



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title *Review of Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*, by Ann Taves

Author Seth Perry

Reference *Mormon Studies Review* 5 (2018): 99–104.

ISSN 2156-8022 (print), 2156-8030 (online)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.18809/msr.2018.0112>

Ann Taves. *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Seth Perry

Mormon Studies Review, vol. 5, 2018, pp. 99–104

© 2018 Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/msr.2018.0112> Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/mimsr.21568030>

WHEN ANN TAVES'S LAST MONOGRAPH CAME OUT, in 2009, the journal *Religion* ran a review of it by Finbarr Curtis entitled "Ann Taves's *Religious Experience Reconsidered* is a sign of a global apocalypse that will kill us all."¹ Curtis was worried about the effects of Taves's unapologetically reductive approach to religion. Taves is well known as a proponent of using cognitive science and related methodologies to explain what *really* happens when people have religious experiences. This sort of thing, as indicated by Curtis's title, rubs a lot of people the wrong way.

This book is a companion to that last one. Taves applies her "building block" approach to religious experience to three very different case studies of, as the title indicates, revelatory events: early Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous, and *A Course in Miracles*. Each case study involves, in Taves's phrase, "a key figure whose unusual experiences and/or abilities led to the emergence of a new spiritual path and to the production of scripture-like texts that were not attributed directly to them" (pp. 3–4). The differences among the case studies have to do with the claims made within each group about the origins of the respective "unusual experiences," the sort of text produced, and the type of group founded. The events constituting the founding of Mormonism are well known to the readers of the *Mormon Studies Review*. Alcoholics

1. Finbarr Curtis, "Ann Taves's *Religious Experience Reconsidered* is a sign of a global apocalypse that will kill us all," *Religion* 40/4 (2010): 288–92.

Anonymous, developed a hundred years later as a therapeutic fellowship, had as part of its origin story a visionary experience of cofounder Bill Wilson. *A Course in Miracles* is not really a single movement at all, but “a self-study course and a loose network of students” organized around a text generated in the 1960s by clinical psychologist Helen Schucman, who said that Jesus dictated to her through an inner voice (p. 151).

The revelatory events at the center of each of these three groups took place in dramatically different historical moments and cultural contexts. The “building block” model is designed to facilitate drilling down into each event and subsequent path to find common, comparable constituent parts so that the shared mechanisms of their interactions can be analyzed. This is what Curtis had a problem with: the moment when particularities, “jagged or fragmentary edges[,] are sanded away to make smooth blocks that can fit together” (p. 289). Curtis argued that this standardization, this loss of subtlety in approaching religious experience, gives cover to and participates in the forces of global capitalism that would do this to every aspect of human being. Acknowledging the importance and the nuance of Curtis’s critique, I am interested in a more proximate question about the relationship of Taves’s building blocks to historical context specifically as it concerns her sources as products of discursive exchange.

It cannot be said that Taves ignores the historically specific aspects of the revelatory events and resulting new paths she is comparing. On the contrary, most of this book consists of historical description. These descriptions, which make up part 1, are impeccably researched and describe the specific circumstances of each revelatory event in painstaking detail. Beyond that, Taves is committed to analyzing both the development of each case and the story that believers told about that development: Taves’s attention to the historical contingencies of her sources is an inspiring model for historiography. There is an Escher-like quality to her analysis of the sources on which she builds her own stories that almost obscures those stories. Even historians, who should know better, at some level want to be told a simple narrative, and there are no simple narratives here.

Mormonism is Taves's signature case study and receives an especially thorough and complex treatment. She presents a detailed and valuable account of the most important sources for the earliest moments of Joseph Smith's career as a prophet. In the book's first chapters, she carefully and inventively retells the founding events of Mormonism. Along the way, she compares and overlays each account of the first vision, Smith's 1823 visit from Moroni, and the discovery of the golden plates (three charts at the end of the book visually compare the various parts of these accounts). Insisting on a co-creative model of the evolution of revelatory claims, her account of early Mormonism is populated with members of Smith's founding circle who contribute to, rather than merely follow along with, his early claims. The other two case studies are subject to a similarly careful treatment.

The challenge, though, lies in attempting to connect this deep historical analysis to Taves's real goal. Taves identifies this goal as *explanation*, which is certainly a goal most historians would reflexively claim to share. As Taves defines it, however, explanation is distinct from history. "Many scholars of religion have been content to analyze the events people consider revelatory without attempting to explain them. Indeed, purely as historians, we have little basis on which to do so." Here Taves is reasserting the connection between explanation and reduction that troubled Curtis. In this view, historians cannot explain, because they tend to make things more complicated, and explanation must involve reduction. Those of us who approach the past from the perspective of the humanities, Taves observes, are "wary of reductionistic approaches to explanation" (p. 300). For all of the detailed history in this book, Taves's brand of explanation is not accessible to scholars "purely as historians" because her fundamental interests are not historical. This is because her answers to the question of what actually happened—the things to which the readable words and observable actions with which historians study must be reduced—are things that happen inside brains.

