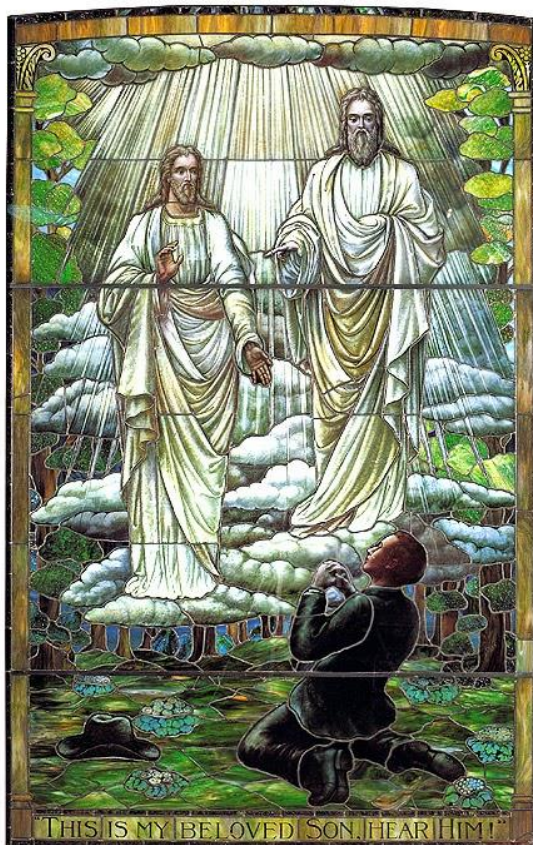


# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

# Recorded Accounts of

# The First Vision

DENNIS A. WRIGHT, DMIN



The importance of the First Vision within the Latter Day Saint movement evolved over time. It should be noted that there is little evidence that Smith discussed the First Vision publicly prior to 1830.<sup>1</sup> Mormon historian James B. Allen explains that:

The fact that none of the available contemporary writings about Joseph Smith in the 1830s, none of the publications of the Church in that decade, and no contemporary journal or correspondence yet discovered mentions the story of the

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<sup>1</sup> "The earliest allusion, oral or written, to the first vision is the brief mention that was transcribed in June 1830 and originally printed in the Book of Commandments." [Palmer, Grant H. (2002), *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books), 235.]

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first vision is convincing evidence that at best it received only limited circulation in those early days.<sup>2</sup>

## ≈ 1830s reference to early Christian regeneration

In June 1830, Smith provided the first clear record of a significant personal religious experience prior to the visit of the angel Moroni.<sup>3</sup> At that time, Smith and his associate Oliver Cowdery were establishing the Church of Christ, the first Latter Day Saint church. In the “Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ,” Smith recounted his early history, noting:

“For, after that it truly was manifested unto [Smith] that he had received remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world, but after truly repenting, God visited him by an holy angel ... and gave unto him power, by the means which was before prepared that he should translate a book.”<sup>4</sup>

No further explanation of this “manifestation” is provided. Although the reference was later linked to the First Vision,<sup>5</sup> its original hearers would have understood the manifestation as simply another of many revival experiences in which the subject testified that his sins had been forgiven.<sup>6</sup>

## ≈ 1832 Smith account

The earliest extant account of the First Vision was handwritten by Smith in 1832 in a letter book, but its existence was not known outside the Church History department until it was published in 1965.<sup>7</sup> Sometime around 1930, the pages on which the account was

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<sup>2</sup> Allen, James B. (1966), “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Thought”, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 1 (3).

<sup>3</sup> The account was first published to non-Mormons in 1831. Howe, Eber Dudley, ed. (April 19, 1831), “[The Mormon Creed](#)”, *The Telegraph*, Painesville, Ohio, vol. 2, no. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Howe (1831).

<sup>5</sup> Allen, James B. (1980), “Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought”, *Journal of Mormon History*, 7:45; Bushman, Richard Lyman (2005), *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. (New York: Knopf), 39, 112.

