
The First Vision Stories: Their History and Development

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SIGNIFICANT DISCREPANCIES in events and dates exist among accounts of the seminal events of the Restoration. During the decade of the 1830s, several versions of Joseph Smith Jr.'s reports of visions were recorded, each presenting a different perspective. This article explores the variations in the main accounts of Joseph Smith's recollections of his early visionary experiences and the corresponding changes in perception this produced among his followers in the course of their ministries.

Soon after the Joseph Smith Sr. family arrived in Palmyra, Ontario County, New York, young Joseph Jr. studied the Bible with particular interest in its underlying themes. In 1832 he wrote of his recollections of the year 1817 or 1818, "At about the age of twelve years my mind become seriously imprest [*sic*; impressed] with regard to the all important [*sic*; important] concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul, which led me to searching the scriptures."¹ With curiosity about several protestant denominations, he attended a debating club and was a lay exhorter in a Methodist class.²

When his father had a disagreement with Jeremiah Hurlbut, Joseph, thirteen years old, testified in the court trial.³ He attended school off and on and worked to help support his family.⁴ It is possible he may have had more than one first vision, as the backgrounds to his recorded recollections are different in each case.

1. "A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr.," Joseph Smith Letter book 1:1-2, MS 155, Box 2, Folder 1, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark-Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832-1844* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 11.

2. O[rsamus]. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase* (Rochester: Published by William Alling, 1851), 214.

3. February 6, 1819, "Court of Common Pleas 1819, Narratio," AM01-185, Box 11203, County Records Center and Archives, Canandaigua, New York.

4. H. Michael Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844*, rev. 2nd ed. (Maitland, Florida: Xulon Press, 2013), 21, 71.

On April 6, 1830, at Manchester, New York, Joseph pronounced a revelation that the church should keep a record. First to begin one was Oliver Cowdery, followed by John Whitmer. While the Cowdery history is not extant, Whitmer's history begins on the occasion when missionaries were assigned to preach to the Lamanites (Native Americans) in September and October 1830. Cowdery later wrote a series of letters that described several prior events leading up to the publication of the Book of Mormon in Palmyra, New York, in March 1830. Church missionaries during the 1830s preached about an angel revealing to Joseph Smith the location of plates of gold but had no knowledge of any earlier vision.

Forgiveness of Sins

Joseph Smith in his youth worked as a treasure seer by showing money-diggers where there were treasures to be located in the ground and hills in the southern New York township of Manchester and in northern Pennsylvania. This was considered unsavory because no treasures were ever located.⁵

From the historical record relating to a March 20, 1826, court examination, or trial, it was evident that Joseph was found guilty because no treasure was found. He then evidently saw the need to turn his life around.⁶ The Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ approved in June 1830 mentions the first elder (Joseph Smith) receiving forgiveness and support to translate the Book of Mormon:

For after that it truly was manifested unto this first Elder that he had received a remission of his Sins he was entangled again in the vanities of the world but after truly repenting god ministered unto him by an Holy angel whose countenance was as lightning & whose garments were pure & white above all whiteness & gave unto him commandments which inspired him from on high & gave unto him power by the means which were before prepa[red] that he should translate a Book⁷

By 1831 John Whitmer was appointed to keep a history of the new church, but he did not begin his account until later. In 1838 Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon wrote to Whitmer asking for the record. When Whitmer refused, they commenced to write their own history. But this new history did not include an important record written by Joseph himself in 1832.

5. Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844*, 33-35.

6. Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844*, 40-45.

7. Zebedee Coltrin Journal, MS 1443, Church History Library; H. Michael Marquardt, *Joseph Smith's 1828-1843 Revelations* (Maitland, Florida: Xulon Press, 2013), 58; Book of Commandments 24:6-7; LDS Doctrine and Covenants 20:5-8; RLDS Doctrine and Covenants 17:2.

