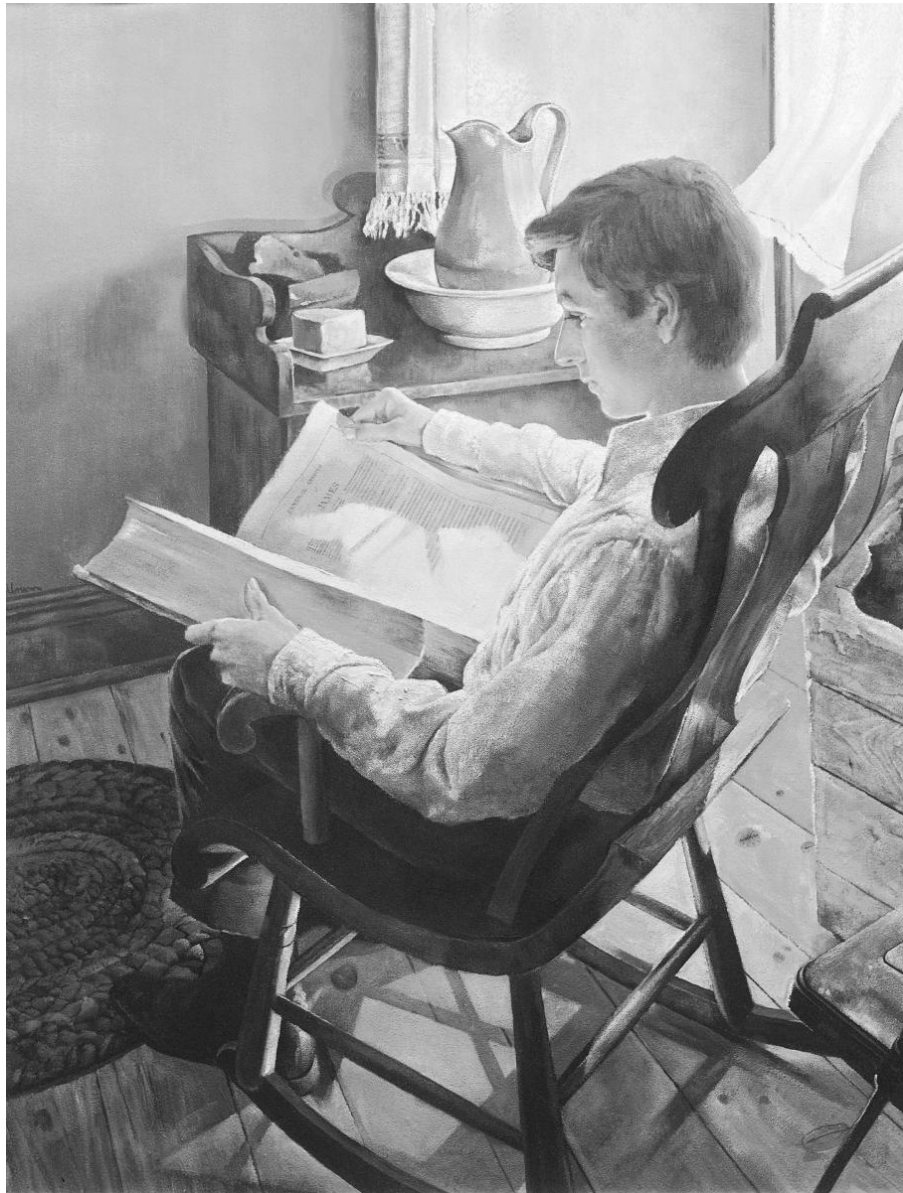


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The Significance of Joseph Smith's "First Vision" in Mormon Thought

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The First Vision, according to the Mormon prophet, came as a result of his prayerful inquiry concerning which church to join. He was forbidden to join any of them, for all were wrong.

(Harold T. Kilbourn, *Joseph Smith Seeks Wisdom from the Bible*, © 1975 Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)

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In the year 1838, Joseph Smith began writing his formal *History of the Church*. The history commenced with the now famous account of what has been termed the “First Vision,” in which he told of the appearance to him, in 1820, of two heavenly personages. The vision, according to the Mormon prophet, came as a result of his prayerful inquiry concerning which church to join, and in it he was forbidden to join any of them, for all were wrong. While not specifically named in the story, the two personages have been identified by Latter-day Saints as God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ; Joseph Smith indicated that the one said of the other, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!”