<sup>6</sup> Bushman (2005), 39.

<sup>7</sup> “One of the most significant documents of that period yet discovered was brought to light in 1965 by Paul R. Cheesman, a graduate student at Brigham Young University. This is a handwritten manuscript apparently composed about 1833 and either written or dictated by Joseph Smith. It contains an account of the early experiences of the Mormon prophet and includes the story of the first vision. While the story varies in some details from the version presently accepted, enough is there to indicate that at least as early as 1833 Joseph Smith contemplated writing and perhaps publishing it. The manuscript has apparently lain in the L.D.S. Church Historian’s office for many years, and yet few if any who saw it realized its profound historical significance.” [Allen (1966), 35]

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written were torn from the letter book, removed from the Church Historian's collection and placed into a private safe in the custody of Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith. In 1952, General Authority Levi E. Young met with amateur historian LaMar Peterson and told him of a "strange account" in Joseph's handwriting that did not mention God the Father. In 1964, Peterson told Jerald and Sandra Tanner about the account, and they subsequently asked permission from Joseph Fielding Smith to see it, but were denied. In 1964, Smith authorized the showing of the account to Paul R. Cheesman, a BYU student working on his master's thesis. The Tanners obtained a copy of the thesis transcript and the account was published for the first time in 1965.<sup>8</sup>

[T]he Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in <the> attitude of calling upon the Lord <in the 16th year of my age> a pillar of fire light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the <Lord> opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph <my son> thy sins are forgiven thee. go thy <way> walk in my statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life <behold> the world lieth in sin and at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned aside from the gospel and keep not <my> commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to th[e]ir ungodliness and to bring to pass that which <hath> been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Ap[ost]les behold and lo I come quickly as it [is] written of me in the cloud <clothed> in the glory of my Father ...."<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Smith's later accounts of the vision, the 1832 account emphasizes personal forgiveness and mentions neither an appearance of God the Father nor the phrase "This is my beloved Son, hear him." In the 1832 account, Smith also stated that before he experienced the First Vision, his own searching of the scriptures had led him to the conclusion that mankind had "apostatized from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stan Larson "Another Look at Joseph Smith's First Vision", *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Summer 2014), 37-62.

<sup>9</sup> "Letterbook 1", *The Joseph Smith Papers*, 2. Angle brackets indicate insertions by Smith.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Smith History, 1832, as found in Vogel, Dan, ed. (1996), *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 1. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books), 28.

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## ∞ 1834 Cowdery account

In several issues of the Mormon periodical *Messenger and Advocate* (1834–35),<sup>11</sup> Oliver Cowdery wrote an early biography of Smith. In one issue, Cowdery explained that Smith was confused by the different religions and local revivals during his “15th year” (1820), leading him to wonder which church was “the true one.” In the next issue of the biography, Cowdery explained that reference to Smith’s “15th year” was a typographical error, and that actually the revivals and religious confusion took place in Smith’s “17th year.”

Therefore, according to Cowdery, the religious confusion led Smith to pray in his bedroom, late on the night of September 23, 1823, after the others had gone to sleep, to know which of the competing denominations was correct and whether “a Supreme being did exist.” In response, an angel appeared and granted him forgiveness of his sins. The remainder of the story roughly parallels Smith’s later description of a visit by an angel in 1823 who told him about the golden plates. Thus, Cowdery’s account, containing a single vision, differs from Smith’s 1832 account, which contains two separate visions, one in 1821 prompted by religious confusion (the First Vision) and a separate one regarding the plates on September 22, 1822. Cowdery’s account also differs from Smith’s 1842 account, which includes a First Vision in 1820 and a second vision on September 22, 1823.

