still compatible with the dream narrative. By introducing oneiromancy into the discussion, I wish to take Quinn's argument further: not only is Smith describing a narrative that echoes a necromantic ritual, but I will argue that his narrative perfectly reflects a very specific kind of ritual which sits at the intersection of oneiromancy and necromancy. The dream narrative may have been informed by this tradition of summoning/contacting spirits in dreams to reveal treasure.

The fifteenth-century grimoire manuscript *Liber incantationum, exorcismorum et fascinationum varium* (or, *Munich Manual of Demonic Magic*) includes among its collection instructions "For discovering hidden treasure in sleep."¹²⁹ Prior to engaging in the ritual, the manual establishes that the magician must make a general confession of all his sins.¹³⁰ Once the instructions are carried out, "a spirit will come to you, who will not displease you, but will make you dream of a treasure, and will lead you directly to the place."¹³¹ This description of a spirit revealing a treasure through a dream is an adequate description of Smith's dream narrative. The specific instructions provided by the grimoire are irrelevant for two reasons. First, Smith himself outlines no instructions, and therefore there is nothing to compare. Second, the *Munich Manual* was written four centuries prior, and an English translation of the Latin text was not published until 1998.¹³² Clearly, the Smith family did not use this manual in any of their magical practices.

¹²⁹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1998), 140.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

However, what the manual does suggest is that the formula of summoning a spirit to reveal treasure in a dream was an existing tradition that far predated Smith. Although the *Munich Manual* would not have made direct contact with Smith, it may have made indirect contact through the occult tradition. The magic practiced by the Smith family was heavily indebted to the centuries of occult studies that preceded it in the Old World. Western esotericism was an established field with generations of practitioners refining it. Historian John Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire* traces the transatlantic connection between Joseph Smith and ancient alchemical, astrological, and hermetic traditions.¹³³ Just as all these traditions made their way to Palmyra, New York, so too did the tradition of oneiromantic conjuring. This occult tradition can be seen in grimoires scattered throughout the four-hundred years between the *Munich Manual* and *The Magus*.

The *Picatrix* far predates the *Munich Manual* but remained influential for centuries as a core text in the occult tradition. The tenth-century text is an Arabic grimoire, originally titled *Ghayat al-Hakim*, which by the thirteenth century had received a Latin translation and renaming before becoming a cornerstone of late medieval, Renaissance, and modern magic.¹³⁴ Although the *Picatrix* does not contain any explicit references to treasure dream spirits, it does include accounts of summoning a spirit to reveal the location of treasure and summoning spirits in

¹³³ John Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹³⁴ *Picatrix: A Medieval Treatise on Astral Magic*, trans. Dan Attrell and David Porreca (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2019), 1-7.

dreams.¹³⁵ The oneiromantic conjuring motif seems to be a combination of these two techniques. In all these instances, prayer and nighttime are necessary preconditions.

The *Verus Jesuitarum Libellus*, dated to 1508 (but almost certainly from much later), provides several invocations that can be used to summon spirits. One of these calls upon a spirit and commands them to “Appear before me in a beautiful, affable, and human form, and bring to me... the best Spanish gold without any disturbance.”¹³⁶ These instructions do not explicitly state a dream, yet they are prefaced by a quote, attributed to Horace, referring to dreams and “night-walking spectres.”¹³⁷ The inclusion of this line before the conjuration seems to leave open the possibility that the spirit’s manifestation may occur in a dream.

This tradition continues into the nineteenth century. The 1817 *Grimorium Verum* includes a multi-purpose method for calling upon spirits. Once the spirit has been called upon, and a request made, the summoner must say, “If, for any reason, thou dost not wish what thou sayest to be heard by others, I conjure thee to... reveal it to me in my sleep.”¹³⁸ One final grimoire, *The Grand Grimoire* from 1821, very explicitly refers to summoning a “specter” to appear in a dream, which will reveal “the object dearest to you and give you the most pleasurable delight [treasure].”¹³⁹

¹³⁵ *Picatrix*, 151, 232, 238-239,

¹³⁶ *Verus Jesuitarum Libellus*, trans. Joseph H. Peterson (2000), <http://esotericarchives.com/solomon/jesuit.htm#chap11>.

¹³⁷ *Verus*.

¹³⁸ *Grimorium Verum*, trans. Joseph Peterson, (2007), <https://grimoire.org/grimoire/grimorium-verum/>.