This singular story has achieved a position of unique importance in the traditions and official doctrines of the Mormon Church. Belief in the vision is one of the fundamentals to which faithful members give assent. Its importance is second only to belief in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. The story is an essential part of the first lesson given by Mormon missionaries to prospective converts, and its acceptance is necessary before baptism. The nature and importance of the vision is the subject of frequent sermons by Church members in all meetings and by General Authorities of the Church in semiannual conferences.

Not only is belief in the First Vision of primary importance to Mormonism, but the story of the vision has what might be termed a number of secondary, although highly important, utilitarian functions. Joseph Smith’s original purpose in writing the story was apparently to help demonstrate his reasons for not joining any church. In our time, however, it is used by Church leaders and teachers to demonstrate for believers many other aspects of the Mormon faith: the idea that God actually hears and answers prayers; the concept that there is a personal devil who tries to stop the progress of truth; and, perhaps most fundamental of all, the Mormon doctrine that the divine Godhead are actually separate, distinct, physical personages, as opposed to the Trinitarian concept within traditional Christianity.

The person who would understand the history of any institution must be concerned not only with chronology but also with an understanding of what the people in that institution were thinking, what they were being taught, and how these ideas compare with present-day thought. In connection with the story of the vision, then, it is important to ask certain questions: When was it first told? When was it first published? Did it have the significant place in early Mormon thought that it has today? If not, when did it begin to take on its present significance in the writings and teachings of the Church? Some thoughts on these questions might open the door to a better understanding of Mormon history and also demonstrate by example the gradually changing pattern of thought which one would expect to find in any church.

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Public Knowledge of the Story

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 was telling it, no one seemed to consider it important enough to record it *at the time*, and no one was criticizing him for it. Not even in his own history did Joseph Smith mention being criticized in this period for telling the story of the First Vision. The interest, rather, was in the Book of Mormon and the various angelic visitations connected with its origin.

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 First Vision is convincing evidence that at best it received only limited circulation in those early days. In February 1830, for example, a farmer who lived about fifty miles from Palmyra, New York, wrote a letter describing the religious fervor in western New York and particularly the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. No mention was made, however, of the idea that Joseph Smith had beheld Deity.¹ The earliest anti-Mormon literature attacked the Book of Mormon and the character of Joseph Smith but never mentioned the First Vision. Alexander Campbell, who had some reason to be especially bitter against the Mormons because of the conversion of Sidney Rigdon in 1830, published one of the first scathing denunciations of Joseph Smith in 1832. It was entitled *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon*. It contained no mention of the First Vision. In 1834, E.D. Howe published *Mormonism Unveiled [sic]*, which contained considerable damaging material against Joseph Smith, including letters of the Mormon apostate Ezra Booth, but again no mention of the First Vision. In 1839, John Corrill, another Mormon apostate, published a history of the Mormons, but he made no reference at all to Joseph Smith's claim to having conversed with the members of the Godhead. In 1842, J. B. Turner published *Mormonism in All Ages*, which included one of the bitterest denunciations of the Mormon prophet yet printed, but even at this late date, no mention was made of the First Vision.² 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

¹ The letter was reproduced in William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, eds., *Among the Mormons* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 28.

² It is probable that Professor Turner had not seen Joseph Smith's written account of the vision when he was preparing his book, for both were published the same year. Turner shows familiarity with the earlier publications of Church history and would certainly have included the history published in the *Times and Seasons* if he had seen it. Orson Pratt's account, published in 1840, may also have escaped him as he prepared his manuscript, for Pratt's work was published in England for circulation there.

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First Vision.³ In 1844, I. Daniel Rupp published *An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*, and this work contained an account of the vision provided by Joseph Smith himself. After this time, non-Mormon sources began to refer to the story. It seems probable, however, that as far as non-Mormons were concerned, there was little, if any, awareness of it in the 1830s. The popular image of Mormon belief centered on such things as the Book of Mormon, the missionary zeal, and the concept of Zion in Missouri.