## ∞ 1835 Smith accounts

On November 9, 1835, Smith dictated an account of the First Vision in his diary after telling it to a stranger<sup>12</sup> who had visited his home earlier that day.<sup>13</sup> Smith said that when perplexed about religions matters, he had gone to a grove to pray<sup>14</sup> but that his tongue seemed swollen in his mouth and that he had been interrupted twice by the sound of someone walking behind him.<sup>15</sup> Finally, as he prayed, he said his tongue was loosed, and he saw a pillar of fire in which an unidentified “personage” appeared.<sup>16</sup> Then another unidentified personage told Smith his sins were forgiven and “testified unto [Smith] that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”<sup>17</sup> An interlineation in the text notes, “and I saw many

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<sup>11</sup> See the full text of the *Messenger and Advocate* from December 1834, [page 42](#) and January 1835, [78-79](#).

<sup>12</sup> The stranger was Robert Matthias, a religious con-artist using the alias “Joshua the Jewish minister”. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 275-276.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, Joseph (1835), “Diary of Joseph Smith Jr.”, in Jessee, Dean C (ed.), *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book [published 2002]), 22-24.

<sup>14</sup> Smith (1835), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Smith (1835), 23–24.

<sup>16</sup> Smith (1835), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

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angels in this vision.”<sup>18</sup> Smith said this vision occurred when he was 14 years old and that when he was 17, he “saw another vision of angels in the night season after I had retired to bed” (referring to the later visit of the angel Moroni who showed him the location of the golden plates).<sup>19</sup> Smith identified none of these personages or angels with “the Lord” as he had in 1832.<sup>20</sup>

A few days later, on November 14, 1835, Smith told the story to another visitor, Erastus Holmes.<sup>21</sup> In his journal, Smith said that he had recited his life story “up to the time I received the first visitation of angels, which was when I was about fourteen years old.”<sup>22</sup>

## ∞ 1838 Smith account

In 1838, Smith began dictating a history, introduced as “I have been induced to write this history ... in relation both to myself and the Church.”<sup>23</sup> This history included a new account of the First Vision, later published in three issues of *Times and Seasons*.<sup>24</sup> This version was later incorporated into the Pearl of Great Price, which was canonized by the LDS Church in 1880, as Joseph Smith–History. Thus, it is often called the “canonized version” of the First Vision story.

This version differs from the 1840 version because it includes the proclamation, “This is My Beloved Son, hear Him” from one of the personages, whereas the 1840 version does not. The canonized version says that in the spring of 1820, during a period of “confusion and strife among the different denominations” following an “unusual excitement on the subject of religion”, Smith had debated which of the various Christian groups he should join. While in turmoil, he read from the Epistle of James: “If any of you lack wisdom, let

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Abanes, Richard (2002). *One Nation Under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church*. (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows), 16 [the 1835 account [Archived](#) April 14, 2005, at the [Wayback Machine](#)]. In 1835, Smith approved the “Lectures on Faith”, an orderly presentation of Mormonism (probably written by Sidney Rigdon) in which it was taught that although Jesus Christ had a tangible body of flesh, God the Father was a spiritual presence—a view not out of harmony with orthodox Christian belief. The “Lectures on Faith” were canonized by the LDS Church and included as part of the Doctrine and Covenants until de-canonicalized after 1921. (Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 283–284.)

<sup>21</sup> Smith (1835), 35.

<sup>22</sup> Smith (1835), 35–36. When LDS Church historian B. H. Roberts included this account into his *History of the Church* 2:312, he changed the words “first visitation of angels” to “first vision.”

<sup>23</sup> The original 1838 manuscript has been lost, but the account was copied to manuscripts dating from 1839, which indicates that the year of writing was 1838, a fact also confirmed by Smith’s journal entries. See Jessee (1969), 6–7.

<sup>24</sup> *Times and Seasons*, March and April, vol. 3 nos. 9, 11.

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him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."<sup>25</sup>

One morning, deeply impressed by this scripture, the fourteen-year-old Smith went to the woods near his home, knelt, and began his first vocal prayer. Almost immediately he was confronted by an evil power that prevented speech. A darkness gathered around him, and Smith believed that he would be destroyed. He continued the prayer silently, asking for God's assistance though still resigned to destruction. At this moment a light brighter than the sun descended towards him, and he was delivered from the evil power.

