

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The First Vision

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Without question the “First Vision” of Joseph Smith stands as the chart and compass to the genuineness of all his subsequent revelations. It is a vision that conflicts with virtually every major doctrine that Christians have held since the first century Church. Since the late nineteenth century Latter-day Saints authorities have agreed on the importance of the first vision for the authority of their Church. If the first vision is a fabricated and evolving story, then the entire foundation of Mormonism is defective.

Before losing faith in the Book of Mormon in his final days, Historian B. H. Roberts organized and edited much of the Mormon history. Roberts understood the importance of Smith’s first vision.” He states:

The facts in which Mormonism had its origin are of such a character that they cannot be resolved into delusion or mistake. Either they were truth or conscious Simon-pure invention. It is not possible to place the matter on middle ground. Joseph Smith was either a true Prophet or a conscious fraud or villain.¹

Former Prophet/President of the Latter-day Saints, Gordon B. Hinckley, declared that the first vision:

...becomes the hinge pin on which this whole cause turns. If the First Vision was true, if it actually happened, then the Book of Mormon is true...If the First Vision did not occur, then we are involved in a great sham. It is just that simple.²

In the current official account of the first vision, Smith went into a grove near his home in Palmyra, New York, in the spring of 1820, when he was fifteen years old. Smith claims he was so disturbed by the controversy of contending denominations during a time of revival when “great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties,” he began reading the Bible and was struck by the force of James 1:4, “*If any of you lack wisdom*

¹ B.H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints* 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907), 59.

² Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1997), 226.

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let him ask of God.” Sometime later, he went into a grove to pray for guidance, followed by a prayer for deliverance from an oppressive wicked spirit. Suddenly, “two Personages whose brightness and glory defy all description” appeared in the air standing above him. When he asked with which of the current denominations he was to unite, he was instructed to “join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the Personages who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt...”³

Joseph Smith was not the first to claim the appearance of two personages in a vision. The conversion story of Norris Stearns was published in 1815, in Greenfield Massachusetts, not far from where Joseph Smith, Sr. lived in Sharon, Vermont. In a pamphlet he describes his vision:

I saw two spirits, which I knew at the first sight. ... One was God, my Maker, almost in bodily shape like a man. His face was, as it were a flame of Fire, and his body, as it had been a Pillar and a cloud. In looking steadfastly to discern features, I could see none, but a glimpse would appear in some other place. Below him stood Jesus Christ my Redeemer, in perfect shape like a man...⁴

Joseph Smith’s later account of his first vision is strikingly similar, particularly in that Norris speaks of seeing two personages with what appeared to be bodies. Given the heterodox value of Stearns vision one cannot discount its influence on Smith’s first vision experience. It would be one that Smith would later affirm in the controversial King Follett funeral sermon in Nauvoo, Illinois.

When Joseph Smith was 18 years old the *Wayne Sentinel* reported a vision of Asa Wild in Amsterdam, New York. Wild claimed God showed him his beliefs were the “commandments and doctrines of men” and that every denomination of professing Christians had become extremely corrupt.”⁵ Smith uses much of the same language as

³ Joseph Smith, *Pearl of Great Price*, 1:1-19, 48-49.

⁴ Norris Stearns, *The Religious Experience of Norris Stearns, Written by Divine Command, Shewing the Marvellous Dealings of God to His Soul, and the Miraculous Manner in which He Was Delivered from the Jaws of Death and Hell; and His Soul Set at Liberty, —Likewise His Appointment to the Ministry; and Commission from on High, to Preach the Gospel to Every Creature,* pamphlet published in 1815 cited by Richard L. Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” 37 *BYU Studies* 1 (1997-8); Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 41. In the *BYU* article, 193, Bushman says, “That voice suited Joseph Smith perfectly, and he adapted it as his own, with immense success.” Bushman, as a faithful Mormon, is referring to other visionaries who simply stated the facts of their vision and were awed by them. In fairness, he is not saying, what we may believe is true, that Smith copied Stearns in his first vision, but merely Smith adapted their approach to their visions.

⁵ *Wayne Sentinel*, 22 October 1823, cited in Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 51-52.

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Wild when he says God told him the churches of his area “teach for doctrines the commandments of men,” and they were all “corrupt.” In Smith’s later account he says that God instructed him to join none of the churches.