1832 Recollection of Joseph Smith's Early Life

In January 1832, Joseph Smith was ordained president of the high priesthood. Later that year Smith began dictating and recording his early history as church leader. The account began with a foreword describing certain events in his young life. His scribe Frederick G. Williams wrote (with some spelling of words corrected in brackets):

<firstly> he receiving the testamony [testimony] from on high secondly the ministering of Angels thirdly the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of — Aangels [Angels] to adminster the letter of the Law <Gospel—> <—the Law and commandments as they were given unto him—> and in <the> ordinencs [ordinances], forthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the Spirit the Kees [Keys] of the Kingdom of God confere[d] upon him⁸

Joseph then recorded that he had searched the scriptures years earlier. He concluded that the “different denominations” did not live by “a holy walk,” writing in his own hand:

from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the sittuation of the world of mankind the contentions and divi[si]ons the wicke[d]ness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind my mind become exce[e]dingly distressed for I become convicted of my sins and by searching the scriptures I found that <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own sins and for the sins of the world.⁹

Joseph went into a “wilderness” and prayed. He said that he had a heavenly vision and saw the Lord and heard the following words:

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 at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned asside 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 ac[c]ording to th[e]ir ungodliness and to bring to pass that which <hath> been

8. “A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr.,” 1 (angled brackets <> indicate word(s) written above the line), in *JSP*, H1:10.

9. “A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr.,” 2, *JSP*, H1: 11-12.

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 Father¹⁰

Though a few words are common in the histories, this writing is not known to have been used for his later manuscript history. Aside from some copies of his early revelations, this 1832 document is the earliest known history written in part by Joseph Smith. Notably, it was not until about 1965 that this story became generally known to historians.

Oliver Cowdery's Letters

While living in Kirtland, Ohio, Oliver Cowdery wrote a series of letters that covered the "history of the rise and progress of the church of the Latter Day Saints." Cowdery, evidently obtaining his information from Joseph himself, wrote of "a great awaking" and of Methodist elder George Lane who visited the Palmyra area. But rather than placing the ministry correctly into the latter part of 1824, Cowdery placed it into 1820 or 1821 in the fifteenth year of Joseph's life:

One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra, and vicinity. Elder Lane was a tallented [*sic*] man possessing a good share of literary endowments, and apparent humility. There was a great awakening, or excitement raised on the subject of religion, and much enquiry for the word of life. Large additions were made to the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches.—Mr. Lane's manner of communication was peculiarly calculated to awaken the intellect of the hearer, and arouse the sinner to look about him for safety—much good instruction was always drawn from his discourses on the scriptures, and in common with others, our brother's mind became awakened . . . In this general strife for followers, his mother, one sister, and two of his natural brothers, were persuaded to unite with the Presbyterians.¹¹

Oliver Cowdery wrote that Joseph's mother united with the Presbyterians, paralleling the event cited in Lucy Smith's own history about joining a church. In February 1835 Cowdery made what he termed a correction "in the type" to Joseph's seventeenth year, which would have been in 1822. But Cowdery mentions the year as 1823 concerning the excitement or revival in Palmyra.¹²

The statement by Oliver Cowdery would now bring new focus to the evening of September 21, 1823, almost two months before Alvin Smith's death in November. Although his letters related to Joseph's early religious experience, Cowdery mentioned only an angel and did not give details of any earlier vision.

10. "A History of the life of Joseph Smith Jr.," 3, JSP, HI: 13.

11. "Letter III. To W. W. Phelps, Esq.," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 (December 1834), 42, Kirtland, Ohio.

12. "Letter IV. To W. W. Phelps, Esq.," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 (February 1835), 78.

Personal Interview with Robert Matthews in November 1835

During 1834-35, the church presidency prepared a series of theological lectures that were to be used for instruction in the school of elders. The seven theological lectures on faith were included as the first seventy pages of the 1835 first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, its doctrinal portion. This included the fifth lecture, defining the Godhead as two personages (the Father and the Son) with the Holy Spirit bearing record of them.

The wording of some of the early revelations underwent modification and were printed in the covenants-and-commandments part of the Doctrine and Covenants. These included revisions relating to events leading up to the Book of Mormon. No objections were raised to modifying content of revelations for this new book of regulations for the church.¹³

In describing his early religious experiences in 1835, Joseph Smith now expanded and modified his former story. This could be seen through an interview he had with Robert Matthews, a stranger who called himself “Joshua the Jewish minister” (also “Matthias the Prophet”). As will be explained, the recorded interview was later omitted from his manuscript history.