In the light, Smith "saw two personages standing in the air". One pointed to the other and said, "This is My Beloved Son, hear Him." Smith asked which religious sect he should join and was told to join none of them because all existing religions had corrupted the teachings of Jesus Christ.

In his 1838 account, Smith wrote that he made an oblique reference to the vision to his mother in 1820, telling her the day it happened that he had "learned for [him]self that Presbyterianism is not true."<sup>26</sup> Lucy did not mention this conversation in her memoirs in her own words, but included the narrative from Joseph's 1838 account directly.<sup>27</sup>

Smith wrote he "could find none that would believe" his experience.<sup>28</sup> He said that shortly after the experience, he told the story of his revelation to a Methodist minister<sup>29</sup> who responded "with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there was no such thing as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the

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<sup>25</sup> James 1:5; Joseph Smith–History.

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, B.H., ed. (1902), *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, vol. 1. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), vol. 1, ch. 1, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Smith (1853), 78; "The First Vision: 1838 Joseph Smith History Account", Woodland Institute, Richard N. Holzapfel.

<sup>28</sup> "Letterbook 1", 2.

<sup>29</sup> According to Mormon apologist Larry C. Porter, the Methodist minister, George Lane, may have passed very near the Smith home and preached at a camp meeting along the way in July 1820. "In the pursuit of his ministerial duties Rev. Lane was in the geographical proximity of Joseph Smith on a number of occasions between the years 1819-1825. The nature degree or indeed the actuality of their acquaintanceship during this interval poses a number of interesting possibilities. ... In July 1820 Lane would have had to pass through the greater Palmyra-Manchester vicinity...unless he went by an extremely circuitous route. Present records do not specify Lane's itinerary or exact route ... but they do for Lane's friend, Rev. George Peck. ... [Peck's] conference route took him north to Ithaca, then on to a camp meeting in the Holland Purchase, subsequently passing along the Ridge Road to Rochester. ... As Rev. Peck, [Lane] may even have stopped at a camp meeting somewhere along the way. A preacher of his standing would always be a welcome guest." (Porter, Larry C. (1969), "[Reverend George Lane—Good 'Gifts', Much 'Grace', and Marked 'Usefulness'](#)", *BYU Studies*, 9 (3):335). Smith never mentions the name of the minister.

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apostles, and that there never would be any more of them.”<sup>30</sup> He also said that the telling of his vision story “excited a great deal of prejudice against me among professors of religion, and was the cause of great persecution, which continued to increase.”<sup>31</sup> There is no extant evidence from the 1830s for this persecution beyond Smith’s own testimony.<sup>32</sup> None of the earliest anti-Mormon literature mentioned the First Vision.<sup>33</sup> Smith also said he told others about the vision during the 1820s, and some family members said that they had heard him mention it, but none prior to 1823, when Smith said he had his second vision.<sup>34</sup> Joseph’s mother recorded the 1820-23 persecution of Joseph in her memoir, stating “From this time until the 21st of Sep. 1823, Joseph continued as usual to labor with his father; and nothing during this interval occurred of very great importance; though he suffered, as one would naturally suppose every kind of opposition and persecution from the different orders of religion.”<sup>35</sup>

## ∞ 1840 Pratt account

In September 1840, Orson Pratt published a version of the First Vision in England.<sup>36</sup> This version states that after Smith saw the light, “his mind was caught away, from the natural objects with which he was surrounded; and he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Smith (1835), 23; Smith, Joseph (1 April 1842c), [“History of Joseph Smith”](#), *Times and Seasons*, 3 (11):748; Roberts (1902), vol. 1, ch. 1, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Roberts (1902), vol. 1, ch. 1, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Allen, James B. (1966). “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s First Vision in Mormon Thought”, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 1 (3), 30: “According to Joseph Smith, he told the story of the vision immediately after it happened in the early spring of 1820. As a result, he said, he received immediate criticism in the community. There is little if any evidence, however, that by the early 1830s Joseph Smith was telling the story in public. At least if he were telling it, no one seemed to consider it important enough to have recorded it *at the time*, and no one was criticizing him for it.”

