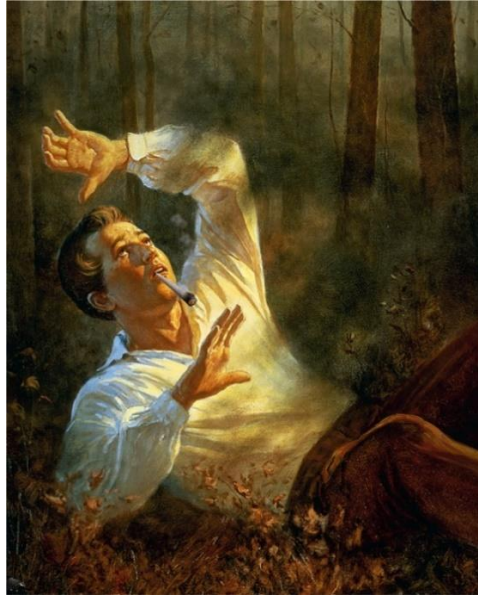


# Official LDS Essay on First Vision Accounts, Annotated

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS



The following essay is the official LDS released essay entitled "First Vision Accounts." It was released by the church to help explain why Joseph Smith's accounts of the First Vision differed from each other, and why it is not a problem for the history of the church that major details changed between Joseph Smith's different retellings of the First Vision story. In the below essay, all text in black is the unedited essay from the church essay, with our comments in **dark red**. The essay below can be found on the LDS website [here](#).

Many church leaders in the past have considered the statements in this essay to be "anti-Mormon" with some ex-communicated for their research into church history. It is important to note that the rise of the internet has forced many of these issues to be addressed in this essay, but as you will see below there are a lot of problems with the differing first vision accounts, and some that are dealt with in ways that are akin to gaslighting.

This essay with notes is fairly long, but it is important to include all of this information. Most of the information in the essay is new to many members, and our additional notes are new to almost all members. It is absolutely imperative to get a true picture of what is

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actually on the papyrus that includes what we are told is the Book of Abraham, as this ties into issues with the Book of Mormon translation as well as the recent study of how Joseph Smith use Adam Clarke's Bible essays heavily in his translation of the Bible (which, again, we were told was inspired by the gift of God). Taken together, there are many questions as to the accuracy of the scriptures Joseph Smith is responsible for, which opens up many questions about Joseph Smith's authenticity as a prophet.. As prominent LDS historian [Richard Bushman noted](#), "I think that for the Church to remain strong it has to reconstruct its narrative. **The dominant narrative is not true; it can't be sustained.** The Church has to absorb all this new information, or it will be on very shaky grounds and that's what it is trying to do and it will be a strain for a lot of people, older people especially. But I think it has to change."

As President George Albert Smith said, "If a faith will not bear to be investigated; if its preachers and professors are afraid to have it examined, their foundation must be very weak." (*Journal of Discourses*, Volume 14, Page 216)

As with all of our material, please email us at [ldsdiscussion@gmail.com](mailto:ldsdiscussion@gmail.com) if you have any issues with our comments or suggestions to add. And without further adieu...

## FIRST VISION ACCOUNTS

Joseph Smith recorded that God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him in a grove of trees near his parents' home in western New York State when he was about 14 years old (This will be covered more later, but the first sentence highlights the problem here: In Joseph Smith's first account of the First Vision, God and Jesus did NOT both appear. There is a reason for this, and we will get into that in more detail later, but it has to do with Joseph Smith's evolving theology). Concerned by his sins and unsure which spiritual path to follow, Joseph sought guidance by attending meetings, reading scripture, and praying. In answer, he received a heavenly manifestation. Joseph shared and documented the First Vision, as it came to be known, on multiple occasions; he wrote or assigned scribes to write four different accounts of the vision.

Joseph Smith published two accounts of the First Vision during his lifetime. The first of these, known today as Joseph Smith—History, was canonized in the Pearl of Great Price and thus became the best known account. The two unpublished accounts, recorded in Joseph Smith's earliest autobiography and a later journal, were generally forgotten until historians working for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rediscovered and published them in the 1960s. (This is a dishonest statement that the church and apologists continue to push. Joseph Fielding Smith was in possession of the 1832 First Vision account sometime in the 1930s or 1940s and kept it suppressed by [tearing it out of the letterbook](#) it

