

Mormonism--Shadow or Reality?

Chapter 8

The First Vision

by Jerald and Sandra Tanner

The Mormon Apostle LeGrand Richards made this statement: "*On the morning of a beautiful spring day in 1820 there occurred one of the most important and momentous events in this world's history. God, the Eternal Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph Smith and gave instructions concerning the establishment of the kingdom of God upon the earth in these latter days.*" (A *Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, 1966, page 7)

Joseph Smith published his story in the Mormon publication *Times and Seasons* in 1842. The following is the description of the vision as written by Joseph Smith:

"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,... 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)

This story is now published in the *Pearl of Great Price* and is accepted as scripture by the Mormon people. The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe made this comment concerning Joseph Smith's First Vision: "*The First Vision of 1820 is of first importance in the history of Joseph Smith. Upon its reality rest the truth and value of his subsequent work.*

"Professed enemies of Joseph Smith and his work, have felt themselves helpless in their efforts to destroy the reality of the First Vision and have said little about it." (Joseph Smith--Seeker After Truth, page 19)

James B. Allen, of Brigham Young University, said that "*Belief in the vision is one of the fundamentals to which faithful members give assent. Its importance is second only to belief in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. The story is an essential part of the first lesson given by Mormon missionaries to prospective converts, and its acceptance is necessary before baptism.*" (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Autumn, 1966, page 29)

Vision Criticized

Fawn M. Brodie was one of the first to cast serious doubt upon the authenticity of Joseph Smith's story of the First Vision: *"The description of the vision was first published by Orson Pratt in his Remarkable Visions in 1840, twenty years after it was supposed to have occurred. Between 1820 and 1840 Joseph's friends were writing long panegyrics; his enemies were defaming him in an unceasing stream of affidavits and pamphlets, and Joseph himself was dictating several volumes of Bible-flavored prose. But no one in this long period even intimated that he had heard the story of the two gods. At least, no such intimation has survived in print or manuscript.... The first published Mormon history, begun with Joseph's collaboration in 1834 by Oliver Cowdery, ignored it altogether,....Joseph's own description of the first vision was not published until 1842, twenty-two years after the memorable event...."*

"If something happened that spring morning in 1820, it passed totally unnoticed in Joseph's home town, and apparently did not even fix itself in the minds of members of his own family. The awesome vision he described in later years may have been the elaboration of some half-remembered dream stimulated by the early revival excitement and reinforced by the rich folklore of visions circulating in his neighborhood. Or it may have been sheer invention, created some time after 1834 when the need arose for a magnificent tradition to cancel out the stories of his fortune-telling and money-digging." (No Man Knows My History, New York, 1957, pp. 24-25)

Dr. Hugh Nibley, of Brigham Young University, was very disturbed with Mrs. Brodie's statements, but he admitted that Joseph Smith did not publish the story until 1842: *"Joseph Smith's 'official' account of his first vision and the visits of the angel Moroni was written in 1838 and first published in the Times and Seasons in 1842."* (Improvement Era, July 1961, page 490)

Dr. Nibley claims that Joseph Smith tried to keep the First Vision a secret. In a letter to us, dated March 8, 1961, he stated: *"The Prophet did not like to talk about the first vision and those to whom he told the story kept it to themselves. It was only when inevitable leaks led to all sorts of irresponsible reports that he was 'induced' to publish an official version."*

In the *Improvement Era* for July, 1961, page 522, Dr. Nibley stated: *"But, one may ask, why should Joseph Smith have waited so long to tell his story officially? From his own explanation it is apparent that he would not have told it publicly at all had he not been 'induced' to do so by all the scandal stories that were circulating."*

Dr. Nibley's argument that Joseph Smith kept the vision secret is in direct contradiction to Joseph Smith's own story. Smith stated that he was persecuted because he told this story and would not deny it: *"I soon found, however, that my telling the story had excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase; and though I was an obscure boy, only between fourteen and fifteen years of age, and my circumstances in life such as to make a boy of no consequence in the world, yet men of high standing would take notice sufficient to excite the public mind against me, and create a bitter persecution; and this was common among all the sects--all united to persecute me....though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking*

allmanner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecuteme for telling the truth?... For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it:..." (Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith 2:22 and 25)

Before Mormon scholars were forced to claim that Joseph Smith kept the vision a secret, the Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe stated: "*Whether the story of the first vision existed in written form in the early days of the Church is not known. Many manuscripts of that time have been lost. In some cases, secretaries deliberately carried Church records away from Church possession. But even were they all available, minutes of meetings as they are usually kept might seldom mention the first vision, for familiar and repeated things are often not recorded because they are taken for granted.*" (Evidence and Reconciliations, 1960, page 334)

Perhaps one of the most damaging evidences that Joseph Smith did not see the Father and the Son in 1820, to those who believe in the restoration of the Priesthood, is the fact that in the year 1832 Joseph Smith claimed to have a revelation which stated that a man could not see God without the priesthood. This revelation is published as Section 84 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*. In verses 21-22 we read:

"And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh;

"For without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live."

In 1841 the Mormon Apostle Parley P. Pratt stated: "*The truth is this: that without the priesthood of Melchizedek, 'no man can see God and live.'*" (Writings of Parley P. Pratt, page 306)

It is claimed now that Joseph Smith saw the Father and the Son in 1820, before he was supposed to have received the Melchizedek priesthood. Joseph Fielding Smith said: "*The Father and the Son appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith before the Church was organized and the priesthood restored to the earth.*" (Doctrines of Salvation, Vol. 1, page 4)

The revelation given in 1832 seems to show that Joseph Smith's story of the First Vision was made up years after it was supposed to have occurred. Joseph Smith did not even claim to have the priesthood in 1820, and the *Doctrine and Covenants* clearly states that without the priesthood no man can see God and live. So, according to the *Doctrine and Covenants*, Joseph Smith could not have seen the Father and the Son in 1820.

James B. Allen, who became Assistant Church Historian in 1972, frankly admitted that the story of the First Vision "was not given general circulation in the 1830's":

"According to Joseph Smith, he told the story of the vision immediately after it happened the early spring of 1820. As a result, he said, he received immediate criticism in the community. There is little if any evidence, however, that by the early 1830's Joseph Smith was telling the story in public. At least if he were telling it, no one seemed to consider it important enough to have recorded it at the time, and no one was criticizing him for it....

"The fact that none of the available contemporary writings about Joseph Smith in the 1830's, none of the publications of the Church in that decade, and no contemporary journal or correspondence yet discovered mentions the story of the first vision is convincing evidence that at best it received only limited circulation in those early days....as far as non-Mormons were concerned there was little, if any, awareness of it in the 1830's....

"As far as Mormon literature is concerned, there was apparently no reference to Joseph Smith's first vision in any published material in the 1830's.... From all this it would appear that the general church membership did not receive information about the first vision until the 1840's and that the story certainly did not hold the prominent place in Mormon thought that it does today...."

"As far as missionary work is concerned, it is evident that here, too, the story of the first vision had little, if any, importance in the 1830's....it was not considered necessary for prospective converts to Mormonism to know the story...."

"To summarize what has been said so far, it is apparent that the story of Joseph Smith's first vision was not given general circulation in the 1830's. Neither Mormon nor non-Mormon publications made reference to it, and it is evident that the general membership of the Church knew little, if anything, about it. Belief in the story certainly was not a prerequisite for conversion, and it is obvious that the story was not being used for the purpose of illustrating other points of doctrine. In this respect, at least, Mormon thought of the 1830's was different from Mormon thought of later years." (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Autumn 1966, pages 30-34)

Dr. Hugh Nibley claimed that Joseph Smith told his great-grandfather the story of the First Vision. Our curiosity was aroused, and we wrote to Joseph Fielding Smith, who was Church Historian at the time. As we indicated on page 11 of this book, he refused to give us a copy of this journal, and Dr. Nibley admitted that he was also *"refused"* access to it (see photograph of his letter on page 12).

A great deal of pressure was put on the Church Historian's Office concerning the journal kept by Alexander Neibaur (Nibley's great-grandfather), and finally Paul Cheesman, of Brigham Young University, was able to quote a portion of it in his thesis. We immediately printed this excerpt in our book *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision*. In April, 1970, James B. Allen was allowed to quote a larger portion of the journal in an article published in the *Improvement Era*. This excerpt reads as follows: *"Br Joseph told us the first call he had a Revival Meeting his Mother, Br & Sister got Religion He wanted to get Religion too wanted to feel & shout like the Rest but could feel nothing, opened his Bible & the first Passage that struck him was if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally & upbraideth not went into the Wood to pray kneels himself down his tongue was closet cleavet to his roof could utter not a word, felt easier after a while--saw a fire toward heaven came near & nearer saw a personage in the fire light complexsion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders his right arm bear after a while a other person came to the side of the first Mr.Smith then asked must I join the Methodist Church--No--they are not my People, They have gone astray there is none that doeth good no not one, but this is my Beloved son harken ye him, the fire drew nigher Rested upon the tree enveloped him comforted Indeavoured to arise and felt Uncomen feeble--got into the house told the Methodist priest & said this was not a age for god to Reveal himself in Vision Revelation has ceased with the New Testament."* (*Improvement Era*, April 1970, p. 12, n. 12)

Paul Cheesman states that the entry was not recorded in the journal until May 24, 1844, and James B. Allen observed that *"Neibaur did not become associated with Joseph Smith until the Nauvoo period, in the 1840's, and that the experience referred to did not take place until*

well after the other accounts of the vision, including Joseph Smith's, had been written and published. (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Autumn 1966, pages 34-35)

Besides being later in date than the *Times and Seasons* version, the journal of Alexander Neibaur contradicts the official version on at least two points. It says that one personage appeared and that "***after a while another person came to the side of the first,***" whereas Joseph Smith's printed account says: "***When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages.***"

Notice also that Neibaur has the Father give the message and then introduce the Son. This is very interesting since Joseph Fielding Smith, who later became President of the Church, has stated that this type of procedure would have proven the story a fraud: "***The Father and the Son appeared unto him, but it was not the Father who answered his question! The father introduced Joseph to his Son, and it was the Son who answered the important question and gave the instruction.***

"Had Joseph Smith come home from the grove and declared that the Father and the Son appeared to him and that the Father spoke to him and answered his question while the Son stood silently by, then we could have accepted the story as a fraud." (*Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. 1, page 28)

The fact that Alexander Neibaur gives the story the other way around--the Father giving the message instead of the Son--may have been one of the reasons that Joseph Fielding Smith suppressed the journal.

The Apostle LeGrand Richards claimed that his grandfather, Joseph Lee Robinson, wrote concerning the First Vision before Joseph Smith published his account in the *Times and Seasons*. In a letter to William E. Berrett, dated August 29, 1960, Richards stated: "***...--my great grandfather's diary...indicated the Prophet Joseph had seen the Father and the Son and this was written back in 1840.***"

LeGrand Richards instructed the Genealogical Library not to allow us to see this journal, but some time later, contrary to his instructions, we were permitted to read it. We found that it was not written until 1883, which is some 39 years after Joseph Smith's death and 63 years after the First Vision was supposed to have occurred!

"Strange" Accounts

For years the Mormon leaders publicly maintained that Joseph Smith told only one story concerning the First Vision. Preston Nibley declared: "***Joseph Smith lived a little more than twenty-four years after this first vision. During this time he told but one story--...***" (*Joseph Smith the Prophet*, 1944, page 30)

At the very time that Preston Nibley made this statement the Mormon leaders were suppressing at least two accounts of the First Vision which were written prior to the account which Joseph Smith published in the *Times and Seasons*. Levi Edgar Young, who was the head of the Seven Presidents of Seventies in the Mormon Church, told LaMar Petersen that he had examined a "strange" account of the First Vision and was told not to reveal what it contained. The following is from notes by LaMar Petersen of an interview with Levi Edgar Young which was held on Feb.3, 1953:

"A list of 5 questions was presented. Bro. Young indicated some surprise at the nature

of the questions but said he heartily approved of them being asked. Said they were important, fundamental, were being asked more by members of the Church, and should be asked. Said the Church should have a committee available where answers to such questions could be obtained. He has quit going down with his own questions to Brother Joseph Fielding (Smith) because he was laughed at and put off.

"His curiosity was excited when reading in Roberts' Doc. History reference to 'documents from which these writings were compiled.' Asked to see them. Told to get higher permission. Obtained that permission. Examined the documents. Written, he thought, about 1837 or 1838. Was told not to copy or tell what they contained. Said it was a 'strange' account of the First Vision. Was put back in vault. Remains unused, unknown."

We became interested in the "strange" account and wrote to Joseph Fielding Smith, who was the Church Historian, enclosing \$1.00 and asking for a photocopy of it. Unfortunately, this letter was never answered, and we had almost given up hope of ever seeing this document. To our great surprise, however, two "strange" accounts of the First Vision have now come to light. The first appeared in the thesis, "An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions," by Paul R. Cheesman. Mr. Cheesman was a student at the Brigham Young University, and he evidently wrote his thesis as a rebuttal to statements we had made concerning the First Vision in some of our publications. Although he tries to support the First Vision story, he has reproduced a document written by Joseph Smith himself which not only proves that he did not see the Father and the Son in 1820, but also casts a shadow of doubt upon his entire story of the origin of the Church. This document was reproduced in Appendix D of Paul R. Cheesman's thesis. Cheesman states that it "*appears to be the earliest written account*" of the first vision. On page 64 of his thesis, Mr. Cheesman states:

"This account was never published or referred to by any of the authorities of the church as far as the writer has been able to determine.... Instead of going back over and revising, Joseph Smith evidently dictated the story later as we have it in Appendix A." ("An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions," M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965, page 64)

Below is a photograph of the "*earliest written account*" of the First Vision. Joseph Smith wrote this in the early 1830's. This picture is taken from the *Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 281.)

memory even in the likeness of him who created them
and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed
well hath the wise man said the fool planteth in
his heart them as is God my heart exclaimed all all
these bear testimony and they speak an omnipotent
and omnipresent power a being who maketh day and
darkness and bindeth all things in their bounds who
filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from all
Eternity to Eternity and when I considered all these things

and that being ~~the~~ such to worship him & wash
 -ship him in spirit and in truth therefore I cried unto
 the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and
 to obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness
 of and while in ^{the} attitude of calling upon the Lord, a pillar of
 fire light above the brightness of the sun at noon day
 came 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} they say are forgiven thee go thy way ^{in my} statutes
 and keep my commandments behold I am the
 Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all them
 who believe on my name may have eternal life ⁱⁿ the world
 -birth in sin and at ^{that} time and none doeth good or
 not one they have turned aside 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 ^{has} been spoken by the mouth of the prophets
 and of ^{the} apostles behold and lo I come quickly as it was
 written of me in the cloud, ^{clothed} in the glory of my father
 and my soul was filled with love and for many days I
 could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me
 but could find none that would believe the heavenly
 vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart
 and ~~did not~~ ^{did not} ~~say~~ ^{say} ~~any~~ ^{any} ~~more~~ ^{more} and but after many

In 1965 we published this early account of the First Vision under the title, *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision*. Because the document was so unusual, some members of the Mormon Church doubted its authenticity. Although the Mormon leaders would make no public statement concerning the document, Professor James B. Allen, who later became Assistant Church Historian, admitted that the document was genuine. In an article published in 1966 he commented: "**One of the most significant documents of that period yet discovered was brought to light in 1965 by Paul R. Cheesman, a graduate student at Brigham Young**

University. This is a handwritten manuscript apparently composed about 1833 and either written or dictated by Joseph Smith. It contains an account of the early experiences of the Mormon prophet and includes the story of the first vision. While the story varies in some details from the version presently accepted, enough is there to indicate that at least as early as 1833 Joseph Smith contemplated writing and perhaps publishing it. The manuscript has apparently lain in the L.D.S. Church Historian's office for many years, and yet few if any who saw it realized its profound historical significance." (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Autumn 1966, page 35)

The Mormon leaders suppressed this account of the First Vision for over 130 years, but after we printed it thousands of copies were distributed throughout the world. Finally, four years after we published the document, the Church Historian's Office made a public statement confirming the authenticity of the manuscript. Dean C. Jessee, "a member of the staff at the LDS Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City," claims that the document was written in 1831 or 1832:

"On at least three occasions prior to 1839 Joseph Smith began writing his history. The earliest of these is a six-page account recorded on three leaves of a ledger book, written between the summer of 1831 and November 1832...."