¹³⁹ *The Grand Grimoire*, ed. Gretchen Rudy (2004), <https://grimoire.org/grimoire/grand-grimoire/>.

Most important in this discussion is *The Magus*, an 1801 grimoire written by English occultist Francis Barrett, which engages with the same tradition as the other grimoires. The instructions provide a variety of ways to receive prophetic dreams, including creating special rings, lamens (magic parchments), or tables of numbers to place under one's head as they sleep.¹⁴⁰ Other means include special prayers before bed.¹⁴¹ This ritual would cause the practitioner to “receive oracles from a spirit by a dream” – a practice which Barrett claims is common among magicians.¹⁴²

What makes *The Magus* so significant is its connection to the Smith family. Although the relationship between the Smith family and the previous grimoires would have likely been indirect, a clear line can be drawn between *The Magus* and Joseph Smith. Several artifacts survive from the family which inform our understanding of what their magic practice included. Among these artifacts is the Jupiter talisman owned by Joseph Smith Jr. (fig. 1). The talisman is an exact model based on Barrett's talisman in *The Magus*.¹⁴³ Another of these artifacts is the “Holiness to the Lord” parchment (fig. 2). The “Holiness to the Lord” parchment was designed by Barrett for the purpose of summoning spirits and angels.¹⁴⁴ The Smith family likely used it for the same purpose. If the Smith family were attentive readers of *The Magus* (as it seems they were), they would have been introduced to the idea of oneiromantic conjuring if they were not already familiar. These two artifacts could also have been used in Barrett's oneiromantic ritual.

¹⁴⁰ Francis Barrett, *The Magus* (1801), Book II, 98.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁴³ Quinn, *Magic World View*, 67.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 105, 112.

In his instructions, two items which could be put under the dreamer's head to summon a dream spirit were a table of numbers and a "holy paper." Both the Jupiter talisman – with a Hebrew number table on the obverse side – and the "Holiness to the Lord" parchment could have been utilized in this ritual.

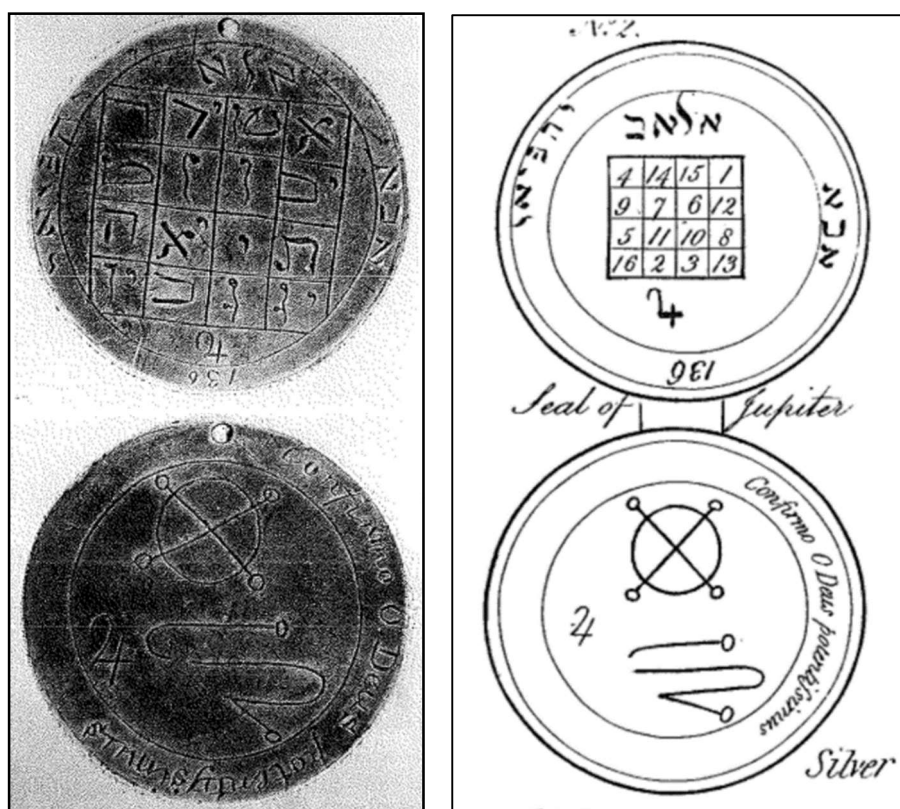


Figure 1. The Jupiter talisman owned by Joseph Smith Jr (left) and the instructions for creating it provided in Francis Barrett's *The Magus* (right). Note the Hebrew table of numbers on the left side. (From D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic Worldview*).