As far as Mormon literature is concerned, there was apparently no reference to Joseph Smith's First Vision in any published material in the 1830s. Joseph Smith's history, which began in 1838, was not published until it ran serially in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842. The famous "Wentworth Letter," which contained a much less detailed account of the vision, appeared March 1, 1842, in the same periodical. Introductory material to the Book of Mormon, as well as publicity about it, told of Joseph Smith's obtaining the gold plates and of angelic visitations, but nothing was printed that remotely suggested earlier visitations. In 1833 the Church published the *Book of Commandments*, forerunner to the present Doctrine and Covenants, and again no reference was made to Joseph's First Vision, although several references were made to the Book of Mormon and the circumstances of its origin. The first regular periodical to be published by the Church was the *Evening and Morning Star*, but its pages reveal no effort to tell the story of the First Vision to its readers. Nor do the pages of the *Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate*, printed in Kirtland, Ohio, from October 1834 to September 1836. In this newspaper, Oliver Cowdery, who was second only to Joseph Smith in the early organization of the Church, published a series of letters dealing with the origin of the Church. These letters were written with the approval of Joseph Smith, but they contained no mention of any vision prior to those connected with the Book of Mormon. In 1835 the Doctrine and Covenants was printed at Kirtland, Ohio, and its preface declared that it contained "the leading items of religion which we have professed to believe." Included in the book were the "Lectures on Faith," a series of seven lectures which had been prepared for the School of the Prophets in Kirtland in 1834–35. It is interesting to note that, in demonstrating the doctrine that the Godhead consists of two separate personages, no mention was made of Joseph Smith having seen them, nor was any reference made to the First Vision in any part of the publication.⁴ The *Times and Seasons* began publication in 1839, but, as indicated

³ A quotation from the article appears later in this study.

⁴ See N. B. Lundwall, comp., *A Compilation Containing the Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.). It is interesting to observe—in connection with the general question of how certain precise teachings of the Church in the 1830s differed from those of today—that in the *Lectures on Faith*, the Father is defined as a "personage of glory and power," the Son is defined as a "personage of tabernacle," and the Holy Spirit is defined as the mind of the Father and the Son (see Lecture Fifth). As far as the vision is concerned, the only possible allusion to it is in section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which reads, "Wherefore I the

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above, the story of the vision was not told in its pages until 1842. From all this, it would appear that the general Church membership did not receive information about the First Vision until the 1840s and that the story certainly did not hold the prominent place in Mormon thought that it does today.

Importance in Early Missionary Work

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As far as missionary work is concerned, it is evident that here too the story of the First Vision had little, if any, importance in the 1830s. The best missionary tool in that day was apparently the Book of Mormon, and most early converts came into the Church as a result either of reading the book or of hearing the “testimony” of others who declared their personal knowledge of its authenticity. Such important early converts as Parley P. Pratt, Sidney Rigdon, Brigham Young, and Heber C. Kimball all joined because of their conversion through the Book of Mormon, and none of their early records or writings seem to indicate that an understanding or knowledge of the First Vision was in any way a part of their conversion. John Corrill tells of his first contact with the Mormons through Parley P. Pratt, Oliver Cowdery, Peter Whitmer, and Ziba Peterson. These were the famous missionaries to the “Lamanites” of 1830. Their message concerned the Book of Mormon, but Corrill reported nothing of having heard of a prior vision.⁵ When Parley P. Pratt converted John Taylor in 1836, the story he told him was of the angelic visitations connected with the Book of Mormon, of the priesthood restoration, and of the organization of the Church. There is no evidence that anything was said of the First Vision. Rather, Taylor was converted on the basis of the Book of Mormon and the fact that Mormonism taught certain principles which he had already concluded were essential and which he had been waiting to hear someone preach.⁶ The first important missionary pamphlet of the Church was the *Voice of Warning*, published in 1837 by Parley P. Pratt. The book contains long sections on items important to missionaries of the 1830s, such as fulfillment of prophecy, the Book of Mormon, external evidence of the book’s authenticity, the Resurrection, and the nature of revelation, but nothing, again, on the First Vision. It seems evident that, at least in the 1830s, it was not considered necessary for prospective converts to Mormonism to know the story. It is assumed, of course, that if they believed in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, as well as the other claims of

Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jr. and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments; and also gave commandments to others, that they should proclaim these things unto the world.” The same statement is in the 1833 *Book of Commandments*, but most would agree that it hardly constitutes a direct reference to the First Vision.

⁵ John Corrill, *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* (St. Louis: printed by author, 1839), 1.

⁶ *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961), 136–151.

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Joseph Smith to divine authority and revelation, the story of the First Vision would not have been difficult for them to believe once they heard it.

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

A possible explanation for the fact that the story of the vision was not generally known in the 1830s is sometimes seen in Joseph Smith's conviction that experiences such as these should be kept from the general public because of their extremely sacred nature. It is noted by some that in 1838 he declared that his basic reason for telling it even then, eighteen years after it happened, was in response to "reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons" who had distorted the facts.⁷ Furthermore, the young prophet said that he had been severely rebuffed the first time he told the story in 1820; and since it represented one of his most profound spiritual experiences, he could well have decided to circulate it only privately until he could feel certain that in relating it he would not again receive the general ridicule of friends.