<sup>33</sup> Allen (1966), 31: “Apparently not until 1843, when the *New York Spectator* printed a reporter’s account of an interview with Joseph Smith, did a non-Mormon source publish any reference to the story of the first vision.”

<sup>34</sup> Palmer (2002), 245: “There is no evidence of prejudice resulting from this first vision. If his report that ‘all the sects...united to persecute me’ were accurate, one would expect to find some hint of this in the local newspapers, narratives by ardent critics, and in the affidavits D. P. Hurlbut gathered in 1833. The record is nevertheless silent on this issue. No one, friend or foe, in New York or Pennsylvania remember either that there was ‘great persecution’ or even that Joseph claimed to have had a vision. Not even his family remembers it.”

<sup>35</sup> Smith, Lucy Mack (1845), *Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845*, (Nauvoo), 78.

<sup>36</sup> Orson Pratt, “Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions”, Orson Pratt, Ballantyne and Huges publ, 1840 [reprinted in Jessee, Dean C., ed. (1989). *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book),1:149–60].

<sup>37</sup> Pratt, Orson (1840), [A Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records](#), (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes), 5.

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Pratt's account referred to "two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness".<sup>38</sup>

## ∞ 1842 Wentworth Letter

In 1842, two years before his death, Smith wrote to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, outlining the basic beliefs of his church and including an account of the First Vision.<sup>39</sup> Smith said that he had been "about fourteen years of age" when he had received the First Vision.<sup>40</sup> Like the Pratt account, Smith's Wentworth letter said that his "mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision."<sup>41</sup> and had seen "two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day."<sup>42</sup> Smith said he was told that no religious denomination "was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom" and that he was "expressly commanded to 'go not after them.'"<sup>43</sup>

## ∞ Joseph Smith's accounts found in later reminiscences

In the rough draft of her autobiography, Smith's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, describes her son being visited in 1823 by an angel, who told him "...there is not a true church on the Earth," but does not include a First Vision narrative.<sup>44</sup> The fair copy of the autobiography, prepared under Lucy's direction by the scribe who had also penned the rough draft, includes in the narrative a copy of the 1838 version of the First Vision from *Times and Seasons*.<sup>45</sup>

Late in his life, Smith's brother William gave two accounts of the First Vision, dating it to 1823,<sup>46</sup> when William was twelve years old. William said the religious excitement in Palmyra had occurred in 1822–23 (rather than the actual date of 1824–25);<sup>47</sup> that it was

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, Joseph (1 March 1842a), "[Church History \[Wentworth Letter\]](#)" (PDF), *Times and Seasons*, 3 (9):706–710.

<sup>40</sup> Smith (1842a), 706.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Smith (1842a), 707.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Smith (1844–1845), bk. 3, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Smith (1845), 73; Smith, Lucy Mack (2001). Anderson, Lavina Fielding (ed.). *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books), 138, 335.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, William (1883), [William Smith on Mormonism: A True Account of the Origin of the Book of Mormon](#), (Lamoni, Iowa: RLDS Church), 6–8.

<sup>47</sup> Pursuette, David (2000). *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.), 26.



