

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

New Light on Mormon Origins from Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival

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Since the year 1838 when Joseph Smith, Jr. set down the official account of his first vision, the story has continued to grow in importance in the eyes of Mormon leaders until it has come to be looked upon as the very foundation of their church and the greatest event in the world's history since the resurrection of the Son of God.¹

The first vision story states that Joseph Smith in the year 1820, when he was but a lad of 14, was greatly stirred by a religious revival that broke out in the vicinity of Palmyra, N.Y. Uncertain as to which church he should join as a result of this excitement, Joseph retired to a near-by grove where in answer to his prayer "two glorious personages," identified as the Father and the Son, appeared to him, informing him that all the religious denominations were wrong. He was told to await further enlightenment which came 3 years later in a second vision on September 21, 1823 when an angelic visitor to his bedroom informed him of the existence of the golden plates of the *Book of Mormon*.²

This account of Joseph's first vision has recently been given more careful study because of a number of difficulties that have been uncovered: the earliest Mormon and anti-Mormon writers know nothing of such a vision; the text of the present printed version has been altered at several points; the early leaders in Utah repeatedly speak only of

¹ The appearing of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith is the foundation of this church." David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals*, 1953, 85; "The greatest event that has ever occurred in the world since the resurrection of the Son of God...was the coming of the Father and of the Son to that boy Joseph Smith." Joseph F. Smith, quoted in Preston Nibley, *Joseph Smith the Prophet*, 1944, 28. "This vision was the most important event that had taken place in all world history from the day of Christ's ministry to the glorious hour when it occurred." Bruce McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 1958, 264; "Thus the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the story of Joseph Smith must stand or fall on the authenticity of the First Vision and the appearance of the Angel Moroni." Paul R. Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions," B.Y.U. thesis, May 1965, 75.

² *Times and Seasons* (Mar. 15, Apr. 1 & 15, 1842) iii, 726–728, 748f, 753f. Reprinted: Millennial Star (beginning June 1842) iii, 21ff; also in xiv supplement, and in PGP (i.e. *The Pearl of Great Price*), Liverpool 1851, 36ff. Reprinted with textual alterations in Joseph Smith, *History of the Church* (ed. B. H. Roberts) i, 1ff; and in present editions of PGP entitled "Joseph Smith 2" (hereafter J. S. 2) where it is divided into verses. Cf. Joseph Smith's shorter published accounts of his first vision in *Times and Seasons* (Mar. 1, 1842) iii, 706f, and in I. Rupp, *An Original History of the Religious Denominations*, 1844, 404f.

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angels and not of the Father and Son visiting Smith at age 14.³ These and other conflicts have forced LDS scholars to write in defense of their Prophet's first vision story. In all their writing they have always *assumed* that Smith's account must be correct wherever it is at variance with the statements of other Mormon or anti-Mormon writings.

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.⁴ 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 really 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.

In 1834–35, nearly 4 years before Joseph began to write his first vision story, the Mormons published an account of the origin of their movement written by Joseph Smith's right-hand man, Oliver Cowdery. Cowdery claimed to have received his information from the Prophet himself, and Joseph in a separate column added some details about his birth and early life.⁵ Like Smith's later account, Cowdery begins the story with a description of the revival that broke out in the Palmyra area. However, Cowdery makes no reference to any vision occurring in 1820 and dates the revival in 1823.⁶ According to his version, Joseph at age 17 was stirred by a revival that broke out under the preaching of a Mr. Lane, a presiding elder of the Methodist Church. Retiring to his bedroom, he prayed for forgiveness and enlightenment on which church was right. In response, an angel appeared and informed him about the golden plates and assured him of his forgiveness.

³ On silence see: Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 1946, 23f; James B. Alien, "Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Autumn 1966) i, no. 3, 30ff. On alterations see: Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Changes in the Pearl of Great Price*, 1965, 36ff; LaMar Petersen, *Problems in Mormon Text*, 1957, 3f; and cf. typed transcription from the original manuscript in P. Cheesman, *Op. Cit.*, 80ff for differences from the *Times and Seasons* printing. On leaders' statements see: Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality*, 1964, 118ff; P. Cheesman, *Op. Cit.*, 31ff, and cf. Tanners' critique of this in their, *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision*, 1965, 8ff.

⁴ J. S. 2:5.

⁵ *Messenger and Advocate* (Oct., Nov., Dec. 1834, Feb. 1835) i, 13, 27f, 40ff, 78f.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 78. Cowdery presents Smith as wondering in 1823 "if a Supreme being did exist." This is rather strange if Smith had already had a vision of both the Father and the Son three years prior, in 1820.

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Except for Smith's moving the revival date back 3 years and adding the first vision story, both Smith and Cowdery record the same features as connected with the revival. In both accounts the revival began under Methodist preaching, Cowdery adding the name of Rev. Lane as the key figure in the Methodist awakening. Both state that soon Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians were sharing unitedly in the effort. Both claim that rivalry developed over who should have the converts. Both mention that large additions were made to the denominations involved. Both note that Smith's mother, sister and two brothers were led to join the Presbyterian church. In both accounts Joseph refrained from joining any church because he was confused as to which group was right. Finally, in both accounts he sought direct guidance from the Lord about this matter and was answered by the visit of a heavenly personage.