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was written in. The only reason it was released in the 1960s was because word had leaked out that it existed, and early LDS critics such as former Mormons Sandra and Jerald Tanner began asking for a copy of the account. The church quietly gave the account to a BYU student to write a paper about, and then [taped the pages back in the letterbook](#). You can actually see the tape marks on the [Joseph Smith Papers project](#). There is a huge reason this account was suppressed for decades, which as noted above is due to Joseph Smith's changing theology at the time.) Since that time, these documents have been discussed repeatedly in Church magazines, in works printed by Church-owned and Church-affiliated presses, and by Latter-day Saint scholars in other venues.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the firsthand accounts, there are also five descriptions of Joseph Smith's vision recorded by his contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

[This is a very deliberate attempt by the church to lump together all first vision accounts and then assume that readers will brush it off and won't bother to check how little attention the first vision accounts except the "official" one have received. In addition, there were no mentions of the First Vision in \\*any\\* church publication until 1840, a full twenty years after it happened and 11 years after the church was officially founded. The footnote cites four sources that talked about the different First Vision accounts since 1970 - one article in the Improvement Era, one in Ensign, and two books. You will note that there have never been conference talks to highlight the different accounts and what they mean, and that in official church material only the 1838 account is highlighted. Missionaries do not discuss the different accounts during their discussions, and the reasons why will be apparent as the essay continues.](#)

The various accounts of the First Vision tell a consistent story, though naturally they differ in emphasis and detail. Historians expect that when an individual retells an experience in multiple settings to different audiences over many years, each account will emphasize various aspects of the experience and contain unique details. (It is true that details will change over time as a story is retold. It is not true that the story will continue to grow more specific and grand as time goes on. Joseph Smith originally just saw Jesus, but then adds God in the "official" version as known to members today. These are not small details. In fact, that would make Joseph Smith the only person in the history of the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, James B. Allen, "Eight Contemporary Accounts of the First Vision—What Do We Learn from Them?" *Improvement Era*, 73 (1970): 4–13; Richard L. Anderson, "[Joseph Smith's Testimony of the First Vision](#)," *Ensign*, Apr. 1996, 10–21; Milton V. Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971; 2d ed., 1980); Steven C. Harper, *Joseph Smith's First Vision: A Guide to the Historical Accounts* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> All of these accounts were reproduced in Dean C. Jessee, "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," in John W. Welch, ed., with Erick B. Carlson, *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* (Provo and Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Press and Deseret Book, 2005), 1–33.

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world to see both God and Jesus together, yet he did not think to mention it in 1832? As stated already, the reason for that is Joseph Smith's evolving theology, but they can not be brushed off as a natural difference in emphasis.) Indeed, differences similar to those in the First Vision accounts exist in the multiple scriptural accounts of Paul's vision on the road to Damascus and the Apostles' experience on the Mount of Transfiguration.<sup>3</sup> (This is an apples to oranges comparison: The biblical gospels were not written first hand, written by multiple authors, and have stories that were passed down over time with different translations/wording which can alter the specific details. This is a misleading comparison used to deflect from the issue that Joseph Smith's story changed from his own retellings.) Yet despite the differences, a basic consistency remains across all the accounts of the First Vision. Some have mistakenly argued that any variation in the retelling of the story is evidence of fabrication. To the contrary, the rich historical record enables us to learn more about this remarkable event than we could if it were less well documented. (There are consistent elements across the different accounts, but there are major changes that do not add up. The essay is correct that we learn more about the history of the church with these different accounts than we would have with just one.)

## ACCOUNTS OF THE FIRST VISION

Each account of the First Vision by Joseph Smith and his contemporaries has its own history and context that influenced how the event was recalled, communicated, and recorded. These accounts are discussed below.

### *1832 Account*

The earliest known account of the First Vision, the only account written in Joseph Smith's own hand, is found in a short, unpublished autobiography Joseph Smith produced in the second half of 1832. In the account, Joseph Smith described his consciousness of his own sins and his frustration at being unable to find a church that matched the one he had read about in the New Testament and that would lead him to redemption. He emphasized Jesus Christ's Atonement and the personal redemption it offered. He wrote that "the Lord" appeared and forgave him of his sins. As a result of the vision, Joseph experienced joy and love, though, as he noted, he could find no one who believed his account. [Read the 1832 account here.](#)

(This is the most important account because it is the first account written by Joseph Smith, and history tells us that the first retelling of a story/experience is always the most reliable. It is also an extremely interesting account because it highlights that the early Mormon

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:3–9; 22:6–21; 26:12–18; Matthew 17:1–13; Mark 9:2–13; Luke 9:28–36.