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stimulated by the preaching of a Methodist, the Rev. George Lane, a “great revival preacher”; and that his mother and some of his siblings had then joined the Presbyterian church.<sup>48</sup>

William Smith said he based his account on what Joseph had told William and the rest of his family the day after the First Vision:<sup>49</sup>

[A] light appeared in the heavens, and descended until it rested upon the trees where he was. It appeared like fire. But to his great astonishment, did not burn the trees. An angel then appeared to him and conversed with him upon many things. He told him that none of the sects were right; but that if he was faithful in keeping the commandments he should receive, the true way should be made known to him; that his sins were forgiven, etc.<sup>50</sup>

In an 1884 account, William also stated that when Joseph first saw the light above the trees in the grove, he fell unconscious for an undetermined amount of time, after which he awoke and heard “the personage whom he saw” speak to him.<sup>51</sup> [\[129\]](#)

## ∞ Comparison of written accounts

In the first written accounts of the First Vision, the central theme is personal forgiveness, while in later accounts the focus shifts to the apostasy and corruption of churches.<sup>52</sup> In early accounts, Smith seems reluctant to talk about the vision; in later versions, various details are mentioned that were not mentioned in the earliest narratives.<sup>53</sup>

Jerald and Sandra Tanner cite the multiple versions of the First Vision as evidence that it may have been fabricated by Smith.<sup>54</sup> For instance, they have specifically pointed out that it is unclear between various versions whether Smith was 14 or 15 at the time of the vision; whether he attended a contemporaneous religious revival; whether the supernatural personages told Smith that his sins were forgiven; whether the personages were angels,

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<sup>48</sup> Smith (1883), 6.

<sup>49</sup> Smith (1883), 6, 8–9.

<sup>50</sup> Smith (1883), 6, 8–9.

<sup>51</sup> Smith, William (1884), [“The Old Soldier’s Testimony”](#), *The Saints’ Herald*, 34 (39): 643–44.

<sup>52</sup> Bushman (2005), 40. “In the 1835 account and again in 1838, the balance of the two parts of the story — personal forgiveness as contrasted to apostasy of the churches — shifted. Joseph’s own salvation gave way to the opening of a new era of history.”

<sup>53</sup> Bushman (2005), 39–40. “At first, Joseph was reluctant to talk about his vision .... When he described the First Vision in 1832, he abbreviated the experience.”

<sup>54</sup> Tanner, Jerald and Sandra (1987), *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* (5th ed.), (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry), 143–162.

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Jesus, God, or some combination; and whether Smith had already determined for himself that all churches were false before he experienced the vision.

It is to be expected that LDS apologists have a different perspective on this inconvenient truth that the Tanners describe. For example, Stephen Prothero argues that any historian should expect to find differences in narratives written many years apart, and that the key elements are present in all the accounts.<sup>55</sup>

Some Mormon apologists view differences in the accounts as overstated. Richard L. Anderson (who was a Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University) wrote, “What are the main problems of interpreting so many accounts? The first problem is the interpreter. One person perceives harmony and interconnections while another overstates differences.”<sup>56</sup> Other Mormon apologists view the differences in the accounts as reflective of Smith’s increase in maturity and knowledge over time.<sup>57</sup>

It has been the experience of this author that many Mormon apologists—especially those employed by the LDS Church or by Brigham Young University—tend to “circle the wagons” and obfuscate the truth with large amounts of bloviation, whether verbal or written. The following table compares elements of First Vision accounts:

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<sup>55</sup> Prothero, Stephen (2003). *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 171. (“Any good lawyer (or historian) would expect to find contradictions or competing narratives written down years apart and decades after the event. And despite the contradictions, key elements abide. In each case, Jesus appears to Smith in a vision. In each case, Smith is blessed with a revelation. In each case, God tells him to remain aloof from all Christian denominations, as something better is in store.”)

<sup>56</sup> “One person perceives harmony and interconnections while another overstates differences. Think of how you retell a vivid event in your life—marriage, first day on the job, or an automobile accident. A record of all your comments would include short and long versions, along with many bits and pieces. Only by blending these glimpses can an outsider reconstruct what originally happened. The biggest trap is comparing description in one report with silence in another. By assuming that what is not said is not known, some come up with arbitrary theories of an evolution in the Prophet’s story. Yet we often omit parts of an episode because of the chance of the moment, not having time to tell everything, or deliberately stressing only a part of the original event in a particular situation. This means that any First Vision account contains some fraction of the whole experience. Combining all reliable reports will recreate the basics of Joseph Smith’s quest and conversation with the Father and Son.” (Anderson, Richard Lloyd (April 1996), “Joseph Smith’s Testimony of the First Vision”, *Ensign*.)