Mormon writers have for some time seen that both Smith and Cowdery had the same revival in view.⁷ This is quite clear not only from the many identical features in both accounts, but also from the fact that some of these features could not have taken place twice. For example, Smith's family could not have joined the Presbyterian Church in 1820 as a result of a revival in the area, and then joined the same church again in 1823 as a result of another revival. Again, Joseph Smith, Jr. could not have been confused about which group was right in 1820, been enlightened that all were wrong, and then have been confused on the same point again in 1823. It is also extremely unlikely that churches which had had a bitter outcome to their united efforts at a revival would have joined forces again just three years later only to end in another bitter contention.

Recognizing that both Smith and Cowdery are describing the same revival, Mormon historians have always credited Cowdery with the error in dating, but have been quite willing to accept the other details given by Cowdery and work them into the 1820 framework. We find LDS writers like historian B. H. Roberts and apostle John A. Widtsoe speaking of Rev. Lane as participating in this 1820 revival.⁸ An account by William Smith, Joseph's brother, adds the information that it was Rev. Lane who suggested the text from the book of James ("If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God"), to which Joseph refers, as a means for determining which group to join. William also, introduces the name of Rev. Stockton, the Presbyterian pastor, as presiding at the meetings.⁹ This information,

⁷ Hyrum L. Andrus, *Joseph Smith, the Man and the Seer*, 1965, 64ff; B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 1930, i, 52f; John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith, Seeker After Truth*, 1952, 16, 22fn.

⁸ Ibid. Mr. Widtsoe even adds (22fn) "Reverend Lane himself confirms the dates of the revival. It was 1820, not 1823." A letter (Dec. 7, 1966) from Mr. Lauritz Petersen, Assistant Librarian for the LDS Church, states that this "could not be verified." He adds, "I asked Mr. Widtsoe not to insert it in the book, but he did anyway."

⁹ *Deseret Evening News* (Jan. 20, 1894), xxvii, 11. From an interview of William Smith by E. C. Briggs as reported by J. W. Petersen to *Zion's Ensign* (Independence, Mo.). No copies of the *Ensign* printing appear to have survived.

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since William does not give it a specific date, is also placed back in the year 1820 and used to fill out Joseph Smith's account.¹⁰

However, this very account of William Smith, to which the LDS writers so willingly refer for details, indicates that the revival did not occur in 1820. William states that after the joint revival meeting had closed, Rev. Stockton insisted that the converts ought to join the Presbyterian Church since it was their meeting. However, William states, "as father did not like Rev. Stockton very well, our folks hesitated." William had already mentioned the reason for his father's dislike of Rev. Stockton. Mr. Stockton had preached the funeral sermon of William's brother, Alvin, and had strongly intimated that he had gone to hell because he had never been a member of any church. Since the tombstone on Alvin's grave gives the date of his death as November 19, 1823, it is clear that the revival must have followed that date.¹¹ William earlier gave the date of the revival as "1822 and 1823" and on another occasion he stated that Joseph Smith was "about eighteen years old at this time," which would make it about 1824.¹² In order to maintain the integrity of Joseph Smith's first vision story, however, Mormon writers have not only charged Cowdery's narrative with error, but also have dismissed the setting given by William Smith and arbitrarily transported both Lane and Stockton back to an 1820 date.

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 Palmyra 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.¹³ 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."¹⁴ The earliest contemporary reference to his ministering in the Palmyra area is in connection with a

¹⁰ B. Roberts, *Op. Cit.*, i, 52f; P. Nibley, *Op. Cit.*, 23f.

¹¹ Inez Davis, *The Story of the Church*, 1959, 39fn, and Hyrum, L. Andrus, "The Historical Joseph," *Dialogue* (winter 1966) i, no. 4, 123fn both report the headstone date as Nov. 19, 1823. The manuscript of Joseph's history gave the date of Alvin's death as Nov. 14, 1823 (see P. Cheesman, *Op. Cit.*, 80), but J. S. 2:4 now reads Nov. 19, 1824. The latter date is clearly an error for beginning Sept. 25, 1824 several issues of the *Wayne Sentinel* carried an announcement by Joseph Smith, Sr. that he had disinterred Alvin's body. The error may have crept in from the history written by Joseph Smith, Jr.'s mother since she gives the 1824 date. (see Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith*, 1853, 40, 87ff).

¹² William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism*, 1883, 6; *The Saints' Herald* (Oct. 4, 1884) xxxi, 643.

¹³ For installation date see: *Evangelical Recorder* (Mar. 7, 1818) i, 111, or *Religious Intelligencer* (May 2, 1818) ii, 800. On the terminal date see James H. Hotchkiss, *History of the Purchase and Settlement of Western New York and...of the Presbyterian Church*, 1848, 341 (and 207–210 for some of Stockton's activities during 1820).

¹⁴ *Palmyra Herald* (Nov. 6, 1822) ii, 3. Stockton remained a member of Cayuga Presbytery through 1823 (see: Geneva Synod, "Records," i, 211, 238, 258, 374) until he transferred to Geneva Presbytery Feb. 3, 1824 (see Geneva Presbytery, "Records," Vol. C, 252). The Presbytery and Synod records are in the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pa.

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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, 1824.¹⁵ It is in this latter year, 1824, that Rev. James Hotchkin, in cataloging the revivals that occurred in the churches of Geneva Presbytery, writes, under the heading of 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."¹⁶

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In the summer of 1819 Rev. Mr. Lane, whom Mormon writers have correctly identified as Rev. George Lane,¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ This post he held only until January of 1825 when ill health in his family forced him to leave the ministry for a while.¹⁹ 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.