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church held a trinitarian view, and \*not\* three distinct personages. To highlight this further, here are early Mormon quotes/scriptures that confirm the trinitarian view:

- ✧ *Evening & Morning Star, July 1832*: Now what things can there be of greater moment and importance for men to know, or God to reveal, than the nature of God and ourselves the state and condition of our souls, the only way to avoid eternal misery and enjoy everlasting bliss!
- ✧ The Scriptures discover not only matters of importance, but of the greatest depth and mysteriousness. There are many wonderful things in the law of God, things we may admire, but are never able to comprehend. Such are the eternal purposes and decrees of God, **the doctrine of the Trinity**, the incarnation of the Son of God, and the manner of the operation of the Spirit of God upon the souls of men, which are all things of great weight and moment for us to understand and believe that they are, and yet may be unsearchable to our reason, as to the particular manner of them.
- ✧ Luke 10:22 (King James Bible): "All things are delivered to me of my Father: and no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him."
- ✧ Luke 10:22 (Joseph Smith Translation): "All things are delivered to me of my Father: and no man knoweth that **the Son is the Father, and the Father is the Son**, but him to whom the Son will reveal it."
- ✧ Ether 3:14 (Book of Mormon): "I am the father and the son"
- ✧ The statement from the three witnesses could not be more clear: And the honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, **which is one God**.
- ✧ The title page of the Book of Mormon, again, could not be more clear: And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, **the Eternal God**, manifesting himself unto all nations.

The book of First Nephi in the Book of Mormon itself changes from a trinitarian view (original 1830 version) to a plurality of Gods (1837 version):

- ✧ 1830: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of God  
Now: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God (11:18).

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- ✧ 1830: Behold, the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father!  
Now: Behold, the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!  
(11:21)
- ✧ 1830: yea, the everlasting God was judged of the world  
Now: yea, the Son of the everlasting God was judged of the world (11:32)
- ✧ 1830: ...the Lamb of God is the Eternal Father...  
Now: ...the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father... (13:40)

These changes present a few problems, but two notable ones. First, why would these changes be necessary since the Book of Mormon is directly translated from the seer stone, and the words did not change in Joseph's hat until the words were written correctly? Two, why would Joseph Smith alter these words that were preserved by God to change the theology of the church?

LDS apologists claim that these changes to the Book of Mormon are merely to clarify the verses, but that of course presents other problems. Why would Joseph Smith need to change verses that were preserved by God? Why do the early church documents refer to the trinity? As we mention in our other annotated essays, the most obvious answer here is that as Joseph Smith's theology changed, he needed to make changes to the text so that everything was correlated.

All of these examples point to a church that believes in the trinity, and as such explains why in the 1832 account Joseph Smith only mentions one personage in Jesus.

## 1835 Account

In the fall of 1835, Joseph Smith recounted his First Vision to Robert Matthews, a visitor to Kirtland, Ohio. The retelling, recorded in Joseph's journal by his scribe Warren Parrish, emphasizes his attempt to discover which church was right, the opposition he felt as he prayed, and the appearance of one divine personage who was followed shortly by another. This account also notes the appearance of angels in the vision. [Read the 1835 account here.](#)

(This version of the First Vision feels like the beginning of the transition from the 1832 to the 1838 version. There is no mention that either personage is Jesus or God, which would again seem impossible to not note. In this version, Joseph is not seeking a forgiveness of sins nor does he already believe that all churches are wrong. This version also begins Joseph's pattern with the First Vision (and other visionary subjects like the priesthood

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restoration) where the story begins to get more specific and grander. The addition of angels and having his tongue bound by Satan are two big additions here.)

## 1838 Account

The narration of the First Vision best known to Latter-day Saints today is the 1838 account. First published in 1842 in the Times and Seasons, the Church's newspaper in Nauvoo, Illinois, the account was part of a longer history dictated by Joseph Smith between periods of intense opposition. Whereas the 1832 account emphasizes the more personal story of Joseph Smith as a young man seeking forgiveness, the 1838 account focuses on the vision as the beginning of the "rise and progress of the Church." Like the 1835 account, the central question of the narrative is which church is right. [Read the 1838 account here.](#)

(This version is best known because it is the only account emphasized in church materials. This account also fits with Joseph Smith's evolving theology, and matches the changes made to the Book of Mormon in 1837 to account for a plurality of Gods. This is important to note because it explains why Joseph Smith changed the story from Jesus in his vision to both Jesus and God. It also gives weight to the critical argument that Joseph Smith was changing the theology of the church as things progressed, which is also apparent with the priesthood, [polygamy](#), changes to the Doctrine and Covenants, and a number of other church doctrines.