Perhaps the closest one may come to seeing a contemporary diarist's account of the story is in the journal of Alexander Neibaur, which is located in the LDS Church Historian's Office. Hugh Nibley, grandson of Neibaur, makes the following commentary:

The writer's great-grandfather, a Jew, one day after he had given Joseph Smith a lesson in German and Hebrew asked him about certain particulars of the first vision. In reply he was told some remarkable things, which he wrote down in his journal that very day. But in the ensuing forty years of his life . . . Brother Neibaur seems never once to have referred to the wonderful things the Prophet told him—it was quite by accident that the writer discovered them in his journal. Why was the talkative old man so close-lipped on the one thing that could have made him famous? Because it was a sacred and privileged communication; it was never published to the world and never should be.⁸

⁷ *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1946), 1:1; Paul R. Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith's Early Visions" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965), 4–7.

⁸ Hugh Nibley, "Censoring Joseph Smith's Story," *Improvement Era*, July 1961, 522.

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Nibley takes the point of view that the story of the vision was not told in those early years because of its sacred nature. With reference to Neibaur's journal, however, it must be observed that Neibaur did not become associated with Joseph Smith until the Nauvoo period, in the 1840s, and that the experience referred to did not take place until well after other accounts of the vision, including Joseph Smith's, had been written and published.

New Evidence of Limited Circulation in the 1830s

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In spite of the foregoing discussion, there is some interesting evidence to suggest the possibility that the story of Joseph Smith's First Vision was known, probably on a limited basis, during the formative decade of Church history. 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 discovery 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 intact to indicate that at least as early as 1833 Joseph Smith contemplated writing and perhaps publishing it. The manuscript has apparently lain in the LDS Church Historian's Office for many years, yet few, if any, who saw it realized its profound historical significance. The mere existence of the manuscript, of course, does nothing to either prove or disprove the authenticity of the story, but it demonstrates the historical fact that in the early 1830s the story of the vision was beginning to find place in the formulation of Mormon thought.⁹ It might be noted that Fawn Brodie suggests that the story of Joseph Smith's First Vision was something which he invented sometime after 1834.¹⁰ If Cheesman's discovery is authentic, Brodie's argument will have to be revised.

Another document of almost equal importance has recently been brought to light by a member of the staff at the Church Historian's Office.¹¹ It is located in the back of Book A-1 of the handwritten manuscript of the *History of the Church* (commonly referred to as the "Manuscript History"). The writing of the "Manuscript History" was personally supervised by Joseph Smith, beginning in 1838, although it is not known who actually

⁹ For a transcription of the entire document, see Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts," appendix D.

¹⁰ Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Knopf, 1946), 25.

¹¹ The document was brought to the attention of this writer in June 1966, and he had the opportunity to examine it. Since the document is bound with the "Manuscript History," it is unusual that someone had not found it earlier and recognized its significance. It seems apparent, however, that, as in the case of Cheesman's document, few, if any, people had been aware of it. The fact that the use of the "Manuscript History" is highly restricted, due to its extremely high value, and that any research done in it is done through a microfilm copy could help account for the fact that researchers generally had not discovered what was in the back of the book.

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transcribed each part of the work. Under the date of November 9, 1835, the story is told of a man visiting Joseph Smith calling himself Joshua, the Jewish minister. The conversation naturally turned to religion, and it is recorded that the Mormon prophet told his guest “the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, as recorded in the former part of this history.”¹² From reading the “Manuscript History,” therefore, as well as the printed *History of the Church*, one would get the impression that at this time Joseph Smith related only the Book of Mormon story. In the back of the book, however, is a most curious and revealing document. It is curious in several ways. First, it was apparently written in 1835 by someone other than Joseph Smith, for it records the day-to-day events in the Prophet’s life in the *third person*, as if it were a scribe recording them as he observed them. Next, it is not written in the finished style that characterizes the “Manuscript History,” indicating that it was not intended for publication without some revision. Finally, in order to read the document, one must turn the book upside down, which suggests that the manuscript certainly was not intended to be part of the finished history. In short, it is almost certain that the document in the back of the book comprises the original notes from which the “Manuscript History” was later compiled and that it is actually a daily account of Joseph Smith’s activities in 1835, as recorded by a scribe. The importance of the manuscript here lies in the fact that the scribe wrote down what Joseph Smith said to his visitor, and he began not by telling the story of the discovery of the Book of Mormon but with an account of the First Vision. Again, the details of the story vary somewhat from the accepted version, but the manuscript, if authentic, at least demonstrates that by 1835 the story had been told to someone.