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.²⁰ Lane's account gives us not only the year, 1824, but even the month and date. By the aid of this account, supplemented by numerous additional references which we shortly

¹⁵ For references see: *Wayne Sentinel* i, 3 of following issues—Dec. 3 & 31, 1823; Jan. 7, 14, 21, 28, 1824. For installation see issues of Feb. 18, 1824, 3 and Feb. 25, 1824, 2; also Geneva Presbytery, "Records" C, 253f, 274, and J. Hotchkin, *Op. Cit.*, 377.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 378.

¹⁷ J. Widtsoe, *Op. Cit.*, 16; I. Davis, *Op. Cit.*, 32fn.

¹⁸ For sketches of Lane's life see: *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1860) viii, 40f. William Sprague, *Annals of the American Methodist Pulpit*, 1861, vii, 810f; Hendrick B. Wright, *Historical Sketches of Plymouth*, 1873, 309, 346ff; Oscar Jewell Harvey, *The Harvey Book*, 1899, 128–134; George Peck, *Early Methodism*, 1860, 492–495, and scattered references 166f, 235–238, 309, 346, 428, 431, 441f, 447–449, 509, and for some of his activities in Pennsylvania in 1819–20 see 313–315, 337. For official confirmation of Lane's assigned field of labor see: *Minutes of the Annual Conferences, (1773–1828)* i, 337, 352, 373, 392, 418, 446. Lane's portrait appears in *The Methodist Magazine* April, 1826, and later in H. Wright, *Op. Cit.*, facing 346.

¹⁹ *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, viii, 41; *The Methodist Magazine* (April 1825), viii, 161.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 159f.

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thereafter uncovered, we are able to give nearly a month-by-month progress report on the spread of the revival through the community and surrounding area, and it was indeed an outstanding revival.

According to George Lands report, the Lord's gracious work in Palmyra "commenced in the spring, and progressed moderately until the time of the quarterly meeting, which was held on the 25th and 26th of September," 1824. A note in the local Palmyra newspaper showed the progress of the work shortly before Lane came upon the scene at the September conference.

A reformation is going on in this town to a great extent. The love of God has been shed abroad in the hearts of many, and the outpouring of the Spirit seems to have taken a strong hold. About twenty-five have recently obtained a hope in the Lord, and joined the Methodist Church, and many more are desirous of becoming members.²¹

As yet the revival had not touched the Baptist Church for at the annual meeting of the Ontario Baptist Association held September 22nd, the church reported only two, baptisms.²² The local Presbyterian church, likewise, remained untouched, for the report at the meeting of Presbytery held September 8th stated, "there has been no remarkable revival of religion within our bounds."²³

About the time of the Methodist Quarterly Conference, September 25th and 26th, the revival, Lane tells us, "appeared to break out afresh." About this time the revival fires must have spread through the Presbyterian Church, for the Synod which met October 5th acknowledged "with gratitude to the great head of the church four instances of special revival," among which was that "in the church at Palmyra of the Presbytery of Geneva."²⁴

November found a fresh encouragement given to the movement through the death of a 19 year old girl who had been converted just five weeks before, following the September Quarterly Conference. She died in great happiness and, as Lane stated, 'it greatly strengthened believers, especially young converts.'

By December the revival had spread into the area beyond the bounds of the town. When George Lane returned to the circuit for the Quarterly Conference at Ontario on December 11th and 12th, he states: "Here I found that the work, which had for some time been going on in Palmyra, had broken out from the village like a mighty flame, and was spreading

²¹ *Wayne Sentinel* (Sept. 15, 1824), i, 3.

²² *Minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association* (Convened at Gorham, the 22d and 23d of September, 1824), 4. These *Minutes* are in the American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, N. Y.

²³ Geneva Presbytery, "Records" (Sept. 8, 1824) D, 16.

²⁴ Geneva Synod, "Records" (Oct. 5, 1824) 1, 404f.

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in every direction.” By December 20th reports had reached Avon, some 30 miles distant, that “about 200...are sharers in this great and precious work.”²⁵ When Rev. Lane left the area December 22nd he noted that “there had, in the village and its vicinity, upwards of one hundred and fifty joined the society, besides a number that had joined other churches, and many that had joined no church.” The Baptists were among the “other churches” who shared in the harvest. Many hearts were so open that they needed only the invitation in order to respond. On Christmas day a Baptist preacher wrote to his friend that, “as I came on my journey this way, I tarried a few days, and baptized eight.”²⁶

By the end of January the effects of the revival upon the town had become apparent. The whole religious tone of the village was altered by its impact. In glowing terms the committee on the “State of Religion Within the bounds of Geneva Presbytery” was able to report:

In the congregation of Palmyra, the Lord has appeared in his glory to build up Zion. More than a hundred have been hopefully brought into the kingdom of the Redeemer...The fruits of holiness in this revival even now are conspicuous. The exertions for the promotion of divine knowledge are greater than formerly. Sabbath Schools, Bible classes, Missionary & Tract Societies are receiving unusual attention, & their salutary influence is apparent.²⁷

Meanwhile the revival fires continued to spread in the neighboring towns and men began to take stock of the number of converts. A Baptist pastor in Bristol, N.Y. reported to a friend under date of March 9, 1825 that in Palmyra “about three hundred have united with the Baptist, Presbyterian and Methodist churches; and to each in about equal numbers.”²⁸ The Palmyra newspaper for March 2, 1825 reprinted a report from the *Religious Advocate* of Rochester:

More than two hundred souls have become 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. ... The cry is yet from various parts, “come over and help us.” There are large and attentive congregations in every part, who hear as for their lives.