One other thing to note is that this version was written in 1838 which was right after Joseph Smith was having a credibility crisis in the church. Two of the three witnesses leave in 1838: Oliver Cowdery was excommunicated in April and David Whitmer says in June that God spoke to him to tell him to leave the church: "If you believe my testimony to the Book of Mormon; if you believe that God spake to us three witnesses by his own voice, then I tell you that in June, 1838, God spake to me again by his own voice from the heavens, and told me to separate myself from among the Latter-day Saints, for as they sought to do unto me, so should it be done unto them."

This is not the essay to get into a long description as to why Cowdery and Whitmer left, but one of the main reasons they left/were excommunicated was because they accused Joseph Smith of adultery. This was due to his affair with Fanny Alger long before he claimed to have the sealing powers, and long before he claimed to receive a revelation from God to institute polygamy. David Whitmer in particular believed that Joseph Smith was a fallen prophet because the revelations he was claiming were not received using the seer stone, and went against earlier teachings. Whitmer said in his [Address](#): "[W]hen the Book of Commandments was printed, Joseph and the church received it as being printed correctly. This I know. In the winter of 1834, they saw that some of the revelations in the

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Book of Commandments had to be changed, because the heads of the church had gone too far, and had done things in which they had already gone ahead of some of the former revelations. So the book of Doctrine and Covenants was printed in 1835, and some of the revelations changed and added to.”

Whitmer also goes on to note that he does not believe Joseph Smith had the power to change the meanings of revelations as he saw fit. This is incredibly relevant to the changes in the first vision, as those changes were made precisely for the same reason: Joseph Smith’s theology changed, and thus the first vision needed to change with it. Whitmer: “I see that some of you claim that the same power which gave these revelations, had authority to change them, and refer to [Jer. xxxvi:32](#). By reading this passage you will see that the words which were added were “like words;” words which conveyed the same meaning — were added to that book by Jeremiah when he was writing it over again, because it had been burned in the fire by the king. But the words added to the two former revelations are not “like words,” as they change and reverse the original meaning.”

In addition, in 1837 the Kirtland Safety Society bank collapsed, losing many Saints all of their money and possessions. This left many angry at Joseph Smith, who had led them to believe that as a prophet of God would could never lead the astray, but did not have the ability to run a bank or the foresight to see a run on banks would be coming.

A First Vision account such as the 1838 version gives a huge amount of authority to Joseph Smith that was not as compelling in the 1832 version. While the most obvious reason for the changes to the First Vision are theological, the timing of the release along with the details becoming more grander for Joseph Smith would match the timeline where he had found himself in a credibility crisis following accusations of adultery, loss of key Book of Mormon witnesses, and the collapse of a bank where he promised the saints they would see their life savings grow under his leadership.

## 1842 Account

Written in response to *Chicago Democrat* editor John Wentworth’s request for information about the Latter-day Saints, this account was printed in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842. (The “Wentworth letter,” as it is commonly known, is also the source for the Articles of Faith.)<sup>4</sup> The account, intended for publication to an audience unfamiliar with Mormon beliefs, is concise and straightforward. As with earlier accounts, Joseph Smith noted the confusion he experienced and the appearance of two personages in answer to his prayer. The following year, Joseph Smith sent this account with minor modifications to a

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<sup>4</sup> The full letter can be found in Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (Mar. 1, 1842): 706–710.



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historian named Israel Daniel Rupp, who published it as a chapter in his book, *He Pasa Ekklesia [The Whole Church]: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*.<sup>5</sup> [Read the 1842 account here.](#)

Secondhand Accounts. Besides these accounts from Joseph Smith himself, five accounts were written by contemporaries who heard Joseph Smith speak about the vision. [Read these accounts here.](#)



As stated above, the changing theology that led to Joseph Smith needing to change the First Vision happened by 1838, so the 1842 account does not have any massive differences worth dissecting. The secondhand accounts all give some interesting differences, but the most important ones are the differences between 1832 and 1838 especially in light of the early church teachings of the trinity. It is crucial to understand that Joseph Smith did not believe in the plurality of Gods until well after 1832, as evidenced by the changes he made to the Book of Mormon in the 1837 edition along with the changes to his first vision account.

## ARGUMENTS REGARDING THE ACCOUNTS OF JOSEPH SMITH'S FIRST VISION

The variety and number of accounts of the First Vision have led some critics to question whether Joseph Smith's descriptions match the reality of his experience. Two arguments are frequently made against his credibility: the first questions Joseph Smith's memory of the events; the second questions whether he embellished elements of the story over time.