"The 1831-32 history transliterated here contains the earliest known account of Joseph Smith's First Vision." (Brigham Young University Studies, Spring 1969, pages 277-78)

At first Dean Jessee assumed that *"the narrative was penned by Frederick G. Williams, scribe to the Prophet,"* but after a more thorough analysis he became convinced that the document is actually in Joseph Smith's own handwriting: *"A closer look at the original document has shown that while Williams wrote the beginning and end of the narrative, Joseph Smith wrote the remainder, including the portion containing the details of his First Vision. This is the only known account of the Vision in his own hand. Most of his writings were dictated, which is not to say that other accounts are less authentic." (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Spring 1971, page 86)*

Writing in *Brigham Young University Studies*, Summer 1971, p. 462, Jessee says that *"This six-page account is the only history containing the actual handwriting of Joseph Smith, a fact that was not detected when this account was previously analyzed."* It is certainly interesting that the only account of the First Vision in Joseph Smith's own handwriting is the account which mentions only one personage!

Now that *Brigham Young University Studies* has published a photograph of this document (see page 145 of this book), we no longer have to depend upon Cheesman's typed copy. Below is the important part of this document taken directly from the photograph of the original document:

"...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 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 on 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 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 this ungodliness and to bring to pass that which hath been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Apostles behold and lo I come quickly as it was w[r]itten of me in the cloud clothed in the glory of my Father..."

A careful examination of this document reveals why the Church leaders have "*never published or referred*" to it. (We have published Cheesman's typescript of the entire document in our *Case*, Vol. 1, pp. 100-104.) To begin with, Joseph Smith said that prior to the time he received his First Vision he knew that all the churches were wrong: "*...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...*" (*Case*, Vol. 1, p. 128) In the account Joseph Smith wrote later, however, he claimed that he went to the Lord to find out which church was right: "*My object in going to enquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right? that I might know which to join....(for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong),...*" (*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, page 748)

In the 1972 edition of this book we pointed out that the clause, "*for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong*," had been entirely deleted from the story as it appears in modern editions of the *Pearl of Great Price*. Strange as it may seem, in the new printing of the *Pearl of Great Price* in the triple combination (Joseph Smith--History 1:18), the clause which was previously suppressed has been reinserted in its proper place.

In the account of the First Vision which is now published in the *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith devotes a great deal of space to tell of a religious revival which stirred him to go out into the woods to pray. In the account which has been suppressed (the 1832 account), Smith does not even mention the revival which was supposed to have played such a major role in the First Vision story. In the first account Smith did not mention an evil power trying to overcome him, but in the printed version he says that he "*was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.*" (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith, verse 15)

In the account which was suppressed, Joseph Smith said that his first vision was "*in the 16th year of my age.*" In the version he wrote later, however, he said that the vision occurred when he was in his "fifteenth year." (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith, verse 7) This is very interesting because the Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe argued that the First Vision had to occur in 1820 when Joseph Smith was fourteen years old: "*Clearly, knowledge of the first vision was current in the early days of the Church, and was dated as the Prophet says, in 1820, when he was not yet fifteen years old.... Whatever opinion may be held as to what he saw on that occasion, it must have occurred in 1820. Any other view would make liars of these witnesses, or make them connivers in untruth with the Prophet.*" (*Gospel Interpretations*, page 119) On page 132 of the same book John A. Widtsoe stated: "*All acceptable evidence within and beyond the Church confirms the Prophet's story that his first vision occurred when he was between fourteen and fifteen years of age in the year 1820 and*

before the Book of Mormon revelations occurred."

The most serious contradiction between the account which was suppressed and the account published by the Church today is the number of personages in the vision. In the first account Joseph Smith only mentions one personage: "... ***I saw the Lord...***" In the version which is published in the *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith said: "... ***I saw two personages.***"

In the first account Joseph Smith related that the Lord said he was "***crucified for the world.***" This, of course, would mean that the personage was Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is plain to see that Joseph Smith did not include God the Father in his first account of the vision. James B. Allen stated: "***In this story, only one personage was mentioned, and this was obviously the Son, for he spoke of having been crucified.***" (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn 1966, page 40)

Writing in the *Improvement Era*, April 1970, pp. 6-7, James B. Allen observed: "***Whenever new historical information is published, a host of questions demand answers, and the disclosure that Joseph Smith told his story more than once has been no exception.... When all of the accounts are combined, only two areas appear that may need some explanation: (1) the time of the vision and (2) the fact that the first account appears to make specific refence to only one personage.... If in his preliminary effort to record the story in 1831-32 he said he was 15 instead of 14 when the vision occurred, he simply made a slight correction in his more carefully prepared history....***"

"In the earliest narrative Joseph Smith simply said, '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....' ...Remembering that the 1831-32 manuscript is a rough, unpolished effort to record the spiritual impact of the vision on him, that this was probably the first time Joseph Smith had even tried to commit his experience to writing, and that in the other narratives the important message was delivered by the Son, it is probable that in dictating to his scribe the Prophet simply emphasized 'the Lord' and his message." (*Improvement Era*, April 1970, pp. 6-7)

Paul R. Cheesman tries to excuse the fact that the account which was suppressed only mentions one personage by stating: "***As he writes briefly of the vision, he does not mention the Father as being present; however, this does not indicate that He was not present.***" ("An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions," page 63)

This explanation by Paul Cheesman does not seem reasonable. Actually, in the first account Joseph Smith quotes the Lord as saying more words than in the printed version. James B. Allen comments: "***Another impressive fact is that the 1831-32 version, which was the first to be recorded, is actually the most comprehensive of all. This early narrative includes all the essential elements of the more carefully prepared Manuscript History and contains more additional details than any other source.***" (*Improvement Era*, April 1970, page 6)

Speaking of the "account of 1832," the Mormon writer Milton V. Backman says: "***It is possible that after dictating the account, Joseph recognized the desirability of modifying certain statements... Often when people record biographical sketches or historical incidents, they write and rewrite until their ideas are clearly expressed.***" (*Joseph Smith's First Vision*, Salt Lake City, 1971, page 124)

While it is true that many people have to "write and rewrite until their ideas are clearly expressed," we do not feel that Joseph Smith could have left out the most important part of

thestory by accident. If God the Father had really appeared in this vision, Joseph Smith certainly would have included this information in his first account. It is absolutely impossible for us to believe that Joseph Smith would not have mentioned the Father if He had actually appeared.

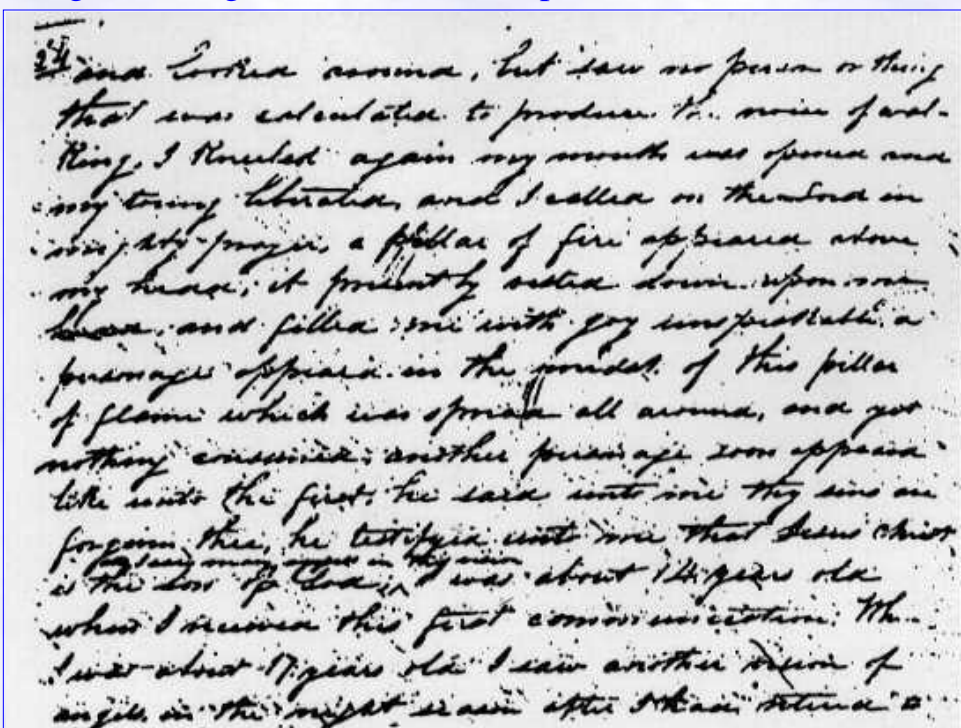
The only reasonable explanation for the Father not being mentioned is that Joseph Smith did **NOT** see God the Father, and that he made up this part of the story after he wrote the first manuscript. This, of course, throws a shadow of doubt upon the whole story.

After this "strange" account came to light, a Mormon Seminary teacher told us that there was still another account of the First Vision which the Mormon leaders were suppressing. To our great surprise, this account was published in an article by James B. Allen in the Autumn 1966 issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. Professor Allen said that the document **"has recently been brought to light by a member of the staff of the Church Historian's office. It is located in the back of Book A-1 of the handwritten manuscript of the History of the Church (commonly referred to as the 'Manuscript History')....it was apparently written in 1835 by someone other than Joseph Smith, for it records the day-to-day events in the prophets life in the third person, as if it were a scribe recording them as he observed them.... The importance of the manuscript here lies in the fact that the scribe wrote down what Joseph Smith said to his visitor,... Again, the details of the story vary somewhat from the accepted version, but the manuscript, if authentic, at least demonstrates that by 1835 the story had been told to someone."** (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn 1966, pages 35-36)

Although this was certainly an important discovery, it was overshadowed in 1971 when Dean C. Jessee, of the Church Historian's Office, reported that this same story (this time written in the first person) had been found in Joseph Smith's own diary. Below is a photograph of the important part of this story as it appears in *Joseph Smith's 1835-36 Diary* under the date of Nov. 9, 1835. [\[Click on the photo to enlarge the image and to see an interpretation of the text \]](#).

The reader will find photographs of three pages of this account of the First Vision and the discovery of the Book of Mormon plates in our publication, *Joseph Smith's 1835-36 Diary*. Dean C. Jessee prepared a typescript of this "strange" account of the First Vision for *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Spring 1971. It is printed on page 87 and reads as follows:

...while setting in my house between the hours of ten & 11 this morning, a man came in, and introduced himself to me, calling himself by the name of



Joshua the Jewish minister, his appearance was something singular, having a beard about 3 inches in length which is quite grey, also his hair is long and considerably silvered with age I should think he is about 50 or 55 years old, tall and strait slender built of thin visage blue eyes, and fair complexion, he wears a sea-green frock coat, & pantaloons of the same, black fur hat with narrow brim, and while speaking frequently shuts his eyes with a scowl on his countenance: I made some enquiry after his name but received no definite answer; we soon commenced talking upon the subject of religion and after I had made some remarks concerning the bible I commenced giving him a relation of the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, as follows-- being wrought up in mind, respecting the subject of religion and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong and I considered it of the first importance that I should be right, in matters that involve eternal consequences; being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove and bowed down before the Lord, under a realising sense that he had said (if the bible be true) ask and you shall receive knock and it shall be opened seek and you shall find and again, if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally and upbradeth not; information was what I most desired at this time, in the place above stated or in other words I made a fruitless attempt to pray, my tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some person walking towards me, I strove again to pray, but could not the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprung upon my feet, and looked around, but saw no person or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking, I kneeled again my mouth was opened and my tongue liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer, a pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon me and filled me with joy unspeakable, a personage appeared in the midst of this 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 unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; and I saw many angels in this vision I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication....

In this account of the First Vision there is absolutely nothing to show that the personages were God and Christ. The statement, "*he testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God,*" would seem to show that the personages were *NOT* the Father and the Son. If Joseph Smith had intended to show that the personage who spoke was Jesus, he probably would have said something like this: "He testified also unto me that He was the Son of God." On the other hand, if he intended to show that the personage who spoke was the Father, he would probably have said something like this: "He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ was His son."

As if this is not bad enough, Joseph Smith states that there were "*many angels in this vision.*" Neither of the other versions indicate that there were "*many angels.*"

We now have three different handwritten manuscripts of the First Vision. They were all written by Joseph Smith or his scribes, and yet every one of them is different. The first account says there was only one personage. The second account says there were many, and the third

says there were two.

It is interesting to note that the portion of Joseph Smith's diary which mentions the visit of "**Joshua the Jewish minister**" was used as the basis for Joseph Smith's *History of the Church*, Vol. 2, page 304. In the diary we read:

"I commenced giving him a relation of the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the book of Mormon, as follows [At this point Joseph Smith gave an account of the First Vision and other visions he received.]...."

"While I was relating this brief history of the establishment of the Church of Christ in these last days, Joshua seemed to be highly entertained"

In the *History of the Church*, Vol. 2, page 304, we find almost exactly the same wording:

"... I commenced giving him a relation of the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, as recorded in the former part of this history."

"While I was relating a brief history of the establishment of the Church of Christ in the last days, Joshua seemed to be highly entertained."

From this comparison it is plain to see that Joseph Smith's diary was the original source for the published *History*, yet over 800 words were **NOT** included in the printed version. In order to make this deletion the words "**as follows**" were changed to "**as recorded in the former part of this history**." The story that was related in the diary, however, differs from that "**recorded in the former part of this history**"--the official account which appears in the *History of the Church*, Vol. 1, pp.5-6. Joseph Smith or those who compiled this portion of the *History* apparently felt that this version of the First Vision had to be suppressed because it differed from the official account.

An Important Change

Joseph Smith's 1835-36 Diary and the "Manuscript History" of the Church also provide some important evidence concerning another reference to the First Vision which has been changed in the printed version of the *History of the Church*. Fawn M. Brodie made this statement concerning this reference: "**Under the date of November 15, 1835 in the History of the Church appears the following statement by Joseph Smith: 'I gave him [Erastus Holmes] a brief relation of my experience while in my juvenile years, say from six years old up to the time I received my first vision, which was when I was about fourteen years old...' (Vol. 2, p. 312). But Joseph admittedly did not begin writing his history until 1838, and the editors of this history do not state from what manuscript source in the Utah Church library this journal entry came. Access to all these important manuscripts is denied everyone save authorities of the Mormon Church.**" (*No Man Knows My History*, footnote, page 24)

The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe tried to defend this reference from the *History of the Church* by stating:

"In 1835 he told one Erastus Holmes of his 'First Vision which was when I was fourteen years old.' Clearly the story of the First Vision was common knowledge among members of the Church. The proponents of the theory that the Prophet invented the First

Vision in 1838 doubt the accuracy of the Holmes and similar references, because they hold that the Church History, the journal of Joseph Smith, has been tampered with by later workers. It is sad when a drowning man does not even have a straw to which he may cling! that seemed and seems to be the need of these critics." (Joseph Smith--Seeker After Truth, pp. 24-25)

In spite of John A. Widtsoe's statement, a woman who was doing research at the Utah State Historical Society searched through a microfilm of the early *Deseret News* and found information which proves that the Mormon Historians deliberately altered Joseph Smith's statement. In the 1850's the *Deseret News* (the Mormon Church's newspaper) was publishing Joseph Smith's History. In the issue for May 29, 1852, the following statement by Joseph Smith appeared:

"This afternoon, Erastus Holmes, of Newbury, Ohio, called on me to inquire about the establishment of the church, and to be instructed in doctrine more perfectly. I gave him a brief relation of my experience while in my juvenile years, say from six years old up to the time I received the first visitation of angels, which was when I was about fourteen years old; also the revelations that I received afterwards concerning the Book of Mormon, and a short account of the rise and progress of the church up to this date." (*Deseret News*, Vol. 2, No. 15, May 29, 1852)

Because this statement by Joseph Smith contradicted the teaching that the Father and the Son appeared to him in the First Vision of 1820, the Mormon Church Historians altered the words of Joseph Smith when they reprinted them in recent editions of the *History of the Church*. They changed the wording so that the word "**angels**" was completely left out. The following is a comparison of the way this reference was originally published in the *Deseret News* and the way it has been changed to read in recent printings of the *History of the Church*. In the *Deseret News*, May 29, 1852, Joseph Smith's statement read:

"... I received **the first visitation of angels**, which was when I was about fourteen years old;...

"In the *History of the Church*, Vol. 2, page 312, this has been changed to read:

"... I received **my first vision**, which was when I was about fourteen years old;..."

over the first vision as his 'first visitation of angels' he is being both correct and evasive. Remember that this was some years before he was finally 'induced' to come out with a public statement about the first vision;..." (*Improvement Era*, November 1961, page 868)

On page 866 of the same article, Dr. Nibley admits that Joseph Smith's use of the word "angels" was "ambiguous," and that the editors of the *Deseret News* ran the "risk of a misunderstanding" by using this term. He does not, however, tell the reader that this "ambiguous" term has been deleted in modern editions of the *History of the Church*. Paul Cheesman fails to deal with this problem in his thesis. He quotes the statement Joseph Smith made concerning his First Vision, but his quotation is taken from the *History of the Church*, and he does not say anything concerning the change which has been made in it. It would appear that the Mormon writers are unwilling to face this problem.