²⁵ *American Baptist Magazine* (Feb. 1825) v, 61f.

²⁶ *Latter-Day Luminary* (Feb. 1825) vi, 61.

²⁷ Geneva Presbytery, “Records” (Feb. 2, 1825) D, 27f.

²⁸ *American Baptist Magazine* (Apr. 1825) v, 124f; also in: *Boston Recorder* (Apr. 29, 1825) x, 70; *New-York Observer* (May 7, 1825) iii, 74; *Religious Intelligencer* (May 7, 1825) ix, 778.

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Since the *Religious Advocate* was a Presbyterian-related periodical, the figures probably reflect only the Presbyterian gains. A note in the same issue of the Palmyra paper adds this balancing information:

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.²⁹

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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 208.³⁰ Cowdery's claim of "large additions" and Joseph Smith's statement that "great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties" were certainly not overstatements.

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 Hotchkin's history records revivals for that church as occurring in the years 1817, 1824, 1829, etc., but nothing for the year 1820.³¹ The records of Presbytery and Synod give the same picture. Early in February 1820 Presbytery reported revivals at Geneva (summer 1819), and Junius 1st and Cayuga ("lately"), all a considerable distance from Palmyra, with "prospects of a revival" at Canandaigua and Phelps, 15 and 25 miles distant.³² While the "effects" of these revivals were reported in September 1820 as

²⁹ *Wayne Sentinel* (Mar. 2, 1825) ii, 3, 4.

³⁰ Geneva Presbytery, "Records" (Sept. 21, 1825) D, 40, and Geneva Synod, "Records" (Oct. 6, 1825) i, 431; *Minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association* (Sept. 28, 1825) 5; *Minutes of the Annual Conferences* i, 471 compared with previous year, 447.

³¹ J. Hotchkin, *Op. Cit.*, 378.

³² Geneva Presbytery, "Records" (Feb. 2, 1820) C, 37. At this meeting the Phelps congregation was reported as having received only 10 on examination and 6 by letter (p. 38). By sometime in 1821 the church had added 62 members (J. Hotchkin, *Op. Cit.*, 380). Canandaigua had to wait until a later date before their "prospects" materialized (*Id.*, 400). Since the 1820 meetings of Presbytery were held at Phelps (Feb. 2) and Canandaigua (Sept. 5), it is impossible that the Presbytery should have been ignorant of a great awakening at Palmyra had there been such. If any were to try to interpret Smith's revival story as referring to the Phelps or Canandaigua Presbyterian churches rather than the *Palmyra* church, it is ruled out not only by the distance and lateness of date, but also by the failure of being able to fit the Methodists and Baptists into the picture. Furthermore, such a shift in location would fail to explain how the names of Smith's mother, sister and 2 brothers all appear on the rolls of the *Palmyra* church (see, Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra, "Session Records" ii, 11ff; These records are still in possession of the Palmyra church, though volume 1 which would have recorded the exact date the Smiths united with the church has been missing since about 1930). To seek a closer location at Farmington or at Manchester is

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continuing, the remainder of that year and the next showed “no distinct mention of a revival,” “no special revival in any of our congregations,” “no general revivals of religion during the year.”³³ 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. An examination of the figures for the years preceding and following 1820 yields the same picture of no revival so far as the Baptist Church of the area is concerned.³⁴

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 1821.³⁵ 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. For some time prior to 1820 a sharp controversy had existed in the denomination, which in the Genesee Conference had resulted in a decline and a loss of spirituality” throughout the entire conference.³⁶ In addition, the Presiding Elder of the Ontario District reported July 1, 1824 that: “Four years since,

equally frustrating for the Quaker area of Farmington had never been a fruitful field for Presbyterian work, and an attempt to organize a church in the town of Manchester in 1823 had to be abandoned the next year (J. Hotchkiss, *Op. Cit.*, 378f; *New-York Religious Chronicle*, Oct. 2, 1824, ii, 126).

³³ Geneva Presbytery, “Records” (Sept. 5, 1820) C, 64; Geneva Synod, “Records” (Oct. 4, 1820) i, 221 (also printed in *Evangelical Recorder*, Nov. 18, 1820, ii, 151); Geneva Presbytery, “Records” (Feb. 8, 1821) C, 86; Geneva Synod, “Records” (Oct. 4, 1821) i, 253.

³⁴ The records of the Palmyra Baptist Church are preserved in the American Baptist Historical Society at Rochester. They are regarded as the records of the Macedon Baptist Church since part of the original congregation moved into the village of Palmyra about 1835 and the parent body then moved to Macedon. The records show a total of 11 members received between September 18, 1819 and September 23, 1820, 5 of these being by baptism (pages unnumbered, see p. headed “Added” for years 1817–1820). The printed *Minutes* of the Ontario Baptist Association for the year 1820 are lost, but from the *Minutes* for 1819 and 1821 the net gain or loss can be computed. These *Minutes* show receptions by baptism for 1819: Palmyra 5, Lyons 3, Canandaigua 0, Farmington 22; for 1821: Palmyra 1, Lyons 8, Canandaigua 0, Farmington 0 (see *Minutes* Sept. 22, 1819, 2ff; Sept. 26, 1821, 2ff).