There are actually more important arguments than Joseph Smith's memory and embellishment, but this of course is designed to downplay the differences in the visions and the changing doctrine of the church under Joseph Smith. More important arguments include:

- ✎ Why did none of Joseph Smith's closest friends in the church know of the First Vision until years later? If he truly met God and Jesus in a physical state, why did no one know about this? Joseph Smith clearly had a penchant for boasting about things he did not understand (Zelph, speaking in Egyptian, translation of the Book of Abraham, etc), so why would he just keep this from his friends and church members for 15-20 years?

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Smith, "Latter Day Saints," in I. Daniel Rupp, *He Pasa Ekklesia: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States* (Philadelphia: J. Y. Humphreys, 1844), 404–410.

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- ❧ The differences in the First Vision between 1832 and 1838 are incredibly important. The Book of Mormon as written does not contain any of the doctrines that make Mormonism unique: Polygamy, three tiers of heaven, Aaronic/Melchezidek priesthood, temple ordinances, and plurality of Gods. From a critical point of view, the changing evolution of theology for Joseph Smith give credibility to the idea that he was making it up as he went along, which is demonstrated not just by the First Vision, but the priesthood revelation, polygamy, and temple ordinances as well. These changes are absolutely ignored in these essays, but completely undermine the credibility of both Joseph Smith and the church as a whole.
- ❧ There are errors in Joseph Smith's historical details in these accounts. The biggest issue is with the religious revival that Joseph Smith mentions as a reason for his excitement and desire to know the truth. Tax records show that the Smith family moved from Palmyra to Manchester in 1822 (Walters & Marquardt 1994, pp. 1-41), and Joseph Smith notes that "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" (Pearl of Great Price 2013, p. 47)
- ❧ The 1824 date for the revival is supported by other evidence, most notably that church denominations were steady in 1820 but grew quickly in 1824 and 1825, which is an obvious impact of a religious revival. (Marquardt & Walters 1994, pp. 17-18). This is a massive problem for the credibility of the story, because Joseph Smith also claims that the first appearance of Moroni was in 1823, which would be impossible if the first vision happened around the revival as stated.
- ❧ Lack of a 'dark force' in the 1832 version but introduced in the 1838 version. This could fall under the category of embellishment since it would lend credibility to the story, but it is an element that is added that would appear to be one that would be unforgettable for the 1832 version. Again, it seems that Joseph Smith's story got more specific and grander as he told it in order to build credibility for it along with a foundation for his changing theologies.

Memory. One argument regarding the accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision alleges that historical evidence does not support Joseph Smith's description of religious revival in Palmyra, New York, and its vicinity in 1820. Some argue that this undermines both Joseph's claim of unusual religious fervor and the account of the vision itself.

Documentary evidence, however, supports Joseph Smith's statements regarding the revivals. The region where he lived became famous for its religious fervor and was

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unquestionably one of the hotbeds of religious revivals. Historians refer to the region as “the burned-over district” because preachers wore out the land holding camp revivals and seeking converts during the early 1800s.<sup>6</sup> In June 1818, for example, a Methodist camp meeting took place in Palmyra, and the following summer, Methodists assembled again at Vienna (now Phelps), New York, 15 miles from the Smith family farm. The journals of an itinerant Methodist preacher document much religious excitement in Joseph’s geographic area in 1819 and 1820. They report that Reverend George Lane, a revivalist Methodist minister, was in that region in both years, speaking “on Gods method in bringing about Reformations.”<sup>7</sup> This historical evidence is consistent with Joseph’s description. He said that the unusual religious excitement in his district or region “commenced with the Methodists.” Indeed, Joseph stated that he became “somewhat partial” to Methodism.<sup>8</sup>

As stated above, there is a lot of evidence to show that the revival took place in 1824 and not in 1820. Alexander Campbell, a Baptist minister that led the Campbellite branch that Sidney Rigdon came from (and also authored the Aaronic/Melchizedek priesthood concepts before Joseph knew of them), wrote this 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 Savior descending to the tops of the trees at noon day” (*The Christian Baptist*, Vol. 1, pp. 148-49).

Further, Wesley P. Walters wrote a 1967 study on the revival issue called *New Light on Mormon Origins From The Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival*. This study bolsters our argument above regarding the revival dating: 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.

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

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<sup>6</sup> Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1950); Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Benajah Williams diary, July 15, 1820, copy in Church History Library, Salt Lake City; spelling regularized.