The Church has absolutely no manuscript evidence to support this change in Joseph Smith's *History of the Church*. The original handwritten manuscript for this part of the *History* reads exactly like the *Deseret News*: "... I received *the first visitation of angels...*" (Manuscript History, Book B-1, page 642). In addition to this, em>Joseph Smith's 1835-36 Diary, page 37, provides supporting evidence for the word "angels": "... I received the *first visitation of angels....*"

The fact that Mormon historians had to make such a serious change in Joseph Smith's *History* after his death tends to further weaken the case for the First Vision.

Revision Required

At least one Mormon writer suggests that because of the release of the new documents Fawn Brodie may have to revise her argument that the First Vision was invented sometime after 1834. We feel that this criticism is a little unfair. Actually, the Mormon leaders are the ones who should revise their arguments. They are the ones that said Joseph Smith "*told but one story*," and they are the ones who suppressed the two "strange" accounts of the vision. We are sure that Fawn M. Brodie would have used these documents if the Mormon leaders had made them available to her. In fact, in a Supplement to the new edition of her book she did reproduce and discuss these documents (see *No Man Knows My History*, N.Y., 1971, pp. 405-410). These documents fit perfectly into her thesis that Joseph Smith made up the vision many years after it was supposed to have occurred. She had said that the "*awesome vision he described in later years may have been the elaboration of some half-remembered dream stimulated by the early revival excitement and reinforced by the rich folklore of visions circulating in his neighborhood. Or it may have been sheer invention, created some time after 1834...*" On page 22 of the older edition she stated that "*Lesser visions than this were common in the folklore of the area.*" She then goes on to explain that others claimed they saw the Lord, but Joseph's vision of both the Father and the Son "*dwarfed all these experiences.*" If Fawn Brodie would have had access to the "strange" account written in the early 1830's, she would have had the missing link to make her thesis complete. The fact that Joseph Smith only mentions Christ as being present in the vision makes it very similar to other visions "*of the area.*" Mormon writers admit that the thing that makes Joseph Smith's account unique is that **BOTH** the Father and the Son appeared. Paul R. Cheesman says that "*Joseph Smith's account is unique in that the*

Father and the Son appeared together and they both spoke. To those who accept the Bible and the Book of Mormon as authentic, nowhere in these histories do we have another example that parallels this experience in this respect. ("An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions," page 18)

Now that we have Joseph Smith's first account of his vision we know that it was ***NOT*** unique. In 1816 a minister by the name of Elias Smith published a book in which he told of his conversion. Notice how similar it is to Joseph Smith's first account: "***...I went into the woods...after a stick of timber; after taking it on my shoulder...as I walked along on a large log...my foot slipped...the timber fell one end on the log and the other on the snow, and held me,... While in this situation, a light appeared from heaven,... My mind seemed to rise in that light to the throne of God and the Lamb,... The Lamb once slain appeared to my understanding, and while viewing him, I felt such love to him as I never felt to any thing earthly.... It is not possible for me to tell how long I remained in that situation,...***" (*The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith*, Portsmouth, N.H., 1816, pp. 58-59)

Alexander Campbell wrote the following on March 1, 1824, concerning a "revival in the state of New York": "***Enthusiasm flourishes,... This man was regenerated when asleep, by a vision of the night. That man heard a voice in the woods, saying, 'Thy sins be forgiven thee.' A third saw his Saviour descending to the tops of the trees at noon day.***" (*The Christian Baptist*, Vol. 1, pp. 148-49)

The noted revival preacher Charles G. Finney, like Joseph Smith, went out "***into the woods***" to pray. That night he came into a room and though there "***was no fire, and no light, in the room; nevertheless it appeared to me as if it were perfectly light. As I went in and shut the door after me, it seemed as if I met the Lord Jesus Christ face to face.***" (Charles G. Finney, pp. 15-21) This vision occurred in the early 1820's, and since Finney was so popular in New York, Joseph Smith probably knew his story. Gilbert Seldes stated: "***The story of his conversion spread and the grove in which he had communed with the Holy Spirit was frequented by other anxious souls who imitated him in prayer with equally successful results.***" (*The Stammering Century*, page 104) We present other information concerning this matter in our *Case*, Vol. 1, pp. 108-109.

In a book published in 1830, Stephen H. Bradley told that he thought he "***saw the Savior***" when he was fourteen years old. William James cites this book in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 157-58.

Asa Wild claimed to have a revelation which is very similar to the story Joseph Smith published. It was published in the *Wayne Sentinel* (the paper to which the family of Joseph Smith apparently subscribed) on Oct. 22, 1823: "***It seemed as if my mind...was struck motionless, as well as into nothing, before the awful and glorious majesty of the Great Jehovah. He then spake... He also told me, that every denomination of professing christians had become extremely corrupt;... He told me further, that he had raised up, and was now raising up, that class of persons signified by the Angel mentioned by the Revelator, xiv. 6, 7, which flew in the midst of heaven; having the everlasting gospel to preach: ... Furthermore he said that all the different denominations of professing christians, constituted the New Testament Babylon;...***

"Much more the Lord revealed, but forbids my relating it in this way." (*Wayne Sentinel*, October 22, 1823)

It is plain to see, then, that the story Joseph Smith told in the early 1830's is not much different than the visions related by others. It was only when he added the part about the Father appearing with the Son that the story began to sound unique.

First History

In the early years of the Mormon Church the members were taught that the first vision Joseph Smith had was in 1823 when he was seventeen years of age, and that the personage who appeared was an angel (not God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ) who told him about the Book of Mormon. Oliver Cowdery, who was one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon, and the first Church Historian, wrote a history of the Church which was published in the *Messenger and Advocate*. This history shows that the story of the visit of the Father and the Son was not taught to the Mormon people. Francis W. Kirkham, in his book *A New Witness For Christ In America*, Vol. 1, page 17, says: "***The first published consecutive account of the origin of the Church began in the October, 1834, issue of the Messenger and Advocate. It consists of eight letters written by Oliver Cowdery to W.W. Phelps. This account is very important as Oliver Cowdery claims in a letter published in the October, 1834, issue, but dated September 7, 1834, that Joseph Smith assisted him in the writing of the letters.***"

The Mormon writer Hyrum L. Andrus states that the *Messenger and Advocate* was "***the official Church organ between 1834 and 1837.***" (*God, Man and the Universe*, Salt Lake City, 1968, page 48) In the *Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, p. 13, the following statement was made concerning this history: "***...we have thought that a full history of the rise of the church of the Latter Day Saints, and the most interesting parts of its progress, to the present time, would be worthy the perusal of the Saints....***"

"That our narrative may be correct, and particularly the introduction, it is proper to inform our patrons, that our brother J. Smith jr. has offered to assist us.... With his labor and with authentic documents now in our possession, we hope to render this a pleasing and agreeable narrative, well worth the examination of the Saints.--"

On page 42 the reader was promised that this history would contain a correct account of events that have transpired:

"Since, then, our opposers have been thus kind to introduce our cause before the public, it is no more than just that a correct account should be given; and since they have invariably sought to cast a shade over the truth,...it is also proper that it should be vindicated, by laying before the world a correct statement of events...

"You will recollect that I informed you,...this history would necessarily embrace the life and character of our esteemed friend and brother, J. Smith Jr....for information on that part of the subject, I refer you to his communication... I shall, therefore, pass over that, till I come to the 15th year of his life.... One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra, and vicinity. Elder Lane was a tallented man... There was a great awakening, or excitement raised on the subject of religion, and much enquiry for the word of life. Large additions were made to the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches.--Mr. Lane's manner of communication was peculiarly calculated to awaken the intellect of the hearer,...in

common with others, our brother's mind became awakened....his mother, one sister, and two of his natural brothers, were persuaded to unite with the Presbyterians...."

In the February 1835 issue of the *Messenger and Advocate*, Oliver Cowdery continued the history. He stated, however, that there had been a typographical error and that the revival had really occurred in 1823:

"You will recollect that I mentioned the time of a religious excitement, in Palmyra and vicinity to have been in the 15th year of our brother J. Smith Jr's age--that was an error in the type--it should have been in the 17th.--You will please remember this correction, as it will be necessary for the full understanding of what will follow in time. This would bring the date down to the year 1823....while this excitement continued, he continued to call upon the Lord in secret for a full manifestation of divine approbation, and for, to him, the all important information, if a Supreme being did exist, to have an assurance that he was accepted of him...

"On the evening of the 21st of September, 1823, previous to retiring to rest, our brother's mind was unusually wrought up on the subject which had so long agitated his mind--his heart was drawn out in fervent prayer,... While continuing in prayer for a manifestation in some way that his sin swere forgiven; endeavoring to exercise faith in the scriptures, on a sudden a light like that of day, only of a purer and far more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room.--...and in a moment a personage stood before him...he heard him declare himself to be a messenger sent by commandment of the Lord, to deliver a special message, and to witness to him that his sins were forgiven,..."
(*Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, pp.78-79)

Several things should be noted concerning this history. First, that it claimed to be a "**correct account.**" Second, that Joseph Smith assisted in the writing of this history. Third, that the date of the religious excitement in Palmyra was 1823. Fourth, that Joseph Smith desired to know at this time "**if a Supreme being did exist.**" Fifth, that a "**messenger sent by commandment of the Lord**" appeared to him and told him that his sins were forgiven.

Mormon writers seem to be somewhat divided concerning this history. Dr. Hugh Nibley suggests that Joseph Smith may not have given Oliver Cowdery a "**full account**" of the First Vision and that this may account for the confusion:

"If William Smith and Oliver Cowdery give confusing accounts of the first vision, we must remember that the Prophet knew from the first that those men were not to be trusted with too much information.... Were such men to be trusted with a full account of the first vision before it was officially given to the world?" (*Improvement Era*, Nov. 1961, pp. 868-869)

This explanation for Oliver Cowdery's silence concerning the First Vision is not reasonable; if Cowdery was so unreliable, why was he chosen to be one of the three witnesses to the Book of Mormon? Could it be possible that Joseph Smith would not trust Oliver Cowdery--the first Church Historian--with the true history of the Church? Actually, Joseph Smith trusted Cowdery with some of his most important secrets. The Mormon writer Max H. Parkin stated: "**...the Prophet testified 'that Oliver Cowdery had been his bosom friend, therefore he entrusted him with many things.'**" (Conflict at Kirtland, M.A. thesis, BYU, 1966, page 166)

Dr. Richard L. Anderson, of Brigham Young University, seems to disagree with Dr.

Nibley. He claims that Cowdery was well aware of Joseph Smith's early account of the First Vision (i.e., the "strange" account), but feels that it was left out "for a reasons":

"Since Oliver Cowdery and William Smith narrated early Church history without mentioning the First Vision, it has been assumed that their silence proves that the event did not occur. Both associate Joseph Smith's revival investigations with 1823 instead of 1820,...Cowdery made the first public attempt to narrate pre-1830 Church history in letters to the 1834-35 Messenger and Advocate. It is incorrect to say that he wrote without an awareness of the First Vision. It may be that the reason for leaving it out is ambiguous, but...the initial manuscript history of the First Vision was entered in official Church records at least two years before Cowdery's history. When he stated that he would utilize 'authentic documents now in our possession,' it is virtually certain that he was alluding to the 1831-32 account....at two points where the Prophet's personal experiences are narrated, identical phrases or structural similarities betray Cowdery's use of the earlier document....added to these is a precise sequence of events that indicates that Cowdery composed his sketch of Joseph's first religious investigations with the 1831-32 manuscript before him:...

"If Oliver Cowdery demonstrably followed the 1831-32 document in rehearsing the background of the First Vision, why didn't he report the full event as found in that history?... By date and verbal dependence, it is known that Cowdery had access to the 1831-32 document, which described two different prayers and two responding visions. Because the logical Cowdery presented differing prayer situations but an answer to only one of them, it must be assumed that he left out reference to the First Vision for a reason.

"It is hard to avoid the impression that the second elder was corrected by Joseph Smith and exercised his editorial privilege of saving face. The installment of December 1834, in which the First Vision background was given, dated the 'excitement raised on the subject of religion' in the '15th year' of the Prophet's life,... Pleading 'an error in the type,' the editor said that the above events happened 'in the 17th' year of Joseph Smith's life....

"Since Cowdery knew of the First Vision and began to describe its circumstances, his failure to continue implies a correction. One might envision a reprimand for giving public details of a sacred experience, though that is inconsistent with Joseph Smith's open description of the event for the Jewish minister Joshua some months afterward.... The absence of the First Vision in these circumstances is an accident of presentation never rectified because the letter-presentation of early history was terminated some months afterward." (Brigham Young University Studies, Spring 1969, pp. 393-398)

It is rather obvious that Mormon writers do not know how to deal with this early history. One Mormon writer has maintained that Joseph Smith was not responsible for the contents of this history (see *Dialogue*, Spring 1969, pp. 84-86). President Joseph Fielding Smith, however, admitted that this history was written under the "*personal supervision*" of Joseph Smith. He even used it to prove where the Hill Cumorah is located:

"The quibbler might say that this statement from Oliver Cowdery is merely the opinion of Oliver Cowdery and not the expression of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It should be remembered that these letters in which these statements are made were written at the Prophet's request and under his personal supervision. Surely, under these circumstances, he would not have permitted an error of this kind to creep into the record without correction....

"Later, during the Nauvoo period of the Church, and again under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith, these same letters by Oliver Cowdery, were published in the Times and Seasons, without any thought of correction...." (*Doctrines of Salvation*, Vol. 3, page 236)

The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts said that ***"Joseph Smith's association with Cowdery in the production of these letters make them, as to the facts involved, practically the personal narrative of Joseph Smith."*** (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, page 78)

Too Many Stories

Prior to the time Paul Cheesman wrote his thesis at Brigham Young University, Mormon writers were emphatically proclaiming that Joseph Smith ***"told but one story"*** of the First Vision. The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe stated: ***"The earliest available written official account of the First Vision dates from 1838 when Joseph Smith began to write the history of the Church."*** (*Joseph Smith--Seeker After Truth*, page 19)

We may never know if John A. Widtsoe knew of the two "strange" accounts of the vision which were written prior to 1838, but one thing is certain, some of the Mormon leaders did know that the account written in 1838 was not the only one in the Historian's Office. In other words, certain leaders deliberately suppressed this information.

Now that these "strange" accounts have been printed and widely circulated, Mormon apologists are forced to admit their existence and authenticity. Dr. Richard L. Anderson, of the Brigham Young University, has gone a step further, however. He not only acknowledges the authenticity of the "strange" accounts, but he also classifies them as "official accounts of the First Vision from the Prophet":

"Before one can prove that Joseph Smith contradicts history, he must be sure of what Joseph Smith claimed. There are four official accounts of the First Vision from the Prophet. The three manuscript texts are printed in Dean Jessee's article in this issue. As he shows, their dates of composition are 1831-32, 1835, and 1838. This 1838 account was published as the 'History of Joseph Smith' in 1842. The fourth account is Joseph Smith's 'Wentworth Letter,' also published in 1842." (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 374)

Dr. Anderson even goes so far as to state that ***"The most striking insight into the earliest religious experiences of the Prophet comes from the 1831-32 manuscript history."*** (*Ibid.*, p.375)

The Mormon newspaper, *Deseret News*, has now admitted the authenticity of the "strange" accounts, but it is made to appear that they are new discoveries:

"Dean C. Jessee, a staff member at the Church historian's office in Salt Lake City, searched through documents of the Church historian's library concerning events of the 1820s. He located and analyzed three early accounts of Joseph Smith's first vision dictated by the Prophet himself." (*Deseret News*, Church Section, May 3, 1969, page 15)

This article gives the impression that Dean C. Jessee just discovered the "strange" accounts. Actually, for many years some of the Mormon leaders have been aware of the fact that the printed account was not the only account written by Joseph Smith. The reader will

remember that Levi Edgar Young had seen some documents containing a "strange" account of the First Vision prior to the interview with LaMar Petersen in 1953, but that he was "**told not to copy or tell what they contained.**" The reader will also remember that we printed the first "strange" account in 1965.

