



**Another Look
At The
First Vision**

"When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) . . . One of them spoke unto me . . . and said . . . This is my beloved Son, hear him." This is a description of a "vision" by Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church. What an astounding experience for a person to have! Mormon apostle John A. Widtsoe commented that "Upon its reality rest the truth and validity of his (Joseph Smith's) work." (*Joseph Smith—Seeker After Truth*, page 19). His "work" was the Mormon Church itself.

One need not necessarily look into the character of Joseph Smith to discover the truth about this First Vision account, written in 1838. One only needs a map, a calendar, and church records to prove or disprove it. A specific gravestone marker gives further proof in establishing the truth about this vision account. This event is called the "First Vision" because Joseph Smith claimed to have had a second "heavenly visitation" on September 21, 1823.

The "Official" Account

The story of the First Vision centers around the statement that Joseph Smith, in the year 1820, was spiritually moved by a revival in the churches in the vicinity of his hometown, Palmyra, New York. There were three main churches in the town, namely Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian; and Joseph was uncertain as to which one he should join. He claims that he went to a nearby grove of trees to pray about this matter; and in answer to his prayer, he gives the following account written in the aforementioned year of 1838 while he was living in Far West, Missouri, and finally published in 1842:

"So in accordance with my determination, to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty. . . I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head. . . When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air. One of them spoke unto me, calling me by name, and said, (pointing to the other) 'This is my beloved Son, hear him.'

" . . . I asked the personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong) . . . I was answered that *I must join none of them, for they were all wrong*, and the personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an *abomination* in his sight; that those professors were *all corrupt* . . . He again forbade me to join with any of them: and many other things did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time."

Times and Seasons
Vol. 3, pages 728 and 748

Joseph was about thirty-three years old when he wrote the First Vision story, eighteen years after his claim of the "heavenly visitation." This "official"

account (with some minor modifications) is used at the present time by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in its publications, its churches, and its missionary work.

The 1832 Version

Joseph, in his earlier years, gave several other different accounts of this vision; and I mention some here as a matter of record and interest. The following unedited MSS account is one written about 1832—prior to the official account:

" . . . the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord in the 16th year of my age a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come (sic) down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son Thy sins are forgiven thee. Go thy way walk in my statutes and keep my commandments behold *I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world* that all those who believe in my name may have Eternal life behold the world lieth in sin at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned asside (sic) from the gospel and keep not my commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to their ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouths of the prophets and Apostles behold and lo I come quickly as it was written of me in the cloud clothed in the glory of my Father . . .

Brigham Young University Studies
Spring 1969, pp 277-278

According to the same publication (in the Summer, 1971, issue, page 462), this account was the only one recorded in Joseph Smith's own handwriting. It is noted that in this version, he mentions seeing *only one personage*; and he states that he was in *his sixteenth year* when this occurred. Both of these facts disagree with the official version, which was dictated some six years later. The above account was never really finished.

In this 1832 version, Joseph states further that between the ages of twelve and fifteen he was an avid reader of the Bible. He claims that his study of the Scriptures led him to understand that all the denominations were wrong. He wrote:

" . . . by searching the Scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament."

Brigham Young University Studies
Spring 1969, pp 278ff

Six years later, when he wrote his *official* First Vision story, he decided that he never had felt that all churches were wrong from his study of the Bible. Instead, he

claimed that it was during a vision of the Father and the Son that he first learned this information. He indicated this came as a great surprise, "for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong." This even contradicted what Joseph had said a few paragraphs earlier in that same account, where he claimed that, "I often said to myself . . . Who of all these parties are right; or are they all wrong together?" Although the former statement appears in the original manuscript (see BYU Studies above, p. 290), such a serious contradiction could not be allowed to stand; and after Joseph's death, the embarrassing words were taken out!

Even without those words, however, the 1838 official account does not agree with the 1832 version. In the 1832 account, it is his Bible reading that stirs him to seek God; while in the 1838 story, it is an alleged revival that motivates him. In the 1832 account, he already knows all the churches are wrong; while in the 1838 story, it is the "two personages" who first inform him of this.

The 1835 Version

In 1835, Joseph Smith produced still another, differing account of his First Vision story:

"... I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head; which presently rested down upon me and filled me with unspeakable joy. A personage appeared in the midst of the pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first; he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee. He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. I saw many angels in this vision. I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication."