Peter Bauder interviewed Smith, in the home of Peter Whitmer in October 1830; just seven months after Smith organized his Church, at that time named the Christ of Christ. Bauder, records spending twenty-four hours “investigating his writings and church records.” Of the interview Bauder made a significant observation, one that he likely brought up to Smith, noting Smith did not share any testimony of a conversion experience with the Lord,⁶ neither did he mention anything about a first vision story. It is likely that Smith, as with other of his developing doctrine, fabricated the first vision story to give credibility to his claim of being a prophet of God.

There are several documented accounts of this first vision by Smith and others close to him. These accounts differ significantly raising serious questions of Smith’s authenticity as a Prophet. By comparing the accounts, it is evident the first vision becomes an evolving story, beginning with the presence of angels, into one presence appearing to him, and finally the appearance two personages, to fit his changing theology.

The first known record of this vision appeared in Smith’s letter book between July 20 and November 27, 1832. This account was discovered by Paul R. Chessman in the Church Historian’s office where it had been for many years. It differs significantly from the current version of the vision which is probably the reason it was not acknowledged until 1965. Fredrick G. Williams is the scribe for the introduction and conclusion, but the vision account is in Smith’s own handwriting. He describes a scene where “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.’” Smith records only the **single person of the Lord appearing** to him at 16 years of age. He further describes the professors of religion as having “turned aside from the gospel.” Smith records the person of Christ announcing that his sins had been forgiven, “...the heavens opened upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me says Joseph my son thy Sins are forgiven thee....” This account, recorded fifteen years after it was to have taken place, records no angels, no record of the Father’s appearance, and no conversation concerning which church to join.⁷ A second account is recorded in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery. On November 9, 1835, of a man that introduced

⁶ Peter Bauder, *The Kingdom of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: Contrasted with That of Antichrist. A Brief Review of Some of the Most Interesting Circumstances, Which Have Transpired Since the Institution of the Gospel of Christ, from the Days of the Apostles* (Canajoharie, New York: A. H. Calhoun, 1834), 36-38 cited in Dan Vogel ed. *Early Mormon Documents* 1, 17.

⁷ Scott H. Fauling, ed. *An American Prophet’s Record Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 5-6.

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himself to Smith as Joshua the Jewish Minister. His real name was Robert Matthews, a known con artist. In their conversation Smith relates a second account of the first vision. Smith states a “personage appear[e]d in the midst of this pillar of flame.” Then another personage appeared, along with many angels, declaring “Thy sins are forgiven thee” and “Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”⁸

There are no specific descriptions identifying the personages, no message of revivals taking place at the time, and no mention of the churches being corrupt. The description appears to be the words of an angel who testifying of Christ. Smith includes in this version that, “There were many angels.”

In *Joseph Smith’s 1835-1836 Diary* and the “Manuscript History,” is a third account of the vision recorded on November 14, 1835. Joseph Smith states: “This afternoon, Erastus Holmes, of Newbury, Ohio, called on me to inquire about the establishment of the church, and to be instructed in doctrine more perfectly. I gave him a brief relation of my experience ...up to **the time I received the first visitation of angels**, which was when I was about fourteen years old; also the revelations I received afterwards concerning the Book of Mormon, a short account of the rise and progress of the church up to this date.” This account was printed in the *Deseret News*, (29 May 1852) without alteration. However, when the account was printed in the *History of the Church* the phrase “first visitation of angels” was changed to “my first vision.”⁹

James Mulholland, a scribe of Smith’s began to record the history shortly after Smith arrived at Nauvoo, Illinois in April 1839. Mulholland died on the 3rd of November of that same year.¹⁰ The account is written in Mulholland’s own handwriting, and it is recorded in third person. It became the source for the *History of the Church*, after undergoing several revisions before it was recorded.¹¹ At “a little over fourteen years of age...I saw a light and in the midst of the light I saw two personages and they did in reality speak to <un>to me, or one of them did,” reads the record.¹² There is no reference to his sins being forgiven or that it happens during a time of revivals.

⁸ _____. 51. This second account is deleted from the *History of the Church*, 2, 304. A deceptive line has replaced the account. It reads, “as recorded in the former part of this history.”