The Church has suppressed these documents for over 130 years, but now Mormon apologists are trying to make it appear that they are proud of them. Dr. Truman G. Madsen, of the Brigham Young University, claims that the harmony of these documents is impressive: "**Now that we have copies of the three early manuscript accounts of the First Vision bound in this single volume, we are impressed with their harmony considering the very different circumstances of their writing: ...**" (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, p. 240)

Richard L. Bushman admits that there are some variations in the story, but he states: "**The reasons for reshaping the story usually have to do with changes in immediate circumstances. We know that Joseph suffered from attacks on his character... Small wonder that afterwards he played down his prayer for forgiveness in accounts of the vision.... One would expect variations in the simplest and truest story.**" (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 83)

On page 91 of the same article, Dr. Bushman says that "**there are bound to be variations in the reports of any event, simply because the narrator emphasizes one portion or another of the story. Simple slips may account for other differences. In the 1831 story, for example, Joseph places the first vision in his sixteenth year instead of his fifteenth, a mistake I for one can easily excuse considering how I always have to stop to calculate just how old one is in his fifteenth year.**"

While it is true that it would have been easy for Joseph Smith to have made a few mistakes in relating the vision, we must agree with Wesley P. Walters when he states that "**The matter is far deeper than a mere lapse of memory as to dating, for it enters into the very fabric of the story itself.**" (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 70)

We would, of course, expect some variations in any story, but we feel that there are so many variations in Joseph Smith's story and they are of such a nature that they make it impossible to believe. The reader will remember that in the first written account Joseph Smith stated that only **ONE** personage appeared to him. The second account says there were **MANY**, and the third account says there were **TWO**. How can we reconcile such discrepancies?

In the Supplement to the new edition of her book, page 409, Mrs. Brodie stated: "**Devout Mormon scholars have made it clear that they believe the differences between the three versions are of no consequence. But to the non-devout the differences are evidence of Joseph Smith's exuberant talent for improvisation before a stimulating audience and his lack of care about consistency of detail. They bear out my original speculation that the first vision, if not an invention, was an evolutionary fantasy beginning in 'a half-remembered dream stimulated by the early revival excitement and reinforced by the rich folklore of visions circulating in his neighborhood.'**"

Doctrinal Change

When Lauritz G. Petersen, Research Supervisor at the Church Historian's Office, was asked concerning the different accounts of the First Vision, he wrote a letter in which he stated: "**We are not concerned really with which of the two Versions of the First Vision is right....**"

Personally I would take the version which the Prophet Joseph gave himself when he stated that he saw two personages. Regardles[s] whether he saw one or two the fact remains that Jesus Christ is mentioned in both of them."

It is obvious from this statement that Mormon apologists are beginning to retreat from the idea that God the Father appeared to Joseph Smith. This is actually a very important matter, for Mormon leaders have used this vision as evidence for their doctrine of a plurality of gods. They have stated that this vision proves that God and Christ are two distinct personages and that they both have a body. They use this vision to prove that God Himself is only an **EXALTED MAN**. George Q. Cannon, who was a member of the First Presidency of the Mormon Church, made this statement in 1883:

There was no man scarcely upon the earth that had a true conception of God;... But all this was swept away in one moment by the appearance of the Almighty Himself--by the appearance of God, the Father, and His Son Jesus Christ, to the boy Joseph,... In one moment all this darkness disappeared, and once more there was a man found on the earth, embodied in the flesh, who had seen God,... This revelation disipated all misconceptions and all false ideas, and removed the uncertainty that had existed respecting these matters. The Father came accompanied by the Son, thus showing that there were two personages of the Godhead,...Joseph saw that the Father had a form; that He had a head; that He had arms; that He had limbs; that He had feet; that He had a face and a tongue... There can be no faith that is not built upon a true conception of God our Father. Therefore, before even angels came, He came Himself, accompanied by His Son, and revealed Himself once more to man upon the earth." (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 24, pp. 371-72)

The Mormon Apostle LeGrand Richards states: "***This was the prophet's first vision. From this we learn among other truths, that God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, are separate and distinct personages, and that man is literally created in the image of God.***" (A Marvelous Work And A Wonder, 1966, page 12)

President Joseph Fielding Smith has said that "***There is no account in history or revelation extant, where ever before both the Father and the Son appeared in the presence of mortal man in glory.***" (Essentials in Church History, pp. 46-47)

The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe commented:

"It was an extraordinary experience. Never before had God the Father and God the Son appeared to mortal man...."The First Vision...shattered many a false doctrine taught throughout the centuries....

" A few, and a very few, had conceived God to be a personage. This view had ordinarily been laid aside, since it made God more nearly like man in body and powers. Men had held up their hands in horror at an anthropomorphic God, whatever that may have meant....

"The First Vision clarified this whole matter.... It answered the centuries' old query about the nature of God. The Father and the Son had appeared to Joseph as persons, like men on earth in form....

"From the early days of Christianity, the erroneous doctrine of the nature of God had led to...the conception that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the Godhead, were One, a unity....

"This false doctrine was laid low by the first vision. Two personages, the Father and the

Son, stood before Joseph.... There was no mingling of personalities in the vision. Each of the personages was an individual member of the Godhead. Each one separately took part in the vision." (Joseph Smith--Seeker After Truth, pages 4-7)

Actually, the fact that the first written account of the First Vision only mentioned **ONE** personage is consistent with what Joseph Smith believed about God when he wrote the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon, which was first published in 1830, taught that there was but one God:

"And now Abinadi said unto them: I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son--... And thus the flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God,..." (Book of Mormon, Mosiah 15:1, 2, 5)

The Book of Mormon tells of a visitation of the Father and the Son to the "brother of Jared." The Father and the Son mentioned, however, are **NOT** two separate personages. Only ONE personage appears, and this personage says: ***"Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have light,..."*** (Ether 3:14)

The Book of Mormon clearly teaches that God the Father is a **SPIRIT**, and the first edition of the *Doctrine and Covenants* also contained a reference which stated that God is a Spirit. It would appear, then, that Joseph Smith did not believe that God the Father had a body at the time he wrote his first account of the vision in the "wilderness." Towards the end of his life, however, Joseph Smith changed his mind and decided that God was just an exalted man. In 1844 he maintained: ***"First, God himself, who sits enthroned in yonder heavens, is a man like unto one of yourselves,..."*** (Times and Seasons, Vol. 5, page 613)

Since Joseph Smith had changed his mind concerning the Godhead, he evidently decided to change his story concerning the First Vision.

Source Of Confusion

After Joseph Smith's death the Mormon leaders made some very confusing statements concerning the First Vision. Now that we have Joseph Smith's first written accounts of the vision we are able to understand why they were in such a state of confusion. Wesley P. Walters states: ***"...the shift from an angel to Christ, then to angels, and finally to two personages introduced such haziness that even the Mormon leaders appeared confused as to the nature of the story itself."*** (Dialogue, Spring 1969, page 73)

Below are a few examples which show the confusion concerning the First Vision which existed after Joseph Smith's death.

In 1855 Brigham Young, the second President of the Church, gave a sermon in which he denied that the Lord came to Joseph Smith in the First Vision:

"But as it was in the days of our Savior, so was it in the advent of this new dispensation. It was not in accordance with the notions, traditions, and pre-conceived ideas of the American people. The messenger did not come to an eminent divine of any of the so-called

orthodoxy, he did not adopt their interpretations of the Holy Scriptures. The Lord did not come with the armies of heaven, in power and great glory, nor send His messengers panoplied with aught else than the truth of heaven, to communicate to the meek, the lowly, and the youth of humble origin, the sincere enquirer after the knowledge of God. But he did send his angel to this same obscure person, Joseph Smith jun., who afterwards became a Prophet, Seer and Revelator, and informed him that he should not join any of the religious sects of the day, for they were all wrong; that they were following the precepts of men instead of the Lord Jesus;..." (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 2, page 171)

John Taylor, the third President of the Mormon Church, made the following statement on March 2, 1879: *"...when the Prophet Joseph asked the angel which of the sects was right that he might join it. The answer was that none of them are right. What, none of them? No. We will not stop to argue that question; the angel merely told him to join none of them that none of them were right."* (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 20, page 167)

George A. Smith, who was sustained as first counselor in the First Presidency in 1868, made the following statement in November of the same year:

"When Joseph Smith was about fourteen or fifteen years old,...there was a revival of religion, and the different sects in the portion of the State--... He had read the Bible and had found that passage in James which says, 'If any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not,' and taking this literally, he went humbly before the Lord and inquired of Him, and the Lord answered his prayers, and revealed to Joseph, by the ministration of angels, the true condition of the religious world. When the holy angel appeared, Joseph inquired which of all these denominations was right and which he should join, and was told they were all wrong,--..." (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 12, pages 333-334)

Heber C. Kimball, the First Counselor to Brigham Young, made the following statement: *"Do you suppose that God in person called upon Joseph Smith, our Prophet? God called upon him; But God did not come himself and call,..."* (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 6, page 29) Heber C. Kimball went on to explain that rather than God coming Himself, He sent messengers to Joseph Smith. He went on to state: *"Why did he not come along? Because he has agents to attend to his business, and he sits upon his throne and is established at head-quarters, and tells this man, 'Go and do this;' and it is behind the veil just as it is here. You have got to learn that,"* (Journal of Discourses, Vol. 6, page 29)

Many other confusing statements about the First Vision were made by Mormon leaders after Joseph Smith's death (see our *Case*, Vol. 1, pp. 119-128)

The Mormon writer Richard L. Bushman admits that members of the Mormon Church may not have understood that the Father and the Son appeared to Joseph Smith:

"Until 1838, in accounts for non-Church members he called the beings in the first vision personages or angels, covering the fact that he claimed to see the Father and the Son. Only in the private narrations for his history written in 1831 and 1838 did he frankly say the Lord had come to him. As Mr. Walters rightly points out, some Church members in the early years may have been unaware of the actual identity of the heavenly visitors." (Dialogue, Spring 1969, page 84)

It is interesting to note that even Joseph Smith's own brother, William Smith, said that it was an angel that first appeared to him: "*In 1822 and 1823, the people in our neighborhood were very much stirred up with regard to religious matters by the preaching of a Mr. Lane,... Joseph, then about seventeen years of age, had become seriously inclined,...*

"At length he determined to call upon the Lord... He accordingly went out into the woods... While engaged in prayer a light appeared in the heavens, and descended until it rested upon the trees where he was. It appeared like fire. But to his great astonishment, did not burn the trees. An angel then appeared to him and conversed with him upon many things. He told him that none of the sects were right;...

"The next day I was at work in the field together with Joseph...Joseph looked pale and unwell,...and sat down by the fence, when the angel again appeared to him,..." (William Smith on Mormonism, Lamoni, Iowa, 1883, as quoted in *A New Witness For Christ In America*, Vol. 2, pp. 414-415)

On June 8, 1884, William Smith again spoke of the personage who appeared in the First Vision as "*an angel.*" He also said that "*Joseph was but about eighteen years old at this time, too young to be a deceiver.*" (*The Saints' Herald*, Vol. 31, No. 40, page 643)

Richard L. Anderson, of Brigham Young University, makes this comment concerning William's statements: "*One cannot be certain that Joseph Smith told his vision of 1820 to young William--or that the boy would have been receptive to such a religious experience.... In 1823 Joseph stood before the family and probably recounted both experiences on the same occasion. It is likely that the two experiences merged in William's mind because he first heard them together. William relates all the elements of the visions described separately by his brother and mother, but he telescopes every detail into a single experience.*" (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1969, page 399-400)

An Evolving Story

The Apostle John A. Widtsoe and other Mormon writers taught that from the beginning Joseph Smith openly proclaimed the fact that he had seen the Father and the Son. New evidence, however, has forced Mormon apologists to retreat from this position. They now state that Joseph Smith kept the story a secret most of his life. In some of his later sermons Joseph Smith tried to prove the doctrine of a plurality of Gods, but he did **NOT** use his own vision to prove the point. James B. Allen made this statement:

"Present-day Mormons use it to demonstrate...the concept of God and Christ as distinct and separate physical beings. It is clear, of course, that Joseph Smith taught these doctrines, but it is of special interest to note that, as far as any recorded material reveals, he never used the story of his vision specifically to illustrate them.

"When did church members begin to make such use of the story? Apparently the early teachers of the Church relied upon scriptural evidence alone to demonstrate the Mormon doctrine of God, and not until well into the Utah period did they begin to use Joseph Smith's story to illustrate it. One of the earliest recorded sermons to make this use of the story was given by George Q. Cannon on October 7, 1883....

"Probably there were earlier sermons or writings that used the story of the first vision to

demonstrate the Mormon doctrine of God. Evidence indicates, however, that they were rare in these early days and that only gradually did this use of the story find place in the traditions of the Church." (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn 1966, page 38-39)

In 1852 Orson Pratt stated that "*both the Father and the Son*" appeared to Joseph Smith, but Mormon scholars have been unable to locate any sermon by Brigham Young in which he identifies the personages as God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. As we have shown before, in one sermon Brigham Young said that "*The Lord did not come... But he did send his angel to this same obscure person, Joseph Smith jun.,...*" (*Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 171) Even Dr. Nibley has to admit that Brigham Young never used the First Vision to prove the doctrine of a plurality of Gods: "*A favorite theme of Brigham Young's was the tangible, personal nature of God, which he never illustrates by any mention of the first vision.*" (*Improvement Era*, November 1961, page 868)

James B. Allen wrote: "*It has been demonstrated that an understanding of the story of Joseph Smith's vision dawned only gradually upon the membership of the Church during his lifetime, and that new and important uses were made of the story after his death.*" (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn 1966, page 45)

Today the First Vision has become of such importance that a person must believe it to be considered a good Mormon. J. Rueben Clark, who was a member of the First Presidency, made this emphatic declaration:

"No teacher who does not have a real testimony of the truth of the Gospel as revealed to and believed by the Latter-day Saints, and a testimony of the Sonship and Messiahship of Jesus, and of the divine mission of Joseph Smith--including in all its reality the First Vision--has any place in the Church school system. If there be any such, and I hope and pray there are none, he should at once resign; if the Commissioner knows of any such and he does not resign, the Commissioner should request his resignation. The First Presidency expect this pruning to be made." (*Improvement Era*, Sept. 1938, as quoted in "The Social Psychological Basis of Mormon New-Orthodoxy," M.A. thesis, by Owen Kendall White, Jr., University of Utah, 1967 page 162)

Thus we see that to be in good standing a Mormon must believe in Joseph Smith's First Vision. David O. McKay, the ninth President of the Church, stated that the First Vision is the very "*foundation of this Church.*" (*Gospel Ideals*, page 85) In his thesis, page 75, Paul R. Cheesman has stated that the Mormon Church "*must stand or fall on the authenticity of the First Vision and the appearance of the Angel Moroni.*" John A. Widtsoe stated: "*The story of the First Vision need only be studied from original sources to assure the seeker not only of its truth, but also of the time of its occurrence.*" (*Joseph Smith--Seeker After Truth*, page 26) When we examine the original sources, however, we find that the First Vision story rests on a very sandy foundation.

Dr. Hugh Nibley once criticized anti-Mormon writers for omitting the words "*This is my beloved Son*" when giving Joseph Smith's story. If Dr. Nibley had read Joseph Smith's first account of the vision, perhaps he would not have been so eager to criticize others, for Joseph Smith not only omitted the "*all-important*" words, but he also left God the Father completely out of the vision!

The second account by Joseph Smith also did not contain the "*all-important*" words; in

fact, it contained words which seem to show that it was **NOT** the Father and the Son.

An examination of the first published history of the Church makes matters even worse, for it does not even mention the First Vision. Moreover, Oliver Cowdery claimed that in 1823 Joseph Smith did not even know "*if a Supreme being did exist.*" Certainly, if Joseph Smith had seen the Father and the Son in 1820, he would know in 1823 that a Supreme being did exist!

Besides all this, falsification has been found in the History of the Church. We have found that Joseph Smith told Erastus Holmes about his "*first visitation of angels,*" but later Mormon historians have altered this to read: "*my first vision.*"

We have also found that Joseph Smith's "brief history" which he related to "Joshua the Jewish minister" (more than 800 words) has been left out of the printed version of the *History of the Church*.

It is very difficult to believe in the authenticity of Joseph Smith's First Vision when there is so much evidence against it.

Those who argue that the "strange" accounts of the First Vision can be harmonized with Joseph Smith's printed account might do well to read a speech given by S. Dilworth Young, of the First Council of the Seventy. This speech was given sometime before the "strange" accounts became known to the public. We quote the following from this speech:

"I cannot remember the time when I have not heard the story,...concerning the coming of the Father and the Son to the Prophet Joseph Smith...."

"I am concerned however with one item which has recently been called to my attention on this matter. There appears to be going about our communities some writing to the effect that the Prophet Joseph Smith evolved his doctrine from what might have been a vision, in which he is supposed to have said that he saw an angel, instead of the Father and Son. According to this theory, by the time he was inspired to write the occurrence in 1838, he had come to the conclusion that there were two beings.