Brigham Young University Studies
Spring, 1969, page 283

In this account, nothing indicates that the "personages" were God the Father and Jesus Christ. The "many angels", not mentioned in the other accounts, strongly suggests that the message presented is delivered by angels.

Different people may have different views of the same event; but when the same person tells opposing stories about an event, his honesty is called into question:

No Revival In 1820

Our main concern is to examine the truth of the First Vision account as it is used by the Mormon Church today. This is the account upon which the Mormon believer bases his faith in his church and its doctrines. Without belief in this First Vision account, a person could hardly be a true follower of Mormonism. It is the actual beginning, so to speak, of the Mormon Church.

Various Mormon leaders have said essentially the same thing. David O. McKay, in *Gospel Ideals* (1953, p.

85) states, "The appearing of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith is the foundation of the church."

"This glorious vision of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ . . . is the greatest event that has transpired in this world since the resurrection of our Lord," stated Ezra Taft Benson in *Church News*, Dec. 23, 1967, p. 12.

A four-year time discrepancy is the real key to examining Joseph Smith's story. First of all, Joseph stated that the revival occurred in the year 1820 and resulted in "great multitudes" joining the various churches. The obvious place to check out such a statement would be the church records of that period. Since he places the revival "in the place where we lived", the natural location to search the records would be Palmyra, New York, Joseph's home town.

Travel in those days was slow; and even though a revival were held—as is surmised by some—in the nearby village of Vienna, it is unlikely that Joseph and his family would have attended meetings there. Joseph said he dropped in as often as time permitted—something he would hardly do at a town 15 miles away (which is over four hours on foot!) It is also quite unlikely at that distance, Joseph could have been caught up in the great "spirit of excitement" which such a local revival brings to an area. This would be especially true since Joseph recalled the after-effects of the revival and speaks of how the three denominations attempted to influence the new converts to join their respective churches. Joseph would hardly have been around enough in a town fifteen miles away to become aware of this fact, for the journey there and back would take up most of the day.

"The place where we lived" was surely Palmyra, New York. Joseph was not surveying newspaper accounts of revivals, collecting hear-say about them, or hiking thirty miles in all to learn what was happening in some other village. It was his own personal observation of the events around him which led him to draw his conclusions. The important part of his story is what he personally saw happen in his own community as a result of revival and how it affected the people he met every day. It was clearly described as a local happening.

It is interesting to note that in the first "official" history of the LDS Church, Oliver Cowdery did not refer to a vision occurring in the year 1820; and he dates the revival in 1823 (*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol I, page 78).

Rev. George Lane

Both Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery stated that the revival began under the Methodists and Oliver Cowdery specifically located the preacher (whose name was Rev. Lane) to "Palmyra and vicinity." According to this version, Joseph was stirred at age

seventeen by a revival that broke out under the preaching of this Mr. Lane, a presiding elder of the Methodist church. Retiring to his bedroom (not to the woods), he prayed for forgiveness and enlightenment on which church was right. In response, an angel appeared and informed him about the golden plates and assured him of his forgiveness (*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, page 78).

Rev. George Lane himself gave an account of the revival in the Palmyra area and dated it in the year 1824. (*"The Methodist Magazine," April, 1825 VIII, 158ff.*) The issues of the *"Methodist Magazine"* between January 1818 and December 1821 did not have a single reference to a revival in the Palmyra area! It would not be typical of Methodists to leave out mention of "great multitudes" joining the church. The actual fact is that the circuit was losing members *before, during and after* 1820 (*Minutes of the Annual Conferences*).

Rev. Benjamin Stockton

Joseph's own brother, William Smith, stated that a Rev. Stockton of the Presbyterian Church was preaching in the revival. Benjamin B. Stockton, who was not installed as pastor of the Palmyra Presbyterian church until Feb. 18, 1824, had preached the funeral service of Joseph and William's brother Alvin, (who died Nov. 19, 1823, according to the date on his tombstone.) The elder Mr. Smith, according to William, "did not like Rev. Stockton very well..." The reason for the father's dislike of Mr. Stockton was that the minister had hinted very strongly that the deceased youth had gone to hell because he had never joined any church.

Joseph Smith's mother, writing the first draft of "Lucy Smith's History" tells that the revival which led to her joining the church took place *following* the death of Alvin; and following that painful loss she reports that,

"About this time there was a great revival in religion and the whole neighborhood was very much aroused to the subject and we among the rest flocked to the meeting house to see if there was a word of comfort for us that might relieve our overcharged feelings."