⁹ *History of the Church* 2: 312) as cited by Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism-Shadow or Reality?* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1987) 148.

¹⁰ Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 1:54-55.

¹¹ Milton V. Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: The first vision in its historical context* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 122 as cited by Neal E. Lambert & Richard H. Crocraft, *Tending the Garden* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, Inc.,1996), 90.

¹² Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 1:5.

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The first published account of this vision was in Orson Pratt's pamphlet, "An Interesting Account of Remarkable Visions, And of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records," in 1840—twenty years after the vision was said to have taken place. The pamphlet, printed primarily for the British, identified Smith as "fourteen or fifteen years old" when "two glorious personages," appeared to him, that Pratt does not identify, although he does embellish the story as originally told by Smith in 1838.¹³

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A fifth vision account was recorded when Joseph Smith prepared a brief history of the church up to March 1842, at the request of John Wentworth, owner and proprietor of the *Chicago Democrat* and on behalf of a friend named Barstow, who was writing a history of New Hampshire. Smith responded to the request with the stipulation that the account not be edited, but printed in full and it was. The letter included, among other things an account of the first vision. This account states his struggle to find the correct church and the appearance of "two personages who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness." He says, "they told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his Church and kingdom." Further they declared that "the fullness of the Gospel should be at some future time be made known unto me." On March 1, 1842, the letter to Wentworth was published in the Mormon Newspaper *Times and Seasons*,¹⁴ twenty-two years after the vision was supposed to have happened.

In summary, the earliest account of the First Vision, written in Smith's own handwriting in 1832, only the single personage of the Lord is mentioned, who declares "thy sins are forgiven thee." This account had been secreted away for years in the Church Historian's office because it conflicted with the presently published account. In the present account there is no mention of the Lord announcing that Smith's sins are forgiven. Neither in the first account, is there any mention of the vision taking place during a time of revival in the churches and there is no discussion as to which church to join as it appears in the present account. In the first account there is no mention of a spiritual struggle that prevented him from speaking as there is in today's version of the vision. A person might forget many things, but it is not very likely he would forget details of his conversion experience or a dramatic vision of seeing both the Father and Son at the same time.

In the various accounts, Smith claims to have been different ages when he had the vision. He vows to have been sixteen years old in the first diary account,¹⁵ and as young as

¹³ Orson Pratt, "An Interesting Account Of Remarkable Visions, And of The Late Discovery Of Ancient American Records" (Edinburgh: Scotland, 1840), 3-7.

¹⁴ *Times and Seasons* 1 (March 1842): 706-707.

¹⁵ Fauling, 5; Jessee, 280.

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fourteen in two other accounts.¹⁶ In the second account a “pillar of fire”¹⁷ is mentioned, but in the official version, not only is the reference to a “pillar of fire” missing, but Smith adds a “thick darkness that gathered around” him.¹⁸ There are also conflicting details as to instructions he received. None of the earliest accounts contain a reference to a revival climate in the Palmyra churches accompanied by a condemnation of all religious groups, found in today’s official version in *The Pearl of Great Price*.¹⁹

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Oliver Cowdery’s account of the first vision, recorded in cooperation with Joseph Smith for the church newspaper, *The Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, twelve years after the event was supposed to have happened, mentions only “an angel” appearing to Smith.²⁰

Joseph Fielding Smith, tenth president of the LDS, compared the account of the first vision’s importance to the resurrection of Christ when he wrote: “The greatest event that has ever occurred in this world since the resurrection of the Son of God ...was the coming of the Father and the Son to that boy, Joseph Smith.”²¹

David O. McKay, ninth president of the LDS, regarded the vision as critical to all Mormon doctrine. He wrote, “The appearing of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith is the foundation of this church.”²²

Mormon Apostle John A. Widtsoe, measured everything that followed by the validity of the first vision, “The First Vision of 1820 is of first importance in the history of Joseph Smith. Upon its reality rest the truth and value of his subsequent work.”²³

Yet, in a sermon on February 18, 1855 President Brigham Young declared, “The Lord did not come with the armies of heaven...But He did send His angel to Joseph Smith jun (sic) ...and informed him that he should not join any of the religious sects of the day...”²⁴ Clearly, Young was thinking about Joseph’s first vision in the grove. How could the second Prophet of the church be unclear about what happened in the first vision? The

¹⁶ ____. 51, 59

¹⁷ ____. 51; Jessee, 284.