"This rather shocked me. I can see no reason why the Prophet, with his brilliant mind, would have failed to remember in sharp relief every detail of that eventful day. I can remember quite vividly that in 1915 I had a mere dream, and while the dream was prophetic in its nature, it was not startling. It has been long since fulfilled, but I can remember every detail of it as sharply and clearly as though it had happened yesterday. How then could any man conceive that the Prophet, receiving such a vision as he received, would not remember it and would fail to write it clearly, distinctly, and accurately?" (Improvement Era, June 1957, page 436)

Now that we have the "strange" accounts we find that the First Vision story did evolve. The story was changed from one personage to two, and Joseph Smith once referred to the vision as a "*visitation of Angels.*"

No Revival In 1820

Joseph Smith claimed that just before he received his First Vision there was a great revival in his neighborhood:

"Some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the

Methodists, but soon became general among all sects in that region of country, indeed the whole district of country seemed affected by it, and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people,...

"I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My father's family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith, and four of them joined that church, namely, my mother Lucy, my brothers Hyrum, Samuel, Harrison, and my sister Sophronia.

"During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection... So in accordance with this 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." (Times and Seasons, Vol. 3, pp. 727-28)

In 1967 the Utah Christian Tract Society published Wesley P. Walters' study, *New Light on Mormon Origins From The Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival*. In the forward to this work, Mr. Walters states: *"Mormons account for the origin of their movement by quoting from a narrative written by their prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. in 1838. In this account he claims that a revival broke out in the Palmyra, New York area in 1820...*

"Information which we have recently uncovered conclusively proves that the revival did not occur until the fall of 1824 and that no revival occurred between 1819 and 1823 in the Palmyra vicinity."

On pages 5, 8, 11 and 12 of the same pamphlet we find these statements by Wesley Walters:

"However, the point at which one might most conclusively test the accuracy of Smith's story has never been adequately explored. A vision, by its inward, personal nature, does not lend itself to historical investigation. A revival is a different matter, especially one such as Joseph Smith describes, in which 'great multitudes' were said to have joined the various churches involved. Such a revival does not pass from the scene without leaving some traces in the records and publications of the period. In this study we wish to show by the contemporary records that the revival, which Smith claimed occurred in 1820, did not occur until the fall of 1824. We also show that in 1820 there was no revival in any of the churches in Palmyra or its vicinity. In short, our investigation shows that the statement of Joseph Smith, Jr. can not be true when he claims that he was stirred up by an 1820 revival to make his inquiry in the grove near his home....

"An even more surprising confirmation that this revival occurred in 1824 and not in 1820 has just recently come to light. While searching through some dusty volumes of early Methodist literature at a near-by Methodist college, imagine our surprise and elation when we stumbled upon Rev. George Lane's own personal account of the Palmyra revival. It was written, not at some years distance from the event as the Mormon accounts all were, but while the revival was still in progress and was printed a few months later. Lane's account gives us not only the year, 1824, but even the month and date....

"By September 1825 the results of the revival for Palmyra had become a matter of record. The Presbyterian church reported 99 admitted on examination and the Baptist had received 94 by baptism, while the Methodist circuit showed an increase of 208....

"When we turn to the year 1820, however, the 'great multitudes' are conspicuously missing. The Presbyterian Church in Palmyra certainly experienced no awakening that year.

Rev. James Hotchkim's history records revivals for that church as occurring in the years 1817, 1824, 1829, etc., but nothing for the year 1820. The records of Presbytery and Synod give the same picture.... Since these reports always rejoice at any sign of a revival in the churches, it is inconceivable that a great awakening had occurred in their Palmyra congregation and gone completely unnoticed.

"The Baptist Church records also show clearly that they had no revival in 1820, for the Palmyra congregation gained only 5 by baptism, while the neighboring Baptist churches of Lyons, Canandaigua and Farmington showed net losses of 4, 5 and 9 respectively....

"The Methodist figures, though referring to the entire circuit, give the same results, for they show net losses of 23 for 1819, 6 for 1820 and 40 for 1821. This hardly fits Joseph Smith's description of 'great multitudes' being added to the churches of the area. In fact, the Mormon Prophet could hardly have picked a poorer year in which to place his revival, so far as the Methodists were concerned." (New Light On Mormon Origins..., pages 5, 8, 11 and 12)

Mormon scholars became very concerned when they saw Wesley P. Walters' study. They were so disturbed, in fact, that a team was sent back east to do research concerning the First Vision and other matters dealing with the history of the Mormon Church in New York.

Richard L. Bushman, who was on the committee headed by Truman G. Madsen, made these interesting statements regarding Walters' work:

"The Reverend Mr. Walters' article on the first vision raised quite a stir among Mormon scholars when an early version circulated about a year and a half ago.... Mr. Walters' purpose, like that of many of his predecessors, was to discredit Joseph Smith's account of the first vision and all that depended on it. But the style of his attack was both refreshing and disconcerting....it was free of the obvious rancor characteristic of anti-Mormon writers... They cannot resist twisting the knife. Mr. Walters, by contrast, sticks to his facts....

"The article also set us back because Mr. Walters took an entirely new track and followed it with admirable care....he...concentrated on a brand-new question: Were there revivals in 1819-20 in the vicinity of Palmyra as Joseph said? Everyone up until now had assumed that of course there were. Walters said no, and the sources of his answer were impressive. They stood apart from the biased materials on which most anti-Mormon work is based. They were contemporaneous with the event, and they were right to the point. Our consternation was a genuine compliment to the quality of Mr. Walters' work.

"While Mr. Walters has put us on the spot for the moment, in the long run Mormon scholarship will benefit from his attack. Not only was there an immediate effort to answer the question of an 1819 revival, but Mormon historians asked themselves how many other questions remain unasked as well as unanswered. Not long after we saw his essay, a committee on 'Mormon History in New York' sent a group of scholars east for special research.... Without wholly intending it, Mr. Walters may have done as much to advance the cause of Mormon history within the Church as anyone in recent years.

"Meanwhile, of course, we have to assess the damage he has done to Joseph's story of the first vision." (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Spring 1969, page 82-83)

Although the scholars who went east "*scoured libraries, studied newspapers, and sought to find private individuals who might uncover hitherto unknown source materials*" (BYU Studies, Spring 1969, p. 242), they were unable to find evidence of a revival in Palmyra in

1820. In their article, "Mormon Origins in New York," James B. Allen and Leonard J. Arrington (who later became Church Historian) reported:

"What evidence do we have, other than the word of Joseph Smith, that there was 'an unusual excitement on the subject of religion' in the vicinity of Palmyra in 1820? Up to this point little such evidence has been uncovered, and Walters challenged the story in the article referred to above. Milton Backman, however, has discovered interesting new material which he presents in his important article on the historical setting of the First Vision." (Brigham Young University Studies, Spring 1969, page 272)

Richard L. Anderson, of the Brigham Young University, makes some rather strange statements with regard to Joseph Smith's account of the revival: *"If years of religious activity are summarized in the short sentences of abbreviated accounts, did Joseph Smith's 1838 history really intend to portray all revival events as happening just before his vision? In that narrative the Prophet identifies the 'unusual excitement' as beginning 'in the second year after our removal to Manchester,' but the outcome may move considerably beyond this sequence. Beginning in the Smith's area, revival spread through 'that region of country,' then to the 'whole district of country.' Even though Joseph alludes to himself as fifteen then, it is possible that 'this time of great excitement' may refer to the entire period of revivals in his youth, with special reference to excesses, irrespective of chronology.... There is no reason why Joseph Smith might not have viewed the intense 1824-25 Palmyra revivals as part of a period beginning earlier than his vision." (Brigham Young University Studies, Spring 1969, pp. 375-376)*

In his article, "Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," Milton V. Backman, Jr., seems unable to provide evidence that there was a revival in Palmyra. He indicates, however, that Joseph Smith may have heard or read of revivals in other portions of the state:

"Although membership records provide one indication of religious activity in a community, occasionally an unusual religious excitement occurred in a neighborhood without resulting in an immediate increase in church membership.... Some 'outpourings of the Spirit' have vanished from mankind's memory because a contemporary failed to record the 'extension of the power of godliness' or because the primary source was not preserved.... A careful reading of the Prophet's account indicates that the great increase in membership occurred in 'the whole district of country,' meaning possibly western New York or eastern and western New York and not necessarily Palmyra, Farmington, or just the neighborhood where he lives. Joseph undoubtedly learned that many revivals were occurring in New York in 1819 and 1820.... In the summer and early fall of 1820, for example, descriptive accounts of awakenings occurring in central and upstate New York were published in the Palmyra Register,... The June 7, 1820, issue carried a brief report of 'Great Revivals in Religion' in the eastern part of the state. This revival was more fully reported on in a later issue." (Brigham Young University Studies, Spring 1969, pp. 315-16)

Dr. Backman cites three issues of the Palmyra Register--i.e., June 7, 1820; August 16, 1820; and September 13, 1820. The reader will note that these are the same issues that we cited in our Case, Vol. 1, p. 113; *"In briefly looking over the Palmyra Register we have found no*

evidence of a revival in Palmyra in 1820, The issue for June 7, 1820 tells of a revival in the towns of Stillwater, Malta, Ballston, Schenectady, Amsterdam and Galway, but no mention is made of Palmyra or Manchester. The issue for August 16, 1820 tells of a revival in Homer, New York, but again there is no mention of a local revival. The issue of September 13, 1820 also speaks of revivals in cities in New York, but there is no mention of any revivals in Palmyra or Manchester."

We feel that it is very significant that the Mormon research team has been unable to find any reference to a local revival in the Palmyra Register. The fact that the Palmyra Register devoted space to revivals that occurred in other parts of the state and did not mention any local revival seems to prove that there was no revival in Palmyra in 1820. Richard L. Bushman makes these comments concerning this matter:

"Mr. Walters' main argument is that no revival occurred in Palmyra itself. But even that fact cannot be established absolutely. It is a negative claim and depends on negative evidence, which is always tenuous. Mr. Walters relies on the absence of revival reports, but just because someone failed to write a report of an event does not mean it did not occur....lots of things happen that are never recorded.... The news included in the Palmyra paper depended on the taste and inclinations of the editor.... The point is that although we think a revival should have been recorded, there are many reasons why it could have been missed. We cannot know for sure that an event did not occur unless reliable witnesses on the scene say so, and thus far Mr. Walters has found none such to testify." (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Spring 1969, page 87)

Richard L. Bushman states that *"Mr. Walters relies on the absence of reports in newspapers and general histories to reach his conclusion of no revivals."* (Ibid., pp. 89-90) Wesley P. Walters, however, shows that the denominational magazines would have mentioned a revival if one had actually occurred: *"Another significant lack of information concerning an 1820 revival lies in the area of the religious press. The denominational magazines of that day were full of reports of revivals, some even devoting sections to them. These publications carried more than a dozen glowing reports of the revival that occurred at Palmyra in the winter of 1816-17. Likewise, the 1824-25 revival is covered in a number of reports. These magazines, however, while busily engaged in reporting revivals during the 1819 to 1821 period, contain not a single mention of any revival taking place in the Palmyra area during this time. It is unbelievable that every one of the denominations which Joseph Smith depicts as affected by an 1820 revival could have completely overlooked the event. Even the Palmyra newspaper, while reporting revivals at several places in the state, has no mention whatever of any revival in Palmyra or vicinity either in 1819 or 1820. The only reasonable explanation for this massive silence is that no revival occurred in the Palmyra area in 1820."* (Dialogue, Spring 1969, page 67)

Richard Bushman claims that Mr. Walters is judging by a wrong standard: *"In assessing Mr. Walters' second line of reasoning, the inferior size of the 1819-20 revivals, two considerations must be kept in mind. The first is that the revivals of 1824 were not the standard for people in 1819. In his article, Mr. Walters tells us first of the hundreds converted in the later years and then goes back to 1819 to show how insipid by comparison.... Without knowing anything greater, did the excitement of 1819 strike him as unusual? Did the*

reports of conversions in the surrounding area sound like great multitudes joining the churches? Remember that he was just developing personal religious concerns and, judging by the 1831-32 narrative of the first vision, was sensitive to religious sincerity and hypocrisy. Would reports of awakenings and conversions, however modest by comparison to later revivals, have registered with this sensitized man as unusual and great?" (Dialogue, Spring 1969, page 99)

In rebuttal Mr. Walters stated: *"...he mistakenly suggests that 'the revivals of 1824 were not the standard for the people in 1819.' Actually, the Palmyra Presbyterian Church received more converts in their 1817 revival ('126 have been hopefully born again, and 106 added') than they did in the 1824 revival (99 added). Most of the people who lived through this 1817 revival were still living in 1819 and in 1824, Joseph's own family to name just one example." (Ibid, pp. 95-96)*

Lane And Stockton

According to the first history of the Church, published in the *Messenger and Advocate*, in 1834-35, a Methodist minister by the name of Lane participated in the revival in Palmyra: *"One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra, and vicinity.... There was a great awakening, or excitement raised on the subject of religion,... Large additions were made to the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches." (Messenger and Advocate, Vol. 1, page 42)*

The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts claimed that both Rev. Lane and Rev. Stockton were present at the revival, which he claims occurred in the spring of 1820: *"In the spring of 1820 the ministers of the several churches in and about Palmyra decided upon a 'union revival,' in order to 'convert the unconverted.' The Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists were the sects represented, and the Reverend Mr. Stockton of the Presbyterian church was the leading spirit of the movement, and chairman of the meetings.... The Reverend Mr. Stockton, however, insisted that the work done was largely Presbyterian work as he had been a dominating influence in the movement, and presided at the meetings. The Reverend Mr. Lane of the Methodist church preached a sermon on the subject, 'What church shall I join?' He quoted the golden text of James--..."*

"The text made a deep impression on the mind of the Prophet." (A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930, Vol. 1, pp. 51-53)

Wesley P. Walters shows that this could not have occurred in 1820 as B.H. Roberts maintained:

"The records, however, of both the Presbyterian and Methodist churches, to which Mr. Stockton and Mr. Lane respectively belonged, make it clear that neither of these men were assigned to the Paymyra [sic] area until 1824. Rev. Benjamin B. Stockton from March 4, 1818 until June 30, 1822 was serving as pastor of the church at Skaneateles, N.Y. While he did visit Palmyra for a speech to the youth missionary society in October 1822, the Palmyra newspaper still describes him as 'Rev. Stockton of Skaneateles.' The earliest contemporary reference to his ministering in the Palmyra area is in connection with a wedding November 26, 1823, just a week after Alvin Smith's death. Following this date there are several

references to his performing some service there, but he was not installed as pastor of the Presbyterian Church until February 18, 1824. It is in this latter year, 1824, that Rev. James Hotckin, in cataloging the revivals that occurred in the churches of Geneva Presbytery, writes under the heading of the the Palmyra church, 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.'

"In the summer of 1819 Rev. Lane, whom Mormon writers have correctly identified as Rev. George Lane, was assigned to serve the Susquehanna District in central Pennsylvania, over 150 miles from Palmyra. He served this area for 5 years and not until July of 1824 did he receive an appointment to serve as Presiding Elder of the Ontario District in which Palmyra is located. This post he held only until January of 1825 when ill health in his family forced him to leave the ministry for a while. Any revival, therefore, in which both Lane and Stockton shared, as the accounts of Oliver Cowdery and William Smith both indicate, has to fall in the latter half of the year 1824, and not in the year 1820." (New Light on Mormon Origins From the Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival, by Wesley P. Walters, 1967, pp. 7-8)

The Mormon writer Larry C. Porter has made a study concerning Rev. George Lane. His research tends to confirm Wesley Walters' study:

"For eight days, July 1, 1819 to July 8, 1819, George Lane was in attendance at the annual Genesee Conference at Vienna, New York (now Phelps), some fifteen miles southeast of the Smith farm at Manchester...."