The only additional evidence that Joseph Smith’s story was being circulated in the 1830s is found in reminiscences of a few people who were close to Joseph Smith in that decade. While reminiscences are obviously open to question—for it is easy for anyone, after many years, to read back into his own history things which he accepts at the time of the telling—some of them at least sound convincing enough to suggest that the story might have been circulating on a limited basis. In 1893, Edward Stevenson published his reminiscences. He first saw Joseph Smith in 1834, and, according to Stevenson,

In that same year, 1834, in the midst of many large congregations the Prophet testified with great power concerning the visit of the Father and the Son, and the conversation he had with them. Never before did I feel such power as was manifested on these occasions. . . .

Although a mere widow’s son, I felt proud and blessed of God, when he honored us by coming under our roof and partaking of our hospitality. . . . We were proud,

¹² Compare with Roberts’s edition, *History of the Church*, 2:304.

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indeed, to entertain one who had conversed with the Father and the Son, and been under the tuition of an angel from heaven.¹³

Lorenzo Snow heard Joseph Smith for the first time when he was seventeen years old. Years later, he recalled the experience in these words:

As I looked upon him and listened, I thought to myself that a man bearing such a wonderful testimony as he did, and having such a countenance as he possessed, could hardly be a false prophet. He certainly could not have been deceived, it seemed to me, and if he was a deceiver, he was deceiving the people knowingly; for when he testified that he had had a conversation with Jesus the Son of God, and talked with Him personally, as Moses talked with God upon Mount Sinai, and that he also heard the voice of the Father, he was telling something that he either knew to be false or to be positively true.¹⁴

If this statement is accurate, it means that Joseph Smith was telling the important story in 1831. When reading the statement in context, however, it will be immediately noted that Snow did not say that he heard Joseph tell the actual story — only that he heard him testify that he had conversed with the Son and heard the voice of the Father. Other reminiscences may be found which would indicate that the story was being told in the 1830s, but at this point the extent of the telling is not clear, and the weight of evidence would suggest that it was not a matter of common knowledge, even among Church members, in the earliest years of Mormon history.

The Story Becomes Scripture

The question for historical consideration, then, is when and how the story of Joseph Smith assumed its present importance, not only as a test of faith for the Mormons but also as a tool for illustrating and supporting other Church doctrines.

It seems apparent that after Joseph Smith decided to write the story in 1838, the way was clear for its use as a missionary tool. It is not known, of course, how generally the membership of the Church knew of the story by the end of the decade, but in the year 1840, Orson Pratt published in England a missionary tract entitled *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records*. This early pamphlet contained a detailed account of the First Vision which elaborated upon several details that Joseph Smith touched on only briefly. Joseph Smith's account was published in 1842. In the same year, Orson Hyde published in Germany a pamphlet entitled *A Cry*

¹³ Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City, 1893), 4–5.

¹⁴ Quoted in LeRoi C. Snow, "How Lorenzo Snow Found God," *Improvement Era*, February 1937, 83.

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From the Wilderness, a Voice from the Dust of the Earth. This also contained an elaborate account of the vision. It is evident, then, that in the early 1840s the story of Joseph Smith's First Vision took its place alongside the story of the Book of Mormon as a missionary message, and it is possible that Joseph Smith's decision to write it in 1838 was a sort of go-ahead for this action.

By the 1850s, the story of the vision had become an important part of Church literature. In 1851 it appeared in the first edition of the Pearl of Great Price, published in England by Franklin D. Richards. This volume was accepted as one of the standard works of the Mormon Church in 1880.¹⁵ By this time, obviously, the story had become well known both to members and non-members alike and was being used as a basic missionary tool.

Utilitarian Functions

A more difficult question to answer concerns the various utilitarian functions of the story. Present-day Mormons use it to demonstrate such things as the factual existence of Satan, the doctrine that God can hear and answer prayers, and especially the concept of God and Christ as distinct and separate physical beings. It is clear, of course, that Joseph Smith taught these doctrines, but it is of special interest to note that, as far as any recorded material reveals, he never used the story of his vision specifically to illustrate them.

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

Joseph Smith, inspired of God, came forth and declared that God lived. Ages had passed and no one had beheld Him. The fact that he existed was like a dim tradition in the minds of the people. The fact that Jesus lived was only supposed to be the case because eighteen hundred years before men had seen him. . . . The character of God—whether He was a personal being, whether His center was nowhere, and His circumference everywhere, were matters of speculation. No one had seen him. No one had seen any one who had seen an angel. . . . Is it a wonder that men were confused? that there was such a variety of opinion respecting the character and being of God? . . . Brother Joseph, as I said, startled the world. It

¹⁵ T. Edgar Lyon, *Introduction to the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1955), 209; James R. Clark, *The Story of the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 186–221.