³⁵ *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, i, show white and negro membership for the Ontario Circuit as follows: 1818–700, 3; 1819–674, 3; 1820–670, 1; 1821–621, 1 (see pp. 312, 330, 346, 366).

³⁶ Abner Chase, *Recollections of the Past*, 1846, 125f. Chase says that the period of “declension was followed by a glorious revival of the work of God among both preachers and people, which I design more particularly to notice hereafter.” However, after carrying his narrative to the year 1821, his book ends abruptly without fulfilling his promise. The revival he had reference to is most certainly the one dealt with in his earlier report (see below). Abner Chase served as Presiding Elder of the Ontario District from July 1820 until July 1824 when he was replaced by George Lane for one year.

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Unitarianism or Arianism, seemed to threaten the entire overthrow of the work of God in some Circuits on this District, and on some others, divisions and wild and ranting fanatics, caused the spirits of the faithful in a degree to sink.” Referring to the years just prior to 1823 he added that “for two or three years we saw no great awakenings.”³⁷ In the light of such depressing circumstances it is impossible that Palmyra could have experienced a glorious revival and yet the Presiding Elder of the area have failed to take note of it at all.

Another significant omission lies in the area of the religious press. The denominational magazines of that day were full of reports of revivals, some even devoting a separate section to it. These publications carried over a dozen glowing reports of the revival that broke out at Palmyra in the winter of 1816–1817.³⁸ Likewise, the 1824–25 revival is covered in an equal number of reports.³⁹ These same magazines, however, while busily engaged in reporting revivals during the 1819 to 1821 period, contain not a single mention of any revival occurring in the Palmyra area during that time. It is unbelievable that every one of the denominations affected by a revival such as Joseph Smith described as happening in 1820 could have completely overlooked the event.⁴⁰ The only reasonable explanation for this massive silence is that no revival occurred at Palmyra in 1820.

In the light of this new historical evidence, what lines of approach are open to the student of Mormon history as he considers Joseph Smith’s first vision story? Some may still try to imagine that a great revival happened in spite of the evidence against it. We are

³⁷ *The Methodist Magazine* (Nov., 1824) vii, 435f. He states that “Though for two or three years we saw no great awakenings...last year [1823] the Catherine Circuit was peculiarly favored” and “the present year we have had some glorious revivals.”

³⁸ Reports of the 1816 revival can be found in: *The Christian Herald and Seaman’s Magazine* (Sept. 28, 1816; May 10, June 7, 1817) ii, 16; iii, 103f, 164; *Religious Remembrancer* (Oct. 5, Nov. 2, 1816; May 17, 1817) 4th Series, 24, 39, 151f; *Religious Intelligencer* (Apr. 19, June 7, Nov. 1, 1817) i, 750 (misnumbered 760); ii, 23, 363–365; *American Baptist Magazine* (July 1817) i, 153; *Boston Recorder* (Sept. 17, 1816; May 13, Oct. 21, 1817) i, 151; ii, 88, 180. See also Joshua Bradley, *Accounts of Religious Revivals...from 1815 to 1818, 1819, 223*.

³⁹ In addition to references cited above, the 1824 revival is reported in: *New-York Religious Chronicle* (Nov. 20, 1824; Apr. 9, 1825) ii, 154; iii, 58; *Western New York Baptist Magazine* (Feb. 1825) iv, 284; *Western Recorder* (Nov. 9, 1824; Mar. 29, May 10, 1825) i, 90; ii, 50, 74; *Boston Recorder* (May 20, 1825) x, 82; *Gospel Luminary* (Feb., Mar. 1825) i, 42, 66; *The Christian Herald* (Portsmouth, Mar. 1825) viii, 7. (This last publication is the organ of the Christian-Connection church and should not be confused with *The Christian Herald* of Presbyterian affiliation).

⁴⁰ We examined all the issues of the following without finding a single reference to a Palmyra revival: Baptist: *American Baptist Magazine* (Jan. 1819–Nov. 1821), *Latter Day Luminary* (Feb. 1818–Nov. 1821), *Western New York Baptist Magazine* (Feb. 1819–Nov. 1821); Presbyterian: *Religious Remembrancer* (Jan. 1818–Aug. 18, 1821), *The Christian Herald & Seaman’s Magazine* (Jan. 2, 1819–Jan. 6, 1821), *Evangelical Recorder* (June 5, 1819–Sept. 8, 1821); Methodist: *The Methodist Magazine* (Jan. 1818–Dec. 1821); Congregational; *Religious Intelligencer* (Jan. 1819–May 1821); Christian Connection: *The Christian Herald* (May 1818–May 25, 1821); Other: *Boston Recorder* (Jan. 1818–Dec. 1821).