"From July 1819 to July 1823, Lane served as supervising elder of the Susquehanna District. During the interval from July 1823 to July 1824, his appointment was the Wyoming circuit. In July 1824 he was once more assigned as a presiding elder, this time, however, to the Ontario District.... For an entire year, then, July 1824 to July 1825, Lane presided over the district within the confines of which the Smith family resided (Manchester was probably on the Ontario circuit)." (Brigham Young University Studies, Spring 1969, pp. 335-336)

James Allen and Leonard Arrington frankly admit that the Mormon historian B. H. Roberts was in error about Lane serving in Palmyra in 1820 but feel there is a "**possibility**" he passed through the vicinity:

"Are we Mormons willing to admit that some of our writers have made mistakes in trying to reconcile conflicting accounts of Joseph Smith's early experience? A case in point is B. H. Roberts' description of the setting for Joseph Smith's First Vision. Roberts based his conclusion upon an attempted correlation of the accounts of Joseph Smith, William Smith, and Oliver Cowdery. He said that it was in 1820 that a certain Reverend Lane so affected Joseph Smith by his preaching that he was induced to utter the prayer which resulted in that First Vision.... It is probable that Roberts came to his conclusion because the revival described by Cowdery seemed similar to the 1820 religious excitement later described by Joseph Smith. Clearing up the confusion of dates does not seem as important here as a frank recognition that there is such confusion. The inconsistencies in early sources do not affect the credibility of Joseph Smith, but our failure to discuss them perpetuates the myth that Mormon writers are not willing 'to face the facts.' ...Larry Porter, in his fine essay in this issue, effectively challenges some of Walters' inferences by showing the possibility that Lane

may have passed through the Palmyra vicinity in 1820. But more research is needed before a final conclusion can be reached." (Brigham Young University Studies, Spring 1969, pp. 271-272)

Wesley P. Walters makes this statement concerning this matter:

"Except for Elder Lane's brief presence at the 1819 meeting that appointed him to serve in Pennsylvania, there seems to be no evidence whatever that he even came near the Palmyra area during the 1819-20 period. Since the assigned fields of labor, for both Lane and Stockton, were so far from Palmyra, any revival in which both of these men shared must fall in the latter half of the year 1824, and not in the year 1820." (Dialogue, Spring 1969, pp. 63-64)

The Mormon writer Richard L. Anderson seems to be willing to concede that Lane did not minister in Palmyra in 1820: *"As shown by Larry Porter's accompanying article, this Methodist leader had no Palmyra ministry until several years after 1819-20."* (BYU Studies, Spring 1969, p. 398) Mormon writers now find themselves in an embarrassing position regarding Reverend Lane. Before Walters' work appeared they had tried to show that Lane was involved in the revival. Hyrum Andrus, for instance, made this statement: *"It was during this contest that a Methodist minister, Reverend Lane, preached a sermon on 'What church shall I join?' He admonished the people to ask God, using the text, 'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God,...'"* (Joseph Smith, the Man and the Seer, Salt Lake City, 1965, page 65)

The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts claimed that *"Reverend Mr. Lane"* was *"at least the most active minister of the Methodist persuasion in the revival"* and that it was *"he who had preached the sermon on 'What church shall I join;' and had used James 1:5 as his text."* (Comprehensive History of the Church, Vol. 1, p. 56, n. 10) The Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe emphatically maintained that George Lane was ministering in Palmyra when Joseph Smith had his First Vision: *"The preacher to whom he told his story was Reverend George Lane, who was the leader of the Palmyra revival and who had quoted the saying from James, which had so deeply affected the lad. "*

It is only reasonable to suppose that Reverend Lane told others of Joseph's story." (Joseph Smith--Seeker After Truth, pages 16-17)

On page 22 of the same book, the Apostle Widtsoe claimed that Oliver Cowdery confirmed the date of Rev. Lane's work in Palmyra: *"Oliver Cowdery in his letters confirms the story of Reverend Lane and the date of his work in Palmyra."*

Actually, Oliver Cowdery did *NOT* confirm the date as 1820. Instead, he insisted that the correct date should be 1823: *"You will recollect that I mentioned the time of a religious excitement, in Palmyra and vicinity to have been in the 15th year of our brother J. Smith Jr's. age--that was an error in the type--it should have been in the 17th.--You will please remember this correction, as it will be necessary for the full understanding of what will follow in time. This would bring the date down to the year 1823."* (Messenger and Advocate, Vol. 1, page 78)

In footnote 10 on page 22 of his book, *Joseph Smith--Seeker After Truth*, the Apostle Widtsoe stated: *"Reverend Lane himself confirms the dates of the revival. It was 1820, not 1823."*

Notice that John A. Widtsoe gives no source for this statement. Now that Mormon writers

are beginning to admit that Lane "*had no Palmyra ministry until several years after 1819-20*" (BYU Studies, Spring 1969, p. 398), they are casting a shadow of doubt upon the honesty of the Apostle Widtsoe. When Wesley P. Walters wrote the LDS Church Historian's Office asking for documentation for Apostle Widtsoe's statement, he received a letter from Lauritz G. Petersen, Assistant Librarian. In this letter Petersen stated:

"The letter that you sent to Mr. Earl Olson was handed to me to answer. I checked all the footnotes or found the footno[t]es for Mr. Widtsoe's book on Joseph Smith.

"The reference made by Mr. Widtsoe on page 22 n. 10 could not be verified. I asked Mr. Widtsoe not to insert it in the book, but he did anyway." (Letter by Lauritz G. Petersen, Dec. 7, 1966)

Moving The Revival

Before Mr. Walters' study appeared Mormon writers taught that the revival occurred right in Palmyra, but since the Mormon research team has been unable to find evidence of a revival in Palmyra, Mormon apologists are now beginning to forsake Palmyra and search elsewhere of a revival. Lauritz G. Petersen, Research Supervisor at the Church Historian's Office, made these statements in a letter dated Nov. 1, 1968:

"Now let me ask you a question. Where was the revival? In Palmyra? He doesn't mention a revival at all. He mentions an unusual excietment [sic] in the 'Whole district of country.' Could an excietment [sic] be caused by a revival somewhere near the area? He doesn't mention being to a revival. If there was a revival somewhere outside of Palmyra and the news of it had already excited the village, would or could it be possible that the Smith family have travelled there to sell root beer and cakes?" (Letter from Lauritz G. Petersen, Nov. 1, 1968)

Although it is true that Joseph Smith does not use the word "Palmyra," his description makes it very clear that he was referring to this area. He states that there "*was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion.*" (History of the Church, Vol. 1, p. 2) In 1843 Joseph Smith told a reporter that the revival occurred right in his "*neighborhood*": "*There was a reformation among the different religious denominations in the neighborhood where I lived, and I became serious, and was desirous to know what church to join.*" (New York Spectator, Sept. 23, 1843, as quoted in Joseph Smith the Prophet, by Preston Nibley, pp. 30-31)

Since Joseph Smith said that the revival occurred in "*the neighborhood where I lived*," we feel that he must have been referring to Palmyra. Furthermore, the first printed "*history of the rise of the church*" published in the Messenger and Advocate--the official church organ--in 1834-35 plainly stated that the revival was in "*Palmyra, and vicinity*" (Messenger and Advocate, Vol. 1, p. 42). The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts definitely stated that the revival was in "Palmyra" (Comprehensive History of the Church, Vol. 1, p. 35). On page 51 of the same volume, Mr. Roberts claimed that the "*churches in and about Palmyra decided upon a 'union revival,' in order to 'convert the unconverted.'*"

Since Mormon apologists have been unable to prove that the revival took place in Palmyra, they have tried to find reasons why Joseph Smith would have been in another city.

Some Mormon writers have suggested that Joseph Smith might have been present at Conference meetings held in Vienna (now known as Phelps). Wesley P. Walters, however, has answered this argument in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Spring 1969, page 69.

Mormon writers are not only trying to move the location of the revival from Palmyra to Vienna, but they are also trying to change the date of the revival. In the past it was taught that the revival occurred in 1820. Joseph Smith stated that he was in his "fifteenth year" at the time of the excitement. (*History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 3) Also, that he had had his first vision "*early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty.*" The Mormon historian B. H. Roberts dated the revival in the "*spring of 1820*" (*Comprehensive History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 51). The Apostle John A. Widtsoe stated: "*Palmyra, a village in western New York State, near his home, was swept in the winter and spring of 1820 by a religious revival.*" (*Joseph Smith--Seeker After Truth*, page 1) Many other references could be cited, but these are enough to illustrate that the Mormon leaders have always taught that the revival occurred in 1820. That they are trying to revise this date is obvious from Richard Bushman's answer to Mr. Walters, for he speaks of the "*question of an 1819 revival*" (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, p. 83). In his book, *Joseph Smith--the Man and the Seer*, Hyrum L. Andrus claimed that the revival occurred in "*the spring of 1820*" (page 63). In his latest book, however, Andrus speaks of the revival as "*the revival of 1819-1820*" (*God, Man and the Universe*, 1968, p. 42), and on page 41 of the same book we find this statement: "*Joseph Smith evidently attended the Methodist revival meetings in the woods near Vienna, in the summer of 1819.*"

Although Dr. Andrus still maintains that the revival came to Palmyra, it is plain to see that he is trying to explain away the fact that the churches in Palmyra did not increase in membership as they would have if a revival had actually occurred:

"There were some features about the revival of 1819-1820 which caused it to end on a negative note, particularly in the area of Manchester and Palmyra.... Joseph Smith wrote that 'great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people.' This does not necessarily mean that they became members of the existing churches.... The revival of 1819-1820 was an abortive affair that failed to produce many positive results for the existing churches. It was an emotional upsurge that ended on a negative note." (*God, Man, and the Universe*, pp. 42-43)

Wesley P. Walters makes this interesting observation in regard to this argument:

"A second approach maintains that the revival was at some distance from the area where the Smiths lived, that it caused considerable stir in their immediate neighborhood, but ended 'on a negative note.' It consequently left no visible traces either in the local or denominational papers of 1820 or in terms of substantial membership gains for the churches of the Palmyra and Manchester area.... The point of the Prophet's story is not that there were revivals occurring throughout the state that year--for this was true every year. His point was that 'an unusual excitement' was going on right there 'in the place where we lived.' Multitudes of his neighbors became 'converts' and 'united' with the various churches of his community, and it was this situation that led him to ask 'which I should join.' ...

"It is further suggested by those who approach the problem by this method that when Joseph spoke of great multitudes 'uniting with the different religious parties,' he did not necessarily mean that they joined the various churches, but rather that they split up into little

cliques which merely took sides in a general controversy. To put such construction on the word 'parties' is to fail to notice that the Prophet uses this very term to refer to the various denominations. In the 'war of words' among Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists, Joseph speaks of the denominations as 'endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others' and this leads him to ask, 'Who of all the parties are right?' Even members of his own family had been 'proselyted' to the Presbyterian faith, while 'converts' filed off to the different parties. That these converts actually joined the churches of Palmyra and vicinity is made clear when the Cowdery-Smith account states that 'large additions were made to the Methodists, Presbyterian and Baptist churches.' To suggest that these multitudes merely aligned themselves with various feuding groups and that consequently the revival was 'abortive' and ended 'on a negative note' is to completely miss one of the main points of Joseph's narrative. The entire thrust of his story is that right there where he lived multitudes were joining the various churches, but with so much conflict in their tenets he was at a loss which one to join himself. The year 1820, however, was not the period when any great multitudes were joining the churches of Palmyra and vicinity. It is not until the revival of 1824-25 that we find a situation that matches the conditions described in this official first vision story." (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Spring 1969, pp. 68-70)

In trying to explain the lack of evidence for a revival in Palmyra, Richard L. Bushman states: *"The second consideration is that admissions to membership do not necessarily measure the intensity of a revival.... There might be an unusual excitement about a religion and only a few people actually qualify for admission. High admissions are a good sign of a revival; absence of admissions does not necessarily mean no religious excitement.... The 'great multitudes' joining churches occurred in 'the whole district of country.' The excitement may have been an awakening or a prospect of a revival, not a shower of grace itself with the resulting increase in memberships and reports in the national religious press."* (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Spring 1969, page 88)

A Changing Story

Before Wesley P. Walters' work appeared, Mormon writers claimed to have a great deal of evidence to prove that the revival occurred in Palmyra in 1820. Preston Nibley, who later became Assistant Church Historian, claimed there were *"several accounts of the religious revival which took place at Palmyra in the spring of 1820."* (Joseph Smith the Prophet, Salt Lake City, 1944, page 21)

Preston Nibley offers three accounts to prove that there was a revival *"in Palmyra in the Spring of 1820."* One of the accounts is the one published by Joseph Smith in the *Times and Seasons*. Another is a statement by Joseph Smith's brother, William Smith. Preston Nibley quotes from an interview which a "Brother Briggs" had with William Smith:

"What caused Joseph to ask for guidance as to what church he ought to join?" asked Bro. Briggs. William answered as follows:

"Why there was a joint revival in the neighborhood between the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians and they had succeeded in stirring up quite a feeling, and after the meeting the question arose which church should have the converts. Rev. Stockton was the president of

the meeting and suggested that it was their meeting and under their care and they ought to join the Presbyterians, but as father did not like Rev. Stockton very well, our folks hesitated..." (Joseph Smith the Prophet, pp. 23-24)

If Preston Nibley had quoted the paragraph just before it would have overthrown his argument that the revival occurred in the spring of 1820. This paragraph, which was published in the *Deseret News*, Jan. 20, 1894, read as follows: "*'Hyrum, Samuel, Katharine and mother were members of the Presbyterian church. My father would not join. He did not like it because a Rev. Stockton had preached my brother's funeral sermon and intimated very strongly that he had gone to hell, for Alvin was not a church member, but he was a good boy and my father did not like it.'*"

Notice that William Smith tells that his father would not join the Presbyterian church because Reverend Stockton had intimated that Alvin "*had gone to hell.*" Now, since Alvin did not die until 1823, this would mean that the revival could not have started before 1823. Thus we see that when the statement is taken in context it proves that the revival did *not* occur in the spring of 1820.

President Nibley's only other evidence for a revival in 1820 is taken from a book written by Willard Bean, a Mormon writer. Mr. Nibley states:

"I shall reproduce first the account as related in 'The Beginning of Mormonism.'
"In the year 1819 a sort of religious awakening started in Massachusetts, gradually moving down the eastern seaboard, gathering momentum as it spread,... After reaching New York it spread to the rural districts upstate, reaching Palmyra and vicinity in the Spring of 1820. It appears that Rev. Jesse Townsend, a young Yale graduate, but recently set apart for the ministry and assigned to the pastorship of the new Presbyterian Church of Palmyra, was the first in these parts to catch the religious fervor, and accordingly started a revival. He was soon joined by the Presbyterian minister of East Palmyra, closely followed by the Baptist minister and two Methodist ministers of Palmyra.

"The revival started the latter part of April, before the rural people could get onto their land to begin spring plowing, which gave the farmers a chance to attend the meetings. Even business and professional men neglected their work and all but shut up shop. By the first of May, the revival was well under way with scores of people confessing religion, and each new convert becoming a self-appointed missionary to solicit friend and neighbor. The prevailing question among people of the neighborhood was, 'What shall I do to be saved?'

"... The revival had been even more successful than the ministers had anticipated. I quote from the 'Religious Advocate' of Rochester: 'More than 200 souls have become hopeful subjects of divine grace in Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Lyons and Ontario since the late revival commenced. This is a powerful work. It is among young as well as old people. Many are ready to exclaim--'What hath God wrought?' It is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes. The cry is yet from many, 'Come over and help us.... Such intelligence must be pleasing to every child of God who rightly estimates the value of immortal souls, and wishes well to the cause of Zion.'

"A week later (from the same publication)... 'It may be added that in Palmyra and Macedon, including Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches, more than 400 have already confessed that the Lord is good. The work is still progressing. In neighboring towns,

the number is great and still increasing. Glory be to God on high; and on earth peace and good will to all men.'

"During the second week in May the revival began to show signs of breaking up, and the many converts were solicited by the different preachers to join their respective churches."
(*Joseph Smith the Prophet*, by Preston Nibley, pages 21-22)

Upon first examination it would appear that this is definite proof that there was a revival in Palmyra and Manchester in 1820. A more careful examination, however, reveals that these references from the *Religious Advocate* do not refer to a revival in 1820, but rather to the one in 1825!

Wesley P. Walters shows that the quotation from the *Religious Advocate* of Rochester could not have appeared in that publication in 1820 because "***the Religious Advocate did not begin publication at Rochester until about 1825,...***" (*Dialogue*, Spring 1969, page 67) In footnote 51 in the same article Mr. Walters states: "***The Religious Advocate began publication in 1822 at Saratoga Springs, N.Y., moving to Rochester about October 1824.***"

This, of course, means that the quotations from the *Religious Advocate* of Rochester could **NOT** have appeared before the 1824-25 Palmyra revival. That they did not appear until 1825 is verified by the fact that both references were printed in the *Wayne Sentinel* under the date of March 2, 1825. In other words, these references have been used to support the date of 1820 for a revival, when in reality they have to do with a revival that took place in 1825. Below is a comparison which proves that the references are the same ones which appeared in the *Wayne Sentinel* in 1825.