<sup>57</sup> Marlin Jensen (LDS church historian and member of the First Quorum of the Seventy): “I’ve actually studied the various accounts of Joseph’s First Vision, and I’m struck by the difference in his recountings. But as I look back at my missionary journals, for instance, which I’ve kept and other journals which I’ve kept throughout my life, I’m struck now in my older years by the evolution and hopefully the progression that’s taken place in my own life and how differently now from this perspective I view some things that happened in my younger years.” *Frontline and American Experience*, “[Interview: Marlin Jensen](#)”, in Helen Whitney (ed.), *The Mormons*, (PBS).

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Source of First Vision	Supernatural beings	Messages from beings	Notes
<p>1832</p> <p>Joseph Smith's own handwriting from his Letterbook<sup>58</sup></p>	<p>"The Lord"</p>	<p>"Thy sins are forgiven thee"; the "world lieth in sin" and has "turned aside from the gospel"; and a brief apocalyptic note.<sup>59</sup></p>	<p>Only account in Joseph Smith's handwriting. Frederick G. Williams edited Joseph's account to take place in his "16th year" (i.e. when he is 15 years old). All other accounts state his age as 14.</p>
<p>1835, Nov. 9, 14</p> <p>Joseph Smith diary (Ohio Journal, handwritten, <a href="#">Warren Parrish</a> scribe)<sup>60</sup></p>	<p>Two personages, and "many angels"</p>	<p>"Thy sins are forgiven thee" and Jesus is the "son of God"</p>	<p>No message of revivals or corrupt churches.</p>
<p>1838/1839</p> <p>History of the Church, Early Draft (James Mulholland Scribe)<sup>61</sup></p>	<p>Two personages appear, and one says, "This is my beloved Son, hear him".</p>	<p>The personages tell Smith that all churches are corrupt.</p>	<p>No mention of "sins forgiven". A revival is mentioned. First edited and published in 15 March, 1 April 1842</p>

<sup>58</sup> Jessee (1989); Vogel, Dan (1996). *Early Mormon Documents*, v 1. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books), 27-29.

<sup>59</sup> Vogel, Dan (2004), *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books), 30: "...the vision confirmed what [Smith] and his father had suspected, that the world was spiritually dead. Jesus told Joseph Jr. that 'the world lieth in sin at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned aside from the gospel and keep not my commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me.'"

<sup>60</sup> Jessee (1989), 68–69.

<sup>61</sup> "[History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 \[Draft 2\]](#)," 2. *The Joseph Smith Papers*. Retrieved August 30, 2023.

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			<i>Times and Seasons</i> , <sup>62</sup> later incorporated into <i>History of the Church</i> , and later into the Pearl of Great Price as Joseph Smith–History and thus is sometimes referred to as the “canonized version”. <sup>63</sup>
<b>1842, March 1</b> <i>Times and Seasons</i> , as part of the Wentworth letter <sup>64</sup>	Two personages appear, and one says, “This is my beloved Son, hear him”.	The personages tell Smith that all churches are corrupt.	No mention of “sins forgiven”. A revival is mentioned.
<b>1843, July</b> <b>Letter from Joseph Smith to D. Rupp</b> <sup>65</sup>	Two personages appear. No mention of “this is my son”.	The personages tell Smith that all churches are corrupt.	No mention of “sins forgiven”. No revival mentioned. Available online <a href="#">here</a> . See also the <a href="#">Wentworth letter</a> .
<b>1843, Aug 29</b> <b>Interview with journalist David White</b> <sup>66</sup>	Two personages appear. “Behold my beloved son, hear him”.	The personages tell Smith that all churches are corrupt.	Revival is mentioned. No mention of “sins forgiven”.

<sup>62</sup> [“Times and Seasons Volume 3, Number 11”](#). *www.centerplace.org*.