¹⁸ Smith, “History,” *Doctrine and Covenants*, 49.

¹⁹ Wesley P. Walters, “New Light on Mormon Origins from the Palmyra Revival,” *Dialogue-A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, (Spring 1, 1969), 60-73.

²⁰ *Messenger and Advocate*, 1:3, 78-79.

²¹ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1919), 495.

²² David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City, Utah: An Improvement Era Publication, 1953), 85.

²³ John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith: Seeker After Truth Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1957), 19.

²⁴ *Journal of Discourses*, 2, 171.

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fact is that Brigham Young, in thirty years as President of the Church, never mentioned the Father and the Son appearing to Joseph Smith.

For more than 130 years the diaries of Joseph Smith, Jr. were kept secretly locked away in the archives of LDS headquarters in Utah, because of the conflicting accounts of the first vision. Only after Mormon scholars revealed their presence and released excerpts of the different accounts of the first vision, which were subsequently published, did the Church Historian's Office acknowledge their genuineness.²⁵

It is significant that in 1859 when Joel Tiffany interviewed Martin Harris, Smith's first official secretary and the financial backer for the printing of the Book of Mormon, the first vision was never mentioned.²⁶ It appears that Harris was unaware of this experience that was to become the chief cornerstone of Mormonism or he would have no doubt related it.

Besides the different accounts, there is the matter of inaccuracy of the date for the first vision. Smith dates his conversion in the grove of Palmyra in 1820 while an extraordinary revival was taking place in the area. The late Wesley P. Walter, Presbyterian minister and respected researcher of Mormonism, proved conclusively that the revival referred to by Smith took place four years later in 1824. Records from the churches in the Palmyra area reveal no significant revival prior to 1824. Reverend George Lane, a Methodist minister and a Reverend Benjamin B. Stockton were pastors in Palmyra no earlier than 1824.²⁷

Before 1840, there is little evidence that many of early the Latter-day Saints knew anything about the first vision that Joseph Smith claimed he had in the grove. Noteworthy is the fact that none of the early Mormon newspapers carried any report of the first vision account. Neither does the Book of Commandments, containing early revelations of Joseph Smith, Jr. published in 1833, nor the 1835 printing of the Doctrine and Covenants, with additional revelations, refer to this vision. The seven series "Lectures on Faith," that claimed to reveal what the Church believed, made one reference to the first vision. Not even the early critics of Joseph Smith, in newspapers and books mentioned this controversial vision that runs counter to what Christians and Jews have always believed about God. It is such a radical departure from traditional biblical theology that it is hard to conceive that the early media would have missed it, especially since they were critical concerning the reported discovery of the Book of Mormon plates

²⁵ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Major Problems of Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1989), 55.

²⁶ Joel Tiffany, *Tiffany's Monthly* (New York: Published by Joel Tiffany, 1859), 163-170

²⁷ Wesley P. Walters, *New Light on Mormon Origins* (Printed by the author, 1990), 7-8.

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and their translation.²⁸ The First Vision has only taken on importance in the late nineteenth century, when affirmation of it has become a requirement to join the LDS Church.

Mormon scholars have attributed the failure of Smith to promote the first vision to two reasons. One was a rebuke that Smith said he received when he related the vision to Methodist pastor Rev. George Lane. Smith reported Lane as saying, "There were no such things as visions in these days." Thus, Smith did not share the story for fear of ridicule. Smith also said that he received increased persecution. Former Assistant Church Historian and B.Y.U. professor James B. Allen, questions that Smith ever shared the vision with Rev. Lane and states there is no evidence Smith was persecuted.²⁹ The second reason suggested is that it was such a private and sacred story it was not told publicly. Hugh Nibley, former professor at Brigham Young University and unofficial apologist for Mormon doctrine, discovered some elements of the vision in the personal diary his great-grandfather Alexander Neibaur who was associated with Smith during the Nauvoo days of the 1840's. Nibley suggested that Neibaur didn't publish this account of the vision, because it was too sacred and private to report.³⁰