Mormon writers were apparently so hard pressed to prove there was a revival in Palmyra in 1820 that they used material concerning the 1825 revival to try to prove there was a revival in 1820. In the quotation Preston Nibley takes from Willard Bean's book it talks of "*Jessee Townsend, a young Yale graduate*," starting the revival. Wesley P. Walters makes these comments concerning Bean's account: "*Bean, a Mormon...has put together an account that Mormon writers are still appealing to. According to Mr. Bean, a revival did break out in 'the spring of 1820,' sparked under the ministry of Reverend Jesse Townsend, whom he describes as 'a young Yale graduate, but recently set apart for the ministry.'*" *The revival started the latter part of April' and by the first of May was well under way. Bean adds an account from 'the Religious Advocate of Rochester' to show how extensive the awakening was. All this sounds very authentic until one begins to examine the story more closely. Jesse Townsend was not a 'young Yale graduate' in 1820, since he was fifty-four years old and thirty years had expired since his graduation from Yale. He was not 'recently set apart for the ministry' for he had been ordained in 1792. Instead of sparking a revival in Palmyra in 'the spring of 1820,' he was in reality on his way west, arriving near Hillsboro, Illinois, May 25, 1820. Furthermore, the Religious Advocate did not begin publication at Rochester until about 1825, and the account which Mr. Bean quotes from that journal is the same one which appeared in the Palmyra newspaper in March of 1825 in reference to the 1824-25 revival. We do not believe that this avenue of approach will yield any fruitful results.*" (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Spring 1969, pp. 67-68)

PURPORTED 1820 REFERENCES	WAYNE SENTINEL - 1825
<p>"I quote from the '<u>Religious Advocate</u>' of Rochester: '<u>More than 200 souls have become hopeful subjects of divine grace in Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Lyons and Ontario since the late revival commenced. This is a powerful work. It is among young as well as old people. Many are ready to exclaim— 'What hath God wrought?' It is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes. The cry is yet from many 'Come over and help us.... Such intelligence must be pleasing to every child of God who rightly estimates the value of immortal souls, and wishes well to the cause of Zion.'</u>" (Joseph Smith the Prophet, pp. 21-22)</p>	<p>"The Revival.—The <u>Religious Advocate</u> published at Rochester, contains the following account as just received from Ontario:—'<u>More than two hundred souls have become the hopeful subjects of divine grace in Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Phelps, Lyons, and Ontario, since the late revival commenced.— This is a powerful work; it is among old and young, but mostly among young people. Many are ready to exclaim, 'what hath God wrought!' It is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.</u>' The cry is yet from various parts, '<u>come over and help us.</u>' There are large and attentive congregations in every part, who hear as for their lives. Such intelligence must be pleasing to every child of God, who rightly estimate the value of immortal souls, and wishes well to the cause of Zion!" (Wayne Sentinel, March 2, 1825)</p>
<p>"A week later (from the same publication)... '<u>It may be added that in Palmyra and Macedon, including Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches, more than 400 have already confessed that the Lord is good. The work is still progressing. In neighboring towns, the number is great and still increasing. Glory be to God on high; and on earth peace and good will to all men!</u>" (Joseph Smith the Prophet, p. 22)</p>	<p>"Religious.—An article in the <u>Religious Advocate</u> gives the pleasing fact that a <u>revival of religion had taken place in the towns of Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Phelps, Lyons and Ontario, and that more 200 souls had become hopeful subjects of Divine Grace &c. It may be added, that in Palmyra and Macedon, including Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist Churches, more than 400 have already testified that the Lord is good. The work is still progressing. In the neighboring towns, the number is great and fast increasing. Glory be to God on high; and on earth, peace and good will to all men.</u>" (Wayne Sentinel, March 2, 1825)</p>

Bean adds an account from 'the Religious Advocate of Rochester' to show how extensive the awakening was. All this sounds very authentic until one begins to examine the story more closely. Jesse Townsend was not a 'young Yale graduate' in 1820, since he was fifty-four years old and thirty years had expired since his graduation from Yale. He was not 'recently set apart for the ministry' for he had been ordained in 1792. Instead of sparking a revival in Palmyra in 'the spring of 1820,' he was in reality on his way west, arriving near Hillsboro, Illinois, May 25, 1820. Furthermore, the Religious Advocate did not begin publication at Rochester until about 1825, and the account which Mr. Bean quotes from that journal is the same one which appeared in the Palmyra newspaper in March of 1825 in reference to the 1824-25 revival. We do not believe that this avenue of approach will yield any fruitful results." (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Spring 1969, pp. 67-68)

The Mormon Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley, who recently became a member of the First Presidency, wrote a book entitled Truth Restored. This book, which was reprinted by the Church in 1969, has a beautiful representation of Joseph Smith's First Vision on the cover.

Unfortunately, however, the references which were written concerning the 1824-25 revival were still used as though they applied to a revival in 1820: ***"In 1820 it reached western New York. The ministers of the various denominations united in their efforts, and many conversions were made among the scattered settlers. One week a Rochester paper noted: 'More than two hundred souls have become hopeful subjects of divine grace in Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Lyons, and Ontario since the later revival commenced.' The week following it was able to report 'that in Palmyra and Macedon...more than four hundred souls have already confessed that the Lord is good.'" (Truth Restored, Salt Lake City, 1969, page 2)***

In the 1972 edition of *Mormonism--Shadow or Reality?* we commented: ***"It will be interesting to see whether the Mormon leaders will continue to use these references now that it is obvious that their own research team has been unable to verify them."*** An examination of the most recent printing of *Truth Restored* shows that the Mormon leader Gordon B. Hinckley has stubbornly refused to face the facts. In 1979 the Church issued a revised edition of his book which still contains these discredited references about the First Vision. If the references Hinckley uses had really been written concerning a revival in 1820 they would have furnished the strongest type of evidence possible. They would, in fact, have proved that a revival occurred in Palmyra in 1820. As it is, however, we can show that they appeared in the *Wayne Sentinel* on March 2, 1825, and had absolutely nothing to do with a revival in 1820.

It would appear, then, that all evidence for a revival in Palmyra and vicinity has fallen, and that Wesley P. Walters' work has been vindicated. All that the Mormon research team have been able to do is to confirm his original findings. Mr. Walters makes this interesting observation: ***"Joseph made his great mistake when he tried to alter the course of history by moving a whole revival back some 4 years. This defect places his entire movement upon a crumbling foundation. For our part we agree that 'life is too short to follow something false, when we can follow what is true' (Richard Evans). We urge all to find in Christ alone 'the way, the truth and the life.'" (The Case Against Mormonism, Vol. 1, pp. 114-115)***

In our pamphlet *The First Vision Examined* we presented additional information showing that the Mormon research team failed in their effort to establish a revival in Palmyra in 1820. The reader should also see the articles on the First Vision by Wesley P. Walters and Richard L. Bushman which were published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Spring 1969, pp. 59-100

Joseph A Methodist?

Wesley P. Walters has not only shown that there was no revival in 1820, but he has produced evidence to show that neither Joseph nor his family took the message of the First Vision seriously. The reader will remember that in the vision Joseph Smith was told to join none of the churches:

"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;..." (Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith, verses 19-20)

Now, if Joseph Smith had really received such a message, we would expect to find that he had nothing to do with other churches after his First Vision. Furthermore, if his family believed his story we would expect to find that they did not support other churches after 1820.

Joseph Smith claims that just before he had his First Vision, his ***"father's family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith, and four of them joined that church, namely, my mother, Lucy; my brothers Hyrum and Samuel Harrison; and my sister Sophronia."*** (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith, verse 7)

Joseph Smith would have us believe that this happened in 1820, but since the revival did not occur until 1824-25 we must assume that they joined the church at that time. Stanley B. Kimball states that the volume of Presbyterian records which ***"would probably give the exact date the Smiths joined, has been missing since at least 1932."*** (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Winter 1970, p. 121)

Nevertheless, Vol. 2 of the "Session Records" for the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra has been located, and this volume shows that the Smiths were still involved with the Presbyterian Church in 1828. Fawn M. Brodie made this interesting observation in the Supplement to the new edition of her book: ***"Of greater significance is the Reverend Mr. Walters's recent discovery, in the records of the Palmyra Presbyterian Church for 1830, that Joseph Smith's mother, and his brothers Hyrum and Samuel, were active members of this church for at least eight years after 1820, the official date of the first vision. The Palmyra records point out that these three members of the Smith family began to neglect 'public worship and the sacrament of the Lord's supper' about September 1828. The 1830 proceedings of this church for March 3, 10, and 29 make it clear that they were accused of this neglect and abandonment 'for the last eighteen months,' and that finally, at the end of March 1830, they were suspended as members of the Presbyterian Church.***

"This raises a question that has never been seriously studied: whether or not Joseph Smith's own family took his religious mission seriously before his alleged discovery or unearthing of the golden plates." (*No Man Knows My History*, 1971, pages 410-411)

The Mormon writer Stanley B. Kimball seems willing to admit that the Smiths were involved with the Presbyterians many years after the First Vision: ***"...Lucy, Hiram, and Samuel Harrison were indeed members of the Palmyra congregation, that sometime during the translation of the Book of Mormon they had become inactive and that by early March of 1830 they were being charged with 'Neglect of public worship and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper....'"*** (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Winter 1970, page 122)

Milton V. Backman, Jr. and James B. Allen state that the Smith family ***"had not actively involved themselves in the affairs of the Presbyterian church since September, 1828, which was just a year after Joseph had received the plates..."*** (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Summer 1970, page 483)

While it is true that the Smiths became inactive in the Presbyterian Church in 1828, we wonder why they would have remained in it so long after Joseph Smith was supposed to have received his First Vision.

As if this is not bad enough, Wesley P. Walters presents evidence that in 1828 Joseph Smith himself took steps towards becoming a member of the Methodist Church. The Utah Christian Tract Society has prepared an article from material furnished by Wesley P. Walters (see the newsletter for July-August, 1971). In this article we find the following:

"Joseph Smith's 1838 account which is recorded in the pamphlet of 'his own story' claims that in 1820 he had seen 'two glorious personages' identified as the Father and the Son, and that he was informed that all the creeds of all the 'sects,' or various denominations, 'were an abomination' and he was twice forbidden to join any of them....

"Perhaps the death of his first-born son on June 15, 1828 induced him to seek membership in the Methodist Church to which his wife belonged since she was seven years old. The 'prophet' Joseph's role as a Methodist member did not last very long, however, only three days--according to statements made by his wife's cousins, Joseph and Hiel Lewis. In their local newspaper at Amboy, Illinois, they told of their earlier years with Joseph Smith in Pennsylvania and of his uniting with the Methodist class:

"He presented himself in a very serious and humble manner, and the minister, not suspecting evil, put his name on the class book, in the absence of some of the official members.' (THE AMBOY JOURNAL, April 30, 1879, page 1.).

"When Joseph Lewis, who was 21 at the time (about a year and a half younger than Smith), learned of this act, he felt that Joseph's manner of life rendered him unfit to be a member and told him either to 'publicly ask to have his name stricken from the class book, or stand a disciplinary investigation.' Mr. Lewis gave further details about the incident a month after the first article appeared in the Amboy paper, and he wrote:

"I, with Joshua McKune, a local preacher at the time, I think in June, 1828, heard on Saturday, that Joe Smith had joined the church on Wednesday afternoon, (as it was customary in those days to have circuit preaching at my father's house on week-day). We thought it was a disgrace to the church to have a practicing necromancer, a dealer in enchantments and bleeding ghosts, in it. So on Sunday we went to father's, the place of meeting that day, and got there in season to see Smith and talked to him some time in father's shop before the meeting. Told him that his occupation, habits, and moral character were at variance with the discipline, that his name would be a disgrace to the church, that there should have been recantation, confession and at least promised reformation--That he could that day publicly ask that his name be stricken from the class book, or stand investigation. He chose the former, and did that very day make request that his name be taken off the class book.' (THE AMBOY JOURNAL, June 11, 1879, pg. 1).

"Mr. Lewis' more detailed statement was called forth because the original statement he and his brother had made had been challenged by a local Mormon elder from the Reorganized Church. This elder, Mr. Edwin Cadwell, was a neighbor of Mr. Michael Morse, the brother-in-law of Joseph Smith. Mr. Cadwell stated that Mr. Morse told him that 'Smith's name remained on the class book...for about six months, when it was simply 'dropped' as Smith did not seek to become a full member.' (THE AMBOY JOURNAL, May 21, 1879. pg. 1).

"Mr. Morse had been the 'class leader' at that time and had been the one who had taken Smith's name for recording in the class book. (THE AMBOY JOURNAL, July 2, 1879, pg. 1). To the statement of Mr. Morse, Joseph Lewis replied that, 'If said Morse was a leader at that time, and Smith's name remained on the class book six months, the class leader carelessly or wickedly neglected his duty.' (THE AMBOY JOURNAL, June 11, 1879, pg. 1).

"Like so many of the early Methodist records, the early class books of Harmony (now Lanesboro) Church are lost, so we will never know for certain whether Joseph Smith remained a member for only three days or for six months. However, there was never any

dispute that he had become a member, and by this one act he completely undercut the story he later put forth claiming that God in a special vision had instructed him not to join any of the existing churches,..."

From the evidence presented it would appear that Joseph Smith did not complete all the steps to become "a full member" of the Methodist Church, but he had certainly started the process when he joined the Methodist class in Pennsylvania. Milton V. Backman, Jr., gives some information on Methodist classes in his book *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, p. 70: "*At the time of the First Vision these classes, which usually consisted of less than thirty members, met in homes, barns, schools, and groves.*"

It is interesting to note that Joseph Smith stated that before his First Vision his "*mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them;...*" (*History of the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 3) There is some evidence that Joseph Smith joined a Methodist class sometime before he moved to Pennsylvania. Pomeroy Tucker stated: "*At one time he joined the probationary class of the Methodist Church in Palmyra, and made some active demonstrations of engagedness, though his assumed convictions were insufficiently grounded or abiding to carry him along to the saving point of conversion, and he soon withdrew from the class.*" (*Origin of Mormonism*, pp. 17-18, as quoted in *BYU Studies*, Spring 1969, page 384)

The Mormon writer Hyrum L. Andrus is willing to admit that "*It is possible that Joseph Smith was affiliated with this organization for a time and served on the local level in the area of Palmyra and Manchester. Turner's statement that Joseph Smith became a 'passable exhorter' for Methodism points to this possibility. The History of Wayne County also states: 'Revivals occurred, and Smith joined a class of probationers in the Methodist church of Palmyra, but soon withdrew.'*" (*God, Man, and the Universe*, pp. 41-42) Although no dates are given as to when Joseph Smith joined the Methodist class in Palmyra, Andrus maintains that Joseph Smith's "*affiliation with the Methodist cause occurred shortly before the First Vision.*" (*Ibid.*, p. 41)

However this may be, Joseph Smith's affiliation with the Methodists in Pennsylvania occurred eight years after he was supposed to have received his First Vision and at the very time he was translating the Book of Mormon! We must agree that "*by this one act he completely undercut the story he later put forth claiming that God in a special vision had instructed him not to join any of the existing churches,..."*

The newsletter published by the Utah Christian Tract Society, July-August, 1971, also points out that in "*retelling*" the story of the First Vision "*to Alexander Neibaur on May 24, 1844, Joseph specifically singled out the Methodist Church as being unworthy of his membership.*" Neibaur's journal reads: "*...Mr. Smith then asked must I join the Methodist Church--No--they are not my People, They have gone astray...*" (*Improvement Era*, April 1970, p. 12, n. 12)

It is interesting to note that although Joseph Smith took steps towards becoming a Methodist in 1828, by 1835 he was condemning a member of the Church who "*confessed that he had been in temptation, and fallen into error, so much as to join the Methodists;...*" Joseph Smith made this comment concerning this matter:

"I spoke of the impropriety of turning away from the truth, and going after a people so

destitute of the spirit of righteousness as the Methodists." (*History of the Church*, Vol. 2, page 319)

For more information against the authenticity of the First Vision see our *Case*, Vol. 1, pages 88-130.

Joseph Changed His Mind

Earlier in this chapter we wrote: "*It would appear, then, that Joseph Smith did not believe that God the Father had a body at the time he wrote his first account of the vision in the 'wilderness.'* Towards the end of his life, however, Joseph Smith changed his mind and decided that God was just an exalted man.... Since Joseph Smith had changed his mind concerning the Godhead, he evidently decided to change his story concerning the First Vision." Just after we published the 1972 edition of this book, Marvin S. Hill, of the Department of History at Brigham Young University, wrote an article in which he admitted that Joseph Smith may have changed his mind about the Godhead. Hill, however, was still unwilling to concede that this shows fraud on Joseph Smith's part:

"Brodie's assumption of a deceitful prophet was supported by her discovery that early Mormons did not relate the first vision story consistently, and, as she maintained in 1945, the earliest version by the prophet was not written until 1838. She has had to revise the argument somewhat since it is now known that the earliest account extant was written in 1832. But there are, undeniably, differences in the several accounts, not all of them minor from the standpoint of Mormon theology.... To focus upon the discrepancies touching the personages of the Godhead in the first vision story, whether one or two personages, is to concentrate on a theological question and to miss its historical significance.... Brodie and others have been preoccupied with the first vision's theological implications which were the product of Joseph Smith's and the Mormon people's later thinkings. This has caused them to miss the important implications as to the social and religious origins of Mormonism which may be the essential point. If over the years Joseph's conception of the Godhead changed, this is not evidence of fraud any more than the adaptation of other aspects of his theology in later years proves to be." (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Winter 1972, pages 78-79)

While we feel that Marvin Hill has still not faced the real implications of this matter, it is refreshing to see a noted Mormon writer admit that "Joseph's conception of the Godhead" might have changed.