The Matthews interview was conducted at Kirtland, Ohio, on November 9, 1835. It was transcribed into Joseph’s journal by Warren Parrish and may have been reconstructed from notes or memory. According to the journal, Joseph gave Matthews “a relation of the circumstances connected with the coming forth of the book of Mormon, as follows”:

I knew not who was right or who was wrong. . . I retired to the silent grove and bow[e]d down before the Lord, under a realising [sic; realizing] sense that he had said (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 him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally and upbradeth not; information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called upon the Lord for the first time, in the place above stated . . . I called on the Lord in mighty prayer, a pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon <me>, and filled me with joy unspeakable, a personage appeared in the midst, of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, another personage soon appear[e]d like unto the first, he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee, he testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God; <and I saw many angels in this vision> I was about 14. years old when I received this first communication; When I was about 17 years old I saw another vision of angels, in the night season¹⁴

13. H. Michael, Marquardt, “Changing Revelatory Messages: A Mormon Example,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 33 (Spring/Summer 2013):122-39.

14. Joseph Smith 1835-36 Journal, 23-24; MS 155, Box 1, Folder 2, Joseph Smith collection, Church History Library; Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832-1839* (Salt

It is clear from the text that Smith has now modified his 1832 visions of seeing the Lord and of an angel revealing the Book of Mormon. Instead, Smith has dropped the excitement of religion mentioned in Oliver Cowdery's letter prior to his answer to prayer and has added the idea of seeing two personages in the vision following the lectures on theology. The story was now his own and not Cowdery's. Even though the events themselves had occurred prior to the organization of the church itself, the matter would be regarded as an authoritative part of the rise of the latter-day church.

As noted above, Joseph's remarks to Matthews were recorded in his journal with the phrase, "as follows," but later in 1843, this was edited out and replaced it with the words, "as recorded in the former part of this history."¹⁵ Five days later on November 14, Joseph dated his earliest experience to visitor Erastus Holmes as: "up to the time I received the first visitation of Angels which was when I was about 14, years old."¹⁶

1839 Manuscript History of Joseph Smith

Before the expulsion from Missouri in 1838, it was preached that the Book of Mormon story had been the founding event of the Restoration. But during a four-day stretch that year, Joseph Smith, counselor Sidney Rigdon, and clerk George W. Robinson drafted a new account of Joseph's history since John Whitmer would not relinquish his history. Unfortunately, this original draft is not extant. However, the following year James Mulholland, another scribe, copied that 1838 draft into what became known as the Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1. It seems clear that this endeavor was conducted primarily for theological purposes on the part of Smith, Rigdon, Robinson and/or a combination of the three.

This remains the longest and most detailed account of all, though not the last that Joseph Smith would relate to others. It describes his first vision account with the words: "When the light rested upon me I saw two personages." Since one of the two personages spoke the words, "This is my beloved Son, Hear him," the scene has been interpreted as a vision of two personages, God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

In this story, the Palmyra revival is placed as a motivating factor leading to Joseph's visionary experience. The account mentions that the revival ("an unusual excitement on the subject of religion") took place in the second year after his father's family move to Manchester Township (or about 1822). This would place the excitement on religion about 1824. The dating of the first vision was explained as happen-

Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 87-88.

15. Omitted in Manuscript History, Book B-1:637, CR 100 102, Historian's Office History of the Church, Church History Library. Written in September 1843 by Willard Richards.

16. Joseph Smith 1835-36 Journal, 37; *JSP*, J1:100. Though the wording was retained in B-1:642, by 1904 the journal entry omitted reference about angels and the text was changed to "the time I received my first vision." *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1904), 2:312, edited by B. H. Roberts.

ing early in the spring of 1820 and not to the time of the Palmyra revival. These two events should not have been included together in the story. They were two events separated by a number of years.¹⁷

Book A-1 was revised both before and after its first publication and is now considered to be Joseph's official narrative. An important feature was contained in parenthesis, where it is stated "for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong." This story incorporates an account of Joseph's early religious calling and has since served as the basis for virtually all official and semi-official histories of the Restoration. The following extracts are from the Manuscript History written in 1839 by James Mulholland before it was edited for publication in the March 15, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* as "History of Joseph Smith":

Sometime in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country, indeed the whole district of Country seemed affected by it and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division among the people, Some Crying, "Lo here" and some Lo there. Some were contending for the Methodist faith, Some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist

...