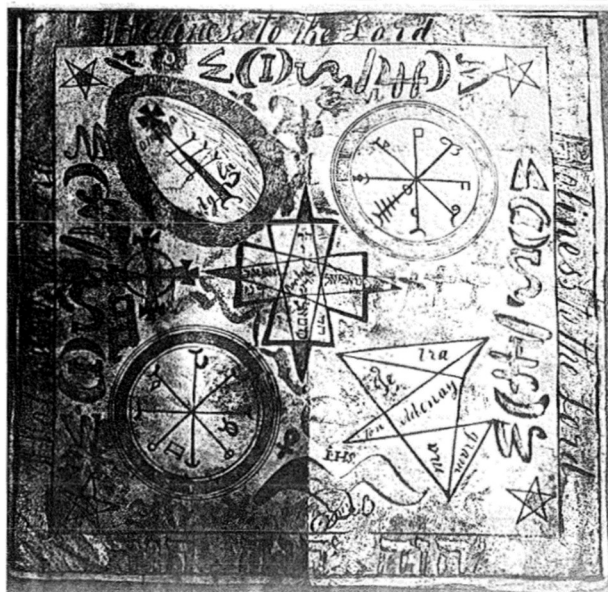


Figure 2. The “Holiness to the Lord” parchment used by the Smiths to summon spirits (From D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic Worldview*).

I am not explicitly suggesting that Smith followed any particular grimoire’s instructions for oneiromantic conjuring which led to his encounter with Moroni. Rather, the evidence points to the existence of this tradition and Smith’s likely familiarity with it. Given this, we can conclude that the thematic similarities between Smith’s dream narrative and these rituals are not coincidental. It appears Smith’s reported experience can be traced back to these motifs, and they informed the narrative he told. In describing how he came to discover such a remarkable treasure, he may have defaulted to a common answer: that he summoned a spirit in a dream to reveal it to him.

Because this ritual overlaps with many traditions (oneiromancy, necromancy, and treasure digging), it allows for a wide range of other scholarly interpretations to be included. I have mentioned throughout this work the various ways in which Moroni has been viewed, whether as a treasure guardian, a dream guide, or a general necromantic spirit. Each one of these

would fit within this oneiromantic conjuring model, as all would be capable of being summoned via this ritual. Quinn's perspective that the narrative aligns with necromantic rituals also remains a possibility, as the oneiromantic conjuring ritual overlaps with necromancy while accounting for the existence of the dream narrative. Treasure digging interpretations are also compatible with this oneiromantic conjuring, as this ritual was primarily useful for locating treasure.

Identifying this specific ritual as a source of inspiration for Joseph Smith is useful in proving the existence of the dream narrative. Not only did the dream narrative exist, and not only is it a part of a broader culture of visionary dreams that Joseph Smith was connected to, but there existed a specific ritual which clearly seems to have influenced the dream narrative if Smith did indeed have contact with it. The dream narrative, therefore, makes perfect sense in the context of Smith's upbringing, treasure digging, and folk magical practices.

V. Conclusion

The 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon and the establishment of the Church of Christ signaled the death of the dream narrative. By 1832, Smith had written his own account of the experience which had changed the story, transforming what was once a recounting of a remarkable dream into a biblical vision of an angel. In 1835, Oliver Cowdery, one of Smith's closest confidants, would explicitly deny the dream narrative in favor of the experience being an "open vision." The dream narrative was driven to extinction and intentionally replaced with the vision narrative which would have been more acceptable to a broader audience. The question of why this shift occurred demands more attention, but it seems likely that the dream narrative, as with other folk magical elements in early Mormonism, was shunned as Mormonism became more explicitly religious. Yet the hint of the dream narrative which remains in the earliest sources is a valuable insight for further understanding Joseph Smith's worldview and ambitions prior to his religious career. It also reveals a broader culture that Smith was a part of, in which dreams were significant aspects of the American experience with religion and folk magic.