Clandestine's Errors

The anonymous Mormon historian whom we refer to as "[Dr. Clandestine](#)" has made a pathetic attempt to save Joseph Smith's credibility with regard to the First Vision. Clandestine apparently realizes the serious nature of the discrepancies in Joseph Smith's accounts of the First Vision. Unlike Mormon apologists Dr. Hugh Nibley and Apostle John A. Widtsoe, Dr. Clandestine seems willing to concede that there are "*varying accounts by Joseph Smith of that experience*," and instead of giving any convincing defense for the claim that Joseph Smith saw

both God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ in 1820, he tries to minimize the importance of the vision:

"A crucial question that is the starting point for interpreting the First Vision is: What significance did this experience (as related in any and all descriptions of it by Joseph Smith) have for Mormonism as a movement and the claim of the LDS Church to be a prophet-led restoration of the ancient Church of Christ?... The First Vision experience of Joseph Smith, Jr. had no significance for his later claims about the Book of Mormon, his prophetic calling, or the concept of a divinely restored priesthood and church....it is a personal experience to be connected with Mormonism only because it had occurred to the translator of the Book of Mormon...

"The accounts of the First Vision consistently describe an experience that was intensely personal for Joseph Smith, rather than a revelation of significance for his followers.... Mormon historians have made the whole issue vulnerable to attack by putting too much emphasis on the spring of 1820 as the date of the First Vision. The obvious uncertainty of the adult Joseph Smith's memory and the ambiguity of his descriptions of age provide a possible time-frame for the First Vision that extends from the spring of 1818 prior to his fourteenth birthday ('I was about 14 years old') to the spring of 1822 ('In the 16th year of my age')....

"I acknowledge freely the sketchy character of Joseph Smith's accounts of his early religious experiences and that some Mormon writers have been wrong or inadequate in their use of the sources of history." (*Jerald and Sandra Tanner's Distorted View of Mormonism*, pages 29-31, 34, 39)

Dr. Clandestine's whole treatment of the First Vision appears to be a desperate attempt to salvage at least something out of a mass of contradictory material. His attempt to play down the importance of the vision will probably not set well with orthodox Mormons. While a recent convert may fall for Dr. Clandestine's reasoning, those who have been in the Church for any length of time know that the First Vision has been proclaimed as the very foundation of the Church. Apostle Widtsoe said that "*The First Vision of 1820 is of first importance in the history of Joseph Smith. Upon its reality rest the truth and value of his subsequent work.*" (*Joseph Smith--Seeker After Truth*, p. 19) President David O. McKay plainly stated: "*The appearing of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith is the foundation of this church.*" (*Gospel Ideals*, p. 85) That Dr. Clandestine would attempt to minimize the importance of the First Vision is almost beyond belief. We feel that this amounts to a vindication of our work on this vision. In a letter dated February 26, 1980, G. Homer Durham, Managing Director of the Church Historical Department, had to admit that Dr. Clandestine had gone too far in his concessions on the First Vision:

"The appellation adopted by the anonymous author to whom you refer was self-adopted and carries no authority except the opinion of an anonymous writer. Many style themselves as 'Mormon historians' but they all speak on their own responsibility. The most responsible historians of the LDS faith known to me have views contrary to the anonymous statement that Mormon historians 'have put too much emphasis on the spring of 1820 as the date of the First Vision.' Rather, they support the statement of the Prophet noted above, as do I."

On pages 30-32 of his rebuttal, Dr. Clandestine goes so far as to try to separate the First

Vision from Joseph Smith's divine calling. In the face of all the evidence to the contrary, Dr. Clandestine says that *"the distinction between private experience and divine calling explains the contrasting publicity given to the Angel Moroni story and the story of the First Vision....the private experience of the First Vision that had nothing to do with the rise of Mormonism, except that it (like the bone surgery incident Joseph Smith included in one of the manuscript histories of his early life) was one of a mass of autobiographical details that would be of interest to persons trying to understand the life of the man who brought forth the Book of Mormon and Mormonism itself. When Joseph Smith finally published an account of the First Vision, he appropriately titled it (in significant contrast to Cowdery's 1834 narrative): 'History of Joseph Smith.'" (Jerald and Sandra Tanner's Distorted View of Mormonism, pages 31-32)*

Dr. Clandestine would apparently have us believe that since Joseph Smith titled his account *"History of Joseph Smith,"* instead of *"History of the Church"* in the *Times and Seasons*, we do not have to believe that it had anything to do with the rise of Mormonism. If he had read the paragraph which appears just above the title, Dr. Clandestine could have never made such a grave error:

"In the last number I gave a brief history of the rise and progress of the Church. I now enter more particularly into that history, and extract from my journal.

JOSEPH SMITH."

(Times and Seasons, Vol. 3, page 726)

If Dr. Clandestine had turned to the April 15, 1842 issue of the *Times and Seasons*, page 753, he would have discovered the same title (*"History of Joseph Smith"*), yet he would have found the account of the Angel Nephi--later changed to Moroni--telling Joseph Smith about the "gold plates" from which he translated the Book of Mormon. The logical extension of Clandestine's reasoning would be that the story of the Book of Mormon has nothing to do with the Mormon Church.

Earlier in this chapter we presented information showing that Wesley P. Walters demonstrated that *"in 1820 there was no revival in any of the churches in Palmyra or its vicinity."* Dr. Clandestine seems to realize that it would be difficult to maintain there was a revival in 1820 in light of Walters' research. Therefore, he tries to fit Joseph Smith's story into the framework of a revival which occurred in 1817:

"The combined data from the 1838 and the 1832 accounts therefore establish the possibility that the religious revivals that impressed Joseph Smith had occurred as early as 1817-1818. Despite their insistence on the year 1820, the Tanners themselves present information that supports the above possibility: On page 65 they quote the 1887 book of M.T. Lamb that the revival occurred 'sixty or seventy years ago' (1817 to 1827), and on page 156 they quote Reverend Walter's verification that a revival did occur in Palmyra in 1817....the ambiguity of Joseph Smith's own dating does not allow the year 1820 to be seized upon as the only date for the revival, the vision, or both.... Many Mormon writers until recent years interpreted Joseph Smith's 1838 reference to the location of the religious excitement ('...in the place where we lived...in that region of country, indeed the whole district of Country seemed affected by it...') as meaning that there was a religious revival in Palmyra in 1820.

Reverend Walters has demonstrated that there was no revival in Palmyra in 1820, and therefore he and the Tanners claim that they have refuted the historicity of the First Vision, when all they have done is show that Mormon writers have misinterpreted the sketchy descriptions of the First Vision." (Jerald and Sandra Tanner's *Distorted View of Mormonism*, pp. 35-36)

Since Joseph Smith would have only been 11 years old at the time of the 1817 revival, we doubt that many people will take Dr. Clandestine's reconstruction seriously. Joseph Smith's 1838 account says that he was in his "***fifteenth year***" at the time of the "***great excitement***" (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith, verses 7-8). It is interesting to note that Clandestine admits that Joseph Smith's earliest account of the First Vision "***does not mention revivals or religious excitement beyond his own,...***" (page 35)

Mormon writers have always depended on the book by Joseph Smith's mother to prove that the First Vision actually occurred. Dr. Clandestine says that "***when Lucy Mack Smith came to the early visions of her son Joseph Smith, she (or her ghost writers, Howard and Marthy Coray) simply quoted from the published version in the Times and Seasons.***" (Jerald and Sandra Tanner's *Distorted View of Mormonism*, p. 20) The fact that Mrs. Smith's book used Joseph Smith's official account of the First Vision has convinced many Mormons that she knew no other story. Wesley P. Walters, however, has recently examined a "preliminary draft" of Lucy Smith's manuscript in the Church Historical Department. Instead of a vision of the Father and Son in the woods, Joseph Smith's mother reports that it was an angel who appeared to Joseph Smith in his bedroom and told him all churches were wrong. We feel that this manuscript destroys the value of Lucy Smith's book as evidence for the First Vision.

Wesley P. Walters has written an excellent response to Dr. Clandestine's work on the First Vision (see *Answering Dr. Clandestine: A Response to the Anonymous LDS Historian*, pages 53-55).

Professor Hill's Speech

At the 1981 Sunstone Theological Symposium, Marvin S. Hill, Professor of History at Brigham Young University, gave an extremely interesting speech concerning the First Vision. In this speech Professor Hill, who is one of the top Mormon scholars, tried to deal with some of the objections to the First Vision which appear in this book. While Hill feels that we are bias in our presentation, he concedes some major points--i.e., that the revival did not occur in 1820 and that Joseph Smith probably changed his view of the Godhead between 1832 and 1838:

"After weighing the arguments in this long and sustained controversy, where does one come down with respect to the Walters, Tanner, Bachman, Crawley debate?... It is my belief that both sides have overlooked some important points and that a plausible argument can be made for the basic church chronology despite some contradictions in some sources, provided that concessions be made with respect to some inaccuracies in the 1838 account. It seems to me that everybody has approached the issue from the wrong end, by taking as the point of departure the 1838 official version when the account that they should be looking at is that of 1832. Merely on the face of it, the 1832 version stands a better chance to be accurate and unembellished than the 1838 account which was intended as a public statement streamlined

for publication. When Joseph dictated his 1838 version, if he did dictate it, he was aware of what had been previously published by Oliver Cowdery and aware of his stature as a prophet of a new and important religious movement. It would be natural for him to smooth out the story to make it more logical and compelling than perhaps it seemed in 1820. But let me react first to the Walters - Bachman war of words. It seems to me that Walters has scored some important points, although not nearly as many as he professes. I am inclined to agree with him that the turmoil that Joseph describes that led to some family members joining the Presbyterians and that led to much sectarian bitterness, does not fit well into the 1820 context detailed by Bachman. For one thing, it does not seem likely that there would have been so much sectarian strife in 1820 and then have a joint revival where all was harmony in 1824. In addition, as Walters notes, Lucy Mack Smith says the revival where she became interested in a particular sect, came after Alvin's death, thus almost certainly in 1824.... She would not be likely to make up such a personal reaction of her own or the family's, nor mistake the time when it happened. I am persuaded that it was 1824 when Lucy joined the Presbyterians, and that, of course, is a critical point for dating the revival.... Larry Porter's argument that Lane passed through in July 1820 and that everything occurred at that time, does not fit what Joseph said, for he indicated that...he did attend the revival meetings as often as occasion would permit. The revival Joseph is describing was a protracted one, covering several days. It would take some time to generate the kind of excitement that Joseph recalled; a one night stand won't do. Walters maintains that an 1824 revival destroys the credibility of Joseph Smith's whole story, since the revival occurred after Moroni's visit. Here Walters appears more the anti-Mormon missionary than the objective scholar. An 1824 revival creates problems for the 1838 account, but not that of 1832. Walters overlooks the fact that Joseph said nothing in his 1832 account about a revival prompting his prayer.... Not only does this account ignore the revival, so, too, does the 1835 account... Neither does Lucy Mack Smith mention a revival when she describes Joseph's first vision, where an angel told him that the churches are man-made and also told him about the plates. She indicates that this vision occurred during the third year after their move to Manchester, which would make it 1820,... The Walters/Tanner argument that Lucy's joining the Presbyterians, and Joseph's the Methodists, destroys Joseph's credibility, fails to consider that unlike 1838, the 1832 version says nothing about Joseph's being forbidden to join a church....there is no great inconsistency as Walters and Tanners assume, when Lucy Mack Smith joins the Presbyterians or Joseph tried to become a Methodist in 1828. Joseph was fairly convinced that all were wrong, but perhaps responded to the urgings of his wife, Emma, who had very close ties with the Methodists in Harmony, Pennsylvania.... At any rate, if Joseph Smith in 1838 read back into 1820 some of the details about a revival that actually occurred in 1824, there is no reason to conclude that he invented his religious experiences.... Giving priority to the 1832 account also makes it more understandable why Oliver Cowdery got his story tangled.... Another point deserves comment here: If initially Joseph said one personage came to him in 1820, it thus became easier for Oliver Cowdery to confuse this visit with the coming of Moroni than it would have been a few years later when Joseph taught emphatically that there were three separate personages in the Godhead. The Tanners make much of the argument that Joseph Smith changed his view of the Godhead. There is a good deal of evidence that his understanding grew on many points of theology; his view of man and his potential; his view of salvation, of what it consists and how it is obtained. If, as the Tanners

argue, Joseph grew in his understanding in the nature of the Godhood, this does not provide evidence of his disingenuousness. I do not agree with the Tanners that the 1835 narrative is no evidence that Joseph believed in two separate personages by that time. It is true, as the Tanners note, that the two personages are not specifically named, and it seems unlikely that Joseph would have distinguished between the two personages and the many angels he said he saw, unless he thought that the two personages were something different. The 1835 version with its two personages, stands at odds with the statement in Lectures on Faith that God is a spirit. This is a conflict that nobody has really reconciled or explained. It seems to me that if the Latter-day Saints can accept the idea that Joseph gained his full understanding of the nature of God only after a period of time, not immediately in 1820, then most of the difficulties with chronology can be resolved."

The reader will notice that in this speech Marvin Hill wants the Church to accept Joseph Smith's 1832 version of the First Vision as more accurate than the 1838 version. In a response to Professor Hill's paper, James B. Allen commented: *"...in asking Mormons to accept the primacy of the 1832 account over the official version written in 1838 he may be unrealistic with respect to how far the church can go."*

Since the 1838 version became scripture when it was canonized in the *Pearl of Great Price*, the Mormon leaders would find it very difficult to say that the account mentioning only one personage is more accurate. Apostle Boyd K. Packer made this very clear when he denounced the liberal Mormon historians:

"There are qualifications to teach or to write the history of this church. If one is lacking in any one of these qualifications, he cannot properly teach the history of the Church....

"I will state these qualifications in the form of questions so that you can assess your own qualifications.

"Do you believe that God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ personally appeared to the boy prophet, Joseph Smith, Jr., in the year 1820?

"Do you have personal witness that the Father and the Son appeared in all their glory and stood above that young man and instructed him according to the testimony that he gave to the world in his published history?" (Brigham Young University Studies, Summer 1981, pages 272-273)

Although it is very unlikely that the Church leaders will accept Professor Hill's ideas, his speech is certainly a step in right direction. We have been informed that it will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.

Other Links Relating to this Topic:



[Problems with the First Vision](#) from *Answering Dr. Clandestine: A Response to the Anonymous LDS Historian*, by Jerald and Sandra Tanner



["As Man Is, God Once Was...": The Mormon Doctrine of God-- Salt Lake City Messenger, November 1994:](#) In August 1997, *Time* magazine published an interview of Mormon prophet Gordon B. Hinckley. The article reported: *"On whether his church still holds that God the Father was once a man, he [Hinckley] sounded uncertain, 'I don't know that*

we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it... I understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don't know a lot about it, and I don't think others know a lot about it." (Time, August 4, 1997). This statement, combined with an earlier April interview published by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, was shocking to those who study Mormon history and theology. Why would the Mormon prophet downplay such an important LDS doctrine? To understand the profoundness of Hinckley's statements, read this edition of the *SLCM*, which takes an in-depth look at the Mormon concept of God and eternal life. Topics include: The existence of "trillions" of Gods--the "celestial" role of women-- polygamy--eternal sexual procreation, the Adam-God doctrine--God's previous existence as a mortal man--men and women becoming Gods and Goddesses-- and much more.



[Dunn In The Name of God](#)--*Salt Lake City Messenger*, June 1991. Documents how General Authority Paul H. Dunn made up the popular World War II and Baseball stories that he used for decades to convert people to Mormonism and help strengthen the testimonies of the faithful. ***Includes revealing information on the evolution of Joseph Smith's "First Vision" story, and how it shows a similar style to that used by Dunn.*** This article also demonstrates that this was not the first time a modern LDS leader has been caught distorting and stretching truth, in the name of "faith promotion."



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