<sup>63</sup> Published in 1842.

<sup>64</sup> [“Times and Seasons, 1 March 1842, Page 706”](#). *www.josephsmithpapers.org*.

<sup>65</sup> Rupp, Daniel (1844). *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*, (Philadelphia: Daniel Rupp), 404–410.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with journalist David White. Reprinted in Jessee (1989), 1:443–444.

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## Accounts of others:

Source of First Vision	Supernatural beings	Messages from beings	Notes
1834 Cowdery Account <sup>67</sup>	An angel appears to Joseph in his bedroom.	Angel grants forgiveness of his sins.	Remainder of the story roughly parallels Smith's later description of a visit by an angel in 1823 who told him about the golden plates.
1840, September <a href="#">Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions</a> , Orson Pratt, <sup>68</sup>	Two "glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in their features".	"his sins were forgiven". The personages tell Smith that all churches are corrupt.	This is the first published version. No mention of revival. Online <a href="#">here</a> .
1841, June <i>A Cry from the Wilderness</i> , Orson Hyde <sup>69</sup>	Two "glorious personages" who resembled "each other in their features".	No specific message.	No mention of "sins forgiven" or revival. Smith determines for himself that all churches are corrupt.
1844, May 24 as told to Alexander Neibaur <sup>70</sup>	Two personages appear. One has a "light complexion" and "blue eyes". "This is my beloved son harken ye him".	Methodist churches are wrong. All churches are corrupt.	Revival is mentioned. No mention of "sins forgiven".

<sup>67</sup> Oliver Cowdery in the *Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835 issue.

<sup>68</sup> [Ballantyne and Huges publ](#), reprinted in: "Appendix: Orson Pratt, A[n] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, 1840," p. [3], The Joseph Smith Papers, Retrieved August 30, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Orson Hyde, published in German, Frankfurt, 1842 (reprinted in Jessee (1989), 1:405–409.

<sup>70</sup> Alexander Neibaur Journal, reprinted in Jessee (1989), 1:459–461.

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<p>1845 Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845, draft copy<sup>71</sup></p>	<p>An angel visited Joseph in 1823</p>	<p>“...there is not a true church on the Earth.”</p>	<p>The fair copy prepared under Lucy’s direction by her scribe includes in the narrative a copy of the 1838 version of the first vision as found in the <i>Times and Seasons</i>.<sup>72</sup></p>
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## ∞ Interpretations and responses to the vision

Smith said that he was persecuted by local “professors of religion” after sharing his story.<sup>73</sup> Historian D. Michael Quinn noted that at the time, the Smith family practiced various Cuning Folk traditions that were criticized by leaders of organized religion, and that Smith’s vision may have given Smith confidence to ignore those leaders and continue being an active participant in the Cuning Folk culture.<sup>74</sup>

Among contemporary denominations of the Latter Day Saint movement, the First Vision is typically viewed as a significant (often the *most* significant) event in the latter day restoration of the Church of Christ. However, the faiths differ in their teachings about the vision’s precise meaning and details.

Secular scholars and non-Mormons view the vision as a deliberate deception, false memory, delusion, or hallucination, or some combination of these.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Smith (1844–1845), bk. 3, p. 10.

<sup>72</sup> Smith (1845), 73.

<sup>73</sup> “[History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 \[Draft 2\],” p. 4](#), *The Joseph Smith Papers*. Retrieved August 30, 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Quinn, D. Michael (1998) [1987], *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (2nd ed.), (Salt Lake City: Signature Books), 31.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Coe, professor emeritus of Anthropology at Yale, has called Joseph Smith “a great religious leader” and “one of the greatest people who ever lived” because “like a shaman in anthropology,” like “magicians doing magic,” he “started out faking it” but ended up convincing himself (as well as others) that his visions were true (*Frontline and American Experience*, “[Interview: Michael Coe](#)”, in Helen Whitney (ed.), *The Mormons*, PBS).