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convinced, however, that they will meet with no more success than Willard Bean's attempt to substantiate Smith's story. Bean, a Mormon and one-time sparring partner of Jack Dempsey, has put together an account that Mormon writers are still appealing to.⁴¹ According to Mr. Bean, a revival did break out in "the spring of 1820," sparked under the ministry of Rev. Jesse Townsend, whom he describes as "a young Yale graduate...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 54 years old and 30 years had expired since his graduation from Yale. He was not "recently set apart for the ministry" for he had been ordained in 1792.⁴² 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, 1820.⁴³ Furthermore, the *Religious Advocate* did not begin publication at Rochester until 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 revival.⁴⁴ In over a hundred years of historical study, this is the best confirmation that the Mormon writers have been able to produce. We do not believe that this avenue of approach will yield any fruitful results.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Willard Bean, A. B. C. *History of Palmyra and the Beginning of "Mormonism,"* 1938, 21f. Utilized in P. Nibley, *Op. Cit.*, 21ff; P. Cheesman, *Op. Cit.*, 12; Pearson H. Corbett, *Hiram Smith, Patriarch,* 1963, 18f. On Mr. Bean, including his pugilistic prowess. see Morris Bishop, "In the Footsteps of Mormon" in New York State Historical Association *Proceedings,* 1941, xxxix, now *New York History,* 1941, xxii, 161–163; also cf. Thomas Cook, *Palmyra and Vicinity,* 1930, 220, 256.

⁴² For Townsend's life see: Franklin B. Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College...July, 1778-June, 1792,* 1907, iv, 695f. Cf. also *Religious Intelligencer* (April 12, 1817) i, 730, and his obituary in the *New-York Observer* (Sept. 1, 1838) xvi, 140.

⁴³ *Palmyra Register* (Sept. 20, Dec. 20, 1820) iii, 2f; iv, 3; *Palmyra Herald* (Dec. 25, 1822) ii, 2; and on the date of his arrival near Hillsboro, (*Palmyra*) *Western Farmer* (Mar. 21, 1821) i, 1. For examples of traveling time to Illinois about 1820 see, A. T. Norton, *History of the Presbyterian Church in...Illinois,* 1879, i, 14f, 52f, 78, 133, 147f.

⁴⁴ *The Religious Advocate* began publication in 1822 at Saratoga Springs, N. Y., moving to Rochester beginning January 1825. See Gaylord P. Albaugh, "American Presbyterian Periodicals and Newspapers, 1752–1830 with Library Locations," *Journal of Presbyterian History* (Mar. 1964) xlii, 62.

⁴⁵ Letters (Dec. 7 & 15, 1966) from the LDS Library cite the following as confirming an 1820 revival: *History of Wayne County, N. Y.,* 1877, 150; Whitney Cross, *The Burned-Over District,* 1950; William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism,* 1959; Rev. R. Smith, *Recollections of Nettleton and the Great Revival of 1820, 1848; A Narrative of the Revival of Religion within the Bounds of the Presbytery of Albany in the year 1820, 1821.* The first two works says nothing that would confirm an 1820 revival in Palmyra; the third begins with the ministry of Charles Finney who was not converted until the fall of 1821 and is therefore irrelevant; the last two concern themselves with the revival in Albany Presbytery some 200 miles from the Palmyra area and are of no value whatever in establishing an 1820 revival in Palmyra.

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A more attractive option is to assume that Joseph's first vision story is essentially correct, but that his memory failed him as to the date of its occurrence. If we pursue this line of thought several major revisions will have to be made in Joseph Smith's story. Since Joseph presents his vision as occurring in the spring,⁴⁶ the date of the vision would accordingly have to be moved to the spring of 1825, following the revival. This would then also necessitate changing the date of his second vision from September 21, 1823 to not earlier than September of 1825. In turn this would require another change in his story, for he mentions visiting the hill where the plates were buried in each of the four years that elapsed between 1823 and 1827.⁴⁷ The revised dating would allow for just one visit in the year 1826. With this much readjustment, Smith's memory for events becomes somewhat suspect. Furthermore, such a realignment of dates calls for an entire recasting of the context of his story. Instead of being the naive boy of 14, as he presented himself, he would in 1825 be a young man of 19, who in less than a year will find himself in court charged with vagrancy and fraud and before a second year has expired eloping with a young woman from Pennsylvania.

Furthermore, this reconstruction would only aggravate the problem of harmonizing Smith's final and "official" account with another first vision account written earlier by the Mormon leader himself. This narrative, which has been dubbed a "strange account," had remained locked in the archives of the LDS Church until brought to light by Paul R. Cheesman in 1965.⁴⁸ Unlike the official account which presents Smith as wondering at age 14 which church was right, the "strange account" presents him as having "from age twelve to, fifteen" studied the Scriptures and already concluded that all were wrong. Instead of seeing two glorious personages at age 14, he sees at age 16 only the Lord Jesus Christ, who confirmed his conclusions that all had "turned aside from the gospel."

Joseph Smith's mother creates two revivals by quoting her son's 1820 account and giving her own account of a revival following Alvin's death (1824). She even includes Joseph's statement about the family joining the Presbyterian Church following the 1820 revival (Lucy Smith, *Op. Cit.*, 74), but her own account of the 1824 revival contradicts this. According to her narrative while contemplating church membership following the 1824 revival, Joseph informed them that it would do "no injury to join them," but he cited "Deacon Jessup" as an example of the wickedness of heart they would find among them. (*Id.*, 90f). That this story has reference to their intention of joining the *Presbyterian* Church is obvious from the fact that "Deacon Jessup" was an officer in that church and was frequently referred to as "Deacon Henry Jessup" and "Deacon Jessup." See: (*Palmyra*) *Western Farmer* (Dec. 12, 1821) i, 4; T. Cook, *Op. Cit.*, 16, 18; Western Presbyterian Church, "Session Records" ii passim, where his name appears as an elder of the church; and "History of Rise and Growth of Western Presbyterian Church," a new clipping in the files of the Presbyterian Historical Society.