In today's Authorized Version, Joseph Smith claimed to have seen God the Father and Jesus the Son as he was praying in the grove. In 1832, he gave a revelation for the priesthood, which all males are expected to enter, that no man can see God without the priesthood.³¹ It was not until May 15, 1829 that Smith and Oliver Cowdery avowed that John the Baptist appeared to ordain them into the Aaronic Priesthood.³² No date is recorded in Mormon history for the confirming of the Melchizedek Priesthood, but some scholars consider May or June 1829 as the time.³³ Other scholars place the date in 1830. The Bible declares that Jesus is the only One worthy to be a Priest after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:19-20). If Smith was 14, 16, or 18 he could have only seen Jesus as late as 1824, before he received the priesthood. From Smith's own accounts, he saw Jesus before he received the priesthood with Oliver Cowdery in 1829.

William E. McLellin was baptized into the Mormon Church on August 20, 1831, ordained as an Elder a few days later and became a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles,

²⁸ Stan Larson and Samuel J. Passey, editors, *The William E. McLellin Papers 1854-1880* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007) Editors Preface xxv-xxvi, 367.

²⁹ James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (Autumn 1996) 30.

³⁰ Hugh Nibley, "Censoring Joseph Smith's Story," *Improvement Era* (July 1961), 522 as cited in James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," 34.

³¹ Smith, *Doctrine and Covenants*, 84:21-22, 155.

³² Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church* 1, 180.

³³ Allen and Leonard, *The Story of the Saints*, 44.

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the second most important office in the Church. He states that he was unaware of this first vision even later in life. In the beginning of the Church at Kirtland, Ohio, the Saints were taught that God was “a person of Spirit,” not a person with a human body.³⁴

In 1821, a young lawyer in Adams, New York, by the name of Charles Grandison Finney, wrestled with conviction of his sin. North of town young Finney entered a grove to pray, eventually surrendering his heart to Christ. Endowed with new power he ran back into town declaring his newly found faith to offices, homes and in the street. Within twenty-four hours, no less than twenty-four people had professed faith in Christ due to his testimony.³⁵ Shortly after his conversion; Finney experienced a call and began to preach, first in a revival at Evans’ Mill, then on to Antwerp, Western, Auburn and Rome, New York.

As early as 1824, news from Evans’ Mill and Antwerp in Jefferson Country, New York about the apprentice lawyer turned evangelist and a certain man who exhibited unusual power in prayer, dubbed “Father Daniel Nash,” swept the nation. Mighty conversions of those who opposed the revivals resulted in answers to prayer. It was one of the leading news stories of the day, second only to the opening of the Erie Canal. In 1825, revival broke out in Oneida County. These revivals have been termed the “western revivals.”

In 1830, a revival broke out in Rochester, where Finney was preaching, that continued for six months. Although Finney employed a similar invitation previously, it was in the Rochester revival that he formally introduced the “anxious seat,”³⁶ where people were invited to come to the front and pray for their souls. The Methodists had previously employed a type of altar call in Rochester before Finney arrived. No little stir spread over the entire state and throughout the country concerning these revivals and the new method of inquiry.³⁷

News of Charles Finney’s “new measures” became a source of intense debate between noted ministers of the area. These measures included the practice of women praying in public, protracted meetings, a call to publicly come forward to an “anxious seat,” praying

³⁴ Larson and Passey, xxv.

³⁵ Lewis A. Drummond, *The Awakening That Must Come* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), 18.

³⁶ Garth M. Rosell and Richard A.G. Dupuis, eds. *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academic Books, 1989), 306. The editors cite “The Second Great Awakening in the Urban Centers: An Examination of Methodism and the New Measures,” *Journal of American History* 59, 2, (September 1972), 338-339.

³⁷ Frederick Morgan Davenport, *Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1905), 191-192.

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publicly for people by name, and immediate church membership for converts.³⁸ A pamphlet criticizing the meetings, printed by a ministerial association, only served to fuel the fires of interest in the Finney meetings.

As early as 1826, some thirty-five miles from Palmyra where Smith lived a mighty revival led by Finney swept over the town of Auburn as well as nearby communities. Joseph Smith would have had to be a veritable hermit not to have heard and read about the revivals including the unusual conversion testimony of Finney. It is altogether possible that Joseph Smith attended one these early revivals of Finney and heard Finney's impressive conversion testimony first hand.