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stood aghast at the statement which he made, and the testimony which he bore. He declared that he had seen God. He declared that he had seen Jesus Christ.

After that revelation faith began to grow up in men's minds and hearts. Speculation concerning the being of God ceased among those who received the testimony of Joseph Smith. He testified that God was a being of body, that He had a body, that man was in his likeness, that Jesus was the exact counterpart of the Father, and that the Father and Jesus were two distinct personages, as distinct as an earthly father and an earthly son.¹⁶

There were probably earlier sermons or writings that used the story of the First Vision to demonstrate the Mormon doctrine of God. Evidence indicates, however, that they were rare in these early days and that only gradually did this use of the story find place in the traditions of the Church. Suffice it to say that by the turn of the century, the device was regularly used. James E. Talmage, for example, in his *Articles of Faith*, used the story to illustrate the Godhead doctrine, and Joseph Fielding Smith, in his *Essentials in Church History*, makes a major point of this doctrinal contribution. In 1961 the official missionary plan of the Church required all missionaries to use the story in their first lesson as part of the dialogue designed to prove that the Father and the Son are distinct personages and that they have tangible bodies.

Comparison of the Accounts

As the story of Joseph Smith's vision was told and retold, both by him and other persons, there were naturally some variations in detail. The account written about 1833 told of his youthful anxiety over the "welfare of my immortal soul" and over his sins as well as the sins of the world. Therefore, he declared,

I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and to obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in the attitude of calling upon the Lord in the 16th [see footnote] year of my age a pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day came down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the Spirit of God and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son 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.¹⁷

¹⁶ George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, (London: Latter-day Saints' Book depot, 1854–86), 24:340–41.

¹⁷ As transcribed in Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts," 129. Note that Mr. Cheesman interpreted the handwriting in the original manuscript as saying that this event took place in the sixteenth year of Joseph's age. In private conversation, Mr. Cheesman indicated that the original document was actually

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In this story, only one personage was mentioned, and this was obviously the Son, for he spoke of having been crucified. If Edward Stevenson's account is correct, however, he heard Joseph Smith say in 1834 that he had seen both the Father and the Son.

In 1835, Joseph Smith's scribe heard him tell the story to a visitor. As recalled and recorded by the scribe, the Mormon leader's words were "nearly as follows":

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Being wrought up in my mind respecting the subject of Religion, and looking at the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong but considered it of the first importance to me that I should be right in matters of so much moment, matter involving eternal consequences. Being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove and there bowed down before the Lord, under a realising sense (if the Bible be true) ask and you shall receive, knock and it shall be opened, seek and you shall find, and again, if any man lack wisdom, let of God [sic], who giveth to all men liberally & upbraideth not. Information was what I most desired, at this time and with a fixed determination to obtain it. I called on the Lord for the first time in the place above stated, or in other words, I made a fruitless attempt to pray My tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some one walking towards me, I strove again to pray, but could not; the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer; I sprang upon my feet and looked around. but I saw no person, or thing that was calculated to produce the noise of walking. I kneeled again, my mouth was opened and my tongue loosed; I called on the Lord in mighty prayer. A pillar of fire appeared above my head; which presently rested down upon me, and filled me with unspeakable joy. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame, which was spread all around and yet nothing consumed. Another personage soon appeared like unto the first: he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee. He testified also unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God. I saw many angels in this vision.¹⁸

not clear—the number could have been either sixteen or fourteen, but sixteen appeared to be more likely. In Joseph Smith's 1838 account, he said it happened in the fifteenth year of his age. Orson Pratt and Orson Hyde both said that it happened when Joseph was "somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old." The Wentworth letter said "when about fourteen years of age." Joseph's brother, William Smith, wrote that the Smith family's concern with the prevailing religions of the day came when Joseph was about seventeen. See William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, IA: Herald Steam Book, 1883). William, however, did not record the story of the First Vision. He related the religious revival which he ascribed to the discovery of the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith's 1838 account is the only contemporary account to date the vision in a definite manner as occurring in the spring of 1820.

¹⁸ "Documentary History of the Church" (MS), located in LDS Church Historian's Office. From a separate section in the back of Book A-1, 120–21.

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In this account, Joseph emphasized the difficulty he had in uttering his first prayer, and the “noise of walking” seems to suggest the evil opposition which became an essential element in the official version of the story. Furthermore, he told of having seen two persons, although one preceded the other. The two persons looked alike, and the second assured him that his sins had been forgiven. The most unusual statement, however, is Joseph’s declaration that he saw many angels in this vision.