⁴⁶ J. S. 2:14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 53–54.

⁴⁸ P. Cheesman, *Op. Cit.*, 126–132; reprinted in published form by Jerald and Sandra Tanner as *Joseph Smith's Strange Account of the First Vision*, (1965).

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Finally, in the “strange account,” he admits that at the first he “sought the Plates to obtain riches,” while in the official version he receives only a warning to beware of such a temptation. This “strange account” substitutes Joseph’s Bible reading in place of the revival as the predisposing factor for his heavenly inquiry. Cheesman regards the “strange account” as a first draft of his first vision story which he laid aside and never completed. If we feel that Smith’s memory was hazy in his official account, a comparison with the “strange account” would lead to the further conclusion that his memory was extremely confused. 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.

A third, more realistic, approach is that Joseph began with a *substantially different* story than the one he put forth later in his career. He *altered and expanded* the story in several steps as occasion required, ending up with the official version he published in 1842. Space allows for nothing more than a sketchy outline, but the development, we believe, based on all the available accounts, was somewhat as follows.

The earliest form of the story which the Smiths circulated was that Joseph, Jr. had discovered the plates through the aid of the seer-stone which he used to locate buried treasures. Just a year after the *Book of Mormon* appeared in print, the editor of the Palmyra *Reflector*⁴⁹ noted that Joseph Smith, Sr. followed the “popular belief that these treasures were held in charge by some *evil spirit*.” “At a time when the money digging ardor was somewhat abated, the elder Smith declared that his son Joe had seen the *spirit* (which he then described as a little old man with a long beard)” who told him he would furnish him with a book containing a record of the ancient inhabitants of this country. At first, the story “had no regular plan or features,” and several variations have been preserved by those who knew the Smiths.⁵⁰ In October 1827, when Martin Harris first heard that Joseph Smith had unearthed golden plates, he visited the Smith home and interviewed each of the members independently. All, including Joseph Smith, Jr. himself, gave the same story:

⁴⁹ Files of the Palmyra *Reflector* are in the New York Historical Society. For excerpts of the main portions see, F. Brodie, *Op. Cit.*, 407–410.

⁵⁰ In the commencement, the imposture...had no regular plan or features.” (Palmyra *Reflector* Feb. 14, 1831, quoted in F. Brodie, *Op. Cit.*, 408). Note also the testimony of Parley Chase, “In regard to their Cold Bible speculation, they scarcely ever told two stories alike.” (in E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 1834, 248); and the letter of Rev. Jesse Townsend, “questioned on the subject from time to time, his story assumed a more uniform statement.” (in Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism*, 1867, 289; and cf. 33 for Tucker’s own statement that the claim of Smith to have “received a revelation of the existence of the records in 1823” was an “after-avertment” and a “secondary invention”). For the testimony of those who heard the story from the Smiths themselves, see the statements of Willard Chase, Henry Harris and Abigail Harris in Howe, *Op. Cit.*, 242f, 252f; and the statement of Fayette Lapham in *Historical Magazine* (May 1870) vii (2nd series), 305ff.

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“He found them by looking in the stone found in the well of Mason Chase.”⁵¹ Harris’ narrative makes it clear that Joseph had already determined to produce a book, but needed someone to back it financially. Since Harris was deeply moved by religious ideas, Smith added that an angel had told him to quit the money-digging business, and that he had been shown Martin as the man who would help him with the new project. Harris replied, “If the Lord will show me that it is his work, you can have *all the money you want.*” A “still small voice” told Harris to become financially involved and he ultimately became one of the witnesses for the new publication.

From this point on the story takes on a religious tone, with an angel taking the place of the “spirit” as custodian of the plates. The *Reflector*, however, is careful to point out that, “It is well known that Joe Smith never pretended to have any communion with angels, until a long period after the *pretended* finding of his book.”⁵²

Once Joseph had put forth his claim to angelic visitation, a new situation had to be dealt with. He had to explain how it was that one with a questionable reputation who had never even joined a church should be favored with such a special visitation from heaven. W. W. Phelps, who lived for a while at the neighboring town of Canandaigua and later joined the Mormons, pointed out that the cry was soon raised that if God were going to reveal anything it would be to some great person in the church.⁵³ Smith’s answer is to admit his sinfulness, and his story is changed so that he no longer finds the plates in his search for *treasure*, but they are revealed to him in his search for *forgiveness*. He has not

⁵¹ *Tiffany’s Monthly* (August? 1859) v, 169, and cf. 163, 167. Joel Tiffany, editor of this spiritualist monthly, in the April 1859 issue (iv, 568), promised to print an interview with Martin Harris together with some other material on the Mormons. The other material appeared in the May and July issues (v, 46–51, 119–121) and the interview was printed in the same volume pp. 163–170, which is presumably the August issue. For a photo-mechanical reprint made from the copy in the Berrian Collection of the New York Public Library, see Jerald Tanner, *Revealing Statements by the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon*. The interview is also reprinted in Francis Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in American*, and excerpts are also found in William Mulder & A. Russell Mortensen, *Among the Mormons*, 1958, 30–32. For other references to Smith finding the plates by means of the seer-stone, see, the diary of Hosea Stout published by Juanita Brooks, *On the Mormon Frontier, The Diary of Hosea Stout 1844–1861*, 1964, ii, 593; and O. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase*, 1851, 216.