Reports of the 1830-1831 Rochester Revival were printed in the *Rochester Observer* and some religious journals, such as the *Western Recorder* in nearby Utica. From the Rochester Revival (1830-1831), only twenty-four miles from Joseph Smith's hometown of Palmyra, estimates of large number of conversions were reported. Even the conservative count of 10,600 known conversions would have been a great revival.³⁹ *The New York Evangelist* estimated that "almost every town within forty or fifty miles of Rochester is favored more or less with the presence of the Lord."⁴⁰ There is little question that the Rochester Revival was the "watershed" of Finney's career, perhaps reaching the surrounding area as far as one hundred miles or more.⁴¹

The Rochester Revival began on Friday the 10th of September, 1830 and concluded six months later on March the 6th, 1831 including a final two weeks of simultaneous meetings

³⁸ Richard Carwardine, "The Second Great Awakening in the Urban Centers: An Examination of Methodism and the New Measures," *Journal of American History* 59, (September 1972), 332-335; Robert Hastings Nichols, *Presbyterianism In New York State* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 101.

³⁹ Rosell, and Dupuis, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 326, footnote 115.

⁴⁰ *The New York Evangelist*, February 26, 1831. *The Rochester Observer*, 12 November 1830, reported the wide-reaching effects of the Finney Revival. The *Western Recorder*, a Presbyterian newspaper, had a regular column that reported revival efforts in different parts of the nation and reported some of the early Finney revivals. The years of 1828 and 1832 are missing from the Utica library. Finney's conversion experience may have been published in one of those years. A Rev. A.E. Campbell, pastor of the Palmyra Presbyterian Church (1828-1830), is listed as an agent for the *Western Recorder* in the February 3, 1829 issue. Joseph Smith's mother, Lucy, Samuel Harrison, Hyrum, and Sophronia were members of the Presbyterian church in Palmyra up to September in 1828 (Brodie, 410.) Orson Parker, a lawyer in Adams, New York, in 1831 recorded accounts of people who went into the same grove where Finney prayed and found the Lord, which seems to indicate that Finney's conversion experience was well known in the Adams area and could have been known in other areas including Palmyra. Orson Parker, *The Fire and the Hammer* (Boston: James H. Earle, 1877), 257 as cited by Rosell and Dupuis in *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 36.

⁴¹ Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney 1792-1875 Revivalist and Reformer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 209, 211.

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in the surrounding area churches.⁴² One of the participating cities was Palmyra where Alfred E. Campbell was pastor of the Presbyterian Church, Joseph Smith's hometown.⁴³

The *Palmyra Reflector* of February 1, 1831 reported that Charles Grandison Finney was scheduled to preach at the Presbyterian Church of Palmyra on Thursday, February 3rd.⁴⁴ Egbert B. Grandin, the reluctant Palmyra publisher of the Book of Mormon, records in his diary of attending the service where Finney preached on "The Wages of Sin is Death." It was not uncommon for an evangelist, like Finney, to include his personal testimony of conversion in his sermon. A sermon on "The Wages of Sin," would serve as a perfect platform for his testimony. The next evening, February the 4th, Grandin again attended the Presbyterian Church where Finney preached,⁴⁵ but does not record the title of Finney's message. A long time resident told Mitchell Bronk, Manchester historian, that Joseph Smith, Jr. occasionally attended the revivals at the Baptist Church in Manchester, where the Smiths lived after moving from Palmyra. He chronicles, "What more concerns us here, however, is the fact that Joe [Smith, Jr.] occasionally attended the stone church [First Baptist Church of Manchester]; especially the revivals, sitting with the crowd-the 'sinners'-up in the gallery."⁴⁶

Before Smith became intoxicated with power, after he had printed the Book of Mormon that reflected the evangelical theology of his day, he was very open to other religious movements. As with many people during this time the revival movement led by Finney would have fascinated Smith.

Around the potbellied stove in the local grocery store of Seymour Scovell (Scoville), where Joseph Smith did odd jobs,⁴⁷ whittlers likely philosophized concerning these "new measures" employed by Finney and recounted details of Finney's conversion. Joseph Smith likely carried in his fertile mind the story of Finney's conversion, or may have viewed a printed account, which he incorporated into his own conversion experience. The evidence is compelling that Finney was Smith's source for his own conversion story.