<sup>8</sup> 1838 account ([Joseph Smith—History 1:5, 8](#)).

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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....

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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....

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. 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 From The Palmyra (N.Y.) Revival*, Walters)

In an article in *BYU Studies*, it is noted that the church sent a team of scholars that "scoured libraries, studied newspapers, and sought to find private individuals who might uncover hitherto unknown source materials" (*BYU Studies*, Spring 1969, p. 242) From this project, they found no evidence to support Joseph Smith's claim that the revival happened in 1820 as stated and not 1824: "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

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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, p. 272).

The writings of Milton Backman, however, **do not provide any evidence that a revival happened in 1820 as stated**, but falls back on the common apologetic argument that Joseph Smith probably heard about the revivals around the country and incorporated it into his worldview. LDS historian Richard Bushman follows-up that point with: “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 no, and thus far Mr. Walters has found none such to testify.” (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Spring 1969, p. 87)

Does this argument sound familiar? It is used on many of Joseph Smith’s claims that not only have no proof for it happening, but a lot of evidence against it happening. The apologetic argument basically boils down to ‘Just because the evidence says it didn’t happen doesn’t mean it didn’t happen unless you have proof that it didn’t happen.’ Obviously we don’t have proof a revival didn’t happen in 1820 because no one would ever write about it not happening... you get the idea. This is the same line of defense that LDS apologists use for the changing story on the priesthood restoration, polygamy and polyamory, the Book of Abraham translation issues, etc.

But this argument carries over to Joseph Smith as a whole. What we’re being told here is that no one can find evidence to back up Joseph Smith’s claim on the revival timing which is absolutely critical to the church narrative because if the revival happened in 1824 as the evidence suggests, then the First Vision happened after Joseph Smith was later visited by Moroni. That obviously blows up the entire story of the foundation of the church, which is why these First Vision accounts are important even if not as big of a problem as the Book of Abraham, King James errors in the Bible, Deutero-Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, or DNA that disproves the entire premise of who the Book of Mormon says the lamanites are.

One final note from Mr. Walters in reply to criticism from Richard Bushman that “Mr. Walters relies on the absence of reports in newspapers and general histories to reach his

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conclusion of no revivals” (pp. 89-90): “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, p. 67)

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Embellishment. The second argument frequently made regarding the accounts of Joseph Smith’s First Vision is that he embellished his story over time. This argument focuses on two details: the number and identity of the heavenly beings Joseph Smith stated that he saw. Joseph’s First Vision accounts describe the heavenly beings with greater detail over time. The 1832 account says, “The Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord.” His 1838 account states, “I saw two Personages,” one of whom introduced the other as “My Beloved Son.” As a result, critics have argued that Joseph Smith started out reporting to have seen one being — “the Lord” — and ended up claiming to have seen both the Father and the Son.<sup>9</sup>

This argument is designed to paint anyone who brings up these points as just nitpicking at details. We have stated clearly above why this matters, and the fact is that the theology of Joseph Smith when the 1832 first vision was written is at odds with the 1838 first vision. There are areas of the First Vision that are embellished (Joseph Smith’s tongue being bound is a great example), but the number of personages has more to do with a changing theology than it does with a simply embellishment.

We noted above about the timing of the 1838 version coming right when Joseph Smith was in the middle of a crisis of confidence between allegations of adultery, two of the ‘Three Witnesses’ leaving the church, and a collapse of Joseph Smith’s Kirtland bank which led to many Saints losing all of their money. The “embellishments” in the First Vision account could definitely be explained by Joseph Smith’s need to assert himself as the only person who can speak to God, and the man chosen by God to do so. While the First Vision account is very similar to others in Joseph Smith’s time, the extra details

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<sup>9</sup> 1832 account (Joseph Smith History, ca. Summer 1832, 3, in Joseph Smith, “Letter Book A,” Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City); 1838 account ([Joseph Smith—History 1:17](#)).

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help to provide further authority that Joseph Smith could use to help silence the growing doubts amount the early saints.