In 1830, Smith would begin talking about another vision – a "First Vision" – which preceded the Moroni encounter by three years. This narrative was a more traditional, palatable vision in which Joseph Smith called upon God and received a manifestation. The First Vision stands in stark contrast with the Moroni encounter, which had become messy and still carried the lingering hints of Smith's folk magic background. Soon, the First Vision would become the pivotal moment in Mormonism, and Moroni would be relegated to a supporting role. And yet, despite the initial pivot away from the dream narrative and the ultimate pivot away from the

Moroni narrative in general, the visionary dream culture and oneiromantic tradition persisted in subtle ways in Smith's later career. Smith made various efforts to identify himself with Joseph of Egypt, the "master of dreams" from Genesis. Among the many revisions Smith made to the Old Testament through divine inspiration, he included twelve new verses to the end of Genesis 50. On his deathbed, Joseph of Egypt delivers a prophecy that another prophet, also named Joseph, will be among his descendants.¹⁴⁵ Through these verses, Joseph Smith had become the inheritor of the biblical Joseph's legacy. It seems he played the part well. In Nauvoo, toward the end of his life, Smith seemingly invited followers into his office to recount their dreams for him to interpret.¹⁴⁶ Although the 1830 pivot away from dreams and oneiromancy may have been a general strategy, the beliefs seemingly could not be exorcized entirely from Smith's worldview. Dreams still had a role left to play in his prophethood.

It would be wrong for scholars to engage in a similar rejection of the dream narrative, and yet it remains neglected in the literature. As I have shown, the earliest sources were not engaging in identical exercises of semantic creativity. The use of the word dream was intentional and suggests that what Smith had originally been recounting to the public was not a vision (as it is later described) but a dream. The dream narrative was therefore the first version – a prototype – of the story before being refined and ultimately replaced by the vision narrative. Given this, it seems as though any historical analysis of the Moroni story should give proper attention to the dream narrative. Why has this not been the case?

¹⁴⁵ JS-T 50:26-35.

¹⁴⁶ "History Draft," January 21, 1842, Joseph Smith Papers Project.

Perhaps scholars have failed to properly analyze the early sources' use of "dream" in context. It is simpler and less disruptive to argue that "dream" and "vision" are synonymous. The dream narrative also does not mesh with our modern worldview. It baffles us to consider that Smith would have told a story of a dream with the hopes of being taken seriously as a prophet. This fails to recognize the clear differences in the way dreams were perceived in nineteenth-century America. Dreams were seen as legitimate sources of divine communication among the clergy and laity, and especially among those with similar backgrounds to Smith. There existed a "visionary dream culture" which the Smith family embraced. Reports of miraculous dreams were common, and the dream narrative would not have been bewildering to the audience receiving it.

More specifically, the dream narrative also makes sense in the context of the Smith family business of treasure digging. This angle is perhaps the most relevant to the religiously unaffiliated family. Dreams were believed to carry hints leading to the location of buried treasure, and astute dreamers could identify these clues to supposedly great effect. The Smith family certainly utilized dreams alongside seer stones and divining rods in their own treasure digging pursuits. Yet, according to folk magic traditions, treasure diggers did not have to wait for clues to appear in their dreams. With proper rituals, practitioners could summon spirits to appear in their dreams and show them where treasure was buried. The evidence suggests that the Smith family may have been aware of this tradition. If so, then here is an obvious context in which the dream narrative makes sense. Rather than being unusual, the dream narrative perfectly reflects Joseph Smith's environment in ways the vision narrative does not. The dream narrative is exactly the kind of account that would come out of Joseph Smith's worldview.

Although the primary objective has been to prove the existence of the dream narrative, I have always approached this research as a microhistory. Through a mundane change in

vocabulary – the quiet swap of “dream” with “vision” – an entire worldview is revealed. Asking the question of *why* did Smith describe a dream leads us to explore the role dreams played in his own life. Asking *why* anybody paid attention to him when he described a dream reveals that his worldview was not isolated to himself. Instead, Americans like Smith perceived the world in a way far different than we do today. Reality was alive and in concert with their life. Answers to personal questions could be found in a world we now see as indifferent to our struggles. Dreams are an excellent place to bridge this gap. This space between waking consciousness and total unconsciousness where we experience total absurdity as though it were *real* sticks out in a cosmos we believe to be disenchanted. In the modern world, dreams remain one of the few mystical experiences we regularly encounter, and one of the few domains left unexposed by science. How we approach this experience, whether as chaotic firings of neurons or messages from God, reveals much about our personal worldviews. This research hopefully brings more understanding to a worldview which is now nearly extinct, yet once reigned with the same authority as ours does today.