Taves's explanation for the revelatory events discussed in this book is that people with unusual mental abilities saw things that other people did not see and, having related special abilities of explanation, made

these things compelling for other people in such a way that those people changed their own self-conceptions in order to align with the consequences of the seer's vision. The first and the last part of this sequence—a visionary's vision and the changed self-conceptions of followers—are mental phenomena, unobservable to the scholar. Taves presents the histories in this book as answering for the middle part—the processes by which a vision becomes compelling for others. Understood this way, these case studies are “case histories” in a clinical sense—the gathering of information in order to make a diagnosis. The gnawing problem with this approach is that treating historical records in this way amounts to treating artifacts of discourse as evidence for the working of a mind in the same way that a doctor would treat, say, a beating heart as evidence for the working of a body, and discourse is just not as straightforward as a beating heart.

Historians, myself included, will likely have no real ability to evaluate Taves's diagnoses. What I do know, though, is that another person's experience, whether of something that happened to a friend yesterday or to a research subject two hundred years ago, is inaccessible to me outside of that person telling someone else about it or acting on it in some observable, recordable way. Such moments of telling or acting—inasmuch as they are utterances, moments of human interaction—are necessarily rhetorical acts. Experience as an object of historical study is fundamentally rhetorical. Taves's approach, though, has difficulty making space for rhetoric. Her subjects can only report; they cannot claim.

In Taves's reading, the revelators and the wider founding communities here cannot direct their accounts of experiences—theirs or others'—toward any particular audience for any particular reason. Creating cognitive-science building blocks out of historical sources would seem to require, in the end, this stripping away the particularizing aspects of the human interactions in which those sources were created. In keeping with her attention to history, Taves does acknowledge the role of context in revelatory moments. She writes, for example, that “hypnosis research would suggest that the ability to incorporate a suggestion depends not only on the subject's abilities, but also on the way the suggestion is

framed and the relationship between those giving and receiving the suggestion” (pp. 308–9). She readily acknowledges that some cultural contexts are more fertile for gifted minds than others. Further, she names as “a central claim of the book” the necessity of discursive exchange for the creation of new spiritual paths: visionaries alone do not make new paths, because “if an emergent group does not accept the presence of the suprahuman entities, no group will form and no path will emerge” (p. 239). Framing and context nevertheless always appear incidental to experience here, not as constitutive parts of it. Even as she obsesses over the changing forms of the founding stories she tells, Taves is interested only in the changing self-*understandings* of these individuals and groups, never their self-*presentations*.

Taves’s avoidance of the realities of discourse is directly tied to what I think she sees as the real payoff to her model. Riffing on Jesse Smith’s comment that his nephew Joseph had “eyes to see things that are not, and then . . . the audacity to say they are,” Taves wonders what exactly this might mean. “Does it mean that the things do not exist, that they are imagined or made up, as Jesse Smith believed? Does it mean that there are things that do exist that are not visible to those who do not have the eyes to see them, as Joseph Smith’s followers claimed?” (p. 269). Taves rejects each of these as the poles of the “charlatan-true prophet dichotomy” that Jan Shipps lamented in 1974 (p. 50). Taves’s third way positions Smith, Schucman, and Wilson as “skilled perceivers”: individuals with “unusual mental abilities” that gave them “eyes to see what could be and the audacity to give what [they] envisioned tangible form” (pp. xii, 269). This view, she says, dissolves the question of sincerity by allowing “us to acknowledge that some people may perceive these possibilities through insights or inspirations that seem to come from beyond the self without dismissing them as self-deception or delusion” (p. 269).

In the end, readers will find this answer interesting to the extent that they find the question to which it responds interesting. Reasonable people can disagree on the value and the stakes of questions of religious sincerity. For my part, I think that insisting on such questions occludes many others that are both more interesting and more answerable. I

think that knowing—through their actions and their words—that prophets want to be believed is about as much interiority as is either interesting or discoverable. Laboring to put a name on their feelings about themselves, moreover, seems to me really about naming *our* feelings about them. It is an insistence that whether we think our subjects are deluded or nefarious or divine matters to our work, to the extent that we must make a choice. By this reading, Taves is giving those of us who take naturalistic approaches an out, an alternative to judging our subjects harshly, but this option is not self-evidently necessary. It is rightfully out of fashion to claim scholarly neutrality, but I am not willing to cede scholarly indifference. I don't believe that it is possible to know what Joseph Smith thought of himself; what's more, I don't care.

All of this said, the scholarly heft that Taves brings to this project makes it important reading. With candor and precision Taves makes important interventions into the most buzzed-about areas of the field. Her use of the concept of *presence* should be put in dialogue with Robert Orsi's. Her notion of materialization, elaborated in her discussion of the golden plates, is essential reading for the ever-growing set of scholars interested in material religion and book history. The questions that this book raises—while maybe at risk of killing us all—are exactly the sort of questions that are healthy for the field of religious studies to continue discussing.

Seth Perry is assistant professor of religion in the Americas at Princeton University. He joined the Princeton faculty in 2014. Perry's recent work includes "The Many Bibles of Joseph Smith: Textual, Prophetic, and Scholarly Authority in Early-National Bible Culture," in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. His first book, *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States*, will be published by Princeton University Press in 2018.