I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My Fathers family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith and four of them joined that Church, Namely, My Mother Lucy, My Brothers Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and my Sister Soph[r]onia. . . . I attended their several meetings as occasion would permit. But in [the] process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect

...

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, First Chapter and fifth verse which reads, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him.["] Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man that [than] this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did, for how to act I did not know and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had [I] would never know, for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passage of Scripture so differently as <to> destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. . . . I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful clear day early in the spring of Eighteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life that I had <made> such an attempt, for amidst all <my> anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally.

17. H. Michael Marquardt, "The Palmyra Revival of 1824-25, From Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist Records: Its Impact on the Restoration Movement," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 40 (Spring/Summer 2020):39-47.

...

I saw a pillar <of> light exactly over my head above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually untill it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air. One of <them> spake unto me calling me by name and said (pointing to the other) "This is my beloved Son, Hear him." My object in going to enquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner therefore did I get possession of myself so as to be able to speak, than I asked the personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong) and which I should join.

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the Personage who addressed me said that all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight, that those professors were all corrupt, that "they draw near to me with their lips but their hearts are far from me, They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof."¹⁸

The Palmyra 1824-25 revival appears to have been an important event for Joseph Smith. It was after his brother Alvin died. It was also the time when family members joined the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra. Though Joseph may have had a religious experience of forgiveness of sins, it did not appear to have had a lasting effect upon him since his visions of Jesus and angels did not cause a change in his treasure-digging activity. His early story also included the instructions to bring someone with him in order to obtain the plates and information relating to the forthcoming Book of Mormon.

The first published pamphlet about the first vision was written by church apostle Orson Pratt in 1840. He wrote that Joseph Smith "was enwrapped in a heavenly vision, and saw two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness. He was informed, that his sins were forgiven."¹⁹

Conclusion

Joseph Smith's accounts evolved over time. The story in his first history featured the receipt of personal forgiveness and an angelic call to a prophetic ministry. The story then sequentially evolved from a heavenly vision of Jesus, to an apparition of

18. Manuscript History, Book A-1:1-3, CR 100 102, Historian's Office History of the Church, Church History Library. *JSP, H1*: 208, 210, 212, 214. "History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 15, 1842), 727-28; 3 (April 1, 1842), 748, Nauvoo, Illinois.

19. Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Printed by Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 4-5. The pamphlet included "a sketch of the faith and doctrine of this Church." Some of the wording of this pamphlet was incorporated into a letter to John Wentworth published in 1842. "Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 1, 1842), 706-709.

two separate individuals appearing one after the other, and finally to the simultaneous appearance of the two. The earlier 1832 history was removed by cutting the pages out of the manuscript record—but not lost. The later November 1835 story was edited out of the official history in 1843, leaving the 1839 history as the canonical theological writing by Joseph himself.

By introducing the Palmyra revival in both Oliver Cowdery's letters and the 1839 history, when his mother Lucy and other family members joined the local Presbyterian Church, a chronological and historical problem was created. This final account is thus more theological than historical through its creation of reasons why Joseph did not join any church at the time. In this new message, he was told that the local churches were an abomination and that he must not join any of them. Another novel issue in the 1839 history was the assertion that Joseph had been rudely persecuted at the time of his vision for discussing them publicly. It is possible that Joseph could have been subtly drawing a parallel to the persecution that Latter-day Saints were then experiencing in Missouri and Ohio.

While Joseph Smith's final version would now explain why he himself did not join a church, it still seems problematic that family members did in fact unite with the Presbyterians at the time. Indeed, many identical Christian teachings of those local churches are contained within the church's 1830 Articles and Covenants.

The First Vision was not part of the early Restoration message. Early missionaries knew only of the angel and the Book of Mormon.²⁰ Church members were not to put their trust in Joseph Smith's personal visionary experiences. Smith made mistakes both before and after founding his church, which may assist in explaining why different branches of the Restoration exist today.

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20. See for example, William Shepard and H. Michael Marquardt, *Lost Apostles: Forgotten Members of Mormonism's Original Quorum of Twelve* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2014), 43-44, 377, 382, 385, 390-91.