When Joseph Smith finally wrote, or dictated, the “Manuscript History” in 1838, he told of his great uneasiness in the midst of the religious confusion of 1820 and his quest to determine which of the churches was right. After reading James 1:5, he retired to the woods and began to pray. In this account he told of a force of darkness which tried to stop him from proceeding, then the appearance in a pillar of light of two personages. When the light appeared, the force of darkness left. One of the personages said to Joseph, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” The crux of the message from the Son was that he should join none of the churches of the time, for all of them were wrong. “When I came to myself,” he said, “I found myself lying on my back looking up into Heaven.”¹⁹ The story as told in Joseph Smith’s published history of 1842 and in the Pearl of Great Price does not differ appreciably from his manuscript history.

The account published by Orson Pratt in 1840 greatly amplifies upon the story as told by Joseph Smith.²⁰ He describes in more detail, for example, the problems running through young Joseph’s mind when he was “somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old.” The appearance of the light is described in more vivid detail, and the whole account takes on a more dramatic air than any recorded story told by Joseph himself. Describing the light, for example, Pratt wrote,

As it drew nearer, it increased in brightness, and magnitude, so that, by the time that it reached the tops of the trees, the whole wilderness, for some distance around, was illuminated in a most glorious and brilliant manner. He expected to have seen the leaves and boughs of the trees consumed, as soon as the light came in contact with them; but, perceiving that it did not produce that effect, he was encouraged with the hopes of being able to endure its presence. It continued descending, slowly, until it rested upon the earth, and he was enveloped in the midst of it. When it first came upon him, it produced a peculiar sensation throughout his whole system; and, immediately, his mind was caught away, from

¹⁹ For a transcribed copy of the handwritten manuscript, see Cheesman, “An Analysis of the Accounts,” appendix A.

²⁰ For a copy of the Pratt story, see Cheesman, “An Analysis of the Accounts,” appendix C.

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the natural objects with which he was surrounded; and he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages.²¹

According to this account, the young man was informed that his sins were forgiven and that the “fullness of the gospel” would be made known to him in the future. Neither of these statements is contained in the Pearl of Great Price account, but the first one is included in both the 1833 and 1835 manuscripts.

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The Wentworth Letter, published in 1842, and Rupp’s history, published in 1844, contained identical but very short accounts of the vision. The force of opposition was not mentioned, and the description of the visitation was shorter than in Joseph’s earlier account. He told, however, of seeing two personages while he was “enwrapped in a heavenly vision” and said that “they” told him that all religious denominations believed incorrect doctrines. The idea that the “fullness of the gospel” should be given to him in the future was recorded here, in agreement with Orson Pratt’s account.

Orson Hyde’s account, published in 1842, is similar to the stories told by Joseph Smith and Orson Pratt. The two personages were not defined nor quoted directly, but they were said to exactly resemble each other in their features, and the promise to reveal the fullness of the gospel was mentioned.

The several variations in these and other accounts would seem to suggest that, in relating his story to various individuals at various times, Joseph Smith emphasized different aspects of it and that his listeners were each impressed with different things. This, of course, is to be expected, for the same thing happens in the retelling of any story. The only way to keep it from changing is to write it only once and then insist that it be read exactly that way each time it is to be repeated. Such an effort at censorship would obviously be unrealistic. Joseph apparently told his story several times before he released it for publication. People who heard it were obviously impressed with different details and perhaps even embellished it a little with their own literary devices as they retold or recorded it. Joseph himself wrote at least two different accounts for publication. These were printed the same year in the same periodical yet differed somewhat in their emphasis.

In this connection, four accounts are especially interesting, for they each suggest that, although two personages appeared in the vision, one preceded the other. The 1835 story is apparently the earliest that makes this distinction. In 1843 Joseph Smith told the story

²¹ Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 5

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to a non-Mormon editor, who later quoted him in an article in the *New York Spectator*. As quoted by the editor, Joseph Smith said,

While thinking of this matter, I opened the New Testament promiscuously on these words, in James, "Ask of the Lord who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not." I just determined I'd ask Him. I immediately went out into the woods where my father had a clearing, and I kneeled down, and prayed, saying, "O Lord, what church shall I join?" Directly I saw a light, and then a glorious personage in the light, and then another personage, and the first person said to the second, "Behold my Beloved Son, hear Him." I then addressed this second person, saying, "O Lord, what church shall I join?" He replied, "Do not join any of them, they are all corrupt." The vision then vanished.²²