There are other, more consistent ways of seeing the evidence. A basic harmony in the narrative across time must be acknowledged at the outset: three of the four accounts clearly state that two personages appeared to Joseph Smith in the First Vision. The outlier is Joseph Smith's 1832 account, which can be read to refer to one or two personages. (There absolutely are more consistent ways of seeing the evidence. It is clear that it is one person, and furthermore fits with the Book of Mormon, statement of the witnesses, and all Mormon material prior to Joseph Smith's changes in the mid 1830s. As we've stated in all of these annotated essays, the obvious answer here is that Joseph Smith change the first vision to match his evolving theology. It could not be laid out clearer above, but this essay can not go into that area because it once again undermines the credibility of Joseph Smith and the church as a whole.) If read to refer to one heavenly being, it would likely be to the personage who forgave his sins. According to later accounts, the first divine personage told Joseph Smith to "hear" the second, Jesus Christ, who then delivered the main message, which included the message of forgiveness.<sup>10</sup> Joseph Smith's 1832 account, then, may have concentrated on Jesus Christ, the bearer of forgiveness. (This is gaslighting at its finest. The authors of the essay are trying to make the reader think they are the unreasonable ones for thinking that Joseph Smith actually meant one personage was there when he wrote one personage. We can't be clearer as to why this first account is written this way, and do not need to rehash it again here.)

Another way of reading the 1832 account is that Joseph Smith referred to two beings, both of whom he called "Lord." The embellishment argument hinges on the assumption that the 1832 account describes the appearance of only one divine being. **But the 1832 account does not say that only one being appeared.** Note that the two references to "Lord" are separated in time: first "the Lord" opens the heavens; then Joseph Smith sees "the Lord." This reading of the account is consistent with Joseph's 1835 account, which has one personage appearing first, followed by another soon afterwards. The 1832 account, then, can reasonably be read to mean that Joseph Smith saw one being who then revealed another and that he referred to both of them as "the Lord": "the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 1838 account ([Joseph Smith—History 1:17](#)); 1835 account (Joseph Smith, "Sketch Book of the use of Joseph Smith, jr.," *Journal*, Nov. 9–11, 1835, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

<sup>11</sup> 1832 account (Joseph Smith History, ca. Summer 1832, 3, in Joseph Smith, "Letter Book A," Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

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This argument is once again falling on the apologetic argument that we can't prove that God and Jesus weren't both there because Joseph Smith didn't write that the other wasn't there. It's insulting to readers, but again this is how gaslighting works. They are also telling us that maybe both were there but at different times and Joseph Smith just didn't think to mention that they had switched out in this time. Common sense would tell you that this argument is insulting, and there's a good reason for that.

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Put another way—this argument would be like me saying that one day LeBron James sought me out and I had a meeting with him. I then years later say that Michael Jordan was also there. Of course no one would forget that detail in the first story, but then I say the reason that you are wrong in questioning my story is that LeBron James actually left after opening the door and Michael Jordan took his place. Would anyone believe that? Of course not. The same applies here, and it is absolutely critical to understand what the authors are doing in these LDS essays to find ways to rationalize the blatant errors in Joseph Smith's stories and actions.

Joseph's increasingly specific descriptions can thus be compellingly read as evidence of increasing insight, accumulating over time, based on experience. In part, the differences between the 1832 account and the later accounts may have something to do with the differences between the written and the spoken word. The 1832 account represents the first time Joseph Smith attempted to write down his history. That same year, he wrote a friend that he felt imprisoned by "paper pen and Ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect Language." He called the written word a "little narrow prison."<sup>12</sup> The expansiveness of the later accounts is more easily understood and even expected when we recognize that they were likely dictated accounts—an, easy, comfortable medium for Joseph Smith and one that allowed the words to flow more easily.

This has no sources and also neglects to address a very simple question: If Joseph Smith felt so uncomfortable writing, why did he write what is the most important story of his life himself? But more importantly, why is this relevant when the 1832 first vision account matches the LDS theology at that time? This vision actually fits in perfectly with the Book of Mormon, the statement of the witnesses, and church teachings at that time. There is just no way around the simple fact that Joseph Smith changed the story to match a changing theology, and the church doesn't address that in any way in this essay. I think that is the most telling aspect of the entire article.

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, Nov. 27, 1832, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; available at [www.josephsmithpapers.org](http://www.josephsmithpapers.org).



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## CONCLUSION

Joseph Smith testified repeatedly that he experienced a remarkable vision of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Neither the truth of the First Vision nor the arguments against it can be proven by historical research alone. Knowing the truth of Joseph Smith's testimony requires each earnest seeker of truth to study the record and then exercise sufficient faith in Christ to ask God in sincere, humble prayer whether the record is true. If the seeker asks with the real intent to act upon the answer revealed by the Holy Ghost, the truthfulness of Joseph Smith's vision will be manifest. In this way, every person can know that Joseph Smith spoke honestly when he declared, "I had seen a vision, I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it."<sup>13</sup>

This is the same conclusion as every other essay, which effectively concedes that history and evidence are not on their side, but if you pray about it you'll receive a personal revelation that what you're reading here and what you can read with your own eyes is not a reason to doubt Joseph Smith's story. They also make sure to note that you have to pray in "sincere, humble prayer" because they want to make sure that you know if you do not receive a personal revelation it is only because you're not being faithful enough.