⁵² *Palmyra Reflector*, Feb. 28, 1831, quoted in F. Brodie, *Op. Cit.*, 23, 408f. For accounts heard by early residents of the Palmyra area see: Rev. John Clark, “Gleanings by the Way,” *Episcopal Recorder* (Sept. 5, 1840) xviii, 94 (or his book *Gleanings by the Way*, 1842, 222–228); O. Turner, *Op. Cit.*, 215f; Lucius Fenn letter of Feb. 12, 1830 in W. Mulder & A. Mortensen, *Op. Cit.*, 28; Cf. also Martin Harris’ statement to the Rochester *Gem* of Sept. 5, 1829, quoted in F. Brodie, *Op. Cit.*, 38; and an 1831 letter of Lucy Smith to her brother, in *The Elders Journal* iv, 59–62 (and also printed in Ben E. Rich, *Scrapbook of Mormon Literature*, i, 543–545).

⁵³ *Messenger and Advocate* (Apr., 1835) i, 97.

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joined a church because he was shown that they have lost the truth which can only be restored when the plates are translated.

His story, however, still lacks an element that will explain what *motivated* his search for forgiveness. Sometime after 1830, possibly in 1833, he drafts his “strange account” in which he sets forth his Bible reading as producing the awareness of his need for forgiveness and his conclusion that all churches were wrong. This approach is abandoned, however, possibly because it might have seemed out of character for him to have shown such Biblical literacy. A better motivation was found in the revival led by Elder Lane, which had occurred, as he recalled, about 1823. Thus late in the year 1834 the story is published through Oliver Cowdery that, stirred by this revival, in September of 1823 he was answered by an angel visitation to his bedroom.

Not content to halt here, late in 1835 Smith is still making improvements in his story. On November 9, 1835 he told his story to a visitor who called himself Joshua, the Jewish Minister, and related how in a silent grove two personages had appeared to him, adding that one of them had testified “that Jesus Christ is the son of God.” Apparently Joseph at this point intended his two personages to be nothing more than angels, for he not only adds that he “saw many angels in this vision,” but also five days later he told Erastus Holmes that “the first visitation of *angels*” occurred when he was about 14 years old.⁵⁴ This would account for the confusion that later developed, even among the church leaders, in speaking of Smith’s first vision as an angel visitation. In telling his story to Joshua, Joseph made no attempt to fit it into the framework of the account his paper had published earlier that year, for apart from two Bible references he mentions nothing about a revival or any other motivation that led him to the grove to seek heavenly guidance. This account, consequently, was left unpublished and largely unheard of until recently brought to light from the archives of the LDS church by James B. Allen of Brigham Young University.⁵⁵

Three years later, in 1838, when he begins his official history, the Mormon leader tackles the problem of working this first visitation story into the setting of the story that had already been released in his paper. Now, far from Palmyra where any might be likely to remember the dates, Joseph moves the date of the revival back to 1820 to accommodate

⁵⁴ *Deseret News* (May 29, 1852) ii, 1; also in *Millennial Star* (July 2, 1853) xv, 424. “I received the first *visitation of angels*, which was when I was about fourteen” has been altered in B. H. Roberts edition of Smith’s history to read, “I received my first *vision*, which...” (ii, 312).

⁵⁵ Published in *Dialogue* (Autumn 1966) i, no. 3, 40–41. A letter from Prof. Allen dated Dec. 6, 1966 states that this account makes no reference to a revival as a motivating factor and that “the excerpt in the article begins just as it is in the original.” A letter from the LDS Historian’s Office dated October 26, 1966 confirms that the excerpt has been “accurately copied” in the *Dialogue* article.

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his first vision narrative. While he is writing in 1838, he is facing division in his own ranks and strong opposition from the established churches. We are not surprised, therefore, to find the strong note of seeking forgiveness shoved into the background in favor of a condemnation of all the churches by his heavenly visitors. At this point in his career it is not so important that he be sorry for his sins, as it is that he be endorsed in his claims. By this time, also, his theology has changed so that he is now advocating a plurality of gods. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the two personages have apparently become, for Smith, two, separate gods, the Father and the Son.

Such, we believe, is the general development by which Joseph Smith, Jr. ultimately arrived at his official story. While some may disagree with our reconstruction, all students of Mormon history will be forced to reconsider the reliability of Joseph's first vision story. We believe that the firmness of the revival date as the fall of 1824, the features of Smith's story as fitting only that date, and the absence of any revival in the year 1820 are established beyond any reasonable doubt, and will force upon Mormon writers a drastic re-evaluation of the foundation of their church.⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ Apostle John A. Widtsoe claimed that “the first vision...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*, 1947, 119).

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* The American Periodical Series filmed by University Microfilms in Ann Arbor, and owned by most large universities, is sometimes not well indexed in some libraries. Therefore we thought it might prove helpful to provide the reel number of this series on which the periodical appears. The library locations follow the symbols used in the *Union List of Serials*.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Walters, W. P. (1967). "New Light on Mormon Origins From Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 10(4), 225–244.