"Lucy Smith's History"
1st Draft, p. 86

She added that although her husband would only attend the first meeting, he had no objection to her or the children "going or becoming church members".

Since Joseph's mother, sister, and two brothers joined the Presbyterian Church as a result of the 1824-25 revival, it stands to reason that they did not join previously in 1820, likewise as a result of revival.

Lucy Smith, furthermore knew *nothing* of an 1820 vision. In her unpublished account mentioned above, she traces the beginnings of Mormonism to a bedroom visit by an angel, just as Oliver Cowdery had done.

Joseph at the time had been "pondering which of the churches were the true one," states Lucy "The angel told him 'there is not a true church on Earth, no not one.'"

There is plenty of additional evidence that the revival Mrs. Smith referred to occurred during the winter of 1824-1825. At least a *dozen* newspapers and religious publications reported it, and church records show great increases in membership due to conversions. In 1824, a Rev. James Hotchkin wrote that a "copious shower of grace passed over this region in 1824, under the labors of Mr. Stockton, and a large number were gathered into the church, some of whom are now pillars in Christ's house." (*"History of... the Presbyterian Church, p. 378*). A review of this same publication, soon makes it clear that no Presbyterian church within any reasonable distance of Joseph's home can be found adding the great multitudes Joseph attributed to them in 1820.

The Geneva Presbytery "Records", (Presbyterian Historical Society,) show that the Palmyra Presbyterian Church had no revival in 1820. They do, however, mention a special revival there in 1824, with 99 added to the church.

Concerning the 1824 revival, Baptist pastor in Bristol, New York, wrote in the *"American Baptist Magazine"* (April, 1825, V, 124f) that in Palmyra "multitudes have abandoned their false hopes, and false schemes... about three hundred have united with the Baptists, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches; and to each in about equal numbers." In looking at the year 1820, however, the Baptist Church in Palmyra, along with the Methodist and Presbyterian, showed no revival; and in fact, some surrounding area churches reported *losses!* These records are still in existence and show for example, that only six persons joined the Baptist Church on profession of faith in 1820—hardly a "multitude", for the Smith family with its ten members had more than that for dinner every day.

Joseph Smith's 1838 First Vision story not only contradicts his earlier 1832 version, his mother's account, and the absence of any revival in 1820, but it is likewise contradicted by historical facts about him when he lived in Palmyra. In his 1838 "official version," Joseph claimed that he was persecuted by all the churches in his area "because I continued to affirm I had seen a vision". No one, either Mormon or non-Mormon, seems ever to have heard of Joseph's encounter with the two Gods until after 1838 (see this admission in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Autumn 1966, page 30*).

Conclusion

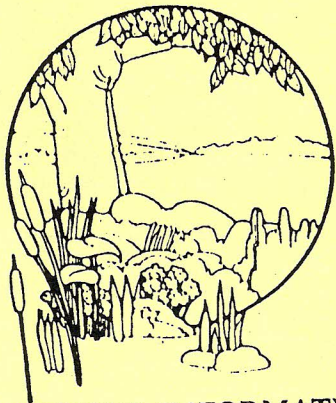
From all available lines of evidence, therefore, it appears that Joseph's First Vision story is clearly a fabrication. There was *no revival* anywhere in the

Palmyra area in 1820. Joseph was not persecuted by the churches (or anyone else). In his 1832 account, he indicates that his Bible study led him to believe that all of the churches were backslidden; while in his 1838 account, he said that it never entered his heart that all were wrong. His 1832 version claimed only a vision of Christ, while the 1838 story claimed a vision of the Father and the Son. This latter story had not been heard until after he dictated it in 1838.

In the light of such contradictions and lack of supporting historical evidence, the First Vision story must be regarded as the invention of a highly imaginative mind. The facts and the words of *Joseph Smith himself* discredit the account of the First Vision. Since this account is regarded as the foundation of all the Latter-day Saint movements (i.e. the many different Mormon splinter groups), it is evident that the Mormon churches all rest on the fictitious inventions of Joseph Smith's mind.

Heber J. Grant, a succeeding "prophet" in the big LDS church in Utah, has drawn the bottom line for us all: "if he (Joseph Smith) . . . did not have that interview with God and Jesus Christ, *the whole Mormon fabric is a failure; is a fraud; it isn't worth anything on earth.*" The irreconcilable conflicts within the various accounts as well as irrefutable historical facts affirm Mr. Grant's conclusion. We pray that those being misled by false prophets will turn from such to the true prophets of the Bible and the real Jesus Christ they bear witness of.

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