Why don't missionaries teach the different accounts of the first vision in their discussions? As someone who went through these discussions years ago, I can testify that they do not mention the different accounts nor the differences in the Mormon theology that led to the changes. This is the same with the incorrect version of the Book of Mormon translation that they told me, the reasons for polygamy and polyamory, as well as other issues like the Book of Abraham. At the end of the day, facts matter. and the reasons for the changes in the First Vision matter.

I want to also note that these visions were incredibly common in Joseph Smith's time, and many of the visions from others are eerily similar to Joseph Smith's account. There is a line in church that the reason Joseph Smith never told anyone else about the First Vision is because he was persecuted for it, but Richard Bushman himself notes that Joseph Smith might have kept it to himself because it was such a common event in those times that no one would have thought anything of it. In an article that Bushman wrote about a very similar account, he notes this [vision from Solomon Chamberlain](#): "Dissatisfied with the religions he had tried, Chamberlain prayed for further guidance, and in 1816, according to his account, "the Lord revealed to me in a vision of the night an angel," whom Chamberlain asked about the right way. The angel told him that the churches were corrupt and that God would soon raise up an apostolic church. Chamberlain printed up an account

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<sup>13</sup> 1838 account ([Joseph Smith—History 1:25](#)).

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of his visions and was still distributing them and looking for the apostolic church when he stopped in Palmyra.” ([Meridian Magazine, archived by BYU studies](#))

What is most amazing about that vision isn't just how much it matches Joseph Smith's First Vision, but that Solomon Chamberlin gave his account of the visit to the Smith family in 1829. As we've noted on other subjects, Joseph Smith has a history of incorporating surrounding materials into his own theology. The Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods were introduced by the Campbellite branch that Sidney Rigdon was a part of, and shortly after Rigdon joined the church Joseph Smith introduced these two priesthoods and changed the Doctrine and Covenants to fit this new theology along with a more specific, grander story including John the Baptist which was never previously mentioned. The temple ceremony was lifted heavily from the masons, and a new BYU study found that Joseph Smith's 'translation' of the Bible was lifted heavily from Adam Clarke's biblical commentaries.

Does that sound familiar? It is a well documented pattern with Joseph Smith, and while the church implores us to ignore the facts and focus on how we used to feel about the church, this is not an honest or healthy relationship. If a husband/wife was caught lying asked their spouse to focus only on good thoughts and ignore the evidence, we would all consider that an unhealthy relationship. As we've noted in our other annotated essays, spiritual witnesses rely heavily on the foundation built up through years of being in church and being told you know it's true. But that's true of all religions and even the most notorious cults of our time — [this video is pretty good evidence of how spiritual witness are formed in all religions and in many cases used in unhealthy ways](#). At the 10 minute mark there is a young woman from an LDS offshoot talking about receiving a spiritual witness that polygamy is the Lord's way.

It is best for all of us to do our own research to come to a conclusion based on facts, evidence, and then trying to make sense of the research by looking at what conclusions make sense. This should be done both with LDS and non-LDS approved sources to get a real picture of the First Vision, Book of Abraham, Polygamy and Polyamory, and Book of Mormon issues. One common misconception is that critical websites/articles are “anti-Mormon,” but the reality is that most critical websites are using church sources to make their case. Facts are not “anti-Mormon” nor are the different first vision accounts. Talking about how the 1832 version was suppressed for decades is not anti-Mormon - it is something that happened and is sourced with church documents. The same can be said for the changing theology, polygamy, marrying other faithful member's wives, the ban on blacks for the priesthood and temple ordinances, the priesthood restoration, and so much more.

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If you've made it this far, thanks for reading. I know this is not easy material to read, and I know it is angering and shocking to discover all of this information that the church does not tell its members. If you would like any further resources for both church history and handling a faith crisis, please email us. Often times the church tells members in talks and articles about how miserable life would be without it, but the reality is that more people are leaving the church each year and they have lives that are just as happy if not more so than they had with the church. It is difficult to walk away from something that ancestors were a part of, but the reality is that those ancestors never were told the truth about the church, just as we were never told it from the church today. Please contact us if you would like further resources or support, and thank you again for reading this annotated essay.

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