The third contemporary account to repeat the idea that one personage preceded the other is the diary of Alexander Neibaur. Writing on May 24, 1844, Neibaur said that Joseph Smith had told him that day of his early quest for religion. In Neibaur's words, Joseph Smith "went into the woods to pray, kneels himself down . . . saw a fire toward heaven come nearer and nearer; saw a personage in the fire; light complexion, blue eyes, a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders, his right arm bear [*sic*]; after a while another person came to the side of the first."²³ A fourth reference to this idea is seen in the diary of Charles L. Walker on February 2, 1893. Walker wrote of hearing John Alger declare in "Fast meeting" that he had heard Joseph Smith relate the story of the vision, saying "that God touched his eyes with his finger and said, 'Joseph this is my beloved Son, hear him.' As soon as the Lord had touched his eyes with his finger he immediately saw the Saviour."²⁴ The latter, of course, is only reminiscence, but together with the earlier narratives it demonstrates at least that a few people had this concept of the vision as it gradually took its place among the fundamental teachings of the Church. Other variations may be noted in all the foregoing documents.

Additional accounts by people close to the Mormon prophet would undoubtedly reveal similar variations and amplifications. Through it all, however, there seems to be no deviation from Joseph Smith's apparent intent in telling the story in the first place: to demonstrate that he had had a visitation from Deity and that he was told that the religions of his day were wrong. The account published in the Pearl

²² *New York Spectator*, September 23, 1843, as quoted in Preston Nibley, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1946), 31.

²³ As quoted in Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts," 29.

²⁴ Diary of Charles L. Walker, as quoted in Cheesman, "An Analysis of the Accounts," 30.

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of Great Price in 1851 has become the standard account and is accepted by the Mormons as scripture.

Summary

This paper has been an attempt to trace the significance of the story of Joseph Smith's First Vision in the development of Mormon thought. It seems apparent that if Joseph Smith told the story to friends and neighbors in 1820, he stopped telling it widely by 1830. At the least, it can be demonstrated that the public image of Joseph Smith and his spiritual experiences did not include the story of the First Vision. Throughout most of the 1830s, the story was not circulated in either Church periodicals or missionary literature. In about 1833, however, Joseph Smith apparently made a preliminary attempt to write the story, but this account was never published. In 1835 he was willing to tell the story to a visitor. There is further evidence, based on reminiscences, to suggest that the story was known on a limited basis in the 1830s, but it is clear that it was not widely circulated. Non-Mormon accounts of the rise of the Church written in the 1830s made no mention of the story of the vision. It is apparent, furthermore, that belief in the vision was not essential for conversion to the Church, for there is no evidence that the story was told to prospective converts of the early 1830s.

In 1838, however, Joseph Smith decided to write the story for publication, and within a few years it had begun to achieve wide circulation within the Church. It was published first in 1840 by Orson Pratt as a missionary tool, and two of Joseph Smith's own versions were published in 1842. Since then, both Mormon and non-Mormon writers have made reference to it when dealing with the history of the Church. The story was accepted as scripture by the Mormons in 1880.

When it was first told, the story of the vision was used primarily to demonstrate the concept that Joseph Smith had been visited by Deity and that he had been told that all contemporary churches were wrong. After Joseph's death, however, members of the Church gradually began to appreciate its usefulness for other purposes. By the 1880s, if not earlier, it was being used in sermons as support for the Mormon doctrine of God, although Joseph Smith himself never used the story for that purpose.

In conclusion, this essay perhaps demonstrates the need for new approaches to Mormon history by sympathetic Mormon historians. Can we fully understand our heritage without understanding the gradual development of ideas, and the use of those ideas, in our history? It has been demonstrated that an understanding of the story of Joseph Smith's vision dawned only gradually upon the membership of the Church during his lifetime, and that new and important uses were made of the story after his death. In what other respects has the Mormon mind been modified since the 1830s? What forces and

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events have led Church leaders to place special emphasis on special ideas in given periods of time? What new ideas have become part of the Mormon tradition since the exodus from Nauvoo, or even in the twentieth century; what old ideas have been submerged, if not forgotten; and what ideas have remained constant through the years? In short, the writing of Mormon history has only begun. As in the case of other institutions and movements, there is still room in Mormonism for fresh historical scholarship—not necessarily for the apologist, although he will always be necessary and will always make an important contribution, and certainly not for the debunker. What is needed, simply, is the sympathetic historian who can approach his tradition with scholarship as well as faith and who will make fresh appraisal of the development of the Mormon mind.

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<https://rsc.byu.edu/exploring-first-vision/significance-joseph-smiths-first-vision-mormon-thought>

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