⁴² George W. Parsons, *History of Rochester Presbytery*, 252.

⁴³ Keith J Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney 1792-1875 Revivalist and Reformer*, 208.

⁴⁴ *Palmyra Reflector*, February 1, 1831. The reference to the Presbyterian Church does not apparently refer to a building but rather to the body of believers as the Town of Palmyra does not record the Presbyterians as having a church building until 1832, one year later.

⁴⁵ Egbert B. Grandin Diary, Palmyra Public Library.

⁴⁶ Mitchell Bronk, "The Baptist Church at Manchester, New York," *The Chronicle-A Baptist Historical Quarterly* 11:1 (Jan, 1948), 23-24 as cited in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 3 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 259.

⁴⁷ Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorhams Preserve* (Rochester: New York, William Alling, 1851), 213.

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By comparing the conversion account recorded in Finney's *Memoirs* with Smith's first two diary accounts of the vision in the grove, the reader may note the similarities. Both Finney and Smith had been reading the Bible seeking truth. Both Finney and Smith became distressed over their sinful states. Both Finney and Smith were struck with the inadequacy of current denominations. Both Finney and Smith went into a "grove" to pray. Both Finney and Smith record thinking someone was approaching them while praying and looked up to see who was approaching. Finney wrote, "... again I thought I heard someone approach me, and I opened up my eyes to see ..." Smith wrote, in one account "I heard a voice behind me like some person walking toward me. I ... sprung up on my feet and looked around ..." Both Finney and Smith describe an inability to pray. Both Finney and Smith experienced an unusually bright light. Both Finney and Smith saw the Lord Jesus. Both Finney and Smith were filled with the Holy Spirit. Both Finney and Smith described the twin sensations of "love" and "joy."⁴⁸ If Smith was fourteen years old, as some accounts record, when he saw his vision in the grove near Palmyra, New York, it would have been in the same year that Finney was converted in the grove near Adams, New York. News of a lawyer turned preacher would no doubt have traveled rapidly and have been repeated in numerous conversations in the eighty miles between Adams and Palmyra, New York.

Why did Joseph Smith wait some twelve years before recording a vague account of his first vision, which is considered by Mormons today to be so crucial to their religion? Was it as Dale Morgan has suggested, "a literary creation"⁴⁹ which bore no support by those who knew him best at the time it was supposed to have taken place? Was he at a critical place in his career as a Prophet "facing division in his own ranks and strong opposition from the established churches" which drove him to fabricate the vision story to boost his image? It was likely invented as a necessary shift in theology from his initial concept of God as one, seen clearly in the Book of Mormon; to a plurality of gods.⁵⁰ It seems more than likely that Smith was aware of the details of Finney's conversion experience as he wrote his own first vision. Smith was regularly given to expediency, calling up a vision to suit the occasion or declaring a new revelation to correct some error in a former one.⁵¹ It is a fact that Joseph Smith borrowed from experiences around him, and made them a part of his story. His conversion account is no exception.

⁴⁸ Finney, *Memoirs* 8-9, 12, 15-16, 19-20; Scott H. Faulring, *An American Prophet's Record Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, 4-6, 50-51.

⁴⁹ John Phillip Walker, *Dale Morgan On Early Mormonism*, 260.

⁵⁰ Walters, *New Light on Mormon Origins*, 18.

⁵¹ Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church* 1,164-165. In this revelation Smith claimed that the copyright of the *Book of Mormon* would be sold in Canada, which never happened. David Whitmer, *An Address To All Believers In Christ*, 30-31. He received a corrected revelation.

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Several prominent Mormon scholars have lost faith in Smith as a Prophet and the Book of Mormon as they have studied the historical records. Some Mormon academicians wish merely to reform the Church by dealing forthrightly and objectively with the contradictory accounts and obvious problems of Mormonism, yet, they often resent non-Mormon scholars writing about their church. They look back to their ancestors driven from Missouri and Illinois, pulling carts across the foreboding mountains and plains to the Salt Lake Basin and forging a home from the rugged frontier wilderness. For them, the church has ceased to be a matter of faith but rather their history and heritage.⁵²

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⁵² © Harrod, Allen F., *Deception by Design: The Mormon Story*. Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2011, 69-81.